



European Observatory of Validation of non-formal and informal activities

Final Report

Public Part

Project information

Project acronym: OBSERVAL

Project title: European Observatory of Validation of non-formal and informal activities

Project number: 2007-1987/001-001 LE 3-NETWOR

Sub-programme or KA: Leonardo da Vinci Thematic Networks

Project website: <http://www.observal.org/observal/>

Reporting period: From 01/11/2007
To 31/10/2010

Report version: 1

Date of preparation: 24.12.2010

Beneficiary organisation: European University Continuing Education Network
EUCEN

Project coordinator: Oliver Janoschka

Project coordinator organisation: EUCEN

Project coordinator telephone number: +34 93 542 1825

Project coordinator email address: Oliver.janoschka@eucen.org

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.

This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

© 2008 Copyright Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency.

The document may be freely copied and distributed provided that no modifications are made, that the source is acknowledged and that this copyright notice is included.

Executive Summary

How can the transparency and recognition processes of qualifications and competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings be improved? How can best practices developed 'on the ground' in the different sectors among the European Member States be made visible and accessible?

OBSERVAL has developed a strong Network of experts dealing with the practice of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The consortium, coordinated by EUCEN, the European Association for University Lifelong Learning bestowed great care on involving partners outside higher education from all sectors. The consortium consisted of 27 partner institutions, with representatives coming from 21 European Member States and 3 EFTA countries, covering all educational sectors (HE, VET, AE, 3rd sector) with close links to approximately 250 validation experts through the National Working Groups.

The nucleus for the core vision of OBSERVAL was to create an online platform and database- the European Observatory. This resource website has been regularly updated, providing an easy access to all produced materials and resources on validation of non formal and informal learning in European countries. Based on the creation of a network of national experts having a leading role in their countries and a general vision of existing practices, the Observatory is promoting best practices, stimulating discussions and a bench-learning approach and supporting further developments in the field among and beyond the network.

OBSERVAL has contributed to overcome fragmented approaches, scattered practices and deep divergences in the conception of validation issues in Europe. The Observatory supported actors working for years on these issues at local, national and European levels and helped to

- Collect and analyse existing data and present it in a common format.
- Identify regulations, organisation, pilot projects and experiments, standards and reference frameworks, tools and methods, etc.
- Review national debates or discussions between the most influent actors (ministries, learning and training organisations, social partners, companies, NGOs, academic researchers) on validation issues.
- Situate the debates in a “lifelong learning culture” and in a European policy context.
- Review research on the policy and practice of validation and create an annual annotated bibliography and literature review.
- Promote an annual European validation prize

The OBSERVAL network, with its main elements - the Observatory and the National Working Groups –created a forum for in-depths information and exchange on validation practices and policies in the different sectors in nearly all European Member States.

For more information about the OBSERVAL Network and all produced materials, please visit the European Observatory directly: <http://www.observal.org>

Table of Contents

1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....	5
2. PROJECT APPROACH.....	5
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS.....	10
4. PARTNERSHIPS	15
5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE	15
6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES	19
7. EXTRA HEADING/SECTION.....	19

1. Project Objectives

In 2007 when the OBSERVAL network was initially founded, the `validation-landscape` looked very different from now. Three to four years ago, actors involved in the practice of validation of non formal and informal learning throughout Europe complained about a lack of transparency and visibility of what was actually happening on the ground in the different sectors of the Member States. The general feeling was that the Inventories done by ECOTEC, or, for instance, progress reports towards the Lisbon objectives were not offering a clear or comprehensive demonstration of the richness of practices, and of the reality of debates and discussions at national and European level.

These informal discussions carried the nucleus for the core vision of the OBSERVAL consortium: to create a database, regularly updated, available in an online European Observatory, providing materials and resources on validation of non formal and informal learning in European countries, based on the creation of a network of national experts (including actors from learning and training organisations in all sectors, including NGOs) having a leading role in their countries and a general vision of existing practices.

The ambition was to produce and collect documents and to disseminate them to a broad range of actors (decision makers at national and institutional level, social partners, human resources managers, people in charge of validation, populations interested in validation issues...). The format of an online Observatory platform was to ensure visibility and accessibility for national materials which are normally hard to find and/or or not widely known or used in the public domain. The quality assurance strategy helped to present all materials in common formats to facilitate understanding and to allow comparison.

Key emphasis has been given to the structure and design of the European Observatory as an interactive and dynamic platform for a network of experts working in different sectors and at different levels, and for the wider public, in order to:

- Collect and analyse existing data and present it in a common format.
- Identify regulations, organisation, pilot projects and experiments, standards and reference frameworks, tools and methods, etc.
- Review national debates or discussions between the most influent actors (ministries, learning and training organisations, social partners, companies, NGOs, academic researchers) on validation issues.
- Situate the debates in a “lifelong learning culture” and in a European policy context.
- Review research on the policy and practice of validation and create an annual annotated bibliography and literature review.
- promote an annual European validation prize

The OBSERVAL network, with its main tools - the Observatory and the national working groups - intended to create a forum for in-depths information on validation practices and policies in the different sectors in nearly all European Member States, promoting best practices and stimulating discussions and further developments in the field among and beyond the network.

2. Project Approach

Management

The OBSERVAL network was managed by a group of European experts acting as the Steering Group (SG) preparing and taking all main decisions for the project.

The SG consisted of senior experts, with a track record on European projects and LLL-policy and systems, working actively for many years at institutional, national and international level on validation of non formal and informal learning issues. The Group has met six times since the beginning of the project (on 16 November 2007, 6 March 2008, 24-25 November 2008, 5 May 2009, 11 May 2010, 12 October 2010) and worked continuously via email and by telephone conferences to manage the network during its lifecycle.

Precisely, the main tasks of the Management Group were:

- to coordinate and manage the project;
- to monitor progress in the production of data by country leaders and national groups;
- to draw up grids, tools and methodology for country to collect data;
- to analyse data collected;
- to carefully develop a comprehensive concept for the implementation of the Observatory as the main platform and website of the network;
- to prepare and organise the events scheduled in the project: meetings of country leaders, the European Forum and the Dissemination Event, to organise the awards of the Validation Prize;
- To identify the conditions to ensure sustainability for the Observatory and produce an analysis of the results for printed publication.

Each member of the Management Group had a specific role:

- Michel Feutrie was the responsible Project manager and the scientific expert of the project; after May 2009 Oliver Janoschka has been acting as Project Director.
- Mireille Pouget was the methodological expert. She was in contact with all country leaders to guide them in collecting data, to review the content of the information provided before registration in the Observatory and prepare transversal analysis in relationship with the members of the Steering Group; she took part in the selection of case studies for the validation prize award;
- Pat Davies, Ruud Duvekot and John Konrad were in charge of the contacts with the countries without a national leader, of the development of European and national policies regarding validation of non formal and informal learning, and of the preparation of the European validation prize. They contributed to the analysis of data;
- Audrey Frith was in charge of the contacts with third sector using the EUCIS-LLL platform as a resource;
- Michel Blachère was the external evaluator.

Country leaders & National Working Groups

Country leaders

A crucial element of OBSERVAL's methodology was the identification of and engagement with experienced country leaders from the 'ground' and the establishment of national working groups made up of key representatives from different sectors in nearly all European Member States.

The country leaders had the role of **national experts** and were responsible to produce, collect and update data at national level. Furthermore, each national expert was in charge of setting up a National Working Group involving representatives of the different sectors, engaged in the work of the Observatory. These National Working Groups worked autonomously and contributed to the production of materials and the discussion of results.

Specifically, the mission of the country leaders was:

- To set up a national group made of representatives from different educational sectors: higher education, vocational education and training, and adult education (third sector) or professional sector to help them to gather relevant data and to guarantee the quality of these data.
- To be the national contacts for the Steering Group in charge of the production of data concerning their country.
- To gather and prepare the data for the Observatory, and in particular:
- To collect four categories of "formal" or "official" data: laws and regulations, tools and methodologies, statistics, useful websites;
- To prepare Case studies;
- To prepare an initial National Review, annually updated and completed;
- To create an annotated review of the most interesting reports, articles, books published in their country concerning validation issues.
- To complete and update the data as far as new developments occurred in the country
- To make proposals about future developments of validation processes.

Full Partner meetings

To facilitate discussions and review the work and the developments within the Network, three main meetings were scheduled and undertaken:

- At the beginning of the project the first meeting was organised in Barcelona on 24-25 January 2008, to form the network, to explore in greater detail the proposal and the work plan, to share the objectives of the project and to launch the process.
- The second meeting took place alongside with the European Forum in November 2009 in Sweden. During the meeting the state of play of the project and the transversal analysis of the information was presented. The first draft of the Observatory was launched and discussed with all partners. Furthermore, the awarding ceremony of the 1st European Validation Prize took place, awarding the first prize to a case study from an Adult Education organisation in Switzerland,

- The Final meeting coincided with the final dissemination conference in Brussels (Belgium) in October 2010. It was an opportunity for all partners to discuss the final results and the impact of the network together with external participants and experts. Special emphasis was given to the discussion of the future perspectives of the Observatory. The second validation prize ceremony took place at the end of the Brussels conference with the prize awarded to another Adult Education organisation from Austria.

National Working Groups

The role of the national team was to help the country leader identify existing useful documents, good (or bad) practices which could then form a basis for useful case studies, and contribute to the elaboration of the national 'state of play' reports written and updated annually. The team leader was responsible for organising the membership and managing the working group, while being the key contact for the Management Group.

The diversity of Validation practices, policies and systems in European Member States is represented in the status and composition of the 23 national working groups, which have been set up during the projects lifetime. The national working groups differed greatly from one country to another in terms of scale, of the type of institutions mobilised, and in terms of their members' level of responsibility and overall participation.

However, the network's high value was demonstrated by the way in which, in nearly all the countries, OBSERVAL encouraged and enabled experts 'from the ground' from different sectors to collaborate, and exchange their views and experiences on validation issues, for the first time; it also showed the many gaps which this project was able to fill. The network's achievement in this respect is even more impressive, given the restrictive regulations which prevented the involvement and funding of external working group members, resulting in limited participation on the one hand, and high volunteering efforts on the other.

External evaluator

The evaluator was a member of the Steering Group with a specific role. He worked independently to guarantee the accountability of the process. He received all documents and was invited to attend all meetings. He established direct contacts with country leaders/national teams, conveyed and analysed surveys and presented his feedback at the end of each meeting of the Steering Group. His role was to monitor, progress towards achievements of the project's goals, effectiveness and efficiency of implementation, quality of management and co-ordination.

Quality Assurance and the Observatory

Throughout the network, an essential aspect of the OBSERVAL approach was the combination of data collection and production (through the country leaders and their respective national working groups) and bench learning processes where all partners were invited to learn from each others experiences and practices. This principle was established

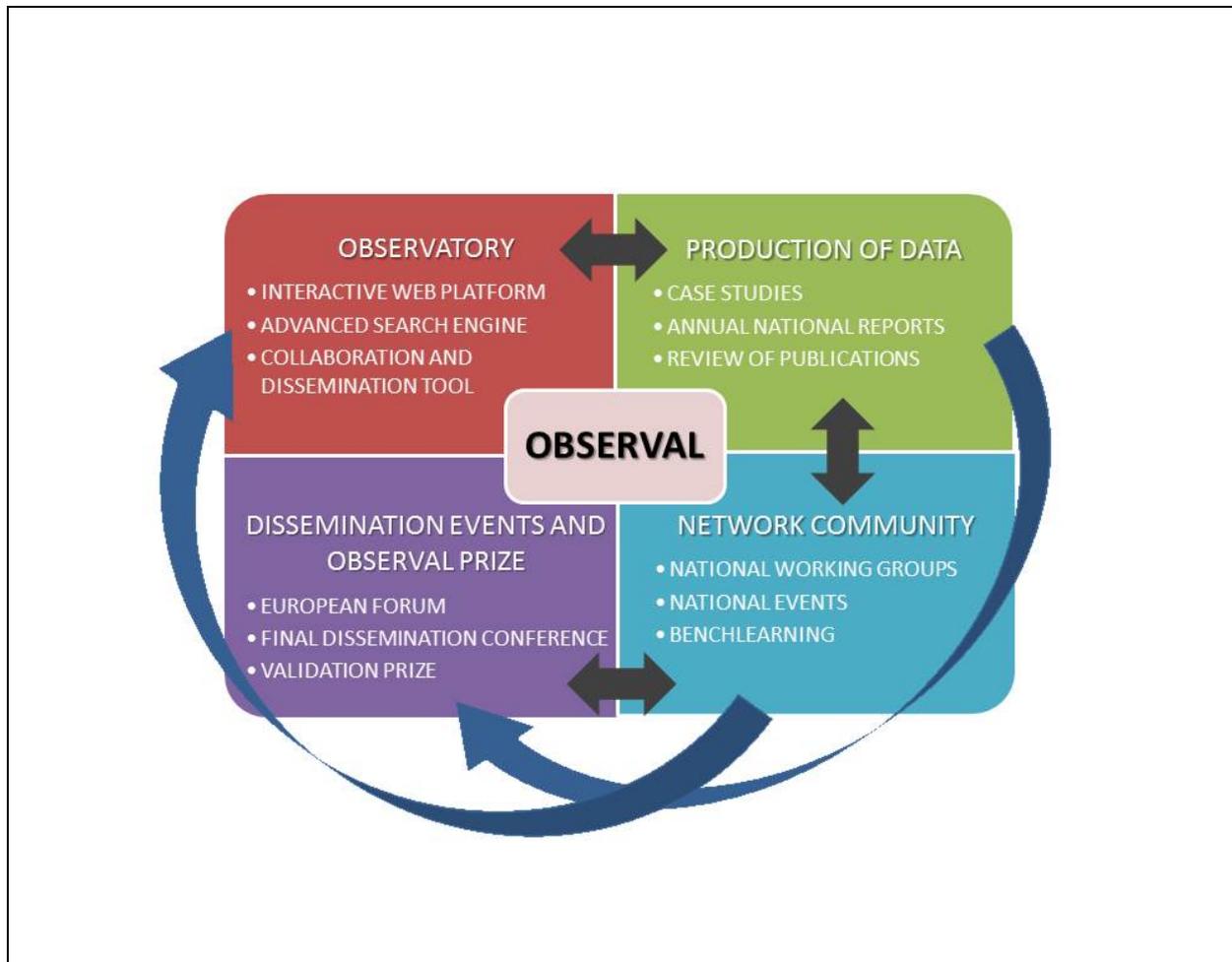
through different elements. First of all, the meeting structure provided a forum for exchange and extensive discussion on key-issues and trends internally but also in exchange with external experts.

Secondly, the Steering Group and in particular the quality assurance expert provided tools (grids, templates, etc.) to develop a common format for the production of data. In addition, assistance and feedback was given regarding the produced materials (case studies, national reports, reviews, etc) in order to assure the overall quality of the content.

Last not least the Observatory as a platform for exchange that catalysed the joint efforts of the network. From the start of the project it was clear that all results were at a later stage to be shared through this online-tool which would demonstrate the dynamic of the ongoing debate in Europe on validation of non-formal and informal learning. This way, partners were encouraged and monitored through the quality expert to provide high quality data for this public website and at the same time they were invited to review each others material and to learn more about the situation in other European countries concerning validation.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The outcomes of the OBSERVAL network are manifold and closely interlinked. The following graphic visualizes the different dimensions and relations of them to provide an overall picture of the network results.



Network Community

National Working Groups

The creation of national working groups represents one of the most innovative aspects of OBSERVAL. Instead of relying on one 'expert' in each country, *the aim was to create a core group of experts, practitioners and decision-makers, people with a vested interest in seeking examples and reporting back, on the understanding that they were asked for their analysis of the situation, and that of the group.* It proved a complex undertaking for some countries to set up the national group and create a consensus for action. In the end, one of the outcomes of the creation of the national working groups, however imperfect their compositions, has been to create a questioning, a growing awareness as well as a reality on the ground of the potentials of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in that country.

When partners probed, contacted decision makers, practitioners, local or national actors, they “made waves”, they stimulated a ‘conversation’ locally and in many instances nationally, while discussions developed within the national group meetings. In other words, the national working groups created a momentum, which did not exist before, in particular in the Eastern and Central European countries.

Production of Data

In order to reach OBSERVAL’s main objectives, creating an interactive web-platform with a huge network community of experts involved, the production and collection of various materials and resources in the different countries and educational systems could be seen as the foundation and key-object for all other related activities. In the light of the diversity of the national situations and achievements in the field of validation, the achievement of the Project’s high standards of Quality Assurance was a significant challenge. The following paragraph illustrates the genuine engagement of most of the network partners involved.

Results in figures

Introducing the data from a quantitative perspective, the first focus is concentrated on the case studies results which in themselves may be considered as substantial. Indeed, by the end of 2010 the project has produced 69 case studies, all checked before publication on the Observatory. Depending on the way of classifying them, the case studies cover the different educational sectors in the following way:

- 23 CS are focused on Higher Education (14 with cross-references to other sectors)
- 42 CS are related to Vocational Education and Training (24 with cross-references to other sectors)
- 14 CS introducing Employer based or WBL (12 with cross-references to other sectors)
- 29 CS dealing with Adult Education (28 with cross-references to other sectors)
- 29 CS referring to the 3rd Sector (29 CS with cross-references to other sectors)

We have received Annual National Reports from 25 countries. Most partner countries updated their annual report three times, for 2008, 2009 and 2010. Depending on the dynamics of the development in the respective country, these updates vary substantially.

Analysis

Cross sectoral collaboration and practices

However, those figures only tell a partial story. First of all, the categories do overlap. Some adult education organisations are involved with either ‘training’ adults in a VET area, issuing their own competence-based qualification (Switzerland), or are working in partnership with a formal training – Further Education institution (Austria), or for example delivering guidance to adults (Denmark, Sweden). Another example of disappearing boundaries between sectors can be found when some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are delivering professional ‘training’ or programmes for local authorities’ employees (Italy), or for companies as part of

their Human Resources management (France, Sweden) or for Trade Unions (Sweden, Denmark).

The boundaries between sectors are thus not necessarily clearly defined. This reflects the growing importance of partnership building and the recognition by local actors of the necessity to work across professional divides and organisational boundaries.

Drivers and barriers:

Another significant outcome achieved through the case studies is to provide an understanding about the way strategies and practices appear to develop, i.e., from a practice-based perspective, almost organic in its developmental quality. In the Brussels final conference, we talked about a 'bottom-up' approach emerging, in the way that local organisations and institutions developed pragmatic strategies based on responses to local need, and, thanks to local actors' knowledge of their environment, initiated practices requiring collaboration across sectors.

Drivers

It seems possible to conclude, from the case studies collected, that the most successful examples of validation stemmed from situations, which benefitted from the following 'drivers':

- Existing tradition of adult education practices, or a strong 3rd sector and adult education sector (such as Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Romania or Sweden)
- Existing local partnerships, or a political or regional / local environment propitious to the creation of partnerships (such as Chambers of Commerce, Trade Unions, . .)
- Existing HE and employers partnerships
- Devolved governance: the more decentralised the decision-making process, the more likely it is for local partnerships and local solutions for local issues to be found. The exception to this is France, which has the only national legislative framework on validation. However, even there, legislation is an 'enabler', in as much as it has spurred activities at a local level, and spurred partnerships too (universities and local or national companies, for example).
- At national level, joined-up thinking between ministries or government departments
- National or local funding: funding determines whether or not practices will get off the ground. In some countries, employers are willing to pay; and/or Trade Unions to contribute; and/ or validation candidates also have to contribute.
- In the central and Eastern European countries, there is no doubt that European funding, and the development of NQFs, have contributed to the development of practices in validation, essentially in the VET sector
- A well developed VET sector.
- Universities' cooperation in research on new practices.

Barriers

Partners struggled to collect examples of validation in countries where there was:

- A centralised governance (top down), and where ministries do not share the decision-making process (for example, separate ministerial responsibility for VET, for HE and research, and / or for employment), with little or no joined-up thinking between them
- Excessive reliance on quality assurance mechanisms in the form of examinations and formal evaluation of competences; it is difficult for countries with a strong tradition of formal examinations to trust different ways of assessing different kinds of knowledge; this often results in practices which are accrediting prior certificated knowledge (or credit transfer in some cases) rather than truly evaluating non-formal and informal learning
- The same distrust of flexible evaluation methods usually goes together with a structural lack of flexibility in accessing HE or formal education for adults with a non traditional educational background, along with a weak or inexistent tradition of adult education/ 3rd sector presence
- A lack of HE involvement (in wider professional learning networks for instance) and wide academic resistance to introduce forms of knowing and evaluating which are not 'academic' in the traditional sense

The Observatory

The European Observatory on validation practices of non formal and informal learning in European countries is the key product of the **OBSERVAL** network and it is serving four main functions:

- First of all, it is a frequently updated, web-based database for all produced and collected materials. Special emphasis has been given to provide advanced search capabilities making it easy to find documents based on the preferences of the different users¹ and in this way improve accessibility and comparability of validation materials. Carefully designed uploading-procedures stimulate proactive participation by the partners while ensuring needs for a clear defined quality assurance process.
- It is a powerful platform for disseminating key-information, innovative practices and new developments in the field targeting [at] and bringing together a broad range of stakeholders, policy makers and experts interested in validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- It is a well-designed tool for online-interaction and collaboration. Registered users can share information and collaborate by using the integrated user forum. A sophisticated but flexible user rights management offers scaled participation possibilities.
- It serves the bench learning approach of the network, enabling partners not only to collect and display materials but also to exchange, analyse and comment key information and discuss results.

¹ The Europe map makes it easy to get a first overview by country. The advanced search engine provides plenty of specifications which help to find the desired documents. The preview-function is an additional tool to work with the materials online.

Dissemination Events & OBSERVAL´s Validation Prize

During the Project lifecycle the Observal network conceptualised and planned during its projects lifecycle two main dissemination events inviting all partners, representatives of the National Working Groups and a broad range of stakeholders and experts (researchers, policy-makers, social partners, professionals, etc.) from all sectors and levels to come together (European Forum – November 2009 - in Jönköping, SE, Final Dissemination Conference - October 2010 -Brussels, BE). Both events and venues were strategically planned to coincide respectively with the Swedish and the Belgian Presidency of the EU, thus [trying to] ensuring a close link to national and European policy agendas. At the same time OBSERVAL´s participatory approach with workshops, round tables and discussion [rounds] ensured a high level of interaction, exchange and vivid discussions. This way, as well as presenting the networks progress and its results, the events were learning opportunities in their own right, contributing to a shared understanding of validation, helping to work on a common language and joint definitions of concepts, and identifying key drivers and obstacles in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The combination of a European with a national and/or sectoral dimension connecting a broad range of experts and stakeholders in these events also contributed to review debates and recent developments, and help to identify future trends which consequently unfolded the panorama of different learning cultures and providing references to the European policy context.

Special emphasis was given to the dissemination of best practices in the field of validation. A specific tool to reach this objective and to interlink the production of relevant and high quality materials from the partners with the recognition of a wider public was the creation of an annual OBSERVAL Validation Prize for the best case study. The selection was based on a set of predefined criteria, and the case study selected from those sent in that year by the partners; the selection of case studies was assessed, discussed and evaluated by a group of external validation experts who agreed to be part of the OBSERVAL Validation Prize-Jury. All nominated case studies were briefly introduced during the event and the winners were presented and awarded in a public ceremony.

4. Partnerships

The OBSERVAL consortium consisted of 27 partner institutions, with representatives coming from 21 European Member States and 3 EFTA countries, covering all educational sectors (HE, VET, AE, 3rd sector) with close links to approximately 250 validation experts through the National Working Groups.

For the remaining countries the Steering Group worked on gathering information through establishing contacts with external experts and through site visits. Thus OBSERVAL succeeded in collecting relevant information from nearly all European Member States and the EFTA countries concerning concrete activities and practices in validation of non formal and informal learning.

EUCEN, the European Association for University Lifelong Learning, representing more than 220 Universities in Europe and being the coordinating and contracting institution of the Observal network, bestowed great care on involving partners outside higher education from all sectors. Close collaboration links were established with institutions from all educational sectors, involving experts from the 'ground' in VET, AE - the third sector, private sector representatives (such as Chambers of Commerce), to cover the whole picture on the dynamic and diverse developments in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Around 1/3 (32%) were coming from the vocational education and training sector or from ministries of Education, slightly more than 1/3 (35%) were coming from higher education institutions and the last third were linked to the field of adult education and the private sector (companies, professional bodies, private vocational education institutions,...).

EUCIS-LLL, the European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning which was contributing to the network and which was represented in the Steering Group, supported to establish links to different educational institutions and networks in the countries and to diffuse key information about the progress of the OBSERVAL network.

At national level with national working groups

As mentioned above, the main channel to gather this level of expertise and to collect the data for the Observatory covering all sectors, country leaders were asked to set up a National Working Group in their country. The status of these groups differed greatly; however, we registered positively the fact that in a maximum of countries where no formal space for this kind of approach existed, actors interested in validation met and sometimes undertook a work that they wished to continue even after the life of the project. Exemplary for others, we would like to quote from one internal evaluation concerning the impact of the National Working Groups:

“Despite the rather reduced role played by the national WG as a collective entity, the high mutual esteem among the group members and their awareness about the importance of validation of prior IF and NF learning in LLL policy and practice constitute the substantial basis for keeping the WG alive even after the end of the Observal project period. The WG might not necessarily want to meet physically at regular intervals, but rather interact virtually, but in any case the WG members agree about the necessity to continue the up-dating, maintenance and development of the Italian section of the Observatory. In order to inform on the results reached by the OBSERVAL projects and to discuss modes and ways of giving stability to Italian contribution to the Observatory tool that has been created, a meeting of the NWG has been organized in Rome for December 3rd, 2010.” (Italian NWG)

5. Plans for the Future

Testimonies

“A second phase of cooperation within the Observal network ought to start now when all the data is gathered. All the rich and interesting data is a source for research and further cooperation at trans-national level as well as between colleagues in Europe. It has been very stimulating with all new contacts, friendships and cooperation-Observal has contributed to expose validation activities. Competencies acquired within the project should be utilized and safeguarded in order not to get lost.” (Christina Chaib, NWG Sweden).

“I am writing to confirm PLIRC's interest in building on the excellent work of the Observal Working Group by producing a similar database tool for other countries beginning with those participating in PLIRC.” (Joy Van Kleef, Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL).

“In short, the main overall message would be to inscribe OBSERVAL in the long term. And this means a good tool, a clear message and a community to serve as main vehicle for this message.” (Patrick Werquin, chairperson of OBSERVAL’s final dissemination conference)

During the past weeks many experts and stakeholders - inside and outside of the network, closely involved or observing it from a distance - showed particular interest in the main OBSERVAL products and results and articulating a common appeal: to explore possibilities on how to continue this valuable work.

In fact, the question of sustainability has been raised throughout the projects lifecycle, and the project management has made considerable efforts to reinforce links with the European Commission, CEDEFOP and GHK² to investigate the potential for collaboration and a joint approach with other main initiatives (e.g. the Inventory). However, even though the genuine interest is high and the discussions with official representatives of European institutions have been intensified and look promising, up to this date the different possibilities are still in the process of further investigation and this report intends to contribute to the panorama of this scenery.

From a meta-perspective one could say that “the spirits that had been called for” are all there, so that the overall success of OBSERVAL, which managed to establish a vibrant network of validation experts from all different sectors (s. chapter 4: Partnerships), collecting so much relevant data (s. chapter 3 Project Outcomes& Results), now needs supportive structures to exploit this momentum further.

In general, it lies within EUCEN’s genuine interest and commitment as a university network, to exploit its project results and disseminate interesting findings and innovative materials to all partners in the network. For this reason, the Observatory will be kept available, providing a good opportunity for all users to access the platform and work with all produced materials.

However, in order to avoid the following threats additional measures need to be considered to secure the continuation of the Observatory:

- Without the incentive provided by OBSERVAL, the ‘conversation’ at national level will stop, especially in those countries where the VNF-IFL is only still emerging as an acceptable concept and practice. Observal enabled key actors in VNF-IFL to

² A consultancy in charge of the current version of the Inventory

recognise each other in their own respective countries, and to take some ownership of the 'moving' forward of validation practices. However, the dialogues at national levels were just beginning to take root, and discontinuity will inevitably lead to the phasing out of the discussions.

- Moreover, It is essential to point out that the Observatory is more than a repository of factual information. It is, a primary source of data, which OBSERVAL could not, in the limited lifespan of the project, begin to analyse in any meaningful way. All OBSERVAL could do was to extract some broad lines of reflexion (see Brussels presentation) in the final months of the project. The sheer volume of material received precluded in the end a proper analysis. This analysis, however, is still needed. Most partners demand it.
- The data will soon become 'out of date', or, at the very least, just interesting case studies, frozen in time.
- The Observatory goes beyond an inventory; it is a Community of Practice where practitioners, decision-makers, researchers can meet and contribute to the emerging picture and strengthen the impact on practice. However, it cannot sustain itself without input from a management team, to sort through, check, categorise and eventually publish on the Observatory, to make it a real interactive tool. For the project to have a final justification there needs to be a continuity to enable a proper analysis of VNF-INF in Europe. At present the Observatory presents a coherent set of data, but no comparative analysis, nor a summative evaluation of the status quo.

Against this background, a short and a midterm perspective seems appropriate to capture the seeds of success and to grow a stable validation network.

In the short term, two dimensions seem to be essential:

- To intensify the exchange and level of collaboration of the network. The vision of an European-wide *social network on the validation of non formal and informal learning, to elaborate a 'grassroots' European knowledge transfer, a forum where citizens, researchers, practitioners and decision-makers share their experience and learn together, seems right now feasible and ready for implementation*. The results of the initial project clearly show the overall motivation and the need for additional work within a European dimension. As discussed during the final partners' meeting in Brussels, one direction leads to focus, using specific sub-working groups on key-topics, and to develop training sessions extracted from the collected materials. This could evolve into a professionalization programme, sharing best practices and providing a forum for discussion and improvement for other experts in other sectors and countries. In addition, it would stimulate further activities through expanded National Working Groups, whose members will become more representative of a desired cross section of key actors in their respective countries, and whose activities will be more formalised and better funded;
- To develop a comprehensive and systematic approach for a comparative analysis, and a summative evaluation of the status quo using the network's expertise to carry out extensive analysis of existing and future data, combining researchers in lifelong learning (or continuing education) and practitioners, through its partnerships within the lifelong learning community of practice in Europe, and reaching out to all the sectors concerned: 3rd sector, VET, Industry, national organisations and agencies. Thus, drawing the

appropriate lessons from the case studies' testimonies, reports and documents in order to produce regular recommendations and updates to the Commission, and to the member states;

In a mid-term perspective the present results of the OBSERVAL network call for focused discussions in the direction of developing a joint approach with the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and informal learning and the revised European Validation-Guidelines. Last but not least the level of interest shown by global initiatives and institutions (e.g. UNESCO, PLIRC) as stated above could help to explore collaboration possibilities and synergy effects with pan-European networks and communities.

“In conclusion one is confronted to a double necessity:
- To save the amount of work and the concrete issues of OBSERVAL.
- To find a smart solution to make it live as a community sharing values and good practices.” (Michel Blachere, external evaluator of the OBSERVAL network)

6. Contribution to EU policies

„Development has to be seen, to be believed in and if development is believed in, it will soon be seen. “ (Ruth Cohn, 1984)

During the projects lifecycle, the field of validation of non formal and informal learning has unfolded a dynamic which has progressively transformed the European state of play from a more or less exclusively policy driven approach to a vibrant validation-scenery with real activities and numerous developments in the European Member States.

Thus the slogan “Making lifelong learning a reality”, as it was reinforced in the revised Strategic framework for Cooperation in Education and Training in 2009, is not only expressing a strategic priority, but the fact that there are real practices in the different educational sectors which underpin this objective and help substantially to cross the slim line from “Rhetoric to Reality³”.

Consequently, in such a mainstreaming process it is of crucial relevance to show and display the current good practices, the “flesh on the validation bone”; in this way transparency and accessibility can help to diffuse key information and events which are important landmarks for continuous innovations and further developments in the European validation landscape.

This is what OBSERVAL has achieved; it has also helped to overcome deep divergences in the conception of validation issues in Europe, fragmented approaches and scattered practices. The Observatory supported actors working for years on these issues at local, national and European levels and helped to pave the bumpy road for trust in validation. The network contributed overall

- To enrich of the reflection of decision makers at European level about the concrete contribution of validation processes in the implementation of the European policies through the Lisbon process together with the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.
- To inform these decision makers about difficulties, resistances, misunderstandings, which could limit the developments of policies carried on by European processes in the field of Education and Training.
- To help them to adjust their implementation processes and make if necessary the relevant corrections or impulsions.
- To provide to decision makers at institutional or national level evidence about the decisive contribution of validation of non formal and informal learning to the implementation and development of lifelong learning policies.
- To contribute to the implementation of the European guidelines as a complementary tool linking principles and reality.

³ This quote refers to the title of EUCEN's last autumn-conference in November 2010 in Lille where more than 120 professionals, researchers, policy-makers and LLL-experts discussed and exchanged perspectives on this topic and where the final product of the OBSERVAL network- an USB-stick with all produced materials- was presented and disseminated. For further information please visit : <http://sudes.univ-lille1.fr/eucen/>

- To provide decision makers at institutional or national level with a tool for bench learning. Comparison may be a powerful tool when you need to understand which policies to define, which strategic processes to develop, or which technical approaches to implement. This may also reassure actors when they have to make choices and to take decisions.
- To contribute to a dialogue between sectors. This is claimed in all European documents or initiatives, particularly between VET, Higher Education but from our perspective also in the third sector
- To provide to actors involved in concrete practices opportunities to have access to a community of practitioners, to reassure themselves on their own practices, to encourage exchange and common work. This could be a way to develop later new European projects on specific issues, domains or tools.

In short, OBSERVAL managed to implement a vivid network community of validation experts and various stakeholders, actively involved and often 'from the ground' covering the work and the new initiatives of the different sectors in different countries, exchanging innovative practices and bench-learning from each other.

OBSERVAL transformed a vision into an emerging evolution which also constitutes a complementary characteristics of other European initiatives (such as the Inventory, European Guidelines, etc.), thus making developments "to be seen [and] to be believed in."