

Specialist Certificate in W&O Psychology: The experience of the pilot test and future developments

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The EuroPsy Specialist Certificate and the Pilot Test

E.A.W.O.P. and E.F.P.A. (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 W&O psychology. As mentioned in the previous contribution in EWOP, 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 work and organizational (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 professionalization 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 WO 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 E.A.W.O.P., 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 harmonization of W&O psychology education and professional practice in Europe. The proposed standards were approved by E.A.W.O.P. General Assembly in May 2009, and accepted also by the General Assembly of E.F.P.A. in September of the same year. The proposal of the Task Force is available on the EAWOP website (<http://www.eawop.com/specialised-background>) and was shortly described in the previous interview (Ramos & Zappalà, 2016). Later, in 2011, another Task Force established by E.A.W.O.P., was called 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;
- c) offered a good geographical balance (especially 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 two different types of applicants:

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

The transitional period/“grand-parenting” route addressed experienced practitioners, that have many years of practice, while the “regular” route addressed younger practitioners, that are in the process or just finishing the professionalization 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 job career, job outputs and show evidence of the competences practiced on the job. 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.

In the whole almost 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 enough variety of situations and careers. About 75% of applications were ‘grand-parents’ and 25% were regular ‘applicants’. The assessment of applications resulted in an almost 10% of rejections, with the other 90% of applicants showing evidence of expertise, qualifications and of regular participation in continuous professional development (CPD) activities. It has to be said that most of the applications were obtained using the social network and knowledge of the P-SNAC members. Anyway, on the whole, 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.

The requirements

To obtain the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate in W&O psychology it is required: a) 90 ECTS of education and learning activities after the academic degree (of which 60 ECTS devoted to learning activities and 30 ECTS to applied research or assessment/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; 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 programs and training to fulfill the requirements are different across European countries. In some countries, like Finland or Spain, Universities started very recently to offer educational programs for practitioners, while in other countries, like Norway or UK, it is the national psychological association that regulates educational programs, offers courses, and requires structured supervision. Such courses are sometimes offered within (in some cases complemented or even substituted by) a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) program, and differ in terms of contents, length or providers.

The pilot showed that in Finland and Spain such post-graduate programs, offered by Universities to practitioners, represent additional educational activities not required by the law in order to practice, and does not attract a high number of graduated students and practitioners. Thus, what is mandated, or expected, by the national law in order to acquire or maintain a specialist status that allows 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 the already available, although loose, activities and courses offered by private and public providers (universities, private companies, associations, freelance practitioners), in order to improve the professionalization 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 are mandatory to maintain national qualification, the challenge is trying to figure out structured developmental programs that aim to educate and train an independent practitioner in a specific

sector of work, organization or personnel psychology, in addition to the variety of short, or daily, seminars and courses on various topics for more senior and expert ones.

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/coaching program, while in others there is very limited, if at all, experience of this. In both cases, anyway, there is the need 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 resulted to be a challenging and delicate requirement, both for the applicants, that have to self-assess their own competence and also figure out how to provide evidence of them, and for the P-SNAC members, that have to 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 programs of post-graduate education in the W&O psychology, and in supporting the professional development by means of supervision and competences' awareness.

The procedure

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

The choice to use the ECTS system 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. 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 programs or CPD (discussed above), will have to be designed and advertised using the ECTS model. The ECTS User Guide (EU, 2009) is recommended as the standard reference tool on 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 coordination 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 EAC (European Awarding Committee) 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 efficiency will have to be optimized also for the sustainability of the whole project.

Implementation issues

National association of W&O psychologists are encouraged to consider the possibility to establish a W&O P S-NAC in order to improve and support the professionalization of practitioners by offering opportunities and services in order they will 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) also 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 some other cases they are more structured. Reinforcing and spreading such practices will allow to develop good quality standards that in a short time might be shared across Europe.

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

The contribution of E.A.W.O.P. member associations and individual members is determinant in order to facilitate the spreading of the EuroPsy Specialist Certificate.

Finally, the collaboration between E.A.W.O.P. and E.F.P.A. can facilitate the knowledge and diffusion of the EuroPsy Certificate among the European institutions and the national competent authorities, by facilitating the recognition of the qualification of those psychologists that want to work in the EU outside their own country.

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