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Evaluation Systems for Adult Education in Italy: differences and similarities with the rest of Europe.



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PREMISES

Adult learning refers to a wide range of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training.

Adults can pursue training for many different reasons:

- to improve their job prospectives;
- to pursue development on a personal or professional level;
- or obtain transferable skills, such as critical thinking.

Adult education also contributes to improving social cohesion and promoting active citizenship and also strengthens the competitiveness of European companies and economies.



Competences for adults in Italy (and Europe) are generally categorised into two macro-areas:

- **basic literacy (LIT)**, defined as “the ability to understand, evaluate use and exploit written texts to participate in society, achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential”.
- **mathematical and scientific literacy or numeracy (NUM)**, defined as “the ability to access, use, interpret and communicate mathematical information and ideas in order to engage with and manage the mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life”.



In general, if we restrict to the average results obtained in European countries for the LIT and NUM tests, the top four places in both rankings are occupied by Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands, while the bottom four are occupied by Italy, Spain, France and Ireland.

Even in terms of distribution around the average, the Italian situation appears very critic. For example, in LIT only 3.3% of Italian adults are placed at the high proficiency levels compared to 20% in Finland. Vice versa at the low levels we have 70.3% of the Italian adults but only 37.1% of Finns.



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The results do not improve when analysed by dividing the sample into age groups.

For example, Italy is definitely last in LIT even if one narrows it down to young adults (16-24 years).

It is particularly worrying that the decline in skills with age starts in Italy from the age of sixteen (a truly anomalous figure compared to other countries), whereas in the average starts after the age of thirty.



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Deepening the discourse for the young-adult age group (16-29 years old), the population in which the expected performance of training policies is the greatest and which best reflects the current results of the education systems in place, young Italians who have recently graduated have the lowest average level of achievement among the OECD countries.

Furthermore, the level of achievement of those with only compulsory education is, on the one hand, better than that of other countries similar to Italy, and it is equal to that of young Italians with a diploma.

In other words, a young Italian graduate today has the same basic cognitive skills as a young person in Europe who at most has compulsory education.



Based on what was mentioned in the previous passage, incapacitating factors include certainly the following:

- the low average level of general education;
- the high number of unemployed and retired people;
- the high number of people unemployed for more than 12 months;
- the strong impact of socio-economic background (social immobility);
- a labour market that tends not to need high qualifications and skills;
- the limited presence of training experiences for adults;
- a widespread lack of trust in others and institutions, with social well-being that is quite high only in the field of health;
- the high number of NEETs;-
- the high number of people retired or working exclusively at home.



In addition to historical reasons of a social nature, the persistence of these incapacitating factors is probably also the effect of a shift in public investment from education/training to health over the last twenty years (Giarda Commission, 2011).

However, other probable incapacitating factors of a cultural nature cannot be underestimated. Among these include in particular

- the Italian school tradition focused, except perhaps in the first cycle, on knowledge more than on skills;
- a highly disciplined and therefore 'academic' teaching system since secondary school;
- the very limited role associated to lifelong learning.



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Furthermore, if we go down from the structural to the personal level, the initial level of education and the performance in basic skills among the very young influence the acquisition of new and improved skills and participation in learning activities in adult life.

Conversely, poor performance leads over time to difficulties in benefiting from the learning opportunities needed in today's society.

It is, therefore, a process that starts with children in kindergarten and reaches kindergarten through to senior citizens and is essentially cumulative in nature.



The actions on which to focus, in the national system of Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET), in order to reverse the causes of the delays highlighted, would seem to privilege the following strategies:

1. increasing attention to the recommendations of the Commission and the European Council, and to strengthen youth unemployment and to strengthen basic skills;
2. alignment of vocational education and training policies to permeability with other educational offers;
3. strengthening of alternating curricula, starting from technical and vocational education and training up to high schools and vocational training;



4. improving the performance of students at high risk of early school leaving and at risk of early school leaving and with low basic skills, through accessible, quality education from early childhood;
5. greater use, in teaching/learning, of ICT and online learning platforms, which can also be used via mobile devices;
6. re-launching a "culture of assessment" in the education system, with the aim of integrating tests based on national and international surveys, of ways of measuring and assessing learning;
7. revision and strengthening of the professional profile of teaching through innovative and collaborative pedagogical approaches.



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SOLUTIONS

Employment Services can carry out an initial functional literacy screening (writing reading, comprehension of written and spoken communication, ICT) of the person who could be referred by the Employment Services to a services could be directed to a structure (schools, training centres, technical and vocational institutes, provincial adult education centres).

Technical and Professional Institutes, Provincial Centres for Adult Education (C.P.I.A.) for the development of a customised training proposal (young people, NEETs, unemployed, etc.) that provides the relevant certification/validation or other accompanying and empowerment measures.

Since the C.P.I.As. constitute, in line with EU guidelines, a significant national contribution to the development of individuals, in the framework of lifelong learning, and since these centres are located on the premises of educational establishments, it will be possible that their full utilisation can be concretely envisaged, hypothesising the activation of afternoon/evening courses also in mixed mode (blended) and for short durations



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Young people not working and not studying (NEETs) constitute the group that not only has the worst proficiency levels in basic skills, but who are at greatest risk of regression of skills acquired in educational pathways.

The 'Youth Guarantee' plan adopted by the Government already places NEETs at the centre of policy action. Within the framework of the planned actions and in a structural logic, the recovery and enhancement of the skills of young people who do not work and do not study are linked to their activation in the labour market.



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The majority of NEETs are young people who have dropped out of school. To recover this important human resource, it is necessary to start from individual needs and build ad hoc pathways.

In order to continue or resume training, the re-motivation of young people (but this is also true for adults) passes through a clear association between the knowledge to be acquired and their operational use.

To this end, a very important intervention can be identified in the strengthening of the vocational training, a sector currently penalised by the scarcity of funding and the fragility of the training offer.



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Innovative pedagogies, including blended learning, and customised to the needs of the people can only be implemented through the involvement and training/retraining of teachers and trainers.

An important role can be played by the C.P.I.As. through the offer of training courses other than the attainment of a qualification (compulsory schooling and technical diploma), and which are characterized by short modules for the acquisition/improvement of literacy and mathematical skills (with certification of competences as should already be the case for long modules).



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Employment services should provide actions, not only for those who are unemployed, but also for those who want to consider the possibility of improving their condition while having a job.

Thus providing not only assistance to young people to get out of disadvantaged situations, but also general orientation for those who want to relaunch themselves with a new occupation more in line with aspirations and professional skills.

In this regard, employment services could provide specific assistance and guidance (career counselling, support for self-entrepreneurship, etc.) for high-skilled under-30s at a reduced cost.

Their convenience is that they experience at a young age the usefulness of support for career transitions by favouring an extension of demand also at later ages.



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In Italy a system has been built of knowledge of occupational needs and competences required by enterprises and acted upon by workers (ISFOL, Istat, Unioncamere). However, building an advanced system of "skills intelligence" is not enough.

This must become a cognitive asset of the training offer, of the guidance and labour services and of all citizens (e.g. the ones from USA);

Another solution could be opening up universities, especially technical universities, to increasing the skills of adults, with specific teaching activities;



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Developing extracurricular traineeships for the acquisition of specialised and transversal skills by those re-entering the labour market can be a suitable solution as well.

In order to guarantee the effectiveness of the traineeship as a learning tool, the competences acquired must be certified and made visible.

In addition, the introduction of tax incentives for participation in lifelong learning activities could help people with economic disadvantages, stimulating their will to invest in their future and career.



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EVALUATION SYSTEMS

In the presence of scarce resources and in the awareness of having to systematically make evaluations on specific situations, in Italy some initiatives were proposed, whose aim is to enhance competences for young people and adults: each institution has its own methodology to evaluate the quality of adult education providers in the national territory, such as surveys and long-term evaluation. The Government is still assessing which methods are the most suitable for the Country.

The analysis started in 2010s in some Southern regions of Italy (such as Sicily), where the problem of the delay in basic skills is more marked. The possible extension of the policies to the entire national territory should be conditional not only on the availability of resources but also on the outcomes of this still ongoing evaluation.

It would also be desirable to set up a sort of 'permanent observatory' that would make systemic the link between training and work, dealing with the monitoring and analysis of the skills training and their use in the labour market and social life, assessing the impact of policies and providing indications for enhancing their effects.



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THE QUALTRACK METHODOLOGY

Project QUALTRACK offers another approach to quality assurance and that is the quality rating of an institution. It is based on a set of criteria and a set of questions. The institution is supposed to fulfil all of them to be awarded a certificate of a quality-rated institution.

However, there is also a set of extra questions that allow an institution to show some specific or unique features of their education process that deserve extra points in the form of a badge.

When an institution decides to get a rating, it files an application. The application is registered in the online system. The administrator confirms the application and launches the evaluation procedure and sets a timetable. It will also make available this methodology and assessment questions to the applicant institution.



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