

Valuing Education and Experience of the local councillors in Europe

Summary :

- What has happened p. 1&4
- Results of the WP 2 : The national reports p.2
- The Development of the Portfolio p. 2
- Relevance of the project in each country p.3

Edito

The project Va2el: Valuing Education and Experience of Local Councillors, funded by Leonardo da Vinci, under the European Union's Lifelong Learning Program, contributes to a greater appreciation and labour market utilization of the skills and competences developed by local councillors. To achieve this, the partners develop a portfolio, with a digital version, an e-portfolio, documenting the councillor's background, skills and competences for recognition on the labour market by prospective education providers and employers.



What has happened...

International Project Meeting

On the 7th and 8th of May the international project meeting of all project partners has taken place in Warsaw. The six different national reports were presented and the results discussed. Jean-François Pin (INDL, leader) and Bénédicte Halba (Iriv, coordinator) introduced the whole consortium to the next steps of the implementation of the project.

France

The National Working group for France was held in Brittany the first week of July 2009 with local councillors belonging to the ARIC's network and professionals of the local development. The main issue of the meeting was to present the idea of a portfolio and the interest

for the local councillors. The first framework of portfolio was presented, discussed and many proposals of improvements have been proposed by the local councillors present, mainly mayors or deputy mayors of small towns in Brittany. This working group will meet again, in the end of August 2009, in order to precise its proposals, especially a typology for the skills and competences that might be more understandable and usable by local councillors.

Austria

On the 20th of July the first Working Group Austria took place in Zwettl, a municipality of around 11.000 inhabitants, situated close to the Czech Boarder in Lower Austria. Altogether 7 city councillors,

including the mayor and the deputy mayor of Zwettl, participated in the meeting. On the one hand the VA2EL project as a whole and the relevance of the e-portfolio for the reflection of their own work experience was presented to them. On the other hand they also had the possibility to discuss and to recommend us modifications so that the portfolio would better fit to the situation of local councillors in Austria.

Read more on page 4

Consortium VA2EL

INDL - National Institute of Local Development



IRIV - Institute for research and information on volunteering



ARIC - Regional Association of Information for territorial communities



OIKODROM - The Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability



AAE - Association for Adult Education



UTGM - Univeresita Telematica Guglielmo Marconi



KLMTCS - Kaunas Labour Market Training and Counselling Service



IRSS - Institute for the Development of Social Services



Leonardo da Vinci programme

The Leonardo da Vinci programme links policy to practice in the field of vocational education and training (VET). Projects range from those giving individuals the chance to improve their competences, knowledge and skills through a period abroad, to Europe-wide co-operation between training organisations. Part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, the programme funds a wide range of actions, notably cross-border mobility initiatives; co-operation projects to develop and spread innovation; and thematic networks. The potential beneficiaries are similarly wide – from trainees in initial vocational training, to people already in the labour market, as well as VET professionals and private or public organisations active in this field.

Results of the WP 2 – The national reports



2nd transnational meeting held by IRSS in Warsaw on may 2009

An important first step in the project was taking stock of the situation surrounding local councillors in the six countries taking part in Va2el: Austria, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Poland. To that end, partners prepared country reports mapping the key aspects of serving in the local councils in their countries. Topics addressed included: the post-war history of local government, the present administrative regime, the legal and institutional framework of local government, requirements to stand in local elections, public perception of local councillors, age, gender and educational background of the councillor population, motivation behind serving in the council, financial remuneration and social benefits,

the training needs of councillors and the courses available to them, including best practice examples. Building on this, a synthesis report was compiled, summarizing and putting country-specific information in a comparative perspective. Drawing also on some additional sources, it discusses the commonalities as well as differences in the situation of local councillors in the six partner countries. The main picture emerging from the report is one of ever more complex and demanding councillor work as the powers of local governments are extended amid the global devolution revolution. This results in rising training needs, especially among first-term councillors. However, in the part-

ner countries - with the exception of France - these growing needs do not seem to be matched by a commensurate offer of technical/training assistance. The available courses appear insufficiently focused on policy-related expertise. Take-up is



Lifelong Learning Programme

also low: in countries such as Lithuania and Poland local councillors are

confronted with combining their local mandates and a full-time job, which leaves little time for further education.

In France, for instance, the local councillor mandate has long been a voluntary activity. This peculiarity might disappear in the near future due to the ongoing reform of local authorities. These problems notwithstanding, councillors are forced, as it were, given the ever rising demands of office, to learn on the job – often by looking up to their senior colleagues (e.g. council speakers, heads of committees) - which makes their tenure in the councils a valuable experience. Depending on the function in the council (and in the various council committees), they develop knowledge in such areas of local-government competence as:

administration, local finances, strategic planning, local (social, economic, rural etc) development, environmental protection, welfare assistance, best practice/policy innovation, international cooperation (associations, twinning partnerships) etc. as well as knowledge of administrative procedures (including e-governance, quality assurance) and the policymaking process. They also develop a range of personal and social skills required for being a successful councillor (e.g. problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiating skills, strategic thinking, networking, leadership, teamwork). Thus the findings of the synthesis report corroborate the

idea at the heart of the Va2el project: that a local council mandate facilitates the development of valuable skills and competences, and that societies should recognize and value this experience, as well as draw from it when ex-councillors re-enter the labour market. This would serve to strengthen the status and legitimacy of local councils, enhance the re-employment prospects of former councillors and bring benefits to their future employers together with enriching their present professional activity.



The portfolio and its digital development, an e-portfolio

A portfolio of competences is a continuous-progress record file, which collects the lifelong acquired knowledge, registers the educations and qualifications. Certifications of newly obtained knowledge can be continuously added. The use of this tool leads to a self-exploration allowing the local councillors to find out what skills and competences s/he has gained during the mandate. It will lead to a concrete action plan. The VA2EL portfolio will be available as a digital file, an e-portfolio, available through the internet to increase its accessibility.

The Development of the Portfolio

The next step for the project is the integration of the results of the six country reports and the experience of the former innovative project - Assessing a voluntary experience, (www.eEuropeassociations.net) which proposed a portfolio for volunteers. The VA2EL project should help to adapt already existing innovative practice proposed in the AVE project for use of a new public, the local councillors.

The e-portfolio is meant to identify :

- the main activities fulfilled by local councillors,
- the skills and competences acquired and/or developed,
- the training to be proposed
- an action plan on the basis of needs expressed

The e-portfolio is taking into account :

- the different status of local councillors in Europe (institutional environment)
- the tasks they have to fulfil in the local authorities
- the administrative context (delegation of competences, decentralisation process)

The e-portfolio is supporting local councillors :

- to acquire a higher self-confidence at work
- to improve their return or situation on the labour market
- to share experience with other local councillors

Relevance of the project in each country

France

The decentralisation process is still an on going debate in France with the proposals made by the "Comité Balladur" in March 2009 that should be discussed in October 2009. The main point is to gather some of the existing local authorities and so the legal competences dedicated to them. The main problem faced is that many local authorities may share the same competences but they couldn't assume them without a budget dedicated clearly to them and so a process of autonomy in financial matters. Additionally, next local elections should be organised in France in 2013, many local councillors elected in 2008 were new. The Va2el project should answer their demand for valuing and developing the special skills and competences they have to acquire/develop to meet the elector's demands.

Poland

When it comes to mechanisms of social advancement, Poland is still lagging behind the more meritocratic societies of the West. Despite the positive effect of transition to democracy and a market economy in 1989, the so-called negative, bonding social capital remains the main driver of social influence. This is reflected in local elections, with candidates' ascribed features (e.g. birthplace) playing a key role in electoral success or failure. As a result, the level of professionalism among local councillors leaves a lot to be desired. The project Va2el represents an opportunity to improve on this state of affairs in two important respects. First, it will help map the training needs of Poland's local councillors. This would be a necessary prelude to addressing the near complete lack of institutionalized mechanisms of skills and competence development for this group. Secondly, it can have a positive impact on the local labour markets. They would witness an influx of professionals equipped with rare knowledge developed while serving in the local councils. A more general impact of the project could be to enhance social mobility and thus make Poland a more open society

Austria

Being one of the few federal states in Europe, the struggle for competences in between the three levels of state, province and municipality is an ongoing process. This process leads also to a complex and changing situation of the local councillors and especially mayors. The amount of local councillors in Austria rises up to almost 42.000. Besides France Austria is the country with the highest per capita rate of local councillors in the comparison with the other partners of the consortium. Although there are associations which are formally enacted to represent Austrians municipalities, there is no association to represent the interests of the local councillors themselves. The only organisation which takes places is integrated into the Austrian system of parties. The local councillors are often confronted with a "jungle" of possibilities of training and qualification. The VA2EL project can help to create an open space for reflecting and revaluing the local councillor's own situation.

Greece

The main issues related to the project context are the following: During last years there is a public discussion concerning the further transfer of competences and financial resources from the central to the local authorities. This aim poses increased duties to local political leaders and consequently demands higher qualifications. Since 2006 the training programmes for councillors have been more intensive. The procedures for identification and recognition of competences acquired in non formal or informal learning environments have not been developed to the desired/required extend. The VA2EL project responds to all the above issues. It can definitely contribute to the increased demand for procedures related to the empowerment of local authorities and their importance as learning environments for the local leaders. The tools to be developed consist an innovative approach for the realisation of life long and life wide learning in Greece.

Italy

Recent developments in the Italian national legislation move slightly towards enhanced regional and local autonomy. As a consequence, councillors' powers and competences are in a steady growth in their number and substance. On the one hand, such trends are not accompanied by a systematic, nationwide program of training or further education initiative to build upon councillors' skills and competences. On the other hand, a formal recognition of such skills and competences does not exist, thus creating a paradoxical situation where leading capacities and highly important responsibilities they are charged with risk to remain in the shadow. Therefore the VA2EL project result, the e-portfolio, seems to be greatly relevant to address the Italian gap in local councillors' professional recognition. It is essential in that it helps councillors' public role and responsibilities to be recognized and valued, during and beyond the governmental mandate.

Lithuania

The decentralization trend of Lithuanian governance is strengthened during the period of independence and especially in the time of being the part of EU and this is strongly connected with increasing demands for local government and local councillors particularly. The higher responsibilities and changed tasks for local councillors determine the development of new and wide range competences and skills which are usually acquired by informal and experiential learning throughout the term. The main idea and result of VA2EL project - the e-portfolio - can be considered as the first step or first attempt towards recognition and formalization of the gained local councillors' competences and skills in Lithuania. Undoubtedly the personal usage of e-portfolio as a tool for self-assessment and self-presentation and as a medium for further activities in the labour market is also in high value for local councillors.

Foresight - upcoming project activities

On the 17th and 18th of September we will meet in Krems, welcomed by our Austrian partners of OIKODROM to jointly discuss the project's progress. The main focus of this meeting is the presentation and work on the portfolio and the integration of the national proposals as well as the development from a portfolio to an e-portfolio. Another topic will be the dissemination and exploitation of results. The project partners will be invited to a fireside chat with the mayress of Krems.



Meeting polish local councllors in Warsaw - May 2009

...What has happened

Greece

On the 14th of July 2009, the first meeting of the Greek working group took place in Athens in the Office of The Institution of Local Authorities (ITA). Participants were representatives from influential organizations in the Local Authorities of municipalities: the ITA, the National School of Local Authorities (ESTA), the Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government (EETAA) and the Polisnet Network of Municipalities (Municipalities at the Eastern Region of Athens). The Association for Adult education (AAE) informed the group about the VA2EL Project. A discussion followed about the objectives and the application of the portfolio. Future activities were planned. 18 members of the above organizations as well as 3 members of AAE were nominated in the first National Working Group.

Italy

On the 28.05.09, in occasion of the workshop held in the UTGM Lecture Hall presenting the new UTGM Public Administration Department, the VA2EL First Italian Working Group has met. Dr. Raffaele Chiarelli, Director of the Public Administration Department and Professor of Administrative Law, has chaired the workshop and was delighted to offer the Department staff support to the VA2EL project, in current and upcoming events. During the workshop, Ms. Ilaria Mascitti, Head of the International Projects and R&D Office has presented the VA2EL background and objectives and Ms. Ilaria Rea, UTGM researcher, has discussed the main findings of the VA2EL project research with the large audience attending the event and with the

local councillors. On the 03.07.09, the Università Telematica Guglielmo Marconi has hosted in Rome the VA2EL Second Italian Working Group, with the aim to gather Italian local councillors coming from different locations and experiences of local administration and analyze and constructively discuss with them the last developments and progressive achievements of the VA2EL project. Ms. Mascitti, Head of the International Projects and R&D Office, opened the session with a presentation of the UTGM offices and mission overlooking the VA2EL project. Ms. Rea's presentation, built upon the synthesis report recently developed by the VA2EL consortium, offered the local councillors an insight into the main findings of the VA2EL comparative research. The Working Group meeting continued with local councillors' interview and panel discussion. It provided them an opportunity to get acquainted with the VA2EL portfolio, be confronted with it and comment on it. Local councillors' first-hand confrontation with the portfolio was essential to validate the results of the work done so far and to let it become a practical and handy tool for recognition of competences and exploration of councillor's professional experiences, background and future job scenarios.

Lithuania

On the 7th July 2009 the 1st national meeting of the local councillors and involved person took place in Biržai district municipality, north of Lithuania. The mayor of Biržai district municipality Regimantas Ramonas described briefly the situation of the north of Lithuania concerning decentralization trend and connected local councillors' situation and perspective. Main

specialist of Kaunas labour market training and counselling service Inga Abramavičienė presented at length the project "Valuing Education and Experience for Local councillors in Europe" with its goals and tasks, foreseen and implemented activities. The idea of e-portfolio as an instrument for local councillors to help identifying and value specific skills and competences acquired during the term was discussed widely and received much attention from all the 25 participants.

Poland:

As part of consultations with Polish councillors under the VA2EL Project, IRSS has so far held two working meetings with councillors from the Maciejowice municipality. The meetings were attended by prominent local-authority officials, including the Mayor, the Speaker of the Council, and a team of councillors. During the first meeting, on the 14th of April, the general idea behind the VA2EL project was outlined. The Maciejowice councillors expressed willingness to take part in VA2EL, while also suggesting that the working group be extended to representatives from other municipal councils. The second meeting, held on 23rd April, was more substantive in character, focusing solely on the uses of the e-portfolio. In the discussion that followed, participants recommended that the e-portfolio evolve into a certificate. This, they argued, could create a stronger incentive for councillors to use the tool in their professional career.



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Find more information on www.va2el.eu. The national reports as well as synthesis reports as well as additional information on the project's progress and the newsletter will be able to be found and to be downloaded on the projects webpage. The second Issue of the periodical VA2EL newsletter will be distributed after the meeting in Poland in May.

VA2EL MAIN GOAL AND EXPECTED IMPACT

The project " Valuing Education and Experience for Local councillors in Europe " (VA2EL) will propose a a portfolio, available through Internet (e-portfolio) for local councillors to help them identify and value the specific skills and competences acquired through their elected experience together with a handbook to use it on the labour market.

The e-portfolio will also identify required training to enhance and improve them, and/or will think of a real validation (with a diploma) in the perspective of a professional insertion.

Local councillors need a specific accompaniment to value and enhance the formal, non formal and informal learning they are experiencing.

The choice of a portfolio for voluntary managers as a basis for the transfer of innovation is explained by the proximity of the tasks to be fulfilled by both local councillors and voluntary managers (pathways between associative functions and elective functions are numerous).

The expected impact is to better take into account the experience acquired by local councillors, to underline the required professionalisation of their activity, and so to enhance recognition of their specific experience on the labour market.