

The ongoing training challenged by the pandemic: some European perspectives from the experience of the Italian Life Long Learning System.

Overview of the speech given during the meeting of director-general for Vocational Education and Training (DGVT) Lubiana, 4-5 October 2021.

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Coherently with the main goals of this workshop I will intervene, from the Italian point of view, about how VET and lifelong learning can play a key role in providing relevant and high quality skills during the post-crisis recovery from COVID-19.

1. An introductory brief outlook on ongoing training and inter-professional funds in Italy

In my intervention I will focus primarily on Italian life long learning system (joint inter-professional funds) and the possibilities of innovation in adult education after Covid-19 crisis without underestimating the important challenges of Vet.

In an European meeting like today could be useful to remember how joint inter-professional funds for ongoing training have emerged in Italy and what can be the role of social partners to strengthen engagement of labor market stakeholders in development and provision of adult education a continuous training and to realize the spirit of the *Osnabruck Declaration*. Not only in VET but in the whole lifelong learning system.

Inter-professional funds, also known as 0.30% Funds, are standardized by a national law dating back to more than 20 years ago: the law 388/2000, partially modified by the art. 48 of the law 289/2022.

The fund, managed jointly by employers' organizations and trade unions, are financed with drawing 0.30% from the employees' wages of the member companies (a compulsory contribution that, with different goals in mind, companies have been paying since 1978).

The final aim of inter-professional funds was and still is to "promote the development of the ongoing training with a view to competitiveness of the companies and to the guarantee of the employability of workers".

The years that led to the development of the funds have been characterised by the so-called, quite pompously, with the European strategy of Lisbon, "Knowledge Society". The latter, twenty years later, now faces the productive transformations of the fourth industrial revolution and the unprecedented challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.

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The most evident feature of Inter-professional Funds lies in their associative nature. They are promoted via specific interconfederal agreements by the organizations that represent the most significant social players on a national level.

The funds can be set up for each of the economic sectors of industry, agriculture, tertiary, craftsmanship and for different sectors. There are independent inter-professional funds or sections of general funds that aim specifically at the training of executives.

The funds finance “wholly or partly training programs on a corporate, territorial, sectorial and individual level, agreed between the social actors”, including “propaedeutic initiatives directly connected such as, for example, general analysis of training needs.

2. Active policies and training: “reversing the system”?

The fundamental question about the functioning of inter-professional funds in Italy could be the following: do companies and workers effectively know their training needs, especially in contexts of dizzying and rapid change, accelerated by the pandemic?

The training offer meets the complexity and differentiation of numerous productive sectors, both those that are more traditionally industrial and structured and those sectors with different dynamics and needs, such as tourism, personal services and advanced technologies.

It is crucial to add to such observations the huge transformation, from multiple points of view (supply, fruition, goals, contents, certification), of the training processes due to the pandemic, involving every sector worldwide, although with different quantitative implications.

Today the pandemic is accelerating transformative processes already underway in companies and work, starting with the pervasive development of digitalization and the growth of green activities, but, at the same time, it is causing the spread of uncertainty, instability, inequality, marginality.

It is necessary to consider the different needs of people: the needs of those who enter the labor market and of those who aim at investing on their own skills, both within the company and in order to improve their conditions of «employability», transversal in the labor market.

The commitment guidelines are multiple: it is necessary to keep in mind – as well as the professional and ongoing training – the projects and the European funds (obviously, starting with *Next Generation EU*, without forgetting the new ordinary programming 2021-2027 of Structural Funds).

In addition to said areas, there is the support towards companies and workers that invest on transnational mobility, distance learning, and the transversal role of working from home. The advanced training as apprentices (including the dual system) should not be forgotten: its actual development is still far from acceptable levels (in terms of quality and, in particular, quantity).

Besides many trite and vague slogans, such as the “necessity to bring the training inside the company”, it must be reinforced the awareness that the training demand does not exist per se, but it is an aspect that needs to be built, controlled, structured, double checked.

It seems necessary to rediscover a diriment role of the strategic connection between social actors and institutions, on every level, through the central role of the training offer in the social construction network.

In order to do so, it is essential to consider how much the actors (workers and companies) are connected to the world tasked with the social construction of the training offer and how much, on the other hand, the authorities providing the training (in relation to the regional institutional systems as well) are capable of responding and identifying the real and often different needs of the actors.

Beside the tropes about «rediscovering the training vocation of the company», it is necessary to go more in depth and analyze, in the professional and ongoing training, how to structure that networking system that is fundamental in order to innovate the training and make it more effective as a whole.

This is not about turning upside down the training system in Italy, but regenerating it effectively, also accepting the challenge to integrate training and active welfare sub-systems, starting with the collective bargaining.

In the Italian national recovery and resilience plan (NRRP) there is an adequate focus on active policies of employment, orientation and (permanent) training, technical institutes and professional education, it is not the first time that these goals have been acknowledged by official documents.

In order to move from words to actions some factors are required:

- Financial resources (end of cost-free reforms);
- A clear institutional and administrative governance system that holds accountable private, public and private social actors;
- A strong and practical integration between active and passive policies;
- The awareness of the needed change

3. Customize, not individualize: some Italian experiences during the pandemic interesting for an European perspective

During the pandemic, we have encountered several risks: those who suggest “dismantling” or “individualizing” *tout court* the training model are likely to undermine the connection with the systems of active employment policies and humiliate actors and tools as a whole.

If the purely training backbone in active policies lacks or is devalued, it is inevitable that all of the observations about the mix between training and welfare tools – also through national and corporative employment contracts – risk collapsing, doubling expenses and waste of resources.

An innovative tool and a test bench (not without difficulties) is the New Skills Fund: a public fund co-financed by the European Social Fund, created to curb the economic consequences due to Covid-19.

The mentioned fund allows companies to adjust the skills of the workers, allocating part of the work schedule to training. The billable hours of the personnel that is being trained are paid by the fund, thanks to the contributions of the Government and the ESF, with the goal of the validation via

collective agreements that, in some areas, have extended territorially and involved small businesses and workers often without a direct trade union representation.

The Fund is an opportunity but it is clearly not possible to convert it in an improper kind of social safety net without any real consequences on the employability of people.

Several inter-professional funds in Italy have published competition notices specifically conceived to dialogue with the New Skills Fund and make their own activities compatible with the resources of the Fund itself.

Back to the structural problems: data about ongoing training in Italy, although mildly positive, show ordinary and consolidated weaknesses: the type of users (companies and workers), albeit with some exceptions, tends to increase and not to decrease the inequalities in Italian labor market.

Precisely for these structural problems, consistently with the *"New European Agenda for Adult learning"*, it is important that every worker and citizen must be able to have access to a training package for digital skills and related to their profession regardless of company training programs that include only one minority share of company employees.

4. Different goals, but integrated in the NRRP and European perspective

The use of resources from inter-professional Funds, in connection with the negotiation and the employment active policies, after the undeniable failure of the connection between Basic Income" and active policies can promote agreements between the Government, the Regions and the social actors. The aim is to integrate the available national resources with a share of the European resources, starting with training activities and for the employability of the workers affected by the crisis.

Consider, obviously, the specific SURE Fund or the more general opportunities that will be provided thanks to the Recovery Plan and the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Program.

The Recovery Plan and the Italian NRRP, as well as considering the digital innovation as a transversal and central goal, identify the misalignment of the skills as a crucial problem that needs solving by investing on adequate training and by following on the national process towards the certification of the skills.

The goals are different, but integrated: lifelong learning, reskilling and upskilling, and a crucial innovation for our system: the possibility, for inter-professional funds, to provide training to the unemployed workers as well.

In fact, we know very well how much Italy is stuck in a "low-skills equilibrium", i.e., a stalemate between the scarce supply of skills and a feeble demand from companies.

For those reasons, when using the resources of the inter-professional Funds, given the current general condition in which the pandemic affects the methodology and fruition of the training, it is necessary to dare with the courage of innovation, although without upturning the function or the governance.

It is all about managing the complexity of the training supply and demand and analyzing the prospects of the role played by bilateral bodies in the connection between professional and ongoing training and in the orientation tools in the labor market, starting with the youth and continuing further.

As written by two important Italian experts about industrial development and lifelong learning (Luigi Campagna and Luciano Pero)²: *“a new season and a new model of ongoing training for workers are essential to Italy in order to enter the post-pandemic development process and to go back to a (qualitative) growth with more productivity and more ‘good’ jobs for the youth”*.

In view of the construction of the «training network», it is important to carry it out as extendedly as possible, involving, together with the social actors, without red tape, the academic world as well, the research, the different training authorities, the territorial institutions (in particular regional ones).

5. A new bridge between companies, knowledges and society through people

It is crucial that training institutions, bilateral bodies and inter-professional Funds gain more and more importance as actors in the – still feeble – connection between the worlds of companies and knowledge.

They must enhance their own facilities and skills creating a shared language that can link those worlds, contributing to a renewed view of work placement projects during school, through a renewed alliance with the world of education that is still baffled by the effects of the pandemic.

A pandemic that showed us, once again, that during a crisis it is crucial to leverage the “relationship”, the “community agreements” (cf. the big issue of education) that connect companies and territory, looking for new synergies and mutual supports.

In response to a system of companies that needs to reconsider its training demand and training authorities that often offer repetitive and obsolete courses, the challenge is to renew the training system and its connection with welfare tools.

The European Union has given the employability a central role in the policies to be activated for the gradual transition from the protection of the workplace towards the protection in the labor market, facing the substantial overcoming of the traditional triple partition between ages of studying, working, and retirement.

It is important to identify some of its main points in the reforms of professional and ongoing training services, but also placement, relocation of workers, active ageing in the workplace and outplacement.

² L. Campagna, L. Pero, *Formazione permanente e continua per creare lavoro e produttività*, in L. Campagna, M. Lizza, L. Pero, R. Rossini, *Le fabbriche delle competenze e della dignità. Idee e progetti per il Pnrr: il Next Generation Italia*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma, 2021.

The employability, as Amartya Sen explained, should not be a burden for the individual worker, but it is a challenge of responsibility and active commitment of the entire society that surrounds them.

The role of the trade union and the social actors in those processes must be based on the valorization of the individual in order to satisfy, also by promoting the training offer, the creativity, the career path, focusing on the process itself (and not only on the final results).

A survey carried out by Microsoft on telecommuting during the pandemic³, although highlighting the positive value of this tool, has also underlined that the lack of “relationship” and even of conflicts experienced during the last year has resulted in a drop of generativity of ideas in the work field.

The “correct” training even during a pandemic, can contribute to overcome this multiple and multidimensional existing risk of isolation. Enhancing and supporting a regaining of subjectivity in the workplace, in the era of algorithms, and promoting a significant, controlled and conscientious use of tools and new individual and collective rights that support it, is one of the most demanding and fascinating challenges of our time, both for social actors and institutions.

6. Some practical ways to commit: from the national to the European dimension

The scenario of the next years comes as an era where changes, instead of stabilizing, seem to be bound to increase, both expanding in the entire economic system and towards further changes in depth for what concerns roles and skills. Although as today this change is difficult to be predicted, it is certain that we are going to face a further evolution and a deep revision of roles, competences, organization of work.

There is no question that there will be a situation with significant gaps of skills and knowledges in many layers of the working population. Those gaps, anyways, will not be homogeneous and thus cannot be faced with a standard training, identical for everyone, that may be based on distanced-dosed pills, digitally and without any real coaching, off the clock.

An effective answer to all of these emerging training needs, will face the necessity to be adjusted to every individual’s need, to the roles, to the working environment.

In particular in the adult training, it is imperative to keep in mind their experience and the environment where they live daily.

Many topics and issues can be shared by different industries and roles, but the training is most effective (even in terms of “acceptance” and “involvement” of those who are trained), as it is known, through the adaptation both to the specific working environment and the characteristics of the individuals.

An important role can be played by the representation of workers, on every level, by enhancing and implementing some tools that already exist in some national collective agreements, for example, in

³ Microsoft, Building resilience & maintaining innovation in a hybrid world. Modernizing the workplaces emerges as top business transformation priority, October 2020.

the engineering industry (recently reinforced and deeply renewed on this aspect) and in the chemical-pharmaceutical industry.

In line with the European framework and validating a renewed prominence of the social actors, even on a territorial level, it is eventually necessary to substantiate and develop a shared implementation of the goals set by the legislative provisions of 2012, 2013 and 2021⁴ starting with:

- Recognition and validation of acquired knowledge; even with the involvement of bilateral bodies and inter-professional funds;
- Identification and validation of formal and non-formal learning;
- Recognition of the work experiences as an essential part of the educational, formative and professional journey of the individual;
- Definition of criteria and tools to validate the non-formal and informal learning;
- Definition of feedbacks and proofs in relation to the European levels and referencing systems;
- Implementation of a national public system of certification of skills based on minimum service standards that are homogeneous across the entire nation and its connection with the requirements of the national collective labor agreements.

We are up against a crucial challenge, also considering the economic and employment crisis: the permanent training must be promoted as a springboard for the employability – correctly intended – and as a key to the active citizenship for the reduction of inequalities outside and within the labor market.

Compared to the challenges connected with the digital dimension the trade union must stand against the “technological determinism” and a training that is ancillary or subject to competitiveness projects that set their primary paradigm in the technology and the supporting capital.

In the perspective of a Work 4.0, the training is not just “useful” anymore, but coessential to the development of the system itself (whether it is corporate, socio-economic, etc.) since it is an investment on people and their skills.

This is a challenge that, starting with the personalization of responses and “areas of opportunities and choices” (not with the digital and solitary alienation of each worker who is learning), puts together individual and collective paths and private, bilateral, public, national and European investments.

The common value, for trade unions, and for the companies as well, consists in the valorization of the individual and its human asset, starting with the moments and conditions of deepest fragility and need, accepted in a project-oriented and proactive perspective and not solely in a defensive or passive one.

Integrating the protection of the Person in / towards the Work, investing in knowledge and skills is therefore an absolute priority, as the European Union indicates, towards sustainable, digital and inclusive development.

⁴ Reference, in this order, to: *Act June 28th 2012, n. 92; Legislative decree January 16th 2013, n. 13; Decree January 5th 2021 for the adoption of the Guidelines that give effect to the National System of certification of skills.*

We are facing, and here I will conclude my speech, a great challenge not only in Europe, but also at global level.

We cannot forget that, on the basis of different scenarios outlined by the ILO, in the postpandemic situation there will be a future number of new unemployed which will range from 5.3 to 24.7 million. This would add up to the 188 million unemployed worldwide in the 2019. The ILO also estimates that between 8.8 and 35 million more people will be found in conditions of working poverty all over the world (and, of course, also in the European Union).

It is known also that the crisis is weighing above all on young people and women: these must be the urgencies and priorities for the training improvement in the coming years.