

Panel Discussion – Connecting Learning Across Continents

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Andrina Wafer: Ernesto, you've completed a huge body of work with the European member states completing inventories. Can you tell us more?

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: The [European inventory on validation](#) is online now, after a two year process. We've been collecting information on what the member states are doing on validation of non-formal and informal learning since 2004. The latest edition of the inventory was done by Cedefop together with the European Commission (and Aline will be talking about EU policies), and with the European Training Foundation [ETF]. We have a contractor that carries out the reporting done by selected experts, many of them present here today. The member states - through a working group of the European Commission - read the reports and give us feedback. Many of the people in the Biennale have contributed to the inventory, so thanks to you all. One of the challenges we have been facing with an inventory over the years is that it's difficult to bring together all the different contexts in which it occurs. So, you realize that taken the global context that is what this Biennale is doing, is even more complex and more challenging!

But talking about the findings of the inventory, at the European level, we can see that there is a consolidation of the frameworks regarding the legal foundation of validation. Much work has been done setting up the systems. In a lot of areas, there's still some frameworks that don't exist or some parts of the system that are not accessible through validation, but we can see a continuation of the consolidation which we already saw in the 2018 inventory edition. There's a need for outreach to get people in, especially those that are more marginalized, as it is a service not very much used. And I believe that the experiences that the US and Canada have with Indigenous people and featured in the Biennale can be very useful for the EU. The EU can learn from them because they are doing a good job in

reaching out and getting to the places where Indigenous people are. That's something that maybe in Europe is less developed, and EU countries tend to be less proactive in the outreach when it comes to validation. The inventory also shows that we need to work on how we're going to provide resources and financing, and how we are going to create systems that are sustainable. We'll be working on making an interactive tool where we can connect the [European guidelines on validation](#) with the information that we collect in the inventory. Another thing to mention is that the inventory also includes ETF countries, expanding the number of countries and information that is collected.

Andrina Wafer: Can you explain the work the ETF has done? A lot of people wouldn't know about the European Training Foundation.

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: ETF has been working with the EU neighboring countries; they've done 11 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Morocco, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine). They have a [report](#) on what is happening in these countries. The ETF works with the countries in setting up the systems. They have a project in Africa dealing with validation in the inventory specifically. Some of their systems are less developed, but they are starting. In general terms, there has been a move in establishing those systems, especially in vocational training and parallel systems of formal education.

Andrina Wafer: Christine, your work is more on a global scale. Do you find resonance with what Ernesto is sharing?

Christine Hofmann: The ILO is the International Labour Organization; it's a specialized UN agency, older than the UN, and we are the only UN agency that has workers and employers as our members. Among the 187 member countries, each delegation comes with workers and employers, and they have an important say in everything we do. We've been created to promote social justice through international labor standards. These standards can be conventions that countries ratify, or recommendations and our reason is to promote these standards and to support countries in implementing them. What resonated with the work we're doing and the keynote yesterday, and I found very stimulating, is the notion of identity and of professional identity. The two key actors in the world of work that create identity and that contribute to creating identity are the organizations and the communities of workers and the communities of employers or the professional communities. There's also unpaid care work. There is volunteer work; everything is work. When we had our Commission on the future of work for our 100-year centenary, that Commission issued a report which said that skills are not only for employability, but skills are for participation in democracy. This is an important recognition that the ILO has made recently. What does the ILO do? We provide policy advice, technical assistance, research, and capacity building to our members and constituents. I've counted, and we've probably supported around 15 countries directly in the establishment of what we call "recognition of prior learning systems." There is capacity building through our terrain center. They have just put a MOOC, a free MOOC on their E-campus. That's available for everyone--for policy makers, but also practitioners. We support networks, like there's an African network on skills and

apprenticeships; they've requested support on the recognition of prior learning. In terms of trends where there's also requests in the care economy now, it is important to highlight that within our international labor standards, several already refer to recognition of prior learning. There is a recommendation on human resource development from 2004 that promotes the idea of recognition of prior learning. There is also a recommendation on transitions to formality. The ILO has been working on the informal economy and transitioning to the formal economy. There you have a reference to recognizing prior learning in the informal economy, particularly through informal apprenticeship. Last year, our members adopted recommendation 208 on quality apprenticeships. In this instrument, you have a definition of the recognition of prior learning. I'm not going to spoil it because I want you to read it, but there is an internationally agreed upon definition now.

Andrina Wafer: Brikena, from the perspective of the individual and the work of the European Lifelong Learning Platform, when you hear about this work, how do you respond?

Brikena Xhomaqi: The work we do at the European Lifelong Learning Platform is an enabler to what you do on the ground and making sure that the work that is done is brought up through different channels at the policy and decision-making table. We are a civil society organization representing individuals, stakeholders, institutions, education, and training providers in all their forms and all their roles within the system at the European level to play this role of advocating for the rights to lifelong learning and the rights to validation as well for all. When I hear institutions, organizations, agencies, specialized agencies that are informing our policies at the EU or international level, speaking about their different policies, obviously the first thing it reminds us of is our role of making sure that civil society organizations are part of your work and that they have a say and that they can inform these policies, and that they can inform this data. The idea behind it is that we make sure that these policies are made with the individual learner at the center, tailoring those policies to their needs and making sure that they represent what is needed. It's a difficult job to do because there are more people in the community out there who probably are not even workers or employers and who should have a say and be represented in those policies. It's important that we make sure that no one is left behind. One of the things that we also see at the European level in terms of policies is this hierarchy of policies prioritizing formal qualifications, formal degrees, full degrees, and diplomas rather than validation of prior learning or more flexible certifications and micro certifications. The formal qualifications, education and training systems have been there for centuries and are well established. It's easier to recognize the work and to prioritize that type of recognition versus validation. Many of us mentioned how much flexibility we need when we design validation processes because we need more creative assessment methods. Policies or policymakers are afraid of something that is too flexible or too creative because it can mean more work. They will tend to focus on something that is already clearly defined with criteria and benchmarks. Another thing that we see being a big issue is this perception that we have of validation being less prestigious, less rigorous, versus degrees, qualifications, and diploma. Unfortunately, we still see this although there has been a lot of progress. We

still see that policies reinforce that bias and prioritize formal qualifications. We are missing out on this pool of talents and expertise that we can tap through validation. We think that people want a qualification, but that's not what everyone wants. They want to be valued and visible and they might be happy with going through the process without necessarily ending up with the certification. That process itself is empowering them. We need to keep in mind the different needs and intentions that people have for going through validation and being careful in balancing, in making it and keeping it flexible and not making it too formal.

Andrina Wafer: Raúl, you've been working in such an exciting space. Can you tell us about it?

Raúl Valdés Coterá: The work we have been doing at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in the last couple of years has been to focus very much on migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, individuals who have been unable to being recognized different competences. For that, we have been developing different elements that are based on starting a literature review that we try to take stock of the situation of RBA [Rights-Based Approach] with migrants and refugees at the global level. We were able to go into the English and French literature. On that basis, we moved into a second piece of work that was more focused on nine countries from three different regions. How is Latin America coping with it? How are the Southeast Asian countries dealing with it, and how about the Arab region? I need to be specific on that, but it allows us to go a little deeper into this process. On that basis, we produced a policy brief. The two last elements that are supporting this research are a tool kit that we are developing for policy makers to understand where they are in terms of policies, or RBA systems for migrants and refugees and that point to the direction they can move based on experiences we can take from these countries. Last year we started an online pilot course on RBA for migrants and refugees, and it was very well accepted. In the pilot we have 40 participants from 13 different countries. In these five elements, we were relying on the work of people that are here. The experience of the researchers' agencies accompanied us in this process because we cannot go alone. There are plenty of gaps. We need to put all the elements together to make this happen. We have an online course that took place last year, and this year we'll organize the online course together with ILO in the region of Latin America in Spanish. We will do it with nine countries that we are accompanying in their process of developing lifelong learning policies. For two weeks, we emphasize working with IBA [[Institution Based Assessment](#)] with these countries in order to continue strengthening their IBA systems and with a particular focus on migrants and refugees. It has been challenging when it comes to this. Refugees and migrants are entirely different groups and need to be treated in different ways. There are also significant differences between legal and illegal migrants. We need to be clear that it needs to be contextualized. During the literature review and the analysis of countries, we've found some key trends that are useful. We received information from countries and now that we have started the policy analysis and literature review, we have much more to do. There's a clear trend in the increase of the RVA [Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation] system. We saw that there are challenges when

it comes to gaps. We saw the great work that is done in Europe. However, even in Europe, there are not many policies focusing on migrants and refugees. There is still a restriction on that. It's there where we could see how, even in regions with strong policy frameworks, they are doing a lot at the local level, which is also something to learn about, and how this bottom-up approach could be so useful for policies.

Andrina Wafer: Raúl, something that struck me about your work was the capacity of these jurisdictions to work at scale. Ernesto, I'm wondering about the inventories that you described. Are you seeing that across Europe? Are we scaling up?

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: It's happening, but not at the level that it is in Latin America. In Europe, there is a different contextualization of the systems than in Latin America. At the end of the day, each system is different, and each system has a different point of departure. There are certain principles, certain aspects, certain elements that are common to all. That's where our work is: trying to make sure that those principles are in place. The key issue is that each context is going to have a different answer to that specific problem. We can learn from each other; that's the point of the inventories and collecting best practices. When they challenge us with the EU guidelines, for example, it is important to realize that a European institution cannot impose on countries what they are supposed to do. We can tell them that these are the different things that we think are important. This is the research that we have that says what is going to happen if you do certain things. But, at the end of the day, it is the specific country that must decide what the specific implementation should be. In Ireland, the RPL network is doing a fantastic job in advancing the field, but it is context specific. There is a lot we can learn from each other, but again, there are differences we need to consider that are important, and it will be important both at an institutional level and for the individual that benefits from that system. The purpose of the validation process will play a major role, different examples from the conference (Chile Valora, Conocer in Mexico, and others we've seen) shows that each system is specific to its specific context and needs. What we need is to try to create consistency between the different systems, including formal and non-formal learning processes. These parallel systems that are being created are all interconnected. I think that's the way to scale – by connecting these different systems and contexts of learning.

Andrina Wafer: Connecting is important for all of us. Christine, in terms of the trends in learning, what should we be taking away?

Christine Hofmann: We need to build more evidence. But my list is longer, so let me get back to the evidence at the end. I echo what Raúl and Ernesto said: systems depend on their purpose and the starting points for countries have different purposes. What we've been seeing in countries in Asia or Africa, maybe also in Latin America, is that migration and refugee inclusion and access to labor markets are important ones. We have a powerful example from Jordan where RPL facilitated access to an occupational license and a work permit in occupations that were barred for foreigners. There's the objective of helping people transition to formality, improve the quality of the job they have, get them access to types of markets, and not only for the refugees but for people in the informal economy to

access public bidding or other types of services that were not available to them before. There's certainly access to education and flexible admissions, but it's rather for access. There have been several pilots funded by agencies and development partners that have remained pilots. It's important to get these pilots owned by the countries and embedded within their own systems. It's a slow process and it depends on how these pilots have been designed. The cost is too high because people in Africa and in Asia often cannot afford that cost. We are developing a guide on costing RPL. Another trend is that countries see RPL as a way to recognize learning that happens in the workplace through an informal training arrangement. Many countries still have a big system with millions of young people going through it. It's a traditional system, but it's known; some call it "traditional apprenticeship." We've been calling it "informal apprenticeship" or "apprenticeship in the informal economy." Countries like Tanzania and others would use recognition of prior learning to recognize the skills. Now French speaking countries interestingly would rather introduce end of apprenticeship certificate and offer RPL to the trainers, to the master craftspeople, because they say, well, it's not the same thing. You give a certificate to a learning process, so you recognize the learning process, but for master crafts people, you recognize anything they have done, their whole professional experience, etcetera. And so, getting back to my first point, we need evidence to convince policy makers that the purpose for which they want to set up a system is going to work out. The one study I would recommend you look at is by the World Bank from Bangladesh.

Andrina Wafer: Brikena in your sector, this is the area where it's most difficult to gather evidence, isn't it? Because communities are distributed and often difficult to hold on to.

Brikena Xhomaqi: Yes, but we need to clarify what we mean by "evidence" because often when we use the term, we refer to scientific data. In issues like this one, it is a more diverse group of population with different needs and communities that are more marginalized. Evidence can be a single experience, a single success story, a practice that has proven to be successful. Small practices have proven to be successful. We must broaden our understanding of "evidence."

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: We need different types of evidence, but again, for different purposes. One of the things that is happening in Europe is to present the stories of the people that have gone through validation. This is important for advocacy. It's important, but we also need evidence that is more robust and built on larger studies, especially to convince policy makers.

Raúl Valdés Coterá: It makes sense to understand the general trends. For that we need to know a little more about the general vision of it. When it comes to the experiences that are taking place more locally, we need to collect more evidence.

Brikena Xhomaqi: Just combining the statistical, the broader data, with these stories of experience is important. Who is taking care of that data and in what way, and does the data lead to any revolution in validation? Unfortunately, we see a lot of silos of who is in charge of validation. Is it the employment people? The educational people? The inclusion people? Who is at the ministry or the government level? We are trying to promote the idea of the

whole government approach when it comes to validation and lifelong learning because we see them impacting society.

Andrina Wafer: Raúl, can you tell us more about the trends?

Raúl Valdés Coterá: This work was inspired by a former colleague, Madu Singh. She published this book in 2018 on migrants and refugees based on the Syrian crisis. We found it was easy to find examples when they came to Europe, but not with the neighboring countries. We tried to focus on Lebanon, Egypt, and how they were coping with it. We found interesting local examples. They are not legal, strong legal frameworks, but there's a policy for IBA focusing on migrants and refugees. This policy was focused on this population; they are more agile, more flexible. The problem is scaling up. That's always the challenge. It was important to consider that this articulation between the bottom up and the top-down policies are not necessarily linked.

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: We need consistency and coherence between the different systems and different phases of validation, but also between the different sectors and to the extent possible find consistency between countries. Coherence is important and forums like the Biennale are key to build that coherence, by bringing evidence to the front.

Andrina Wafer: The big notes today are valuing flexibility and connecting to frameworks, being open to different kinds of qualifications, valuing robust systems and coherence to design in validation.

Audience member to the panel: What I remember from my home country, Canada, was that there was a policy for lifelong learning. One of the reasons for that policy for lifelong learning was the impact on health, the impact on public health. I didn't hear about that in your discussion. Does anybody have any comments on that?

Raúl Valdés Coterá: We have a very interesting program in UNESCO. It's called UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities because we found that it's sometimes better to work at the local level because the city authorities are the closest to the people and we can have more intersectoral approaches. Due to COVID, we worked on lifelong learning policies for health and well-being and structuring guidance for cities to start implementing specific approaches to it.

Audience member to the panel: We've been talking quite a bit about putting the learner at the center and the refugee asylum seeker. We should have had people, the learners, the refugee asylum seekers, tell us what they do because sometimes we speak for them, and we voice their narrative, and we don't give them voices. Our interventions as change makers and influencers need to take place at different levels. We need different strategies because we only talk at a high level, and we forget the people who do the work on the ground. I'd like to hear what your agencies are doing to reach the people at the ground level and make a difference. How are you documenting, sharing lessons learned, even in case studies?

Christine Hofmann: We've only had a few minutes, but you'll find plenty of great stories of learners and participants in RPL schemes on our website. Working with people in the informal economy is where you must start bottom up because this is where you need to understand how people make their choices and what would constitute an added value for them. You do need all this policy debate because we still have a lot of countries that do not have any systems on recognition of parallel and we only have informal ways.

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: At the European level, we need to move the discussion a little bit farther down. It is fundamental that we have different discussions at different levels, including discussions at the policy level. That's why it's difficult sometimes in a group with so much diversity, so many different needs. You need ways to bring them together.

Raúl Valdés Coterá: When we tried to get the information from the nine countries, we had the survey for different levels of governmental structure and of course the learner. In the nine countries, we just managed to get one survey from the learners themselves. It was so difficult. It was clear that there was a gap, and we must try harder.

Brikena Xhomaqi: My organization works with the people, and we create different spaces and moments throughout the year for them to tell stories and give them a voice. We have the Lifelong Learning week every year where we bring these stories of the people and the people telling the stories to European institutions so that they can see what they are working for and the needs at the ground level. We create different channels to communicate those individual stories which are very important indeed. We are among our organizations, our learners' associations, and unions as well. They are vocal and say that they should be at the table of decision and policy making. There are attempts, but we can do more, especially at a higher level.

Audience member to the panel: There's a real difference between policy and programs, that in my perspective, are big ideas, and the question is about whether they're actionable at all at a local level or whether they are just removed from I called "the real world." The policy development needs to be both bottom up and top down. If you're going to take action that is going to be applicable to individuals or communities, then policy makers need to come off their highchair and speak with the real people in the corner store. They're going to inform you whether the policies are applicable to them or not.

Raúl Valdés Coterá: The more we can have a well-oiled system that could go through the different levels the more useful it can be. I like the case of the Republic of Korea when it comes to implementing lifelong learning. It is clear and established at the national level. Who are the implementers of that? And it goes down into the different states of government, into cities, community learning centers, and what do they need to do? It could be a narrow view of lifelong learning, but it's a very well-oiled system.

Audience member to the panel: What do you see as the key "asks" of policy makers at the moment?

Ernesto Villalba-Garcia: I think something that we haven't discussed enough in the panel and in general is that validation is an element of these different policies of lifelong learning. It is only one element, and they need to work together with other elements that are as important as validation. It's important to consider that they are all the elements that need to work together with validation and that they need them to be in the system. So, we need to ask policy makers to create consistency across the different sectors, break the silos. If there is one element that I am always missing, it is the evidence. We don't have enough data. We don't have enough information that is robust enough. We have a lot of good cases and now they need to be more consistent. We need more of that community of practice we are building on research, also on basic research.

Andrina Wafer: I really want to thank Raúl for calling to our minds, Madhu Singh, our very dear friend. Madhu was never far from our minds in putting the program together. For those of you that knew her, she was a very special person and somebody who graced several of our gatherings of some of the Biennale and many RPL gatherings around Europe and who contributed hugely to scholarship and to the development of policy and practice in RPL. We miss her very dearly.