



Department of Political Science
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Course of the Policy of EU Structural Funds

**The EU's Lifelong Learning Strategy and its
Impact on Skill Centered National Education
Policies. The Italian Case of *Atlante del
Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni***

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Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	6
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	7
INTRODUCTION	8
METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH	13
1 THE EVOLUTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING: IS THERE A STRATEGY FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?	15
1.1 Overview	15
Defining Lifelong Learning.....	18
1.2 Historical Developments of the European Education Policy.....	20
The 1960s – 1970s and the Rise of Lifelong Education	20
The Dark Decade	23
A New Start for Lifelong Learning: Delors and the Year Of LLL.....	24
1.3 The Creation of a Knowledge-Based Society	26
The Lisbon 2000 Strategy	26
Education and Training and Europe 2020.....	30
The European Social Fund’s Contribution and the Next Programming Cycle	34
1.4 Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: the European Qualification Framework	37
NOTES.....	40

2	A CASE STUDY: THE ITALIAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK AND THE <i>ATLANTE DEL LAVORO E DELLE QUALIFICAZIONI</i>.....	42
2.1	Overview	42
2.2	The Italian Approach to the European Education and Training Strategy.....	45
	The Italian Context	45
	Education and Training Governance in Italy.....	49
	A Way Towards Lifelong Learning.....	53
2.3	Building a National Qualification Framework	57
	Legislative Decree 13/13.....	57
	Minimum Standards and the Construction of the National Repertory	59
	National Framework of Regional Qualifications.....	61
2.4	The Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni	65
	Structure and Implementation	65
	Beyond Institutional Functions.....	70
	NOTES.....	71
3	STATE OF THE ART IN THE ITALIAN REGIONS: IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS THROUGH A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS.....	74
3.1	Overview	74
3.2	Comparative Analysis.....	78
	Initial Processes and Approaches	78
	Actors	82
	Procedures	84
	Impact and Criticalities	86

3.3 Final Remarks.....	88
NOTES.....	89
CONCLUSION.....	91
LEGISLATION.....	95
REFERENCES.....	98
ANNEX 1. INTERVIEWS' STRUCTURE	105

List of Figures and Tables

Fig. 1.1	Lisbon benchmarks about education and training.....	30
Fig. 1.2	Early leavers from education and training, 2002-2018	33
Fig. 1.3	Tertiary education attainment, 2002-2018.....	34
Fig. 2.1	Total unemployment rate (EU-27, Italy), 2014-2019.....	46
Fig. 2.2	Adult participation in learning (EU-27, Italy), 2014-2019.....	48
Fig. 2.3	Early leavers from education and training (EU-27, Italy), 2014-2019.....	49
Fig. 2.4	The education and training system' structure, 2018-2019.....	53
Fig. 2.5	The Italian system of competence certification	65
Fig. 2.6	The 24 professional economic sectors of Atlante Lavoro	67
Fig. 2.7	Structure of the sector "Food production"	68
Fig. 2.8	A.D.A 02.02.05	69
Tab. 2.1	Summary of legislation concerning the National Certification System	63
Tab. 3.1	Interviews in brief.....	76

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEC	Commission of the European Communities
CEU	Council of the European Union
EEC	European Economic Community
EPCEU	European Parliament and the Council of the European Union
EQF	European Qualification Framework
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
LLL	Lifelong learning
MS	Member State
NEET	Neither Employed or in Education and Training
NQF	National Qualification Framework
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
PE	Permanent Education
SEA	Single European Act
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Introduction

Over the last decades, the European Union (EU) has faced new economic, social and cultural challenges. Economic globalization has changed relations among States in terms of capital, labor, goods and services. Companies, which are suffering the increasing international competition, are engaging in flexible arrangements for workers, lowering costs and practicing offshoring, but creating concerns about social security, wages, quality and quantity of jobs. Furthermore, technological changes are increasing productivity and leading to significant transitions for workers. Europe is suffering from an increasing older population and a stagnant growth trend. An older workforce and the entrance of millennials in the labor market will change certain types of jobs and career pathways.

Since the 1990s, the EU has highlighted, in its strategical documents, the importance of education and training to face these challenges. Skills, knowledge and competences have become key elements to guarantee economic growth and, thus, individual and common well-being. To both students and workers, it is constantly requested to update and improve their cultural and experiential heritage. On the one hand, more skilled workforce is requested to adjust emerging skills mismatches; on the other hand, education offers must to be constantly updated. For this reason, the EU has embraced a new approach towards education based on the concept of Lifelong Learning (LLL): education is no more limited to formal and structured pathways, but it is conceived as the sum of the experiences and expertise gained by an individual throughout his/her life. LLL systems are perceived as necessary in providing learning opportunities to all, strengthening citizenship and democracy and supporting economic

mechanisms. Many instruments and tools have been defined to concretely put these models at work: among others, national qualifications systems have been identified as key factors that can bring about their implementation. Qualifications systems - together with their related frameworks - aims at recognizing, validating and certifying learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. Practice of validation and certification becomes fundamental to link education and training systems with the labor market and to address social challenges.

The idea that these systems can be used as a policy tool is relatively recent: the EU started to promote LLL in the 1990s and less than 20 years ago to develop its own European Qualification Framework (EQF). Even more recently, Member States (MSs) have begun to interiorize these new models and tools and build up their national systems. Italy legislated for the first time about LLL in 2012, formulating its strategy and its national qualification framework (NQF).

The Italian challenge is little-known outside the competent environment, but it directly affects citizens and the valorization of their cultural and experiential heritage. It also concerns the construction of new governance for education, training and labor systems, which must be rethought within an integrated approach. Indeed, Italy has shown to have to face structural issues that have challenged the successful actualization of the EU strategy. Particularly, difficulties emerge in the coordination between the various institutional levels involved in the process: the EU (as the institution in charge of providing the overall guidelines), the State (with exclusive legislative competence on general norms on education), and the Regions (with exclusive competence on vocational training and implementation).

From these considerations, derives the need to understand how MSs have transposed guidelines, produced by the EU, into their national strategy and operational programs and how they are implementing them. Indeed, several issues arose from the process of updating pre-existent systems and adapting them to new models, to make them effective. Specifically, this work raises

and investigates the following questions: first, why has the European approach in education shifted towards a lifelong learning strategy? Second, which is the building process that has led to the Italian National Qualification Framework – as the product of the new EU strategy – and how has it overcome the structural challenges presented by the Italian system? And finally, which are the advancements made and the current implementation issues being debated among the Italian Regional systems?

To attempt to answer these questions, the thesis posits that a multilevel research approach is needed. The first level of analysis, in Chapter 1, assesses: *a)* the theoretical debate that has led to the conceptualization of lifelong learning; *b)* the historical process that made LLL the cornerstone of European strategies. In the literature dedicated to the history of LLL in the EU, some key themes have emerged. First of all, many scholars have underlined the fundamental role played by intergovernmental organizations in promoting lifelong learning before EU institutions took the lead. Most of them have argued that the 1990s were the moment in which LLL stopped to be a UNESCO and OECD's slogan and became an official strategy of the EU (Field 2001; Volles, 2014; Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015). The 1990s are also identified by many authors as the time in which LLL abandoned the humanistic approach of the 1970s to assume a neo-liberal identity: that is, individuals are considered as responsible for their knowledge and personal development and a market-based strategy is introduced (Field, 2001; Dehmel, 2006; Volles 2014). Today, the EU is fully aware that education and training policies are fundamental for the creation of a knowledge-based society, to guarantee adherence with the labor market and foster social cohesion. This last reflection has led many scholars to analyze actions promoted by the EU to improve education and training systems capable of fostering employability, upgrading skills, encouraging mobility (Dehmel, 2006; Alulli, 2015). Specifically, the present work examines European programs and strategies from Lisbon 2000 to Europe 2020 inclusive of the more recent programming cycle of the European Social Fund

(ESF). Furthermore, the thesis assumes that one of the major tools defined by the EU to enhance LLL is the creation of a European Qualification Framework.

With some exceptions (CEFEDOP, 2018; Perulli, 2019), the mechanism through which such policy is developed within MSs has received little attention. This is why the second level analyzed by the thesis is the national one. The intent is twofold: while tracing the process of elaboration of the Italian National Framework and the National Repertory, from a historical and normative point of view, Chapter 2 highlights the importance of competences validation and certification systems. The work points out a series of advantages both for the individual and the society and, consequently, for the labor market and the education and training sector. Furthermore, these systems are presented as tools for harmonizing national models. MSs need to reorganize administration and management strategies and find a link with the supranational level. Therefore, in analyzing how this top-down policy impacts the pre-existent governance, the thesis states that Italy has made further improvements in the elaboration of its own qualification system, has developed a consistent strategy and created an innovative model with pertinent tools: among others, the *Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni*.

Within this multi-level governance logic, the main goal of Regions is to ensure that European directives and national strategies properly reach the ultimate users and to deliver a service to the community. This is why the work posits that the assessment of criticalities and strengths in the building of the system must be carried out at the third level of analysis, the regional one. Given the fact that the process is recent, regional experiences are under-researched. Thus, the last Chapter 3 aims at giving a first insight into the Italian regional certification systems through direct interviews with experts that, over time, have been involved in the formulation of these systems. Direct testimonies have allowed to develop a qualitative analysis of four regional systems and, at the same time, to draw on first-hand reflections on criticalities and future perspectives for these policies. The work expects to reveal different results concerning initial

approaches, procedural and organizational aspects, level of implementation and impact. At the same time, there are common challenges that need to be tackled at the national level.

Finally, the last section suggests the need for further investigations in the application of the European lifelong learning policies, highlighting how the comparative approach can improve our understanding of the mechanisms that each MS has adopted and providing relevant insights into the necessary steps that should be taken over the next years to harmonize and upgrade the different national policies applied so far in the field of education and training.

Methodology and Research

The present work is based on the research conducted at the National Institute for Public Policies Analysis (INAPP), thanks to the support of the group of experts devoted to the development of the *Atlante Lavoro*. The assessment of the European and national system, which has been carried out in the first two chapters, is based on legal documents, legislative texts, normative sources and resolutions. To ensure an in-depth analysis, reports, white papers, conclusions from EU and inter-governmental agencies (UNESCO, OECD, Council of Europe) have been examined. Furthermore, several databases (ISTAT, EUROSTAT, OECD) have been consulted to contextualize the formulation of the Italian qualification system and to analyze economic and social conditions.

To analyze the regional level, the thesis builds on semi-structured interviews of key witnesses. Their format has been chosen to give a greater margin of reply to interviewees, receive exhaustive answers and allow to articulate the analysis about key topics. Questions retrace the phases of the building process of validation and certification systems: formulation, formalization and implementation.

The case study selection has been made based on the level of formalization and implementation of regional certification systems for formal, non-formal and informal learning. Each regional case needed to have: *a)* the presence of decrees or deliberations which at least formalize the regional certification system; *b)* the presence of regional repertories and other validation systems; *c)* the presence of experimental trials/implementation actions of the validation system. Furthermore, they have been selected to ensure representativeness of the whole national

context, comparability and diversification. For these reasons, the work elects as case studies: Abruzzo, Lazio, Lombardia and Puglia.

After that, key witnesses have been identified based on their prominent role in the formulation process of regional competences evaluation and certification systems. They have been contacted, at first, through the mediation of Dr. Riccardo Mazzeella (INAPP Researcher and Group Coordinator for *Atlante Lavoro*) and Dr. Rita Porcelli (INAPP Researcher). Interviews have been carried out remotely. Prior to the interviews, the agreement of all interviewees was formally secured.

The key witnesses involved were the following:

- Dr. Antonio Rodriguez Putrone, Head of O.P. *Repertorio Professioni e certificazioni* of the General Directorate *Istruzione Formazione e Lavoro* (Lombardia Region);
- Dr. Alessandra Tomai, Director of *Area Programmazione dell'Offerta formativa e di Orientamento* of the General Directorate *Direzione Istruzione, Formazione, Ricerca e Lavoro* (Lazio Region);
- Dr. Maria Saula Gambacorta, Head of the Office *Programmazione Politiche formative e di Orientamento professionale* (Abruzzo Region);
- Dr. Rossana Ercolano, Official of O.P. *Attuazione del Sistema Regionale delle Competenze* of Department for *Sviluppo Economico, Innovazione, Istruzione, Formazione e Lavoro* (Puglia Region).

1 The Evolution of Lifelong Learning: Is There A Strategy for The European Union?

1.1 Overview

Education has been for a long time outside – or at least on the border – of the EU’s policy debate. At first, the policy area was seen merely as collateral to the predominant themes of economics and politics. When the European Economic Community (EEC) arose, education emerged just as a tool to foster the creation of a common internal market and fulfill economic obligations. The Treaty of Rome¹ mentioned professional education in Article 128, highlighting the importance of recognizing diplomas abroad to encourage free movement of persons and services (Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015, 887).

Further discussions on the topic incrementally arose when the idea itself of the EEC went further towards the creation of a political union. In the 1960s, the necessity of cooperation in other areas than the economy started to emerge: educational policies could foster political and cultural integration and, thus, enhance the European integration process. However, MSs complained that education was something to be debated at the national level and, for this reason, the policy stopped at the stage of intergovernmental cooperation (Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015, 887). Nevertheless, outside the institutional arena, some ideas started to come to light: *lifelong learning* was born at that time. Firstly, the concept emerged as adult education to develop, years after years, into the idea of learning from “cradle to grave” (Volles 2014, 9).

In the beginning, the topic was promoted only by transnational organizations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) made a magistral effort to lead lifelong learning to enter the European debate and, then, the official policy tables. However, the process required almost four decades, when LLL became the cornerstone of the EU's educational policy. In the 1970s and 1980s, efforts towards a common policy were merely based on statements or information (Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015, 888) because founding treaties and MSs did not take into consideration the idea of a supranational authority. Economic issues, such as the oil crises of 1973 and 1979, stagnation and unemployment, led to closer cooperation in vocational education. The Community implemented some initiatives: the “Education Action Plan”, which addressed youth unemployment and migrant workers’ issues, and the Eurydice system, created in 1980 as a network to collect and share information on education for European policymakers (Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015, 888).

The 1990s have been the real turning point: there are some key dates to remember. In 1986, the Single European Act was signed to complete the creation of a single market and education became one of the instruments to realize it. At that time, the Community established the “Erasmus Program” to allow students’ exchange within the EU borders. Besides, at the end of the decade, Eastern block’s dissolution eventually led to the enlargement of the Union and harmonization of educational systems became a fundamental prerequisite to join the EU. Moreover, 1992, with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, signed the moment in which the EU educational policy reached a legal dimension (Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015, 888). Vocational Education, former Education and Youth Policies entered the EU official agenda and the Union rebuilt its strategies with new goals.

From then on, the EU made some steps forward. Concerning higher education, the “Bologna Process” (European Commission, n.d.) started in 1999, intending to enhance regional

cooperation in higher education and find common solutions to similar problems within the EU. The formation of a European Higher Education Area aimed primarily to harmonize the recognition of diplomas and enhance students' exchange. More importantly, the European Commission started to have a proactive role in the decision-making process and LLL became the educational reform policy that the EU wanted to promote within all MSs. Moreover, this period signed the transition of lifelong learning from "a slogan promoted largely through intergovernmental debating chambers" to "a tool for the reform and modernization of aspects of national education and training systems" (Field 2001, 3).

In terms of meaning, the lifelong learning strategy dealt with different conceptualizations. At the beginning of the 1960s and for the following decade, the approach was humanistic. The UNESCO and the *Faure Report* – a milestone for LLL theory – defined the concept of "learning through the entire lifespan" into a framework of societal solidarity and democracy. The slogan was "to be, to know, to do, and to live together" (Faure 1972). On the other hand, in the 90s, the discourse took a neo-liberal and individualistic turn. The *Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (Council of European Union, 1996) stressed individual responsibility for acquiring new skills and knowledge and set the goal of reaching individual personal development. Lifelong learning also became a macro theme through which to tackle different issues, in particular the economic ones. This changing approach could primarily be reconnected to new structural problems that arose in that period: globalization, new information technologies, aging society, unemployment and, last but not least, the aim of creating a knowledge-based society (Volles 2014, 3).

The concept of lifelong learning internalized a dualistic vision: on the one hand, the idea of education as a social equalizer, on the other, the human capital theory stressed the importance of the economic contribution of education in terms of productivity (Margiotta 2012). This twofold approach is present in both the EU strategies that have characterized the period from 2000 until today: the Lisbon 2000 Strategy, which aims at "making the EU the most competitive

knowledge-based economy in the world”, and Europe 2020 that points to a “Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth”. This double meaning has generated an in-depth theoretical debate.

The aim of the present thesis needs to retrace the history of the European education policy, focusing on the evolution of lifelong learning theory, to understand how the approach towards education has changed over time in the European discourse and why it finally results in the present policies. The chapter begins with an extensive definition of lifelong learning and the explanation of its changing terminology. It chronologically recalls the history of lifelong learning from the 1960s until today, with particular attention to the two strategies mentioned above. The final part is devoted to the European Qualification Framework as a practical case of implementing an EU policy instrument in lifelong learning.

Defining Lifelong Learning

As already mentioned, the concept of lifelong learning has evolved over time. For its changing nature, it is not easy to find a comprehensive and unique definition. The terminology has mutated as well as the theory. As stated by Gelpi (1984), there is the need for a clear definition and for overcoming the lack of conceptual clarity. There are two discursive shifts that LLL has faced in its history (Volles 2014, 4): firstly, the step from adult to lifelong and, then, from education to learning.

In the 1960s, when the concept emerged, it was referred to as “adult education” because it focused primarily on activities aimed at improving technical and professional qualifications, abilities and, more generally, knowledge to allow adults to complete a level of formal education or acquire new skills (UNESCO 2012). In this case, the target and the aim were limited to the working class and guaranteed access to training activities. Soon, the concept evolved into two ramifications: “éducation permanente”, promoted by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, and

“recurrent education”, used by the OECD in the 1970s. The first one refers to education as “a permanent process of development of knowledge, know-how and social skills” (Titz 1981, 46) while the second formulation stresses the importance of “distribution of education over the lifespan of an individual in a recurrent way” (OECD 1973, 24). They both still focused on reformation of post-secondary education and vocational training. However, the approach “from cradle to grave” was already established: the step towards “lifelong education” was behind the corner. Lifelong education does not refer to a particular phase or sector of the educational system, but it envisions a comprehensive strategy centered on the achievement of personal fulfillment. The transition from education to learning was almost completed when increasing attention was put on the individual sphere rather than on formal structures and institutions.

Today, the EU has embraced the definition of Lifelong Learning as: “all general education, vocational education and training, non-formal education and informal learning undertaken throughout life, resulting in an improvement in knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (EPCEU 2006). This general definition clarifies the lifelong and life-wide approach: LLL encompasses all stages of life and takes place in several contexts, not just in school. The real innovation is the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning, entailing a recognition for competences acquired in those contexts.

Formal learning consists of “learning that occurs within an organized and structured context” (Laal 2011, 471) and it is easily recognized. Otherwise, non-formal learning comprehends planned activities that are not explicitly conceived as learning, such as skills acquired at the workplace or in extra-curricular programs (Laal 2011, 471). Informal learning is also called experiential learning. It is unintentional and results from daily life activities (UNESCO 2012). The integration of those new contexts signs the passage from education to learning.

1.2 Historical Developments of the European Education Policy

The 1960s – 1970s and the Rise of Lifelong Education

Inside the lifelong learning history, the role of transnational organizations results in being crucial. As already mentioned, UNESCO and OECD have been the driving force that has allowed the realization of a European Education Policy. Most of the themes became relevant in the political arena and the official agenda of the EU after a broad discussion among intellectuals and technicians inside the two organizations. It was the UNESCO that, in 1949, organized the first International Conference on Adult Education in Denmark². For the first time, the concept of adult education entered the institutional discourse. During this conference, a broad range of topics arose: from the meaning and purpose of adult education – vis à vis vocational training³ (UNESCO 1949, 12-13) - to questions about the practical realization of it. What emerged at the end was that national cooperation was needed. States have the duty of fostering the growth of adult education, but cooperation and the creation of transnational voluntary movements could ensure a more extensive development of the matter (UNESCO 1949, 5). The exchange of students between MSs may facilitate the achievement of educational and linguistic goals and could ensure the acquisition of a common culture and understanding of citizenship, facilitating the European integration process.

This new social and civic scope of adult education became official at the second UNESCO conference in Montreal in 1960⁴ called the *Role of adult education in a changing world* (UNESCO 1960). The final report framed adult education as one way to help people understand the changing society they live in and to critically deal with new themes, such as technological developments, political divisions, nationalism. It was also stressed the need to recognize adult education as part of the formal educational provision and to allow people to update their knowledge and exploit their interests continuatively during their life: the first lifelong approach

arose. After this conference, many European MSs adopted several educational provisions and adult education finally entered national policies.

If the necessity of devolving some powers to supranational institutions in that field was still a chimera, the idea that education could be a tool for cultural and civic developments was soon internalized by all the actors involved, even by the EU institutions. Probably because the European social context was changing and there was the need to give a new stimulus to the integration process: the movements of '68 partially represented this kind of malaise. Education was framed as a tool for spreading the Union's (at the time European Economic Community) fundamental values and as an answer to new social demands. The Council of Europe⁵, for the first time, embraced the concept of *permanent education* (PE) (Volles 2014, 11). As mentioned, PE introduced the idea of "learning across an individual's lifespan." The organization describes the educational process as "a continuous, lifelong process marking all stages of life", which "encompasses the entirety of needs, roles and functions of an individual" (Titz 1981, 46). Thus, educational policies would allow flexibility "in their process, structures and operational modes" (Titz 1981, 46) and openness to socio-economic contexts.

This idea was reinforced in the same years by the publication of the document *Recurrent education: a strategy for lifelong learning* by the OECD (1973). The preface provided four reasons in justification of seeing recurrent education as an alternative to formal schooling patterns. Firstly, the necessity of restoring the role of education as a social equalizer and, secondly, the need for adaptation to the continuing social and occupational adjustments (OECD 1973, 5). Thirdly, according to the document, some forms of "deschooling" (OECD 1973, 11) were also necessary to spread different learning methods and introduce alternation between work and leisure. And, more importantly, finally the report stressed the idea that recurrent education was indispensable to give more opportunities to adults, which were suffering the total absence of education and training during their work lives. The OECD's vision still focused on

the reform of post-secondary education and how to put lifelong learning to the service of elders – or, more generally, the workforce.

The publication of the document *Learning to Be* (Faure 1973), the so-called *Faure Report*, represented the real turning point. Edgar Faure was the French Minister of Education and former Prime Minister, who, together with a group of experts and technicians, wrote the first document on lifelong education. UNESCO brought this work to the political arena and a discussion started around it. Two are the main innovations derived from this contribution. Firstly, the purpose was not confined to adult education anymore. Faure identified as the main scope of development the “complete fulfillment of a man” and recognized lifelong education as the way through which individuals could “build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – 'learn to be'” (Faure 1972, vi). Practically this could be done, according to Faure, through formal educational patterns, such as wider access to higher levels of education and the integration of new curricula, and through recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Furthermore, Faure approached the matter differently, introducing in the discourse humanistic concepts that would be the pillars of LLL for many years and still today characterize a school of thoughts that differ from the neo-liberal ones. The humanistic approach brought in by UNESCO is based on two assumptions. Firstly, the belief that the international community must move towards the same goals and destiny and that “solidarity of governments and people” (Faure 1972, vi) is, in that respect, fundamental. Secondly, the certainty that democracy is fundamental to provide each individual with the right to realize themselves and share his/her potential and that, mutually, education is the keystone of democracy.

The Dark Decade

While the debate over LLL was developing within international organizations, practical developments seemed far away to be achieved. Few policy proposals were born of national policymakers and fewer initiatives were actually implemented. Field (2001) suggested two limiting factors that, in such a way, blocked the discussion over lifelong learning between the late 1970s and the 1980s.

Firstly, the arena in which the debate took place in that period showed its limits: intergovernmental agencies made such an effort, but they were without actual powers (Field 2001, 8). The OECD resulted in being the most appealing because it made direct proposals to a restricted circle of national governments regarding practical policies. On the contrary, UNESCO opened discussions within a broader forum where the conflict among Eastern and Western blocks prevailed. The only initiatives taken into considerations were the ones that could be used against the enemy. The Council of Europe, on the other hand, worked just on adult education bodies and did not spread its message to policymakers.

The second limiting factor directly links to the changing socio-economic context. LLL was conceived in the Golden Age, during years of economic prosperity and in a situation of full employment. After the two oil crises of the 1970s and the labor unrest, the European economy became weaker and new and more urgent issues started to arise. Training and education lost their importance compared to the significant growth of unemployment figures: the only initiatives born in that period referred to adult professional education. More generally, the debate over lifelong learning did not reach national agendas and it even lost its appeal inside international organizations.

A New Start for Lifelong Learning: Delors and the Year Of LLL

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the European Community ended up in a severe recession with high unemployment levels. In the same years, the lifelong learning concept came back into the European policy agenda and resulted in new policy outputs (Volles 2014, 14). The leading advocate for lifelong learning was the member of the French Socialist Party, Jacques Delors, who chaired the European Commission from 1985 to 1995. Within that period, he submitted a White Paper to the European Council, called *Growth, Competitiveness and Employment – The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century* (European Commission 1993). In this document, Delors developed a new strategy for the Community that envisaged the recovery of the three areas mentioned in the title. The recipe included the birth of information society and investments in several fields: research and technology, trans-European transport and energy networks, European market competitiveness (EC 1993). Within this framework, the concept of LLL was not merely confined to the educational system, but it was interpreted as the “catalyst of a changing society” (EC 1993, 117): in other words, it must tackle all threats that showed up with globalization, science and new technologies. In 1986, the passage of the European Single Act (SEA) revised the 1957 Treaties of Rome and launched the Cohesion Policy while sign posting the creation of the Single Market.

Indeed, during these years, the Community achieved the European Single Market’s completion with the signature in 1992 of the Maastricht Treaty and became the European Union. Consequently, the aim was to put education and training in satisfying Single Market’s requirements (Field 2001, 10). In addition to that, the European Commission - under the Presidency of Delors – published a White Paper, called *Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society* (CEC 1995). Here the message was even clearer: the necessity of MSs to devolve some of their authority to the supranational body and to use education to enhance the European integration process. The Commission launched A European Year for Lifelong

Learning for 1996. Within this initiative, several projects and policies stemmed out and the debate over LLL started to spread all over Europe, bringing in new actors – as the EU became more and more involved - and revaluing old ones, such as international agencies.

In 1997, UNESCO, which was at the time chaired by Delors, held the International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg. The conference centered on the idea of a “learning society committed to social justice and general well-being” (UNESCO 1998) and the necessity of international organizations in promoting LLL. UNESCO was still focused on the pillars developed by Faure - to be, to know, to do, and to live together –, but this time its influence was decreasing. On the contrary, the OECD had the opportunity to spread its power: its members consisted of the wealthier economies in the world and its contributions reached the most important policy-makers and so, national parliamentary arenas. The OECD set its goals to help governments face new challenges, which arose from globalization and technological changes. Once again, LLL was referenced as a solution for issues brought in by global competitiveness and science without abandoning the theme of social exclusion. OECD emphasized the recognition of informal learning and the necessity of enlarging the educational pattern of an individual to all the aspects of his/her life.

Moreover, lifelong learning was present at the time in every strategy developed by international organizations or European institutions. There was a significant trend towards vocationalism: as macro-economic issues reappeared consequently to the crisis, there was a renewed emphasis given to education as a tool for economic interests. The main aim was to link “school education and working life” and provide the labor market with highly skilled workers to match skill needs (UNESCO 1993, 120). The private sector was incentivized to become more involved in the provision of training. Even if the fight against social exclusion was not entirely forgotten by international organizations, the concept of lifelong learning was rife with neo-liberal intents, that highlighting an individual contribution’s to economic growth.

The Council's *Strategy for Lifelong Learning* (Council of the European Union 1996) made it evident since the discourse took an individualistic turn. The document stressed individual responsibility in taking care of the acquisition of knowledge and skills and the aim shifted from a collective intent towards individual personal development. This vision is in line with a new relationship settled between the state and the civil society (Field 2001, 11), with a decreasing role of the former and a growing trust towards the market and the private sector: individual behavior and autonomy became two fundamental concepts in the society.

1.3 The Creation of a Knowledge-Based Society

The Lisbon 2000 Strategy

The 1990s consolidated the concept that education and training are essential tools for developing economic and political sectors. Moreover, within the European borders, MSs all agreed on the necessity of creating a more cohesive and competitive Union. At the beginning of the new century, these beliefs converged into the Lisbon Strategy, which cleared the way for a new course for lifelong learning. The Strategy interiorized the idea that the realization of economic goals must comprehend social, cultural and personal objectives and, in doing so, lifelong learning became one of the cornerstones of the entire project (Proietti 2020, 19). Its main scope was to make the EU “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world that could realize a sustainable growth with better working places and more social cohesion” by 2010.

The European Council held a meeting in Lisbon between the 23th and 24th of March 2000 and predisposed the purposes:

- preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society by better policies for the information society and R&D, as well as by stepping up the process of structural reform for competitiveness and innovation and by completing the internal market;
- modernizing the European social model, investing in people and combating social exclusion;
- sustaining the healthy economic outlook and favorable growth prospects by applying an appropriate macro-economic policy mix.

(Lisbon European Council 2000)

The second pillar is particularly interesting for education and training. The Council highlighted the need to invest in people, as the main asset of the Union, and develop a stronger welfare state to tackle social issues. Concretely, MSs must (Lisbon European Council 2000):

- increase per capita investments in human resources;
- increase by half the number of 18 to 24 years old people - with only lower-secondary level – involved in further education and training;
- develop multi-level purpose learning centers which involved schools, training centers, firms and research facilities, all linked to the Internet;
- define a European framework for new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning and promote digital literacy throughout the Union;
- foster the mobility of students, teachers, training and research staff through existing Community programs (Socrates, Leonardo, Youth) through greater transparency recognizing qualifications;
- develop a common European format for curricula vitae, to be used voluntarily, in order to facilitate mobility.

Lifelong learning also had a special mention within the employment policy. In this sense, the Strategy aimed to involve social partners, encouraging the introduction of LLL inside firms by alternating working time and learning moments.

Another innovation set in Lisbon was the creation of the *Open Method of Coordination* (OMC), a system that should support MSs in developing policies and enhance cooperation. The OMC consists of fixed guidelines with specific timetables, benchmarks and indicators, precise targets expressed in national strategies and periodic monitoring and evaluation. These processes resulted in similar policy outputs among MSs and, so, OMC is considered a valid tool for convergence (Dehmel 2006, 54) even though it does not have a way of enforcing its indications. Moreover, after the legal phase of the 1990s, the Lisbon Strategy opened a season of political awareness on lifelong learning (Giunta La Spada and Brotto 2011).

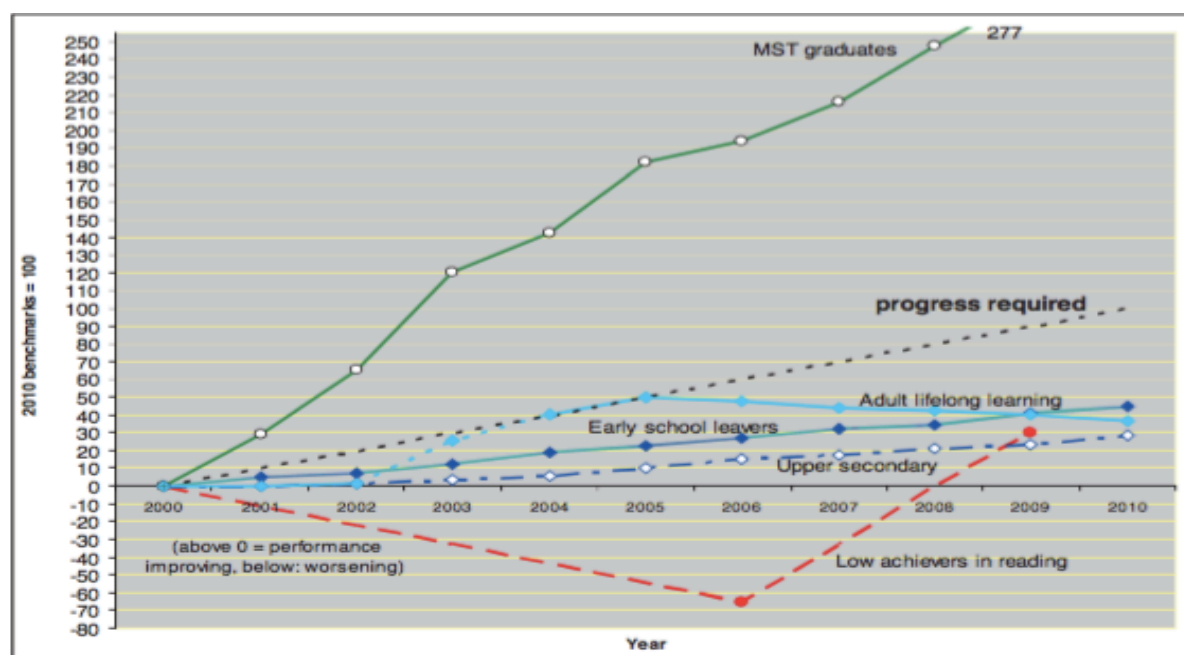
Some major initiatives were put in place by European institutions, following 2000. Among them, one needs special attention: the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (CEC 2000). Six Key Messages formed the European Commission's document: "new basic competencies for all; more investments in human resources; innovations in teaching and learning methods; evaluation of learning outcomes; rethinking orientation; improvements of local learning centers" (Proietti 2020, 84). They would be the tools to create a global strategy for lifelong learning, which should ensure two goals: the promotion of active citizenship and the increase in employability. This twofold aim, conferred to LLL, shows the dualistic nature that the concept had not abandoned since the 1990s. However, especially when it comes to the national level, economic interests seemed to overtake the social and civic perspective.

Nevertheless, the Memorandum set the basis of a comprehensive action plan for the realization of a European Area of Lifelong Learning (European Commission 2001). It became the guiding principle and gained a complete definition. The Commission states that LLL corresponds to "all learning activity undertaken through life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within the a personal, civic and\or employment-related perspective" (European Commission 2001). Again, the necessity emerged of including non-formal and informal learning within the concept of LLL.

In the following years, a ten-year program was implemented by the Council and the Commission with the main aim of “making a reality of lifelong learning”: it is called *Education and Training 2010*. It is formulated on three objectives – quality, access, openness – and thirteen targets (Dehemel 2006, 55). Under the umbrella of the OMC, ET 2010 represented the common framework that must be adopted by each state. In 2003, the European Council set five benchmarks: among them, the need to decrease the EU rate of early school leavers to 10% and increase the EU average rate of participation in lifelong learning to 12.5% (CEDEFOP 2006, 6).

Both the Lisbon Strategy and the agenda ET 2010 signed a fundamental step towards the acceptance by MSs of lifelong learning and the consolidation of it among EU institutions. Nonetheless, concrete results were disappointing. The mid-term evaluation of the Strategy set in 2005 highlighted that benchmarks previously established were not met at the national level. Probably, the OMC process, which was based on informal patterns of communication, did not reach the national debate. At the EU level, the gap in economic growth with the United States and China seemed to increase (Proietti 2020, 92). MSs tried to re-launch the Agenda, strengthening programming conditions, but, at the end of the cycle, none of the educational goals were reached. Figure (1.1) showed progress of the 2010 benchmarks between 2000 and 2009. On five indicators, just one - MST graduates – increased steadily while the others grew slowly and below the progress required. The curve about reading was even negative in 2006.

Fig. 1.1 Lisbon Benchmarks about education and training.



Source: Progress towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training. Indicators and benchmarks 2010/2011

Education and Training and Europe 2020

In 2008, a severe economic crisis hit the entire world. The EU was affected in its whole: MSs' economies almost collapsed and some sectors were left behind. Education was one of them. While youth unemployment peaked at 23% in 2012, measures implemented for recovery envisaged cuts in educational budgets. In the middle of the crisis, the EU set a new framework for enhancing the collaboration of MSs, following ET 2010: *Education and Training 2020*. Again, the main goal was to improve national systems, reconstructing them into a lifelong learning perspective. In 2009, the Council of the EU set a series of common benchmarks that must be reached by 2020 (CEU 2009):

- an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning;
- the share of low-achieving 15-years old in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 %;

- the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10 %;
- at least 95 % of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.

ET 2020 wants to improve the quality and efficiency of education and training systems, guaranteeing basic skills, such as reading, writing and calculus. It also integrates new competences – math, science and technology - that could ensure the match between labor's demand and education's offer. At the same time, it promotes equity, social cohesion and active citizenship to guarantee people the right to ameliorate their personal, economic and social condition. Among the full range of skills, the program introduces innovation and creativity, which are fundamental for an individual to start a business and be competitive at the international stage (Alulli 2015, 24). Thus, ET 2020 highlights the increasing attention that by the world of education is given to skills and competences. The mid-term evaluation of the program shows how, at the EU level, the most critical fields are the rate of 15 years old people who do not reach the basic level of reading, math and science, and adult participation to education and training systems, which in 2018 was still 11% (Proietti 2020, 88).

Moreover, ET 2020 inserts itself into the framework of a new comprehensive Strategy: Europe 2020. In 2010, the Lisbon Strategy ended and a new cycle of reforms was formulated by European institutions and approved by the European Council on the 17th of June 2010 (European Council 2010). The Strategy aims at guaranteeing the recovery of the European economy after the crisis. While globalization and economic interdependence are moving faster and faster, the political level is blocked and EU institutions gave uncoherent answers (European Commission 2010).

According to the Strategy, the EU growth should be:

- Smart, based on knowledge and that ensures investments in education, research and innovation;

- Sustainable, thanks to a more competitive, interconnected and greener economy;
- Inclusive, fostering high employment economy and reducing poverty.

The Strategy proposes a new kind of governance. It sets priorities which interrelate with concrete targets that the Commission will use to monitor advancements of each MS:

- 75 % of the population aged 20-64 should be employed;
- 3% of the EU's GDP should be invested in R&D;
- The "20/20/20" climate/energy targets should be met (including an increase to 30% of emissions reduction if the conditions are right);
- The share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree;
- 20 million less people should be at risk of poverty.

(EC 2010, 5)

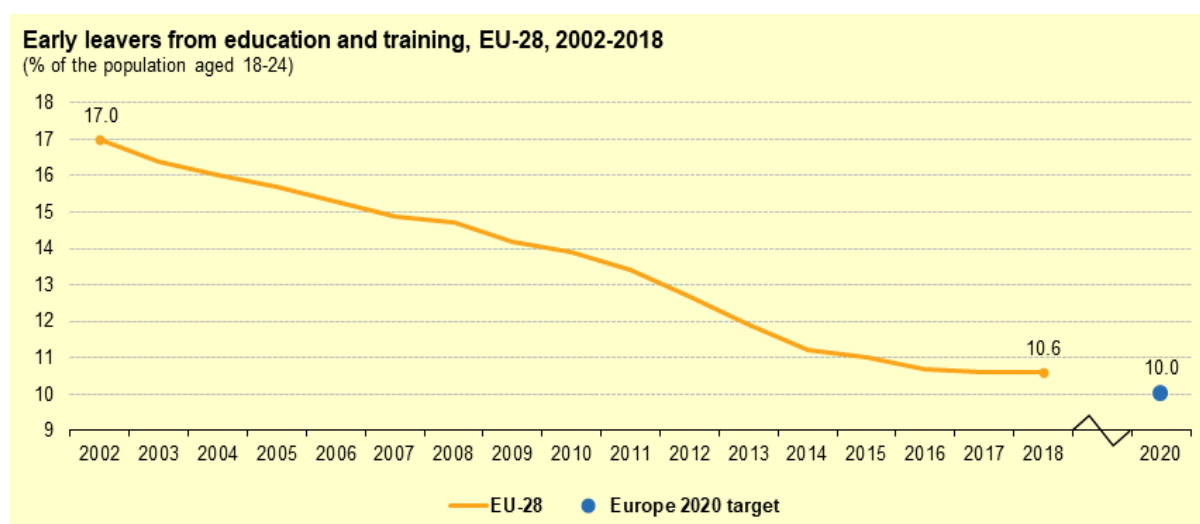
Then, guidelines adopted at the EU level combine with national strategies and country reporting. A periodic evaluation ensures achievements while countries that are not fulfilling the targets receive policy warnings. Within the Strategy, education and training are cornerstones for the achievements of the goals mentioned above. Since smart growth means strengthened knowledge and innovation, improving the quality of the triangle education/innovation/research becomes a priority. The Commission stated that “a quarter of all pupils have poor reading competences, one in seven young people leave education and training too early. Less than one person in three aged 25-34 has a university degree compared to 40% in the US and over 50% in Japan.” (EC 2010, 12).

On the other hand, inclusive growth means building a cohesive society where people are not left behind. The need is to enlarge the pool of people who benefit from lifelong learning – for now, just the more educated (EC 2010) – and guarantee at least basic skills. The Commission forecasts that by 2020 there will be a polarization of jobs, with 16 mln more jobs requiring higher competences and a drop in low-skill activities. It will be fundamental to invest in skills

that could help people manage economic and societal changes and face new challenges that are arising, such as aging population and global competition. Investments should be made in every part of the EU, strengthening territorial cohesion.

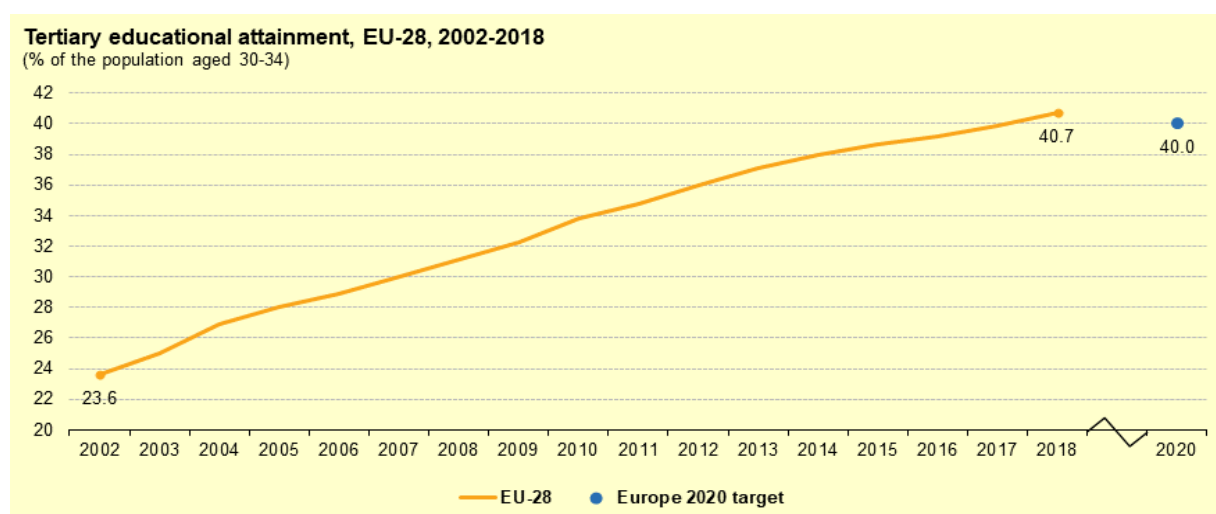
The two charts below show some advancements of the Strategy in education and training, up to 2018. There are positive results concerning early school leavers (Figure 1.2): the EU average⁶ of drop outs falls to 10.6%, close to the 10% target. Figure 1.3 points out that the percentage of the population, aged between 30-34, which is involved in tertiary education, overcomes the Europe 2020 target.

Fig. 1.2 Early leavers from education and training, 2002-2018



Note: Breaks in time series in 2003, 2006 and 2014.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: t2020_40)

Fig. 1.3 Tertiary education attainment, 2002-2018



Note: Break in time series in 2014 (switch from ISCED 1997 to ISCED 2011).
Source: Eurostat (online data code: t2020_41)

eurostat 

The European Social Fund's Contribution and the Next Programming Cycle

The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the five European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), constituting the Cohesion Policy of the EU for territorial development. The ESF is programmed through seven years' cycles and its financial budget is distributed among European regions based on their per capita GDP: less developed regions – whose GDP accounts for less than 75% of the EU average – are the main target to which money is allocated. Both budget and guidelines are negotiated among MSs and EU institutions while the national level defines the operative program.

ESF has the main scope in improving employment and education opportunities for workers by promoting mobility and creating jobs. In addition to that, in recent years, the Fund is in charge of tackling youth unemployment. In agreement with the Cohesion Policy and Europe 2020,

for the programming cycle 2014-2020, ESF has four thematic objectives (European Commission n.d.):

- promoting employment and supporting labor mobility through professional training and orientation, especially for youngers;
- promoting social inclusion and combating poverty through financial support to more disadvantaged groups;
- investing in education, skills and lifelong learning. ESF financed initiatives devoted to enhancing education and training systems around the EU, incentivize students to complete the educational pattern, give necessary competencies, and reduce school drop-out rate;
- enhancing institutional capacity and an efficient public administration through support to structural reforms of PA.

Since 2014, the ESF budget accounts for EUR 10 billion per year plus private and national investments. Thanks to the complementarity⁷ principle, resources of other Structural Funds must be added to the quota (Alulli 2015, 72). According to the European Commission (2008), to the end of 2017, EUR 25 billion - on a total of 49 bln euros - had been allocated to projects that address education and vocational training. The Commission has estimated that:

- 4,5 million participants have been supported;
- 1 million participants have gained a qualification;
- 583 000 participants were in education or training;
- 1,8 million students (26% of the target) should benefit from ERDF projects investing in schools' infrastructure.

(European Commission 2018a)

Vocational education and training are areas that account for the majority of implemented and selected projects. Furthermore, the ESF resulted in being a fundamental instrument to enhance

priorities set by Europe 2020. For the next programming cycle (2021-2027), in 2018⁸ the EU decided to reduce the number of primary issues to five fundamental themes (European Commission 2018b):

- *a smarter Europe*, for growth based on innovation and technology, economic transformation and support to small and medium enterprises;
- *a greener, low-carbon Europe*, through investments in cleaner energy and circular economy, more careful of climate change;
- *a more connected Europe*, with transport and digital networks;
- *a more social Europe*, for the recognition of social rights and the support to employment, education, skills, social inclusion;
- *a Europe closer to citizens*, by enhancing sustainable development and the revaluation of urban, coastal and rural areas across the EU.

When the budget is finalized by the end of 2020 under the German Presidency, the new programming cycle would invest, as always, in every EU region, through the criteria mentioned above, but, this time, there would be new standards to tackle the most critical situations (Proietti 2020, 105). The Commission expects to strengthen interregional and cross-border cooperation through the opportunity for MSs to employ part of their budget to finance projects and common programs everywhere in Europe. Furthermore, the reduction of priorities' number is meant to give MSs more flexibility in the management of their national operative programs, which results in a necessary condition to face unexpected events, as in the case of the COVID-19 emergency.

Given the pandemic situation, in May 2020, a new proposal has been submitted by the European Commission to face new challenges brought in by the healthcare emergency and the expected economic and social crisis. The Commission proposes a reinforced multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027 and a new tool to boost the budget: the

emergency European Recovery Instrument, also called ‘Next Generation EU’ (European Commission 2020). The 2018 priorities would rest in place, but they will be readapted to power the European recovery in required fields, such as healthcare systems, tourism and culture, youth employment, education, child poverty. Cohesion Policy would be fundamental.

1.4 Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: the European Qualification Framework

The 2000s ushered in a new season for lifelong learning: the EU stepped in as the principal promoter of LLL, substituting international organizations. The Lisbon Strategy highlighted the necessity of implementing concrete policies in education and training and enhancing cooperation among MSs. While in the context of formal education, the Bologna Process has already led to a partial harmonization of national systems, as *vocational and training* (VET) was still an issue (Elken 2015, 6).

The history retraced so far has shown how VET has had a fundamental impact on the progress of lifelong learning from its origins – with the concept of adult education – to the neoliberal turn. The Community already attempted to create common VET standards in 1985, but a real turning point was the beginning of the Copenhagen Process, in 2002. The Copenhagen Declaration defined four priorities (Proietti 2020, 114):

- strengthen the EU dimension in vocational education and training;
- provide more information, guidance and transparency regarding VET;
- develop tools for mutual recognition and validation of skills;
- improve the quality of VET programs.

Particularly impressive is the proposal for the development of the common European Qualification Framework (EQF). It is a tool for allowing qualifications' comparability and recognition by referencing educational and training systems to a common framework. Since lifelong learning has incorporated the concepts of informal and non-formal learning, the need emerged to make visible the skills acquired in those contexts. Thus, a system like EQF seems indispensable for enhancing LLL. Within the years 2002-2003, debates about EQF became more and more consistent and, in November 2004, the EU established the first expert group on the matter (Elken 2015, 8). At that stage, there was the necessity of building consensus among MSs around the proposal, since the subsidiarity principle does not allow any Commission's initiatives in the direction of harmonization (Elken 2015, 8).

The issues that arose from the discussion were fundamentally two. The first question regards the kind of system that EQF must perform. Many MSs have already implemented a national qualification framework, but with different characteristics. For example, Ireland has a comprehensive system that links both VET and higher education, integrating the two fields in one extensive scheme. The Council endorsed this integrated approach and, in the end, the EQF results to be a real lifelong learning instrument, comprehensive of all levels of education and training. Moreover, the discussion focuses on whether the EQF would initiate a process of harmonization. Many scholars state that, in the long term, the system could have a standardized effect. (Elken 2015, 13). When in 2008, the Council and the Parliament officially established the European Qualifications Framework (EPCEU 2008), they specified that there is no binding nature for MSs and that the aim is to support cooperation among them. Nevertheless, they did not want to standardize national systems, but to make them understandable in different socio-cultural contexts present within the EU.

Furthermore, the 2008 Recommendation established an 8-levels system: each level contains typologies of qualification, described based on learning outcomes. According to the document,

“‘learning outcomes’ means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence” (EPCEU 2008). The Council and the Parliament set a deadline – 2010 – by which MSs have to conform their national qualification systems to EQF. In 2016, after several delays, 39⁹ countries were about to develop their own NQF: 35 out of 39 were working on a comprehensive framework and 32 have referenced it to the EQF (CEDEFOP 2018).

In 2012, the Council tried to strengthen the process inviting MSs to institute system of validation – always linked to EQF - of competencies, skills, and knowledge, acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, in order to deliver qualifications (CEU 2012). The Council highlighted how institutions and customers may benefit from the process of recognition and validation. Since it is the last step of lifelong learning, individuals have not only the possibility of developing their knowledge during their lifetime, but they could also see their competencies officially qualified. Qualifications make skills easily “saleable” in the labor market, increasing the chances to be hired for a job that required specific competencies. Conversely, this would enhance people to participate in learning activities, if they are guided towards quality-assured qualifications consistent with their previous paths. What is understood to be desirable is that low-skilled or unemployed workers were to be the pool of population that mainly exploit these kinds of opportunity. Besides, employers and recruiters would have a standardized framework to set requirements for a job and evaluate candidates in a more transparent way.

Furthermore, it was underscored that recognition and validation create a mutual trust and transparency system in which qualifications are shared and freely visible to anyone. Then, it would be easier to match labor’s offer and demand and foster mobility, sharing information also across national borders. The EQF could make qualifications easily understandable among MSs, enhancing exchange of students and workers. The logic is that a qualification certified by a national system could be measured and compared – through the EQF – in every MS, creating

a European labor market. Moreover, the process is to involve several actors: from political institutions to appointed authorities, that must create the legal and operative framework, to employment center operators, who concretely work with it, up to the civil society that is the primary customer.

The European Qualification Framework synthetizes the long history of lifelong learning, demonstrating how it has evolved from a simple idea – promoted by international agencies – into an official EU strategy and concrete policies. Education and training have become more and more involved within the European process and, today, there are even attempts to create a common European system. Lifelong learning has mutated its meaning over time until it integrates all educational aspects of an individual life: the EQF is the ultimate result of it. It is desirable that this process will create more and better working opportunities, decrease disparities and enhance justice and social cohesion, taking back its humanistic approach.

NOTES

1. The Treaty of Rome was signed on the 25th of May 1957 and entered into force on the 1st of January 1958. It established the European Economic Community.
2. The Conference took place in Elsinore, Denmark, between the 19th and 25th of June 1949.
3. The Report stresses the difference between adult education and vocational\professional training. The latter focuses on achieving qualifications to be hired for a job, to change occupation or to complete the training. The former may comprehend vocational training, but it also includes the conclusion of former patterns of education and the enrichment of personal culture.

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4. The Montreal Conference took place from the 22th to the 31th of August 1960.
 5. The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organization. It includes 47 Member States, 27 of which are members of the European Union.
 6. Data referred to 28 EU members.
 7. The complementarity principle consists of the constitution of a joint strategic plan for funds with a thematic objective in common, as ESF and the European Regional and Development Fund.
 8. The budget has been formulated for the Union at 27.
 9. CEDEFOP collects reports from the 28 EU Member States plus Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Kosovo, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

2 A Case Study: the Italian Qualification Framework and the *Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni*

2.1 Overview

Since the 1990s, as seen, the European Union has been in charge of promoting lifelong learning through its Member States. LLL becomes the cornerstone of most educational and training policies in Europe and generates institutional and political debates. The 2000s sign the step towards the conversion of theory into practice. The Lisbon Strategy, and later Europe 2020, crystallizes the concept that education and training are fundamental for the creation of a knowledge-based economy and to tackle future social and cultural issues. Increasing and ameliorating competences of the new and old workers' generation becomes a priority to spread all over Europe. As in the case of the ESF, the key is to integrate this goal into national strategies and foster the implementation of systems that support LLL. The European Union has identified some policies that could be fundamental in that respect, among others the birth of national systems of competence certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (Perulli 2019).

These systems are essential in a lifelong learning perspective because they allow the identification, measurement and traceability of skills acquired outside formal education pathways. In this way, these competences are put on the same level of skills obtained in formal contexts and placed into the same evaluation framework, so that all valuable peoples' skills

may contribute to sustainable economic and social growth. Indeed, with this in mind, the whole cultural and experiential heritage of a person is enhanced. The individual has the possibility of applying all his/her abilities and see them recognized. This also means that a person is informed about his/her level of expertise and can decide whether or not to engage in new educational paths. This process gives value to all learning methods, from internship to work-school and apprenticeship until work experiences. These good practices contribute to the creation of a high-skilled society and workforce, facilitating the transition from school to work, reducing the number of NEET (Neither Employed or in Education and Training), improving employment transitions (unemployment-work, work-work) in support of active labor policies, increasing the number of adults involved in education paths.

Moreover, building a national system of competence certification can represent a way to link education and training policies to labor and economic development. There are, then, greater chances of matching labor demand and offer, bringing together educational opportunities and labor needs. Furthermore, national systems arrange skills and competences in a more comprehensive framework, referencing them to the European Qualification Framework (Proietti 2020, 77). In this way, skills are recognized and “spendable” both at the national and European levels: students’ and workers’ mobility is encouraged as well as the integration of foreign workers into the national market. Those are just some of the opportunities attributable to the realization of a national qualification framework.

Nevertheless, developing such a complex policy means that the already-established institutional setting must be rethought in a lifelong perspective and some structural changes should occur. If policies do not fit the context or are not seriously implemented, the risk is that new opportunities could not be effective at all or even reproduce old issues. In the case of lifelong learning policies, the preexistent education and training system must be integrated into all its parts and rebuilt to ensure learning over the lifespan. MSs have started a process of adaptation

to the European directives, seeking to make them interact, in some ways, with the systems already in operation. In a diversified territory as the EU, the most likely risk is that some States, or even regions, go further than others. The present chapter focuses on the Italian case.

Over the past two decades, Italy has attempted to bring national standards in line with European recommendations. The Italian debate over competences already started in the 1990s, both in the social and institutional context, with the reform of the education and training system. Those discussions began their transition towards practice with Law No. 92 of 2012 and its implementing Decree No.13 of 2013. They started a process of lifelong learning policies' reorganization in Italy – with the creation of *Reti Territoriali* – and the construction of a National Qualification Framework (NQF). This framework has at its basis the *National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications*, which collects already-issued qualifications from the whole national territory. In 2015, this catalog has been integrated by the National Framework of Regional Qualifications, which lists all the certificates released by regional authorities. Those qualifications have been finally referenced to the European Qualification Framework through the institutionalization of the Italian NQF, in 2018.

Furthermore, the real innovation of this system is represented by the platform *Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni*. Born as a descriptive map of the labor market, it has been elected to be the information backbone of the NQF (Mazzarella, Mallardi, Porcelli 2017). Through its innovative structure, the *Atlante* has been able to link two “worlds”, the labor market and the education and training system, carrying out a series of institutional functions and potentially performing new ones.

This system is currently in its implementation phase, but, along the way, it fell into obstacles deriving from the difficult context it is placed in. It involves the educational system in its whole, which is organized through a variety of bodies with different institutional and social backgrounds. On the one hand, there are institutional entities, such as ministries, regions and

local authorities, which have the task of defining guidelines; on the other, bodies that operatively provide services and, finally, users, the citizens. It also entails the interactions of different sectors other than the educational one. The division of responsibilities among these departments was already a problem before the initiative was launched. Besides, the economic and political context is not homogenous within the 20 Regions (one divided into two autonomous provinces: Trentino and Alto Adige) that shape Italy. This makes it a challenge to plan integrated policy reforms and, coherently, link them to the European environment.

The present chapter aims to understand how the governance of this system has been built, in such a heterogeneous environment; how it adapts to the institutional and regulatory structure and how it has been possible to overcome problems, and which ones have yet to be solved. It is divided as follows. The first part aims to give in a glance some information about the Italian context, clarify how the educational and training system works in Italy and what was the first approach that the country had adopted with lifelong policies. Later, the chapter focuses on the actual construction of the NQF, from 2012 until today. The last paragraph discusses the structure of the *Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni* and its possible implementation methods.

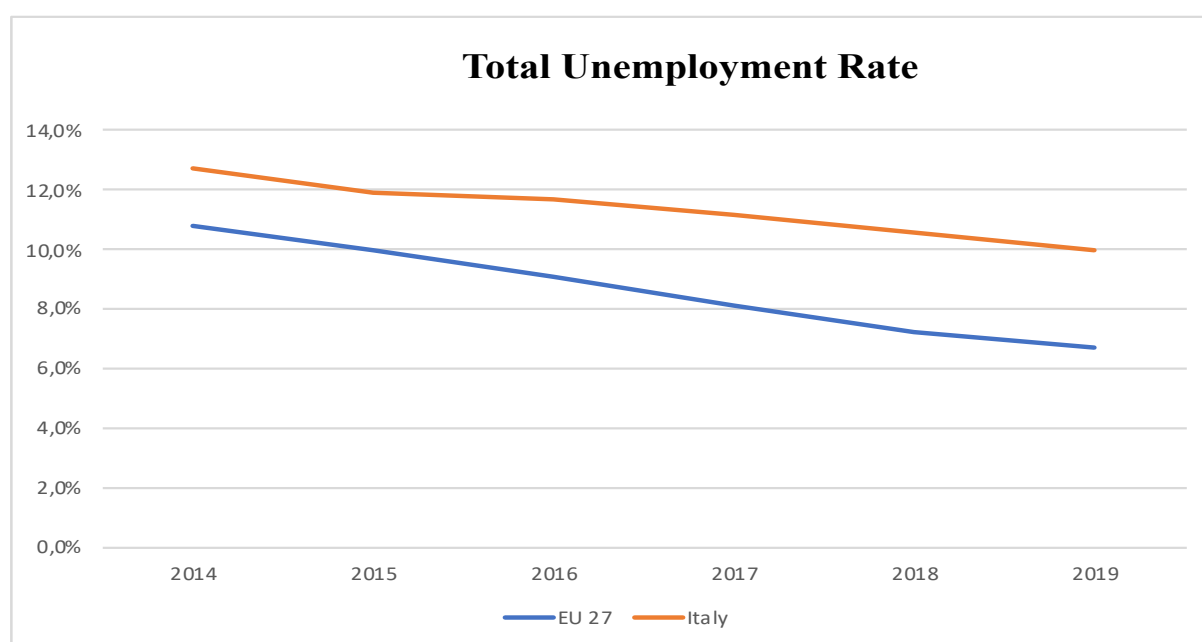
2.2 The Italian Approach to the European Education and Training Strategy

The Italian Context

The Italian labor market was not spared by recent trends that are affecting the international world of work as a whole. Economic digitalization, together with aging population and increasing global competition, profoundly modified the labor demand and, consequently, skills

needed. Between 2014 and 2019, the Italian total unemployment rate, while being slightly grown, remained far above the European average (Figure 2.1). In 2020, the Covid epidemic onset has caused a reduction in employment rate by 0,5% in March and by 1,2% in April (ISTAT 2020a).

Fig. 2.1 Total unemployment rate (EU-27, Italy), 2014-2019



Source: Eurostat 2020 (Elaborated by the author).

Moreover, Italy is experiencing a polarization of the occupational sector. A research by ISTAT (2017) highlights how employment has considerably grown in qualified, intellectual, scientific and highly specialized (+330K) jobs, and, at the same time, in low-skilled professions that concern social interactions (+268K). Instead, practical tasks in office work, craftsmen and farmers declined. The research groups these jobs in four categories, linking them to competences (ISTAT 2017):

- technical specialized jobs, which consists of qualified jobs in the technological and scientific field, characterized by intellectual and managerial skills;
- non-technical specialized professions, which are intellectual, but without high-tech competences;
- technical operational jobs, mostly manual;
- elementary, low-skilled professions.

It is highlighted that the technical operational category has been reduced by -222K units and, conversely, a growth of similar dimension has been experienced by elementary (+215K) and specialized jobs (+171K). This shows how the labor market is going to polarize towards high and low skilled professions, leading to a change in skills demand. In this situation, the most disadvantaged groups suffer the harshest consequences. Italy has the highest level of young people neither in employment nor in education and training (18.1%); one of the lowest rate of female employment (53.8) and a huge divergence in employment rate between youngsters born in Italy and foreigners¹.

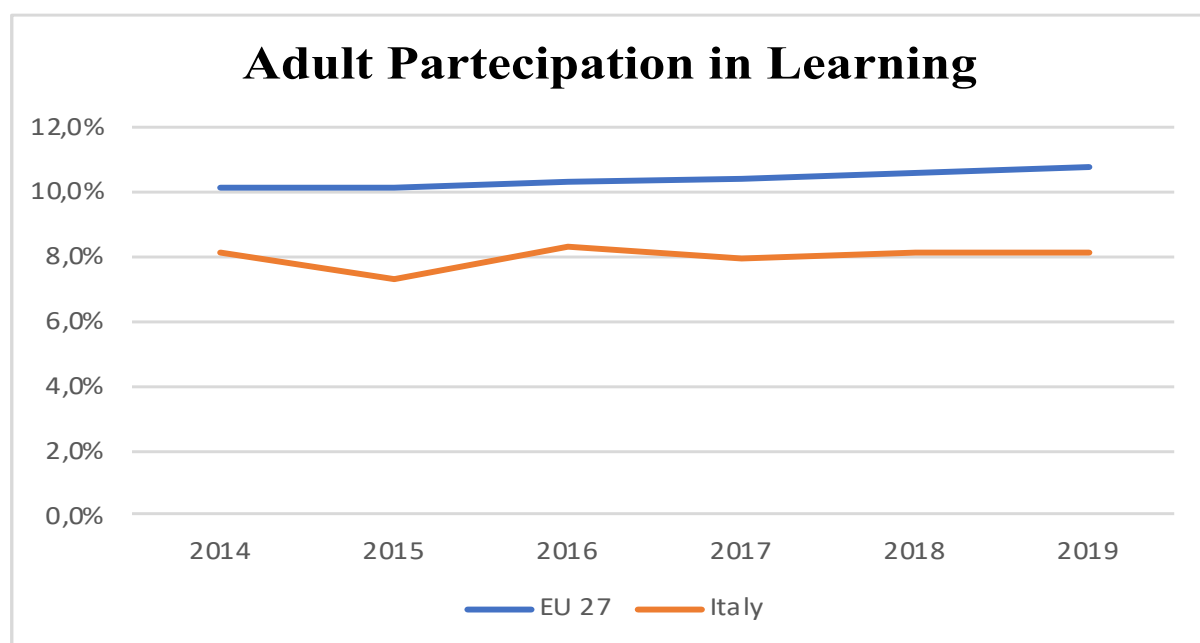
Education and training result to be fundamental for workers and companies, but even there data are not reassuring. During the period 2014-2019, adult participation in learning has been below the EU average (8.1% against 10.8% in 2019) (Figure 2.2). The share of those who hold at least the lower secondary level and have participated in training activities drops to 2.3% (compared to 4.2% in the EU28). Besides, participation in training is influenced by employment status (9.1% among the employed, 6.8% among the unemployed) and age (participation decreases as the age increases from 15.1% in the 25-34 age group to 4.3% in the 60-64 age group) (ISTAT 2020).

Furthermore, Italy did not reach the target about early leavers from education and training that is still above the EU-27 level (13.5% against 10.2%) (Figure 2.3). ISTAT (2020b) has highlighted that early leavers are generally males (15.4% in 2019 against 11.5% for women),

but they also have an higher employment rate compared to women who have left school (41.8%). Italy must also take account of the territorial gap. In the *Mezzogiorno*, the rate of students who leave school before ending the upper secondary cycle is at 18.2% against 10.5% in the North and 10.9% in the Centre and, in the South, youth employment rate is the lowest. Early school leaving is much more frequent among young foreigners: 36.5% against 11.3% of Italians.

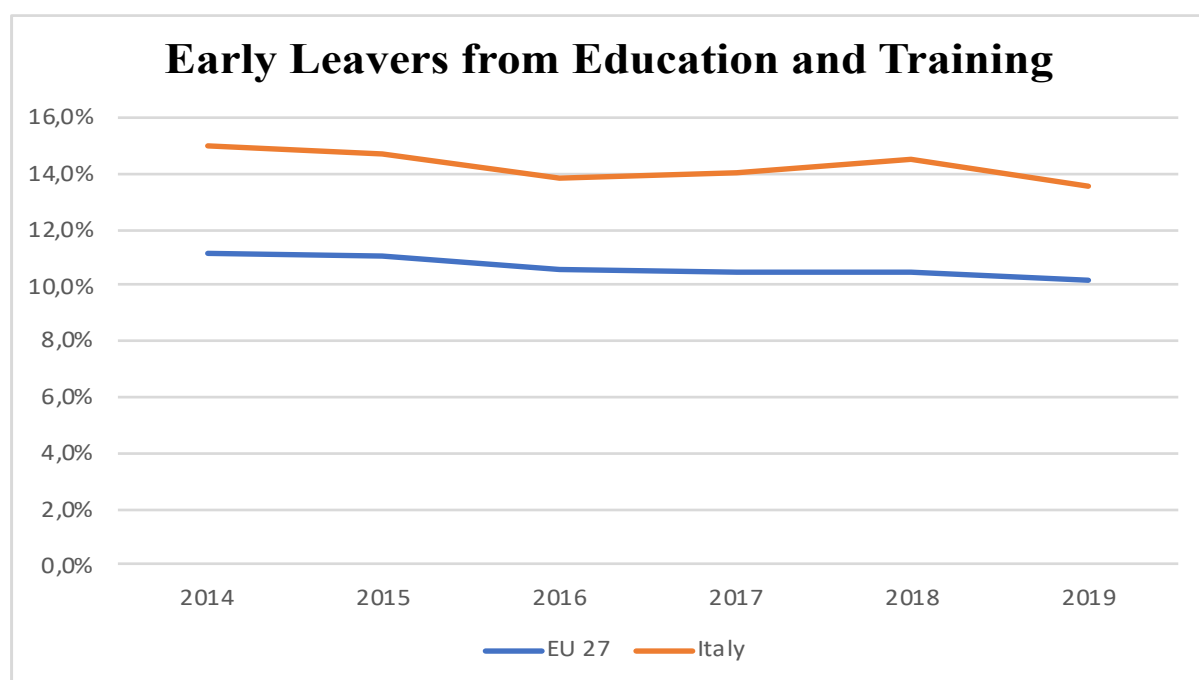
Moreover, the report has set that in Italy, in 2019, the population share, aged 25-64, with at least one higher secondary education qualification is 62.2%, lower than the EU average 78.7% (EU28). The same part of the population with a tertiary qualification is well below the European target and the difficulty to find a job for graduated students is too high: after one to three years of leaving school, 40.1% of school graduates and 27.2% of high education graduates available to work are not employed. The transition from school to work is not easy at all.

Fig. 2.2 Adult participation in learning (EU-27, Italy), 2014-2019



Source: Eurostat 2020 (Elaborated by the author).

Fig. 2.3 Early leavers from education and training (EU-27, Italy), 2014-2019



Source: Eurostat 2020 (Elaborated by the author).

Education and Training Governance in Italy

Before examining in depth strategies and policy tools adopted in Italy to promote lifelong learning, it is necessary to clarify how the Italian education and training system works. In Italy, the Constitution defines national and regional competences and distributes them among several institutional actors.

Since the Constitutional reform passed in 2001, Title V (*Regions, Provinces – Municipalities*) confers to the State exclusive legislative powers in “general provision on education” (art. 117 Const., para. 2, let. *n*)) and in the “determination of basic level of benefits relating to civil and social entitlements to be guaranteed throughout the national territory” (art.117 Const., para. 2, let. *m*)). Moreover, paragraph 3 (art. 117 Const.) attributes to Regions concurring competence in “education, subject to the autonomy of education institutions and with exception for

vocational education and training”. Regions have also residual legislative powers over VET. Within the State-Regions Conference², institutional actors sign formal agreements to define matters of common interest.

The decision of the Constitutional Court No. 200 of 2009 defines the concept of “general provisions of education”, making references to articles 33 and 34 of the Constitution. The State must ensure:

- a) the right to establish schools and institutions of education to entities and private persons, at no cost to the State (art. 33 Const., para. 3);
- b) that non-state schools enjoy full liberty and offer their pupils education and qualifications of the same standards as those afforded in State schools (art. 33 Const., para. 4);
- c) a state examination for admission to and graduation from the various branches and grades of schools and for qualifications to exercise a profession (art. 33, para. 5);
- d) that schools are open to everyone (art. 34 Const., para. 1);
- e) that primary education, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free of tuition (art. 34 Const., para. 2);
- f) that capable and deserving pupils, including those lacking financial resources, have the right to attain the highest levels of education (art. 34 Const., para. 3).

To give further specifications to Title V, the doctrine suggests referring to Law No. 59 of 1997 which represents an important step towards transfer of powers from the State to territorial authorities and that anticipates the Constitutional reform of 2001. Law 59/97, which is part of “the Bassanini Laws”³, radically modified the education system that had characterized Italy since the Gentile reform of 1923. At the time, the State was the only actor involved in the process of defining school programs and economic and human resources: the Ministry of Education was the center of every decision. Instead, the Law of 1997 imposes the collaboration

of several actors onto the organization of the education system – State, Regions, local authorities and school autonomies –, defining a horizontal and vertical integrated model.

The following Legislative decree No. 112 of 1998, which implements the Law, reserves to the State the definition of criteria and parameters for the organization of schools, the school system's evaluation and the determination and allocation of financial resources. Moreover, Regions have the duty of planning the integrated offer between education and professional training within the limits of the availability of human and financial resources and based on of local authorities' proposals. They also have to determine the school calendar and contribution of non-state schools. Law No. 59/97 began a process of promoting the autonomy of schools, giving them legal personality and administrative, organizational, teaching, research and development self-government. The process of decentralization would then reach its peak with the reform of Title V.

This integrated system has been further specified by Law No. 53 of 2003, also called “Moratti Law”, which institutes the *Sistema educativo di istruzione e formazione*. The school system is organized as follow (CEDEFOP 2019, 17):

- a three-years pre-school education (early childhood education and care);
- a first cycle, divided in primary and secondary school;
- a second cycle, which offers upper secondary education that comprehends both general and vocational programs, and regional vocational education and training pathways (IFP).

Tertiary education includes higher education - universities and equivalent institutions - and higher technical institutes (ITS). There is a post-secondary education pathway which presents courses within the higher technical education and training system (IFTS). Also, VET offers programs for adults, which lead to post-secondary education qualifications, and continuing

training that mainly targets employed people. The latter consists of courses aimed at upgrading workers' skills and compulsory training at the workplace.

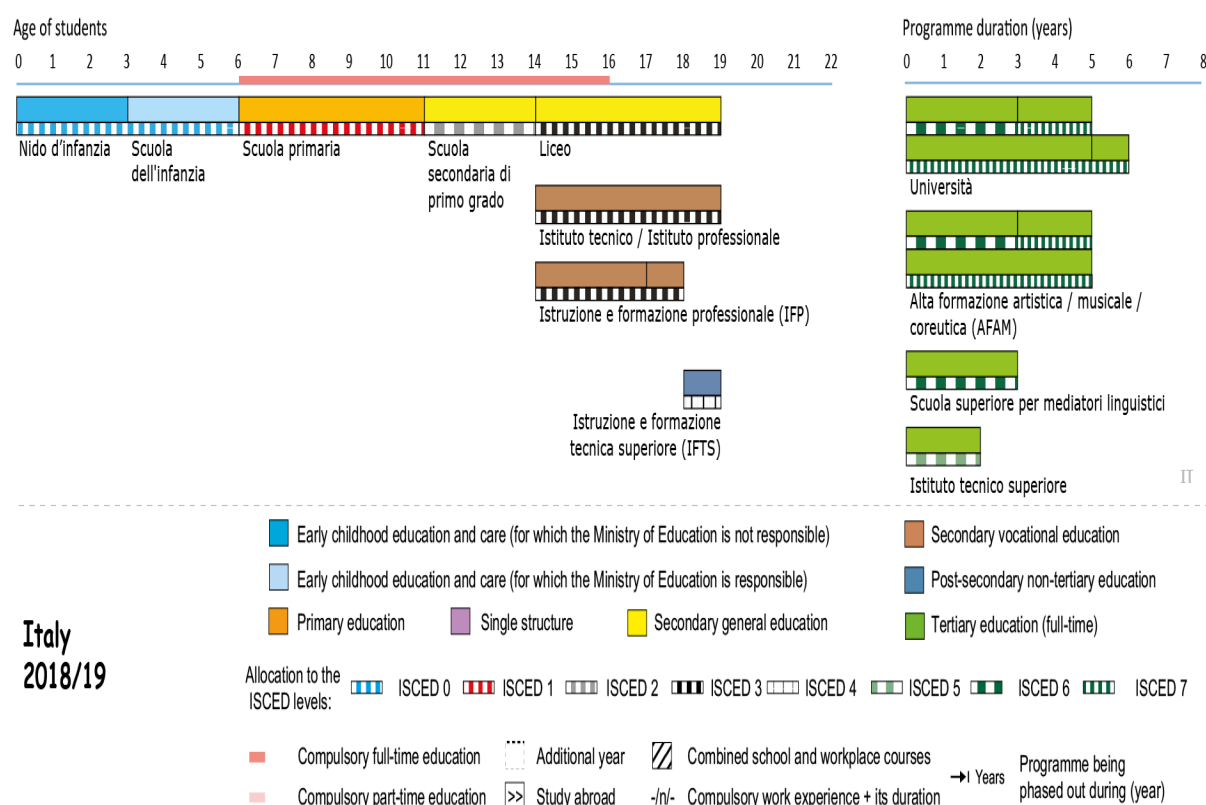
In this single and integrated system, in which VET joins formal educational paths, the State re-gains legislative powers over vocational training, at the expense of Regions, which have to comply with national directions. For this reason, the most debated article is the first, which delegates the government to adopt legislative decrees to define general rules on education and basic levels of benefits in the field of education and vocational training, considered as a step back compared to the reform of 2001.

At this point, VET governance includes (CEDEFOP 2019, 22):

- Education Ministry, which defines the VET framework in general school pathways (vocational upper secondary options) and for technical and professional institutes (ITS) in agreement with the Labor Ministry;
- Labor Ministry, which is in charge of defining VET framework in vocational and training pathways (IFTS), for apprenticeships and continuing training, vocational upper secondary education options and ITS in agreement with the Education Ministry;
- Regions and Autonomous Provinces, which are responsible for planning, programming and implementation of interventions for VET pathways (IFTS), VET integrated into general education (IFP and ITS) and apprenticeship and continuing training in agreement with social partners.
- Social partners, that is organizations which advise in the formulation of training policies, training offer and active labor policies. They also join Regions to provide continuing training through interprofessional funds.

Figure 2.4 below sums up the Italian education and training system.

Fig. 2.4 The education and training system' structure, 2018-2019



Source: Eurydice 2018-2019

A Way Towards Lifelong Learning

In such a complex system, studded with actors of various kinds, policies based on the concept of lifelong learning need to be transversal to education, labor and vocational sectors. Law 53/2003 itself could be considered as an attempt towards a LLL strategy, with the making of an integrated system that – although debatable in its organization – puts together different pathways. Other reforms were aimed at giving the possibility to students to be involved in education and training as long as possible, in a lifelong perspective. For example, in 2007, the length of compulsory education was extended to 10 years⁴ and mandatory skills – that the school system must provide to pupils – were harmonized with the EU key competences (Eurydice 2018). From 2011, upper secondary education courses – both general and vocational

that last 5 years – can directly lead to higher education pathways. However, it is just in 2012 that the concept of lifelong learning openly enters the Italian institutional debate.

Law No. 92 of 2012 legally defines LLL for the first time in Italy: “lifelong learning encompasses learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken throughout life to improve knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective” (art. 4 l. 92/2012, para. 51). The Law is also called “Fornero Labor Reform”, by the name of the Labor Minister Elsa Fornero (Monti Government), and it is part of a wider restructuring of the labor market in Italy. Article 4, the one dedicated to LLL, adheres to the definitions adopted by the EU, specifying the concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning (art. 4, para. 52-54). After establishing a regulatory and conceptual framework, the Law remits further decisions and the adoption of lifelong learning actions to the State-Regions Conference. In particular, in a unified context, the State and the Regions will have to define criteria and priorities for the support and promotion of territorial networks for lifelong learning, the so-called *Reti Territoriali* (art. 4, para. 54), and for the realization of the National Qualification Framework.

The *Reti Territoriali* are considered the supporting structures of the whole lifelong strategy. They include education, training and work systems, in an integrated process of supporting lifelong learning. Universities, businesses, chambers of commerce, industry, craft and agriculture as well as employment centers, social partners and local bodies must contribute to their development (art.4, para. 56). According to the Law, their realization has to deal with three priorities: guaranteeing support for people to build their own formal, non-formal and informal learning paths; ensuring the recognition and certification of education and training qualifications; securing the use of vocational guidance services through the entire life course. On December 20, 2012⁵, the Permanent Conference approved the Agreement on lifelong learning policies. It defines the organization of territorial networks and identifies the following

key actions, under the EU programming cycle 2014-2020, that must be undertaken (Act 154/CU, para. A.5):

- measures to support lifelong learning and improve skills, with the involvement of social partners and civil society;
- measures to support lifelong guidance;
- measures for effective development of skills of young people - involved in training courses - adults, with particular attention to women, who are reentering the labor market, low-skilled workers and other disadvantaged groups;
- measures to develop effective tools (such as the European Qualification Framework and National Qualifications Framework) to widen the access to lifelong learning and to integrate education and training services;
- measures to match education and training pathways to labor market opportunities and workers' necessities.

Finally, the Conference set up an inter-institutional table on lifelong learning, with the function of coordinating and monitoring policies and interventions.

Those actions must be implemented within a perspective that focuses on individuals, overturning the centrality of services in favor of the person. For this reason, the Permanent Conference recognize to each person:

The right to access to effective learning opportunities, in every phase of life, and the right to make use of supports for the recognition and enhancement of competences acquired in a formal, non-formal and informal context, following attitudes and individual choices, and in a personal, civic and occupational perspective, with the aim of a better personal and professional fulfillment and greater employability.

(Act 154/CU)

Thus, the Italian system is conforming to the European position regarding lifelong learning, increasingly directed towards individual responsibility and personal development.

Both the Law 92/2012 and the Agreement have tried, for the first time, to link Italy to the European context and to satisfy those points that EU has defined as fundamental for its strategy: among others, the creation of a national qualification system for the identification, validation and certification of competences, referenced to the European Qualification Framework⁶. Article 4 prescribes national policies to be formulated “starting from the identification and recognition of the cultural and professional heritage collected by citizens and workers during their life and professional course, to be documented through the full realization of a single information backbone, through the interoperability of existing central and territorial databases (l.92/2012, para. 51). To explain the essence of what needs to be done, the Law commits the institutions involved to issue one or more decrees for the definition of general rules and essential levels for recognition and validation of learning skills.

The following paragraphs 64-68 define the public competence certification system that will be built as a result of this Law. Firstly, it will be based on minimum service standards, recognized throughout the whole national territory and will follow the principles of “accessibility, confidentiality, transparency, objectivity and traceability” (art. 4 l. 92/2012, para.64). Moreover, the Law establishes that the certification process will necessarily end with the release of a formally assessed certificate, diploma or title. A further fundamental specification concerns what can be certified. According to paragraph 66 (art. 4 l.92/2012), a certifiable competence means “a structured set of knowledge and skills [...], recognized as *crediti formativi*, after a validation procedure in the case of non-formal and informal learning”.

The pillar of this system is the National Repertory of Education, Training and Professional Qualifications (*Repertorio Nazionale dei titoli di istruzione e formazione e delle qualificazioni professionali*). It has been conceived as the backbone and the collector of all the qualifications’ standards and competences that can be certified under the public certification system, openly recognized and accessible by both citizens and experts (art.4, para.67).

2.3 Building a National Qualification Framework

Legislative Decree 13/13

Law No. 92 of 2012 clarifies that validation of non-formal and informal learning is one of the key elements to support lifelong learning. Building a comprehensive system, giving rules and standards to the stakeholders, ensuring basic principles valid for the whole national territory are just some of the prerequisites to create a regulatory framework that can bring order to several qualifications already available in Italy. Those qualifications were issued without a clear recognition throughout the 20 Italian regions and so, without being able to be used outside the regional borders. They did not have legitimate value in the EU. A process of reorganization of the qualification system started after 2012. The implementation of the Law led to the Legislative Decree No. 13 of 2013 on *National competence certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning*.

It consists of 11 articles and contains a series of fundamental definitions. Firstly, the Decree establishes what is a national competence certification system. It is “all the identification and validation and certification services, granted in compliance with general rules, essential level of performance and minimum standards referred to in this decree” (art. 2 d.lgs. 13/13, para.1, let. *n*)).

Among others, the Decree defines general principles that characterize the validation system (art. 3 d.lgs. 13/13, para.4, let. *a-e*):

- the individual is the center of the whole process of validation, which is based on valuing his/her life, work and study background. To guarantee the individual centrality and a voluntary process, for all citizens, principles of accessibility, transparency, objectivity, traceability must be ensured;
- documents and certificates issued at the end of the process are public;

- the entitling public bodies must operate autonomously, under the subsidiarity principle and the autonomy of schools and universities, following the inter-institutional coordination approach and complying with social partners;
- the realization of the single information backbone and the interoperability of the national and territorial databases are fundamental for the mutuality of services and for the creation of a joint system;
- the reliability of the system is based on standards, tools and indicators shared across the whole national territory.

Furthermore, the Decree establishes a system which covers qualifications from all the sectors involved in education and training. Each field is to have its institutional entity that deals with the identification, validation and certification of competences⁷. Those entities are divided between a “public entitling body” and an “entitled body”. The range of the former includes (Perulli 2019):

- the Ministry of Education, University and Research (now a separate Ministry), for the identification, validation and certification of competences related to the qualifications of the school system and university;
- Regions and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, in the identification, validation and certification of competences related to qualifications issued under the respective responsibilities in the VET system;
- the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, in the identification, validation and certification of competences related to qualifications of non-regulated and non- organized professions in chambers or formal associations;
- The Ministry of Economic Development, in the identification and validation and certification of competences related to qualifications for regulated professions.

On the other hand, those entitling authorities identify and recognize public and private organizations – called “entitled bodies” – that could provide services of identification, validation and certification of competences: for example, chambers of commerce, industry, trade and agriculture, schools, Universities and higher education institutions. Among other things, the entitling authorities must provide individuals and organizations with practical information on the system and ensure quality standards that could assess the reliability and integrity of the system.

Moreover, the institutional authority in charge of the implementation of the system is the National Technical Committee led by the Ministries of Labor and of Education with representatives of all the entitling bodies. The Committee must define national guidelines on the use of validation services to guarantee a single regulatory framework (Perulli 2019), where all the actors involved could work together.

Finally, the Committee is in charge of formally adopting a catalog of qualifications referenced to the European Qualification Framework, what the Decree 13/13 calls the National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications.

Minimum Standards and the Construction of the National Repertory

The Legislative Decree 13/13 proceeds to draft minimum service standards of the national competence certification system, or rather the essential levels of performance to be ensured on the whole national territory. Those standards are adopted by the public entitling bodies and are a point of reference for the entitled authority to guarantee a uniform provision of service, conformed to the operative rules. The Decree identifies three types of standards: process, attestation and system.

Article 5 (d.lg.13/13) defines process standards, in turn divided into three validation steps:

- identification, aimed at pointing out individual competences that could be related to one or more qualifications. When those competences must be identified in a non-formal or informal context, the process involves an accurate analysis of learning experience;
- assessment, meant to ascertain that the individual has those competences through specific methods and evidence;
- attestation, intend to issue validation documents or certificates to formally support the ascertained competences.

Moreover, Article 6 lists what kind of information must be present in the validation documents to be clear and reliable (attestation standards):

- recipient's personal data;
- data of the entitled body;
- acquired skills and related qualifications, linked to the 8-level European Qualification Framework;
- data about the learning and validation process.

Finally, Article 7 defines roles and responsibilities of entitling bodies (system standards). They are committed to the creation of one or more repertories of qualifications and a single information backbone as well as to the definition of a uniform regulatory framework and standardized formats and procedures. They must release information about the validation and certification system for individuals and organizations. They must guarantee the reliability of the system itself and of the certificates, ensuring collegiality, objectivity, impartiality and independence across all the process' phases.

The Legislative Decree 13/13, in its final part, establishes the National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications. It is defined as follows:

The national repertory is the shared reference framework for skills certification, throughout the progressive standardization of essential elements, also descriptive, education and training qualifications, including vocational education and training and professional qualifications,

through their correspondence to a shared system of recognition of training credits in a European key.

(art.8, d.lgs 13/13, para.2)

Therefore, the Repertory consists of all the repertories of education and training qualifications that already exist, codified by national, regional entities or autonomous provinces and entitled bodies (art. 8, dr.lgs. 13/13, para. 3). Those repertories could be included in the National Repertory as long as there is the identification of the entitling body and the recognition of all the competences and qualifications.

Furthermore, since every competence could be validated and certified by an entitled body only if the related qualification is included in the National Repertory, Article 8 is fundamental in defining what could be certified. According to the Decree, a qualification must be referenced to the European Qualification Framework, through the National Qualification Framework. The Repertory begins a process of standardization to allow the comprehensive recognition of outputs and the interaction between sub-systems. Only when the qualification is widely recognized, it could become valuable at the national and European level. This implies that the person who obtains a qualification can easily “spends” it across and above the national borders and, in this way, that the system guarantees students’ and workers’ mobility. Among other things, the Repertory is made accessible and open to everybody. On the one hand, transparency favors the exchange of information among businesses and employers, on the other, the recipient becomes aware of his/her learning needs.

National Framework of Regional Qualifications

As already mentioned, the main problem was represented by the recognition, at the national and European levels, of all the qualifications issued by entitled bodies or territorial entities. In

2013, at the time of the signing of the Decree No.13, on the national territory, there were 21 regional qualification systems (19 regional and 2 provincial) (Perulli 2019). They were at different stages of implementation: some regions could boast complete and operational systems, while others were at the starting point. The necessity of standardization and connection became more and more pressing at the beginning of the new European programming cycle for the period 2014-2020. The European Commission sets an ex-ante conditionality⁸ for the access to the funding of the European Social Fund (ESF): VET programs would be financed by the ESF as long as qualifications issued in those places will be recognized on the whole national territory. For this reason, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor signed a joint decree, on the 30th of June 2015, *on the definition of an operational framework for the national recognition of regional qualifications and related competences*. The inter-ministerial Decree establishes the National Framework of Regional Qualifications. It is a catalog of regional competences, which integrates the National Repertory. It is also a mechanism of mutual recognition among regional qualifications, which began a standardization process. This process consists of the identification and description of qualifications and related competences, their classification and division based on two types of national statistical codification⁹ and their referencing to the European Qualification Framework.

One year after the approval of the Decree, the Regions proceeded with its implementation. In 2019, regional policies and practices on validation still present consistent differences. Some Regions had already in place measures implied in the regulatory framework, such as Emilia Romagna, Piemonte, Toscana, Lombardia, Umbria, Valle d'Aosta and Veneto (Perulli 2019). Others introduced those measures later in 2016. Abruzzo, Calabria, Marche, Molise and Sicilia are now implementing the system.

The last step towards the creation of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) is the inter-ministerial Decree of 8 January 2018, which formally institutes it as the national instruments

for description and classification. It “represents the national mechanism for referencing¹⁰ Italian qualifications to the European Qualification Framework, referred in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017, with the function of connecting the Italian Qualification System to the systems of other European countries” (art.1 d.interm. 8/01/18, para.2). The decree recognizes to the NQF several goals, among others: coordination of services and systems that contribute to the public offer of lifelong learning; improving accessibility, transparency and permeability of qualifications as well as facilitating its usability at the national and European level; promoting the centrality of the person; contributing to the quality of training. Competences are described according to three dimensions, in terms of knowledge, abilities, autonomy/responsibility and then they are positioned on 8 levels, characterizing the growing complexity of learning. The referencing of qualifications is run by the National Agency for Active Labor Policies (ANPAL), in collaboration with the National Institute for Public Policies Analysis (INAPP). Finally, the legislative framework is completed (Table 2.1) and the governance of the system is designed (Figure 2.5).

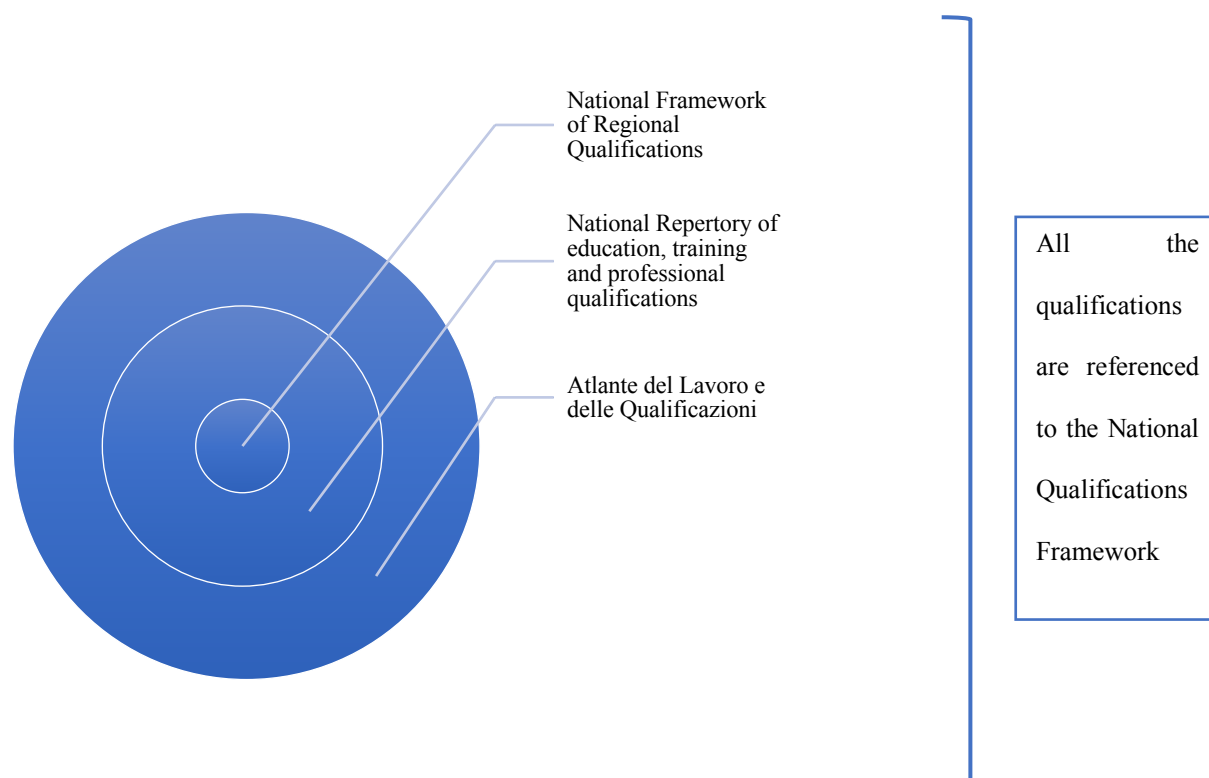
Tab. 2.1 Summary of Legislation Concerning the National Certification System

Legislation	What does it introduce	Actors
Law No. 92 of 2012	It begins a reform of the labor market, defining lifelong learning for the first time in Italy. The Law foresees the institutionalization of a comprehensive system of competence certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.	Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labor.

Legislative Decree No.13 of 2013	The Decree establishes what is a national competence certification system; defines general principles that characterize the validation system; draft minimum service standards. The Legislative Decree establishes the National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications.	The National Technical Committee led by the Ministry of Labor and of Education with representatives of all the entitling bodies (Regions and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano; the Ministry of Economic Development).
Inter-ministerial Decree of 30 th of June 2015	The inter-ministerial Decree establishes the National Framework of Regional Qualifications, a mechanism of mutual recognition among regional qualifications.	Regions in collaboration with Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Education.
Inter-ministerial Decree of 8 January 2018	It institutes the National Qualification Framework (NQF), for referencing each qualification to the EQF.	Ministry of Education, University and Research; Regions; Ministry of Labor and Social Policies; Ministry of Economic Development - EU Policies Department.

Source: elaborated by the author.

Fig. 2.5 The Italian System of Competence Certification



Source: elaborated by the author.

2.4 The Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni

Structure and Implementation

To make the National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications a comprehensive system for the identification and validation of competences, the necessity was to create a database that could act as its backbone. For this reason, in 2015, the Technical Committee prepared the implementation of the Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni¹¹,

which would serve as a reference model for the creation of the National Framework for Regional Qualifications. In this case, the Technical Committee inherited a project already started by the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies¹² (INAPP) to create a 24-sectors map of the labor market (Mazzarella, Mallardi and Porcelli 2017, 10).

The Atlante Lavoro describes the contents of works starting from the elementary unit of the activity, then, it groups them in areas of activity (ADA), which, in turn, are assembled in productive processes and, finally, in macro-categories, the professional and economic sectors (PES). Chronologically, the starting point for the construction of the Atlante is represented by the sectors (Mazzarella, Mallardi and Porcelli 2017, 8). PESs were obtained through the intersection of two classification codes adopted by the Italian National Statistics Institute (ISTAT): one concerning economic activities (ATECO) and the other professional classification (CP 2011). Those are the same used by the National Framework of Regional Qualifications to reference its competences. Subsequently, a third dimension has been introduced, represented by the eight levels of the EQF. The aggregation of these codes has allowed the creation of clusters (Mazzarella, Mallardi and Porcelli 2017, 10), the sectors.

There are currently 24 professional and economic sectors (Figure 2.6). The 24th is the Common Area (*Area Comune*), which collects activities transversal to the other 23 ones, such as administration, marketing, communication, public relations, human resources.

Fig. 2.6 The 24 professional economic sectors of Atlante Lavoro



Source: INAPP website https://atlantelavoro.inapp.org/atlante_lavoro_dettagli.php

Sectors are, then, described in terms of production processes, which have as their final product a good or service. Processes arise from the transformation of inputs (economic, material and human resources) into final outputs, through the addition of value. Moreover, the Atlante goes even deeper in the description, dividing processes into sequences and areas of activity (ADA). ATECO codes are assigned to sequences while CP 2011 are linked to ADA. For example, the first sector placed in Atlante is the one concerning “Food production”. Inside the PES, there are seven processes: from treatment and production of dessert to that of beverages. The second one, “Processing and production of flour, pasta and bakery product”, is divided into sequences, that concern specific groups of activities (ADA), for two different types of production: industrial and handcraft (Figure 2.7).

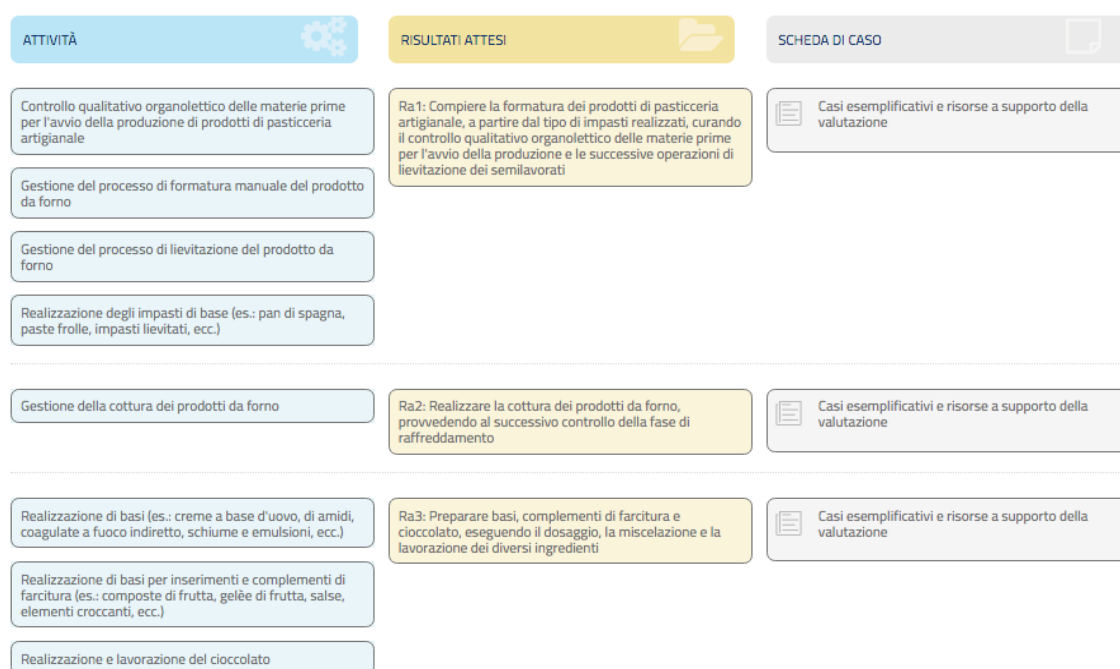
Fig. 2.7 Structure of the sector “Food production”



Source: INAPP website https://atlantelavoro.inapp.org/atlante_lavoro_dettagli.php

As mentioned, the ultimate unit of description is the activity, which reveals what is done within a determined phase of the process. Precisely, each activity corresponds to one or more expected results, which describes the good/service/part of a process that must be realized/provided and the related performances. The expected result is the connection between the description of a job activity and the competences needed to fulfill it. Finally, the Atlante contains illustrative cases (*Schede di caso*) that describe typical situations that could be useful to link it to reality. Following the previous example, the A.D.A 02.02.05 “Artisanal production of pastry products” lists and describes several activities, such as controlling, management and implementation, and the corresponding expected results within that phase. For example, to realize the cooking of an oven product, the person in charge needs to know how to manage the baking (Figure 2.8).

Fig. 2.8 A.D.A 02.02.05



Source: INAPP website https://atlantelavoro.inapp.org/atlante_lavoro_dettagli.php

The innovative contribution of the Atlante lies in the realization of a job description that does not imply professions, functions or roles, but that considers the essential elements of productive processes: the activity. Furthermore, the description links qualitative elements (activities, expected results, illustrative cases) to macro quantitative elements (ADA, sequences, SEP) (Mazzarella, Mallardi and Porcelli 2017). Currently, Atlante contains 83 processes, 261 sequences, 881 ADA, 279 activities, 2219 expected results and 305 illustrative cases.

When the *Atlante del Lavoro* was formally adopted by the Technical Committee to support the improvement of the Italian NQF, two categories were added to it: l'*Atlante delle Qualificazioni* e l'*Atlante delle Professioni*. The latter lists professions while the former contains the National Repertory with all the qualifications and related skills. This section is organized in three sets:

- secondary education
- higher education
- regional vocational education and IFTS

The assumption is that each qualification, in addition to being cataloged, is in any case referenced to one or more ADA, creating a synergy between competences and expected results, thus, between the education and training sector and the labor market.

Beyond Institutional Functions

L'Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni performs several institutional and non-institutional functions that deserve careful attention. Its creation was primarily intended to support the National Repertory and to catalogue all the qualifications issued on the national territory. At the moment, the *Atlante delle Qualificazioni* section contains 43 qualifications for the second education cycle, 4708 for higher education and 4913 for regional vocational training¹³. This function is part of a wider aim of supporting lifelong learning policies, as required by Law No. 92 of 2012 and various European strategies. The fact that each qualification within the Atlante is referenced to an EQF dimension ensures the recognition of skills at the national and international levels. In this way, students' and workers' mobility is granted as well as transparency in information exchanges.

Furthermore, the Atlante is based in its implementation on the European conceptualization of lifelong learning: the person is at the heart of the system. The aim is, therefore, to enhance individual skills, both those acquired in formal pathways and those deriving from non-formal and informal contexts. The association of each qualification to an ADA, allows linking descriptive contents of the labor market (ADA, PES, sequences, processes) to the education offer (University, VET, higher education). In this way, the description of the education and training sector is as detailed as the labor one. It is traced from sectors to expected results, allowing the traceability of competences, even those with lower social visibility (Mazzarella, Mallardi and Porcelli 2017, 18). Individuals will concretely see their experiential heritage

recognized. This can potentially stimulate lifelong learning services' demand, especially for disadvantaged groups.

Moreover, this platform, as it is structured, creates synergy between the labor and the education worlds. At the individual level, the Atlante links what are the resources owned by each person (qualifications and related skills) to job activities (ADA). Expected results describe the performance needed to realize a product and what concretely must be known to carry out an activity. So, people are aware of where they are and of what they need to access that kind of productive process. When skills are placed within the labor market map, the individual itself is included in that context. This function allows the Atlante to become a tool for professional guidance and, potentially, a policy tool for skills governance.

Indeed, at the institutional level, the Atlante becomes an instrument for supporting the development of lifelong learning and active labor policies. It provides institutions with a range of information about the labor market and the education and training sectors and many analyses and researches can be realized through its lens. Knowing how many qualifications and jobs are available in Italy potentially allows to make previsions and build policies coherent with systemic needs. It collects data on labor demand and supply, which would allow better management and governance of the two and improve the final results of employability.

NOTES

1. Source of data: Eurostat database, 2020.

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2. It is the Permanent Conference for relations between the State, the Regions and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, a collegial body aimed at guaranteeing institutional collaboration among the central government and territorial authorities.
 3. The Bassanini Laws consists of a series of laws and implementing decrees, signed between 1997 and 1999, aimed to reform the relations among sub-national authorities and State in Italy towards decentralization.
 4. The 10-years compulsory education (*obbligo scolastico*) was, firstly, defined by the Minister of Education, Luigi Berlinguer, together with the introduction of the *obbligo formativo*. Then, Law No. 53 of 2003 canceled the increase of compulsory education, notwithstanding the *obbligo formativo*.
 5. The text is referring to the State-Region Conference No. 154 of 20 December 2012 - Agreement on lifelong learning policies and guidelines for the identification of general criteria and priorities for the promotion and support to the realization of territorial networks.
 6. The text is referring to the 2008 European Parliament and Council Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and to the following Council of the European Union's Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
 7. The Decree defines “identification and validation of competences” as “the process that shall lead to recognition [...] of skills acquired by each person in a non-formal context, or informal” (art. 2 d.lgs. 13/13, para.1, let. *i*). Those skills acquired in formal contexts are also taken into consideration. On the other hand, the “certification of competence” is the “formal procedure of recognition” (art. 2 d.lgs. 13/13, para.1, let. *l*)., which ended with issuing a certificate.
 8. Partnership Agreement 2014-2020:

file:///Users/sun/Desktop/tesi/capitolo%202_Italy%20e%20Repertorio%20e%20Atlante/usati/Accordo_di_Partenariato_SEZIONE_2.pdf

9. This point will be further explored in the next paragraph, when it is discussed the structure of the *Atlante Lavoro*.

10. Referencing is the institutional and technical process that associate qualifications awarded under the National Certification System at one of the 8 levels of the NQF. The referencing of Italian qualifications to the NQF ensures that they are linked to the EQF (art.2 d.interm 8/01/18, para.1, let. a)).

11. It was institutionalized by the Inter-ministerial decree of 8 January 2018.

12. INAPP was born in 2016 as the transformation of ISFOL.

13. Data are collected from INAPP's website dedicated to the Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni. https://atlantelavoro.inapp.org/atlante_lavoro_dettagli.php.

3 State of the Art in the Italian Regions: Implementation and Results Through a Comparative Analysis

3.1 Overview

The last 20 years have been fundamental for Italy to define its own strategy regarding lifelong learning. The previous chapter has provided an analysis of how European directives have been interiorized by the Italian government and transformed into a national qualification framework. The present chapter posits that, to assess the current status of the system, it is necessary to analyze its implementation at all levels of governance. Indeed, it is at the regional level that this system is implemented and can reach the ultimate users, the citizens. Sub-national institutions participate in the decision-making process within the State-Regions Conference and the Technical Committee, but they are also entitled to the operational capacity. Thus, at this level of analysis is possible to identify the system's criticalities and shortcomings, as well as its successful factors.

Some Italian Regions had started to develop their own systems of validation and certification prior to Law No. 92 of 2012. Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Piemonte and Lombardia started a debate about certification and validation processes, following European models, in the first decade of the 2000s. Between 2005 and 2010, they institutionalized their regional systems and, then, they proceeded to harmonize them with the national framework.

Indeed, after the inter-ministerial decree of 2015, all Regions committed to equip themselves with a repertory of professional profiles, to adopt regional regulations on identification, validation and certification services and to relate their competences to the National Repertory. At the end of 2015, only Abruzzo and the autonomous province of Bolzano lacked a regional repertory while Calabria, Sicilia and the autonomous province of Trento were formulating them. Concerning regional certification systems, in 2015, Valle D'Aosta, Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Toscana and Umbria had fully implemented systems while the others were defining their own normative framework. In September 2018, only Sicilia, Calabria, Molise, Abruzzo, Marche and the autonomous province of Trento did not have a regional certification system (Tecnostuttura 2019).

Given this background, this last section provides a comparative analysis of four regional experiences: Lombardia, Lazio, Abruzzo and Puglia. Information has been directly collected through semi-structured interviews (Annex 1) with experts who are involved in the process of formulation and construction of regional certification systems. The analysis sets three research objectives for each regional experience to be evaluated, that is to: *a)* understand the process of formulation and realization of the system related to territorial peculiarities; *b)* analyze the process of adaptation and connection to the other regional systems and to the national one; *c)* highlight the successful factors and the criticalities of each model.

Furthermore, this part of the work of the thesis identifies a series of dimensions for measuring the state of play of each Region, summed up in the following table (3.1). Interview results are analyzed in the following paragraphs on the basis of the four dimensions identified: initial processes and approaches that led to the formulation of regional systems; the actors and stakeholders involved in the realization phase and entitled to the service; peculiarities that emerged from each regional procedure; the actual state of play and the main criticalities of each regional model.

Tab. 3.1 Interviews in brief

DIMENSIONS/ REGIONS	LOMBARDIA	LAZIO	ABRUZZO	PUGLIA
Key Dates	2007-2008 and 2012 for non-formal and informal paths	2016-2018 Since 2012 , the Region is equipped with a Repertory	2018	2011-2013
Regional Acts	Regional Law No.19 of 2007 ; Regional Act No. 976 of 2008 ; Regional Act No.737 of 2012	Council Deliberation No. 452 of 2012 Council Deliberation No. 122 of 2016 Council Deliberation No.254 of 2018	Regional Law No. 30 of 2018 Council deliberation No.788 of 2018	Council deliberation No.1604 of 2011 Council deliberation No. 2273 of 2012 Council deliberation No. 327 of 2013
Regional Repertory	Regional Framework of Professional Standards	Regional Repertory of Competences and Training Profiles; Regional Repertory of Training Course Standards	Regional Repertory of Qualifications and Professional Profiles; Regional Repertory of Training Course Standards	Regional Repertory for Professional Profiles
Region's Role (other than entitling body)	Limited to monitoring and ex-post control	The only entitled body to the certification phase	Limited to accreditation	Part of the Technical Committee

Stakeholders	Social parties and employer associations; labor Services (non-formal and informal learning); education and training bodies (formal courses)	Entitled bodies	Employment services and training agencies	Regional offices, Universities, social partners, employers
Formal learning	Yes	Yes	Approved	Just for authorized public courses
Non-formal and informal learning validation systems	Yes	Accreditation	Experimental	Experimental
Weaknesses	Social recognition for non-formal and informal patterns	Organizational issues for certification procedure in head to Region	Internal harmonization of profiles	No link between labor and education sectors

Source: elaborated by the author

3.2 Comparative Analysis

Initial Processes and Approaches

The first aspect along which the four regional systems have been analyzed is the start date of the formulation process. Substantial differences have emerged from the interviews, as table 3.1 shows.

The **Lombardia Region** was one of the first to start a debate about certification and validation services. In 2007 – five years before the institutionalization of the NQF – the Region approved Law No. 19, which formally established the regional certification system. The regulation, in conformity with the division of powers established by Title V of the Constitution, modified the National Law No. 845 of 1978, which regulated vocational education in Italy and qualifications' award. The Regional Law introduced a series of new concepts – such as lifelong learning, flexibility, permanent guidance – that come from the European discourse and that would be taken up by the Fornero Law in 2012.

Moreover, Article 10 (l.r.19/2007) defined the main features of the regional system: both formal learning and non-formal and informal experiences had to be recognized as training credits (*crediti formativi*) and were subjected to the realization of a comprehensive framework, the regional repertory (l.r. 19/2007, art.23). In 2008, to support the regional system, Lombardia introduced, as one of the first regions in Italy, the Regional Framework of Professional Standards (*Quadro Regionale degli Standard Professionali*) (Act 976/2008). It was filled in with 450 profiles, differentiated by competences, knowledge and abilities. This structure was perfectly in line with the European guidelines and with the future construction of the National Repertory. Of course, as the key witness has outlined, the framework has been modified based on changes occurred in the regional labor market and adapted to the national legislation, but the structure itself has remained substantially unchanged.

What can be said is that, since 2007, the regional lexicon has been updated with new terms and definitions. Particularly, Lombardia has been one of the first regions to think in terms of competences. Skills are placed at the heart of the system, allowing greater flexibility in the formulation of the educational and training offer and an extension to non-formal and informal contexts. To be certified will no longer be titles of training courses, but competences and related professional profiles within the Repertory: article 10 (l.r.19/2007) establishes that the only valid issued document is the competence certificate. Moreover, the Regional Framework was divided into six sections grouped in terms of competences. Also, these concepts would be recalled by the National Law of 2012. Although the regional Law of 2007 has established a system in which competences from formal education, non-formal and informal learning were treated in the same way, it would be necessary to wait until October 2012 (Act 737/2012) to have a fully operational system for identification, validation and certification of competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts.

The **Lazio Region** began a process of convergence and adaptation to national guidelines soon after the adoption of the decree of 2015. In 2016, through the Council deliberation No.122, the Region established its own certification system, which is based on three main instruments. Firstly, the Repertory of Competences and Training Profiles (*Repertorio Regionale delle Competenze e dei Profili Formativi*), which dated back to the Council Deliberation No. 452 of 2012, collects minimum references used for the description of job contents and qualifications issued by the Lazio Region. These references are articulated in profiles, associated to the National Framework, and units of competence, described in terms of EQF levels. Secondly, in 2018, the Region instituted the Repertory of Training Course Standards (*Repertorio degli Standard di Percorso Formativo*), which contains minimum description references for formal training courses contents: it regulates the characteristics of a training course that the Region can or cannot authorize. Overall, the first repertory addressed the need of all the people who want

to obtain a certification, while the latter is dedicated to the ones who want to join a training course: they are correlated because at each competence unit corresponds a learning outcome. The third tool is represented by the information system, CLARICE¹, which is a platform that supports individuals and entitled bodies in the certification procedure.

Once these instruments have been established, the Lazio Region has started its process of formulation and implementation of the regional system by training human resources. The first experimental initiative realized in this field involved 100 training services and employment agencies, aimed at preparing persons who will be able to operatively realize each phase of the certification procedure. The Lazio interviewer has highlighted that this trial has been useful for the Region, on the one hand, to test the procedure and the technical tools and, on the other hand, it has allowed to prepare operators to become familiar with normative lexicon and practical phases.

Furthermore, after this project, the Region established a series of regulations for:

- Recognition of training credits, through the validation and certification procedure in formal contexts;
- Enabling operators for the procedure, through an exam and the enrollment in dedicated lists;
- Identifying process standards and costs;
- Accreditation of entitled bodies.

The **Abruzzo Region** started to build its regional certification system in 2018. The Regional Operative Program of the ESF, for the programming cycle 2014-2020, underlined the necessity of implementing a system of certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, in line with the goals defined at the European and national levels (Abruzzo Region 2016). Operatively, the intervention foresaw the identification of an entity that should elaborate the procedure of certification and validation and define minimum standards and entitled bodies.

Furthermore, the Region needed the support of technical expertise to realize the correlation with the national framework and the standardization of regional qualifications. Consequently, the Abruzzo Region issued a public call² for the identification of an agency for technical assistance and support in the realization of the system. The project has been assigned in May 2018 and the first act undertaken to implement the system was the modification of the Regional Law 111/2005. The introduction of paragraph 3bis (l.r. No.30/2018, art.2) allowed the Region to adopt the normative prescriptions foreseen by the inter-ministerial decrees of 2015 and 2018. Furthermore, through a Council's deliberation, the Region finally adopted the document called "Regional integrated system for certification of competences and recognition of training credits from formal, non-formal and informal learning"³.

In line with the other regional experiences, the Abruzzo's system is found on two pillars: on the one hand, the identification, validation and certification of competences and, on the other hand, the recognition of training credits. Consequently, the Region has established two tools: the Regional Repertory of Qualifications and Professional Profiles (*Repertorio delle Qualificazioni e dei Profili*) and the Repertory of Training Course Standards (*Repertorio degli Standard di Percorso Formativo*). The former consists of regional qualifications that are referenced to the National Repertory and to EQF levels; the latter recognizes training credits through the standardization of educational contents – in other words, what the individual needs to know to obtain that credit. All these tools and mechanisms are inserted in the overall project "VALE ABRUZZO"⁴, which supports the Abruzzo Region to transpose provisions of the national decrees and finalize to implementation.

The **Puglia Region** has started its process of building a regional competence certification system in 2011, when, with the Council deliberation No. 1604, it adopted a Protocol of Intent with the Toscana Region to collaborate, through the exchange of experiences and materials, for the definition of their respective systems. More generally, Regions and Public Administrations

have decided to formulate two kinds of bilateral or interregional Agreements to accelerate the process of convergence: *traghettamento* and *maternage*. The former allows one Region to take the whole repertory, and the corresponding certification standards, from another Region. The latter instead consists of the transfer of single qualifications from one regional repertory to another. In Puglia, it has been taken a real action of *traghettamento* of the repertory of Toscana, followed by a process of adaptation to the regional context, which is still ongoing.

Moreover, the Puglia Region established in 2013 the Regional Repertory for Professional Profiles (*Repertorio delle Figure Professionali*), which sustains the implementation of interventions and services for lifelong learning: from training evaluation and projects design to validation and certification procedures until professional guidance for citizens. To this repertory would be then associated the repertory for professional qualifications and regulated pathways, which consists of all the regulated professions at the national and regional levels.

Actors

The second dimension that has been taken into consideration to analyze the regional experiences concerns the nature of parties engaged in the recognition and certification procedures – namely the actors that concretely participates in the implementation process. On this respect as well, from the interviews have emerged several differences among Regions under scrutiny.

In **Lombardia**, all the changes that are brought to the system and to the Repertory are arranged by a sub-committee of the Regional Commission for Labor Policies and Training, which is formed by social parties, trade unions and associations, employer categories. As stated by the Lombardia manager, this level of engagement with territorial actors generates consent inside interested parties and also recognition and legitimation within society and among the users.

Moreover, actors that are involved in the implementation of the procedure vary – as well as in other Regions – based on the certification path. Concerning formal education, the entitled bodies are education and training services, which realize structured courses: nowadays, they are almost 750. For the validation of non-formal and informal competences, bodies accredited to the labor services register can issue certifications. At the moment, there are 200 of such entities in the region. In Lombardia, all these bodies have a broader scope. Indeed, the system is based on their utmost responsibility in all the phases of the procedure and on a sanction system operated by the Region through periodic actions of monitoring and ex-post control.

In the **Lazio Region**, the operative body involved in the formulation and realization process is the Regional Directorate for Education, Training, Research and Labor. From the interviews emerged that, compared to Lombardia, which gives room for maneuver to entitled bodies, the Region is the main actor entailed to the certification of competences. So, while entitled bodies have to proceed with the identification and validation, the actual certification service is in the hand of the Region. This structure, if it has allowed for greater control, has also led to a series of organizational issues: identifying the commission, the competent bodies inside the Region, the physical locations, updating procedures and digitizing the system are long-term processes, which employ a certain amount of resources. Nevertheless, the Region has decided to test this practice just for some categories and small groups that could be easily managed, as in the case of enabling operators.

The **Abruzzo Region** is the entitling body designated to the maintenance and updating of the system. It defines criteria and prerequisites to enable operators and to validate bodies to provide the service. For the accreditation, there is a simplified procedure for the entities already accredited such as employment services and training agencies, which are identified as entitled bodies *ex-officio*.

In **Puglia**, the Council deliberation 2273/2012 has established the presence of a Technical Committee that is finalized to the adaptation process, which is still on going, to the national system. Within the Committee, there are various regional offices, provinces, Universities, social partners and employers. The key witness highlights that this system foresees, particularly, the involvement of public entities engaged in formal patterns of education – such as Universities and schools – that should be the main providers of validation and certification services, since they can directly link these procedures to formal paths of education.

Procedures

The four Regions have also been compared on the basis of the different procedures applied in the supply of the services.

In **Lombardia**, the regional system is based on the endowment (*Sistema della Dote*). The Region does not finance training courses through public bids, but it supports personalized courses. This means that the individual can choose a training or labor service (public or private) and asks for the dowry. The entitled body ascertains users' characteristics and needs and, based on costs and standards, assigns a budget that can be used to have access to a series of services. Each "basket of services" is defined by the Region: there is an endowment that addresses youth unemployment, financed by the fund *Garanzia Giovani*; one dedicated to all the categories of unemployed workers and to employees who want to join qualified courses in continuing training (*Dote unica lavoro*); a basket that takes care of internships. These resources are not directly assigned to the individual, but to the entitled body on the basis of employment results and performances. In 2015, for the first edition of the program, 82.217 endowments have been assigned and the employment rate was at 81%. Among youngsters, 19.414 people between 15

and 29 years old had found a job and 55% of those who have started an internship had been employed. After three years, total endowments were 169.325⁵.

In **Lazio**, the Region foresees to divide the procedure into two essential moments. Firstly, the citizen accesses the identification and validation services to have his/her competences recognized by the entitled body which releases a validation document. Then, this document is sent to the Region, which must issue the certificates. This procedure is not done on an individual basis, but through public calls for specific groups of qualifications.

In the **Abruzzo Region**, the service has been already tested in two fields. A first experience has been carried out to enable operators and experts to the recognition of training credits. As explained by the Abruzzo representative, the Region asked labor agencies and training entities to identify groups of operators that could be included in the trial. Then, to an initial training phase has been associated a practical experience for credits recognition. Future operators experimented the procedure on third persons and, at the end, they concretely formulated and released training credits certificates.

A second experiment in the field of non-formal and informal learning has been made within a specific project for individuals with mental disability. The aim was to identify the competences held by these people, other than the ones recognized by schools and formal educational paths. Operators took charge of identifying their skills and formalized the path through validation documents, specifically formulated for this case.

In **Puglia**, the procedure for non-formal and informal learning has been tested with two trials finalized to the recognition of competences acquired “on the field”. One was dedicated to family caregivers (*Assistenti familiari*): beneficiaries were operators already employed in public or private health organizations with 5 years of experience. Applications, collected within three public calls, amounted to 264⁶. The caregivers have been involved in identification, validation and certification pathways through the support of Universities and Province Centers for Adult

Education (*CPIA*). Moreover, the second trial was delimited to two refugees with a multi-annual experience as intercultural mediation technician (*Tecnico di mediazione interculturale*). In this case, the experience has been undertaken by the CAP (*Centro per l'apprendimento permanente*) of the University of Bari, identified as entitled body by the Region.

Impact and Criticalities

Today, the **Lombardia Region** has a consolidated certification system for formal education and it is revisioning the validation procedure for non-formal and informal contexts based on new national guidelines. This phase of adaptation has never generated unrests and upheaval. On the one hand, because the Region has always been in line, since the formulation stage, with the supranational and national directives, and, on the other, because the structure of the regional system itself allows greater adaptability and flexibility in the management. For example, the Regional Repertory is formulated so that the entitled body can build its own educational path without limitations about hours or pre-requisites, imposed by the Region, but based only on competences. This flexibility also offers the possibility of updating the Repertory with new skills that reflect the evolution of the labor market: nowadays, there are two competencies related to smart working and a section dedicated to transversal abilities that are relatively new and associated to multiple and younger jobs.

The Lombardia's system has demonstrated to be constantly growing and updating. Nevertheless, two criticalities have been identified during the interview. The first issue is the recognition through the regional territory of the importance of validation processes for non-formal and informal learning. While certification of formal paths has become an essential part of the educational system, the possibility of validating competencies acquired in other contexts is not widely recognized, especially if the procedure is not financed by the Region, but it is at

the expense of the user. The other criticality regards the harmonization to the other regional systems and, more generally, to the EQF.

The **Lazio Region** has fully implemented the recognition of training credits: both the education and training system and the users have completely understood the importance of this procedure after a first phase of adaptation. In addition, the Region has consolidated its process of enabling operators for the non-formal and informal patterns through the institution of two registers. One concerns operators entitled to the phases of identification, assessment and evaluation. The second register lists the experts that will take part in the Regional Commissions entitled to the certification phase. As stated by the key witness, the Region is not ready to officially implement the system until it overcomes the main issues deriving from organizational and technical lacks. Nevertheless, it has been underlined how the identification stage alone may create advantages that go beyond the acquisition of a certification. This phase results as essential to the assessment of individual experiential and cultural heritage and to understand his/her collocation inside the labor market. In this sense, more and more people have asked to take the exam to be enabled as operators in employment agencies and other entities that are responsible for placements and matching labor demand and supply. These people need to know how to use national and regional tools and to understand the legislation to be competitive and to offer a complete service.

The **Abruzzo** is one of the Regions in which the service is not yet operational: the system has been approved, but the implementation will start in about two months. The process of enabling operators is not completed. The ROP has foreseen, in its next programming cycle, to continue the correlation with the National Repertory through a technical agency. Indeed, today, the Region is revising its repertory, excluding professional profiles never activated within the Region and modifying them in line with the national standards. The interviewer has pointed out the necessity to align profiles and qualifications within the regional territory.

The **Puglia Region** has started to issue certifications, in formal context, for courses recognized and authorized by the public system. Identification, validation and certification systems for non-formal and informal learning are in the experimental phase. In this case as well, the main criticality is identified in the uneven regional context, where contents, length and cost of courses are still not standardized.

3.3 Final Remarks

The aim of this paragraph is to summarize, through an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, the main results obtained from interviews conducted on the four regional representatives.

By comparing the selected administrations, it is possible to define some transversal weaknesses:

- a) insufficient knowledge by the citizen of the opportunity offered by the certification service in non-formal and informal contexts;
- b) the service for identifying, validating and certifying competences, when it is at the expense of citizens, is still scarcely used and is not fully taken into account in its potential;
- c) mutual recognition of competences among Regions is not consistent and homogenization at the national level is not completed;
- d) the process of referencing qualifications to the EQF through common standards is not always conducted homogeneously through the national territory.

With regard to strengths, each region has highlighted the peculiarity of its system. In Lombardia, which is the only Region out of the four analyzed to have a non-formal and informal procedure fully implemented, the autonomy and responsibility of entitled bodies in carrying out the service is highly valued as a key element of the system. Conversely, in Lazio, there is a

direct involvement of the Region both as the entity in charge of the formation and as the only body entitled to certification. In these two Regions, even the initial approach has been different: while Lombardia has given priority to the formulation of a system based on competences, Lazio has begun from training human resources. In other cases, as in Puglia, the interviewer has pointed out the priority given to the engagement with universities and schools.

Foreseen improvements can be summed up as follow:

- a) Boost the link between education and training, on the one hand, and labor market needs, on the other, to match demand and supply and to enhance employability results;
- b) Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication to the citizen and to territorial operators in relation to the opportunities of the certification service;
- c) Promote greater engagement with territorial bodies in the organization of the services to foster the social recognition of this system and to broaden the consensus on this practice
- d) Improve the dialogue among Regions and the exchange of information to identify best practices and promote integrated regional development;
- e) Enhance the process of standardization and harmonization at the national and European level to foster mutual recognition of qualifications and mobility.

NOTES

1. Lazio Region. “Centro Risorse per il riconoscimento dei crediti formative e la certificazione delle competenze”:

<http://www.regione.lazio.it/rl/clarice/>

2. Public ban available at:

<https://app.regione.abruzzo.it/avvisipubblici/147ID>

3. Deliberation available at:

https://www.valeabruzzo.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/DGR788_2018.pdf

4. Abruzzo Region. “VALE ABRUZZO”:

<https://www.valeabruzzo.it/il-progetto/>

5. Lombardia Region. “Dote Unica Lavoro – monitoraggio”. Updated at 2018:

<https://www.fse.regione.lombardia.it/wps/portal/PROUE/FSE/Bandi/monitoraggi-settimanali>

6. Puglia Region. “Puglia Competenze – Sperimentazione assistente familiare”:

<https://www.pugliacompetenze.eu/assistente-familiare/>

Conclusion

As illustrated in this work, lifelong learning has emerged as a strategy of the EU in the 1990s, after a long theoretical debate. Using the case study of Italy, the present thesis has attempted to understand how MSs have transposed guidelines and directives from the EU in their national strategies and how they have implemented them on the territory. Specifically, this work has examined the development of one specific policy in the field of LLL: the European Qualification Framework. By adopting a multilevel approach, in particular, it has attempted to assess its advancements at each level of governance.

The present work has firstly provided a historical and theoretical framework to contextualize the overall European policy. It has emerged that the EU has recognized the need for lifelong learning when MSs agreed on the necessity of creating a more cohesive and competitive Union and, consequently, enhancing the European integration process. To develop economic and political sectors, the EU has identified LLL as a macro theme through which to tackle new structural problems that range from labor market issues to social cohesion. In 2000s, the Lisbon Strategy set the goal of creating a knowledge-based society and the EU started to formulate policies and promote actions aimed at improving education and training systems, fostering employability, upgrading skills, encouraging mobility. From the conceptualization of lifelong learning proposed by this work has comes to light that knowledge and expertise derive from all the experiences that an individual has gained during his/her life. Thus, a desirable outcome was the realization of a system that could value formal, non-formal and informal learning and, at the same time, create a comprehensive framework for MSs. From these intentions, EU

institutions have started to build the EQF, whose realization process has been retraced at the end of the first chapter.

Furthermore, the present analysis has been applied to the Italian context for a detailed account of the process that has led to the formulation of a national qualification system. This operation has allowed clarifying the characteristics of the national environment and the advantages of this policy. In particular, it has emerged that:

- a) the cultural and experiential heritage of a person is enhanced through skills assessment and competences recognition;
- b) unemployed people, youngers, elders, women, disadvantaged groups are encouraged to join educational and training paths, contributing to the creation of a high-skilled society and workforce;
- c) educational opportunities and labor needs are linked, and labor demand and supply are matched;
- d) students' and workers' mobility is fostered through the European comparability of qualifications.

Moreover, the work has pointed out that at the national level this policy has never been regulated until the 2012 National Law and the 2013 implementation Decree, which have allowed the formulation of a new governance, based on defined procedures, systemic standards and organizational features. These legislative steps represent a concrete incentive towards the recognition of the importance of recognition and certification system. The thesis considers, as the main achievements of the Italian governance, the realization of a clear structure built on innovative tools. The *National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications* collects qualifications from the whole national territory, referenced to the European Qualification Framework. The *Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni* has been able to link the labor market and the education and training system.

Finally, this system has been assessed at the regional level through a comparative analysis of four Regions built on first-hand data. The dimensions employed for this analysis (initial processes, actors, procedure, criticalities) have suggested the existence of different and diversified regional models. Peculiarities derive from a number of factors. This includes earlier policies in the area, pre-existent tools, political and social acceptance, stakeholders involved, structural issues. Regions under examination have also confirmed that the implementation of this policy is not uniform across them. Indeed, validation and certification of competences in the field of non-formal and informal learning is fully functioning in one region out of four while training credits recognition for formal learning, in some cases, is still experimental or limited to some categories.

Nevertheless, these data have also highlighted common tendencies and weaknesses, confirming that further improvements must be undertaken, throughout the whole national territory. In particular, the thesis has assessed that what is really missing in this system is social recognition: citizens and, sometimes also territorial operators, are not fully aware of the opportunities that this service can bring to individuals and to the community as a whole. For this reason, the thesis suggests that the next step must be broader the consensus on this practice through the involvement of social partners and territorial bodies and a more effective communication strategy. Among other things, the comparison among Regions has highlighted that all the administrations are having some problems in guaranteeing mutual recognition of competences both within regional borders and among them. Therefore, it is possible to draw some conclusions on future developments that must be attempted at the national level: such as a wider use of the *Atlante Lavoro*, which can give concrete support to enhance standardization, information exchange and a better dialogue among Regions.

Overall, the main result accomplished by this work relates to the methodology it has employed. Departing from previous works on the subject, the analysis has claimed that little attention was

given to regional experiences. To overcome this shortcoming, the work has adopted a multi-level approach, integrated with a regional-level analysis, and a comparative study method. This structure has allowed a comprehensive analysis of the policy under examination: the policy formulation has been investigated at the European and national level while the implementation stage has been assessed at the regional one. In addition, this last level has been analyzed comparatively. Despite the limited number of cases, this method has allowed some fundamental features of the system to emerge that would otherwise have never been detected in a context as heterogeneous as the Italian one. In particular, it made it possible to extensively detect analogies and differences over several dimensions and synthesize them into transversal tendencies that could be used to define the status of the overall system. This type of methodology also allows to widen the scope of research to other regional cases for a more complete analysis and to use the same method for other subjects. For example, the European environment is heterogeneous in the implementation of such a policy: there are countries in which the validation system is already consolidated, others in development and other systems in formulation. They may be compared to obtain an analysis of strengths and weaknesses on multiple cases and to allow reflections on best practices, on which model is transferable and at which conditions, and on what can be improved at the national level. A possible return to the supranational level is then desirable to answer questions about how regional issues are re-taken up by the EU. Therefore, an in-depth comparative analysis on NQFs can provide the full picture of this specific policy and fruitful starting points for further research.

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ANNEX 1. Interviews' Structure

QUESTIONS
Description of the formulation and realization process of the regional certification system (When does it start? Which were the initial goals?)
Thrust of Regional legislation and administrative acts
Actors involved in the process (entitling and entitle bodies)
Description of the certification procedure (accessibility, definition of standards, issued documents)
Relations with the National Repertory and NQF
Relations with other regions (transparency and exchange of information)
The role and contribution of the European Social Fund
Assessment of the importance of the recognition, evaluation and certification system for non-formal and informal learning
Implementation stage (beneficiaries, qualifications, specific project, education and training offer)

SUMMARY

Purpose, RQs and Organization of the Thesis

As a result of a long and deep institutional and inter-governmental debate, in the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has started to integrate the concept of lifelong learning (LLL) within its educational strategies and to consider it as a key development factor for the construction of a knowledge-based society. Among the various instruments developed at the European level to enhance lifelong learning systems, a fundamental contribution comes from the birth of the European Qualification Framework (EQF), aimed at identifying, validating and certifying skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts.

Member States have adapted their pre-existing models to European directives and, over time, have built their national systems. In Italy, the formulation of a national qualification framework (NQF) has led to face a series of challenges concerning, on the one hand, the construction of a new governance at the state level and, on the other hand, the implementation of this system on regional territories. Many scholars have investigated the historical process that has led to the conceptualization of lifelong learning in the EU and the related strategies, but the mechanism through which these policies have been developed within Member States (MSs) has received little attention.

From these considerations, derives the need to understand how MSs have transposed guidelines, produced by the EU, into their national strategy and operational programs and how they are implementing them. Specifically, this work raises the following questions: first, why has the

European approach in education shifted towards a lifelong learning strategy? Second, which is the building process that has led to the Italian National Qualification Framework – as the product of the new EU strategy – and how has it overcome the structural challenges presented by the Italian system? And finally, which are the advancements made and the current implementation issues being debated among the Italian Regional systems?

To attempt to answer these questions, the thesis posits that a multilevel approach is needed. The first level of analysis (Chapter 1) assesses the theoretical debate that has led to the conceptualization of lifelong learning and the historical process that made LLL the cornerstone of European strategies. The second level of analysis (Chapter 2) is the national one. The intent is twofold: while tracing the process of elaboration of the Italian National Framework and the National Repertory, from a historical and normative point of view, the work highlights the importance of competences recognition and certification systems. Finally, the last level of analysis (Chapter 3) is regional. The work aims at giving a first insight into Italian regional certification systems through direct interviews with experts who, over time, have been involved in their formulation. Direct testimonies have allowed to develop a qualitative analysis of four regional systems and, at the same time, to draw on first-hand reflections on criticalities and future perspectives of these policies. The work aims to reveal different results concerning initial approaches, procedural and organizational aspects, level of implementation and impact. At the same time, there are common challenges that need to be tackled at the national level.

Methodology and Research

The present work is based on the research conducted at the National Institute for Public Policies Analysis (INAPP), thanks to the support of the group of experts devoted to the development of the *Atlante Lavoro*. The first assessment of the European and national system has been carried out on legal documents, legislative texts, normative sources and resolutions, reports, white

papers, conclusions from EU and inter-governmental agencies (UNESCO, OECD, Council of Europe) and several databases (ISTAT, EUROSTAT, OECD).

To analyze the regional level, the thesis builds on semi-structured interviews to key witnesses. Questions retrace the phases of the building process of recognition and certification systems: formulation, formalization and implementation. Each regional case has been chosen because of: *a)* the presence of decrees or deliberations which at least formalize the regional certification system; *b)* the presence of regional repertories and other validation systems; *c)* the presence of experimental trials/implementation actions of the system. For these reasons, the work elects as case studies: Abruzzo, Lazio, Lombardia and Puglia.

After that, key witnesses have been identified based on their prominent role in the formulation process of regional competences recognition and certification systems. They have been contacted, at first, through the mediation of Dr. Riccardo Mazzarella (INAPP Researcher and Group Coordinator for *Atlante Lavoro*) and Dr. Rita Porcelli (INAPP Researcher). Interviews have been carried out remotely. The key witnesses involved were the following:

- Dr. Antonio Rodriguez Putrone, Head of O.P. in *Repertorio Professioni e certificazioni* of the General Directorate *Istruzione Formazione e Lavoro* (Lombardia Region);
- Dr. Alessandra Tomai, Director of *Area Programmazione dell'Offerta formativa e di Orientamento* of the General Directorate *Direzione Istruzione, Formazione, Ricerca e Lavoro* (Lazio Region);
- Dr. Maria Saula Gambacorta, Head of the Office *Programmazione Politiche formative e di Orientamento professionale* (Abruzzo Region);
- Dr. Rossana Ercolano, Official of O.P. in *Attuazione del Sistema Regionale delle Competenze* of Department for *Sviluppo Economico, Innovazione, Istruzione, Formazione e Lavoro* (Puglia Region).

Chapter 1. The Evolution of Lifelong Learning: Is There A Strategy for The European Union?

In this section, the work discusses the concept of lifelong learning and the theoretical debate born around it. Following the results emerged from previous works, two fundamental shifts in the conceptualization of LLL have been identified in the thesis. The first one is the passage from adult to lifelong education – occurred in the 1970s –, which shifts the focus from activities aimed at improving technical and professional qualifications and, more generally, knowledge of adults to strategies targeting all the individuals and their personal development. Secondly, a shift occurred from education to learning, which made possible to overcome formal contexts and assume that knowledge and expertise derive from all the experiences that an individual has gained during his/her life. There is then the integration of two new concepts: non-formal learning, which comprehends planned activities that are not explicitly conceived as learning – such as skills acquired at the workplace or in extra-curricular programs (Laal 2011, 471) – and informal learning, which results from daily life activities (UNESCO 2012). Today, the EU defines lifelong learning as: “all general education, vocational education and training, non-formal education and informal learning undertaken throughout life, resulting in an improvement in knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (EPCEU 2006).

After having clarified these concepts, *Chapter 1* discusses the literature dedicated to the history of LLL in the EU, through which some key themes have emerged. First of all, many scholars have underlined the fundamental role of intergovernmental organizations in promoting lifelong learning before EU institutions took the lead. Most of them have argued that the 1990s were the moment in which LLL stopped to be a UNESCO and OECD’s slogan and became an official strategy of the EU (Field 2001; Volles, 2014; Cankaya, Kutlu, and Cebeci 2015). The 1990s are also identified by many authors as the time in which LLL abandoned the humanistic approach of the 1970s to assume a neo-liberal identity: individuals are considered as responsible

for their knowledge and personal development and a market-based strategy is introduced (Field, 2001; Dehmel, 2006; Volles 2014). From the analysis, it has emerged that the EU has recognized the need for lifelong learning when MSs agreed on the necessity of creating a more cohesive and economically competitive Union and, consequently, enhancing the European integration process. To develop economic and political sectors, the EU has identified LLL as a macro theme through which to tackle new structural problems that range from labor market issues to social cohesion. Based on these premises, the present work examines European programs and strategies from Lisbon 2000 to Europe 2020 until the more recent programming cycle of the European Social Fund (ESF). When in the 2000s emerged the goal of creating a knowledge-based society, the EU started to formulate policies and promote actions aimed at improving education and training systems, fostering employability, upgrading skills, encouraging mobility (Dehmel, 2006; Alulli, 2015). From these intentions, EU institutions have started to build the EQF, whose realization process has been retraced at the end of the first chapter. This policy aims to identify, validate and certify learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, in a lifelong perspective, and to ensure the transparency of the related qualifications among all the MSs. EU institutions have then defined the necessity that each State be endowed with its own national qualification system, referenced to the European one.

Chapter 2. A Case Study: the Italian Qualification Framework and the Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni.

Chapter 2 aims to discuss the process that has led to the formulation of the Italian national qualification system and to understand how it has adapted to the pre-existent institutional and regulatory structure. Indeed, developing such a complex policy means that the already-established institutional setting must be rethought in a lifelong perspective and some structural

changes should occur. The NQF involves the educational system in its whole, which is organized through a variety of bodies with different institutional and social backgrounds. On the one hand, there are institutional entities, such as ministries, regions and local authorities, which have the task of defining guidelines; on the other, bodies that operatively provide services and, finally, users, the citizens. It also entails the interactions of different sectors other than the educational one. The division of responsibilities among these departments was already a problem before the initiative was launched.

Assuming these limits, the present Chapter focuses on the actual building process of the NQF, from 2012 until today. The Italian debate over competences already started in the 1990s, both in the social and institutional context, with the reform of the education and training system. Those discussions began their transition towards practice with Law No. 92 of 2012 and its implementing Decree No.13 of 2013, which defines tools, procedures, actors, standards and organizational features that shape the system. Competences are described on three dimensions, in terms of knowledge, abilities, autonomy/responsibility and then they are positioned on 8 levels, characterizing the growing complexity of learning. This framework has at its basis the *National Repertory of education, training and professional qualifications*, which collects qualifications from the whole national territory. In 2015, this catalog has been integrated by the National Framework of Regional Qualifications, which lists all the certificates released by regional authorities. Furthermore, the real innovation of this system is represented by the platform *Atlante del Lavoro e delle Qualificazioni*. Born as a descriptive map of the labor market, it has been elected to be the information backbone of the NQF (Mazzarella, Mallardi, Porcelli 2017). The innovative contribution of the Atlante lies in the realization of a job description that does not imply professions, functions or roles, but that considers the essential elements of productive processes: the activity. These activities have been then associated, through several steps, to qualifications inserted in the National Repertory. Through its

innovative structure, the *Atlante* has been able to link the labor market and the education and training system, carrying out a series of institutional functions and potentially performing new ones. The collected qualifications have been finally referenced to the European Qualification Framework through the institutionalization of the Italian NQF, in 2018. The 2018 decree defines the system as “the national mechanism for referencing Italian qualifications to the European Qualification Framework, with the function of connecting the Italian Qualification System to the systems of other European countries” (art.1 d.interm. 8/01/18, para.2). The advantages that this kind of policy brings go beyond the simple referencing process. In particular, it has emerged that: the cultural and experiential heritage of a person is enhanced through skills assessment and competences recognition; unemployed people, youngers, elders, women, disadvantaged groups are encouraged to join educational and training paths to see their competences recognized, contributing to the creation of a high-skilled society and workforce; educational opportunities and labor needs are linked through a series of tools and the formulation of integrated policies that could derive from the system; students’ and workers’ mobility are fostered through the European comparability of qualifications.

Chapter 3. State of the Art in the Italian Regions: Implementation and Results Through a Comparative Analysis.

The present work posits that, to assess the current status of the system, it is necessary to analyze its implementation at all level of governance. Within a multi-level governance logic, sub-national institutions participate in the decision-making process within the State-Regions Conference and the Technical Committee, but they are also entitled to the operational capacity. The main goal of Regions is to ensure that European directives and national strategies properly reach the ultimate users. They must provide a service of competences identification, validation and certification to the community. Indeed, Regions are entitled to the construction of regional

repertories that must collect qualifications and reference them to the national one. Moreover, they concretely enable bodies to perform the procedure of validation and certification and monitor the performances. This is why the present work posits that the assessment of criticalities and strengthens in the building of the system must be carried out at the third level of analysis, the regional one.

This last section provides a comparative analysis of four regional experiences: Lombardia, Lazio, Abruzzo and Puglia. Information have been directly collected through semi-structured interviews with experts who are involved in the process of formulation and construction of regional certification systems. The analysis sets three research objectives for each regional experience evaluated: *a)* understand the process of formulation and realization of the system related to territorial peculiarities; *b)* analyze the process of adaptation and connection to the other regional systems and to the national one; *c)* highlight the successful factors and the criticalities of each model. Interviews' results are analyzed on the basis of the four dimensions identified: initial processes and approaches that led to the formulation of regional systems; the actors and stakeholders involved in the realization phase and entitled to the service; peculiarities that emerged from each regional procedure; the actual state of play and the main criticalities of each regional model.

By comparing the selected administrations, it has been possible to define some transversal weaknesses:

- e) insufficient knowledge by the citizen of the opportunity offered by the certification service in non-formal and informal contexts;
- f) the service for identifying, validating and certifying competences, when it is at the expense of citizens, is still scarcely used and is not fully taken into account in its potential;

- g) mutual recognition of competences among Regions is not consistent and homogenization at the national level is not completed;
- h) the process of referencing qualifications to the EQF through common standards is not always conducted homogeneously through the national territory.

With regard to strengths, each region has highlighted the peculiarity of its system. In Lombardia, which is the only Region out of the four analyzed to have a non-formal and informal procedure fully implemented, the autonomy and responsibility of entitled bodies in carrying out the service is highly valued as a key element of the system. Conversely, in Lazio, there is a direct involvement of the Region both as the entity in charge of the formation and as the only body entitled to certification. In these two Regions, even the initial approach has been different: while Lombardia has given priority to the formulation of a system based on competences, Lazio has begun from training human resources. In other cases, as in Puglia, the interviewer has pointed out the priority given to the engagement with universities and schools.

Foreseen improvements can be summed up as follow:

- a) Boost the link between education and training, on the one hand, and labor market needs, on the other, to match demand and supply and to enhance employability results;
- b) Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication to the citizen and to territorial operators in relation to the opportunities of the certification service;
- c) Promote greater engagement with territorial bodies in the organization of the services to foster the social recognition of this system and to broaden the consensus on this practice;
- d) Improve the dialogue among Regions and the exchange of information to identify best practices and promote integrated regional development;
- e) Enhance the process of standardization and harmonization at the national and European level to foster mutual recognition of qualifications and mobility.

Conclusion

Overall, the main result accomplished by this work relates to the methodology it has employed. Departing from previous works on the subject, the analysis has claimed that little attention was given to regional experiences. To overcome this shortcoming, the work has adopted a multi-level approach, integrated with a regional-level analysis, and a comparative study method. This structure has allowed a comprehensive analysis of the policy under examination: the policy formulation has been investigated at the European and national level while the implementation stage has been assessed at the regional one. In addition, this last level has been analyzed comparatively. Despite the limited number of cases, this method has allowed some fundamental features of the system to emerge that would otherwise have never been detected in a context as heterogeneous as the Italian one. In particular, it made it possible to extensively detect analogies and differences over several dimensions and synthesize them into transversal tendencies that could be used to define the status of the overall system. This type of methodology also allows to widen the scope of research to other regional cases for a more complete analysis and to use the same method for other subjects. For example, the European environment is heterogeneous in the implementation of such a policy: there are countries in which the validation system is already consolidated, others in development and other systems in formulation. They may be compared to obtain an analysis of strengths and weaknesses on multiple cases and to allow reflections on best practices, on which model is transferable and at which conditions, and on what can be improved at the national level. A possible return to the supranational level is then desirable to answer questions about how regional issues are re-taken up by the EU. Therefore, an in-depth comparative analysis on NQFs can provide the full picture of this specific policy and fruitful starting points for further research.