

Quality review of the SHEILA project outputs

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1. Introduction

[EUNIS](#) (European University Information Systems) association is a membership organisation (a statutory association governed by French law) which exists to encourage exchange, co-operation and debate between those responsible for information systems in higher education or research institutes/organisations within Europe.

This report outlines the findings of a short review commissioned to evaluate certain aspects of the quality of outputs produced by the [SHEILA](#) project.

2. Context and approach

The unique aspect of EUNIS as a membership organisation for higher education is its breadth of coverage both in terms of the number of European countries it covers (23) and also the range of higher education job roles involved in its activities.

The SHEILA project already has an excellent reputation within the European learning analytics expert community and collaboration with EUNIS has offered an opportunity to present its outputs to a wider audience not already closely integrated into that community and who may not have otherwise encountered the project outcomes.

For the purpose of this evaluation, the main findings of the SHEILA project were presented to a group of c. 74 European higher education professionals and a smaller group of 22 met in a workshop setting to review and discuss the main project output - the SHEILA Framework.

The participants in these activities were mainly from Finnish universities. This group was chosen because, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no previous events on the topic of learning analytics targeted specifically at this audience and none of the SHEILA project partners or associate partners were from Finland.

The discussion group included people from 10 different universities of varying sizes including one LERU (League of European Research Universities) member and a number of universities of applied sciences which have a more technical and vocational focus. This group also included representatives from Germany and Albania which are also countries not represented amongst the SHEILA project partners or associate partners.

The discussion group involved people in a wide variety of job roles including, but not exclusively, senior academic managers and other teaching staff, legal advisers and data and information specialists.

It is notable that many of those who describe themselves as data and information specialists had experience of various aspects of business intelligence but would not view themselves as learning analytics specialists. One described himself as a business intelligence expert who had '*stepped accidentally*' into learning analytics work.

This group was therefore very different from the learning analytics expert community.

3. Conclusions

3.1. The SHEILA framework meets an urgent need

Our group were not learning analytics experts but what they had in common was the fact that learning analytics was beginning to happen in their institutions/organisations and they had an immediate need to support and guide such activities without having a robust knowledge base within their own organisation. All of the participants felt that learning analytics policies were necessary and that the SHEILA framework helped fill a gap.

3.2. The SHEILA framework is easily understood

The fact that the framework consists of prompts and questions means that people can begin to engage with it very quickly.

N.B. Background knowledge of the ROMA framework on which it is based is not a pre-requisite for using the SHEILA tool so it would be possible to simplify it even further by removing the references to ROMA in the tool itself as this is explained in the background information on the website.¹

3.3. The flexibility of the SHEILA framework is a strength

The participants were from a very wide variety of institutions and roles yet all found the framework useful. It is evident that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to policy development and, despite the sound research behind the SHEILA project, it is nonetheless reassuring that none of the participants identified major gaps or elements that did not appear relevant to their context.

¹ This would avoid any possible confusion about the term Roma framework having a completely different meaning in an EU context - see for example <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/revisiting-eu-roma-framework-assessing-european-dimension-post-2020-future>

The participants talked about layers of policy e.g. departmental, institutional, national and felt that the SHEILA framework could help them map that landscape and connect it in a coherent way.

'Even within a single University perspectives differ. You have to navigate that jungle and we don't currently have a model like we do in other business intelligence. That's why this is very interesting.'

Similarly, the framework appeared useful in different political contexts for example the Finns characterised their policy drivers as very much top-down whereas the Germans felt their approach was more bottom-up.

3.4. The SHEILA framework is a useful communication tool

A recurring theme of the conversations is the fact that use of the SHEILA framework can facilitate dialogue between stakeholders. This was particularly welcomed by a number of participants who were involved in cross institutional projects (in most cases without having any clear policy in their own institution). This was also mentioned by representatives of national support agencies.

3.5. The SHEILA framework makes people think

All of the participants said that the prompts in the framework made them consider aspects that they would not have immediately thought of for themselves.

One particular example of this is dimension three which considers desired behaviour change. Many participants felt this would help them avoid falling into a trap of trying to re-design business processes without adequately considering this aspect.

'This isn't usually how we approach policy as we just find it easier to start from the process.'

A second example is that the Finnish delegates said using the framework made them question some of the principles that underpin their policy making and, in particular, the notion of 'equality'. This is usually interpreted as ensuring weaker students do not get left behind and the framework made them question whether they were making sufficient use of learning analytics to encourage high performing students to maximise their potential.

3.6. The SHEILA framework is immediately useful

All of the participants said that they intended to make further use of the framework.

Perhaps surprisingly, they were less concerned with the framework being an externally validated model (only around half of the participants felt this was important to them) and more concerned with the fact that it appeared immediately useful.

'You have to take a pragmatic view and start from something.'

3.7. The SHEILA framework is likely to have lasting impact

As well as simply saying they intended to make further use of the framework, participants also came up with some concrete suggestions about how they intended to use it.

The idea of the framework being used to facilitate dialogue between stakeholders and ensure that all perspectives are understood is central to its potential impact. Participants talked about the fact that learning analytics in their experience was often teacher-led and that use of the SHEILA framework could help to raise awareness amongst those in administrative roles and help them plan for future change.

The framework was felt to be particularly useful in the context of moving beyond small pilot/research activities to delivering learning analytics as an institutional service involving policy development, process change and formalising behavioural change e.g. by writing roles and responsibilities into job descriptions.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Consider making the framework available in different formats

The SHEILA framework is currently only available as a downloadable PDF. Users will want to translate it into their own language and possibly adapt it to focus on the issues of most importance to them. This could be facilitated in a range of ways e.g.

- by making it available as an editable document
- by providing approved translations into other European languages

4.2. Consider providing some additional support resources

As a minimum this could involve ensuring that some of the suggested resources referenced are included as hyperlinks.

Additional value could be offered by making available some (possibly anonymised) examples of policies and action plans created using the framework.

4.3. Develop a plan for further dissemination

This short evaluation has shown that the SHEILA project outputs meet a real and immediate need. The outputs are likely to be most useful to those who are not already engaged in the learning analytics expert community and it is worth identifying communication channels that can help disseminate the outputs widely across the European higher education sector.

EUNIS is willing to provide support in implementing this recommendation.