

Conceptions and Strategies for User Integration across Refugee Services in Italy

Marco Catarci

*Università degli Studi «Roma Tre», Dipartimento di Studi dei Processi Formativi,
Culturali e Interculturali nella Società Contemporanea*

catarci@uniroma3.it

RAPPRESENTAZIONI E STRATEGIE PER L'INTEGRAZIONE DEGLI UTENTI NEI SERVIZI PER RIFUGIATI IN ITALIA

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on quantitative research on refugee services undertaken throughout Italy via the national «System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees». Research data show that refugee service coordinators consider user integration to be strictly related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills by both refugees and the native population. In order to promote user integration, refugee services use various types of networks in conjunction with local stakeholders. These change according to geographical location: for instance, in northeast Italy, services set up more collaborations with continuing education, private education and temporary work agencies. Although more than half of all service coordinators, particularly those with either very little or a great deal of work experience, judge the instruments at their disposal to be inadequate for promoting user integration, services with broad local networks, with coordinators utilising continuing education opportunities provided by the «Central Services» office and in which discussion with colleagues of other refugee services is carried out, have found them to be adequate. Research findings highlight the need to promote further awareness of the refugee service mission and aims among local stakeholders, and to consider the possible involvement of experienced service operators in planning and organising continuing education activities for service operators.

Keywords: Continuing education, Education, Education needs, Integration, Refugee.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are 44 million people worldwide who have been forced to leave their country of origin due to persecution, war, or violation of human rights (UNHCR, 2011, p. 5). According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who «owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country» (United Nations, 1951). An asylum-seeker, by comparison, is someone who is waiting for an evaluation of his or her claim by the country of asylum. Moreover, the terms «international protection seeker» and «holder» are also used to include all people forced to leave their country, even when not legally recognised as refugees, if they would be at risk of persecution in the event of repatriation (European Migration Network, 2011, p. 139).

Whilst an economic migrant chooses to move in order to improve his or her life prospects, a refugee is forced to move, without being able to prepare for travel, and after experiencing traumatic events (persecutions, loss of economic and social resources, unsafe travel, uncertainties of future).

In Italy there are 60,000 international protection holders (UNHCR, 2010, p. 58). Many of them belong to «vulnerable» categories: unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities, people requiring in-home personal or health specialist and long-term care, old people and victims of torture or violence.

In analysing the integration of refugees, the *European Council on Refugees and Exiles* (ECRE) points out a dynamic «two-way process», which places demands on both individuals and the communities concerned, and the receiving societies. From a refugee's perspective, it requires the ability to adapt to the host society whilst maintaining own cultural identity. For the host society, a willingness to adapt public institutions to changes in the population profile is required, as well as an acceptance of refugees as part of the national community, and action to promote intercultural relations. Moreover, integration is a «long-term» process, because it often starts at the time of arrival in a country and continues even when a refugee has become an active member of that society from a legal, social, economic, educational and cultural perspective, even beyond first generation refugees. Finally, it is a «multi-dimensional» process, relating both to the conditions for and actual participation in all aspects of the economic, social, cultural, civil and political life of the country of asylum (ECRE, 2005, p. 14).

Research shows that, despite commonly elevated levels of qualifications and skills, unemployment and underemployment among refugees remains high in western societies: skills audits carried out in several countries con-

firmed that many refugees have valuable skills and experience which could benefit western societies (Kirk, 2004; Smyth, Stewart, & Da Lomba, 2010). Research has highlighted the fact that integration of refugees requires an effective match between previous personal skills, abilities, qualifications, experiences, interests and aspirations, and features of the new society and, above all, of its job market (Campani, Schlenzka, Sommo, & Wadia, 2004; Threagold & Court, 2005). Lifelong learning is noted as a key strategy in providing opportunities for social inclusion for refugees, allowing activation of individual resources and personalisation of integration paths. Furthermore, research also shows that, to become effective and competent members of a society, refugees must acquire not only professional and language skills through formal learning, but also «soft skills»: developing cultural understanding and knowledge of the rules of social engagement through informal and non-formal learning (Morrice, 2007, p. 159). In Italy, since 2002, on the basis of the previous experience of non-profit organisations, and by reason of Law No. 189/2002, asylum seekers and refugees are housed throughout the country in the local services of the national *System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees* (SPRAR): in 2010 this system housed 6,855 people. Involving public and private levels of government (Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Association of Italian Municipalities, local and provincial authorities and non-profit organisations) and promoting networks with local stakeholders (hospitals and health services, public employment services, vocational training and continuing education agencies, etc.), each service in the system provides its users with, for a period of about six months, «integrated reception» activities, including not only board and lodging, but also customised pathways to integration through social support, knowledge of territory and access to its service, health support, support in access to continuing education, vocational training and school services, housing support, legal information and assistance (Central Service, 2011b, pp. 36-37). The whole system is coordinated by the «Central Service for Information, Promotion, Advice, Monitoring and Support to Local Bodies» office, which monitors the presence of asylum seekers and refugees, provides assistance to local services and supervises continuing education opportunities on behalf of service operators as well.

2. RESEARCH AIMS

The main aim of the present study is to investigate conceptions and strategies for integration across refugee services in Italy. In particular, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

- *Hypothesis 1:* refugee service coordinators consider user integration as an objective requiring intervention not only on behalf of refugees but also on behalf of the native population.
- *Hypothesis 2:* the types of networks with local stakeholders built by refugee services in order to promote user integration change according to geographical location.
- *Hypothesis 3:* in refugee services in which there is the opportunity for reflection with colleagues of other refugee services, there are higher judgements of adequacy of tools at their disposal and higher levels of satisfaction in work experience.
- *Hypothesis 4:* service coordinators consider continuing education programmes useful when they are closely connected to their daily professional experience.

The research aims include the verification of these hypotheses along with the further investigation of their related issues.

3. METHODS

The data were collected between April and December 2011 through a quantitative approach. An anonymous self-completion questionnaire was administered online to the coordinators of local services of the «System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees» throughout Italy.

Based on results from pre-testing, the final version of the questionnaire was composed of 42 (both open-ended and closed) questions investigating 198 variables (dichotomous, ordinal, ratio and nominal) and several aspects of conceptions and strategies on refugees' integration. As the population of service coordinators was not very high (123 people), instead of selecting a sample from that population, a census methodology was chosen, collecting data from every member. Afterwards, data analysis was carried out using SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*). At the end of the data-collecting period, the number of valid respondents was 88, so the percentage of responses was 71.5%; therefore, the non-response rate (due to absence of response or refusal to reply) was 28.5%.

The literature on research methodology indicates that non-response is often problematic in online or e-mail surveys (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 281). Furthermore, previous research showed that this difficulty is even more common in surveys carried out in the third sector – charities, non-governmental or volunteer organisations – whose members can be reluctant to undertake administrative work, such as answering online question-

naires, preferring to give priority to the work directly addressed to service users (Carbone, 2007, pp. 38-39).

With regard to the present study, in order for the responses to be effectively representative, it must be assumed that non-responses were distributed randomly across the population. This assumption can be supported by a comparative analysis of the differences between specific data registered in the responses and the respective known population parameters. This analysis shows, firstly, that in every geographical division of the *Italian National Institute of Statistics* (ISTAT)¹, the response rate remains above 70%; moreover, percentage differences between responses and population for each geographical division are not significant, as they remain below 0.3%: therefore, all geographical areas are well represented in the responses (Table 1).

Table 1. – Percentage of responses per geographical division.

	RESPONSES		POPULATION		RESPONSE RATE (%)
	Freq.	Perc. (%)	Freq.	Perc. (%)	
Northwest	11	12.5	15	12.2	73.3
Northeast	15	17.0	21	17.1	71.4
Central	25	28.4	35	28.5	71.4
South	23	26.1	32	26.0	71.9
Islands	14	16.0	20	16.2	70.0
TOTAL	88	100.0	123	100.0	71.5

Furthermore, this comparative analysis also shows quite modest percentage differences (below 3.9%) between responses and population with regard to the number of inhabitants of municipalities in which services are located, indicating that all the different contexts are well represented in the responses (Table 2).

Although for types of service users (ordinary, vulnerable or mental disorder groups) there are some percentage differences between responses and population (-8.1% of services addressed to ordinary users are represented in the responses), they do decrease with regard to the number of users hosted in the service, remaining below 5% (Table 3).

¹ The *Italian National Institute of Statistics* (ISTAT) adopt geographical divisions as follows: northwest Italy (including regions of Piedmont, Aosta Valley, Lombardy and Liguria); northeast Italy (including Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Emilia-Romagna); central Italy (including Tuscany, Umbria, Marche and Lazio); south Italy (including Abruzzi, Molise, Campania, Apulia, Basilicata and Calabria); and the islands (including Sicily and Sardinia).

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of differences between the various data observed in the responses and the respective known population parameters seems to encourage the assumption of a random distribution of non-response across the population; in particular, it can be reasonably sustained that, although the research non-response rate is consistent and responses present an under-representation of services addressed to ordinary users, they are representative of the population in terms of geographical area, number of users and the population of municipalities in which services are located.

Table 2. – Number of inhabitants of municipalities in which the service is located in responses and population (%).

NUMBER OF INHABITANTS	PERCENTAGE IN RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE IN POPULATION*
Up to 5,000	8.9	12.1
5,001-10,000	5.5	5.7
10,001-20,000	7.8	9.8
20,001-50,000	15.7	18.7
50,001-200,000	46.2	42.3
200,001-500,000	10.2	6.5
Above 500,001	5.7	4.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

* Own statistical processing of ISTAT data on inhabitants at 1st January 2011.

Table 3. – Typology and number of service users in responses and population (%).

TYPOLGY OF USER	PERCENTAGE IN RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE IN POPULATION (Central Service, 2011a, p. 5)	NUMBER OF USERS	PERCENTAGE IN RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE IN POPULATION (Central Service, 2010, pp. 245-250)
Ordinary	69.4	77.5	Up to15	51.5	56.5
Vulnerable	25.0	22.5	16-30	33.8	32.6
Mental disorder ²	5.6		31-50	11.8	8.0
			Above 51	2.9	2.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	TOTAL	100.0	100.0

² After the beginning of the data collection refugee services addressing vulnerable categories were subdivided into services addressing vulnerable users and users with mental disorders. Subsequently, the typology «mental disorder user», which was not present in the list of population of services and appears in responses, can be related to the typology «vulnerable user».

4. RESULTS

4.1. *General features of refugee services*

The refugee services investigated are predominantly small (85.3% of them host up to 30 users) and located in medium-small municipalities (46.2% of them are located in places with 50,001 to 200,000 inhabitants and 84.1% with up to 200,000 inhabitants). Furthermore, the majority of the services have been active for more than five years (67.7%) (Figure 1). These aspects point to a certain embedding of the system of refugee services in the different territorial contexts, even of small dimensions.

Service coordinator mean age is 38.9 years, almost three-quarters are female (71.2%) and their educational qualifications are particularly high, as more than three-quarters of them are graduates (77.6%) while two-fifths hold a master's degree or even a PhD (respectively 19.4% and 3%) (Figure 2). While the female prevalence confirms a widespread trend in social care jobs in Italy, the high levels of qualifications highlight the remarkable knowledge and skills possessed by service coordinators.

Their professional experience as service coordinators is also significant: 59.1% of them have been in charge for more than three years; however, one quarter have been in charge less than a year (25.7%), one-sixth for 1-2 years (15.2%) or more than 7 years (15.2%), and one-fifth for 3-4 years (22.7%) or 5-7 years (21.2%) (Figure 3). For these people, working in the refugee service is personally motivated (40.6%) and related to previous skills (39.1%). The majority have previous work experience (88.2%), especially in the tertiary economic sector, related to provision of services (82.4%); in particular, a significant percentage of those who worked in such a sector have been active in social or health services (44.1%) or in the field of education (10.3%). These aspects seem quite interesting from an educational viewpoint, as it can be reasonably sustained that service coordinators transfer to their professional practice the knowledge acquired in these previous sectors.

Finally, as long-term exhaustion and burnout has been related in the literature to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Shier & Graham, 2011), one question addressed respondents' levels of satisfaction from work experience. Despite numerous difficulties in finding solutions that would assure integration opportunities for service users, coordinators point out a high level of personal accomplishment for their current work experience in comparison with their first work experience in a refugee service: in fact, the vast majority of service coordinators express a level of personal accomplishment as at least sufficient (93.9%), while 68.1% of them declare it is still high or even very high (Figure 4).

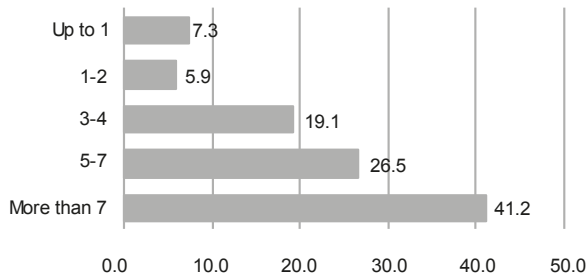


Figure 1. – Years of activity of the service (%).

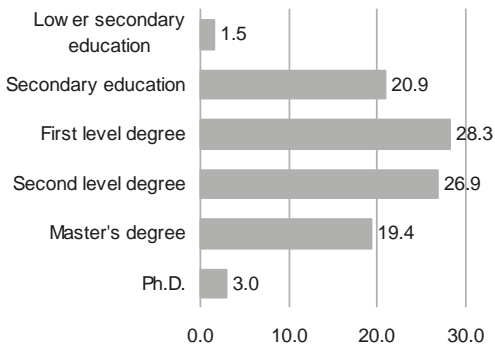


Figure 2. – Service coordinator educational qualifications (%).

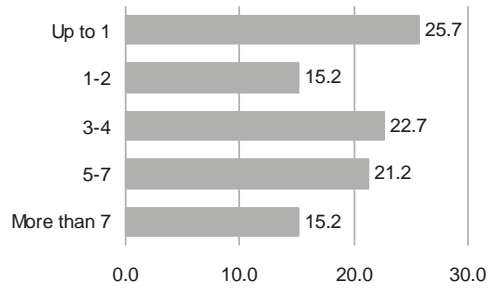


Figure 3. – Years in charge as service coordinator (%).

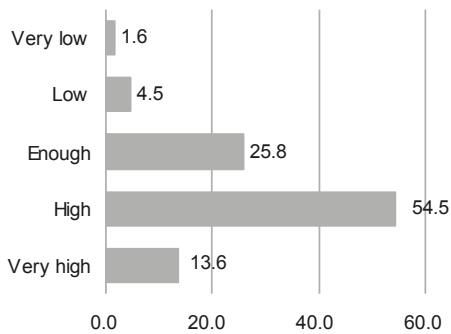


Figure 4. – Level of satisfaction for current work experience in comparison with initial work experience in a refugee service (%).

It must be particularly highlighted that such a significant level of accomplishment is crucial in supporting service coordinators in a professional practice which often involves facing critical and stressful situations, related to meeting users' needs.

4.2. Conceptions of integration issues and inclusion strategies

Relevant research results regard respondent conceptions of refugees' integration. Answering an open-ended question, they give personal definitions of their user integration, mentioning several issues. The most frequent are the acquisition of tools, knowledge and abilities by refugees as well as by native Italians (27.4%), inclusion of different cultural identities in effective intercultural relationships (25.8%), and acknowledgement, active citizenship and acquisition of rights and duties (19.4%). Some respondents explained these three major issues, respectively, as follows:

User integration in the community means: from the user's side, acquiring the ability to orient themselves, communicating and building relationships in the new context; and on the hosting community's side: understanding the refugee's reality and modifying behaviours of refusal as well as fear of «difference». Social integration requires economic, work and housing inclusion, allowing for the refugee's psychological stability, and building a climate of trust within the community in order for refugees to be considered an opportunity for enrichment of both knowledge and humanity. (Respondent no. 37)

Integration is the possibility of including distinct identities in a unique context without any discrimination, and carrying out intercultural communication. (Respondent no. 4)

Refugees' integration implies pathways of progressive awareness in their status, in accordance with the context of their reception. The main task of our service is to build a «bridge» between the inside (the service) and the outside (the society), facilitating the acquisition of self-confidence and autonomy, and transmitting a «universe of meanings» in order to promote hybridisation among cultures. A deep knowledge of local resources and of user needs represents a fundamental prerequisite for us. (Respondent no. 57)

Other service coordinators instead highlight the results of different paths to autonomy (work, social, cultural and political inclusion) (16.1%), work and housing inclusion (9.7%), and the matching of refugee expectations with features of the new society (1.6%). These issues are explained by some respondents, respectively, as follows:

Integration is a process concerning every social actor in society: young and elderly, men and women, native and immigrant, and it becomes true through economic, social and cultural affirmation, acknowledgment and respect of their own identities in interaction. There can be integration if there is shared reflection between different positions and opinions, in a climate of respect, and equal rights and opportunities. (Respondent no. 68)

To allow long-term integration, it is necessary to assure our users' economic continuity, which can be provided only by regular job contracts. (Respondent no. 53)

Integration is a path involving two different bodies: the subject who tries to access and coexist in the best possible way in the context of reception, and the society which helps or places obstacles to his or her achievement. The concept of integration can be defined as the inclusion of people within the already existing social structures and the quality of relationships between them and the native culture. (Respondent no. 31)

To deepen respondent understanding of refugee integration they were asked to express their level of agreement with several statements. Most agreed with the idea that user integration requires action (mainly awareness campaigns) within the native population (95.4%), refugee integration requires sharing work plans with other territorial services (95.4%) as they cannot pursue complete integration, refugee services need to define intermediate objectives for their users (89.4%), service operator and user points of view on integration paths do not always fit together (88%), and the idea of user integration changes in services as time goes by (83.3%) (Figure 5). The high percentages of agreement for several statements precisely highlight the breadth, complexity and multi-dimensionality of the notion of integration in respondents' views.

When considering what dimensions of integration are most important, respondents prioritised: economic inclusion (access to the labour market and to residence) (54.5%); cultural inclusion (access to education opportunities and development of cultural mediation) (37.9%); social inclusion (relationship management, joining associations, use of spare time) (7.6%); and political inclusion (political and citizenship participation) (3% of respondents indicate it only as a second option) (Figure 6). These results show that in building integration opportunities of integration in a limited time – as the service provides reception to its users for a period of about six months – a choice is made, giving priority to the economic and cultural dimensions of inclusion.

Research results also provided information with regard to networks developed by refugee services with local stakeholders. The types of stakehold-

ers which collaborate most with refugee services are, in order, health agencies (hospitals and health services, social services) (83.8% of refugee services have «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation with them); education agencies (schools, vocational training, continuing education and private education agencies) (66.4%); socialisation agencies (cultural, sport and volunteer associations, driving schools, housing agencies) (53.4%); and job agencies (public employment services, unions, industrial organisations, temporary work agencies) (44.8%).

With regard to specific stakeholders, respondents stated that their services collaborate «quite a lot» and «a great deal» with hospitals and health services (92.3%), public employment services (81.6%), vocational training agencies (78.8%), continuing education agencies (78.5%) and social services (75.4%) (Figure 7). In this sense, local stakeholders with whom refugee services develop firmer cooperation appear to be the ones aimed at dealing with users' socio-health and education (particularly, linguistic and vocational) needs.

In order to understand whether the geographical area in which the service is located is related to different understandings of integration and features of networking, a cross-tab analysis comparing the variables regarding service locations and statements on both integration and networks built by the services was carried out. This analysis showed that, in some geographical areas, significant changes in respondent statements about integration issues have been observed: for instance, in northeast Italy, service coordinators expressed more agreement that interventions aimed at reception must be distinct from those aimed at integration (+14.3% of answers in the northeast compared to total responses), while in the northwest respondents expressed less agreement about the idea that a specific service operator should be in charge of promoting interventions aimed at integration (-17.8%) and more agreement on the statement that user integration is not directly achievable but, rather, promotable (+22.3%) (Table 4).

Other territorial differences emerge with regard to the types of network built by refugee services. While in northwest Italy there seems to be more partnerships with vocational agencies (+21.2%), in the northeast services developed more cooperation with continuing education (+13.8%), private education (+16.9%) and temporary work agencies (+23%) (Table 5). These results suggest that the types of network built by refugee services with stakeholders change according to their geographic location.

Assuming that an effective collaboration with a local stakeholder may have been structured only by a respondent expressing «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation, in order to investigate the different types of network arranged by the refugee services, four indexes were built:

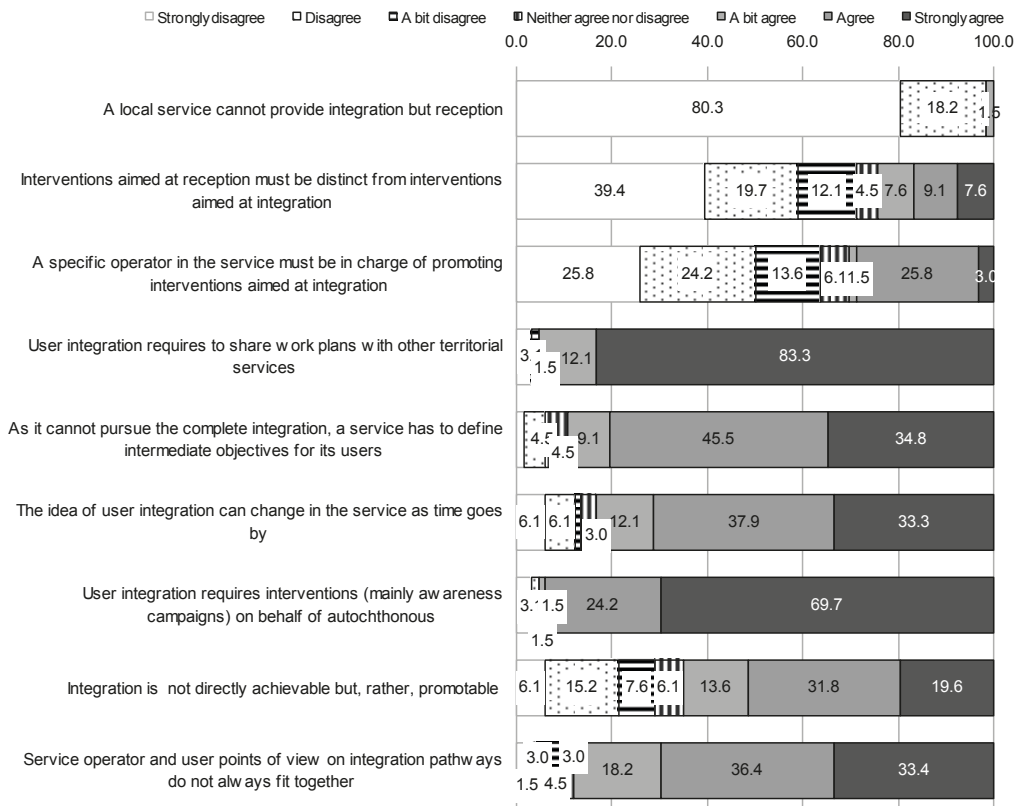


Figure 5. – Agreement with statements on integration (%).

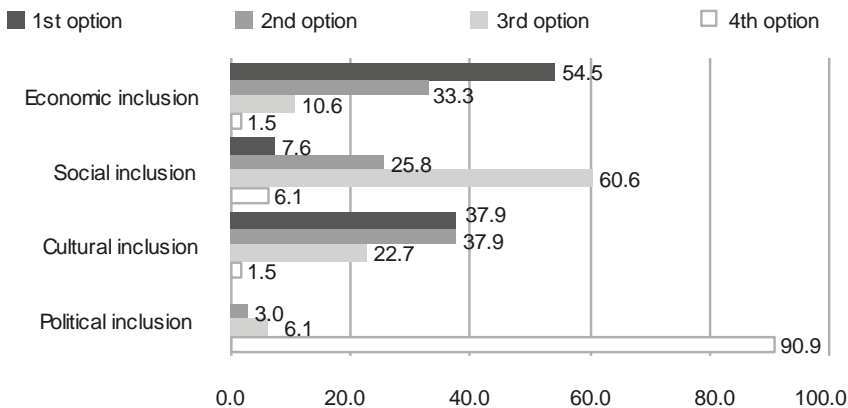


Figure 6. – Sorting of different dimensions constituting integration (%).

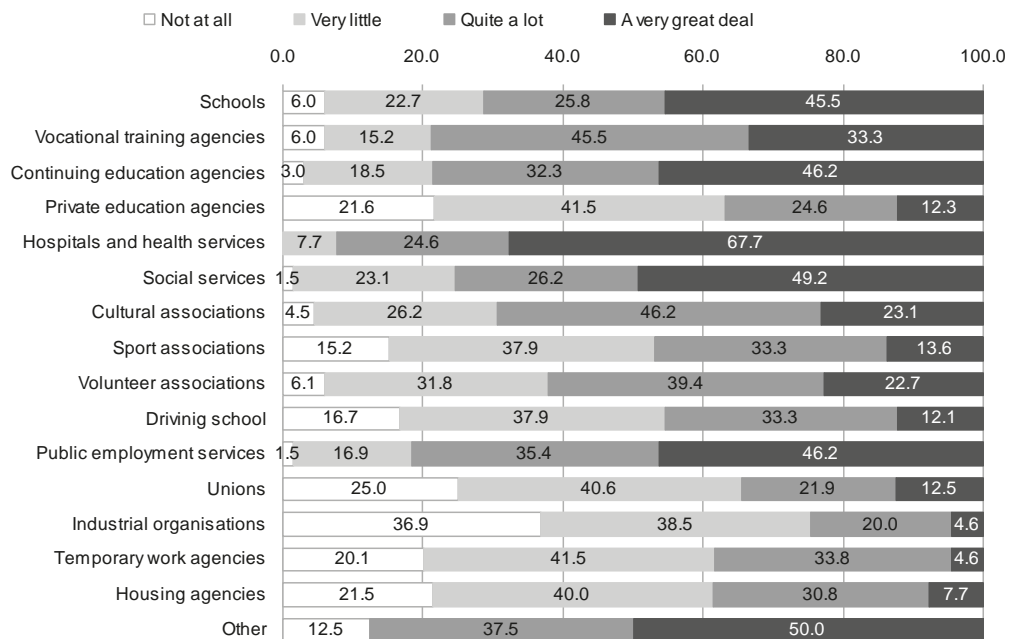


Figure 7. – Local stakeholders in networks with refugee services (%).

Table 4. – Cross tab-analysis between service locations and statements of integration (%).

GEOGRAPHICAL DIVISION	INTERVENTIONS AIMED AT RECEPTION MUST BE DISTINCT FROM THE ONES AIMED AT INTEGRATION			A SPECIFIC OPERATOR IN THE SERVICE MUST BE IN CHARGE OF PROMOTING INTERVENTIONS AIMED AT INTEGRATION			INTEGRATION IS AN AIM NOT DIRECTLY ACHIEVABLE BUT PROMOTABLE		
	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree
Northwest	87.5	0.0	12.5	87.5	0.0	12.5	12.5	0.0	87.5
Northeast	61.5	0.0	38.5	53.8	7.7	38.5	46.2	7.7	46.2
Central	83.3	5.6	11.1	72.2	11.1	16.7	22.2	0.0	77.8
South	58.8	5.9	35.3	58.8	0.0	41.2	35.3	5.9	58.8
Islands	70.0	10.0	20.0	50.0	10.0	40.0	20.0	20.0	60.0
TOTAL	71.2	4.5	24.2	63.6	6.1	30.3	28.8	6.1	65.2

Table 5. – Cross tab-analysis between service locations and service partners (%).

GEOGRAPHICAL DIVISION	VOCATIONAL TRAINING AGENCIES		CONTINUING EDUCATION AGENCIES		PRIVATE EDUCATION AGENCIES		TEMPORARY WORK AGENCIES	
	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
Northwest	0.0	100.0	12.5	87.5	75.0	25.0	62.5	37.5
Northeast	7.7	92.3	7.7	92.3	46.2	53.8	38.5	61.5
Central	27.8	72.2	22.2	77.8	61.1	38.9	55.6	44.4
South	47.1	52.9	35.3	64.7	64.7	35.3	88.2	11.8
Islands	0.0	100.0	22.2	77.8	77.8	22.2	55.6	44.4
TOTAL	21.2	78.8	21.5	78.5	63.1	36.9	61.5	38.5

- *Index of network aimed at Education (IE)* [0.0-1.0], considering responses expressing «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation with education agencies (schools, vocational training, continuing education and private education agencies).
- *Index of network aimed at Socialisation and cultural exchange (IS)* [0.0-1.0], considering answers expressing «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation with socialisation agencies (cultural, sport and volunteer associations, driving schools, housing agencies).
- *Index of network aimed at Health and social support (IH)* [0.0-1.0], considering responses expressing «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation with health agencies (hospitals and health services, social services).
- *Index of network aimed at Job market inclusion (IJ)* [0.0-1.0], considering answers expressing «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation with job agencies (public employment services, unions, industrial organisations, temporary work agencies)³.

To investigate services presenting high effectiveness for these types of networks, upper quartiles for each index distribution have been taken into account (considering $IE \geq 0.75$; $IS \geq 0.8$; $IH = 1.0$; $IJ \geq 0.75$). Such an analysis provides information on those groups of services which achieve high values of collaboration with local stakeholders, bringing to light several clusters of refugee services:

- The larger cluster comprises more than three-fifths of the services (68.2%), which, along with local stakeholders, built networks aimed at health and social support with high values of cooperation. Among these services there are slightly higher percentages of respondents utilising continuing education opportunities provided by the «Central Service» office (+6.8%) and describing the adequacy of tools at their disposal (+5.8%).
- A further cluster includes little more than half the services (56.1%), which built with local stakeholders networks aimed at education with high values of cooperation. These services are more frequently from larger contexts (locations with more than 20,000 inhabitants) (+9.5%) and related to higher percentages of respondents describing an adequacy of tools at their disposal (+12.3%).
- Finally, two clusters of similar dimensions, each comprising approximately one-fourth of the services, built networks – with local stakeholders – aimed at social and cultural exchange (28.8%) and at job market inclusion (27.3%) with high values of cooperation. In the first cluster there are higher percentages of opportunities described for sharing reflections with colleagues (+6.5%), respondents describing the adequacy of tools at their

³ It must be observed that, to gain comparability of them, these indexes were built considering that both responses of «quite a lot» and «a very great deal» of cooperation and the total of stakeholders for each index had the same statistical weight.

disposal (+11%), and service experience of more than five years (+12.2%). Finally, services in the second cluster are more frequently from a much larger context (locations with more than 50,000 inhabitants; +15.7%) and related to higher percentages of opportunities for sharing reflections with colleagues (+14.7%), of positive judgement on satisfaction for work experience (+19.2%), and of service experience of more than five and seven years (respectively +27.7% and +10.6%).

A cross-tab analysis between variables related to the extent of service network (computed taking into account the number of stakeholders for whom each respondent express «quite a lot» and «a great deal» of cooperation) and several other features of services allowed considering further aspects related to broader local networks. In particular, very broad networks (with more than 11 stakeholders) are more frequent in services located in larger contexts (locations with more than 50,000 inhabitants; +17.9%), that have been active for more than seven years (+12.1%) and with coordinators who have been in charge for more than seven years (+18.1%) (Table 6). Thus, it appears that both a populous context and a long experience of the coordinator are frequent features in services that can build very large local networks.

Other research data highlight the degree to which respondents are engaged in planning activities that directly address users: coordinators arrange initiatives aimed mainly at promoting user access to the national health service (92%), citizenship counselling (knowledge of the territory and its services) (92.3%), learning Italian as a second language (90.7%), cultural and linguistic mediation (89.3%), vocational training opportunities (78.1%), housing counselling (78.1%), apprenticeships (76.9%) and legal information (71.9%) (Figure 8).

Finally, respondents pointed out that the main obstacles to refugee integration are the present job market crisis (36.4%) and the limited reception times at their disposal (30.3%) (Figure 9). In particular, the former is an obstacle external to the national system of refugee services, while the latter (dictated by the need to provide reception to a significant number of users per year) is internal to the system.

4.3. *Problematic situations experienced by refugee services*

The aim of the next section of the questionnaire was to gain an understanding of problematic situations experienced by service coordinators in their daily work. More than half reported that they had inadequate tools at their disposal for promoting user integration (56.1%) (Figure 10). It appears particularly relevant that these respondents point out that they are facing a multi-faceted and challenging objective as user integration with tools perceived to be inappropriate.

Table 6. – Cross-tab analysis between network size and several aspects regarding the service or its context (%).

NETWORK SIZE	INHABITANTS IN THE MUNICIPALITY IN WHICH THE SERVICE IS LOCATED		YEARS OF ACTIVITY OF THE SERVICE			YEARS IN CHARGE AS COORDINATOR		
	Up to 50,000	Above 50,001	Up to 2	3-7	Above 7	Up to 2	3-7	Above 7
Low (up to 6 partners)	35.7	64.3	14.2	64.4	21.4	50.0	42.8	7.1
Medium-low (7-8 partners)	35.0	65.0	30.0	25.0	45.0	60.0	25.0	15.0
Medium-high (9-10 partners)	58.8	41.2	0.0	64.7	35.3	29.4	64.7	5.9
High (above 11 partners)	20.0	80.0	6.7	40.0	53.3	20.0	46.6	33.3
TOTAL	37.9	62.1	13.2	45.6	41.2	40.9	43.9	15.2

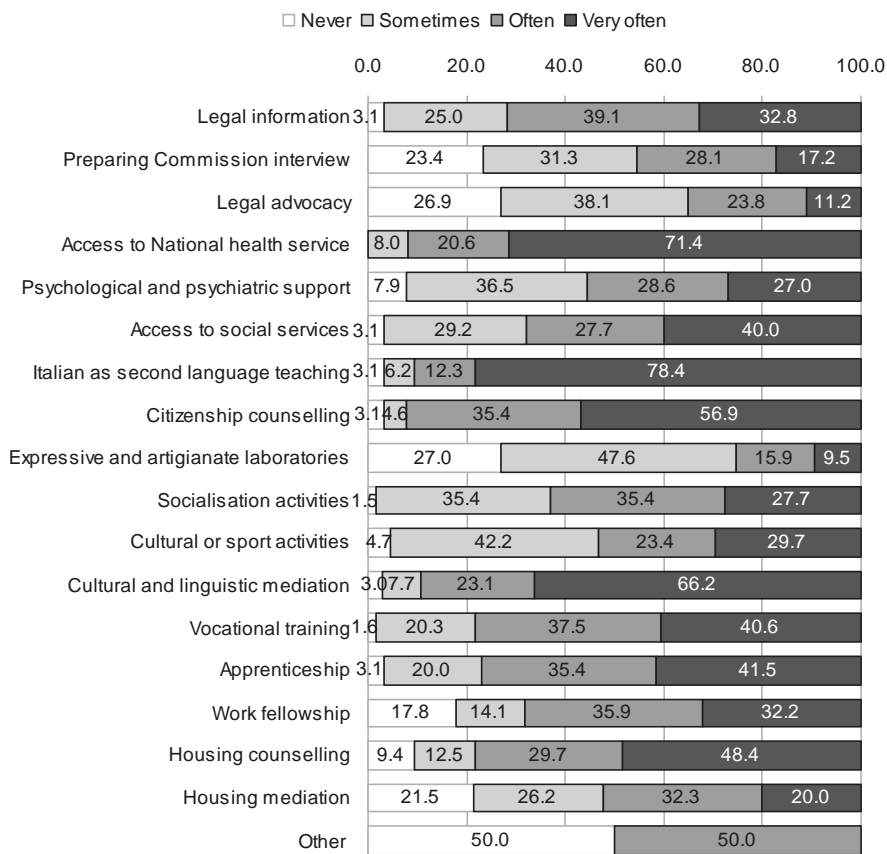


Figure 8. – Activities planned on behalf of services users (%).

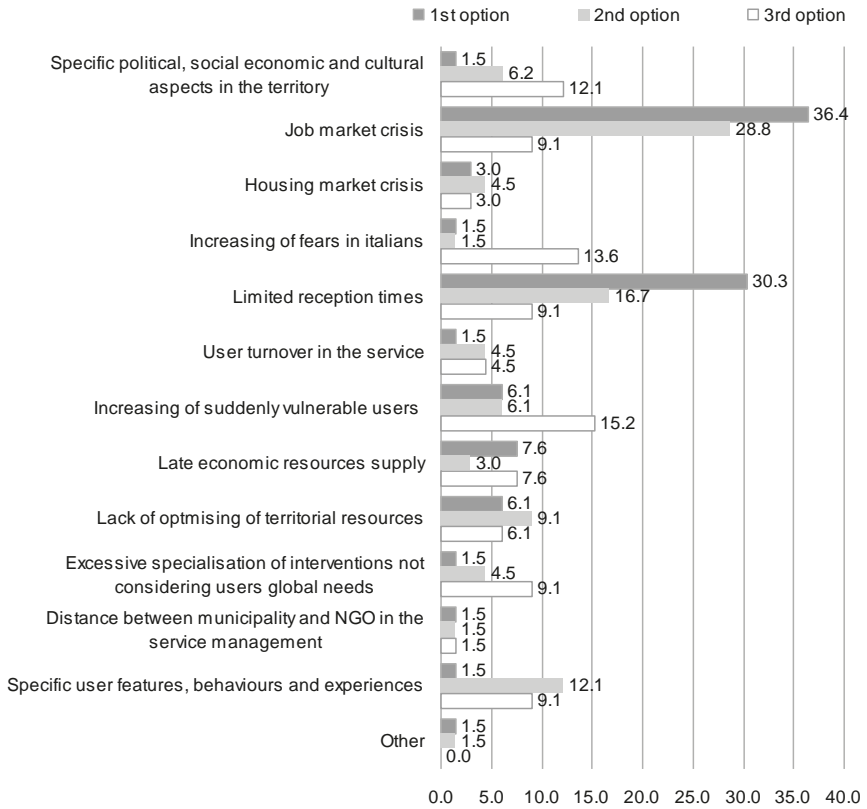


Figure 9. – Obstacles to refugee integration (%).

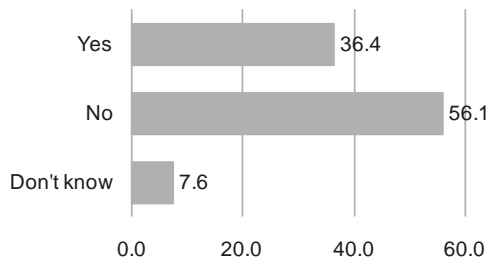


Figure 10. – Judgment on adequacy of the tools at one's disposal (%).

In order to more closely consider respondents expressing such a judgement, a cross-tab analysis comparing the variables regarding judgement on the adequacy of tools at one's disposal and several features of both respondents and services was carried out.

Respondents judging that they had inadequate tools at their disposal to promote refugee integration are slightly more frequent among coordinators with very little (+5% of responses among coordinators of up to two years' experience) and a great deal of work experience (+3.7% of responses among coordinators of over seven years). The same trend was observed with regard to years of service activity (respectively +5.7% and +7.4% of responses of inadequacy of tools at one's disposal among respondents in services active for up to two years and more than seven years). Moreover, in services with very broad networks (+26.5%) and among respondents utilising continuing education opportunities provided by the «Central Service» office and in the form of short-term programmes (up to 50 hours) (respectively, +12.9% and +7.1%), a higher percentage of respondents described the tools at their disposal as adequate (Table 7). As a result, it can be observed that having a better adequacy of tools at one's disposal is likely to be perceived in refugee services committed to developing broad local networks and in acquiring specific skills in continuing education programmes provided by the «Central Service» office.

Responding to an open-ended question, service coordinators explained the inadequacy of tools at their disposal as being due to: inadequate networks (43.2%); lack of specific financial resources (21.6%) or specialised strategies (18.9%); insufficient reception times at their disposal (13.5%); and lack of national policies on integration (2.8%). For example:

In our territory there is lack of an effective network, and awareness of the mission and the aims of the System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Often, institutions are not aware of refugee issues and few know the legislation on asylum. (Respondent no. 7)

It could be useful to provide a financial budget spendable by users to promote their integration paths, in continuing education or vocation training activities and to face the housing problem. (Respondent no. 17)

Often there is a lack of specialised strategies, for instance, strategies for job inclusion. Moreover, strategies must be continually adapted to users and to changes in society. (Respondent no. 61)

The time at our disposal limits the potential for educational activities and, besides, with vulnerable users, time is a key-factor. (Respondent no. 10)

National policies are urgent to raise public awareness on the issue. Otherwise, Italians' distrust of refugees becomes an insurmountable obstacle in the promotion of their job or housing inclusion. (Respondent no. 55)

Table 7. – Cross tab-analysis between judgment on the adequacy of tools at one's disposal and several features of both respondents and services (%).

JUDGMENT ON ADEQUACY OF TOOLS	YEARS IN CHARGE AS COORDINATOR	SERVICE YEARS OF ACTIVITY	NETWORK SIZE	ORGANISATION PROVIDING CONTINUING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY	LENGTH OF CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMME						
	Up to 2	3-7	Over 7	Over 7	Up to 2						
	3-7	3-7	Over 7	Others	Up to 50						
	Over 7	Over 7	Over 7	Central Service	Over 51						
			Low (up to 8 partners)								
			High (over 8 partners)								
Yes	33.3	58.3	8.3	4.2	25.0	25.0	75.0	87.5	12.5	87.5	12.5
No	45.9	35.1	18.9	18.9	32.4	48.6	62.2	65.7	34.3	73.0	27.0
Don't know	40.0	40.0	20.0	20.0	40.0	40.0	100.0	75.0	25.0	100.0	0.0
TOTAL	40.9	43.9	15.2	13.2	41.2	48.5	51.5	74.6	25.4	80.4	19.6

A further open-ended question in the questionnaire aimed at investigating strategies adopted when the service had not been able to properly address user's integration needs, allowing an understanding of the choices made facing a particularly relevant problematic situation.

On these occasions, respondents addressed users to other services both in the protection system and in the local area (32.2%), discussed the situation with their team or with the «Central Service» office (25.4%), redefined new objectives with users (23.7%), communicated motivations and problems to them (13.6%) and, finally, asked the «Central Service» office for a respite (5.1%). Explaining these strategies, service coordinators stated:

I tried to «export» refugee issues from our service to other ones in the territory. I met service managers in different fields: public employment services, hospitals, municipalities, local authorities, schools, unions, immigrant, cultural and sports associations, in order to spread information, build interest in the issue and, finally, develop a network able to elaborate shared inclusion strategies. (Respondent no. 37)

I tried to consider this as a team, by thoroughly analysing user strengths and weaknesses, in order to play on their strengths. (Respondent no. 56)

I tried to review, with the user, the path undertaken, stressing achievements and suggesting alternatives, in accordance with a more careful reading of his or her needs and strengths. (Respondent no. 9)

I tried to explain, clearly and truly, to the user the objective limits both of the service and of the social context, in order to find the best solution with him. (Respondent no. 24)

In the majority of cases, I tried to develop alternative strategies asking for a respite from the «Central Service», to make sure the user gained at least vocational qualifications. (Respondent no. 36)

The final open-ended question aimed at investigating service needs for a more effective promotion of opportunities of integration on behalf of refugees. Respondents claimed greater effectiveness and coordination of the local networks (31.8%), greater effectiveness of vocational training and work opportunities (27%), cultural change and greater awareness of the figure of the refugee in the society (20.6%), specific resources or strategies (11.1%), longer reception times at their disposal (6.3%), mainstreaming of best practices (1.6%) and more support from second level reception services (1.6%). Some respondents explained the three first issues as follows:

It is absolutely necessary to build a more functional local network focusing on work and housing needs. I would propose two distinct services or stages:

firstly, first reception, learning Italian as a second language, knowledge of the territory and vocational training, and, secondly, job and housing inclusion. (Respondent no. 13)

A necessary condition is the provision of vocational training without qualification entrance requirements. (Respondent no. 60)

A new model of integration, effectively meeting refugee needs, is urgent, along with new practices of skill acknowledgment and validation. (Respondent no. 36)

4.4. *Skills and educational needs of operators in refugee services*

The research results also provide interesting information with regard to skills and educational needs of operators in refugee services. With regard to knowledge and abilities, respondents point out that the main things someone working in the refugee service must know are the features of the territory in which he or she works (31.3%), user needs (30.8%) and legislation related to refugee inclusion (15.9%) (Figure 11); moreover he or she must be able to promote networking (25.5%), pick out resources (19.4%) and identify user needs (18.9%) (Figure 12). These issues highlight the role of deep knowledge both of users and the context in which the service is located, in order to pursue cultural and social mediation, facilitating links between refugees and their inclusion context.

Just over half the respondents stated that there were sometimes opportunities for sharing thoughts on integration strategies with colleagues from other services in the system of protection (51.5%), while three-fifths (59.1%) said that this happened only sometimes or never (Figure 13).

A cross tab-analysis between variables related to the frequency of opportunities for sharing reflections with colleagues and several features of the services highlighted that respondents who often share reflections with colleagues more frequently report an adequacy of tools at their disposal for promoting user integration (+11.7%).

Moreover, although among respondents with frequent opportunities for sharing reflections a significant change in the level of satisfaction for the actual work experience cannot be observed, broader service networks (+14.5%) can be seen, along with more frequent work experience and service activity of over seven years (respectively +7% and +14.4%) (Table 8). Consequently, a relation between the opportunity of interacting with colleagues on the issue of user integration and the perception of adequacy of tools at their disposal is apparent.

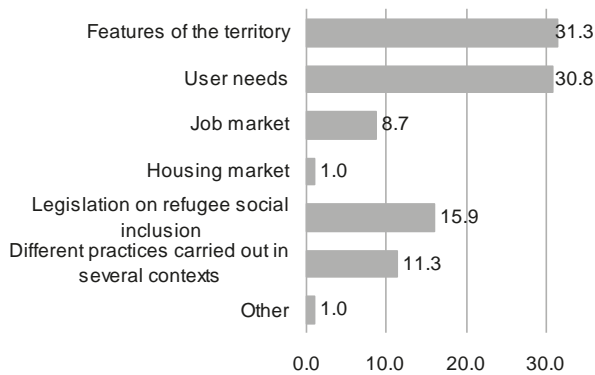


Figure 11. – Required knowledge for an operator working in a refugee service (%).

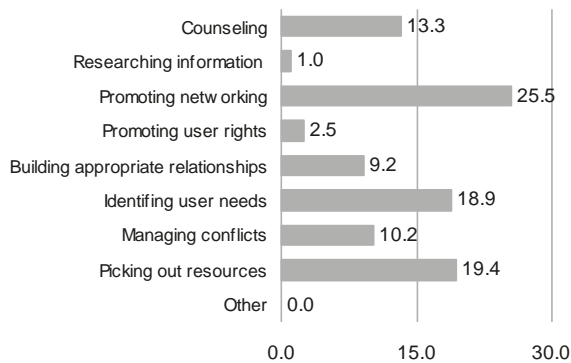


Figure 12. – Required abilities for an operator working in a refugee service (%).

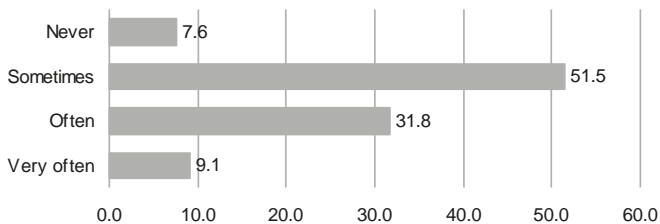


Figure 13. – Frequency of opportunities for sharing reflections on integration strategies with colleagues from other services in the system of protection (%).

Table 8. – Cross tab-analysis between variables related to frequency of opportunities for sharing reflection with colleagues and to several service aspects (%).

FREQUENCY OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHARING REFLECTIONS	JUDGMENT OF ADEQUACY OF TOOLS	LEVEL OF SATISFACTION FOR CURRENT WORK EXPERIENCE	SERVICE NETWORK SIZE	YEARS IN CHARGE AS COORDINATOR	YEARS OF SERVICE OF ACTIVITY	
Rare (never and sometimes)	Yes	Don't know	Low and medium-low	Up to 2	Over 7	28.2
	No	Positive	Medium-high and high	3-7	3-7	20.5
Frequent (often and very often)	Yes	Negative	Low and medium-low	Up to 2	Over 7	48.1
	No	Positive	Medium-high and high	3-7	3-7	40.7
TOTAL						36.4
						56.1
						7.6
						6.1
						93.9
						51.5
						37.0
						61.5
						38.5
						43.6
						46.2
						10.3
						22.2
						40.7
						51.3
						28.2
						55.6
						41.2

For three-quarters of respondents, the most relevant continuing education programme on asylum issues was provided by the «Central Service» office (74.6%) (Figure 14), mainly in the form of a short-term programme (up to 50 hours) (80.4%) (Figure 15). An essential role of such an agency is plain, in supplying those working in the national system of refugee service with continuing education opportunities.

Topics considered most useful in continuing education programmes for daily work are legal (93.9% of responses stated that such an issue was «quite a lot» and «a great deal» useful), psychological (90.7%), socio-anthropological (87.8%) and administrative (86.2%) matters (Figure 16). In particular, service coordinators pointed out their interest in learning about conflict management and negotiation techniques (16.7%), service planning and management (18.2%) and legislation (13.6%) (Figure 17). It must be observed that these issues point to approaches of continuing education that can address problematic situations experienced day by day in professional practice.

According to respondents, valuable methodological devices in continuing education programmes are reflection carried out with other colleagues (97% of responses point out these as «quite a lot» and «a great deal» useful), communication techniques adopted (91.4%), supervision (88.4%) and theory (87.5%) (Figure 18). Research data also show that the activities of planning a social intervention (96.9%), follow-up (with an analysis of education results on professional experience) (95.2%), team work (93.8%), and simulations (92.1%) are all crucial methodological-didactic aspects in continuing education programmes for refugee service operators (Figure 19).

The continuing education programmes attended mainly allowed respondents to improve the quality of their service on behalf of users (29%), along with service management (24.6%) and individual professional skills (23.5%) (Figure 20). The most frequent weaknesses in educational programmes revealed by respondents were the lack of continuity between theory and practice (26.4%), the lack of connection between education and work problems (25.6%), and the little attention given to participant expectations (12%) (Figure 21). In this way, respondents confirm their call for strategies of continuing education from which possible responses to problematic situation experienced in services could arise, in a perspective of service innovation and experimentation.

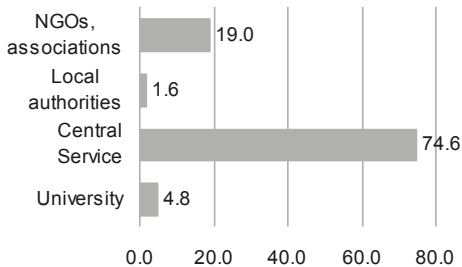


Figure 14. – Organisation promoting the most relevant educational programme on asylum issues (%).

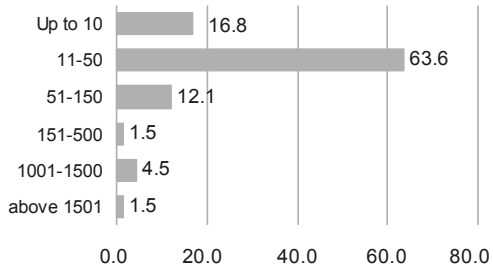


Figure 15. – Length of the most relevant educational programme on asylum issues (%).

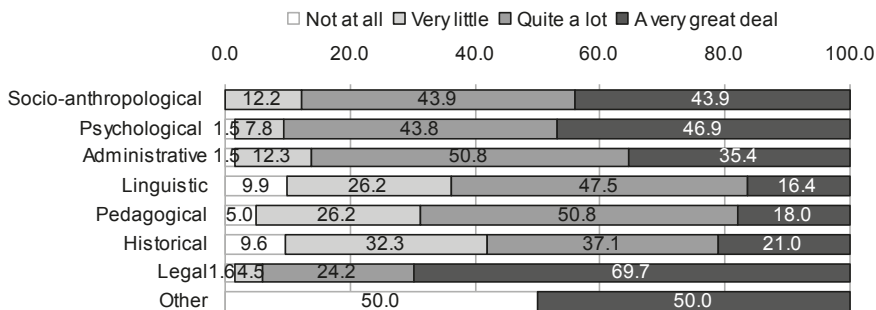


Figure 16. – Most useful issues in continuing education programmes for daily work (%).

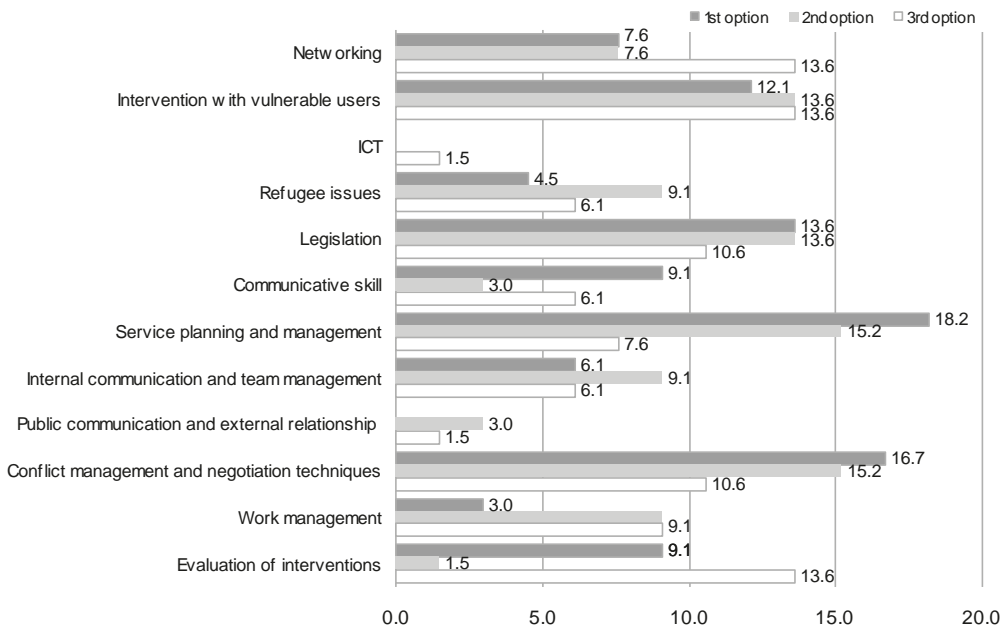


Figure 17. – Most interesting issues to include in continuing education programmes (%).

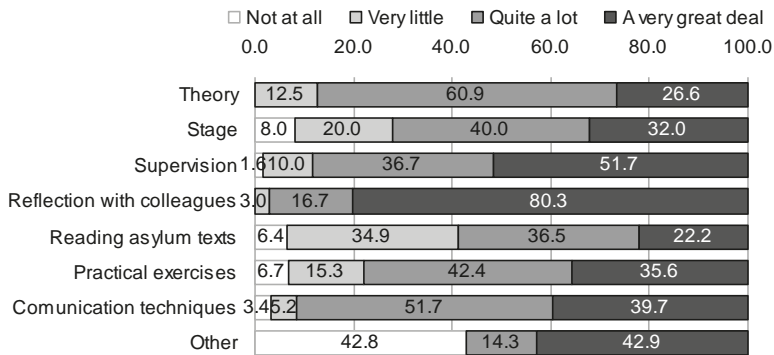


Figure 18. – Most useful methodological devices of continuing education programmes on asylum issues (%).

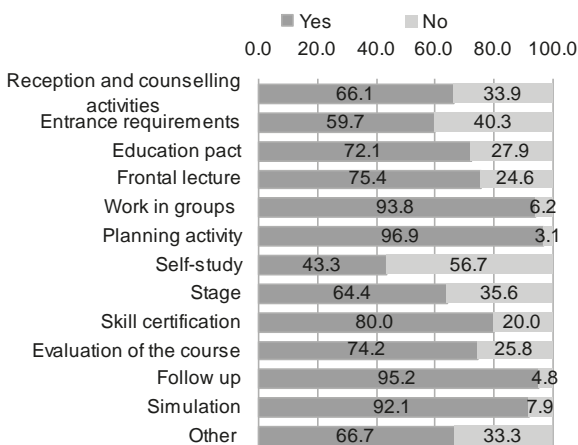


Figure 19. – Most useful methodological-didactic aspects in continuing education programmes on asylum issues (%).



Figure 20. – Results of the continuing education programmes on asylum issues (%).

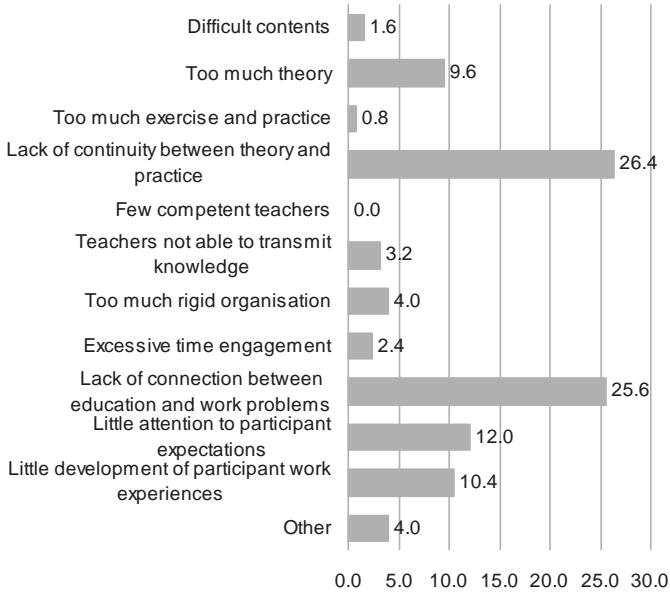


Figure 21. – Weakness of continuing education programmes on asylum issues (%).

5. DISCUSSION

On the basis of the aforementioned results, the research hypotheses can be evaluated as follows:

- *Hypothesis 1: refugee service coordinators consider user integration as an objective requiring intervention not only on behalf of refugees, but also on behalf of the native population.* Research data highlight that, after giving personal definitions of user integration, service coordinators relate most frequently to the acquisition of knowledge and skills both by refugees and native inhabitants. Moreover, the greatest agreement was expressed by respondents on the idea that user integration requires interventions (mainly awareness-raising campaigns) on behalf of the native population. Finally, among needs for effective promotion of user integration, respondents mentioned a greater awareness of the figure of the refugee in society. These findings suggest that Hypothesis 1 can be supported.
- *Hypothesis 2: the types of networks with local stakeholders built by refugee services in order to promote user integration change according to geographical location.*

Research findings show that, in some geographical areas, significant changes in respondent statements about integration can be observed: in northeast Italy, service coordinators express more agreement that interventions aimed at reception are distinct from those aimed at integration, while in the northwest, respondents express greater agreement that user integration is not directly achievable but, rather, promotable. Moreover, territorial differences also emerge concerning the types of networks developed by refugee services: while in northwest Italy they seem to be more in partnership with vocational agencies, in the northeast they cooperate more with continuing education, private education and temporary work agencies. Research data also show that broader networks are more frequent in services located in larger contexts (those with above 50,000 inhabitants). Thus, Hypothesis 2 can be supported.

- *Hypothesis 3: in refugee services in which there is the opportunity for reflection with colleagues of other refugee services, there are higher judgements of adequacy of tools at one's disposal and higher levels of satisfaction in work experience.* Relevant research findings suggest that over half the service coordinators report inadequate tools at their disposal for promoting user integration, due to inadequate networks, lack of specific financial resources, and insufficient reception times at their disposal. Respondents expressing such an evaluation are more frequently coordinators with either very little or a great deal of work experience. However, among respondents utilising continuing education opportunities provided by the «Central Service», there are higher reports of adequate available tools. With regard to opportunities for sharing reflections with colleagues from other services in the system of protection, just over half the respondents stated that such an event happens sometimes. Respondents with frequent opportunities for sharing reflections with colleagues of other services tend to come from contexts with broader service networks, and report more frequently that the tools at their disposal are adequate, but changes in the level of satisfaction for the current work experience cannot be observed. These findings suggest that Hypothesis 3 must be rejected.
- *Hypothesis 4: service coordinators consider continuing education programmes useful when they are closely connected to their daily professional experience.* Research findings show that, according to service coordinators, valuable methodological devices in continuing education programmes are reflections carried out with other colleagues, communication techniques adopted, supervision and theory. Moreover, the activities of planning a social intervention, follow-up (with an analysis of results of education programmes on professional experience), team work and simulations are all considered crucial methodological-didactic aspects in continuing educa-

tion programmes for refugee service operators. Research findings highlight that the most frequent weaknesses in educational programmes reported by respondents are the lack of continuity between theory and practice along with the lack of connection between education and work problems. All these findings suggest that Hypothesis 4 can be supported.

6. CONCLUSION

The research results have specific implications for refugee services and their stakeholders in Italy. In the light of the discussion of the research findings, some recommendations can be made with reference to the relevance of understanding integration concepts developed in refugee services, the empowerment of refugee services in local networks with their stakeholders, the possibility of removing some obstacles from refugee paths toward autonomy and, finally, service operators' educational needs:

- Preliminarily, it must be observed that understanding integration issues should constantly be the object of shared reflection in the various levels of government (Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Association of Italian Municipalities, local and provincial authorities and non-profit organisations) of the System of Refugee Services, as it is according to these perspectives and perceptions that interventions aimed at promoting the integration of refugees are carried out in local services throughout the country.
- Moreover, as respondents call for more effectiveness and coordination of the local networks of stakeholders (hospitals and health services, public employment services, vocational training and continuing education agencies, etc.), considered a key issue in providing continuity between a broad base of refugee integration developed inside the services, and their autonomous paths within the new society, it is crucial to strengthen the awareness of service mission and aims, as well as of refugee needs in these local networks. It would be fundamental for local public authorities to provide impetus and support in this task. If some suggestions formulated by service coordinators are related to obstacles pertaining to the limits and endemic deficiencies of Italian society that services cannot solve, such as a lack of coherence between vocational training topics and job market demands, or the need for more financial resources directly spendable by refugees to promote personal integration projects, other suggestions could be effectively sustained especially by stakeholders: for instance, in the absence of a formal equivalence for refugee qualifications which hinders their access to the labour market, there should be provision of vocational training without

qualification entrance requirements or experimentation with innovative practices of skill acknowledgment and validation.

- With regard to continuing education opportunities, it must be observed that, for the great majority of respondents, the most relevant opportunities for continuing education on asylum issues was provided by the «Central Service» office, indicating a prominent role for the agency coordinating the System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in making available continuing education programmes on behalf of refugee service operators. As research findings highlight, it should be possible to assure that continuing education opportunities are closely connected to the daily professional experience of service operators, for instance, by adopting methodological-didactic devices such as team work, follow-up and simulation activities, allowing frequent opportunities for sharing reflections with colleagues from other services, focusing particularly on service coordinators who have either a little or a great deal of work experience (who expressed a more negative judgement on the adequacy of tools at their disposal). Also, experienced coordinators and operators should be directly involved in planning and carrying out education activities, and providing support for their autonomous education plans could be crucial.

In conclusion, the issue of user integration in the system of refugee services brings to light a fundamental educational question. Although indispensable, ensuring reception is not sufficient, if at the same time the opportunity of an active participation in society is not provided through an effective intercultural effort, aimed at promoting fair relationships between refugees and the native population, within a perspective of «interdependent» integration. This involves an intellectual, moral and cultural investment – both at the information and educational level – addressed not only to refugees but also to the native population, along with the initiatives necessary to provide them with social and economic opportunities.

As a result, analysing the path of those who have been forced to leave their countries – who did not actually choose such a path – allows us to «overturn» the issue of social integration, generally seen within an assimilationist perspective as a «one way» process of inclusion, spurring changes in minorities without calling for the majority to get involved. This viewpoint instead asks for reference to a project of society such as the one envisaging a perspective of interculturalism, committing refugee services not only to the successful inclusion of their users, but also to an essential educational task, related to the acquisition of intercultural skills on behalf of the entire population, within a framework of mutual cultural transformation.

Such a long-term perspective can be pursued only through a broad educational effort in society, involving each space of formal and informal learn-

ing, in the foundation of a permeating «culture of integration»: in this sense, the refugee services investigated could be effectively considered as fundamental «social laboratories» prefiguring the horizon of an intercultural society.

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RIASSUNTO

L'articolo dà conto di una ricerca quantitativa svolta in tutta Italia nei servizi per rifugiati del «Sistema nazionale di protezione di richiedenti asilo e rifugiati». I dati dell'indagine mostrano che i coordinatori di tali servizi considerano l'integrazione degli utenti strettamente connessa all'acquisizione di conoscenze e competenze da parte sia dei rifugiati sia degli autoctoni. Le tipologie di reti costruite dai servizi per rifugiati insieme agli stakeholders territoriali al fine di promuovere l'integrazione degli utenti variano in base alla collocazione geografica: ad esempio, nel nord-est Italia i servizi avviano più collaborazioni con agenzie di formazione continua, enti privati di formazione e agenzie di lavoro interinale. Sebbene più della metà dei coordinatori dei servizi, in modo particolare coloro che hanno poca e molta esperienza professionale, giudichino inadeguati gli strumenti a disposizione per promuovere l'integrazione degli utenti, nei servizi con estese reti territoriali, all'interno dei quali i coordinatori utilizzano le opportunità di formazione continua offerte dal «Servizio Centrale» e nei quali vengono svolte riflessioni con i colleghi di altri servizi per rifugiati, viene espressa maggiore adeguatezza di strumenti a disposizione. Alcune indicazioni che scaturiscono dagli esiti dell'indagine riguardano la necessità di una maggiore consapevolezza delle finalità e degli obiettivi dei servizi per rifugiati tra gli stakeholders territoriali e un possibile coinvolgimento degli operatori dei servizi con maggiore esperienza professionale nella progettazione e organizzazione delle attività di formazione continua per gli operatori stessi.

Parole chiave: Bisogni formativi, Formazione, Formazione continua, Integrazione, Rifugiato.