CAREER CALLING: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS[*]

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ABSTRACT: In this moment the policies on lifelong guidance, recognition of learning and skills certification seem more working on who should do what and not on how make. It would be desirable to create links between the various providers of training, education and business, allowing for a reframing of orientation processes and of identification and certification of skills. All these practices can reduce distances for those who are likely to remain at the margins of education, training and work (Neet and over fifty).

KEYWORDS: lifelong learning, skills, orientation, guidance, identity, carrier.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to develop a reflection on how the standards in Lifelong Learning, Lifelong Guidance, the Certification of Competences, and the operating systems implemented by various institutions can represent a true resource for the needs of students and professionals. As a result of repeated calls by the European Union, Italian Law 92/2012 Article 4 (paragraphs 51 to 68) equated formal learning with non-formal and informal learning and hence the different ways of acquiring professional and technical skills in all processes and at each stage of training, orientation, and work of specific competence[1].

It is our belief that lifelong learning and the various contexts (formal and non-existent) today represent the fundamental element of the resources whereby people cope with the needs of late modernity. Extremely complex systems, where the autonomy of individual action increases, leave the student or worker the responsibility for building and growing their own knowledge base, skills, motivation, and propensity to action that blend in the term 'competence' (Beck, Gernsheim 1990; Lupton 2003).

According to the writers, to disentangle the current debate, it is worthwhile speculating whether the current certification and guidance procedures really do allow students and workers in limbo

between a 'mechanical' model and a model based on free self-entre-preneurship, to develop awareness and the relevant resources. The risk is for those who fail to keep up with the processes of training and acquiring new skills that a flexible and knowledge-centred organization of work requires. Recognition of lifelong guidance, validation of previous learning, and competence certification could be the means to guide the structuring and restructuring of professionalism, which, in turn, requires a process of re-socialization (Berger, Luckmann 1995), thus redistributing values relating to the reality of the job market and education. To date, however, there are still cultural barriers in the formalization of guidance procedures, recognition of learning, and skills certification, such as:

• the legal value of qualifications obtained through formal education and training paths;
• the traditional weaknesses of further education and adult education and training, which in Italy are not as widespread and consolidated as in other European countries;
• the absence of an explicit national system of qualifications and competences and auxiliary services for choice and lifelong guidance services;
• the multitude of institutions involved in this issue at national, regional, and local levels (ISFOL 2012).

Within this problematic context, the process of recognition, validation and certification of skills acquired in formal, informal, and non-formal contexts can be significant in terms of both professional and personal development. Acquiring awareness of their skills can be an opportunity for individuals to redesign their career, but also to consider entering a path of education and training and, more generally, it provides an opportunity for critical–propositive reflection on their past to design their own future. In the light of continuous changes in the forms of work and professionalism required, lifelong guidance can become a tool for continuous growth and development.

It is also a process of learning intended as change, an ability to play, to choose, to take responsibility for ourselves; a process by which one becomes skilled, capitalizing not only on past experience, but all the experience of the very processes of orientation, identification, validation, and certification.

2. Lifelong guidance today

The Age of Uncertainty: Orientation and Life Design in the 21st Century was the title of the 16th SIO Conference (Italian Orientation Society),

and it can be argued that this represents a social snapshot of today's advanced demands, including orientation. The concept of 'Life Design'[2] is based on an ability to consciously design one's own life (following an individual's real and profound needs) within a biocentric and holistic evolutionary model. To identify the needs to be met in a lifelong guidance perspective, studying work transitions allows us to investigate mechanisms to structure the opportunities and inequalities systems and their degree of permeability (Schizzerotto 2002).

While, on the one hand, this approach has enabled one side to understand the degree of societal openness or closeness, on the other, it has overlooked some peculiar configurations and mobility features. Reflection has focused primarily on all the ascending and descending, inter- and intra-generational movements, seen as an indicator of the real change in life and affiliation opportunities. However, it has not focused on changes associated with horizontal displacements in social space (Bison 2002; Cobalti 1995); and while great emphasis has been placed on structural and context variables, the interest in subjective lives and the sense of the individual's own work career has been studied little and left in the background.

Hence, our proposal is to widen knowledge of mobility dynamics by studying individual displacements along the horizontal axis and among working positions of different areas of use in which elements of regularity and predictability are induced by the action of social automation, and attention is focused on the micro-social dimension of the passages previously indicated (subjective lives and the sense that individuals attribute to their work and training career)[3]. This could be achieved by focusing on the supply side of the job and seeking more precisely to look at aspects that have already been investigated but can provide other valuable information, such as motivations, expectations, and individual preferences that generate and guide change.

The purpose of lifelong guidance is to understand how the traits of uncertainty, volatility, and fragmentation typical of the current social context (Bauman 2002; Giaccardi, Magatti 2003) affect work and employment transitions (including career choices made by university students) and to redefine not so much and not only the linearity and consequentiality (Fullin 2004; Sennet 1999), but also the intrinsic meaning. In particular, within a cultural and occupational universe whose traits are difficult to fix and where the contingency of the choices made

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[2] Life Design (or Vocational Design) is based on the use of a narrative approach (Life Design Counselling, or Narrative Career Counselling).

[3] Interesting in this line of research is the quantitative study on job-to-job mobility, co-funded by the MIUR within the Prin Cofin 2005, as part of an inter-university survey of mobility and local job market transitions (Colasanto, Zucchetti 2008).

is more than stability and long-term commitment (Bauman 2004; Sennet 2006), all of this can contribute to generating and self-feeding a weakening, standardization, and a crumbling of social relationships.

The most consistent hypothesis is that work forces are devoid of the meaning of a career as a social institution − or as a system of disciplinary rules of substantial weight in individual and collective life (Castel 1995) − while, instead, individual protagonism becomes prevalent in the form of a constant tension to achieve what makes more immediate sense, with personal experience and the construction of one's identity thereby resulting in a narrowing of the temporal perspective and an acceleration of subjective time (Aubert, Haroche 2013).

Today, we no longer have the expectation of a better life for our children, on the contrary, we fear that their lives will become more difficult. If we wish to avoid this worsening, we must move at a faster pace, increasing our efforts, and innovating even more every year. The current crisis in the Eurozone is a practical demonstration; political actions do not tend to create a better society, they do not create expectations, but simply focus on overcoming the crises by adopting the quickest workable solutions in order to avoid a *worst-case scenario.*

The linear social time ruled by our clocks has been replaced by a 'timeless time', a ceaseless flood of de-territorialized flows (capital, goods, people, ideas, as well as diseases and risks) that are emerging worldwide, giving rise to the phenomenon of de-synchronization of living places (Rosa 2012), and a consequent increase in uncertainties, inequalities, and discrimination (Piketty 2013).

3. Recognition of learning and certification of skills

Legislative Decree 13/2013 provides a definition of competence that does not neglect the learning contexts: «Proven ability to use in a work, study, and professional development context, a structured set of knowledge and skills acquired in formal learning contexts, whether non-formal or informal». It is also explicit when it says that

> in the context of public education, training, work, competitiveness, active citizenship and welfare policies, the Republic promotes lifelong learning as a person's right, and ensures equal opportunities for the recognition and valorization of competences., however acquired, in accordance with individual aptitudes and choices and from a personal, civic, social, and employment perspective.

It focuses on people's acquisition of knowledge and skills throughout their life, in their study and work lives, ensuring a transparent,

pertinent recognition system. These skills become an indispensable element for interventions aimed at professional development and job placement processes, which include the various training providers, employment services, schools, universities, and enterprises interconnected in the creation of institutional strategies and actions which seek to overcome a concept of accompanying and episodic orientation, and which intend to create opportunities with specialized action plans that surpass the idea of welfare.

From this perspective, the methodologies, tools, and techniques adopted by the competent entities and their actual functionality and usefulness regarding recipients' real needs come into play. It is perhaps necessary to be careful not to fall into an «educator's perspective» (Cepollaro 2008: 127), that does not surmount the possible contrast between personal goals and the means at hand and the actual opportunities to achieve those goals. The challenge is how to work on the 'weak link' that exists between formal, informal and non-formal learning supporting the identification of skills.

We believe that validating and certifying are not one single process. Underlying these reflections is the belief that before you can evaluate and then certify the acquisition of a series of skills, it is necessary to make the skills possessed by the subjects visible, and subsequently recognize them as examples of knowledge or stable knowhow acquired, and subsequently certified. At a national level, it remains necessary to distinguish between the validation of previous learning and competence certification. These two paths are linked, but different.

Among the most important difficulties remaining is the confusion in certifying skills with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. As already mentioned, competence has come to the fore in terms of implementing specific actions in contexts. Professional repertoires are split into skills and knowledge, which contribute to producing competence and the level of autonomy with which actions are carried out. The critical issue here is to unite the informal and non-formal learning acquired in the professional background of a person with transverse skills, which are not found in the regional repertoires of professional figures, and have not even really been evaluated in formal paths[4].

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[4] See, for example, the Dublin Descriptors, a general outline of learning expectations and skills for each of the closing titles of each 'Bologna' cycle, that is, the typical achievements of students who have obtained a qualification after successfully completing a study cycle. These include elements of which there is no formal evaluation if not tacitly through examinations and positive evaluations of internships. 'Knowledge and Understanding'. 'Applied Knowledge and Understanding' (applying knowledge and understanding). 'Making Judgments'. 'Communication Skills'. 'Learning Skills'.

In implementing recognition and certification processes, it is equal-ly important to recognize the role of the accompanier, recalling that, in selectively reconstructing their biography in terms of training experiences or otherwise, candidates mature awareness of the professional applicability of these experiences, and focus on the profile proposed for certification. The accompanier plays a crucial role in recruiting candidates for the initial stages of education, further education, professional and personal experiences.

The selection of experiences, carried out with the aim of facilitat-ing the recognition and worth/marketability of the experiences that subjects have developed in different contexts, should be fostered, in our opinion, through assisted self-assessment of skills with an approach that recalls the output−links−resources model, aiming to ag-gregate appropriate skills to a specific role that should be explicitly expressed in:

- output production processes with all the technical–realizational problems that have different degrees of predictability;
- connections with clients and internal or external suppliers with the relational difficulties that these involve;
- resources which, under their own responsibility, raise many dif-ficulties associated with management dynamics.

The accompaniment should:

- define the objective of the entire recognition and certification path that can be identified:
  - in the certification of competences for the recognition of qualifi-cations within the regional Directory of Professions system. The development of this goal may also include new profiles if they are not already present in the Directory;
  - in previous learning consistently with the content of training and/ or education paths that may allow for the acquisition of a formal diploma/qualification.
- identify the most significant experiences and, for each experience identified, analyse the entire process of each macro, thus finding the relevant skills.
- find continuous training paths in line with the goal.

The whole accompanying phase is complex for both the accompa-nier and the candidate, since in the process of conceptualizing pro-fessional and personal biographies, all experiences seem valid, and it is not always possible to identify those that are genuinely marketable. The greatest risk is to fall into the trap of stating the possession of skills through an account of what the person did and to merely ex-hibit documentation that 'certifies' these. However, we need to be

very aware that this is a reflective narrative (Reggio, Righetti 2013) which shows the ability to reason on what has been done as well as the resources that have been mobilized to achieve the result or deliver the performance.

This reflection is not always easy for potential candidates for certification, and therefore it requires the support of a qualified guide. Moreover, it is indispensable to think about how to redesign study courses at all levels in a lifelong learning perspective. This means thinking about what skills learning should be offered, which delivery method is most cohesive with the local territory and job market, and how to create validation and certification services and procedures that will be recognized by all education and training agencies.

4. The impact of orientation and lifelong learning on career paths

Lifelong, lifewide and lifedeep[5] are increasingly invaluable conditions for the effective exercise of the right to active citizenship. These variables, which are present to different degrees as resources in individuals, now more than in the past represent guarantees to protect oneself from the multiple risks of marginalization or exclusion from the workplace[6]. This is the set that constitutes the underlying conditions from which mobility paths develop. Such paths are characterized by a degree of complexity and articulation of trajectories and are not necessarily driven by a search for material aspects, such as hierarchical progression and authority, and pay rises (which are among the aspects of gratification), but are instead aimed at achieving a gratifying personal condition, defined by the level of initiative and autonomy exercised; by the correspondence of the job carried out with personal interests, expectations, and ways of being subjective; by the possibility of satisfying integration between the personal and professional spheres (Bovone 1984; La Rosa, Meda 1998; Lewis, Rapoport, Gambles 2003).

Today more than ever, Career Calling represents a challenge that requires us to reflect on how to launch a professional vocation; its dimensions and relationships with studies, motivation, satisfaction in life and work; the professional identity, and the career choices made

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[5] Lifedeep Learning is a third dimension that has only recently begun to be debated. It relates to beliefs, values and life orientations.

[6] On 19 February 2014, the MIUR published its *National Guidelines for Lifelong Guidance*, in which life-long orientation is recognized as the right of every person and exercised in different and specific forms and needs, contexts and situations (Lisbon 2010, Europe 2020).

by students (Fournier *et al.* 2016: 93–143) and adult/lifelong learn‐
ing. To deal with this task, three different key interpretations can be
used. The first is based on reflections on career theory, above all, the
approach where cultural patterns and norms of use depart from tra‐
ditional models towards a new, multifaceted, versatile, indeterminate,
and self‐taught business idea (Arthur, Rousseau 1996; Hall 1976). This
perspective signposts increased opportunities for movement beyond
organizational boundaries, between and within employment sectors,
through a series of episodic, often unplanned jobs[7], in particularly
dynamic employment markets, especially for the most qualified pro‐
fessional profiles, but also for intermediate figures. These opportu‐
nities are organized in a design plan whose stages are characterized
by lifelong learning and the acquisition of those multiple skills that
this learning can help to build. In fact, there is a high probability of
further inequalities,[8] particularly on the road to success, since this is
measured by the ability to ensure meaning and continuity through‐
out one's life story (Arthur, Khapova, Wilderom, 2005).

The second follows the approach of the life course, which identi‐
fies itself as a combination of a series of events, transitions and paths,
the practice by which individuals produce and reproduce their iden‐
tity, each time reaffirming themselves. The course of life and the
working careers in it are interpreted as a cumulative result of the
multiple career lines which make up an individual life story, and
the trajectories of the 'significant other', including partners, family
members or, more generally, members of one's own social networks.
These are, therefore, the results of experiences and change, whose
outcomes can be both unexpected and foreseeable (Saraceno 2001;
Schizzerotto 2002). These, however, seem to continue to follow a
series of institutional references − typical of modern society: work,
the family − whose relevance and normative nature seem almost
unaltered (Kohli 2007).

The third perspective is enclosed in the culture of the project,
whose principles have been described by Boltanski (2005), pointing
out how in the features that distinguish the 'new spirit of capitalism',

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[7] Due also to changing market conditions and organizational structures, the re‐
sponsibility for deciding the ways and direction of such a career path falls entirely on
individual subjects, who, in the absence of a reliable guide provided by the firm, under‐
take to collect information, skills and knowledge that will enable them to orient their
subsequent choices.

[8] On the one hand, thanks to the human and social capital possessed, they can
play the protagonist and thus exploit the opportunities of realization that unfold. On
the other, there are those who find themselves on a shaky unyielding path, made up of
continuous moves, within a precariousness that they cannot abandon and which causes
the lack of available resources.

of priority is the value assigned to the activity which, past an original identification with the work for the market, is reinterpreted as the involvement of the subject in changing and heterogeneous episodes and projects that are not confined to the employment dimension alone. These projects, by their very nature, have a limited timeframe; once completed, they require the ability and will to be questioned again, along with a promptness to change the scope of action, meaning, and relational values. Here, there is a very serious risk for individuals, namely, the loss of their roots as a result of the frantic success of the various projects, something which can create a deep sense of anxiety, fuelled by the fear that the plurality and complexity of the projects undertaken may actually prevent one from making sense of one's life[9].

5. Final remarks

The development and implementation of lifelong guidance models, the recognition of learning, and the identification and certification of competences, depend on how institutions face the challenges of European and national legislation. In current practice, the focus seems more on who should do what and not on how, why this should be done, and what the effect will be on recipients of this new right to competence and recognition of learning matured in their lives. It would be desirable to find a common ground that creates links between the various providers of training, education, and business, allowing for a reframing of orientation processes and the identification and certification of skills. This ought to represent a common system of development and inclusion for those who have failed to build a linear career in the name of flexibility, limiting themselves to experiencing several iotas of professionalism. Lifelong guidance, the recognition of learning, and skills certification can shorten the distances for those who are likely to remain at the margins of education, training, and work. Operators should be careful not to remain involved in bureaucratic and documentary schemes that cannot create added value, but could produce symbolic and stigmatizing hierarchies for those who obtain a degree through a recognized traditional course.

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[9] The basis for individual success and social recognition is, in this cultural landscape, risk predisposition, and an ability to adapt and be flexible; Thanks to these qualities, individuals succeed in nurturing an identity in progress, supported through the social networks they have created and the unceasing experiences that ensue in their life story.

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