

ENABLING POLITICAL CONDITIONS FOR AN IMPLEMENTATION OF UPSKILLING PATHWAYS FOR ADULT POPULATION IN ITALY

Claudio Maria VITALI¹

National Coordinator EU Agenda for Adult Learning (IT) INAPP – National Institute for Analysis of Public Policies, Rome, Italy

Abstract: *The extent of the phenomenon of functional illiteracy in Italy is extremely worrying. The data presented in the article, mainly from the OECD-PIAAC Survey, show that a large proportion of the adult population does not have enough literacy, numeracy skills and lack of digital knowledge. Moreover, there is an equally low level of educational attainment, with some 13 million citizens not acquiring a secondary school degree. In addition to the obvious impact on the competitiveness of the national economy and the difficulty for this part of population to address and support the challenges of innovation and changes in production processes, this fragility impacts on people-to-people relations, on the possibility of exercising their citizenship rights and on participation in the active and democratic life of the country. The article, considering AES and LFS Eurostat sources, highlights how the growth in participation in training and educational processes is extremely slow, even considering that the baseline remains well below the European average and, therefore, far from the benchmark ET2020 set at 15% in 2020. Effectiveness of governance and quality of educational and training provision are discussed in detail, both in terms of principles and general approaches and by offering concrete indications of measures and system actions with respect to which to concentrate resource investments. The article also revives the notion of positive discrimination policies based on the territorial dimension rather than on specific target groups, while reviving the notion of neighbourhood, educating community and territorial network for lifelong learning and guidance, as contexts to support individuals in their personal growth.*

Key words: *Adult low skilled, low qualified, governance, educational strategies, lifelong learning and guidance, neighbourhood, educational community, territorial networks.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As already highlighted in the first OECD-PIAAC International report (OECD, 2013), in some Countries the educational policies and the acquisition of a degree (at least a diploma) seem to be effective measures that help people, in particular the new generations, in the acquisition of skills, so reducing their risk of functional illiteracy.

This does not seem to be taken for granted in Italy, where one in four of the citizens has very low skills, despite having a diploma or even a degree, and where, unfortunately, these "anomalies" are strongly present even among the new generations. The datum show, therefore, a dramatic reality: many young adults with poor functional literacy, even if they have a degree that would raise different expectations. In absolute terms, these data refer, at the time of the PIAAC survey, to over 2,600.00 Italians with a diploma or degree with low skills; of these, just over one million are between the ages of 16 and 34. This can only solicit, once again, a reflection on our formal education system and, as we will see below, on the lifelong (and lifewide) learning system in general [1].

If the educational qualification is not always "sufficient" to guarantee an adequate level of functional literacy, it is widely documented that lifelong learning is a fundamental driver to support the development, maintenance and update of skills.

In Italy it seems to be widely available an educational and training offer capable of responding to a potential demand for upskilling and reskilling and, with equal evidence, there are regulatory and organizational infrastructures capable of guaranteeing adequate processes for identifying and validating skills and knowledge, however and everywhere acquired. These processes can be considered as preordained and facilitating not only the personalization of the educational and training offer, but also - and above all - a certification having a use and exchange value also on the labour market.

The critical and, in some ways, dramatic issue - due to its dimension and potential consequences on different levels (individual, economic, social and cultural awareness and well-being) - is that of the persistence of an extremely low rate of adults' participation to the opportunities offered; participation rate that even if it's rising, shows to be extremely slow and discontinuous.

The criticality is basically due to the fact that the levels of mastery of skills in literacy, numeracy and in the use of digital resources and technologies held by the so-called low skilled, are at the origin of:

¹ Corresponding author: INAPP – National Institute for Analysis of Public Policies, Corso d'Italia 33, 00198 Rome – Italy
Tel. +39 06 85447812,
E-mail: c.vitali@inapp.org (C. Vitali).

- lack of confidence in the profitability of the investment in training or in the re-entering in the education circuits;
- distance from information on the existence of the offer and of its full availability;
- low skilled underestimation of their own locus of control, or poor self-esteem on the resources possessed to produce changes in their social and economic condition;
- poor ability to act one's own competences – however held - due to the difficulty in mobilizing and making interact one's own resources of knowledge (it is evident, in this consideration, the influence of the notion of competence as defined by G.Le Boterf [2]);
- insufficient learning or use abilities of what was learned in any upskilling courses of a professional type [3].

2. CONSEQUENCES OF LOW ADULT'S PARTICIPATION RATE

It is necessary to reflect very carefully on the effectiveness of investments on projects aimed at professionalizing or formally qualifying these subjects that do not foresee – in the overall “economy” of the intervention – significant percentages of recovery and strengthening of those skills that we have defined as preordained and conditioning the very effectiveness of training and its usability in different contexts (family, society, work).

A second, but no less important, critical area is constituted by the increasingly evident connections between problems of exclusion and marginality and reduction of active participation, difficulties in exercising citizenship rights and seriously at-risk social equity².

It has already been pointed out elsewhere that C. Birzea [4], jointly declining terms such as education, social cohesion and active and democratic citizenship, argued that we can compare ourselves with two rather different conceptions of the role of education:

- the former assigns education a prominent role in ensuring that individuals, groups and communities gather around a common political project and a shared values system;
- the second is that education represents – rather -- a "repair shop", in which to remedy the failures of social fragmentation, rejection of politics, alienation and disengagement.

As a tool to increase social cohesion, (not the only one), education should hold together two apparently distinct, if not opposite, objectives:

1. one, having an inclusive nature, that seeks and stimulates the convergence of recipients towards concepts such as the common good, the sense of belonging, the full sharing of beliefs and values;
2. the other, which pursues – on the other hand - objectives for the valorisation of differences and

specificities, taking charge of the needs of specific target groups.

If for a long time the concept of social cohesion has been interpreted as the result of a national, cultural, religious and linguistic homogenization, aspects as globalization, crisis and increase of complexity in our societies suggest us, rather, to anchor it within a dynamic relationship, that keeps the rights and duties of citizens in balance.

If the priorities – in this perspective – are represented by the valorisation of diversity, pluralism, social justice, solidarity, active participation and responsibility, then, the social cohesion can be pursued through educational policies promoting among individuals:

- awareness and belief that they are - at the same time - bearers of rights and duties;
- sense of belonging and active participation;
- free access to all educational opportunities, without risks of discrimination;
- a positive and proactive attitude in the creation of networks and partnerships;
- capacity for peaceful conflict management;
- the practice of dialogue, the search for consensus, cooperation and negotiation.

Assuming the context elements already mentioned, (consequences of the economic crisis, globalization and of the increasing complexity of the society), to which must be added a growing disengagement (witnessed, for example, by the gradual decrease in the voting exercise) and a widespread feeling of distrust in institutions and representative organizations, to reflect on the theme of active citizenship and its strengthening finds justification in the attempt to fill what some have defined as permanent democratic deficit.

Starting from these premises, a definition of possible active citizenship is that given by the Commission in the Memorandum on education and lifelong learning: "*Active citizenship concerns the possible participation of citizens in all spheres of social and economic life, opportunities of which they benefit and the risks that all this implies, trying to determine to what extent they feel they belong to the society in which they live and have a voice in it*".

If the relationship between active citizenship, social equity and lifelong and life-wide learning finds solid references in scientific and institutional literature, an interesting development of the reflection concerns the didactic transposition of these concepts/contents achievable in the different contexts in which adults activate teaching and learning processes.

In other words, it seems timely to ask whether and how the themes of rights and duties, of participation and social equity (as a model to be pursued), of democracy and responsibility, are effectively taken into account when it comes to adapting the didactical curriculum addressing the adults included in learning/education processes: a very important focus of attention at a time when the system of educational provision for adults is invested with a long-awaited and profound reform of its architecture, its contents and its mission. To propose the topic of learning and teaching in adulthood, related to contents and values linked to active citizenship - with the meta-goal of positively impacting on the issues of access

² The definition of literacy adopted in PIAAC is as follows: "... the interest, the aptitude and the ability of individuals to properly use socio-cultural tools, including digital technology and communication tools to access, manage, integrate and evaluate information, build new knowledge and communicate with others, in order to more effectively participate in social life"

to opportunities, increase in participation rates, re-establishment of a framework and a context characterized by social equity, strengthening of an inclusive social model – must not be interpreted as an attempt to propose new interruptions of the educational continuum.

The reflection should not be limited to the contents of the didactic programs, their modularity or cumulation, the regularity of the supply, the communicative registers adopted by the educators and the learners, but should also consider "how" to promote and strengthen the paradigm of lifelong learning, investing, legitimizing and empowering a plurality of actors and contexts, of new roles and tasks.

3. POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION POLICIES AS A POSSIBLE COPING STRATEGY?

Another area of reflection concerns the relative dimension of policies. S. Meghnagi, questioning himself on the nature of adult education and, in particular, on when and under what conditions it can be an instrument of cultural emancipation or not, comes to the conclusion that professional competence and social competence are constitutive of the "knowledge that is useful" [5].

Meghnagi reaches this conclusion starting from the analysis of the context in which the training and educational events take place and, delimiting the field in relation to work, focuses on the knot of inequalities and reductions in protections. It is from this perspective that he reintroduces the notion of "positive discrimination", considering the need to invest the maximum of the resources in favor of the weaker social groups.

There are, therefore, good reasons why, on the one hand, the attention paid to the issue of active citizenship should be rebalanced for the adult population involved in lifelong learning activities – thus not relegating the topic to the school age population only – and, on the other hand, more attention should be paid to the possibility of adopting the "affirmative action", that is, positive discrimination policies addressing the adult population, considering that the composition of this target includes for the most users characterized by different, but critical, fragility, (difficulty of insertion, poor knowledge of the Italian language, extremely different cognitive styles in the "class-groups", poor or inadequate skills and previous knowledge, biographies often marked by failures, etc.).

The stock-taking exercise carried out during the E.Q.U.A.L. project implementation³, took place simultaneously with the preparation of the National Report on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on "Pathways to improve the skills of the adult population": many interviews and most of the relevant literature analysis have fed both Reports, constituting an important information base aimed, however, at different objectives: the first consisted in providing an account on how the Italian educational system for adults – in the broadest sense of the term – is capable of responding (or is being equipped to do so) to the solicitations identified in the "three steps" strategy suggested in the Recommendation, on the basis of necessarily general analysis and not necessarily drawn on

the specificities of the single Member State; the second one was to identify, within the existing policies and devices, the strengths to be consolidated and the still in progress "work sites".

4. MULTILEVEL AND MULTIACTOR GOVERNANCE IMPLIES A VISION

The regulatory infrastructure constitutes a significant strength of the national system. The legislative framework is now able – even after very long and debated defining processes – to grasp the complexity deriving from the need to keep under control and guarantee clear rules with respect to the many components of lifelong learning and, above all, to the relative connections with the labour market and social policies.

The subjective right to lifelong learning, the equal dignity and value of learning acquired irrespective of the contexts in which the result was achieved, the guarantee of access to educational and training opportunities at no or facilitated costs, the formal recognition of the territorial networks of employment and training services such as, *à la fois*, contexts and reference actors for taking charge of the needs of the most fragile population, the economic support bound to the attendance to training courses or guidance processes: these are the most important – but not the only ones – areas with respect to which the regulatory framework offers new elements of protection and clarity.

But the governance that has made the overall design of these devices possible remains complex, multi-level and multi-actor: today, therefore, raises the theme of the implementation and of the relative control, as well as the monitoring of the effects and the evaluation of the impacts.

It is also necessary to underline that the different regulatory systems have been designed with the necessary levels of detail but, also, that these could hide the need for a *reductio ad unum*, that is, their inclusion in a strategic framework and in an overall vision characterized by medium-long term programs. In other words, the country does not appear to have – as is the case in other EU States – an integrated National Plan or Strategy aimed at overcoming functional illiteracy (whereas, instead, with respect to the objectives of raising the educational levels of the population, an important sign seems to be constituted by the slowing down of the tendency to decrease the investments in education, that had characterized the period of the great economic crisis). Such a way of planning certainly requires an intensification of the efforts aimed at finding the best possible forms of dialogue between the various actors, in view of overcoming the fragmentation that characterized the decision-making processes (and, therefore, in view of overcoming the "disjoint incrementalism" [6] approach⁴ which has constituted the prevailing policy making model also in this sector). An

⁴ With respect to the Disjoint (or disconnected) incrementalism, see C. Lindblom, *The Science of Muddling Through* (1959) regarding the theory of mutual partisan adjustment and *The intelligence of Democracy* (1965) regarding incremental decisions.

³ More info available at www.upskillingtonaly.eu.

efficient governance can oversee not only the policies implementation (and its progressive adaptation to new scenarios), but also – and above all – to bring into practice the devices outlined in them.

As widely discussed in the report by R. Salomone held during the Conference "*Training for work and at workplace: towards a Trentino model of a European nature*", carried out within the framework of the E.Q.U.A.L. project, the need to consolidate relations between the various stakeholders is already taken into account at the level of constitutional law, where the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, also called social subsidiarity, is evoked.

This principle requires that State, Regions and Local Authorities should promote the autonomous initiative of citizens, as individuals and/or in association, to carry out activities of general interest: in practice, should be valued those forms of civil society spontaneous organization – as voluntary service associations, NGOs, Social cooperatives – to manage the services to be provided to the citizenship.

But the networking process of the territorial services, as the text of the Unified Conference State-Regions Agreement also states, "*cannot and must not be reduced to an institutional and organizational engineering that considers the structures and the services themselves in merely functional terms. The territorial networks must, indeed, constitute the modality with which the set of services is rethought according to the answer that it must give to the person and to his/her right to lifelong learning*".

Certainly, the declination of the horizontal subsidiarity principle in the Constitution and in its exemplary interpretations has been extended and extended to new stakeholders capable of exercising their role with respect to the subject of learning in adulthood: for example, Salomone expressly recalled the lines of cooperation activated with the Interprofessional Funds, the Bilateral Bodies and the synergies with the territorial Funds.

It is within the territorial networks of the employment and training services (PES), envisaged among the enabling infrastructures in the legislation that establishes the national lifelong learning system (L.92/12), which must be tested and implemented permanent alliances and collaborations among all those socio-economic and institutional actors who, in various ways, can contribute to mitigate the consequences deriving from the low participation in the upskilling opportunities provided.

5. BASIC SKILLS PROVISION IN ALL UPSKILLING AND RESKILLING PATHWAYS

Among these, the personalization of the education and training pathways, that is, the provision of an educational and training offer suited to the individuals' needs and exploiting ability, is considered one of the conditions to derive the maximum benefit from the investment that both system and person make on skills development.

As a result of the surveys carried out, it seems that the customization practice is gradually coming out of the scale of isolated experimentation and is now part of the

delivery methods provided in different contexts. Two are the most relevant examples: the first is the flexibility of the courses, with a significant reduction of the total hours considered necessary for the acquisition of the knowledge prescribed in the didactic axes that constitute the reference for the achievement of the educational qualifications in the CPIAs (adult learning centres); the second is represented by Individual Training Plans that are designed and delivered in the continuous training contexts within the companies.

As regards the CPIAs, the individualization of the paths takes place also using technologies that enable distance learning. In fact, the Reform law foresees that the adult can make part of the training path at distance and the operational guidelines adopted in 2015 establish that, in light of emerged needs, the distance fruition may include synchronous activities, between the teacher placed in the offices of the CPIA and students placed in the distance classrooms, called AGORA (delocalization of the training supply).

It is relevant here to re-propose – in terms of reflection and recommendation - the need to consider, as a precondition to avoid to waist the consistent investment requested by the individualization approach, the development of assessment processes also with respect to the individuals' ability to learn and – if deficits are detected – the inclusion of modules dedicated to the development of the key competence of learning to learn in the educational offer: underestimating the importance of this competence would be a serious error in the allocation of resources and in educational and training planning.

This is a preordained key competence, which in adults should correspond to the ability to mobilize and combine resources of different nature (knowledge, technical skills, attitudes and values, experiences, networks and social capital possessed, etc.): low skilled they do not seem to have exactly this capacity, besides probably having few resources to mobilize and combine.

It should also be emphasized that there are probably differences of mastery between young adults, adults aged between 35 and 50, long-term unemployed: basic literacy skills are subject to rapid obsolescence. Equally, at risk are the skills acquired in organizational and production contexts characterized by processes, machineries and tools that are no longer in use. It seems useful, for example, to deepen and draw indications from already locally tested devices (in some cases, even on a multi-year basis). One of these is undoubtedly the interventions that the Autonomous Province of Trento has planned and financed for the development of key competences for the unemployed engaged in paths that are part of the conditionality foreseen to benefit of support in the job search phase and to benefit of passive measures of labor policies⁵.

⁵ This in-depth study is postponed to the preparatory phases of the Report envisaged in a subsequent *working package* of the E.Q.U.A.L. project -WP3 - Regional case studies) and, certainly, will contribute to the definition of the intervention model that constitutes the project's purpose.

6. THE KEY ROLE OF GUIDANCE, COUNSELLING AND OUTREACH SERVICES

As regards the low levels of participation, the lines of action seem to be substantially two: promote/support and strengthen the services already provided at the time of the agreement in the Unified Conference and identified in the framework of strengthening permanent guidance and acting on the outreach.

In the first case, the model of infrastructure that appears most effective would seem that of the "one stop shop", a physical place within which users are provided with a set of services, specialized according diverse purposes, but connected and inter-functional with respect to people's needs. It must be remembered that are needs ranging from the support to the employment search to the support in the phases of choice and transition, from immediate and concrete help – even financial – to problems related to integration and self-esteem and minimal sociality recovery. Counselling and coaching, information and technical assistance, listening practice and ability to bring out real needs, often latent, are the activities to which the operators of these "one-stop shops" would be called [7]. Of course, if on the one hand the desirable solution is that of the concentration of the set of services referred to in a single physical space, it is clear that it will be necessary to reach this form of infrastructure step by step: for example, by networking distinct but close services (territorial proximity), capable of interacting and taking charge of complex user's problems, accelerating the response thanks to fully shared information services, updating and exchange paths between personnel and operators and the design of social projects and shared interventions. Certainly, activating outreach practices is more complex and expensive.

Moreover, although some examples of this practice can be traced – even in the literature – the dimension of the experiments is limited, as are the possibilities of a complete transfer of such practices.

The first challenge consists in "making visible what is not": the latent and profound discomfort of individuals who should be reached and supported, plays a dominant role, continually reproducing and reinforcing "escape behaviours" – with the settling of feeling of pointlessness of the intervention, especially the public one – and the renege on commitments, however minimal, required to access the services.

Also, in this case, the viable strategy can only be characterized by progressiveness and distinction in phases to be activated in the short term and actions to be planned in the medium-long term. In short it would be necessary:

- to increase the visibility of those experiences that have shown significant implementation results and change effects, even if developed on limited territories and on very specific fragile targets. For example, many lessons can be learned by studying and disseminating practices locally developed in the fight against early school leaving, such as those of the Neapolitan and Sicilian "street teachers", in the components more specifically aimed at identifying, recruiting and reactivating young dropouts;

- to make massive use of awareness campaigns, using role models and witnesses and carefully studying the languages, in order to offer a more comprehensible and "reassuring" narrative of the services offered;
- to map the resources available in the territories, paying particular attention to places of aggregation hitherto excluded from the existing territorial services networks and supporting their attractive role with financial resources and the making available of specialized operators task forces of (health services, post offices, public transport terminal, food markets, etc.). In parallel, and with expectations of medium-long term results, may be considered system actions aimed at enhancing the skills of the Employment Services operators, of the social services, of school administrators and CPIAs' teachers, of the volunteers – above all working in the civil service – of citizens' associations, of library and museum managers;
- launching massive awareness-raising campaigns through conventional media (TV, radio, newspapers and periodicals, road signs) and social networks;
- establishing awards and recognitions – in goods and services, up to small tax exemptions – whose collectability and collection could be subject to conditionality in the educational and training field.

7. MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND KEY MESSAGES

Strengthening the image and reputation of the adult education lever, promoting not only the typical purposes, (acquisition of qualifications and personal growth and development), but also those linked to employability objectives, implies the drastic reduction of educational and training answers not suited to the learners' needs.

This means being able to rely more and more on the reliability of the surveys and of the tools linked to the labour market intelligence, while strengthening the ability to design the educational and training pathways offered [8].

The proposed logical sequence (identification of needs and design of curricula) is not a new answer: what could improve its effectiveness consists in the adoption of a more participatory approach to the elaboration of the paths by the recipients. In other words, it would be necessary to move to a more decisive involvement of the beneficiaries: no longer just "target groups" but involved as co-designers.

A first benefit of this approach would be the increase in the commitment of the recipients and the reactivation of the skills and competences of the designers and teachers/trainers called to new challenges for the development of contents and innovative didactic methods and tools. It is quite clear that this reflection is closely linked to the topic discussed above concerning the personalization and flexibility of the paths.

But co-planning, when started up and correctly managed, has also a positive effect on the reconstruction of social ties (between the different participants in the process) and on the strengthening of the reflective and self-analysis abilities of the potential learners, with consequent self-esteem recovery. Of course, one of the preconditions enabling the launch of these processes is represented by the continuous consolidation of cross-

contextual networks between formal, informal and non-formal learning environments, oriented both to learning and to the process of recognition and validation of previous learning.

Also in this case there are examples, (such as the experiences carried out in recent years by the Lazio Region “in alliance” with the voluntary sector and the Civil Service; by the Lombardy Region in the framework of numerous protocols with ANCI; or, again, by the Autonomous Province of Trento with the training agencies and the Interprofessional Funds), which could direct this effort to build “hybrid composition infrastructures”, networks with varying intensity bonds, capable of combining intelligence and resources from different worlds which would *de facto*, as it was said at the beginning of the paragraph 4, substantiate the constitutional principles of horizontal and vertical subsidiarity. The quality and relevance of the educational offer for adults are strongly correlated to the skills of educators, regardless of the contexts in which they operate.

Among the operators of the system to be considered in a broad strategy of redevelopment and in-service training, also following the new organizational architectures foreseen by the reforms that have had an impact both on employment services and on the educational and training offer in the field school and regional, it is necessary to include:

- those who oversee within the CPI the phases of welcome, guidance, profiling;
- the CPIAs’ School Managers;
- the experts involved in the skills certification processes;
- the designers and trainers engaged in continuous training processes for adult workers;
- the trainers and educators of the third sector;
- the actors of the social dialogue and all those who participate in the construction of a new system of industrial relations characterized by a marked and new attention to the quality of the training offer as a lever for the competitiveness of the companies and for the maintenance and increase of job opportunities and related quality.

Starting and giving continuity to continuous training and upskilling interventions for the benefit of this complex and articulated audience, would not only produce upskilling – to face new tasks – and reskilling effects – to update skills already possessed – but would meta-communicate a new focus on the strategic importance of the role they play. It would mean acting on the increase of the reputation of the “adult educator” profession, attaching to it a new and marked specificity deriving from the preparation of ad hoc, non-generic but specialized courses, identifying it as a “stand-alone” career and not as a profession made up of skills’ contents that do not vary according to the different class groups, to the recipients of the educational and training service, to the educational settings and to the organizational and operational contexts in which it is performed.

It would be necessary:

- to strengthen the image and to improve the social perception of the role and work of the Adults’

Educator, insisting on its specificity and high professionalism, also accepting a drastic reduction of rhetoric and recurring narrative that associates the professional commitment of these “learning mediators” above all to a mission of social recovery;

- to involve universities, to support the curriculum innovation and to expand the number of universities that are seriously working on the topic and on the third mission;
- to diversify teachers’ careers, selecting *ab ovo*, those who are destined to work in what is still called “the morning school”, from those who will be called to work in the CPIAs;
- and, once again, to create the conditions and infrastructures that would really allow the creation of bridges between trainers and teachers, for example by using frequent and periodic Peer Learning Activities.

What is reported in these considerations and conclusions certainly does not exhaust the set of lessons learned in the stocktaking exercise accomplished within the E.Q.U.A.L. project.

Some work paths will have to be more focused during the in-depth action focused on regional experiences, expected in the coming months. The related results should allow the definition of an intervention model that can consider and valorise what has been already valued as effective and highlight the fine-tuning margins.

However, what seems evident is that this model will necessarily have to be implemented within an overall strategic vision and will not deploy all its potentialities, in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, if it will merely juxtaposed to a set of fragmented interventions, oriented by adhoc principles, added one over the other and without a direction and a responsibility shared among the actors representing the governance that oversees this issue.

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