A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The Ways Forward

By Manuel Souto Otero
(ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

CONTENTS

> **Comment [CA1]:** Table of Contents automatically generated from Headings

1.0 THE WAYS FORWARD

By Manuel Souto Otero (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

The European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning is not an aim in itself; its value will primarily be being a tool for decision-makers in the area of non-formal and informal learning, in different sectors – public, private and voluntary. Its aim is not to provide a mere description of existing initiatives that pre-empts the debate on validation by providing an authoritative source on validation methodologies and practices. It is rather proposed as a source of information that stimulates debate.

In this context, there are two key issues to be addressed: how the disseminate the current European Inventory and how to take the European Inventory initiative forward in the future. We take each of these in turn below.

1.1   Dissemination of the European Inventory

1.1.1   Dissemination activities

A critical issue within the context of the current Inventory project is how to make it known and accessible to a wide audience. A series of steps have already been taken during the life of the project to ensure that the results of the Inventory reach the range of stakeholders interested in its results. These have included:

- The setting-up of a project web-site (http://ecotec.com/europeanInventory2004/). As set out in ECOTEC's proposal, during the project life a dedicated project website would be the main mechanism for dissemination of the project activities. Websites are a cost effective means for dissemination of project activities and outputs, providing easy access to information to interested parties. Through the setting up of a project website ECOTEC has made draft European Inventory chapters available for feedback from readers from January 2005.This has increased the transparency regarding work done and has served to improve the quality of the final chapters. The website, moreover, also puts the European Inventory in context and contains information on the Common European Principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, the previous European Inventory prepared by Danielle Collardyn and Jens Bojnavold, other literature on this topic and a glossary of key terms.

- Presentations about the Inventory project at different meetings in Brussels with the European Commission and the Expert's Working Group on validation of non-formal and informal learning, which included representatives from the private as well as public sector.

- Presentation at the European Commission - European Training Foundation conference on the Common European Principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, attended by public and private sector representatives from 13 countries (Vilnius, February 2004).

- Presentation at the "Bridges for recognition" conference organised by SALTO Youth, attended by 125 representatives from the Youth Sector, International organisations and educational institutions from a wide range of European and non-European countries (Leuven, January 2005).

- Distribution of project leaflets at the "Bridges for recognition" conference to disseminate information about ECOTEC's project website.

- Distribution of project leaflets at the "Beyond Dichotomies" conference, organised by the Comparative and International Education Society, at Stanford University (Palo Alto, March 2005), to disseminate ECOTEC's project website.

- Liaison with International Organisations such as CEDEFOP, the European Training Foundation and the International Labour Organisation at different stages during the life of the project.

- Interviews with public, private and voluntary sector organisations which served to collect primary information about existing initiatives, to gather feedback about the Inventory draft chapters and to disseminate the project website.

- Liaison with CEDEFOP's Virtual Community on Non-formal and Informal Learning. ECOTEC has liaised with the Community Moderator, and dissemination of the availability of the European Inventory Draft Chapters has been provided by the Community, which currently has a large membership of practitioners, policy-makers, private and voluntary sector representatives as well as academics, which numbers around 1,000 people.

- ECOTEC's European Inventory website is currently the second hit provided by the search engine Google.com – the most widely used search engine on the web - to a query on the words "European Inventory" (search on 14/05/05), providing easy access to the website for those who have heard about the project but are unaware of the website address. This would have to be considered when planning to move the website to a different server.

- A reference to the Inventory project will be made on ECOTEC's corporate website (www.ecotec.com), under the "Learning and Skills" theme.

1.1.2   European Inventory website

The project website already features on a number of public sector (The European Training Foundation, The European Science Education Portal (xplora), The European Association for Education of Adults, The Swedish National Commission on Validation website, the Finish CIMO, The Norwegian VOX, amongst others), voluntary sector (the European "Association of Colleges", Scouting Gelderland Netherlands, SALTO Youth, etc.) and private sector websites (for instance software and e-learning firms such as Koders and others, Leonardo Project Inflow). Some of these sites also provide links to the project website.

The Inventory could be further disseminated by establishing links to the project website from the websites of other organisations (European Commission 2010 website, CEDEFOP's website), or by moving the Inventory website to the CEDEFOP server, whilst re-directing visitors there from the current ECOTEC's Inventory website. An important aspect would be to add periodic news and updates to the website so as to keep its audience interested in a continuous use of the website, which could in the future also include following editions of the European Inventory.

The final version of the Inventory will be made available on the website as a number of individual chapters in Adobe Acrobat 7 (for use by those with lower internet bandwith or an interest in particular sections of the Inventory, for example particular chapters) and a single Adobe document. Adobe Acrobat 7 has a much more powerful search function than previous Adobe versions, making it possible to search for words throughout a single document (as opposed to the page-by-page search function of version 6). This would enable readers to have easy access to the information they are interested in within the Inventory.

In any event, it will be important that the website presents the European Inventory in its policy context to readers. In other words, the Inventory website should reflect the profile of the Inventory and the material it contains. We suggest that the structure for the final version of the European Inventory website as a result of this project is as follows:

Home: Introductory page, with links to sub-sections *Project Scope*
- Project Aims
- Policy Background

European Policy
- European Qualifications Framework
- European Common Principles for Validation of non-formal and informal learning
- "Peer learning" in the context of Europe 2010

European Inventory 2003
- Introduction
- Full report

European Inventory 2005
- Introduction
- Full report in one document
- Individual National chapters
- Illustration of good practice: case studies

Other Research on Validation of non-formal and informal learning
- Downloadable documents
- Excel matrixes with research references (providing details on the content of the referenced materials)

Links
- International sources (including the Virtual Community)
- National sources

Glossary
- From Cedefop, Terminology of vocational training policy – A multilingual Glossary for an enlarged Europe*, Tissot, P., 2004*

Contacts and Feedback
- ECOTEC contacts and feedback mechanisms

1.2 The future for the European Inventory initiative

1.2.1 Introduction

The current version of the European Inventory aimed to meet an existing need for a wider and deeper overview of validation initiatives in Europe and a clearer understanding of existing data-gaps than existed before. We believe that the Inventory presented in this report, notwithstanding its limitations, meets this need. Never before had systematic information on high-quality validation initiatives been collected for 30 European countries, which is also across different sectors, thus enabling a richer exchange of experiences than in the past. Positive feedback on the chapters has indeed already been received from different national authorities who have reviewed national chapters, by users of CEDEFOP's virtual community on validation of non-formal and informal learning and participants in the "Bridges for Recognition" conference organised by SALTO Youth, where the Inventory was presented[1].

We consider, however, that a debate should now be opened between those concerned with the use of the Inventory on how the project should be taken forward to be of greater use for stakeholders. Whereas the Inventory presented in this report will be of use for many, we hope, it is also necessary to point out that initiatives in this area are on-going. This great pace of reform makes necessary that the Inventory is continuously updated if it is going to be a reference point for those who it aimed to reach from the beginning of the initiative. Moreover, collecting data on validation initiatives on a large number of countries is a time-consuming task, precisely due to the extremely decentralised character of many of these initiatives. We therefore recommend that discussions on the future of the Inventory are opened between key stakeholders as to what shape should it take in the future as soon as possible.

These discussions could take as a base a broad range of possibilities, which should be filtered depending on the exact needs of the Inventory users. There are a number of current initiatives including:
- current national reforms of validation systems, on-going in a number of Western and Eastern European countries

---

[1] For the full evaluation by Bridges for recognition participants see http://www.salto-youth.net/BridgesEvaluation/ .

- the implementation of the Common European Principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning,

- the preparation of the European Qualifications Framework and also

- "peer-learning" developments in the context of Europe 2010.

These initiatives could be supported by this and future versions of the Inventory, but it would also be important to broaden discussions to include representatives from the private and voluntary sectors, as well as policy-makers.

1.2.2 *A new version of the European Inventory, with similar structure and new contents*

There are several alternatives on how to take the Inventory forward. Firstly, future editions of the European Inventory could present a similar description of national initiatives as the current Inventory. This option would have several practical and analytical advantages. Firstly, much of the work would entail updating and completing existing information, as opposed to creating a new Inventory structure. Readers would know what to expect on the new versions of the Inventory, and therefore would monitor the release of new reports if the information contained in it is of their interest. Even more importantly, opting for consistency in the nature of the data gathering will be useful in the context of tracing progress made in the Implementation of the Common Principles, not only from a top-down but also from a bottom-up approach (companies, sector, voluntary organisations). It is expected that the Inventory helps in monitoring progress on the implementation of the principles –see, for example, Michael Aribaud, European Commission[2]. For this, periodic editions of the Inventory, which have a certain degree of methodological consistency, are necessary. The Inventory could also present more information on the current "hot issues" around validation that develop through time. Notably, the next edition will probably need to take into greater consideration the increased emphasis on linking Lifelong Learning, and perhaps include more detail on HE.

The Bergen[3] (May 2005) Recommendations to Strand B (Validation of non-formal and informal learning) have indeed recommended that Lifelong-Learning should be integrated with the Bologna process, whilst recognising that Bologna has paradoxically "increased difficulty for adult participation and validation", an issue which should be addressed. The recommendations have also called for the discussion of an annual survey to monitor the implementation of validation in Universities and an Inventory of good practices to supplement a trends report on the issue. These monitoring systems and quality assurance procedures could be linked or even integrated with future editions of the Inventory.

---

[2] http://64.233.183.104/search?q=cache:2Ky0NSRwo-YJ:www.bbt.admin.ch/aktuell/events/praxistage/d/mai05_c.pdf+european+Inventory+validation+non-formal+and+informal+learning&hl=en checked on the 14/05/05

[3] http://www.eucen-conf29.uib.no/Proceedings/Bergen-Recommendations%20Feutrie.ppt#257,3,1 Bologna process and LLL

The conclusions of the "SALTO Youth" conference on "Bridges for recognition" also welcomed the European Inventory and a recommendation was made to the Acting Director of the Youth, Civil Society and Communication Unit that the initiative is continued, if providing additional information on the Youth Sector and other Third sector organisations (information on validation practices for those who participate in the youth activities as "users", but also for teachers, trainers and youth leaders).

Moreover, there is a need to enhance synergies between the Inventory and the on-going activities of other initiatives which collect information on validation of non-formal and informal learning, such as the on-going CEDEFOP eKnowVet data collection. Although it is necessary to recognise that the purposes of eKnowVet and the Inventory are different and therefore both projects have different data requirements, it is also true that synergies between both projects can be identified and it should be ensure that wastage in the collection of data is minimised whenever possible.

Networks are already available with national experts who undertook the current version of the Inventory, and methodological lessons have been learnt, therefore the completion of future Inventory projects could be quicker, and with a very high degree of efficiency. ECOTEC could support the organisation taken this option forward, regardless of who the contractor is.

1.2.3 *A sector-specific European Inventory*

The existing version of the European Inventory provides an overview of a wide range of initiatives, in a very large number of countries. This necessarily leads to a number of trade-offs to make the project viable and feasible. It is now up to stakeholders to decide whether the level of information provided in this Inventory is useful, and whether, regardless of its usefulness at present, future Inventory versions should lead in different directions. In other words, is the right level of detail needed by stakeholders in the future? Or are there any particular areas where further information should be made available? In particular, and given the differences in the aims, purposes and therefore emphasis on different methodologies used in different sectors, but also the unbalance in the availability and difficulty in the collection of information for these different sectors, it may be preferable to produce sector-specific inventories in the future, perhaps on a rota basis (private-voluntary-public) depending on the availability of resources. The interest of the voluntary sector in this type of sector-specific Inventory was evident at the Bridges for Recognition conference, but it also was evident the full acceptance and the need to maintain links between the analysis of validation initiatives in all sectors and play within the framework of wider developments in this area. Striking the right balance between detail and general overview is therefore a key issue. In addition to an external contractor, should this option be preferred, there are a number of networks that could collaborate on this task, such as NARIC or National Reference Points, coordinated by a central unit which would link findings from different organisations. What organisations should be involved in this process depends on the nature of the Inventory to be produced. When information is mainly to be collected for the private sector a questionnaire to the right contacts in National Ministries topped-up with a small number of interviews may be a simple and efficient way to approach the collection of information, in particular given existing information (National Reference Point, for example, may be able to do this efficiently and

with relatively low resources). Yet Ministries and pubic authorities are not best placed, we have found, to inform on private and third sector initiatives. This requires approaching a different set of stakeholders, and has proved a very time-consuming process; a different contractor therefore may be needed for this task.

1.2.4   *An Inventory focused on methodologies*

A third option would be to undertake methodologically-specific Inventories in the future, focusing mainly on illustrating best-practice. This would require a previous filter of initiatives from the existing Inventory, as a first task, to select those for which further detail should be provided in the future. The selection would arguably need to take into consideration the methodological quality of the initiatives, but also try to search a balance and provide information about how to improve the methodology of initiatives in which take-up is higher, that more cost-effective, or have stronger political support or relevance for companies/ voluntary sector. Compliance with the Common Principles should be another key factor to be taken into consideration in the selection of initiatives. The level of detail needed in the description of these methodologies may need to be discussed with different types of stakeholders, who will of course have different needs. The description of the methodologies could go deeper into the background and aims of that methodology and illustrate best practice through a very in-depth description of them, in the form of one or two case-studies from which other organisations and individuals can replicate the methodology or select points of it for their own work. Whereas public organisations may be willing to reveal such a level of detail about the design and application of methodologies, collection of similar information from the private sector will prove more challenging, and this should be appropriate consideration.

1.2.5   *A platform for updating the European Inventory*

The platform for updating the Inventory in the future can be supported, but cannot be led by the establishment of a permanent project website with a central point of contact. Information on public, but in particular private and voluntary sector initiatives needs to be actively sought by the Inventory manager, rather than be expected from stakeholders. That has been the approach used in the production of the current Inventory, entailing a large task in following up leads on validation initiatives obtained in conferences, interviews and literature review. The platform should nevertheless contain mechanisms for feedback and updating by readers (e.g. through dedicated feedback e-mail addresses) and also for support for readers (e.g. through an "info" e-mail where additional information about existing initiatives or contact details could be requested). The platform could also contain a section on on-going research activities, where authors or readers could publish short reviews of available material, for example in the style of the American Journal "Education Review", which specialises in making reviews available to readers on a range of education issues.

In our opinion, ultimately, the decision over the different shapes of the Inventory to be undertaken in the future is as much a political decision which should be made depending on the needs of the Inventory's users and the political will to support the initiative as a technical question.