

Linking Educational Research Activities across Europe: A review of the WIFO Gateway

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(Original version of the article published in the European Educational Research Journal/ EERJ Vol. 6 (2007) No 4, pages 446-450)

ABSTRACT

The WIFO Gateway to Research on Education in Europe (www.wifo-gate.org) is an internet portal focusing on vocational education and training and human resource development. Launched ten years ago, it developed in several stages in close collaboration with research partners across Europe. Several dimensions of linking educational research activities at European level are addressed in this article: linking research content, both over time and across the field; linking research and information; linking researchers in collaboration. These dimensions are outlined by drawing on evidence of piloting from the WIFO site, including thematic resource bases on European research projects, a synopsis of national research across EU countries, directories of doctoral dissertations and Masters programmes, an indexed edition of ECER VETNET proceedings, and finally the Newsletter for European Research in Learning and Work as an efficient tool for linking the on-line platform with the community of researchers.

Emergence of the WIFO Gateway

The WIFO Gateway to Research on Education in Europe [www.wifo-gate.org] is an internet portal focusing on vocational education and training (VET) and human resource development (HRD). Its origin is a home page which was launched by the Research Forum WIFO (Wissenschaftsforum Bildung und Gesellschaft e.V. Berlin) ten years ago.

This WIFO home page developed in several stages in close collaboration with research partners across Europe. To start with, its purpose was simply to collect links leading to key resources of education in European countries. Updates of those early pages, including the collection of journals and the listing of current conferences, have been used frequently ever since. The second step was to provide web pages in support of ongoing European projects coordinated by WIFO. This piloting work included the first Leonardo da Vinci project exclusively presented as an on-line resource base (DUOQUAL). Later on, WIFO was increasingly engaged in accompanying and reviewing European projects and networks. In this context, the home page developed into a collaborative platform of research resources and experts in Europe (the present WIFO Gateway).

The collaborative approach adopted for the WIFO site reflected the general process of advancing research in vocational education at the European level from the mid 1990s. Various initiatives resulted in the gradual emergence of a research community, including the activities of informal networks, the rise of partnerships for the new Leonardo da Vinci projects and the formation of a network (VETNET) as part of the European Educational Research Association (EERA). These initiatives were accompanied by the creation of several pilot web services, both for compiling joint resources and for facilitating communication. The latest interactive platform for vocational education researchers, which draws on Open Source software, is the VETNET home page [www.vet-research.net], which operates as part of the KnowNet website [www.theknownet.com].

Throughout this period, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) played an active role in promoting collaborative research and supporting network activities. One of its initiatives was to provide a European research overview of vocational education (ERO). The Research Forum WIFO became a contract partner for developing ERO, using the facilities of the European Training Village in conjunction with pilot work on the WIFO site. This cooperation, also involving CEDEFOP networks of European experts, proved to be a major stimulus in developing the WIFO Gateway.

Against the background of these collaborative activities, also reflecting gains and losses in web experiments, work on the WIFO site has been driven by a number of concerns in European research: How to promote continuity of research, such as the accumulation of knowledge, under conditions of constant discontinuity, in particular short-lived projects? How to place VET research, which is interdisciplinary in nature while being focused on a professional field, in a broader context of research? How to relate research work with information on research (and for research) across the divide between research and information? How to build a community of researchers across Europe in the light of the dispersed activities of individual institutions, projects and networks?

These concerns are taken up in the present contribution by addressing the following dimensions of linking educational research activities at European level:

- linking research content, both over time and across the field;
- linking research and information;
- linking researchers in collaboration.

In the next section, these dimensions will be outlined, using evidence of piloting from the WIFO site.

Dimensions of linking research activities

The various products made available on the WIFO site have their own specific objectives, in support of or reflecting particular research activities (e.g. reporting on project outcomes, collection of papers or theses, mapping of thematic issues and analysis of trends). While these objectives are fairly 'visible', the underlying aims of linking are less apparent. The outline below tries to reveal these linking dimensions.

Linking research content

The first aspect considered here is how VET research links up with other research fields. VET is an interdisciplinary field, closely related above all to educational research and practice. This major context has determined the design of the WIFO site from the very start, presented as a gateway to research on 'education' in Europe. The systematic link collection, as one of its services, also follows this pattern.

A specific field related to VET, which however has emerged quite separately, is HRD. This field was explored as an accompanying measure, carried out by WIFO under the Fifth Framework Programme of the EU. The aim of this measure was to compile the outcomes of a thematic cluster of EU research projects related to HRD. In collaboration with the project coordinators, a resource base was developed on the WIFO site, underpinned by a conceptual framework of HRD in Europe [see figure www.ehrd.wifo-gate.org]. The EHRD Portal was later extended in cooperation with the University Forum for HRD.

As a follow-up, WIFO carried out a project in cooperation with CEDEFOP, aimed at monitoring, analysing and promoting European research in VET and HRD. As a guideline for

this work, a conceptual map of VET and HRD related research was produced on the WIFO site [www.areas.wifo-gate.org], setting out the major areas of European research and practice associated with VET and/or HRD, the relations between these areas and their position within the broader context of education.

This VET-HRD map has served as a practical device (under continuous revision) for describing the contents of research activities and resources across Europe. A more general phrase now used on the WIFO Gateway to describe this interrelated field is 'learning and work'. Two on-line directories newly published by WIFO are based on this approach: the directory of current doctoral dissertations [www.ddd.wifo-gate.org] and the directory of Masters programmes [www.master.wifo-gate.org]. While the first directory attempts to provide a platform for young researchers and their themes, the second aims to explore the new higher education courses emerging from the Bologna process. The linked areas of research covered by these two directories have been made visible in the attached thematic overviews. These are structured as follows (example from Masters directory):

- Education - adult education - lifelong learning (incl. vocational component)
- Vocational education - continuing vocational education
- Human resource development (or component)
- Business - human resource management (incl. HRD component)
- Organisation - work (incl. learning)

The second aspect of linkage which the WIFO Gateway incorporates is the evolution of research content. One approach which has been taken up is the collection of research products and of references to these products over a period of time. An example of such a chronologically structured resource base is the presentation of ECER VETNET proceedings, as outlined further below.

Another approach, which has been piloted as a special service on the WIFO Gateway, is the reproduction of thematic discussions (using transcripts of recordings) carried out by researchers at selected conference sessions. A major theme of debate, followed up over several years, has been the European approach to HRD and VET in research and practice. A review of these debates, from a first exchange of views at a special session of the HRD conference in 2002 up to a round table at ECER in 2006, can reveal how the understanding of these issues has advanced over time. The WIFO Gateway provides a complete set of these proceedings on its publication page [www.pub.wifo-gate.org].

Linking research and information

The WIFO Gateway offers information on research activities intended to support the collaborative process at European level rather than specific work in individual subject fields. This information service draws on both internally collected data, mainly through WIFO's own involvement in projects and networks, and externally provided documentation, in particular by linking up with the data bases maintained by the European Training Village.

As part of a CEDEFOP project, in collaboration with its large network of national experts (ReferNet), WIFO has compiled information on the current state of research and development in VET and HRD in all EU countries. Based on the national reports provided by this network, a synopsis of national research (pilot version 2006) has been made available on the WIFO site [www.synopsis.wifo-gate.org]. Accessible via a grid, the synopsis offers structured information, provided for each EU country, on a common set of aspects, including the context of national VET/HRD policies, themes of R&D projects, research-related institutions, funding frameworks and contact persons. Also included is a review of VET/HRD research written by an expert from each country concerned. The synopsis is linked to more

detailed information stored in the ERO Base of the European Training Village. Altogether, this project is a unique example of how the two 'worlds' of research and information, in terms of content, facilities and experts involved, can be linked.

Other, more specific, information provided on the WIFO site has been generated by applying analytical tools for monitoring research activities. One of these tools, designed to describe the content of research resources, is a set of 25 thematic descriptors covering VET and HRD. With the help of these descriptors, the themes of European research projects and conference papers have been analysed in order to establish major patterns and trends in research. The outcomes indicate, for instance, a high priority of the combined topics learning and work. Furthermore, the focus of research appears to be on processes (of education/ training/ development) rather than on systems and frameworks. A selection of these studies has been made available for downloading on the publication page [www.pub.wifo-gate.org]. An initial view of the thematic 'landscape' of European research (related to the topics of VET/HRD conference papers follow-up over several years) is also presented [www.topics.wifo-gate.org].

Linking researchers in collaboration

WIFO has been involved in various initiatives aimed at promoting collaboration and networking in European research. One of the tools used in support of these efforts from the very start was the WIFO home page. This has provided continuously updated overviews and analyses of research networks and partnerships in VET and HRD at the European level. The initial page presenting 'networks at a glance' [www.networks.wifo-gate.org] still serves as an entry point. More recently, a section of the WIFO Monitor was devoted to the analysis of network activities.

One of the issues investigated in these network studies is how communities of researchers evolve, how linkages between researchers get established and how various groups of researchers are interconnected. A particular case addressed in this context is the relationship between the VET and HRD communities, especially the part played by the two parallel European conferences of VET and HRD in community formation: the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), including the VETNET programme, and the International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe (HRD conference).

Supported by the University Forum for HRD, WIFO carried out a comparative analysis of participation at these two conferences over several years [www.2conf.wifo-gate.org]. This revealed, among other outcomes, that only a limited number of people attended events of both ECER/VETNET and the HRD conference at any time in this period (accounting for a tenth of the total number of individual participants at each conference). This proportion of overlapping participation is remarkably small, if the close thematic links existing between the two research fields are considered. The outcomes of the analysis were discussed in the networks concerned, giving rise to suggestions about further collaboration.

A special contribution in support of VETNET activities, offered by the WIFO site in cooperation with the VETNET Board and in liaison with the VETNET home page, is the publication of the ECER proceedings [www.ecer-vetnet.wifo-gate.org]. A particular concern guiding this service, established with the help of numerous researchers, is to promote continuity of network activities across annual events and to underpin the process of collaborative knowledge development by providing systematically collected resources. The newly edited proceedings page includes a collection of submitted papers, linked to downloadable documents, covering all annual ECER/VETNET events since 1998. This collection is complemented by an index, also serving as an overview of the resource base, sorting papers by author, country and keyword. Altogether, this proceedings page is expected to stimulate collaboration within and beyond VETNET.

Interaction between Gateway and Community

As is evident from the outline above, resources on the WIFO site have been developed in continuing interaction with various groups of researchers and other experts. This approach is based on two components:

- technical facilities designed as an easy-to-use website, combined with ordinary email as major means of communication;
- intensive collaboration between the editor/moderator and the networks concerned.

The basic concept of this collaboration has been derived from studies on knowledge-intensive networks, which emphasise the interrelation between resource and activity: the resources can only function and unfold their impact if the actors competently relate to them in their work, thereby continuously reproducing the resources.

While this interactive approach comes about fairly naturally in the case of resources developed for a specific project partnership or network, it is more difficult to establish and maintain for an overarching gateway to resources. WIFO uses a conventional communication tool for this purpose: the "Newsletter for European Research in Learning and Work (L&W)", which is distributed by email and published on the website [www.news.wifo-gate.org]. This newsletter serves to disseminate calls for information, required for instance to update directories and conference proceedings, and announcements about the publication of new resources on the WIFO site.

The L&W Newsletter reflects the WIFO Gateway spectrum in both its thematic profile and the composition of its list membership. The term 'learning and work' used in the title stands for the broad field of research combining VET and HRD and their related fields. The list membership, presently about 800 persons, has been gradually developed by including representatives of research networks, project partnerships, experts included in the directories, authors of proceedings papers and key contacts in related research communities. Furthermore, particular efforts have been made to involve researchers and experts from Central and Eastern Europe in this community.

While the newsletter is an efficient tool for linking the on-line platform with the community of researchers, more informal and flexible means of communication, including countless individual messages as well as face-to-face and phone contacts, remain indispensable. Researchers and their activities across Europe undergo continuous change and, consequently, the WIFO Gateway in its short history has evolved in permanent tension between preserving and renewing its services and tools.

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