

Soft Skills Recognition, Validation And Certification In A Lifelong Learning Perspective. Presentation Of The Project Unimc For Soft Skills

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ABSTRACT

The issue of recognition, validation and certification of skills, especially those developed in non-formal and informal fields, is becoming a current topic for all educative institutions, including University. The main aim is to promote lifelong learning, a strategic factor for individual fulfilment in work and for social aspects. Soft skills is a psycho-sociological term relating to a cluster of personality traits, social abilities, communication, language, personal attitudes that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities. In Italy the legal framework on skills is led by the Legislative Decree n. 13/13. According to the Decree, University should assure the effective implementation of lifelong learning through guidance and counselling services. The University of Macerata (UNIMC) has been involved from a long time in the field of soft skills with activities to develop informal and non-formal learning and recently, a system to recognize and validate them has been experienced. A Pilot Project structured in three phases - recognition, validation and certification of the soft skills - was introduced within Alternating School and Work Project, which involved 12 students of a local High School in an internship at Unimc.

Keywords: soft skills; lifelong learning; informal learning; non-formal learning; guidance; counselling; skills certification system; internship.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of *recognition, validation and certification of skills*, especially those developed in non-formal and informal fields, is becoming a current topic for all educative institutions, including University. The main aim is to promote *lifelong learning*, which is defined as «all learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences in a perspective of personal, civic, social and employment growth» (Bertagna, Casano, & Tiraboschi, 2012).

Lifelong learning is considered by the European Union as a strategic factor for individual fulfilment in work and social aspects (Field, 2005). In addition, it is considered an essential contribution to the implementation of the *Europe 2020 Strategy* for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2009). At the same time, the European Council Recommendation of the 20th December 2012, on the validation of *non-formal* and *informal learning*, proposes the development of knowledge, skills and competencies aiming at an economic growth and employment (European Commission, 2012).

In particular we are interested in *soft skills*, considered as a psycho-sociological cluster of personality traits, social proprieties, communication, language, personal habits, and friendliness, that characterizes relationships with other people (Le Boterf, 1994). Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Under this perspective soft skills complement hard skills, which are the main

technical and theoretical requirements for a job. Unlike hard skills, which are specifically related to a specific task or activity, soft skills are related to the personal abilities to interact effectively with coworkers and customers and are broadly applicable to different kind of performances, both in and outside the workplace (Rey, 2003). Over the long term, to manage soft skills may be even more important than to possess hard skills. The legal profession is an example, where the ability to deal with people effectively and politely can determine the professional success of a lawyer. Due to their added value, it is important to identify them and certify that they are available to be used.

According to the Italian legislation, the University of Macerata has been involved from a long time in the field of soft skills training. In the last period a Pilot Project aimed to the *recognition, validation and certification* of soft skills was made up. We will discuss the contents, the phases, the results and the issues of this experience.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The Italian legal framework on *recognition, validation and certification of skills* is led by the Legislative Decree n. 13/13 (pursuant to paragraphs 58 and 68, Article 4, of Law No. 92/2012) which defines *the general rules and the basic performance for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning as well as the minimum service standards of the National System of Certification of Skills*. This measure introduces a recognition of acquired skills throughout lifetime, even to develop a European skills Framework usable by the citizens. The Law is based on main statements such as the definitions of *competence, skill, non-formal learning, informal learning, formal learning and lifelong learning*. The identification of the *Public Authorities*, including University, and *Private Authorities* which are accredited to certificate skills acquired by students and workers is quoted in the same Law as well.

According to the Legislative Decree n. 13/13 *non-formal learning* is defined as a learning characterized by a deliberate choice of the person, which is conducted out of education and training system with but ending with the release of an educational qualification. On the other end, the *non-formal learning* takes place in every organism pursuing educational and training purposes, such as volunteering, National Civil Service and internship (Isfol, 2012).

THE PILOT PROJECT “UNIMC FOR SOFT SKILLS” FOR THE *RECOGNITION, VALIDATION AND CERTIFICATION OF THE SOFT SKILLS*

The University of Macerata (UNIMC), committed from a long time in the field of soft skills development (Nicolini & Pojaghi, 2006), provides to the students many activities aimed to acquire relational and methodological skills, such as: effective communication, teamwork, conflict management, negotiation, problem solving, etc. Among various experiences offered from the 1975, we can mention the Workshop for Observing Children at School (Nicolini & Lapucci, 2009) as well as the Training to Communication Laboratory (Nicolini & Lapucci, 2011) as for formal learning experience. In addition participation in editorial staff of important cultural events in the territory, collaborations with the University Radio and the workshop to design the University Advertising Campaign, as for informal learning activities.

Specifically, along several years UNIMC has been participating to the Project *Alternating School and Work* which is sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce and the Regional Education Office. The Project involves High School students in an internship at Public Administrations, Local Authorities and Professional Studies to promote the integration between school and work (article 4 of Law No. 53/2003).

In view of the future commitment of the University in the field of skills certification in *non-formal learning*, a research team from UNIMC Orientation Office introduced within *Alternating School and Work* a Pilot Project called *Unimc for Soft Skills*, which involved 12 students of a local High School in the period between January and February 2014. Following the indications of Italian and European legislation, the Project was structured in five phases to *recognise, validate and certify* the *soft skills* likely acquired or consolidated during the internship.

First phase of Pilot Project

The first phase of the Pilot Project was dedicated to the identification of the targeted soft skills mainly required during the internship at UNIMC by the students (Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist, & Stringfellow, 2005). For the aim of the *Alternating School and Work* project we outlined four soft skills:

- *Observation*
- *Listening*
- *Communication in group*
- *Problem solving*

As theoretical reference, the definition of the four soft skills employed in an experienced and knowledgeable

way was used. A definition of an expert approach for each soft skill is provided below:

Observation

An expert approach in *observation* consists in to able to distinguish between data that can be directly observed in the description of a phenomenon - such as actions, words and non-verbal behaviors - and items that can only be deduced because belonging to the inner world of the subject observed - such as thoughts, feelings and intentions. Furthermore, the competent observer fits the times and places where the observation takes place, taking care to discuss own comments and being aware of own point of view.

Listening

A good expertise in *listening* is characterized by the ability to select among an amount of information the most significant ones in relation to the objective of communication.

Communication in small group

An expert approach to *communication in small group* is distinguished by the ability to clearly express opinions and emotions, avoiding to minimize, to trivialize or to make fan of other's ideas and frame of mind, also offering recognition to other's ideas. Also, it allows to change own attitudes based on the discussion in group.

Problem solving

To have a good expertise in *problem solving* means to be able to process the different information available to identify answers to the problems encountered, sometimes also in an original way. Also, it permits to transfer learned strategies, adapting them to new contexts. Finally, an expert approach is characterized by the ability to use an overview able to take on the problem from an outside perspective.

Second phase of Pilot Project

Using the definitions described above, the second phase of the project consisted in the operationalizing of the four soft skills, declined them in three levels of expertise, through the identification of specific indicators for each skill (Nicolini, Moroni, & Lapucci, 2009): *basic, intermediate* and *advanced*.

As an example, we will illustrate the operationalization of the *Communication in small group* competence. In the Table 1 the indicators which identify the *communication in small group* of *basic* and *advanced levels* are illustrated (Pojaghi & Nicolini, 2011).

Table 1. Communication in small group indicators

In small group basic communication	In small group advanced communication
To remain mainly silent during the discussion	To take an active part in the discussion
To carry on own opinion only at once considering the opinions of the other participants	To propose and stimulating speeches, listening and taking into consideration the opinions of the other participants
To intervene with speeches not actually relevant to the group objective	To return the discussion towards the group objective to be achieved
To use a personal language or technical terms, without checking whether they are comprehensible to the other participants	To use a shared linguistic repertoire
To minimize ideas or frame of mind expressed by the other participants	To offer recognition to the thoughts and frame of mind of the other participants
To maintain the same style of communication during the group interaction, without measuring it in relation to others	To change the way of relating based on the feedback received by the other participants
To keep the speech for a long time	To intervene synthetically and clearly
To interrupt others in their speeches	To encourage others to participate and to support them expressing their point of view

Following the operationalization just showed in the Table 1, the three competence levels of the *Communication in small group* skills are described as in the following list:

- *Basic*: the student mainly uses the elements of a basic approach within the communication in small group.
- *Intermediate*: the student uses the characteristics of both approaches, in a mixed way, within the communication in small group.

- *Advanced*: the student uses all or most of the indicators of an expert approach within the communication in small group.

Third phase of Pilot Project

In this phase, several tasks related to every skill were identified and then tested by the research team. This step involved the group of experts in a deep analysis of the different tasks, to arrive at a shared and convinced choice of the activities to be proposed. After different pilot experiences, two tasks for each of the four soft skills were selected to be used in two different moments, as an in entrance and in exit assignments (Trincherro, 2013). The selection of the tasks able to ascertain the level of soft skills possessed by the students at the beginning and at the end of the experience was the crucial passage of the project. In fact, the two tasks selected for each of the soft skills need to be homologous but not completely identical, to ward off a sort of "training activity" effect, instead of an actual recognition of the soft skills acquisition (Le Boterf, 1994).

As an example, we briefly illustrate the in entrance task for the *Communication in small group* skill. It consists in a discussion in small group to reach a common solution to an assignment, during twenty minutes. After informing the group about the activity to carry on, the development of the discussion within the group was recorded through a video camera. Simultaneously, two members of the research team took notes through a check list of the conversation and the exchanges within the participants (Bresciani, 2012).

Fourth phase of Pilot Project

In the fourth phase the results of the proposed activities were analysed by each expert involved in the soft skills survey, using the indicators identified for each soft skill. Subsequently, the whole group of experts shared the results and discussed all doubtful cases, to arrive to a consensual assessment. In the Table 2 the students' in entrance and in exit levels of expertise for each soft skill are illustrated.

Table 2. In entrance and in exit students' *soft skills levels*

Stud	Observation		Listening		Communication in small group		Problem solving	
	entrance level	exit level	entrance level	exit level	entrance level	exit level	entrance level	exit level
1	basic	intermediate	basic	intermediate	basic	advanced	basic	intermediate
2	basic	intermediate	intermediate	Basic	intermediate	basic	intermediate	intermediate
3	intermediate	advanced	intermediate	advanced	advanced	advanced	intermediate	intermediate
4	basic	intermediate	intermediate	Basic	basic	basic	advanced	advanced
5	basic	intermediate	basic	Basic	basic	basic	intermediate	intermediate
6	intermediate	intermediate	basic	Basic	basic	intermediate	intermediate	intermediate
7	intermediate	advanced	intermediate	intermediate	intermediate	intermediate	intermediate	intermediate
8	basic	intermediate	basic	intermediate	intermediate	intermediate	advanced	advanced
9	basic	advanced	intermediate	advanced	advanced	advanced	intermediate	intermediate
10	intermediate	basic	basic	advanced	intermediate	intermediate	advanced	advanced
11	basic	intermediate	advanced	advanced	advanced	advanced	basic	intermediate
12	basic	basic	basic	advanced	intermediate	advanced	intermediate	basic

As the Table 2 shows, almost all the students improved their skills. In particular, eight students out of twelve showed a significant evolution in the owned skills, moving from basic or intermediate to intermediate or advanced level.

Analysing the four cases where the students seem to be regressed, it is possible that the motivation factor induced the same subject to produce different performance, as in other cases or fields. However, if a subject is able to carry out a performance at an intermediate level, it is quite sure that he/she owns and he/she has consolidated a basic level of the same skill.

Taking into consideration that all the participants were students, it is not surprising that they showed above all *problem solving skills* already in the entrance task, and also that an actual development is not considerable under this perspective. In fact, *problem solving* is one of the most requested skill in learning process at school. On the other hand, observation and communication in group seem to be not so much developed at the beginning of the experience, while the participants obtained good performances at the end. In fact, these kind of skills were the most requested to take actively part to the activities at UNIMC offices.

Fifth phase of Pilot Project

Once the internship was over, a document was sent by email to each student with the acquired soft skills degree declaration, using the three identified level (basic, intermediate and advanced). The document illustrates student's development, highlighting the owned skills in the entrance and exit tasks, with particular attention to the improvements. In addition, a file contained general explanations on the topic of soft skills and a focus on *Unimc for Soft Skills Project* was included.

CONCLUSION

Applying the project, we reached some important results to be outlined. First of all we reached the goal to identify and operationalize a series of soft skills, declining indicators to recognize different levels of expertise. We also selected a collection of tested tasks useful to assess the different soft skill levels.

As a secondary outcome, during the internship at UNIMC a development of soft skills possessed by students was observed. This shows the validity of the Alternating School and Work experience, especially in the development of non-formal learning.

Although the Unimc for Soft Skills was a Pilot Project, it achieved good results also in terms of students participation, taking into consideration that twelve out of thirteen students completed the path, even if the evaluation of their soft skills levels was not compulsory.

Providing for the first time the issuance of a certificate with the soft skills acquisition declaration, the project reinforced the UNIMC commitment to promote the development of non-formal and informal learning. Next year the University of Macerata intends to intensify its role in lifelong learning. Specifically, *The Good Work* module will be activated, in which conveying all the initiatives proposed or hosted by the University to develop soft skills. Students who will participate in one or more of the activities set out by *The Good Work* module, can be seen certified the soft skills acquired. The certificate obtained can be used in the presentation of CV. The aim is to structure a stable system of *recognition, validation and certification of soft skills* acquired in each informal and non-formal experiences offered by University, launching an accredited University agency.

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