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## **Orientamento e passaggio a corsi universitari: uno studio di caso Orientation and transition into university courses: a case study<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The hypothesis that this paper advances is that the definition of a life plan within a clear time scale is the basic guidance framework - perhaps the only one that can help the subject in his or her effort to construct an identity and negotiate the transition from study to work. This hypothesis has been tested in empirical exploratory research into the university guidance system in the largest Italian University ("La Sapienza" University of Rome ), with particular attention to the target of young leavers.

**Parole chiave:** orientation, transition, university courses

Over the last decade, the transition from education to employment has become increasingly difficult, long and uncertain, so that legislators have been forced to consider new means of

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<sup>1</sup> L'articolo è uscito su: University guidance services and support in the transition from education to work, in Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 2011, 1: <http://www.ijse.eu/index.php/ijse/article/viewFile/90/93>.

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access to facilitate the entry of young people into working life. In addition, a certain discrepancy between employability and training received (Benadusi, 2001) as well as situations of entrapment in the short to medium term which are likely to result in dead-end jobs from which it is difficult to escape can be observed (Consoli, Follis, 2001). This is especially true in a country like Italy where social mobility is blocked more than elsewhere. In an incoming and outgoing labor market which has become more and more flexible and is characterized by towering peaks of unemployment, especially among the young, these problems are aggravated more and more<sup>3</sup>. The relaxing of the regulatory and stability norms which characterized labor relations in the Italian system since the 80s has introduced elements of differentiation and heterogeneity among subjects. As biographical paths become increasingly uncertain, people are forced to change their employment status several times during their working-life cycle.

Because of this, the workforce today has become, on the whole, weak. Furthermore, the most vulnerable are young people. Orientation appears to be the right tool for helping people to take charge of their destinies. For this reason, in many quarters it is considered to be essential in supporting people during ever more frequent periods of transition. Recent legislative measures in Italy have also attributed to the University a leading role as an intermediary actor (Law 30/2003), with the aim of fostering a better matching between highly-professionalized job offer and demand. Therefore, it is important to understand whether and how our university services are able to guarantee support to students, providing a range of guidance services instrumental in the construction of pathways and effective choices<sup>4</sup>.

The theoretical framework is that of orientation training recognized as a maturing process (AA.VV., 2003) essential to supporting subjective choices in a context of growing complexity and fragmentation where rational choice approaches show their limitations. In this maturing path, reflective deliberation on the courses of action that people decide in their "internal conversation" (Archer, 2003) plays an essential role in explaining social action and its social outcomes (Donati, 2006). In this sense, the reflexivity is the way of return of the subject on himself to consider results of his direct and indirect actions. So he can connect these results to a possible aim that is the dream to produce a better future.

For this reason, it is interesting to understand which factors support subjective decision making in this particular stage of development and the role played by the university placement system in supporting this process.

The hypothesis that this paper advances is that the definition of a life plan within a clear time scale is the basic guidance framework - perhaps the only one that can help the subject in his or her effort to construct an identity and negotiate the transition from study to work.

This hypothesis has been tested in empirical exploratory research into the university guidance system in the largest Italian University ("La Sapienza" University of Rome), with particular attention to the target of young leavers<sup>5</sup>. The objective of this pilot research was to understand

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<sup>3</sup> Unemployment that, as highlighted by the *Annuario sul lavoro* (Cnel, 2010), has increased significantly due to the recent economic and financial crisis.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to quality of guidance services, see, among others, Borrás (2010).

<sup>5</sup> To this end, after a period of many years of observation within the guidance out services, we carried out in 2010 a total of 10 in-depth interviews of which: 2 university orientators, 8 service users (graduates and undergraduates, male and female), chosen for their typical pathways (greater or lesser difficulty in self-management and completing their courses, greater or lesser difficulty in realizing satisfactory choices and reaching their career goals, effective decision-making); lastly, we elaborate a life-history.

how they have developed guidance services in that Ateneum following the introduction of recent regulatory norms, in an attempt to understand:

- whether the guidance services offered are able to support a subjective process of choice based on the definition/construction of a personal pathway of biographical and career development;
- what resources are provided by the young in the construction of their personal project life.

To investigate both the forces that drive the most intimate personal reasons of those who approach the university placement services and the way in which these services have been developed to support their choice, we have preferred a qualitative approach aimed at reconstructing the complexity of a system that appears to be particularly fragmented and locally differentiated in our country. The interest for the importance of reflexivity in the construction of a personal project life led to the preference of in-depth interviews.

The essay starts with a reconstruction of the way in which the concept of orientation has been modified as a result of the changing socio-economic system and a presentation of the guidance system in Italy. The results of our analysis demonstrate the usefulness of the service in this case study and how it is perceived through the eyes of its users, also focusing attention on the subjective dimensions relative to the transitional approach.

### **The social dimensions of orientation**

In recent years, the concept of guidance has evolved from a "welfare" to a "promotional" vision. The guidance function represents a help mechanism based on the recognition of subject's centrality, and is based on counseling<sup>6</sup>. Orientation is a complex concept that can be utilised in very different areas and with reference to different ages and subjects. We can talk about orientation in the passages between the school and university systems, emphasizing the role played by both the school and university. We can speak of guidance for career choices and its inclusion in organizational contexts, and re-orientation or guidance for situations in which subjects are faced with further job placement. Today the concept of orientation has become central to understanding the employability of individuals. Furthermore, it represents a useful conceptual passepartout in examining this issue, both with regard to the subjective dimension (the social actor's ability to adopt an active attitude), and to the objective one (social stratification). In the first case, it is important to analyze the subject's ability in self-orientation (both internal and external), while in the latter case we must look at the way the orientation function is performed by the competent institutions in order to promote his or her employability. We can say that subject's abilities in self-orientation are closely related with the reflexive skill, i.e. the interior conversation that anyone has with himself with regard his feelings, his situation, vision and project on it.

With the changing social problems to which orientation must respond, we see a progressive change in our understanding of this concept. We move from to the centrality of the orientator, who is seen as an expert in detecting the individual's characteristics, to a guidance system in

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<sup>6</sup> To further investigate the meaning and significance attached to the concept of counseling, see, among others, Berra (2003) and Raabe (2002).

which the user is considered competent and responsible for his selection process, with the orientator supporting his decisions. The focus is shifting more and more toward the importance of the subjective dimension, which is considered particularly significant in the construction of career pathways (Brown, Lent, 2005). In fact, a service which focuses almost exclusively on an informative type of orientation is particularly frail because it fails to meet the deeper needs underlying the issue of awareness in the choices expressed by ever more fragile social actors. The idea of orientation appears to represent a means of encouraging the development of the reflective capacity necessary in promoting the recovery or activation of the subject's internal conversation<sup>7</sup>, useful in modelling oneself and re-shaping the social context. The different reflective modes activated by the social actor indeed "mediate between the socio-cultural structures and people's ways of life" (Archer, 2003).

In line with this theoretical approach, we can recall three fundamental dimensions of orientation yet illustrate by Isfol: the information, the consulting and the educational (AA.VV., 2003) dimensions. The first aims to ensure a complete understanding of training and employment opportunities and their access routes. The second consists of various types of counselling, mostly in the form of individual support processes. These aim to clarify and define a personal development project and strategies for action. The third involves a training action which does not support only choices, but also their success, for the active maintenance of self-esteem and professionalism<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, orientation becomes a tool for lifelong learning, supporting the person in the act of building his or her own life project, a project that be developed despite many difficulties, but at the same time can be continuously disputed by the new opportunities that life presents<sup>9</sup>.

Most scholars of economic and social phenomena share the view that we are seeing the passage from so-called scale economies to those of flexibility (Rifkin, 2004; Scott, 2008). The effects of this shift on the organization of work, the way people work, the skills required and the professional sphere are both evident and considerable. In short, the mission and the problems which guidance must face in a society marked by the uncertainty of the life pathway are changing. In the past, the elderly transmitted socially shared values and behavior patterns, including those relative to work, within the extended family. They also indicated paths along which individuals were directed by force or by choice. Until the nineteenth century, the family supplied the orientation function (Hofstede, 1991; Salling, Olesen, 2000). With the industrialization process, this model disappeared. At a time in which the possibilities of choice are multiple, orientation begins to emerge and to define itself and its functions precisely. From being a private event, relegated within the family sphere, it becomes a social issue that affects the whole community<sup>10</sup>.

It is possible to identify four distinct historical periods<sup>11</sup> within which the concept of orientation evolved and define them according to two opposing views: the deterministic one that conceives

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the internal conversation concept and reflexivity in the paths of life, see Archer (2006).

<sup>8</sup> Based on the changes taking place in recent years, a non-directive approach that is increasingly open to the action of the subject has emerged (Rogers, 1970; Pombeni, 1996) within a relationship in which orientation plays a facilitating role.

<sup>9</sup> On the function of guidance in individual choices see also, among others, Thierry, Grelet, Romani (2008), Bandura (1995); Prestini, Christophe (2008).

<sup>10</sup> An interesting and precise reconstruction of social orientation can be traced in Guichard (2006).

<sup>11</sup> For a debate on different approaches to guidance and its historical evolution, see Capogna (2003).

the subject as being over-determined and “activated by external forces”; the autonomist one which is founded on the idea of an "active", "free" and "self-determined" individual.

In this evolution, we are witnessing a transition from a conception of informational orientation to one of training. This passage is marked by a change in the overall social framework, within which it appears possible to isolate four social dimensions that have radically changed and that affect largely the self orientation processes:

1. work-study transition arrangements<sup>12</sup>;
2. career life patterns<sup>13</sup>;
3. the development of reflexive modernity<sup>14</sup>;
4. the inequality systems, intended as new risks, work traps and the stratification system<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, the significance of the changes imposed by these four dimensions induces a rethinking of social systems in the orientation training sense, aimed at promoting a "self-orientation process by the subject, [...] primary agent of the choice process" (Castelli, Venini, 1996:23). This model sees social actors in an active position. Actors capable of designing their own personal development path and helping to build organizational systems and work processes in a creative and responsible manner. In this new vision, guidance fits into the educational process "as a specific way for realizing the potentiality of every person and preparing him to motivate career choices at various stages of his development, both in youth and in adulthood" (Frabboni, Guerra, Scurati, 1996:25).

During the last decade, orientation has seen the growth of its significance and its areas of application, so we will try to summarize its various application trajectories, but without aspiring to cover all of them.

First, as suggested by Guichard (2006), we must remember the importance it assumes in relation to the ability to cope with transition, or rather, different types of transition<sup>16</sup>. In contemporary society, the individual is engaged in a constant process of synthesis of changing experiences in every area of life. Through counseling, the orientator can help the subject to draw up a list of possible solutions for every circumstance, to develop greater accountability within the first critical steps and complex choices, to reflect on their goals and experiences. The aid that the counsellor is able to offer in making a personal reconstruction of experience through the development of narrative practice is an added value.

Orientation training (AA.VV, 2003) has established itself as an awareness of self and identity in terms of immediate and future choices, but also as opportunities for lifelong learning. In this sense, orientation becomes an educational tool capable of proposing values and rules which must be internalized by subjects in order to assume the responsible and informed behaviour patterns that are fundamental to the development of a personal and professional project. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> Important contributions are to be found in Walther, Lopez Blasco, McNeish (2003), Walther, 2004; Shoon (2009), among others.

<sup>13</sup> With reference to changing career patterns, see Collin, Young (2000), Brown, Lent, Hackett (1996), among others.

<sup>14</sup> Among the best-known contributions on reflexive modernity, we can cite Archer (2006), Beck, Giddens, Lash (1999).

<sup>15</sup> On this, see Boudesseul (2010), Duffy, Glenday, Pupo (1999), among others.

<sup>16</sup> On the issue of transition, the contributions of Shavit, Muller (1998); Schoon (2009) among others, are of interest.

orientation training seems to constitute an appropriate approach in capturing individual's needs during his quest for giving a meaning to his life, causing him to adopt a reflexive approach to building his identity without losing sight of the other part of himself, thus enabling him to recognize and build his position in the world. Through time, the need for this orientation and continuous training approach emerges more clearly when we consider the fragmentation and individualisation of social dynamics, which produces inevitable repercussions on the education system, its relationships with other sub-systems and on the subjects that transit through it<sup>17</sup>. As Besozzi (2010) reminds us, these transformations call into question the career model that modernity has given us and with it the functions attributed to the practical guidance that aims to guide the subject in the crucial moments of his career. This linear and continuous career-path model, characterized by a rigid distinction between periods of study, work and rest has been irretrievably lost. In the new socio-economic context, we can observe a discontinuous life career model, which shows significant changes in the ways we consider education, employment and the articulation of the periods in our lives. In this new context, the choices we make are freer and more informed, but also reversible and temporary, and the development of a "career life is more like a journey than a destination, continuous negotiation rather than adaptation to a clear and binding path or social expectations "(AA.VV., 2001:119).

Pombeni (1998) defines the educational orientation dimension as "methodological support that is offered to the subject,". This support does not constitute an answer to our problems, but it can help us to find the answer by ourselves, thus making us able to stand independently and responsibly and face up to the decision-making task that gives rise to the need for guidance. The development of meta-cognitive skills can trigger a process of self-reflection, which may, in turn, result in self-knowledge, self-evaluation and self-regulation processes. As Archer says, the development of these meta-skills, which are formed in primary and secondary socialization, allows the actor to elaborate the set of reflective processes that enable him to consider himself as an object under observation, thus giving rise to "an interrogative exploration of the subject in relation to an object, which includes the subject as object" (2003:174).

Another factor to be considered when we speak about orientation is the relationship between individual and society. The actor's choices are not arbitrary, never occur needlessly, and learning how to make the appropriate choice is part of the socialization processes that accompany integration into society<sup>18</sup>. According to this view, guidance takes the form of an action aimed at leading the person to identify his position in the world. In this sense, decision making plays a crucial role both in the representations that the individual has of himself, and the representations of relationships through which he relates to the surrounding world. We construct our self-image and sense of having our own identity by confronting ourselves with the world around us, identifying with significant others, internalizing the roles that the environment in which we are inserted considers appropriate and socially acceptable. During adolescence, an individual develops a sense of identity and defines and negotiates his personal self-image with himself and with others. Building and developing our own identity allows us to understand our potential and ability and therefore directs us toward the realization of a life project, rendering us autonomous

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<sup>17</sup> With regard to the experience of being a student, with particular reference to the university, please see Coulon (1997).

<sup>18</sup> See Colombo in this volume.

and self-sufficient. It is in the inter-subjective relationship with other selves, here understood in the broader sense of human and nonhuman actors (artifacts, technologies, tools, etc..) (Latour, 2002) that we build skills and meanings, and, at the same time, relate to the structuring effect of social dynamics compared with individual actions. The family and social context within which the subject constructs meanings of work and develops employability delimits his range of choices, but at the same time, this can be managed by the subject using his resources and attributions of meaning. The construction of the right of every individual to give meaning to his existence begins with an analysis of the limitations encountered with regard to the possibility of becoming a social subject (Touraine, 1998). Given the complexity of the intrapersonal and inter-subjective dynamics in play, the importance of a reflective approach that provides the subject with a resource key for reassembling the fragmented nature of the personal experiences which always affect all dimensions of being and acting becomes evident.

However, we cannot think that orientation can play an equalizing role in supporting choice, ensuring equal opportunities of success for everybody. Research carried out in Britain highlights the fact that the understanding of transition processes from education to employment cannot be interpreted solely on the basis of the concept of occupational choice. In fact, the concept of structural opportunities (Roberts, 1977) that are inevitably different in relation to cultural (Bourdieu, 1970) and social (Coleman, 1988) capital of origin cannot be underestimated. However, structure cannot be regarded as immovable, given that the effects of globalization make social mobility paths increasingly uncertain, so that we can speak of "the yo-yo transition" (Walther, 2004). For all these reasons, the subject's planning ability and his capacity for organizing his self-fulfillment through time become fundamental to his integration into working life and his maintaining satisfactory employability.

### **University orientation services in Italy**

In Italy, the guidance system is relatively new. There is still no clear and definitive legislation and institutional framework relative to this issue. In general, initial discussions and actions in terms of orientation can be traced to the start of the active policies season, that began to redefine the rules for the workplace<sup>19</sup> in the second half of the 90s.

In the absence of a regulatory and institutional framework that defines roles, responsibilities and training and professional guidance profiles at the moment in Italy, this function is carried out by a variety of services. The Employment Centers usually provide a first-level reception and orientation function, that is orientation information and referring to second-level services (i.e. consulting services) which may be internal and are often offered by consultants, or external. Among the external services we may include Guidance Centers, Vocational Training centers, accredited Guidance Services, schools and universities as well as any voluntary associations operating in the territory for various reasons<sup>20</sup>.

As far as university orientation (which is the focus of our analysis) is concerned, this is divided

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<sup>19</sup> The most important legal regulations to this regard are: The law on decentralization L. 59/97; the contribution to the regions and local authorities of functions and tasks in the field of active employment policies; D. L.vo 469/97; L. 196/97 which introduces elements of flexibility in labor market and the subsequent L. 30/2003 that redefine actors' system.

<sup>20</sup> In the Province of Rome where we contextualize the analysis, the network of employment services is formed by: 23 employment centres, 25 training institutions; 8 Orientation Information Services, 40 Guidance Centres for Work and other accredited training bodies.

into three segments, corresponding to successive time phases and distinct user groups: pre-university guidance, for students leaving secondary school; ongoing guidance, aimed to university students during their university entrance or course of study; transition orientation, which directs students who are leaving university and looking for professional pathways or work placement aimed at developing a career<sup>21</sup>.

In order to conform with recent legislative action in the field of guidance and work intermediation activities within the university, a listening service must be provided for students to supply them with information useful in the achievement of educational success. Almost all universities have a centralized structure for guidance and have set up a service open to the public in order to bring the structure to users, but the percentage of universities that offer internships and placement services designed specifically for different subject areas is still low. Moreover, according to young listeners, the lack of orientation toward the professions so that they often "do not even know for what job profiles we are going to prepare" (FS. ic) is one of the major issues that distinguish guidance in the Italian university. Furthermore, the transmission approach based more on the notional dimension rather than the experiential workshop is still too predominant.

One of the problems which we encounter in understanding university guidance is represented by this internal fragmentation which is not wrong in principle and responds to different targets and requirements. However, the resulting organizational fragmentation creates confusion for students who are struggling to find the necessary information and identify the referents of trust who can accompany them through the various stages of the process, while the world of employment is unable to achieve a clear understanding of new curricula (known as 3+2) established by the recent reform, or of the academic organization. Furthermore, when the orientation role goes beyond the mere need for information, this cannot be left to chance or to the sensitivity of the educators who are generally appointed as members to the orientation committee, randomly.

A three-year project known as Fixo<sup>22</sup> has been promoted at national level to deal with this problem and accompany universities in the process of modernizing their transition support services by supplying resources, support and innovative tools. This project<sup>23</sup> has given a significant boost to universities in adopting an intermediary role, as in L. 30/2003, and has reduced the gap that still characterizes the university system and the labor market. This project has been useful in dealing decisively with the issue of guidance and placement which we are

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<sup>21</sup> Crui, L'Università Orienta, 2005, CRUI Survey on attitudes and actions in Italian universities, Rome, 2005: <http://www.cruir.it/HomePage.aspx?ref=1070>.

<sup>22</sup> The project was promoted by Labour Italy, Organisational Institution of the Ministry of Labour, with the twin objectives of: supporting the difficult organizational change within the university and reducing the timescale of entry into employment by graduates through measures aimed at qualifying and strengthening guidance and job placement services in the public-private sector. The project provided resources and technical assistance to universities interested in trying out the proposed organizational model, also in order to accompany a process of standardization of services offered by the universities outside the area of the traditional educational and research activities that form the academic's primary mission. For further information: [www.italialavoro.it/wps/portal](http://www.italialavoro.it/wps/portal) area Transition Education, Training and Labour.

<sup>23</sup> This project includes four distinct action lines that are complementary (technical assistance to university offices in designing/organizing information systems for students and companies, placement, co-designing highly-specialized training ; research spin-off creation). However, here we will exclusively consider the supporting activity for transition made with the dual aim of promoting post-graduate job placement and the acquisition of technical and professional skills through experiential internships.

examining in this essay.

Given the magnitude and variety of courses of study at the “La Sapienza” University in Rome where the analysis was carried out, the information system sponsored by the Project provided a single information desk for each faculty, within which we tried to establish or strengthen the orientation experiments through: targeted training to staff working in the information/guidance to students sector; selection of companies interested in offering internships; the organization of a database to match employment supply and demand. The Fixo project required significant organizational/management effort, involved as many as 72 public and private universities, in all Italy, promoted a total of 13,887 job training opportunities and brought the problem of orientation output practices to the attention of the university. However, by listening to the recipients of the guidance services, we can best pinpoint the criticalities of a complex system that has not yet reached its full maturity.

### **Results of an empirical study**

In this section we present the results of an empirical study consisting of 10 exploratory interviews with young people leaving their university courses in 2010<sup>24</sup>. We chose them in faculties considered weak power-wise (communication sciences, sociology, psychology, literature and philosophy) with regard to employment opportunities. They allow us to make some interesting considerations both with regard to the "resources" capable of activating self-guidance paths and the subjective strategies that support the social actor within the complex transition paths through the analysis of three dimensions of considerable interest, which are examined herewith:

1. orientation and disorientation;
2. services and inefficiency;
3. from orientation to a life project.

### ***Between orientation and disorientation***

As mentioned, the ever more complicated transition process, career patterns and layering processes, accompanied by the spread of reflexive modernity, induce new social actors to face up to the need for self-guidance that emerges strongly in socialization paths which have become less and less linear and defined. In the midst of this profound change in the socialization processes, with no top and no centre, the subject frequently feels alone and bewildered, unable to activate the reflective requisites independently, with obvious repercussions on his pathway towards fulfillment. Even the subjects we interviewed show non-linear choice paths that appear fraught with difficulty and are characterized by the constant analysis and evaluation of personal choices and opportunities, thus confirming studies that illustrate the complexity of career models. All of them exhibited very "frayed" courses of study, marked by a long permanence in the ranks of the student population or by a kind of temporal deferral of their choices.

One of the main problems identified by the respondents is the remoteness of the world of work, as suggested by Ghichard (2006), a distance that was even more radical before the so-called 3+2 university reform. These young people have been pursuing a course of study without having any

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<sup>24</sup> Excerpts from the interviews are always indicated by the use of italics and inverted commas. They can also be identified in accordance with the following legend: M/F: for Male or Female; S: student; L: graduate; D: drop out; O: orientator; fc: off course; ic: Ongoing.

idea of how to achieve employability.

Their stories show the difficulty of access to incoming guidance services that could somehow bridge the information gap and reduce their sense of loss. This is consistent with the target subjects chosen. In fact, at the time of their entrance, they found a guidance system in its embryonic state (see previous §). Regardless of their choice of study or the time taken to complete it, all the respondents were oriented towards higher education from high school, and were strongly supported by their families. In some cases, the families have strongly influenced their offspring's choices, but have then had to deal with incredible hurdles in the studies that ended with an acceptance of the initially-denied choice. This shows how much a choice made in a condition of initial disorientation can impact on a personal development path. The recuperation of the original choice represents a second chance for success, a kind of redemption: "*I granted myself the opportunity of enrolling in a psychology course and despite the difficulties, I made it*" (FL.fc). We can see from this evidence all the limitations of choices which are based only on rational considerations and are incapable of dealing with more intimate matters such as the passions, vocations, impulses and value dimensions that accompany the image of the desired job and social role associated with it<sup>25</sup>.

As evidenced by the witnesses we spoke to, most of the time the planning of a university course "is the result of self-assistance", where very often a significant role is played by fellow students. This planning autonomy appears to be a double-edged sword: enhancement of free choice and subjective responsibility versus a sense of abandonment and isolation that can insinuate itself into the instability of individual pathways, making the professional goal too ephemeral.

In the experiences observed, the extension of the duration of studies is due both to the primary quest for personal autonomy which lowers efforts to study in the priority ranking, and to the coexistence of a variety of choices/life experiences which do not allow for easy conciliation and neither do they seem to represent an integral part of a personal development strategy. In a life perspective that seems to be based only on the present dimension, this multiplicity of opportunities takes on the form of an illusion that reveals itself in the long-term, resulting in a fragmented pathway at the mercy of randomness. Often, those who live experiences characterized by long, labored and less than satisfactory curricula, organize their pathways on do-it-yourself lines, omitting the dimension of comparison with the most appropriate contact figures (professors, tutors, administrators). This comparison, as indicated by Coulon (1997), appears to be extremely valuable in accessing information in the logic of weak ties theorized by Granovetter (1973), building an identity of self within the occupational area that one aspires to, and lastly for quantifying one's efforts with reference to a specific time dimension that would otherwise risk losing all points of contact with reality, as indicated by the subjects interviewed.

*"With reference to the rhythms of working life, is very important to conclude a path early in order to start along another"* (FL.fc). *Isolation can produce "a loss of rhythm because you do not have regular contact with teachers"* (FL.fc).

To this regard, a system that is "too permissive" and doesn't check the completion time of the course appears weaker because a sense of abandonment increases the risk of dropping out because a course of study which ended after the standard term is not rewarded by the world of work, even if the results were brilliant. Therefore, we risk producing subjects who are too fragile

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<sup>25</sup> With regard to choice strategies see, among others, Rivera-Simard (1996); Rudisill, Edwards (2002).

for the professional sector in question or who are deficient in that range of tacit competencies that make up the know-who and know-why of professional knowledge and can be acquired only "in the field"<sup>26</sup>. Thus, orientation counseling grants the subject a form of external support and helps him to restructure his professional ego-consciousness since he cannot do so independently, as emerges from the following testimony: "*I didn't get the chance to interact and refine my choice processes, and even today I'm very discouraged by the failure of my attempts to re-enter employment. I need support*" (FL.fc).

### ***Services and inefficiency***

One of the benefits that the University has received from the project is the possibility of launching a significant internal advertising campaign to inform staff and students about the opportunities available and raise awareness on the issue of outgoing guidance. The campaign featured posters, a wealth of instructive materials, seminars, conferences and information booths. Simultaneously, a database was organized to promote the matching of students and firms. This was an important first step in the planning /organization of an orientation information service at basic level, with the systematization of information regarding both: a) companies, which may be interested in looking for young university graduates and b) students who are seeking opportunities for job placement or internships. However, at least three critical elements that represent inefficiency in the eyes of our stakeholders can be pinpointed. This information system is considered to be:

1. "Insufficiently adherent to the requirements of the degree course" (FL.ic), presumably because the level of the Faculty is in a better position to develop strategies for development, research and professional roots in the markets of reference;
2. limited to guaranteeing the transparency of the more accessible information "with no added value given to the hidden – or “niche” - opportunities" (FL.fc). The problem is compounded by the fact that Italy is characterized by a system where employment and job-searching take place mostly informally, and is based on personal knowledge or family (Istat, 2007). From the interviews, it emerges transversally that the guidance offered “does not manage to penetrate the more informal level, where friendship and family logics come into play, and cannot penetrate the innovative sectors” (ML.fc). According to this perception, the orientation information offered is limited to systematizing and rendering transparent the less important opportunities for integration, where selection becomes more rigid because there is more competition.
3. "Barely significant" (FL.fc; ML.fc) in terms of individual counseling, in that these activities occupy very limited space and time, and are often carried out by people who are unqualified.

It should be stressed, however, that in order to guarantee "second tier" services, i.e. structures that are able to offer individual counseling pathways, agreements with other institutional actors which make up the whole framework of employment services in Italy, such as career guidance centres and Bic Innovation Centres were established. This referral to other services, however, is experienced as a fragmentation and dispersion of information and energy by the end user. It

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<sup>26</sup> For a debate on the educational value of the university internship within a framework of Faculty integration policies in relation to the professional sectors of reference, see Capogna (2009, 2010).

represents an additional burden to be borne by its already fragile shoulders, and an element of confusion in the absence of a clear personal goal. In general, it can be said that, apart from rare and limited exceptions, the university placement system is focused only on the function of providing information useful in the evaluation of the options available, but encounters difficulty in accompanying the maturation processes of choice that may also appear to be tormented. According to various interlocutors and as confirmed by other research projects, (Walther, Bechmann, Lenzi, 2004), the said orientation information might appear "not very useful if it lacks sophisticated information" (FL.fc). All this appears to be a "disservice" to young people who are not looking for "information, but rather a consultative approach and / or training, an upgrading of skills for self- direction" (FL.fc; FL.ic), as well as a protective barrier against the frustrations caused by the fragility of the current employment systems: in other words, an intimate and subjective area for growth which the traditional transmissive and notional course of studies does not permit.

### ***Orientation towards the life project: the resources provided by subjects***

The interviews revealed that subjects who are disoriented and less able to activate reflexive ability tend to use soft skills which might be defined as meta-cognitive, i.e. able to operate at a higher level, and are crucial to the self-guidance process. These skills are an essential prerequisite in elaborating the internal conversation mentioned by Archer (2003), i.e. the ability to think of oneself as an object in relation to a frame of reference. From this knowledge comes the ability to activate and manage a personal and professional life project which is established to a greater or lesser degree and is able to face up to the opportunities, risks and constraints linked to the context.

The first of these skills to come into play is the proactive approach geared at acting propositionally in a social space through a continuous action of sensemaking (Weick, 1969) aimed at designing one's own professional destiny. Moreover, "the capacities for initiative and self-direction" are two essential qualities in a system of social relations which is based less and less on hetero-normative constriction and is ever more focused on self-direction. However, proactivity is a dimension of expertise that relates more to character traits and can sometimes be inhibited by insecurity, the tendency to postpone decisions, the difficulty in managing informative stress. All of these tend to undermine the pathway to job collocation and weigh negatively on entry into working life. The range of competencies relevant to orientation "that children do not often have" (O), is also a very important resource for self-evaluation because the entire educational system is based on a prevalently transmissive and hetero-evaluational system of learning. Furthermore, analysis highlights a situation of particular risk in the absence of a time scale. The attitude of "presentification", a tendency to live for here and now without a future-oriented planning dimension (Petruccelli, Lodi, 2007), strongly penalizes the construction of a pathway and an affirmation of identity in the workplace and shows us young people leaving the education system as particularly vulnerable social actors.

"They do not take time to assess whether or not it is useful for their career path, and then they get lost" (O). What seems to confer meaning to life is the act of reaching out towards the future, ever forward for the continuous achievement of goals (Berra, 2003). Only a balance between the three different time dimensions, past-present-future, can provide sound planning. Moreover, as already evidenced by existentialist thought, time is the backbone of life. The time perspective is a fundamental dimension of self-realization (Jaspers, 1964) and an inescapable dimension of

social action, always situated in a place and a space.

The imaginative resource that helps to guide the efforts of personal and relational investments is also essential to the elaboration of a life plan. "If you don't have a dream, in the end you get lost in the confusion and fragmentation that this reform has provided. You can do everything without being able to do anything" (O). Learning to anticipate a possible and desirable future is proof of the individual's ability to diagnose, seek solutions, circumscribe limits, intercept possibilities and external aid, learn to cope with events: in other words, it can be considered a prerequisite skill in problem solving (Di Francesco, 2004; Montedoro, 2003). Young people who are able to do so demonstrate greater ability in controlling the complexity and difficulties inherent to job placement in an unfavorable economic climate; the others manifest all the personal and work-related weaknesses which expose them to the risk of entrapment within an ever less protective welfare system. The imaginative capacity targets planning a career path in the medium-to-long term, within which the opportunities or the milestones that mark progress towards achievement converge.

*"Being able to redefine the target, which could be represented by a long-term goal, is not a defeat but only a stage" (O).*

It is necessary to develop a vision of one's procedural path of professional and identity construction, aimed at achieving an ultimate goal and characterized by many intermediate stages. Our educational systems, which are based mainly on a notional type of transmission model, fail to develop such a competence. This does not mean that the choice process takes place in solitude. All the young people interviewed express a *"need to compare experiences to see if what they have in mind can be real"* (O). They express the need for "mirroring", for conducting an interactive dialogue with each other which can allow them to define their own self-image and anticipate a possible future through the use of the anticipatory or re-evocative narrative resource. Another key element in defining a personal and professional development project is the experiential dimension which allows the subject to place himself within a situation and pit himself against the practice and the context of action. Some tend to postpone this opportunity until the end of their studies, others prefer to seize it in a quest for personal autonomy, whether this be offered by occasional work not pertinent to their studies or an internship experience related to their educational choice, even though this may represent a great effort on their part. The experiential dimension (Petruccelli, Lodi, 2007) is appropriate to the recognition of the value of an action aimed at a scope, participation in a professional community, personal commitment. It favors the construction of a subject's self-image by means of interpersonal relationships and those with the artifacts / tools (Latour, 2002) that constitute the techno-social environmental context. However, it is essential for the young person to reflect on the action carried out in order to foster his knowledge of himself (even with regard to motivations) and to understand the consistency of the constraints, opportunities and areas of action necessary to achieving a personal reconstruction of experience. This experience is useful in defining one's own professional self through self-assessment (once again in a reflective way) of their skills/knowledge in practice and the recognition of others. This set of skills join together within a meta-expertise capable of acting as a vector for subjective change, reflection and a strategic component in developing skills and self-orienting a life plan. Reflection allows for a rebalancing of the plurality and fragmentation of daily experiences, and represents recovering and reinterpreting their meaning and significance in relation to the contexts and structures of action reference within an uninterrupted dialogue circuit. It is progress within a spiral process which is able to reinterpret and enhance their wealth of experience. This reflective capacity is important in

bringing out vocational willingness and guiding choices in order to address internal motivations rather than respond to external conditions.

*"It really helped me to think about it a lot, these elaborations allow me to orient myself, to express my desires and objectives and make a decision" (FL.in).*

Guidance, with particular reference to its function as individual counseling, seems to represent a privileged strategy for accompanying these reflective pathways. It is a maturation process that accompanies the subject along life's pathway, facilitating the necessary internal dialogue when this appears to be interrupted or disturbed. In this perspective, orientation information should represent only a moment of access where:

*"The person begins to take action, starts asking, starts thinking about what his interests are, what his motives could be. Orientation is needed if the person begins to wonder, if he begins to reflect on his motivations, his resources and starts setting goals "(O).*

However, the mere information phase is not sufficient in covering all these opportunities, and, though very important, it does not respond to the complexity that characterizes the current educational/training and labor systems. Guidance provides information for "activating the curiosity that stimulates internal motivation" but the consulting dimension of guidance undoubtedly possesses the value "of external comparison" and acts as a reinforcement or correction in building a professional identity. This requires a professional counseling capacity that cannot be left to professors armed only with goodwill.

All the respondents state the importance of developing alongside merely informative orientation also counseling aimed at enhancing the potential and talents and promoting the empowerment of individuals, so that they can develop *"self- guidance skills and a broad view of the labor market"* (ML.fc) as well as the "ability to compete over time". The projection of goals over time allows one to spread the weight of failure, move forward and look at the objective in a more complex process where not only the ability of the subject counts, but the action is interpreted in the context of an arena where other actors and situations compete, and different strategies can be activated according to personal choices.

While recognizing the importance of the changes under way - changes that in the last five years have enabled universities to establish a very articulated system of outgoing guidance - and also that of the contribution made by the Fixo project to the field of orientation towards transition, it would seem useful to focus on problem areas that still remain within the University, with particular reference to observed reality, and which may become a stimulus for the improvement of services and tools to support the young in transition. In fact, all the respondents recognize the need to plan this activity even better by providing a guidance system that can accompany the student throughout his degree course, not only with regard to his profile of studies but also the professional markets of reference. Recognition of the value of university orientation, coupled with the allocation of the appropriate resources and skills necessary in managing all three phases of orientation could represent the most favorable outcome, thus specializing tools and techniques, differentiating the services offered according to their specific targets and developing second-level orientation strategies. In fact, an orientation service can be considered formative and instructive, independently of the type of recipients it serves, when it is an event that puts the person in the position of reflecting on his professional life in order to understand his past, his strengths and weaknesses, activating in him a planning capacity that allows him to anticipate the future and build a personal and professional life project. As maintained by Gardner (2005), a choice is never an instantaneous brainwave, but the result of continuous interaction with one's

own context and the outcome of the interpersonal influence processes that cross all of our paths through life.

### The subjectivity in the approach to transition

Focusing on the subjective dimension in the approach to transition, the importance of: a) having a project to be developed, and b) dominating the time axis to some extent, emerge strongly in all of the interviews. By analyzing the two dimensions, each articulated in two modes (well determined/indetermined project; long/short temporality), we can distinguish the following four categories compared with the ideal and desirable way of dealing with the problem of transition in its subjective dimension.

<b>Life Project</b>			
Time dimension	Indeterminate	Well-determined	
Short temporality	4 Absence of vision Transition as destiny	2 Limited vision Transition as performance	+
Long temporality	3 Indistinct vision Transition as discontinuity	1 Ample vision Transition as "arena"	

**Figure 1 - The subjective guidelines for transition**

### Transition as arena: ample vision and well-defined project

In the lower right quadrant, where both positive signs cross, we find the best situation for the young man who possesses a very strong life plan and a long-term time horizon within which to self-evaluate his career. The young man who is in this situation is certainly characterized by a very advanced maturing process and strong self-guidance and self-evaluation skills. That is, he displays a highly-developed meta-reflective competence that allows him to go in search of the most appropriate strategies for integration, together with the ability to interpret his own individual and professional environment references in their complexity. In this case, we can say that the subject is guided by a "broad view" of the transition process and can interpret it as an arena where he is faced with diverse subjects and situations. The transition process is not an individual matter, but is part of a complex system of expectations, with consolidated information, aspirations, clear interests and fairly straightforward processes. It may be that this kind of vision could also help in reconciling him to failure, which is no longer seen exclusively as a personal lack of success but can be interpreted as one of the possible outcomes within the different arenas in which we act. The subject is able to recognize the chances in life, that is, the opportunities offered by the wider social environment and institutions, and make an informed choice in order to achieve his personal objectives, as evidenced in the following testimony:

*"I was very much oriented towards human resources, it was just a coincidence that I ended up in*

*placement, but one way or another I'm in human resources. It's exactly what I wanted, I don't regret having followed this direction at all, so much so that I did it without any difficulty and with good results. At first, I considered trade unions, an idea that grew out of personal interest. Then careful evaluation of the situation ,including the labor market, made me fall back on placement - it should be an area that will take off in Italy, sooner or later "(ML.fc).*

### **Transition as performance: tunnel vision and specific project.**

Moving to the upper right quadrant, we can see the intersection relative to a well-defined training project, that is, characterized by clear career goals, but with a short time perspective. Although there are ambitions for self-realization, these subjects meet difficulties in realizing their objectives within a defined time frame. There is a risk of "presentifying" actions, including a tendency to formulate goals that are too ambitious in comparison with the steps taken to achieve them, or the postponement of important decisions. They experience difficulty in planning their own personal and professional time. In this case, the subjects have a "narrow view" of the transition path and because of this can manifest a tendency towards rigidity, as this process is experienced as a personal matter and every failure can be considered a personal failure that threatens self-esteem and future planning.

*"I remember the case of an electrical engineer who couldn't find work. He had taken 12 years to graduate, he didn't want to, but had done it for his parents. He found work as a programmer. He was convinced that with his engineering degree, he would have worked as an engineer immediately, even after 14 years. Instead, he found work as a programmer. If he had continued to look for work as an engineer, he would never have found it - he had to redefine his purpose, which is not a defeat. But you must work on that "(O).*

### **Transition as discontinuity: long-term vision and indeterminate project**

In the lower-left quadrant a long-term time perspective and an indeterminate life project converge. In this case, the subject has "blurred vision", and is unable to define a clear career goal, setting priorities and strategies for action, while demonstrating diverse interests. There is a tendency to procrastinate or to change course choices easily in the absence of a real capacity for facing up to concrete goals and the temporal dimension. In this case, transition represents a discontinuous and fragmented process. The subject appears fragile and uncertain, in other words at the mercy of events, forced into an eternal present, incapable of relating to the future and making relative choices. He wanders through different experiences in the absence of a clear developmental line, so that it is an effort to try to pinpoint the crucial issues in his personal biographical history. This viscosity of his pathways can take the form of emotional stress, burdening him with insecurity and a deep sense of frustration<sup>27</sup>.

*"At first I did not have a clear idea of what I would do with this degree course, I wasted so much time preparing for exams that I could have done in much less. I tried to reconcile my interests a bit, but I never had a clear idea of what I would have done. I encountered the guidance services even after I had graduated, when I realized that I didn't know where to turn. And now I'm confused, I don't know what to do. I've suffered this loss, even having lost sight of what was once*

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps it is a condition in which it is most obvious waste of talent (Collins, 1971) of those who fail to recognition of its quality because they are unable to pursue self-positioning strategies in the world of work.

*the future direction of my career, and I think everything has got on top of me, I'm still confused"* (FL.fc).

In such a case, it can be easy to fall into paths of downward mobility or situations of entrapment, even in the presence of a good social position of the family of origin.

### **Transition as fate: the absence of vision and project**

In the box on the upper left we find the worst situation of entrapment, with a permanent life plan and a short time perspective. There is "no vision" of the future and the necessary reflective and imaginative skills seem totally absent. In this case, transition represents a strongly-determined process which impacts with the full force of destiny, and an attitude of passivity and lack of self-awareness prevail. The subject risks being subdued by events and not being able to control his own choices or the process of constructing his pathway through life. In these circumstances, the compulsion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1970) may manifest itself in all its importance, forcing the subject to focus constantly on his defeats in a vicious circle caused by lack of awareness, limited resources and heteronomy. The confusion of ideas and the absence of reference to a clear picture of reality is clearly expressed by this witness, a young woman who failed to complete her studies:

*"I did different jobs: I worked as a hairdresser, a shop assistant, a secretary in a real estate office. Now I'm doing an internship in a hotel, but I find it too hard, I have some health problems, I don't think I'll continue with it. I should look for other opportunities, but I'm not sure which. Maybe an idea would be to open a small business with someone I trust"* (FD).

We can imagine that the career strategies (Colling and Young, 2000; Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1996) activated by the subjects are very different, and therefore respond to different strategies of action. In all cases, the complexity of these processes of transition allows us to glimpse the weight of the so-called "YoYo Transition" (Walther, 2004) which characterizes modern Western societies, very often creating real biographical dilemmas. Guidance, therefore, offers help in coping with these dilemmas. These four subjective transition guidelines highlight many possible target subjects for guidance. It is therefore conceivable that the request for guidance and the related approaches / tools to be prepared for the response might be very different according to the real demand expressed.

The emerging vision may change in the course of a life, depending on the personal maturing process and may require different approaches and tools to cover a range of information, training and/or consulting guidance needs. The information dimension appears to be sufficient for those who are able to express an ample vision of the transition - which can encounter difficult measurement processes and delicate moments of personal growth (Googman, Schlossberg, Andersen, 2005) - independently. Those who express a narrow view require intervention to help them project their objectives over time and within a precise framework of reality, as they often lack competence in self-assessment and analysis of the external environment as well as the process. Subjects who manifest a blurred, long-term vision need to learn to compete with objectives and priorities in order to build a bridge to the future and avoid the risk of "presentifying". They need to learn how to evaluate themselves according to the results achieved. Where transition is experienced as the fulfillment of a pre-ordained destiny, the educative action of orientation becomes necessary, not in substitution of counselling services, but rather as their completion, aimed at developing an imaginative and anticipatory resource in order to grant support to choice and the enhancement of metacognitive skills. In this context, orientation represents a continuous process with the potential to develop reflectiveness in people,

a space and a place in which to hold in check and accompany the tension experienced by individuals who are facing up to the laborious process of subjectification (Touraine, 1998) that prevails in post-modern societies in the absence of an ethical and legal framework that obliges the person to take part in a constant process of construction and reconstruction of identity.

### **Conclusions**

As we have sought to show, guidance services in Italy appear to be greatly fragmented. Despite the existence of peaks of excellence, the quality and variety of services in this area is also very heterogeneous due to the absence of a well-defined regulatory framework. In particular, although there are some exceptions, the organization of specific career services within the university is fairly recent, and thanks to the Fixo project has involved outgoing students.

To better meet the standards of an orientation service in the current sense of the term, this nascent system should now face up to the challenge of moving beyond the traditional model of precise and direct adaptive guidance based solely on the information function. It should favor a proactive, continuous and vocational approach by providing second-level guidance aimed at giving priority to the training and advisory function. This represents an area of personal growth in which the subject may find an opportunity to ponder his limits and opportunities/resources, and reflect on the meanings assigned to work and the choices that guide him in this regard. We can observe the importance of maturity in guidance, that is, the ability to master change in a responsible and flexible way in order to negotiate transitions independently, addressing the risks associated with choice and the anxieties arising from error and uncertainty. The focus on individualisation that characterizes our society places the subject more and more in the midst of "located" decision-making problems, which refer to a will to make decisions there and then, at all costs, without always being able to predict the outcome, in that the choice of sites/locations/levels of education becomes increasingly self-centered, experimental, intermittent and reversible, hence the need to develop the aforementioned reflective potential. In a context marked by an increasing reduction in the spaces dedicated to rationality, with a corresponding increase in the degree of uncertainty, the subject is facing an ever-larger share of "ignorance" with regard to the choices made (AA.VV., 2003). This means that the choice of routes to self-fulfilment always incorporates a certain amount of "non-logical" (Pareto, 1916) or rather extra-rationality, based not on the sole criteria of economic utility (which in some cases even prove counterproductive, as in the case of adaptation to endogenous pressures), but on matters of transfer / recognition of meaning and / or guided by ideas and values. Neither can we forget the emotional and affective dimension which can guide many of the choices we make in our daily lives (Maffessoli, 1989), those on which we base the construction of our self-identity pathway. Within this "short circuit", reflectiveness has the advantage of being able to activate the set of emotional and imaginative resources that can compensate, albeit partially, for limitations of choice based on a limited and increasingly multidimensional rationality (Simon, 1982). As Alexander points out, "the logic of rationality does not lie in foreign elements external to the subject, but essentially in the experience accumulated by the plaintiff and the voluntary component that is inherent in it (Cocozza, 2005:140). The voluntary and reflective perspective of social action referred to here takes into account both the rational dimension aimed at the scope, and the extra-rational legislative one guided by ethical choices, values and ideals, but also the affective-emotional dimension through which we familiarize with the world around us and build

social relationships (Hoshschild, 1975).

However orientation can be considered a fundamental policy for life-long learning in each of the four types analyzed (Watts, Sultana, 2004). Then, the orientation acts differently in each of the four subjective expressions to activate different resources. In individuals who express maturity orientation can act as increase in awareness, helping people to recognize and learn from their mistakes. For those who express a rigid and limited view, orientation can support a transformation towards a better flexibility and adaptability to environments and situations. For those who are trapped in the viscosity of their perspective, the orientation can stimulate processes of clarification. Finally, for those who express a state of passivity, orientation can promote responsibility and taking care of their destiny. In all cases, these are empowerment measures implemented on the basis of recognition of diversity underlies to every implicit help request by subjects. In this sense, orientation can be understood as a means of promoting a new vision of social justice (Irving, Malik, 2004) within an idea of welfare which tends to transcend a purely assistance-based logic (Watts, 2008).

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