

Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology: The experience of the pilot test and future developments

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In a previous issue of *In Practice*, interviewed by Jose Ramos, the main characteristics and goals of the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology were outlined (Ramos & Zappalà, 2016). In this issue, two papers enrich the discussion. The present paper reports some of the main issues and learning resulting from the pilot test, the experience conducted in five European countries in order to test the organizational and technical feasibility of the specialist certificate. In the second paper, Per Straumsheim describes the specialist education in work and organizational psychology in Norway and the contribution of the certificate to this process.

The EuroPsy Specialist Certificate and the Pilot Test

EAWOP and EFPA (the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations) developed the "EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology" in order to establish those minimum standards of education and training that demonstrate the expertise and competence of practitioners in the field of Work and Organizational (W&O) psychology. As mentioned in the previous contribution to *In Practice*, the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate is part of the larger project of EuroPsy; a comprehensive description of the origin, development, and components of EuroPsy is offered by Lunt, Peirò, Poortinga and Roe (2015).

Considering the growing mobility of W&O psychologists across Europe, the main aims of EuroPsy are to:

- a) safeguard clients' interests at a European rather than a national level;
- b) support the recognition of qualification of psychologists working outside their own country in the EU (as laid down in the European Directive 2005/36/EC, the Qualifications Directive); and
- c) encourage and solicit European national associations, whose national standards are below EuroPsy, to support and raise the qualification and professionalisation of its own W&O psychologists.

It has to be underlined that the Specialist Certificate does neither substitute nor replace national laws and rules for professional practice; but it is an addition to these rules and shows that the community of W&O psychologists, pro-actively, has established

its own standards of quality and has tools to check and increase the quality of services provided to clients.

In 2005 a Task Force established by EAWOP, and chaired by Prof. Jose Maria Peirò, formulated a proposal about the contents and requirements of what was later called the Specialist Certificate in W&O Psychology. Such proposal defined the standards for the education of W&O psychologists with the goal to contribute to the harmonisation of W&O psychology education and professional practice in Europe. The proposed standards were approved by EAWOP General Assembly in May 2009, and accepted also by the General Assembly of EFPA in September of the same year. The proposal of the Task Force is available on the EAWOP website (<http://www.eawop.com/specialised-back-ground>) and was shortly described in the previous interview (Ramos & Zappalà, 2016). Later, in 2011, another Task Force established by EAWOP to tune and test the standards, and to develop the application forms, checklists, and the administrative and technical procedures necessary to run and manage a pilot test.

The pilot test represented the opportunity for a first implementation and testing of the Specialist Certificate in W&O Psychology standards, by trailing the practical and administrative procedures, seeing if and how well these standards were fitting local circumstances, and which difficulties and challenges were faced in the implementation of the Specialist Certificate. In particular, the pilot test aimed to collect information and advance knowledge about post-graduate learning activities, professional activities, experiences in relation to supervision and coaching, and procedures and materials to be used to report coached practice and competences. The final report of the pilot test is available on the EAWOP website at: <http://www.eawop.com/standards>.

Five European countries decided to participate in the pilot test: Finland, Italy, Norway, Spain and United Kingdom. Their participation was possible because they:

- a) had already participated in the past to the pilot test of the Basic Europsy (see Ramos & Zappalà, 2016);
- b) had already established a National Awarding Committee for assessment of the Basic Europsy; and
- c) offered a good geographical balance (especially from north-south Europe).

It was considered to include at least one eastern country, but it was difficult to find one country fulfilling the above criteria.

An EAWOP-EFPA body (the “Provisional Specialist European Awarding Committee”, P-SEAC) developed the pilot test procedure, the tools and coordinated the experience. Similarly, a national body was established in each country (the “Provisional Specialist National Awarding Committee”, P-SNAC) in order to manage the pilot locally.

The aims and requirements of the Specialist Certificate and the possibility to obtain the Certificate during the pilot test were advertised in national meetings, conferences and newsletters. Thus W&O psychologists in these five countries were informed about the pilot test were invite to apply.

The pilot test involved two procedures, or routes, addressing different types of applicants:

- a) the transitional period route (or “grand-parenting”); and
- b) the regular procedure route.

The transitional period or “grand-parenting” route addressed experienced practitioners with many years of practice, while the “regular” route addressed younger practitioners in the process or just finishing the professionalisation route and are just starting to practice independently in the professional field. Both grand-parent and regular applicants had to fill their application and provide a detailed CV in which they reconstructed and described their own career, job outputs and offer evidence of the competences practiced in their work. This “backward” reconstruction of one’s own career aimed to show learning and developmental processes, and also competences that had been developed. Many applicants considered this reconstruction as a particularly critical and difficult task to perform but, at the same time, also a very useful and rewarding one.

Overall nearly 100 applications were received and assessed in the five countries by the P-SNACs. The goal was not to have very large number of applicants but testing the procedure covering a variety of situations and careers. About 75% of applications were ‘grand-parents’ and 25% were regular ‘applicants’. The assessment of applications resulted in 10% rejections, with the other 90% of applicants showing evidence of expertise, qualifications and of regular participation in continuous professional de-

velopment (CPD) activities. It has to be said that most of the applications were obtained using social networks and knowledge of the P-SNAC members. Overall, the pilot showed the meaningfulness of the whole framework, the feasibility of the procedure, tools, application forms and that applicants were able to understand the model and provide the expected information and the required evidence.

What was observed and learnt from the pilot test? In the following sections I outline some general conclusions under the headings of requirements, procedure and structure.

Learning from the pilot testing

The requirements

To obtain the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in W&O psychology the following are required: a) 90 ECTS of education and learning activities after the academic degree (of which 60 ECTS are devoted to learning activities and 30 ECTS to applied research or assessment or intervention); b) at least 400 hours per year of supervised or coached practice and at least 50 hours of supervision obtained during the three years before the application; and c) a detailed CV showing evidence of a certain level of competences in the field.

These requirements stimulated some reflections by practitioners and national (and European) associations. Availability of educational programmes and training to fulfill the requirements are different across the European countries. In some countries, like Finland or Spain, universities have only recently started to offer educational programmes for practitioners, while in other countries, like Norway or UK, it is the national psychological association that regulates educational programmes, offers courses, and requires structured supervision. Such courses are sometimes offered within (in some cases complemented or even substituted by) a CPD programme; and these differ in terms of content, length and providers.

The pilot showed that in Finland and Spain such post-graduate programmes, offered by universities to practitioners, represent additional educational activities not required by the law in order to practice, and therefore do not attract a high number of graduated students and practitioners. Thus, what is mandated, or expected, by national law in order to acquire or maintain a specialist status to practice as a W&O psychologist is

an important point to be considered when assessing applications to get the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in W&O Psychology.

Increasing the opportunities for post-graduate learning, and/or structuring those already available, although loose, activities and courses offered by private and public providers (universities, private companies, associations, freelance practitioners), in order to improve the professionalisation of W&O psychologists, is another important point to be considered by professional associations, institutions and universities. In countries like UK, and in the near future also in Italy, where CPD is mandatory to maintain the national qualification, the challenge is trying to figure out structured developmental programmes that aim to educate and train independent practitioners in a specific sector of work, organization or personnel psychology, in addition to the variety of short seminars and courses on various topics for more senior and expert practitioners.

Even the supervised practice and assessment of competences resulted to be in some cases new and challenging requirements. In many countries young psychologists have the experience of a supervised or coached practice, and also of a structured supervision or coaching programme; while in other countries supervision may be very limited, or absent. Therefore it is important to define supervision in a way that is more compatible with the W&O psychology field, elaborate theoretical models on the supervision process and also develop tools to record, store and document supervision. Even the assessment of competences was found to be a challenging and delicate requirement, both for the applicants in their self-assessment of competence and the provision of adequate evidence of competence. Even P-SNAC members found it difficult to accurately assess the possession of such competences in the applicants.

Interestingly, some applicants reported that although preparing the application was difficult and time consuming, the self-assessment of the competences was very useful to increase self-awareness of one's own skills. As for the Basic EuroPsy, although mobility is an important reason to start a EuroPsy specialist certification process, having guidelines on how to improve the discipline and the professional identity of W&O psychologists seems to be the most interesting outcome of this project. In other words, the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in W&O psychology may help in developing qualified programmes of post-graduate education in W&O psychology, and in supporting the

professional development by means of supervision and awareness of the competencies required to practice.

The procedure

In order to provide information about one's own career, educational learning, supervision and competences, applicants completed forms and checklists developed by the P-SEAC. Although this was expected to be an easy task, this was not the case. As many individuals will apply for the certificate providing a wide variety of information, educational activities, and so on, application forms will have to be refined and probably adapted to the specificity of that country and its requirements. It might also be useful to provide examples of well-completed applications, in order to clarify what and how much information should be given about one's own career and competences.

The choice to use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to quantify learning experiences and research activities, although more and more common in European Universities, was another source of difficulty. In many cases post-graduate learning activities are offered in terms of hours, or months and not credits. The pilot offered the opportunity to collect some cases that facilitated the 'translation' from the model "hours-weeks-months" to the ECTS model. But more cases are necessary to make such 'translation' even finer. And, in the long run, even the educational programmes or CPD will need to be designed and advertised using the ECTS model. The ECTS User Guide (EU, 2009) is recommended as the standard reference tool for this regard.

A final point related to the procedure, that has also some impact on the assessment of the requirements, is the fact that not all the European countries have adopted the Bologna process. This fact creates some complication in the counting of years of education useful to fulfill the requirements. However, this was managed with flexibility in the pilot and will require some co-ordination in the requirements for the Basic and for the Specialist Certificate that can be managed in a collaborative work between the S-EAC and the local S-NAC.

The structure

The Specialist Certificate in W&OP will benefit of the bodies and structures already established for the Basic Certificate. The already established European Awarding Com-

mittee (EAC) that oversees the whole EuroPsy project, the EFPA administrative staff and the Register, are resources that will definitely make easier the implementation of the Specialist certificate at the European level.

At the national level, the positive collaboration between EuroPsy Basic and Specialist structures will facilitate the process (like, for instance, the integrated or joint assessment of grand-parents applying for both the Basic and the Specialist Certificate), and also the efficient use of resources like the national website, the promotion of the EuroPsy project, the administrative procedures and the secretary staff. Such efficiencies will need to be optimised for the sustainability of the project.

Implementation issues

National associations of W&O psychologists are encouraged to consider the possibility to establish a W&OP S-NAC in order to improve and support the professionalisation of practitioners by offering opportunities and services in order to fulfill W&O EuroPsy Specialist certificate requirements.

Requirements for the implementation of the Specialist Certificate are:

- Support from the national W&O psychology association and its involvement in promotion of the project;
- Existence of a NAC for the EuroPsy Basic Certificate - because the Specialist certificate is awarded only to practitioners that have already (or can obtain jointly) the EuroPsy Basic Certificate;
- Constitution of a SNAC for the Specialist Certificate;
- Training of S-NAC members on the requirements and procedures of the Specialist Certificate;
- Translation of the documents on EuroPsy in the local language;
- Preparation of the application forms in the local language, based on the common format developed in the pilot test;
- Opening of a webpage for the Specialist Certificate in W&O Psychology within the website of the Basic EuroPsy;
- Publicity materials and publicity plans addressing both universities and professional associations.

Conclusions

The pilot test demonstrated the feasibility of the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in Work and Organizational Psychology. It raised interest in EuroPsy within the community of the W&O practitioners, generated awareness of the difficulties and challenges, and identified many useful practical points.

The pilot showed that some adaptation to local circumstances is needed, but also identified various pertinent experiences and practices in the education of W&O psychologists at the national level; in some case such practices are still experimental ones and in other cases they are more structured. Reinforcing and spreading such practices will allow the development of good quality standards that in a short-term might be shared across Europe.

EAWOP can have a key role to play in terms of developing, refining and sharing good practice regarding education and supervised practice, through the many activities that it runs, like its bi-annual conference, workshops, small group meetings, the WorkLab for practitioners and also continuing to describe experiences in this journal.

The contribution of EAWOP member associations (or Constituents) and individual members is vital to facilitate the spread of the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate.

Finally, the collaboration between EAWOP and EFPA can facilitate the knowledge and diffusion of the EuroPsy Certificate among the European institutions and the national authorities, by facilitating the recognition of the qualification of those psychologists that wish to work in the EU outside their own country.

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