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**Promoting the Acquisition of Competences certified through Micro-credentials for the Integration of Adult Migrants: The Proposal of the European Project PRISCILA<sup>1</sup>**

**Promuovere l'acquisizione di competenze certificate attraverso micro-credenziali per l'integrazione dei migranti adulti: la proposta del progetto europeo PRISCILA**

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ABSTRACT

*European research reveals that migrants' basic citizenship educational rights are disrespected, despite the declared attempt to recognize their former qualifications or to give*

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*them access to education and training opportunities. This paper presents rationale and methodology of the capacity building project PRISCILA, that aims to implement and recognize through European micro-credentials training paths on Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn; Intercultural Awareness; and Citizenship Competences. The dissemination materials of this integrated method should enhance migrants' adult trainers' reflective way of thinking ensuring that migrants' learning needs are effectively addressed and based on their personal, relational and contextual needs. In fact, enhancing their full participation in civic life and Lifelong Learning implies their active involvement in the definition of their needs.*

**Keywords:** adult education, migrants, integration, equity, micro-credentials.

#### RIASSUNTO

*Le ricerche europee rivelano che i fondamentali diritti di cittadinanza dei migranti in tema di educazione non sono rispettati, nonostante il dichiarato tentativo di riconoscerne le qualifiche precedentemente acquisite o farli accedere a ulteriori opportunità di istruzione e formazione. Questo contributo presenta il progetto PRISCILA, che mira a promuovere e certificare tramite micro-credenziali europee percorsi formativi volti all'acquisizione di: competenza personale, sociale e imparare ad imparare; consapevolezza interculturale e competenze di cittadinanza. I materiali di disseminazione di questo metodo integrato sono pensati per promuovere nei formatori di migranti adulti un'attitudine riflessiva che riconosca le esigenze di apprendimento dei migranti e si basi sui loro bisogni personali, relazionali e contestuali. Promuoverne la piena partecipazione alla vita civica e al lifelong learning implica infatti il loro coinvolgimento attivo nella definizione dei loro bisogni.*

**Parole chiave:** educazione degli adulti, migrant, integrazione, equità, micro-credenziali.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The rapid demographic changes, together with the international turmoil (war, forced displacement, climate change, persecution, etc.) and polarizing media discourses, generate multidimensional levels of social tension and trauma deeply affect the well-being of both adult migrant learners and host communities. Addressing this growing social complexity implies the adoption of equally complex pedagogical approaches to simultaneously deal with the often precarious personal, relational and contextual needs of adult migrant learners threatening their competence development and full participation in civic life and Lifelong Learning.

This paper presents rationale and methodology of the capacity building project PRISCILA, "Fostering Personal, Intercultural, Social, and Citizenship Competences for Lifelong Learning to Empower Adult Migrant Learners", which involves 6 partners in 4 different countries and

an international organization: La Xixa (coordinator) and ACATHI from Spain, Hasat from Turkey, the Department of Education Studies of the University of Bologna and APS Cantieri Meticci from Italy, Volkshochschule – Cham from Germany and the European Association for the Education of Adults, based in Brussels.

Grounding on four creativity-based methodologies - Theatre of the Oppressed, Spatial Assemblage, Deep Democracy, and Critical Incident - the project aims to implement its own method to promote three of the eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning that are key to enhance individual development and access either further training paths or the labor market: Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn; Intercultural Awareness; and Citizenship. The training paths go hand in hand with reflection on and development of learning recognition through European micro-credentials certificates for the three above mentioned competences (European Commission, 2019).

The outcomes of this project are intended to empower adult migrants enhancing their inclusion and integration process in the host countries and to equip adult migrant trainers with competences and sensitivity to cope with the many challenging learning situations affecting this target group (see 3.1, p. 5). The paper is structured as follows: the first section illustrates how migrants' basic citizenship educational rights are disrespected in the EU member-states, despite the formal attempt of recognizing their former qualifications or to make them access to education or training opportunities. The second section presents objectives guiding the method's implementation and, subsequently, the process leading to the issue of micro-credentials. The third section proposes some concluding remarks and recommendations for implementing and recognizing empowering learning paths for migrants and trainings for adult migrant educators to reflectively shape the support provided, thereby ensuring that learning paths effectively address the needs of target groups.

#### 1. THE CHALLENGE OF AN INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE EUROPEAN RECOGNITION OF MIGRANTS' SKILLS

The European Commission (2020a) considers integration as a process leading to active participation on equal terms in all areas of society: economic, social, cultural and political; both a right and a duty for everyone living in the European society. In this vision, education is not only an important means to reach these goals, but a fundamental right. However, providing everyone with equal opportunities to enjoy their rights and participate in all areas of society, as stated in relevant treaties (European Union, 2012a; 2012b) and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Union, 2012c) is still far from reality.

Adult migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers represent particularly vulnerable groups for what concerns the access to education in the host countries and the recognition of their previous qualification. These two problems are often interrelated and risk becoming a vicious cycle, hindering their economic, social, cultural, and political participation. To counteract this trend, the European Commission's *Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027* (2020a) invites the Member States to strengthening their policies of migrants' skills recognition, stressing that there is an urgent need to facilitate the recognition of qualifications acquired in third countries, to promote their visibility and increase their comparability with EU

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qualifications, also offering preparatory courses to help migrants to complete the education acquired abroad. The aim of the plan is to set in motion a faster and more equitable integration of migrants, enabling them to fully use their skills and abilities. The recognition of skills and qualifications should also help migrants to continue their studies in the host country, thereby increasing their level of participation in higher education and Lifelong Learning.

Nowadays, policy guidelines at both the European and national levels attribute crucial importance to an updated skills certification system. This is confirmed through the main provisions that both European and national institutions have adopted to address the main challenges on the social, cultural, labor, education, and training level (Di Rienzo, 2018). Despite this formalized effort, only a few migrants succeed in using their resources at the best in terms of experience and learning. In fact, national education systems are traditionally based on predictability, linearity and continuity and do not acknowledge at the outset the often-fractured educational trajectory of adult migrants, building specific targeted opportunity and support into the system.

In the EU Member States, there is a growing population of newly arrived adult migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who are unable to access vocational training and job placement paths that value their individual skills. This ends up in reproducing automatic mechanisms that are not targeted on their effective training and cultural demands, their subjective migration project, skills, and prior learning, since the focus of reception pathways is focused on primary and standardized needs. What emerges is the “contemporary tension between the global promise of these rights [to education] and their limited realization within nation-states” (Dryden-Peterson 2016, p. 475).

These forms of exclusion from basic citizenship educational rights could be counteracted through training actions and training recognition that shed light on - and certify their formal, nonformal and informal learning experience - gathered over time from their personal, social, and cultural influences. However, as testified by international research, a racialised skills regime has emerged that supports individuals who conform to the host country's norms and workplace cultures (Guo, 2015). Lodigiani & Sarli (2017) also stress that practices and tools that are used for the recognition of prior learning are still built on a "Western" educational and vocational system that are influenced by race and global hierarchies in knowledge production (Guo, 2015). Therefore, this process often neglects the multiple social contexts and complexity of subjective experiences that are crucial to an individual's overall understanding of competence (Diedrich *et al.*, 2011). In so far, the recognition depends on the standards and criteria of the host country determining local notions of professionalism and expertise and not on individual skills or knowledge (Diedrich, 2017). Furthermore, it regards skills and qualifications that are contingently needed in the national labor market (Werquin, 2014). Therefore, the process implies a statement about who is desirable as a citizen and who is not: migrants are treated as economic goods and are selected according to their usefulness for the labor market. This creates a system of exclusion (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Diedrich *et al.*, 2011) and reinforces existing power relations.

Reflecting on human mobility in the 21st century, Bauman (2017) stated that it embraces different facets and the worst of them are nurtured by never known before levels of social

inequality and injustice in the world without borders. In this vein, Moss (2014) affirms that issues such as inequity, devaluing, inaccessibility, and unfairness are also inherent to the recognition of adult migrants' prior learning and access to individually meaningful training opportunity. As a result, much of the adult migrants' potential remains unexplored and hidden and their training needs are either not made explicit or not considered.

Despite the evident shortcomings of the existing skills certification system, some scholars have detected some possible encouraging effect on involving migrants in the process of recognition of their prior learning experiences and highlighted positive outcomes for their self-esteem (Albert *et al.*, 2013; Brown & Moss, 2018; Clayton, 2005; Laudenbach & Lis, 2019). Laudenbach and Lis (2019) stress how after a positive experience of this process, participants have shown a higher confidence in their qualifications and skills. Brown and Moss (2018) go further affirming that a by-product of the process of recognition of acquired competences results in a significant potential for transformative learning. However, even if there is evidence that these processes motivate participants, making them proud of their achievements, their effective value for integrating adult migrants into the labor market and society has not been sufficiently proved (Diedrich & Styhre, 2013). Even if their prior experiences are recognized, their skills go unseen and unrecognized as they are often denigrated due to the systemic limitations of the labor market and the negative social ascription affecting them as migrants (Andersson & Osman, 2008).

## 2. THE RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE PRISCILA PROJECT: FROM LEARNING TO RECOGNITION

### 2.1 Objectives

The Erasmus+ PRISCILA funded project “Fostering Personal, Intercultural, Social and Citizenship Competences for Lifelong Learning to Empower Adult Migrant Learners” has a twofold objective.

First, it aims to propose an innovative method to promote three of the eight key competences for Lifelong Learning, namely Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn; Intercultural Awareness; and Citizenship. These are fundamental for individual development as they influence both the cognitive and behavioral way in which individuals navigate complex and dynamic systems (European Commission, 2020b; Luppi *et al.*, 2024), enhancing their agency and adaptability; therefore, promoting their coping strategies for diverse challenges (OECD, 2021). As a basic entry training, the acquisition (and recognition) of these competences should equip learners with better possibilities to succeed at the rest of the key competences, such as literacy and digital competence. Moreover, they do not only cultivate professional discernment but can also enhance those emotional, social and behavioral attitudes that are necessary for a meaningful participation in diverse communities. They result particularly useful in case of vulnerable learner groups affected by one or more of the following characteristics, acting as significant barriers to Lifelong Learning: newcomers, low-skilled adults, groups with low or mixed language proficiency, groups facing difficulties or having experienced traumatic

situations (displacement, discrimination, violence, etc.) and groups experiencing social tensions or high levels of polarization.

The second goal is to develop a feasible and portable way of learning recognition through micro-credential to increase their up-skilling opportunities. This initiative aims to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning and aligns with broader European goals of enhancing employability, supporting Lifelong Learning, and fostering social inclusion by creating a flexible, inclusive, and transparent credentialing system (Cedefop, 2022). As mentioned before, this is particularly relevant for these target groups who often arrive empty-handed regarding training certifications from home but are required to present proof of skills to have access to administrative procedures, employment, and further training. Flexibility, adaptability, satisfaction and motivation for everyone are the guiding lights of PRISCILA's learning process.

As a necessary precondition for the achievement of these two goals, PRISCILA had to develop resources, piloted and tested during the project, to improve competences and sensitivities of educators and support staff in adult education on the needs of adult migrant, refugee and asylum seeker learners for the acquisition and recognition of those three key competences. Reports on the pilot trainings, adult trainer handbook, quality and recognition guide have been produced to provide them with viable and user-friendly tools to cope with challenging learning situations affecting the target group (lack of social network, traumatic experiences, lack of basic communication skills, conflict resolution, etc.).

## 2.2 Methodological approach to pilot training

With the aim of developing a meaningful and respectful training path, the project has been based on an *inclusive* (adapted to learner needs), *comprehensive* (multidimensional and complexity-based learning) and *participant-centered* (learner-led process) methodological approach (Bremner *et al.*, 2022; El Galad *et al.*, 2024). This approach falls within the domain of non-formal learning. Due to its inherent characteristics, non-formal learning provides an ideal framework for implementing the PRISCILA method: on one hand, it reaches individuals who are underserved by formal education systems, and on the other, it actively fosters social inclusion by specifically engaging marginalized learners (McCoshan *et al.*, 2020). Differently from formal learning, non-formal learning encompasses a broader spectrum of activities: it places reduced emphasis on cognitive performance (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2013), fostering instead a more balanced approach to the intellectual, emotional, social, and behavioral dimensions of learning (Mlynarczluk-Sokolowska, 2022). Previous research has proven that non-formal learning methodologies are adequate for coping with the learning needs of adult migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2020). As they adopt both a flexible modular arrangements and choice of content, they could be tailored to learners' needs and interests, creating inclusive learning environments, and cultivating holistically the affective, cognitive, and social aspect of learning (Badger, 2021). Moreover, non-formal learning can promote learners' participation in group activities with symmetric interactions between learners and adult educators (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2013) reducing the power



imbalance that migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers experience in their daily life and increasing their agency.

PRISCILA pilot training brings together four different creativity-based learning methodologies: Theatre of the Oppressed, Spatial Assemblage, Deep Democracy, and Critical Incident. In line with the objectives of the project and characteristics of non-formal learning, these methodologies are characterized by a flexibility, experiential and participatory approach (Almeida & Morais, 2024). Such a choice responds to the need of fostering creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability, that are essential skills in a rapidly changing world (Coelho & Martins, 2022; Lamri & Lubart, 2023). Moreover, participatory arts have proven to be effective in non-formal learning “as a way of contributing to community ownership, inclusive critical analysis, coalition, and resilience” (Butterwick & Selman, 2020, p. 35).

PRISCILA is grounded in the conviction that art may promote greater mutual understanding and constructive conversations on polarizing topics, such as migration and asylum, by transferring them from an immediate political to an aesthetic space. Furthermore, targeted interventions using theatre, or art exhibitions that combine images and stories “can enliven adult learning, promote risk taking and empathy for others, and move toward relations of solidarity” (Butterwick & Roy, 2018, p. 3), counteracting negative stereotypes and prejudices by questioning assumptions and stimulating alternative ways of thinking about a particular topic.

This makes the PRISCILA training method ideal to provide adult migrant, asylum seeker and refugee learners with enhanced basic competences for learning, enhanced social networks facilitating to overcome barriers to learning, enhanced sense of agency to impact on their own learning path and learning contexts.

### *2.3 Methodological approach to the issuance of micro-credentials*

In line with the broader European goal of enhancing employability, supporting Lifelong Learning, and fostering social inclusion by creating a flexible, inclusive, and transparent credentialing system (Cedefop, 2022), the second goal PRISCILA is to issue micro-credentials to validate the skills acquired by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers participating in the training.

In doing this, one of the main challenges lies in the ambiguous definition of micro-credentials. While they represent a rapidly expanding approach to recognizing shorter learning opportunities across Europe and globally, there is still no universally agreed terminology or standardized framework to define and manage them. This lack of a common definition complicates the evaluation and comparison of micro-credentials for both organizations and learners (Cathrael Kazin & Clerkin, 2018; Varadarajan *et al.*, 2023).

The Council of European Union (2022) has recommended the Member States to adopt a European approach to micro-credentials. For the purposes of this Recommendation, it has proposed the following definition:

“Micro-credential” means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against

transparent and clearly defined standards [...] Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity” (Council of the European Union, 2022/C 243/02, 5a).

However, a fully operative European system is still missing and, in this absence, PRISCILA project acts as a pilot initiative, shading light on the many challenges and opportunities of implementing a micro-credentials system within non-formal adult migrants' education.

To operationalize the development of feasible and effective solutions in line with the Council Recommendation, it has been first necessary to identify the needs and specific characteristics of the partners of the PRISCILA consortium and their target groups. Under the lead of EAEA (*European Association for the Education of Adults*), a joint analysis was carried out to choose the most suitable model of micro-credential fitting for the recognition of the PRISCILA trainings.

Existing approaches and tools have been analysed while considering the project's objectives, the learners' needs, and the nature of the organizations participating in the project (civil society organizations and/or non-formal adult education providers). Specifically, three main aspects have been considered: partners' and participants' access to micro-credential issuing system (in technical, administrative, and personal terms), effort and costs required by the partners (both within the project context and in the long term), and the sustainability of the system in the long run (in terms of financial and technical capacity of the partners and the availability and reliability of the tools). This second preparatory phase was crucial for outlining the necessary conditions to ensure that the newly conceived PRISCILA micro-credential system would have been both feasible and sustainable over time.

Eventually the European Digital Credentials for learning (EDC) and European Learning Model (ELM) were chosen as guidelines for the process of building and issuing the micro-credentials. These tools do not only ensure standardized and verifiable credentials but also enhance cross-border interoperability, facilitating the mobility of learners and workers across the European Union (European Commission, 2022).

The EDC is a free infrastructure developed by the European Commission to provide standardized, tamper-proof, electronic documents that certify skills acquired in formal, non-formal, or informal contexts. This system meets the requirements set by the EU Council Recommendation (European Council, 2022) for an ideal micro-credential, which must be verifiable, accessible, and available to all participants to enhance transparency and trust in the skill recognition system (EQAVET, 2009). Therefore, to make PRISCILA micro-credentials comprehensive and comparable, all the essential information (participant's identification, title of the micro-credential, issuing organization, issuance date, description of learning activity, workload, learning outcomes, type of assessment, and participation in the activity) is included in them to enable effective skills' recognition at the European level (European Council, 2022).

Addressing potential obstacles in accessing the EDC technology, the project identified a few alternative solutions. For instance, organizations lacking the technical, administrative, or financial capacity to use the EDC infrastructure can act as “awarding organizations”, still enabling the issuance of credentials according to the PRISCILA model. Additionally, for



participants who face administrative or personal challenges in accessing the Europass service (part of the EDC), credentials can be provided in PDF or paper format. This approach aligns with the equity principle underpinning the European micro-credential framework, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their socio-economic or technical constraints, have equal access to skills recognition and validation (Council of the European Union, 2022).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The PRISCILA method from learning to recognition develops a basic entry training for adult migrant, asylum seeker and refugee learners. Designed to be flexible and inclusive in terms of types of learning opportunity, processes, times, spaces, and methods, this approach aims to facilitate their integration into the labor market and the host society. Its short learning paths adapt well to promote precise and delimited modules, tailored to their specific educational needs and addressing barriers to skill acquisition (lack of money, time, unknown language, etc.). The method has been developed by positioning migrants' goals and aspirations for dignified and self-sufficient lives at the starting point and then reflecting on what structures and support are needed to fulfill them. It focuses on individual desiderata and on how adult educators might respond to their needs, rather than expecting learners to adapt to the existing system. From a Lifelong Learning perspective, this implies considering what migrants need to be active participants in society, and then working back to reflect on how Lifelong Learning should be reconsidered to fulfill this need (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). In fact, truly emancipatory learning opportunities can be provided only if Lifelong Learning adopts an empowering approach acting as a bridge between the life interrupted by the migratory experience and future aspirations for emancipation and social participation (Morrice, 2021). This requires moving away from a top-down, policy-driven approach to an inclusive, horizontal form of Lifelong Learning. In this regard, the additional value of PRISCILA lies in fostering competences that can support the individual throughout the integration process, thus providing them with essential resources for the necessary redesign of their personal and professional identity, ensuring their broader and successful community participation.

From a pedagogical point of view, PRISCILA emphasizes the importance of equipping anyone dealing with the complexities of migration and integration contexts - especially adult educators working with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers - with a reflective way of thinking. This should enable them to critically examine their own values, experiences, and prejudices, taking a distance from - and revaluing preexisting convictions to intercept what needs to be changed or improved. Through reflexivity, adults' trainers can realize that diversity needs to be addressed in an intersectional perspective paying attention to cultural diversity, body, gender, age, sexuality, health, socioeconomic and family situation, among other areas to fully understand the impact of education on learners' integration and well-being.

From an operational point, by implementing a tailored micro-credential system, PRISCILA does not only address the immediate needs of recognized learning paths for adult migrant learners, but it also contributes to disseminating good practice for the wider adoption of micro-credentials in non-formal education across Europe. To this aim, trainers working in the

organizations participating in the project have been trained to adopt and apply this methodology in their own practice. In the following dissemination phase, all the materials tested in the project will provide a wider audience of adult trainers with a comprehensive guidance to test step by step this approach in their daily activity with migrants: from the administration of assessment tools to the selection of appropriate activities, addressing potential challenges, and certifying competences' achievement through micro-credentials.

Although still a developing process, the PRISCILA project aims to pave the way for a training and skills recognition system that places the individual at the center, fostering a learning environment that values diversity, participation, and shared experiences. Its dual focus on learners and trainers makes PRISCILA both a system for validating individual skills and a trainer toolbox to be adopted on a broader scale to enhance those emotional, social, and behavioral attitudes that are necessary for a meaningful participation in diverse communities.

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