

Italy

Working Paper

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Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship





Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship (EduMAP)

EduMAP is a Horizon 2020 research project focusing on adult education among young adults at risk of social exclusion. Particular attention is paid to educational policies and practices needed to foster active citizenship among vulnerable young people.

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1. Challenges in AE provision and access

The greatest weakness is lack of a coordinated quality assurance strategy for all AE and VET programmes. This appears as a shared statement among trainers and the ISFOL official. Public investment should respond to a support strategy of expanding the demand for training by all the population and qualification and enlargement of the offer. Until recently, a policy of emergency containment prevailed concerning vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants, NEETs, etc.) through specific responses and momentary interventions. Today the challenge for Italy is to define the supply of skills that the country needs to ensure participation of the country in the new industrial revolution characterised by new production models based on the embedding of intelligence in all objects of industrial production, as well as in living and working environments. Today, the creation of innovation and its use aim at human capital development, equipped with more refined qualities than those required by previous industrial eras.

Low qualified young adults (ISCED 1-2) are under-represented with respect to participation in all training programmes. Low qualified young adults constitute 41.9% of the Italian population and just 27.4% of them participate in training activities. The programme therefore needs to be more open to a wider audience of young unemployed as well as young unemployed women.

Overall, the resources are insufficient to activate participation levels that produce a significant impact on increasing the participation of vulnerable groups in adult education. The first problem that reduces the effectiveness of public policies is the low volume of investments. The remaining problem is that of disparity between public and private investment for training that reduces the chances of the former to play a redistributive role in favour of vulnerable groups.

Public investments in order to improve teaching methods have focused primarily on the field of remote learning.

Guidance services are managed independently by education and training providers, who are often in competition with each other. This carries the risk of guidance being distorted by marketing. The case of services that accompany the flexicurity measures is different. These services should have an independent character with respect to the training offer.

Innovation and flexibility in the delivery of learning in programmes is reflected principally in regional policies that over the past 15 years have developed regional, remote training systems and structure models of training paths. A national database is not currently in place however. Trainees therefore can only seek employment opportunities within their own region.

The majority of VYAs suggest that one important competence they are missing from the programmes is how to create their own networks. Some trainers also mention the need for building a networking capacity. As one of them suggests, networks can provide an effective approach to support clusters of individuals rather than single persons. Networks can thus represent vibrant motors of change in personal, social and working life. They give otherwise individuals and organisations new ways of connecting with like-minded institutions and individuals, as well as a vehicle through which to speak to the broader public. For some VYAs networking compared with

traditional styles of communication, can offer a number of structural advantages such as increased opportunities for peer exchange and cooperation, professional development, and the greater political force that comes through collaboration.

Low levels of education of the young adult population and the tendency to stagnate (-2.1% low skilled in 10 years). This is even more evident when considering the educational attainment levels, jointly with the PISA data and the growing number of NEETs. There are no plans suggesting that a significant number of young people and adults who have already left the school system can improve their level of skills.

The Italian welfare state model is not based on the principle of universalism granting access to benefits and services based on citizenship, but is inspired on the principle of subsidiarity and the dominance of social insurance schemes, offering a medium level of decommodification and a high degree of social stratification. This model offers sub-protective welfare and creates inequalities especially among youths depending on the resources of their families.

Participation in adult education activities is low and even among the privileged strata of the population participation does not exceed the European benchmark of 15%. This reduces the propensity for training the vulnerable groups as well. Achievement of the European benchmark by 2020 is impossible because it would require a significant increase of public and private investments. Macroeconomic strategies in place are characterised by the postponement of new investments to overcome the crisis and towards the consolidation of public finances. This approach involves optimisation processes of public spending (e.g. financing flexicurity measures), but does not allow the activation of investments needed to produce changes in resource allocation, specifically in orientation to finance the growth of individual and collective demands for skills. However, public funding is still directed towards supporting existing policy paradigms, though it could be argued the related devices and systems have helped create the current imbalances: a lack of a strategic framework, lack of knowledge on the expected impact of policies, especially on vulnerable groups, financing a public market of adult education dominated by an oligopolistic system.

The lack of financial resources weakens the action of adult learning government. Many laws simply state principles that cannot be met. The implementation of administrative decentralisation was started in 1970, over a century after the birth of the Italian State. In the first decades of decentralisation, the regional governments have approved regional laws on adult learning. In recent years their action in the field of adult learning was limited to the management of the European Social Fund and educational interventions in the field of health and social policies (normally entrusted to social economy enterprises). The ability of the state to intervene in the area of adult learning is also hampered by weaknesses in the system of public administration, although a profound reform in this area is in progress. The weakness of the administrative and financial framework has accentuated the fragmentation of political action processes. The definition of strong policy priorities at national level (such as the Job Act) has allowed for better coordination and, possibly, a more effective intervention.

2. Gender and diversity aspects tackled in the studied programmes

According to the educators the gender diversity is not considered an issue, and that men and women are equally welcome. Nonetheless, the majority of participants are always men. This leaves much space for women's outreach. The educators do not have an explanation for why men prefer the course more than women but the fact that the majority of those long-term unemployed in the region are men (74% of the total unemployed population 18-35).

For most of the trainers recognizing the value of gender and diversity, respect for differences and the ability to incorporate or obviate any differences in the learning process are important elements of the design process that unfortunately are lacking from VET today. The trainers but also the trainees need to be self-aware and have the ability to see others' points of view, valuing diverse experiences, recognizing the challenges and complexities of diversity and willingness to engage in it. Furthermore, they must be able to learn about others' experiences and have the ability to analyse behaviour of the group, to identify possible problems and conflicts and to act strategically to prevent and/or manage possible conflicts and anger in the training environment. This however as one of the trainers suggested asks for trainers to having internalised the philosophy of respect, valuing diversity and heterogeneity in different context and groups and to motivate their trainees to share this perspective and learn to positively deal with diversity.

3. The concept of APC as it is defined, understood or approached in the context of the study by different respondent groups

Policy makers: Strictly related to the eight key competences for active citizenship as these are described in relevant European documents. These are competences that all the students must acquire by 16 years of age and are needed for personal fulfilment, the building and the full development of all individuals, of fair and relevant relations with others, of a positive interaction with natural and social reality. The poor attention given to these competences however is one of the main causes of the disorientation and uneasiness of young people.

Educators: APC is relevant to competences that refer to organising a CV for seeking employment but also being familiar with legal and other policy idiosyncrasies of the Italian labour market. APC is based on how decisions are made by the individual as part of a broader social group, and how these decisions affect the life course, but also the life course of other peers who also need to make similar decisions. APC is also about “claiming what is rightfully yours” meaning that young people need to learn how to make demands and not simply how to follow the law. This essentially entails knowledge of their needs.

Learners/Participants: APC is about claiming social benefits.

4. Elements that are critical and or significant for enabling learners to become active citizens, or to develop APC competencies in the studied programmes

APC is not the focus of this programme but there is a strong element of critical thinking, decision making and entrepreneurship in the courses' learning outcomes as the trainers suggest. The trainees also mention that they receive good knowledge with the use of examples regarding the legal requirements for applying to a job, compiling their CVs in a manner that highlights their skills and competences with the use of examples from their training, as well as material that guides them through the process of decision making for selecting the best employment opportunity for them based on their competence profile.

Using innovative methodology during the training and particularly the "Training Gym", the "Smart Agent" and the "Digital training pills". VYAs in particular seem to be fonder of the latter method "Digital training pills". As some of them suggest it is a new way to find out about how to organise your skills and competences around the demands of the labour market.

5. Competencies and qualifications possessed, represented and/or cultivated through by the AE practitioners who contribute to the design, development and delivery of APC programmes for VYAs

There must be a significant paradigm change in teaching and learning practices according to some of the trainers. As they suggest they need a paradigm that puts the student at the centre of the process and places much more emphasis on the skills and attitudes that help young people to apply their knowledge. Trainers should no longer only transmit knowledge, but rather support and encourage each student's own learning process and to develop their full potential – individually and in groups. This asks for new competences like understanding diversity as the ability of the trainer in dealing with the heterogeneity and diversity based on historical, social, economic, religious backgrounds, learning needs, motivations, prior experience and knowledge, learning history, (learning) abilities, learning styles, age and gender of the group of trainees.

6. Critical factors and conditions (favourable and unfavourable) that affect the potential of AE policies to cultivate APC for VYAs

Favourable conditions:

- Adult learning policies related to social policies are determined by the wide variety of actors working in this field. Each ministry operates independently in a given field of competence (e.g. health, culture, defence, interior, justice, etc.). This is replicated at various levels of local government.
- Programmes and policy measures can be identified particularly for special targets (e.g. immigrants, marginalised people, inmates, drug addicts, etc.). Appropriate forms of cooperation between the various public and private stakeholders involved only occasionally emerged from these programmes and policy measures. The most significant growth trend must be attributed to the role of the various agencies of "non-formal education", among them the various actors of the social economy. Between 2012 and 2016 the percentage of participation in this type of activity went from 18% to 31% for people 18 to 35 years old. Of these, approximately one third participated in activities promoted by organisations of the social economy.
- The new service system is now based on building customised courses aimed at acquiring the necessary skills for effective placement and relocation of the unemployed in the job market. The recipients of income support benefits are obliged to participate in personalised vocational training and community services. In case of breach of duty they are subject to penalties ranging from curtailment, suspension or debarment from benefits. The supply of vocational education and training courses, both at secondary (CVET) and at post-secondary level, leading to qualifications and competences recognised in the labour market.

Unfavourable conditions:

- It can be said that the impact of investments in favour of vulnerable groups remains the most problematic. The possibility to activate public resources for adult learning in vulnerable groups is guaranteed, but it varies depending on the type of policies.
- The people who fall within the framework of the flexicurity policies or social acts access resources activating measures in their favour in an individual dimension (individual vouchers and individual plans). In other cases the possibilities to activate public resources are linked to the cyclical nature of issuing notices and approval of special ESF projects aimed at the vulnerable groups. It should be born in mind that the Italian welfare state model is not based on the principle of universalism granting access to benefits and services based on citizenship, but is inspired on the principle of subsidiarity and the dominance of social insurance schemes, offering a medium level of decommodification and a high degree of social stratification. This model offers sub-protective welfare and creates inequalities especially among youths depending on the resources of their families.
- Essentially what is needed for AE to respond to diverse VYAs are more focus on

raising outreach and promoting access to young adults essentially those who are unemployed or threatened by poverty. This is not feasible due to insufficient funding as it has been suggested by all interviewees, but according to some of the trainers the reform of labour market policies and the beginning of a flexicurity model should produce a significant increase in participation and in training for vulnerable groups.

7. Lessons learnt from laws and policies that contribute effectively to cultivating APC for VYAs

APC is not addressed as a priority in any AE policy document in Italy. The adult learning policies related to social policies are determined by the wide variety of actors working in this field. Each ministry operates independently in a given field of competence (e.g. health, culture, defence, interior, justice, etc.). This is replicated at various levels of local government.

Programmes and policy measures can be identified particularly for special targets (e.g. immigrants, marginalised people, inmates, drug addicts, etc.). Appropriate forms of cooperation between the various public and private stakeholders involved only occasionally emerged from these programmes and policy measures.

The delivery of activities that are very much related to transversal skills like decision-making and critical thinking are crucial for engaging trainees with demands of the regional economic life. The programme applies some interesting and quasi innovative training methods, in order to create relevance to the realities of the regional labour market. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, but the programme eventually does not create an added value for those trainees who wish to seek employment opportunities outside the region.

Greater equality of access to lifelong learning for all age ranges is present only in some Regional Operational Programmes. The possibility to activate public resources for adult learning in vulnerable groups is guaranteed, but it varies depending on the type of policies. The people who fall within the framework of the flexicurity policies or social acts access resources activating measures in their favour in an individual dimension (individual vouchers and individual plans). In other cases the possibilities to activate public resources are linked to the cyclical nature of issuing notices and approval of special ESF projects aimed at the vulnerable groups.

Strong performance in the field of problem solving in the PIAAC study are to be connected to the particular production structure of the country, which is mainly made up of small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises. In such contexts, the organisational structure is generally flat and forces workers to deal everyday with the challenges of problem solving and the production of new product and process knowledge.

The reform of labour market policies is to be enhanced and the beginning of a flexicurity model should produce a significant increase in participation and in training for vulnerable groups.

8. Existing practices of information access and communication (emerging patterns and tendencies; people/social networks; media/platforms/channels; content/messages) about adult education in the studied programmes

- A major share of participation in adult education activities is due to the support of families and businesses. In addition, the role of social economy, associations and voluntary work have played a key role in adult education for centuries in Italy and must also be considered.
- Access to relevant programmes is only made through the relevant application platform. An online application is available. Candidates who submit their applications by post or to the office are NOT considered for the programme. Incomplete applications are discarded from the system after the deadline and relevant applicants are noted by an e-mail message. Any other communication is either by phone or e-mail but only with the secretary.

9. Leveraging on VYA's information access and communication practices about adult education

The important factor to pursue AE and VET is a job guarantee. Unless the programme is work related there is no motive for them to participate. Another element of improvement for both trainers and trainees is the development of innovative training methods that involve practice, work related scenarios and also simulations in real working environments.

Active student-centred entrepreneurship training at this level is likely to prove more effective than formal passive teaching processes. The traditional approach to academic entrepreneurship training relies on business or management schools to deliver reflective modules through lectures and literature based seminars as part of specific degree programmes. More recent innovative approaches extend entrepreneurship training to students using non-formal courses and curricula such as business-plan seminars, business simulations, project seminars and role-playing activities.

10. Information accessed and used during the design of AE for APC programmes

All trainers and educators hold a degree or a master in education, and they have received special training on issues pertaining job counselling quality management and validation techniques. Trainers seem to rely on the provider regarding their training and up-skilling. This is because the provider organises relevant courses for trainers very often particularly courses on soft-skills. Trainers however have no involvement in designing the programmes and courses. They apply their knowledge and skill to successfully implement a course that has been designed by their employer.



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