

ADULT LIFELONG LEARNING AND COUNSELLING IN LIFE TRANSITIONS: CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES

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This paper aims to explore the implications of university lifelong learning on professional and personal transitions (and micro-transitions) and the role of adult counselling in supporting and facilitating them. This is a challenge for Italian Universities as national rules are being implemented in the perspective of a National Lifelong Learning System.

In recent decades in Europe different research has analysed the phase between adolescence and entry to adult life, defining it as post-adolescence or youth, the duration of which has increased and has spread to increasing parts of the population and is presented as a sort of long transition.

The extension of youth as a life phase is intertwined with longer periods in education and struggling with labour market integration. This has led research to give more attention to micro-transitions.

From this approach, research has moved on to one (Bresciani & Franchi, 2006; Bridges, 2004; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Merriam, 2005) which recognizes the presence and increase of a series of transitions and micro-transitions in the life of young adults and adults.

An even more relevant change is the shift from a linear conception of biography to the understanding of de-standardized life courses (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). This notion describes the non-linear mixing of the “traditional” markers of transition (conclusion of education, stable labour market integration, creation of a new household). Indeed, different combinations of the “markers of adulthood” are unfolding within life trajectories, and the higher reversibility of the choices which shape biographies makes the transitions less stable and predictable. As the yo-yo metaphor (Biggart & Walther, 2006) explains, movements among different life phases and scopes might be represented as constant oscillations, disrupting the linearity of the “traditional” transitions. Consequently, even work transitions are increasingly distant from the incremental conception of career, as they are more and more shaped by unpredictable changes, which at an individual level entail the need to constantly adapt professional profiles (and biographies) to market requirements. Thus, the capacity to stay on the market and compete is increasingly linked to the possibility of applying a set of individual resources to managing transitions and to effectively selecting adequate training for spendable skills.

As Palma (2017) explains well, transition is a phenomenon which increasingly more frequently - due to its pervasiveness - needs to be dealt with and managed in a positive way (Ecclestone, 2009), but it also presents itself as a particularly thorny key-change. This is because it is the moment in which work experience ends and we must prepare for a new, sometimes unknown and indefinite situation. It is possible to clearly recognize the differences in the management of expected or unexpected transitions; a distinction can still be found between the management of transitions which are self-initiated - and therefore sought by the individual - or forced transitions - experienced by the individual without having been chosen by them. However, as Merriam (2005) reminds us, a lot depends on how the transition is perceived personally by whoever experiences it, and not only on the type of transition or on the meanings that the individual attributes to the transition. Indeed, the way in which individuals encounter transition and the meaning they attribute to it can make a

difference. In order to be a learning opportunity, the transition also requires support for the way it is perceived and managed.

Reliance on age as a key organizing principle reinforces a normative approach to learning and disconnects learning from the context and circumstances of individuals and communities. Although significant advances have been made, educational systems still reflect the age-based nature of their origins in the 1950s. Early school leavers (or “dropouts”), in particular, find themselves shut out because, having left school, it can be difficult to reconnect with formal education. New models of second-chance education are responding to this challenge, recognizing that age is an artificial barrier to learning and creating stronger articulation between different institutional sites of learning (Wyn, 2014).

Being “self-navigators” is increasingly necessary, in part because the links between education and employment are so complex. Research shows that educational qualifications, although important, do not correspond directly to employment outcomes. (...) Being good navigators requires a conscious approach to personal development so that individuals can see how their personal biography has developed in the past and how it is currently being constructed so that they can make decisions about their future options. Being good navigators also requires a deep understanding of the nature of the social, economic, and political world in which they are living and their relationships with others, locally and globally. (Wyn, 2014: 12).

These findings are confirmed by the first results of an H2020 project, in which the University of Genoa participates, that shows that skill markets and job markets are frequently loosely coupled, especially in Southern European Countries ¹.

These transitions are not only professional. They can refer to entry or return to the workforce, career change or progress, unemployment, retirement, or personal choice, but also a return to university as a free choice. In all these situations, universities offer adults significant and different opportunities. Transitions increasingly take place in the context of highly differentiated systems and workers have to be aware of changing needs and adapt to different contexts (Guichard, 2007; 2008; Guichard & Huteau, 2003).

In Italy, since 2012, there has been a very important change of course in lifelong learning and lifelong guidance policy. Law 92/2012 established the right to lifelong learning. Today, thanks to a series of normative mechanisms, the National Certification of Competences System is “under construction”. In different Regions, it is even possible to certify non-formal and informal competences.

Particularly, in 2014, an Agreement between Government, Regions and Autonomous Provinces about the definition of minimum guidance service standards and professional competences, described the accompanying function in terms of specific experiences of transitions. In university, this activity can take place if the basic organisational and professional requirements are ensured.

The University of Genoa has experience of assessment and certification of competences in apprenticeship projects in tertiary education, paths of Higher Technical Education Training (IFTS - its acronym in Italian), Joint Training courses for teachers and trainers, and in the context of the European project IDEAL (Identifier, Evaluer et Valider: transfer et adaptation d'un dispositif de validation des acquis formels et informels). Research on “Defining a model of certification, integration and validation of competences acquired during professional

¹ Project website <http://www.young-adullit.eu/>

development courses and training," involved a large distribution company and a consortium of social cooperatives. All these experiences have enhanced the match between different types of learning produced in the world of work and knowledge produced in academia. In addition, the tested model puts people in a position of assessing their own experiences in order to translate their learning into competences, as well as to improve their professional competitiveness or to revalue it or re-enter into the system (see Palumbo, Piccardo & Startari, 2014).

The University Roma Tre promotes the inclusion of students and graduates in the labour market. In addition to a wide range of degree courses, master's degrees and post-graduate courses, the University collaborates in the project "Porta Futuro Rete Università" which aims at the integration of placement services (Stages and Job Placement).

The Stage and Internship Office promotes and supports extra-curricular work experience aimed at facilitating professional choices and the employability of new graduates. It provides for the formalization, in synergy with all study courses, of curricular training internships for its students. It manages the formalization of curricular internships through a portal - www.jobsoul.it - as well as the publication of internship opportunities based on sponsor requests. The Job Placement Office is a result of the University's need to assume the new role of work intermediary assigned by Law 30/2003, and aims to ensure and develop relationships with institutions and companies in order to facilitate the transition of young graduates from university to the world of work. In particular, the office manages the activation, management and coordination of financed projects with funds from the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Labour. A number of different projects have taken place. The Office seeks to match job demand and supply, through the job opportunities on the JobSoul portal; it ensures the maximum dissemination of all placement initiatives promoted by the University, Porta Futuro Rete Università and other external organizations; it provides a mailing list service targeted to specific requests from companies and supports University facilities and companies vis-à-vis the activation of Apprenticeship and Higher Education and Research contracts.

Among the additional available services in the aforesaid project there is professional guidance - the guidance path involves the exploration of attitudes, talents, expectations and individual competences for the achievement of one's professional goals – and the Bilan des compétences.

For adults who return to University, guidance services must provide for recognition and validation of prior learning (Di Rienzo & Proietti, 2013; Palumbo, 2014; Palumbo & Startari, 2013). This new service is a challenge for universities in Italy, as elsewhere. APL is going to be harmonised with the new rules on certification of competencies: a process that requires time, competent human resources, appropriate spaces and financial investments.

All the three missions of the universities, in different ways, are questioned by increasing complexity, labour market crises, and lifelong and lifewide learning implications, not only by the Third Mission (Frignani, 2014; Galliani, Zaggia & Serbati, 2011).

Universities should be able to tackle career changes and transitions, to take into account the life cycle of learning and skills and to develop a useful process for professionals who need to build further projects for their future (Alberici & Di Rienzo, 2010; Alberici & Di Rienzo, 2014). Another aspect that we must consider is that universities are lacking with regard to skill ecologies and activities that can empower workers to improve their position in the labour market (Loiodice, 2004; Formenti, 2006).

In the aforesaid Guidance Project of the Department of Education of University Roma Tre, *Porta Futuro Rete Universita*, various guidance activities took place: a "reduced" pathway of

Bilan des compétences; a guidance pathway and a small project of "alternanza scuola lavoro".

Target-groups were different, for example students who were close to graduation, unemployed graduates and graduate workers.

The Bilan des compétences was organized as a path with three individual interviews and two group meetings, during which some tools of an autobiographical-narrative nature and others useful for the definition of personal and professional development projects were written up, with the support of the consultant. The objective was to reconstruct the study, training, professional and life path of the participant, identifying resources - in terms of competences - and areas for improvement. The Bilan ended with the delivery of the synthesis document by the consultant.

The guidance pathway was organised in two individual interviews. Some questionnaires were completed before the first interview and soon after it. During the second interview, the consultant gave the beneficiary some reflections about expressed guidance needs.

During the last project, five group meetings were organised. The proposed themes were: world of work, curriculum vitae preparation, cover letter, job interview, assessment.

The tendency was to reduce the number of individual activities to enable more people to participate in the initiatives. In spite of this, the results confirm the efficacy of this kind of approach.

The main motivations of beneficiaries were related to the need to recognize their competences, how to enhance them in a CV, and how to present them during an interview. Some of them needed to rediscover the motivation to finish their studies, and the key to support them was the identification of a development project, beyond university, but starting from their personal resources.

As we can see every day, new target-groups of students – and maybe also the standard target-groups – need new services: young adults at risk of dropping out, adults who turn to study, unemployed young adults with a degree.

In general, all these groups need both guidance and certification services, and suitable paths to obtain qualifications or certification useful for insertion or reinsertion into the labour market, not only to meet their individual expectations, but also to meet the needs of society and the economy.

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