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VOL. 2, NO. 3 (October, 2010) ADULTS EDUCATION VERSUS LIFELONG LEARNING: “CREATIVE DESTRUCTION” TREND AND “CAPABILITY” PERSPECTIVE

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Recent transformation of the Italian labour market: towards a lifelong learning system

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Abstract
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Recent transformation of the Italian labour market: towards a lifelong learning system

*Francesca Bianchi*¹

Abstract: Lifelong learning is the issue that best characterises the recent development of Community policies. Since the formulation of the idea of an Europe of knowledge, the view of human capital as a strategic European resource has been progressively asserted and strengthened. In the light of the recent economic, social and cultural changes, the knowledge and skills acquired in childhood and adolescence can no longer be sufficient for a lifetime and it becomes essential to supplement education in adulthood. In this context, a positive and open attitude to learning and developing the concept of “learning to learn” become essential. In this paper the author examine some recent transformation of labour market and social policy system in Europe. Then she analyze the specific role, in a postfordist society characterized by the decline of European traditional welfare systems, of some innovative lifelong learning tools which have been introduced even in Italy in order to promote employability and active citizenship of individuals.

Keywords: Life long learning , labour market, employability, capabilities, Welfare State

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1. The rise of life long learning in a postfordist society

In this paper I will examine some recent transformation of labour market and social policy system in Europe. Then I will analyze the specific role, in a postfordist society characterized by the decline of European traditional welfare systems, of some innovative lifelong learning tools which have been introduced even in Italy in order to promote employability and active citizenship of individuals.

Lifelong learning is the issue that best characterises the recent development of Community policies. Since the formulation of the idea of a “Europe of knowledge”, through the Lisbon process, until its most recent review in the new framework of policies for education and training beyond 2010², the view of human capital as a strategic European resource has been progressively asserted and strengthened. Continuing education has been recognised as a crucial element of this strategy to improve competitiveness, employability, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. In the context of the European employment strategy, life long learning has been defined as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”³ (Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

The European Memorandum on life long learning makes a distinction between three kinds of learning (Commission of the European Communities, 2000): 1) *formal learning* (takes place in education and

² In March 2000 the Lisbon summit defined the strategic objective for Europe to become in 2010 the most competitive knowledge economy in the world, this in order to realize a sustainable economic growth, not only characterised by new and better jobs but by more social cohesion as well.

³ It doesn't still exist a common definition of life long learning. While some authors define it more in terms of further education and training, others, according to the European Union suggestions (Commission of the European Communities, 2000), develop the concept of learning ‘from the cradle to the grave’ (Dohmen, 2003). The need of (private) investments in life long learning and of rationalizing the utilization of European economic resources has been reaffirmed in some relevant European documents, such as, for example (ISFOL, 2005):

- Lifelong Learning - Practice and Indicators (SEC (2001) 1939).
- The European Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning (Official Journal C 163 of 09.07.2002).
- Communication from the Commission of 10 January 2003 - Investing efficiently in education and training: an imperative for Europe (COM(2002) 779 final - not published in the Official Journal).

training institutions, leading to recognised diplomas and qualifications); 2) *non formal learning* (takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups -such as in youth organisations, trades unions and political parties. It can also be provided through organisations or services that have been set up to complement formal systems -such as arts, music and sports classes or private tutoring to prepare for examinations); 3) *informal learning* (is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Unlike formal and non formal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills).

In the light of the recent economic, social and cultural changes that society has undergone, the knowledge and skills acquired in childhood and adolescence in the family, school, higher education and training can no longer be sufficient for a lifetime and it becomes essential to supplement that education in adulthood. In this context, a positive and open attitude to learning and developing the concept of “learning to learn” become essential.

In recent years we have witnessed the constant development of lifelong learning in Europe, through patient cooperation, the creation of a common culture of learning and the definition of appropriate resources to facilitate access to education. In this context, all aspects of education have taken on the same importance: lifelong learning takes place in different contexts (formal, non formal and informal) precisely because it must play a key role in economic development, social inclusion and active citizenship.

As the topic of lifelong learning is gradually gaining recognition in the European policy agenda, we should examine the reasons behind this new importance.

Since the 1970s countries with developed economies have witnessed a process of transformation that has affected society economically, demographically and culturally. From the economic point of view, various changes have taken place. First of all, the basic technological paradigm has changed: the Fordian economy has been substituted by the post-industrial economy, in which the leading products are no longer durable goods but interactive services related to information and communication, so much so that we speak of the progressive establishment of a knowledge society. Job

characteristics have also changed: while contracts of indefinite duration are decreasing, atypical and flexible contracts that increase insecurity and the risk for occupational biographies are more common (Bauman, 1995; Beck, 2000).

Demographically, the population is ageing and the birth rate falling, especially in Italy (Burke, 2003). The composition of the active population has changed (employment opportunities tend to decrease due to demographic changes) and the percentage of the population that is no longer active has increased due to greater life expectancy and fact that young people spend more years in education.

There are more women in the labour market and immigration is increasing, meaning that more non-European citizens are working, both legally and in the illegal and unregistered workforce (Milione, 2007).

Definitions of what constitutes a family and the different forms of family have also multiplied, as family units have become smaller and older due to the growing number of elderly members, and roles within the family have changed due to modifications in relations between genders and generations and in interfamily networks⁴ (Milione, 2007; Paci, 2007).

These transformations consequently generate “new needs” alongside the traditional needs associated with poverty and disabilities. On the one hand, there is more demand for care due to the general ageing of the population and, on the other hand, preventive measures are required to maintain a high level of social inclusion among older people.

In the labour market, the myth of “full employment” has been replaced by an increase in long-term unemployment and a lack of job security (Milione, 2007). Employment opportunities are no longer characterised by stable jobs - the indefinite contract of the family *breadwinner* on which the Fordian paradigm was based (Esping Andersen, 1995) - instead becoming chances to create paths along which employment is no longer certain and permanent. While for some people “precarious” forms of employment only constitute a stepping stone towards stable and certain employment in the context of a positive process of growth and personal fulfilment, for many others whose educational credentials are not competitive enough, they

⁴ The new work organization, the redoubling of familiar models and the increasing depersonalization of social relations weaken the traditional fordist society forms of solidarity, while the welfare state fails to govern this process.

mean risking relegation in the poorly paid and less protected areas of the labour market (Gallino, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Beck, 2000).

Faced with ever more uncertain careers and the risk of unemployment (both long and short term) and thus influenced by the possibility of weakening individual motivation and competencies, it becomes essential to consider targeted educational opportunities for different living and working situations that have been tried and tested by individuals. Such opportunities constitute a safety net against the negative effects of the “precarization” of employment, ensuring full participation in social life and the achievement of full citizenship (Milione, 2007; Bianchi 2005a). The welfare system that characterised the Fordist era no longer enjoys the stability and integration of its institutional components. On the contrary, social protection systems are becoming increasingly fragile and there is a constant search of balance between the need for emancipation from the forms of social protection provided and the need for renewed security against the risks in life, at a time when families are more fragile, the labour market more “precarious” and the welfare state based on social insurance less effective (Esping Andersen, 2005; Paci, 2007).

On the other hand, the expansion of choices for the individual in a rapidly changing society is accompanied by a greater exposure to risk. As a result, society is pervaded by a condition of mass vulnerability and individuals do not appear to be protected as in the past (Castel, 2003).

While in the system centred on industrial society the key element was the creation of strong identities and collective structures, moving the focus to modernization, the key element becomes the process of individualization, as the liberation of the individual from imposed loyalties and as the growth of universal awareness and self-determination (Habermas, 1987; Paci, 2007). Modern individualism is ambivalent: on the one hand it represents an element of emancipation of individuals, augmenting their independence and their rights but on the other hand it represents an element of insecurity because it makes social actors responsible for the future and obliges them to give a sense to lives that are no longer predetermined by any external factors (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1999; Beck, 2008).

Thus the challenge is set. The numerous indicators of the current transitional phase, such as risks, anomy, uncertainty and solitude, are certainly difficult to deny. However, this situation is not necessarily heralding a standstill or even a regression in relation to the western scheme

of modernization. Gradual progression beyond this point is possible and, on an institutional level, this depends on the ability to develop a new model of welfare that is capable of combining the demands of social security with those of the substantial freedom of the individual (Supiot, 1999; Paci, 2007).

From a subjective point of view, the individual should be equipped with (or helped to acquire) capital or assets that allow him to fully participate as an actor and not be reduced to the destiny of an incomplete citizen (Gautié, 2003). Chances for success, social inclusion and participation therefore seem to depend on individuals' "capacity" to acquire cognitive competencies and relational skills that will allow them to actively take on the risk of independently and responsibly planning their own social destiny (Milione, 2007; Paci, 2007). "Skills" are therefore more important than "qualifications" in the post-Fordist era. While the latter were connected to collective constructions, the former refer to the individual, to his or her "*savoir être*" as much as his or her "*savoir faire*".

The new terms of economic exchange are "employability" for workers and "performance" for companies. For workers, employability implies the necessity to be mobile and therefore 'marketable' on the labour market, while for companies the employees' performance is related to the usability of his or her individual aptitudes within the working context.

Wages also seems to depend increasingly on the personal characteristics of the individual rather than on objective characteristics (age, education, qualifications) (Gautié, 2003). This is why educational resources are the most important tools with which to manage social insecurity and why they are essential throughout an individual's lifetime⁵.

As international statistics show, a lack of education and, more generally, of knowledge, is both an effect and a cause of social exclusion and social inequality⁶ (Negri, Saraceno, 1996).

⁵ The worker flexibility is the new goal, therefore it is requested an adequate training which improves his ability to manage many different tasks, to acquire quickly new capacities and to operate with new technologies. This new kind of continuing and multiskilling training must necessarily follow the individual through his working life (Lodigiani, 1999).

⁶ Research data show that our country is characterized by an education deficit, indeed all the traditional indicators underline this: dropping out rates, participation rates in educational and continuing training programs, graduates rate, state investment in further education and research, etc. (Panini, 2006; Benadusi et al. 2010). The rate of school attendance in Italy is one of the lowest throughout all Europe: in 2007 48% of Italian active population (between 25 and 64 years) had below upper secondary school degree, 39% had upper secondary (and

In this context, lifelong learning becomes a strategic priority. Investing in human capital, continually updating citizens' knowledge and skills, and fostering their potential and adaptability to change is the only way to maintain Europe's competitiveness and social cohesion. Surviving in 'globalised' and interrelated, knowledge based societies is only possible if individuals have the basic competency to learn almost permanently, are flexible and entrepreneurial in organizing their lives and prepared to reflect critically upon their activities and functioning in personal and working life. This is an idea, a frame for the future, with lifelong learning as one of the core characteristics.

At the same time we feel ourselves embedded if not imprisoned in an institutional environment which has been largely constructed in the context of the 19 and 20 century industrial welfare state. Institutional change is required in order to meet the requests of the new knowledge economy/lifelong learning frame (de Vijlder, 2003). The distinctions and the dichotomies between employed and unemployed, young people and adults, those with qualifications and those without, although relevant in the past, are gradually being substituted by new approaches based on the recognition of people's changing and varied needs throughout their lifetimes, with particular reference to their working lives.

The individual lifetime becomes the basic parameter for planning and development of the professional capital that can ensure the competitiveness of the European economy. Career paths increasingly depend upon the quality of the workforce's education and their opportunities for gaining new skills.

2. Labour market and employability: the role of activation policies

If education and training policies act, alongside social and labour policies, as essential tools to fight exclusion, this may characterize the State in terms of its transition from passive social spending to active social spending, aimed at increasing the opportunities for social inclusion and participation (Benadusi, 2006; Milione, 2007).

post secondary-non tertiary degree) and finally only 14% had tertiary education degree, while the OECD average was 30% of the population with below upper secondary school degree; 43% with upper secondary (and post secondary-non tertiary) degree and 27% with tertiary education degree (OECD, 2009).

However, as we know, most continental European countries have a strong tradition of passive labour market policies (Gualmini, 1998) oriented towards supporting the income of the workers or of the retired people, which so far has left little room for a policy of activation and rendering individuals responsible.

Southern European welfare systems in particular are less well equipped to respond to the emerging challenges of a society in transition, and among these the Italian system is far behind regarding both services to guarantee minimum wages and the development of social services⁷ (Paci, 2007).

Furthermore, the construction and expansion phase of government intervention in Italy was achieved through the creation of various bodies and agencies intended to satisfy both the particularistic needs of individual groups and professional categories (following a defence of civil rights/corporative logic) and the political class' interest in maintaining social consensus (Paci, 1992). The professional exclusiveness, organizational fragmentation, incoherence and lack of organicity with which expectations and social services have grown over the decades affect young generations in particular as, due to a process of decline of welfare policies that began in the 1970s, the guarantees and benefits that were granted to the earlier generations can no longer be provided⁸ (Milione, 2007; Ferrera, 1998).

Despite the fact that, from the end of the second world war onwards, the orientation of welfare services gradually changed from paternalistic-repressive (aimed at social control) towards the active prevention of situations of need in various phases of life - proposing to act not only on the effects but especially on the causes of poverty and marginalization (Ferrera, 2006; Milione, 2007) - crucial changes in social and labour policies have actually occurred only recently.

Following the constant prompts of the European Union and emerging observations in international debate that aim to highlight how the welfare system needs to be redefined and viewed as a social investment rather than

⁷ In the 50's and 70's, when the welfare state in central Europe was developed, Italy as other southern European countries didn't reform its social security system in order to rationalize interventions and devices of extremely intricate and scarcely efficient organisations (Ferrera, 2006).

⁸ New generations, destined to take part in the working life in the next years, will have to contribute the social security system (insurance, social assistance, health care and retirement pensions) supporting the aging population, without having in prospective the same level of social protection (Milione, 2007).

a simple cost (Esping Andersen, 2002), among other factors, such change has been achieved in the movement from passive to active policies, or employment activation policies⁹. These activation policies usually include incentives to work, employment insertion programmes and vocational training projects. At the same time, whereas a system of monetary transfer managed by the State was previously sufficient to counter social risks (Ferrera, 1998), the fundamental shake up of the phases and contents of an individual's lifetime leads to a radical transformation in the demand for welfare services and benefits in the fields of education, work, health and assistance. The multiplication and diversification of needs requires a remarkable interpretative effort on the part of the institutional actors, calling for increasingly targeted and individualised solutions and services (Rosanvallon, 1995; Paci, 2007): it therefore becomes necessary to establish a system of decentralised social services (assistance, treatment, prevention, insertion, training, etc.) throughout the country, provided by either the State or the market (Ranci, 2001). The centralised welfare system thus seems to give way to a new and more incisive system of local welfare services.

Welfare reform policy is currently unquestionably complex, partly because of the structural limits to the growth of State intervention in the field of social policy: a profound rationalisation of the resources available is essential for the present and especially for the future. Thus, while an active welfare state that aims to empower citizens and facilitate them in exercising their social rights as well as making them more responsible (Paci, 2007; Sen, 1999) is desirable, there is still much to be accomplished

⁹ The debate shows two different positions: on the one hand we can mention the workfare measures which have been initially introduced in Great Britain by Mrs. Thatcher government (where the unemployment benefits for the worker are linked to the worker duty - to take part into training programs - and/or to accept new jobs proposed to him by the employment agencies with the provision of administrative sanctions in case of non fulfilment); on the other hand we can refer to the measures introduced by Scandinavian welfare systems which have a completely different approach. In this case the goal is to help the unemployed to find a new occupation without relying too much on unemployment benefits (Paci, 2007). The keyword to achieve this is the empowerment of the unemployed through training, but these educational policies don't bring a serious reduction of unemployment benefits. Due to this, most of the European countries prefer to adopt a workfare approach and to reinsert the worker as soon as possible in the labour market (Benadusi, 2006; Paci, 2007).

regarding making services that citizens need effectively useable (through the development of activation), and facilitating citizens' participation in the planning and implementation of public services.

Today's individualized society, characterised by liquid modernity, uncertainty or risk (to paraphrase some of the titles of famous texts by Bauman and Beck) needs a welfare system that can offer instruments of support and social cohesion in the (various) situations of fragility that affect individual biographies more than ever and not only "compensation for damages": today the individualized society needs more and not less a protection system (Castel, 2008). New policies are therefore needed that are capable of accompanying individuals through crucial stages in their lives and protecting them so that they can exercise responsible citizenship (Milione, 2007; Leonardi, 2009).

In this new context, the maintenance of employability through lifelong learning becomes a key theme even for a country like Italy that has not traditionally been oriented towards developing lifelong learning. The fundamental tools of activation are recognised as continuing vocational training and employment policies, which become the axes around which the new welfare state revolves (Benadusi, 2006).

Employability is directly linked to skills because skills are the key tools of employment policies (Benadusi, 2006). The best security that can be offered to an individual these days is a rich portfolio of skills, which will render him independent and free both inside and outside his company. This is the great challenge of employability: to provide citizens with the tools to increase their capital of skills and, as workers, to not solely depend on a single company throughout their working lives, considering that careers today often involve various different companies (Farinelli, 2006). This means promoting the figure of a 'portfolio worker' who is required to be his own manager (Gautié, 2003; Ruffino, 2006). For this reason, minimum but essential conditions of safety and stability must be guaranteed – not so much *on* the job, but *in* the labour market, and from this point of view new regulation scenarios obviously arise – regulation that refers to Labour Law but that must evolve towards a contract and incentive logic rather than be based on a rigid regulation (Gautié, 2003; Mari, 2004; Bianchi, 2005a).

According to this concept, the labour market can no longer be considered an area of simple accommodation between supply and demand, but it becomes part of all the mobility spaces that need to be regulated¹⁰.

From the perspective of education, on the one hand, and the labour market (including traditional company related training) on the other, the move toward the knowledge economy implies the gradual disentangling of traditional, relatively separated clews of interrelated policy instruments on both sides and their recombination as a new, more intertwined and flexibly manageable instrumental arrangement in order to allow people to combine learning and work and other activities as they see fit. Some authors refer to the transitional labour market (TLM) perspective. The transitional labour market (TLM) perspective also argue that the borders between the labour market and other social systems are becoming more open for transitory states. Transitional labour market can be regarded as institutional responses to critical events in labour markets. Critical transitions can be said to occur when events result in a change in one's behaviour and relationships. The more dynamism is required or desired in these relationships, the greater the need for arrangements in which workers can put their trust in order to cope with the uncertainty that transitory states cause (de Vijlder, 2003).

TLM theory was and still is first conceived as a labour market policy reform proposal – including employment protection-, aiming at reintegrating excluded groups in to gainful employment, and, further, at rethinking the very notion of full employment. TLM can be defined as a negotiated and systematic management process of *transitions* in and around the labour market. In this view, transitions are defined as any departure from the traditional full-time and long term employment position. They include parental and training leaves as well as apprenticeship, temporary jobs and subsidized programmes, but also within a single company the switch from full time work to part time work and back to full time. The core idea is to secure the individual throughout his/her professional life

¹⁰ Some interesting experiences have been carried out in Europe. For example, we can mention the 'activity contracts' proposal according to which the worker can sign a contract with several enterprises inside an 'employment basin', instead than with a single one, or with a training or employment agency (Offe, 1999; Dahrendorf, 1995). In this way workers can move from a job to another one according to the needs of the various companies, taking advantage of training courses during the transitional periods. This happened in France in the case of tourism and agriculture sectors whose contracts were recently signed by entrepreneurial associations (Gautié, 2003).

course providing different institutional supports, based on both public and private funding (Gautié, 2003; Schmid, 2006).

Through appropriate training measures, the social protection system can respond not only to the new social risks introduced by economic and demographic change, but also, and more importantly, to citizens' demand for substantial freedom as a way of counting more in their relationship with public administration, as well as a way of achieving personal fulfilment (Esping Andersen, 2005). Policies that focus in particular on the demand for training seem to be crucial: adapting the way in which training is proposed to the needs of the individual ensures that everyone has equal opportunities to learn in relation to their personal needs (FSE-ISFOL, 2005).

Scientific debate has long asserted that education must be seen as a social good, to be distributed according to rules of impartiality with the aim of promoting equal opportunities. It is therefore not sufficient to provide individuals with equal quantities of "capital", but they must be able to mobilize their capital in order to successfully implement their life plans: as well as possession of capital, individuals' ability to use their capital – their *capabilities* – also need to be ascertained¹¹ (Sen, 1999; Dahrendorf, 1988). Skills and employability cannot therefore be reduced to simple individual attributes, but demonstrate the effort of collective planning in which public powers must play the decisive role. In another way, *capability* can not be considered as exclusively referred both to individual and his abilities but in this definition we have to include also opportunities and tools supplied by the society to the individual (Leonardi, 2009). With this aim it would be preferable to speak of *combined capabilities*: that is the development of the individual's inner capabilities is linked to the collective and institutional ones and these are a precondition for the formers (Nussbaum, 2001, Lodigiani, 2008).

In this context, we know that the access to education tends to take on the form of a citizens' right: the relationship between social citizenship and

¹¹ The concept of capability refers to the effective capacity to convert assets into achievement. For example, frequently, even where there is availability of supply, the opportunity to benefit of some rights is linked to the individuals capabilities in terms of information gathering and relations with the institutions. In case of support to new life long learning measures, information represents a key factor to get access to training opportunities and consequently to reduce social inequalities. People which are not informed can't choose between the many different opportunities and because of this someone talks about the existence of 'asymmetrical informations' (Beltrametti, 2004).

stable membership of productive society having deteriorated and the welfare state's promise of "jobs for all" having failed, education is required to be both a creator of citizenship and an instrument for insertion into and the maintenance or reacquisition of employment. This is the assumption that has led international debate to agree on the recognition of education as a resource (Lodigiani, 1999).

In contrast to the traditional model of social security, the "new" system of social protection refers to the conditions of citizens rather than workers (Gautié, 2003). Investment in education is not therefore necessarily aimed at the acquisition of competencies specifically required for the job done or that may be required in a future job, but is related to a way of perceiving oneself and considering oneself as competent and adequate in work and in life, to the need to possess a wealth of knowledge and to the habit of education that is more generally considered to constitute people's adult identity (ISFOL, 2005). The role of the State is therefore to provide part of individuals' capital and to help them acquire further capital, so that they can build up a wealth that defines them as true managers of their own lives.

Even in Italy the model of a "social market of services" has gradually established itself in recent years, with the State spending less as it becomes capable of mobilizing families' demands for services, orientating them towards accredited private providers in competition with each other.

This solution highlights the transition to a mixed system characterised by citizens' freedom of choice and by public regulation that permits greater competition and pluralism between private or Third Sector providers.

Among the programmes that contribute to this solution in the field of learning are "accounts" made available by public authorities that individuals can use to finance lifelong learning. This already occurs in the systems tested with Individual Learning Accounts (ILA), which workers can open at a bank (Gautié, 2003), and vouchers that give the right of access to services for the majority of citizens (who are often called upon to contribute to expenses). These individual funding systems make it possible to move beyond the traditional logic of policies in support of learning opportunities, in favour of "demand policies" that are capable of satisfying and valuing users' needs, thus encouraging freedom of choice and the empowerment of citizens (Ranci, 2001). This is part of a more general reflection on the necessity of giving individuals the real possibility to practise active citizenship, which consists of new social rights (we

increasingly hear of the “right to learning”) that are not only nominally but also effectively exercisable (ISFOL, 2005).

These systems help create a particular mix between the public sector and the market: on the one hand there is competitive-type regulation between service providers and freedom of choice for users is encouraged and, on the other hand, the public administration maintains the function of funding, identifying resources, authorization-accreditation of providers, quality assessment and control and drawing up contracts (Paci, 2007; Beltrametti, 2004).

The role of the public administration is thus transformed, losing importance regarding the management and assignation of resources, as choices are completely handed over to individuals, and acquiring a more central role as regulator of the conditions that ensure the effective exercise of the right to education, i.e. the quality of learning made available by the system. The public administration therefore finds itself playing a mostly new and highly responsible role (ISFOL, 2005).

3. The development of lifelong learning in Italy: a delayed process

As it has been recently remarked, in spite of the fact that the employability approach has received a great consensus, it shows the tendency to emphasize the European and national point of view in the evaluation of social policies. Besides this, with the adoption of this approach there is a risk of losing what happen at the local level: the individual level ‘situated’, the collective resources and the institutional assets, as the supply of public services (among which education) are neglected (Leonardi, 2009, Salais, 2004). As far as the lifelong learning policies, very often we believe that the citizen may move with a great ease in the complex context of training without taking in to account that many social groups are weak and underdeveloped as far as the human capital. It is quite difficult to reach the individuals of the above mentioned groups with training proposals which should help to develop new skills throughout their life. For these ranges of the population lifelong learning access could be a necessary even if not a sufficient condition, to benefit of the learning opportunities.

For these reasons, at this point it is useful to analyse how lifelong learning policies have developed in Italy.

Politics and economics have traditionally paid little attention to the acquisition of new skills and updating individuals' existing skills after school or university. The delays in Italy in continuing vocational training and bringing workers' skills up to date have been highlighted by the international comparisons made in the Eurostat surveys¹² (Continuous Vocational Training Survey – CVTS 1993,1999 and 2005) and depend on various factors.

Aside from a general disinterest shown by the public powers until at least the 1990s, economic and entrepreneurial Italy has always regarded training with circumspection, seeing it above all as a cost. However, faced with the entrepreneurial class' reluctance to invest in continuing vocational training, partly because of the size of Italian companies¹³, in recent years workers themselves have shown a renewed interest in learning.

Various signals have gradually highlighted the need to increase opportunities for learning and training for workers, and in particular for adults. Among these, the incentive of the Lisbon objectives for 2010 represented an important stimulus, especially for Italy, to make up its very obvious delay in relation to other more advanced countries. For example, a European-level comparison of employment rates and the participation of over-45 year olds in the labour market shows that Italy's rates are very low. Considering the constant increase in the mean age of the population, these data are of some concern. While average life expectancy has risen to 80 years and retirement occurs at around 60, the OECD (2006 Report) indicates an increase in the ageing process in Italy over the next fifteen years, with a growth in the percentage of over-65 year olds still at work. This will occur in the context of a general backwardness of the labour market in relation to the average in developed countries, involving both

¹² Italian enterprises reveal a strong delay, more pronounced in the case of continuing vocational training. While continuing vocational training was subjected to a fast development in foreign countries, in Italy it has remained substantially underdeveloped. If we take into account the European indicators on the R&D investments of companies and on their involvement in training activities, we found that Italy is quite outdistanced by Northern European countries. The CVTS3 Eurostat survey shows a low value of the indicator - 32% - concerning the number of enterprises providing vocational training to their employees in 2005, while the European average is 60% (ISFOL, 2009).

¹³ Generally speaking, training predisposition is directly related to the company size, this means that training investments grow in large enterprises. This represent a typical and traditional problem for Italy, where the economic system is characterised by the presence of small and medium firms.

young people in employment (Italy is in 26th place for the population between 15 and 25 years old, with 26.4% in 2004) and the number of older workers (27th place, with 30.5%, in comparison to the OECD mean of 50.9%) (ISFOL, 2007).

The education gap of the older workers is particularly pronounced. In 2007 the Italian population between 25 and 64 with at least upper secondary education was 52% while the OECD average was 70%. The comparison as far as the population with at least upper secondary education between Italy and the OECD average was: between 25 and 34 68% (OECD average was 79%); between 35 and 44 56% (OECD average was 74%); between 45 and 54 48% (OECD average was 67%); between 55 and 64 34% (OECD average was 57%) (OECD, 2009).

This is mainly because of the late development of mass schooling, but also due to the low level of basic skills and literacy in the adult population, which represents an obstacle to workers' access to continuing vocational training opportunities, as well as to the exercise of active citizenship.

The low level of basic and functional skills in these categories of workers increases the risk of their professional and social marginalization as they reach retirement age.

Furthermore, most of the adults who return to education already have a medium to high level of education: this is particularly evident in their participation in in-company training activities, due to companies' interest in investing mainly in the most well educated and professionally advanced workers.

However, some signs of improvement in this situation can already be seen, due to both the spontaneous emergence of new trends and the development of public policies that aim to counter the tendency to exclude workers with lower levels of education and older people from education and training activities. There has been a significant convergence of actions in the lifelong learning approach on measures concerning continuing vocational education and training that were already provided for in the European Social Fund's operative programmes and the implementation decrees of national law No. 236/93 ("Urgent measures to support employment"), which have brought about a significant increase in the trend of companies investing in training¹⁴. The purpose of these measures is to

¹⁴ The vocational training investments of enterprises were increased from 895 million of euros in 2000 up to 1,603 million of euros in 2004. We attend a process of polarization, on the one hand there are big enterprises with a good performance while on the other hand there

consolidate basic and transversal knowledge in order to maintain workers' skills and adapt them to changes in the labour market through training programmes in the form of projects, desk services, or through training vouchers.

Since only in the last twenty years it is possible to recognize in Italy some important reforms concerning education and training towards the realization of a life long learning system, it is therefore necessary to analyze in brief the main steps of this process.

The 1990s marked a significant turn in Italian labour market policy. Law n.196/97 provided for a substantial revision of all the main active and passive labour market policies constituting Italy's system of institutional protection against the risk of unemployment. The Law attempted to redevelop the conception of vocational training as an active labour market policy and, therefore, an instrument to promote new employment (Gualmini, 1998). With this end in mind, the resources and objectives of the program were shifted from basic skills training, the traditional focus of the Italian system, to continuing education and lifelong learning. Though the law did not propose a precise model, the development of continuing education programs has been facilitated by the development of a formal system of recognition for training credits. Lifelong learning has likewise been encouraged by new provisions for leaves, sabbaticals, and training fellowships-opportunities that have been available to workers in other European countries for quite some time (Gualmini 1998).

In 1998 the Ministry of Labour (Ministero del lavoro) formally introduced individual training opportunities with an Administrative Act (Circolare amministrativa No.37/98). The provisions of this Administrative Act guaranteed for the first time the right for an individual to choose his personal life long training/education path. This through an articulated project aimed to the acquisition of new knowledges and skills, which

are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which behave mainly like micro-enterprises. If large enterprises are dynamic, small, medium and micro-enterprises are more cautious. If we take into account the economic data, in 2004 the training expenditure of enterprises reached the amount of 1,603 million of euros: 56% was concentrated in the enterprises with more than 250 workers, 27% in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the other 17% in micro-enterprises. Business services is the sector characterized by the higher level of training, while the most relevant levels of participation to training courses are in the north east area. However if in 1999 only 23,9% of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) invested in vocational training activities, in 2005 the percentage increased to 32,2% (ISTAT, 2008).

eventually should be validated and certificated¹⁵. In December 1998 Social Pact for Development and Employment (*Patto Sociale per lo Sviluppo e l'Occupazione*), the Government and the Social Partners emphasised the key role to be played by life long learning also with reference to the changes underway in the competitive sector and in the labour market, marked by mobility and new expertise requiring individuals to be always ready and capable of learning new skills (Grelli, 2004).

The Pact for Italy (*Patto per l'Italia*) signed in July 2002 (between the Government with the main employers' and trade-union organisations, except for the General Confederation of Italian Labour (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro - CGIL*)) confirmed and supported this perspective, establishing that youth and adult education and training levels were to be increased, heading towards a lifelong learning and employability focused education perspective aimed at improving basic knowledge and at acquiring specific skills related to working or social life (Grelli, 2004). With regard to the segment of the adult population, we should distinguish between continuing vocational training¹⁶ (in which technical, vocational and transversal skills are acquired on the job) and adult education or continuing vocational education, where the basic skills and the skills that in general refer to the active population, are acquired in formal at Permanent Territorial Centres (*Centri territoriali permanenti – CTP*) which have been

¹⁵ This new perspective which assigns a new centrality to the individual, as a citizen and an economic subject, has allowed the workers to communicate directly their demand for training and new knowledge. This demand helps to shape the training system, because it links directly the individual and the training providers with the provision of public local institutions. In this case vocational training, based on individual demand, not only answers to the citizen needs, according to the specific context where the citizen/worker lives, but allows the enterprise to empower itself as well (ISFOL, 2005).

¹⁶ Since the 1990s, in Italy a new definition of 'continuing vocational training' gained popularity, including all the training activities, making up learning pathways, focusing on knowledge and skills following (and differing from) initial training. Based on this notion, the typical features of continuing training are represented, first and foremost, by its being different from initial training and, secondly, by the fact that it is addressed to adult individuals belonging to the workforce and - in particular, but not limited - to employed workers. This concept was finalised towards the mid 1990s, as a result of the combination of two elements, which changed the policy framework in force at the time: the definition of a national-level legislative pathway supporting the continuing training, with the issue of Law 236/93 and the start of the European Social Fund 'Objective 4'. Ten years later, the strengthening of this concept has led to the start up of a major process relating to the creation of an integrated continuing training system through the gradual setting-up of the interprofessional funds for continuing training (Grelli, 2004).

instituted under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, University and Research and 'Level II' schools (evening courses) or informal off-the-job contexts (e.g. Popular and Third Age Universities). It is important to consider that even if this distinction has many historical reasons linked to the development of the Italian educational system, today this is an anachronistic distinction and it will be necessary to develop the new idea of a continuing learning, that is a synthesis of both of them (Colasanto, 2009). Indeed, at present, it is possible to observe that the two systems are completely divided: this phenomenon causes many difficulties to the individual who cannot easily orient himself and be able to choose his path in the context of training supply.

In Italy, the implementation of lifelong learning strategies tends to have a transversal impact on the process of reform within the education and training systems with regard to legislative, organisational and operational aspects. This approach is based on the principle by which the learner becomes the focus of the various training and education environments. It is therefore a dynamic concept that does not involve a standard set of lifelong learning strategies, but considers them to be present in the various configurations and aspects characterising each system, through models of interaction between the systems, and between different institutions and social partners, each having (in their own specific sphere) the common aim of fostering the training development of the individual. Lifelong learning in Italy is thus "disseminated" through the education, training and labour systems and therefore the institutional jurisdiction in the programming, management and evaluation of the actions regarding lifelong learning is highly specialised. Besides this, it is necessary to keep in mind that the financial framework in Italy is rather complex, since it involves a multitude of devices, developed as a part of the policy scenario, which has been constantly evolving in recent years¹⁷.

Another Law (no. 30/2000) designed a new system of education and training with some interesting elements. Vocational training was placed within the general education system, while on the other hand, it has been also recognized as a pathway to adult training that merits the same amount of dignity and respect as the traditional educational system. There is a need

¹⁷ Main players and services supporting continuing vocational training public funding system are Regions and Provinces with European Social Fund (Regulation n. 1081/2006), National Laws (Laws 236/1993 and 53/2000) and Social Partners with Industry-based Training Funds (ITFs), Law 388/2000 amended by art. 48 Law 289/2002.

both to integrate general and vocational programs and to enable young people to move easily between different kinds of education, training and work experience during this period of their lives rather than being channeled into narrow pathways (Iannelli, 2000; Bianchi, 2005b). Vocational education was intended to offer a more specialized and qualifying education for those who did not want to go to university¹⁸.

A remarkable new legislation was introduced in the period 2000-2004 with the aim of creating an integrated and coherent policy system for continuing training, which also takes into account the strategic aims of the Lisbon process with regard to lifelong learning. An important measure in that sense is the new instrument for financing continuing training, the "Joint multi-sectoral Funds for Continuing Training" (*Fondi Paritetici Interprofessionali per la Formazione Continua*) which contributes to extending the variety of the available measures. In accordance with the regional programming and guideline functions of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Interprofessional Funds are the specific and major financial instrument to support the vocational training of workers in the context of the competitiveness of the enterprises, thus guaranteeing the employability of workers. The Interprofessional Funds are managed by the social partners. The social partners, besides the usual tasks of negotiation and programming of training activities, can thus also deal with the management of extremely large resources¹⁹. In 2003, the Ministry of Labour conferred operational status to the Interprofessional Funds through a series of measures. In the same period, the national Law 53/2000 on training leave was also implemented, allowing above all funding by vouchers for the continuing training of workers, together with the Regional Operational Programmes and the National System Actions of the Ministry of Labour falling under the ESF 2000-2006 (Grelli, 2004).

It is easily deductible from this background that at present the current model of vocational training is clearly more articulated and differentiated

¹⁸ The most important innovation in post-secondary education has been the reform of the university system in 1999. The D.M. No. 509/1999 introduced a three year university degree, in place of the traditional course of study, which sets the Italian system in harmony with other universities throughout Europe. The new degree programmes were designed with the specific intention of bringing university preparation closer to the needs of the world of work, and providing a more professionalizing course of study.

¹⁹ The Inter-professional Funds were set up under Law 388/2000 (amended by the Article 48 of Law 289/2002) and finance corporate, sectorial, local and individual training plans to benefit the enterprises participating in the funds.

than before, offering a variety of experiences and a range of training options throughout a worker's lifetime. Segmented trajectories, composed of isolated periods of training and work, that, though being internally coherent, did not particularly overlap, seem to have been left by the wayside. The new training system should provide the option of alternating training periods with work, or even mixing the two (Besozzi, 1998; Bianchi, 2005b).

As we have already mentioned above, an important improvement in Italy has been the introduction of individual training at the end of 90's. From this point of view, it should be pointed out that since 1973 in Italy employed workers can attend training courses as a result of a national labour agreement clause, which provides workers with approximately 150 hours of leave. Initially the contracts stated that this number of hours was to be linked to needs of school recovery (for example to obtain a lower-education certificate), or to attend educational and university courses. Some agreement also included the opportunity of attending vocational training courses.

More recently, in 2000, individual training measures for employees have been tested by the regional authorities using vouchers (Grelli, 2004; Bianchi, 2005a). The public financial support of individual vouchers can collect funds from L.236/93²⁰ (the main financial instrument to support the

²⁰ Strategic evolution of the Law 236/93 from 1996 to date: a) since 1998: start up of training on individual choice b) since 1999: experimentation of concerted training plans; c) since 2000: funds allocation to Regional Authorities (regionalisation of the Law) with the possibility to finance training actions implementing specific Ministry conditions; d) since 2003: strategy shift through the focus on new recipients; e) since 2006 strategy shift based upon an integration employment policy. In 2003: shift in the Law implementation strategy which moves towards a "specialisation" of funding: a) encouragement of integration with the ESF and improvement of the various types of public support for continuing training, taking into account the start-up of funds; b) 70% of resources allocated to the regions to be spent on action targeting the following: 1) workers employed by private companies with fewer than 15 employees; 2) workers employed by any private company with part-time, fixed-length or hybrid "self-employed, waged-work" contracts as well as contracts coming under the reduced working hours, modulated or flexible and project categories provided for by Law no. 30/2003; 3) workers employed by any private company that are receiving dole and welfare benefits or are over the age of 45 or hold elementary school or compulsory schooling certificates only. The remaining 30% of resources is targeted at beneficiaries defined and chosen by the regions and autonomous provinces. In 2006 we have a change in the allocation criteria: a) 90% of resources assigned to the Regions on the basis of the number of workers employed in private companies; b) 10% of resources shared between the Regions with employment rates lower than the national average.

voucher system). The Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, in agreement with the Regional Administrations, has diversified the resources allocated to training actions 'on individual application' through two other financial instruments: Law 53/00 with "Provisions in support of maternity and paternity, the right to care and the coordination of city hours" and the European Social Fund. With reference to the European Social Fund, in the context of the programming for 2000-2006, the issue of vouchers was included for all the programming strands involving actions targeted to individuals.

Law 53/00 offers the possibility of leave for training and continuing training on the basis of training plans submitted by workers either individually or under collective agreements; in the latter case, it is possible to reduce working hours. Regarding to individual training, the Ministry of Labour has made the corresponding resources available (around 60 million euros since 2001 to 2004) and distributed them to the Regional Authorities (Interministerial Decree n. 167/01 and n. 136/04) to finance the two types of actions provided by the law: a) projects for training workers which, on the basis of contract agreements, have quotas of reduction in working hours; b) training projects submitted directly by the workers themselves (Grelli, 2004).

At present in our country the 'voucher' tool is revealing very successful because partly translates into reality the workers' right to make an individual vocational training and updating choice. Vouchers are not training coupons that workers use to pay for training themselves. It is the cost that can be financed for each workers. The main feature of this measure is that company intermediation is not necessarily required, since the workers' subjective rights to training according to their needs (which may not always coincide with those of others working in the same sector) are duly recognised. Generally, the financing of training activities takes place through the granting of individual vouchers and with the joint financial participation by the workers requesting the voucher (up to 20% of the total amount). Training is normally undertaken outside of working hours. The system of training supply through vouchers is on a 'catalogue basis'. Each Regional Authority (or province in those cases where this subject matter is decentralised) adopts its own system in creating the training catalogue, which contains the various types of vocational training

supply available by the training bodies. This should assist workers in choosing a specific training pathway based on their own individual needs²¹.

The voucher system allows regional or provincial authorities to achieve two objectives: to introduce a market approach among vocational training bodies and to increase learners' sense of responsibility and motivation towards the investment in training.

Among the emerging training options, special attention is being paid to corporate vouchers which can be defined as personalised financial incentives to fund certifiable training activities chosen by the beneficiaries (company workers).

Individual continuing training provisions are also envisaged by the multi-sectoral training funds. In addition, training schemes for adults are provided by The 'Permanent Territorial Centre for Adult Education'. Their objective is to identify and fulfil individual demand for vocational education and training. This is usually free of charge and mainly geared to remedial or first time acquisition of basic skills (languages, computer studies, Italian for foreigners, and so on) or to basic vocational training (pre-vocationally oriented training) (Grelli, 2004).

The scenario described above highlights the increasing spread of individual training and adult education initiatives in the context of the rapid development of lifelong learning. In the above mentioned period there has also been a growth in the demand from individuals for a greater differentiation of learning opportunities.

As demonstrated by the regulatory developments, growing restraints on public spending have made it necessary to find ways of acting that are not exclusively based on the State system, but involve the presence and involvement of a wider group, including private and Third Sector actors.

Furthermore, in line with the orientation of the most recent European-level plans²², we are witnessing the growing introduction of instruments to

²¹ The Regional authorities have assigned different economic value to the vouchers, ranging from 500 euro up to around 1,300 euro, and they are issued by the regional or provincial authorities to training bodies in respect of each learner. If the cost of the training is less than the value of the voucher, some regional authorities will accept applications by a worker to participate in several courses on condition that the various activities form an organic training pathway. Many Regional Authorities have gradually extended and diversified the target groups. Sometimes the training providers may ask the workers to pay a deposit when they enrol, which is returned to them at the end of training.

²² The essential news of European Social Fund (Period 2007-2013 are: a) the new ESF is more focused than the current regulation. Under the 'Regional Competitiveness and

transfer decision making power to citizens, which envisage forms of intervention co-funded by workers (or companies). These measures support the individual demand for training from the point of view of rendering individuals responsible and encouraging higher quality in training.

On the other hand, as we have already mentioned, there is growing interest at the European level in mechanisms that can both encourage companies to invest in training (through “compulsory funding” programmes, “train or pay” programmes and tax relief systems) and provide individuals with a greater choice of individual funding systems (subsidies, vouchers, Individual Learning Accounts, etc.).

Among the education and training systems that aim to motivate individuals to continue learning throughout their lifetimes and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) merit particular attention as they represent a highly innovative education and training instrument, which has only recently been introduced in Italy²³.

Following the positive experience gained with training vouchers, some Italian regions have decided to experimentally adopt Individual Learning Accounts (through the establishment of an inter-regional project in 2004), with reference to two specific targets: the unemployed and workers on atypical contracts.

The characteristic of ILAs, apart from those specific to the different experiments, is that their purpose as incentive is to encourage individual participation in lifelong learning on the one hand and, on the other, to oblige both the beneficiary and companies (or other private organizations) to contribute to expenses²⁴ (although in the case of the experiment launched

Employment’ objectives, (ex Ob. 3) the ESF will provide support for anticipating and managing economic and social change. Its intervention will focus on the increasing adaptability of workers and enterprises, which consists of greater investment in human resources through lifelong learning schemes, making qualifications and skills more accessible and fostering enterprise and innovation; b) decrease in total amount of ESF resources (Grelli, 2007).

²³ In 1999 British government begun the most large experimentation in Europe according to the New Labour Party principles: through the ILAs, Labour Party has developed a light and decentralized welfare system, aimed and personalized in order to answer to the citizen needs.

²⁴ The ILA credit card, deposited in a post office or in a bank, may have a maximum amount of 2,500 euros, which can be spent by the beneficiary to cover his training activities expenses in two years.

in the three regions mentioned above, the beneficiaries are not required to make a contribution because of the lack or instability of their employment).

Individual Learning Accounts belong to the category of political initiatives that aim to increase funds in favour of segments of the population which do not generally take part in educational and training activities and who even, from certain points of view, represent users at risk.

The ILAs influence the learning demand system, affecting individuals without a personal education and training project, with little information and low motivation.

As well as representing a change of viewpoint in learning intervention, in the transition from a supply-side to a demand-side logic, ILAs also express the more radical change in welfare policies that we mentioned in the first part of this paper. The State is transformed from monopolistic manager/distributor to regulator and controller, in most cases delegating the phase of the distribution of services to actors belonging to the private system (companies, individuals, or other social and economic actors).

This is the model that is also spreading in Italy, based on needs born of the “disengagement” of the State system, the broadening of the body of users to be reached and curbing costs (ISFOL, 2005). Extending the initiative to involve a larger number of users is one of the objectives of the experimentation.

Furthermore, the organizational model outlined by the memorandum of understanding signed by Piedmont, Tuscany and Umbria puts significant emphasis on the orientation and accompaniment of beneficiaries, which are seen as fundamental in order to combat discrimination phenomena caused by difficulties in finding and processing the information necessary to create effective training and employment strategies, thus supporting individuals’ “ability to decide” (ISFOL, 2005).

Lastly, apart from stimulating the individual, the role of ILAs is also to prompt training agencies to change strategy - differentiating and broadening the choices to make them more suitable to increasingly localized and individualized needs, leaving the State system (in particular local government) with an essentially regulatory and facilitating role regarding exchanges between territorial actors (research and training

centres, universities, schools, social partners), and increasing their strategic role²⁵ (ISFOL, 2005).

Finally, moving towards the conclusion of this contribution, it now seems evident that Italy has finally begun the complex but vital process of redesigning and redressing the balance in public policies in the field of education and training. This process is currently ongoing and appears to be particularly focused on the necessity of planning targeted actions for individuals, the various sectors of business and the different areas of economic activity. In the end we have to consider the Copenhagen process that, although focusing on Vet, has done much to further lifelong learning²⁶. For example, setting up a specific system for the recognition of

²⁵ In order to sustain this experimentation, the Ministry of Labour has promoted a specific system action in order to increase the monitoring and the evaluation activities concerning the ILAs training credit cards at local level. Carrying out this action the ministry has strongly recommended the involvement of all the regions and autonomous provinces and possibly an experiences exchange at European level through international networks (both existing ones, such as EARLALL network, or new ones to be activated) which are focused on the development of training policies at local level (ISFOL, 2007).

²⁶ According to the Copenhagen Declaration On Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (2002) there are several priorities, which will be pursued through enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training, among these we can mention:

- strengthening the European dimension in vocational education and training with the aim of improving closer cooperation in order to facilitate and promote mobility and the development of inter-institutional cooperation, partnerships and other transnational initiatives, all in order to raise the profile of the European education and training area in an international context so that Europe will be recognised as a world-wide reference for learners;
- increasing transparency in vocational education and training through the implementation and rationalization of information tools and networks, including the integration of existing instruments such as the European CV, certificate and diploma supplements, the Common European framework of reference for languages and the EUROPASS into one single framework;
- strengthening policies, systems and practices that support information, guidance and counselling in the Member States, at all levels of education, training and employment, particularly on issues concerning access to learning, vocational education and training, and the transferability and recognition of competencies and qualifications, in order to support occupational and geographical mobility of citizens in Europe;
- investigating how transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competencies and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels, could be promoted by developing reference levels, common principles for certification, and common measures, including a credit transfer system for vocational education and training.

qualifications obtained to allow the transferability of education or training received throughout the European Union is of the utmost importance for the consolidation of a lifelong learning system²⁷. An European credit system for vocational education and training (EcVet), to allow trainees to build upon their achievements when moving from one national Vet system to another, has been recently developed. The technical working group on credit transfer in Vet has developed proposals on the principles and rules of a European credit system for Vet, to ensure its effective implementation in mobility exchange initiatives. At European level last action has been the consolidation of the work begun on developing common tools and frameworks and the development of a European Qualifications Framework (Eqf) in 2007. This provided a common reference to facilitate the recognition and transferability of Vet, general and higher education qualifications, based on competencies and learning outcomes. It will improve permeability in education and training systems, provide a reference for validating informally acquired competencies and support effective functioning of the European, national and sectoral labour markets. Besides this, through their Europass portfolio, citizens could have the reconnaissance of their competencies in all the European context. Many of the tools developed are applicable beyond Vet and contribute to making the European area of lifelong learning a reality. The lifelong guidance principles and handbook, the common principles for validation of non formal and informal learning, form part of the required building blocks (Tessaring, Wannan, 2004).

From this point of view, consolidation of orientation services and networks (which is already taking place in many other European Union countries) must be achieved so that learning and skills acquired in formal, informal (on the job and in life) and non-formal (adult education institutes, continual vocational training courses, etc.) systems can be exploited. While labour policies focus on training, it becomes necessary for those

²⁷ The question of validation of both non formal and informal learning was at a crucial stage in Italy, because of the European Union requests. Indeed our country seems quite far to create a formalized and institutionalized validation system. On the other hand, initiatives for specific segments seem to prevail: for example, in the education context some training paths like IFTS (Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore) and EDA (Educazione degli Adulti) have already adopted national guidelines in order to validate the student education at the beginning of their training paths. Besides this, in university paths the acknowledgment of skills acquired on job, stage or cultural activities, voluntary service and alternative to military service is provided (Di Francesco, 2006).

responsible for matching supply and demand (chiefly employment services) to become involved in informing, consulting with and accompanying individuals, also to help them choose from among the many learning opportunities available in the various territories (a selection of currently separate courses, which were conceived independently, therefore not making it easy to pass from one course to another). In order to strengthen the role of demand in the network of systems and assign a key role to the choices of individuals, the development of specialist orientation services capable of encouraging expression of learning needs, as well as facilitating changes from one course to another, is crucial (ISFOL, 2005).

Moreover, one of the most urgent issues to be dealt with remains workers' unequal participation in training. Unfortunately, the highly selective nature of training persists: the beneficiaries are mainly people with a medium to high level of education, while those who are most in need of training do not take part (Farinelli, 2006). In order to promote the demand for learning among the most needy, the so-called "silent demand", it is undoubtedly important to offer non formal learning, which is capable of provoking their curiosity and interest based on life experiences, ethic and civic commitment and social participation and can prompt or use involvement in a community or association. Non formal learning can also offer forms and styles of knowledge other than those typical of scholastic and training institutions, which are traditionally focused on the organization of courses and the method of classroom teaching.

The local range of opportunities is equally important in order for the supply to be attractive and effective, as is their ability to respond to specific needs and relate to the different forms of aggregation and social relations in the area, making use, for example, of libraries, bookshops, museums and galleries, and social and cultural services of all kinds.

On the other hand, the culture of adult education is strongly connected to the idea of an open society, in which social origins count less than responsibility, commitment, and individual merits, and in which people are always given the opportunity for and access to another chance (Farinelli, 2006).

In such a society Ivan Illich's project, which was initially considered to be utopian, seems to become increasingly possible: to put the initiative to learn back in the hands of the individual; to guarantee access to the resources available to all those willing to learn, at any point during their lives; to allow all those who wish to transmit their knowledge to others to

meet with those who wish to learn from them; in short, to allow free access to knowledge.

This is the direction that even the Italian education and training system finally seems to be developing in.

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