



Methodologies and scenarios

# University and lifelong learning in Italy: policies and higher education & training systems integration

Giorgio Federici<sup>1</sup>, Giovanni Ragone<sup>2</sup>

Università degli Studi di Firenze<sup>1</sup>, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"<sup>2</sup>

federici@dicea.unifi.it, giovanni.ragone@miur.it

**Key words:** Lifelong Learning, e-Learning, training systems, continuing professional development.

## Abstract

This article expounds the legislative measures, regulations and initiatives pursued and implemented by the Prodi Government and, more specifically by, the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) with regard to Lifelong Learning.

Specifically, the article summarizes the lifelong learning bill, the ministerial Guidelines on "University for Lifelong Learning", and the measures adopted in Universities to foster the development of Lifelong Learning as part of their institutional tasks.

The need for suitable collaboration and intergrational activities between the different education-training systems and the economic, productive and professional contexts is highlighted. The need to pursue the realization of lifelong learning systems organized typically on a regional basis, and categorized by productivity sector and professional profile is also identified.

Finally, the article addresses the link between Lifelong Learning and e-Learning, and refers to the legislative measures related to the accreditation of distance learning courses and the system actions activities undertaken.

## 1 Introduction

The article outlines the policy pursued by the Prodi Government and especially the Ministry for Universities and Research (MUR) with regard to Lifelong Learning. It covers the measures and initiatives carried out in the period June 2006-December 2007.

The need for a change in policy in approaches to Lifelong Learning on the part of the various training systems is made ever more evident by the economic and social changes which reveal that people, as well as economic and social organizations, and the public administration are not properly equipped to deal with them. This causes, not only a lack of competitiveness on the part of Italy compared to other countries, but also a growing social and individual malaise.

The social need for Lifelong Learning – already envisaged in strategies at a European level and recently confirmed by the decisions of the Council and the Commission of the Union [1, 2] – is gaining ever more relevance, spurred by technological innovation, and comparisons and competitiveness at local, European and global levels.

Italy finds itself in greater difficulty than most other European countries, as it tries to fulfill the goals of the Lisbon Strategy in the field of lifelong learning [3]. The reasons for this difficulty are well-known and are the result of different causes. These specifically include the non-flexible nature of Italian training systems (i.e., University, school, vocational training systems, etc.), together with the low percentage of people with university education which is less than half that of more developed countries. Given that, in Italy, a lower number of people have higher education qualifications, initiative and autonomous or self-directed learning are less frequent, hence the education-training systems and the individual are less able to react when faced with continuous restructuring and change which characterise the Networked Society.

The Government, the regions and the different institutional, economic and social players must therefore collaborate in a more meaningful manner. At the Higher Education level, Universities hold the key to change; they, in turn, are called to gradually accept and legitimize their new mission. Now Italy is awakening to the problems related to the amount of resources necessary for the development of a University which is open to all, and for the training of competent researchers who are essential to be competitive in the innovation society. The same awareness needs to be developed with regard to the fact that the further education and training which is open to all must include the adult population, and cater to its needs in the area of lifelong learning. At the same time, we must be aware of the fact that in almost no

European country did University Lifelong Learning develop spontaneously. Universities adjusted to the task only after a clear policy had been defined and suitable resources had been made available for that purpose.

Thus, it is obvious that, despite the above-mentioned issues, continuing-education is rapidly destined to become one of the institutional tasks of the University, side by side with its fundamental role in Research and in providing young people with Higher Education.

The first recommendation made by the MUR was for Universities to re-organise their structures so as to address this new institutional task, i.e., the growing social need for lifelong learning, by undertaking suitable institutional changes or adjustments in terms of objectives and organization, for the provision of suitable education and training.

The second recommendation encouraged Universities to engage more and more as a protagonist in the lifelong learning concept, through closer collaboration with the other training bodies, Industry, and social partners.

To this end, a long-term strategy which obviously fits the well-defined European union one) is needed, and concrete actions need to be proposed which take into account the specific nature and needs of our society and country.

The need emerges to find a suitable way to accomplish these important changes required within the University and which have been delayed for too long; moreover, we must bear in mind the national reality and the few available resources within the university system.

#### **MUR Working-group for Lifelong Learning**

To bring about concrete actions in this direction, the then Minister, Mussi, constituted the Working-group for Lifelong Learning which was co-ordinated by the authors of the present article<sup>1</sup>.

Hereafter the activities, legislative measures and initiatives developed up until the end of 2007 are summarised.

## **2 A national framework law for lifelong learning**

In December 2007, the Council of Ministers approved the Bill/ framework for the would-be law relating to “Standards related to Lifelong Learning” [4] which is to be found in the current issue. It is the result of concertation between four Ministries (Ministry for Labour, Education, University and Research, Innovation in Public Administration), and the

<sup>1</sup> The following members constituted this group: A. Masia (General Director – MUR). S. Bagnara (Polytechnic of Milano); A. Battistelli (University of Verona); L. Benadusi (University of Roma “La Sapienza”); A. Chianese (University of Napoli “Federico II”); A. Colorni (Polytechnic of Milano); L. Galliani (University of Padova); D. Iervolino (University of Napoli “Federico II”); T. Leo (Polytechnic University of Marche); R. Maraglino (University Roma III); G. Ronsisvalle (University of Catania); A. Simone (University Roma II Tor Vergata).

Coordination of the Regions.

The importance of this document which faces both a difficult and a lengthy parliamentary process, lies in its attempt to introduce the necessary innovation into our system so as to fully adopt the European Union policies on lifelong learning.

The Draft Bill highlights some extremely important principles related to the promotion of Lifelong Learning, its definition and its purposes. The related actions are indicated as follows:

- support actions to enable individuals to develop their own formal, non formal and informal learning routes;
- recognition of education and training credits and the certification of competences however acquired;
- fruition of guidance and counselling services throughout one's life-span.

With regard to the University, its role in formal learning is fully recognized (Article 2), to the same degree as other training systems. University is always fully recognised as being part of what is referred to as the national Strategy for Lifelong Learning, in accordance with the European Union recommendations (Article 9); the EU is to finance suitable policies.

Moreover, Universities are requested (Article 4) to recognize non formal and informal learning, according to principles to be defined by a special legislative decree.

These profound innovatory changes in the both the university role and system are in line with the processes already underway in the other countries of the Union. They can be introduced into Italy by degrees, however, they nonetheless represent steps which are absolutely necessary. In order to enable Universities to accomplish these changes, the MUR Working-group for Lifelong Learning prepared the "Guidelines for the recognition of Previous Learning". It has been suggested to universities to include them in their instruction regulations. They contain proposals for a system of recognition of learning however acquired (formal, informal, non formal), coupled with procedures related to quality, and which can be certified.

### 3 "University for lifelong learning" Guidelines

The launch of the MUR's new policy on Lifelong Learning took place at the Naples Conference on, "University for Lifelong Learning", 17<sup>th</sup> March 2007 [5]. On that occasion, the Guidelines<sup>2</sup> were presented.

These recommendations were then adopted in the Guidelines for the plan-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.miur.it/Miur/UserFiles/Notizie/2007/Conferenza%20Napoli%20-%20Linee%20Indirizzo%20Apprendimento%20Permanente.pdf>

ning of the new Instruction Regulations for Degree Courses and Magistral Degree Courses dated October 2007, herein reported:

“Within the context of the European Area for Higher Education, the Italian University System is called on to address further challenges in relation to education and training processes, with the upgrading of research doctorates (the third level) and a serious commitment in the area of Lifelong Learning, interpreted as a new and specific institutional mission of Universities (and for which specific guidelines have been presented and are available on the Ministry web site). The action taken in relation to degree courses and magistral degree courses must be seen as part of a wider process of improvement as regards the quality and efficacy of the entire gamut of the University education and training on offer in Italy.”

It is worthwhile referring to the effect that these Guidelines have had on universities, as well as on the other parties (providers and end-users) involved in Lifelong Learning.

Within the university system, those already engaged in continuing education and training activities appreciated the initiative promoted by the ministry. Said initiative strengthened their position within their own specific university enabling them to further develop at an institutional level Lifelong learning initiatives. The suggestion made to universities to equip themselves with new forms of organization and methodologies to welcome the new adult learners, also through the setting up of special Lifelong Learning Centres has indeed been followed by some universities which have developed or consolidated existing centres. The Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” is one example of an institution which has fully complied with the ministerial recommendations.

Doubts and perplexities which nonetheless arose within universities were, first and foremost, due to the difficulties caused by adding more “fuel to the fire”, at such a crucial moment in time with the revision of the three and five-year courses of study as envisaged by Ministerial Decree 270. This new political trend which is considered necessary for the harmonisation of the education and training systems within the European Union has not been met with any objection in principle.

Furthermore, we believe that those involved in the world of non university education and training one consider the Guidelines to be an important new step. Time and again, at meetings and Conferences, the Coordination of the Regions, ISFOL, as well as other professional groups, associations and professional institutions have expressed their appreciation as regards the attribution of this new role to universities, since they consider it to be an important step towards the enrichment of the education and training on offer as well as the integration of the entire education and training system.

## 4 Investment and Planning for Lifelong Learning

With regard to the concrete action undertaken by the Government in relation to acknowledging the University also as a *locus* for lifelong learning activities, in addition to the Draft Bill previously referred to in paragraph 2, two important facts must be highlighted..

The text of the “Document on Economic-Financial Planning for the period 2008-2013” by the Ministry for Economics and Finance dated June 2007 [6] states:

“Prior to direct investment in research, it is necessary to increase investment in University education and training (from the current 0.88 % to 1.2 % compared to the GNP, financial obligations permitting), by improving quality through prize and reward systems, by eliminating areas of inefficiency and promoting *rigueur*, transparency and better management practices. Furthermore, the contribution that the University must make to Lifelong Learning and continuing education and training activities at a qualified level, addressed to the private sector, professionals, public administration and workers seeking to improve their qualification, is of vital importance.”

This is the first time that an expenditure law makes such a clear and explicit reference to the role of universities with regard to Lifelong Learning by including it in a plan for the allocation of resources to achieve this objective.

Finally, the inclusion, by the Ministry for Universities and Research, of the indicator which is useful to determine the Fund for Ordinary Financing (FFO) in the Decree Indicators for the three-year planning period dated October 2007 [7], , is extremely important. The FFO is defined as follows

### INDICATOR C.5

Proportion of University Education and Training Credits (CFU) acquired in Lifelong Learning

Defined as the ratio between:

*Number of CFU acquired in Lifelong Learning in the academic year. t at University and the Number of CFU acquired in courses of study in the academic year t at University*

This indicator will need to be specified at a later stage, however it certainly constitutes an innovative measure, and impacts the institutional nature of Lifelong Learning activities within universities.

## 5 Lifelong Learning and e-Learning

The MUR has considered the need to promote the relaunching of e-Learning within the Italian university system. This need for innovation of the higher education system in our country through new methodologies and technologies linked to the information and communication technologies has been evident for a long time.

The Moratti - Stanca Decree of 2003, which established telematic universities, had already tried to answer this need for innovation but, in actual fact, it sparked off several degenerative phenomena which demanded intervention.

For this reason MUR, together with the Ministry for Public Administration Reform and Innovation in, has drawn up a new decree for the accreditation of distance-learning courses of studies. This decree establishes the minimum requirements necessary for the recognition of the delivery of telematic courses on the part of both public and private universities. Thus, the very concept of the telematic university, interpreted as a university “without teachers”, becomes null. In this way, distance study courses are guaranteed to have quality accreditation criteria so as to guarantee users suitable teaching and tutoring activities.

The development of Lifelong Learning for working people can thus identify e-Learning for education and training as an essential development and enrichment tool.

Moreover, within this concept of Lifelong Learning and Training which is supported by e-Learning, the necessary and suitable co-operation between Industry, Public Bodies, and regional web-learning systems need to be established.

To this end, MUR is part of an important initiative known as the “Institutional and Technical Joint-Table for the systematic observation of e-Learning supply and demand in the P.A.”. This initiative includes:

- Ministry for Public Education, DG Information Systems
- Ministry for University and Research, DG University
- Ministry for Labour and Social Security, DG Guidance and Training Policies
- Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori - ISFOL (Institute for the Development of Professional Training for Workers)
- Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione - SSPA (Specialization School for Public Administration)
- Italia Lavoro S.p.A
- Fondazione CRUI per le Università Italiane (CRUI Foundation for Italian Universities)

- Commissione servizi e contenuti multimediali di AITech-Assinform (AITech-Assinform Multimedia Services and Contents Commission)
- Associazione Italiana per l'Information Technology - ANEE/AITech-Assinform (Italian Association for Information Technology)
- Associazione Italiana per la Formazione Manageriale - ASFOR (Italian Association for Managerial Training)
- Geie Menon Network
- Società Italiana di e-Learning SIE-L (Italian Society of e-Learning)

The objectives of the Table are to:

- eliminate the fragmentation and opposition that hinder the development of innovatory e-learning practices and the wider adoption of distance learning;
- identify common needs and approaches to be jointly undertaken so as to implement experimental activities and plan new initiatives.

E-Learning methodologies occupy a fundamental role in the provision of Lifelong Learning and training and they need to be able to fully achieve their potential.

The last few years have seen a significant increase in e-Learning experiences which, however, have not always been qualitative. The context is now ready for a qualitative leap, based also on a critical analysis of these experiences, which may see e-Learning as an important trigger for the innovation of training systems and organizations. The new decree for the accreditation of distance study courses, together with the education and training system as well as the above-mentioned co-ordination seem to have added the necessary spur for the development of e-Learning in Italy.

## 6 A Lifelong Learning system

The need for appropriate actions of collaboration and integration between the various training systems and the social, economic, production and professional contexts in the area of lifelong learning is well known. A new commitment is needed if we are to achieve Lifelong Learning education and training systems at local level (typically on a regional basis), and in relation to productivity sectors and professional categories.

All the ingredients needed for success, are all here: the growing social need for adult education and training, and a new willingness to integrate on the part of the different training systems. The activities undertaken by universities in the last few years (masters, IFTS, specialization courses, etc.) have favoured the exchange of useful experiences which also enable us to learn from mistakes. Now the time is ripe to close the gap that separates us from other European countries also .

The system of higher education and training for Lifelong Learning must envisage:

- a socially and locally developed system that responds to very different needs;
- a system which offers incentives to people and organizations;
- a multiplayer approach based on real partnerships between the different training systems;
- an integrated monitored and certified approach in which people can capitalize on competences wherever acquired;
- an innovative methodological and technological approach.

In addition to the general law for Lifelong Learning referred to in paragraph 2, the MUR is engaged in the following initiatives:

- framework agreements with the other Ministries so as to organise university education and training provision with a view to promoting human resource innovation and training;
- other framework agreements are to be defined with Regions and regional universities, on the basis of their competences in the areas of training, research and innovation. These agreements envisage the MUR co-financing activities agreed upon with the Regions, which have local added-value, within a nationally co-ordinated framework of . Agreements have already been signed with the following regions: Piemonte, Basilicata and Sardegna together with their respective universities.
- general and specific agreements with social partners, professional bodies and associations.

For example, the agreement with Regione Basilicata and the University of Basilicata envisages the regional development of a lifelong learning system. The aim is to develop a lifelong learning system for the Basilicata region, with a view to establishing an integrated education and training system in which the University cooperates in relation to its areas of expertise with the Industrial world, the Public Administration, and the education and training agencies. The SAPERE– Basilicata initiative - Sistema per l'Apprendimento PERmanente della REgione Basilicata (System for Lifelong Learning of the Basilicata Region) envisages:

- the development of post-graduate training through the creation of a system of Schools of Excellence capable of further improving first and second level university education and training in specific fields of study, by using the best knowledge and competences available to the region to their utmost;
- the development of training profiles, in collaboration with Enterprises and Service Industries, as well as by means of certified credits for Lifelong Learning and continuing-training;

- the development of Information and Communication Technologies to support traditional education, so as to plan and undertake lifelong learning and continuing-training courses that can be taken at a distance;
- the creation of Centres for Lifelong Learning throughout local areas, so as to enable people to avail of local assistance and tutoring services which give them access to SAPERE – Basilicata as well as to a wide range of distance learning initiatives;
- the creation of at least one specialised Lifelong Learning Centre of Excellence which is able to provide learning initiatives which make it a magnet at both a national and international level. These Centres could be part of a wider network of Centres/regional systems for lifelong learning initiatives undertaken by other regions, especially those in Southern Italy.

## 7 Conclusion

The above-mentioned innovation and initiatives are useful steps to spur innovation within our higher education & training system. We are witnessing, on the one hand, the re-organisation and re-qualification of our provision of education and training in relation to Courses of Studies (Primary and Master Degrees) while, on the other, we have the development of Lifelong Learning which, in the next few years, thanks especially to e-Learning, will represent an innovative sector for the provision of higher education and training, given the change underway with regard to providing education and training almost solely for young people.

Lifelong Learning has been part of European Union strategies for quite some time. Now the time is ripe for its development in Italy. The time has come to take the necessary concrete steps to implement it. Perhaps we will not achieve the Lisbon objectives in the given time-frame, but what is important is that we improve drastically, and that we move consistently in the right direction.

Italian universities have been active for some time in post-graduate education and training. This is an area of activity which is not very known and which has developed without any proper legislative or political guidelines. If this area were not already quite developed, we would not have many opportunities for development. The foundation and the know-how exist for the development of strategies and actions. The latter need to be made available and organised in a coherent and strategic approach so as to integrate them into our present specific context by adapting European strategies and allocating the necessary resources to achieve the objectives.

The conditions are favourable for the development of a national as well as regional educational and training system for Lifelong Learning. University autonomy favours immediate innovation and integration, if linked with other

education and training systems, and if universities work together to achieve size, scale and critical mass which can better answer the needs of people and organizations.

Perhaps the most needed innovation is that of the integration of education and training systems, Enterprises, and the Public Administration. Therefore, in harmony with the development of Lifelong Learning which is a fertile area for e-Learning, it is essential to implement policy and support actions for initiatives undertaken by Universities, Training Bodies, the Public Administration, and other stakeholders. The reasons for such an approach lie in the need to: (i) guide initiatives in the sector, (ii) link and co-ordinate current experiences, as well as (iii) promote and spread innovation in education and training.

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