

PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES: CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION OF SKILLS ACQUIRED IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONTEXTS

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THE MISSION OF CAP (CENTRE FOR LIFE LONG LEARNING FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BARI (ITALY)

CAP¹ was established in 2015 at the University of Bari as an experimental output of two research projects funded by the European Fund for the Integration of non-EU migrants (EIF). Since 2016 it has been supporting young and adult refugees and migrants in managing their vocational and professional careers through a process of formal validation and certification of their skills and prior learning, acquired in formal and informal contexts (Berger-Schmitt, 2000). These forms of informal and non-formal learning frequently take place without full awareness or intentionality on the part of the protagonist, who thus finds it hard to acknowledge them and attribute them to him / herself. The vocation of CAP, as a university service for the valorization of lifelong learning among adults, is expressed in the service offered to the users of self- and hetero-assessment of soft skills against a profile of skills useful for new employment and ongoing training paths. This relies on the interdisciplinary work carried out by researchers in the areas of sociology, the psychology of work and didactics / formative assessment.

The University of Bari, through CAP, is a member of the Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP), which over recent years has been dealing with the problems of formal recognition, validation and certification of foreign qualifications, such as the time required, the costs and the complexity of the bureaucratic procedures.

It currently seeks to apply the combined guidelines of articles 22 and 25 of the Geneva Convention, of art. 2 of Law 148/2002, of art. 39 of the TUIM (Testo Unico Immigrazione) paragraph 5, the procedure laid out in the Testo Unico on immigration (legislative decree No. 286/98, directive 2011/95/EU – legislative decree 16/2014 - recognition of qualifications in lieu of original documents, the procedure foreseen for law No. 148/2002 following the Lisbon Convention).

It provides services to migrants and refugees such as information and guidance; assessment of soft skills; conversion of informally acquired on-the-job learning into academic credits; accreditation of previous studies and professional qualifications (also in instances where the original documentation is unavailable) according to the regional and national framework. The process of accreditation and certification consists of 5 steps: profiling, evidence gathering, evidence assessment, evaluation and accreditation, and conclusion (Scardigno, Manuti & Pastore, 2019).

The attention given by the Centre for Life Long Learning for Migrants and Refugees (CAP) to the valorization of learning acquired in all kinds of contexts arises from the reflection on the radical changes that the labour market has been subjected to, effectively imposing a rethinking of the framework of professional competence. The fluid and uncertain edges of post-modern careers call for not only technical skills but also soft skills, such as independence, flexibility, a spirit of adaptability and re-orientation (Bauman, 2007).

¹ www.uniba.it/centri/cap

The skilled worker is not merely one who possesses qualifications and experience, but who is able to demonstrate his / her skills and knowledge in the field in relation to context-specific demands. In order to understand the cognitive aspects of the learning process, it is useful to make a distinction between three terms: knowledge, skill and competence. One may know information, a fact, a theory or a procedure. The associated skill lies in the capacity to apply such knowledge in order to carry out tasks and solve problems. Having competence means having the capacity to use knowledge, skills and information in real life and work situations.

This dimension of expertise is closely linked to informal learning, i.e. all those forms of learning that take place tacitly and through informal channels, starting with the family itself. This reflection, supported by evidence gathered in work contexts and by the results of scientific research on a national and international level (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002; Jacob & Parks, 2009; Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijs, 2009; Manuti *et al.*, 2015), is broadly confirmed in the attention which over recent years the European Union has dedicated to the role played by the informal and non-formal contexts of life in the development of competences.

Individuals learn and acquire skills not only in the traditional scholastic and / or university context (formal learning), but also and ever more often in alternative contexts: through participation in the organizations of civil society or in the virtual field of Internet and mobile devices, either individually or among peers.

CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION OF SKILLS ACQUIRED IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONTEXTS

The connection between social research and the contextual policies of cultural and academic integration was obtained through an operative protocol adopted between CAP and the Regional Council of Apulia, and later extended to include the Universities of Foggia, Salento and the Polytechnic of Bari in June 2018.

The protocol concerns the construction and implementation of the Regional System of Validation and Certification of Skills of the Apulia Regional Council (SRVCC), which embraces the experimentation set up by CAP for the certification of the skills / qualifications acquired in non-formal and informal contexts over the course of the individual's life, which must be valorized, clarified and recognizable, with particular reference to the target group for CAP: political refugees or beneficiaries of international protection.

CAP researchers and the Professional Training Section of the Apulia Regional Council collaborated on the definition of an experimental working methodology for the provision of the service for the identification and validation of skills, and the University of Bari CAP was acknowledged as the regional 'certifying authority' for the identification and validation of skills.

The experimentation began with the request, sent to CAP, to examine the experiential and training background of two users of Afghan origins, who had been in Italy for a few years, and had been involved on a daily basis in intercultural mediation at reception centres, public structures and bodies. The two users aspired to carry out their professional activity with a formal recognition of the title / qualification of 'intercultural mediation expert'. In specific terms, the folder of transversal skills enhanced the profile of the two users, in line with the skills required by the professional body in question, as highlighted in the judgement given by the operators and provided together with the clarification document.

The service centre of the university accepted this innovative (the first case in Italy with refugees) request, making the commitment to lay down the basis of an ever more structured service, which would be accessible also to those who might need it in the future.

The activity started with the drafting of the application and the compilation of the 'Consent to the itinerary for the identification and validation of skills' sheet.

Those responsible for the acceptance and validation at CAP therefore undertook the process for the recognition and clarification of formal qualifications as well as non-formal and informal experience, in view of their potential certification by the Apulia Regional Council. The starting point, from within the Regional Repertory of Professional Bodies, was to identify the profile for which certification had been requested. The description sheet of the skill units and the relative knowledge and skills was compared with the evidence presented by the users to verify any similarities. The figure identified as the target of their certification for both users appeared to be made up of three areas of competence: the acceptance of foreign citizens, the facilitation of the exchange between foreign citizens and their territory of reference, and the development of social integration activities.

Starting from there, individual interviews were carried out in which the CAP researchers asked the users to provide as detailed a description as possible of their formative and professional experiences relevant to the field of reference. This information, documented by proof (letters of reference, work contracts, certificates of participation, diplomas, etc.), was included in the clarification document or portfolio, which highlights the experiences and the activities carried out, translating them into meaningful and documentable learning processes.

In particular, by making reference to the experimentation carried out with the two users, respectively citizens with subsidiary protection and international protection, the analysis of the curriculum and its translation in the clarification document highlighted major overlapping between the skills, knowledge and abilities outlined in the sheet of the Regional Repertory and the studies documented by various sources of proof, numbered so as to make them available in the confirmation process as foreseen by the certification itinerary.

CAP then contributed to enhancing the portfolio of the two users, inserting among the documented studies and those in progress an evaluation of their so-called soft skills, i.e. interpersonal skills useful for carrying out the role of intercultural mediation expert alongside their other technical skills.

The phase following the drafting of the clarification document consisted in the validation of skills, which in concrete terms entailed the analysis of the evidence produced to support the studies enumerated. Once the reconstruction phase was completed, the itinerary outlined the possibilities for completing the itinerary – in relation to the percentage of coverage of the skills expected by the users – with the definition of a plan of action regarding the potential completion of their study careers, and / or the integration of relevant professional experiences.

In the case of the two users, given that the percentage of coverage of the three areas of competence investigated was over 70%, it was possible to continue along the path of formal certification. The validated skills were formalized in the Certificate of Validation, and this stage came to an end with the identification of the contents to investigate in the direct assessment followed by the official request for the constitution of a third-party evaluation panel, made up of experts in the subject area in question, as well as experts in validation and certification from CAP, representatives of the social sectors, of the Ministry of Labour and the Sector of Professional Training of the Apulian Regional Council.

The assessment consisted in a technical / practical test of the skills not covered by the users' curricula. The itinerary was finalised successfully, with the awarding of the certificate of professional qualification as 'intercultural mediation experts' for both users, the first two beneficiaries of international protection in Italy to receive a professional qualification recognized by the Regional System of Education and Training. The agreement was based on the common institutional interest in guaranteeing to every individual the valorization of the

skills acquired in all learning contexts, coupled with the possibility of putting such skills to use in the various fields of lifelong learning (education / training / work).

On the basis of the protocol, access to services for the identification and validation skills acquired in non-formal / informal learning contexts will be possible in dedicated service centres, lifelong learning centres and / or university structures with placement services (career guidance) offering the recognition and acknowledgement of skills in the universities of Apulia.

The Apulian universities and the Puglia Regional Council will be called upon to guarantee the matching of training and university courses for the recognition of university training credits (CFUs) and, should the responsibility remain on a regional administrative level, develop the methodology of issue of the certification of skills / qualifications; analysis of the access requirements to the roles of the SVCC-RP; staff training; the definition of a regional repertory of soft skills; the formulation of a methodology of credit recognition covering training paths and university careers for the purposes of student placement; all with particular reference to our target group of international students and refugees.

OUTCOMES OF ACADEMIC INCLUSION OF REFUGEES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BARI ALDO MORO CAP

Over these years, thanks to the efforts of CAP, 17 refugees have won a grant financed by the Conference of Italian Deans, by the Ministry of Inner Affairs and by the Regional Agency for the Right to Study to start and / or continue their university study, and two refugees have gained a formal recognition of their professional experience and the consequent certification by the Apulia Region. This experience is a clear example of how it is possible to achieve such an ambitious goal in southern Italy, where we are very near the Mediterranean area where many migrants first land.

Over the years, CAP has developed an innovative approach to prior learning recognition based on identification, validation and certification of experience and learning. During identification CAP examines the professional and educational resumé of the candidate and, where necessary, supports him or her in the writing and editing of the Europass curriculum. Later it carries out an assessment of the evidence provided, according to three criteria (value, pertinence, validity). At the end of the second phase, CAP communicates the final decision to the candidate and issues the validation documents. The third and last phase provides for a final assessment before a board composed of experts, representatives of the Regional Council, members of CAP, and the representatives of trade unions, trade associations and social partners, according to Italian law (art. 29 L. R. n. 15/2002).

The strategic element often undervalued by the hosting community, called upon to work towards integration, is the desire for autonomy among migrants and their wish to move away from a welfare-based dimension in order to affirm their own capabilities and skills.

This aspiration is very often frustrated by the objective difficulties that they encounter, but even more by the subordinate level to which not only their contribution is relegated – often downgraded compared to their actual professional potential – but also their social position.

The step forward that the hosting societies are called upon to make, as expressed also by the UNHCR, consists of placing the refugees in a condition to be able to state their own needs and to take part actively in decisions concerning their own lives. When they are in a position to be able to take part in the definition of strategies and policies, it will at last be possible to speak of the real empowerment of the refugees themselves.

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