

Could European eGovernment policy initiatives, in effect, be stifling the development of learning technologies?

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ABSTRACT

European eGovernment initiatives give standards boards a prominent role in the governance of standards and specifications for Learning, Education and Training. One of the instruments of governance is a standards catalogue, which is intended to guide users towards appropriate standards to implement. However, these initiatives coincide with a debate of the value of formal standards versus community specifications. The authors analyse the standards catalogue approach against a horizon scan report of current standardisation projects in the sector. They suggest that eGovernment standards boards should focus on semantic, organisational, cultural, political and legal interoperability, in preference to attempting to stabilise practice around a limited number of technical interoperability standards.

1. Introduction

The authors have in previous papers (ICALT 2008) [3] suggested reasons why the positive role of standards is now being questioned.

EU member governments and institutions have invested heavily in the development of standards and wish to see the benefits of interoperability being realised. Standards have been marketed as an effective means to facilitate interoperability. One such initiative; The European Interoperability Framework (EIF) project is working to develop a framework for pan-European eGovernment services.

In this paper the authors present a short overview of the EIF initiatives, highlighting current efforts to establish standards catalogues and reflect on the sustainability of the approach pursued in a number of European countries.

The authors suggest, that this approach could have the unintended consequence of stifling the application and development of new learning technologies. In an attempt to

substantiate this hypothesis, the authors will analyse findings presented in a horizon scan report undertaken as a technical support activity for the United Kingdom Information Standards Board (ISB).

2. Standards catalogue initiatives

The European Commission has established an initiative for Interoperable Delivery of European eGovernment Services to public Administrations, Businesses and Citizens (IDABC)¹. As a result IDABC announced a new version of the European Interoperability Framework (EIF). This version acknowledges “the existence of the National Interoperability Frameworks and related activities that today either already exist in the Member States or are being prepared” [4].

The issue of governance of the EIF is being stressed, and governance policy guidelines are currently being developed to specify decision rights, managing the life cycle and measuring the effectiveness of the governance activities [5]. The revised paper suggests that “a method is needed by which standards can be assessed and selected in a systematic and structured way” [5], and on a national policy level that includes establishing “dynamic” standards catalogues, i.e., web based registries providing guidelines for selecting which standards and technical specifications are appropriate for a given context.

In Norway the initial version of the catalogue [8] met with harsh criticism from the standards community. The table of Learning Educational Technology (LET) related standards was characterised as incomplete and inaccurate [2].

¹<http://ec.europa.eu/idabc>

The Norwegian authorities have continued to work towards a standards catalogue. To become a “recommended Norwegian eGovernment standard” the process outlined in six phases, starting with Proposal, through Prioritisation, Surveying, Preparation for Decision, Decision and finally to Management. The process is further outlined in a flow chart that has a feed back arrow to Proposals for the Revision of the Catalogue. However, the uni-directional characteristics are very strong, both in the textual and illustrative descriptions of the process. It could be argued that the Board seem to be primarily concerned with populating the catalogue, at the expense of capturing the dynamic environment in terms of interoperability needs and practices that are to be standardised.

The Norwegian case raises a number of questions: How does the Standards Board interact with those charged with improving interoperability working in standardisation, and with other stakeholder communities to capture what standards, specifications or practices are relevant for inclusion in the catalogue? Furthermore, how to maintain the currency of the catalogue as a dynamic tool, – one that reflects the complexity and diversity of the domain in avoiding the presentation of unilateral or mono-dimensional solutions? How does the Board deal with other stakeholder communities, perhaps with their own vested interest in development?

Whilst the Norwegian Standards Board and the UK Information Standards Board (ISB) commenced work at the same time the ISB would appear to have come up with a more detailed, elaborated plan of work. During 2009 the ISB is set to “deliver a portfolio of business led standard initiatives; successfully engage standards stakeholders from across the system; and establish and operate a world class standards advisory service” [6]. The web-based registry will be the authoritative source for information and data standards in education, skills and children’s services, and will also be an important tool in the ISB’s ambition to “govern standards making”. The ISB will establish a collaborative workspace and tools support or develop communities of practice to enable partners and stakeholders to work together in addition to the standards registry. “The ISB will regularly review standards and withdraw those that no longer fulfil a business need or unduly constrain innovation in education, skills and children’s services.”

The ISB had defined an elaborate adoption life cycle for standards, commencing with a Horizon scan and ending with a Benefit Measurement with detailed regulation of who should have a vote at the different phases of the life cycle (Figure 1).

Despite the circular form of the UK process model, the ISB business plan describes the adoption of standards for the LET domain as a directed and relatively straight forward process, one step building on another with the cumulative result of better services for all.

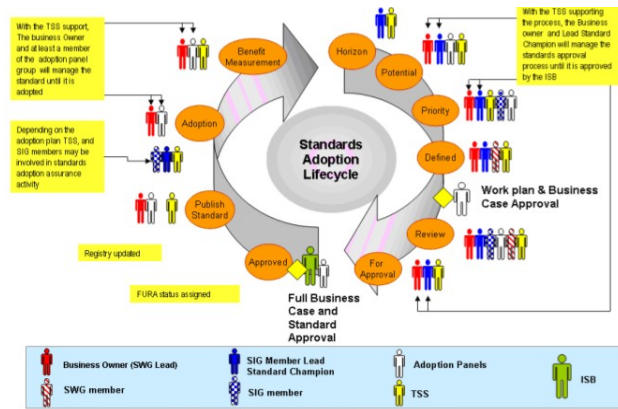


Figure 1. Standards Adoption Full Lifecycle (ISB Business Plan v0.8)

3. UK Horizon scan report

In January 2009 JISC-CETIS, as part of its activity support of the technical support service provided a horizon scan report to the ISB as the input from Higher Education [7].

Whilst the scope of the horizon scan document is limited to the LET domain, what is significant is the inclusion of standards developed for other domains being applied in, or of interest, to LET. An example of this is the W3C Widgets 1.0 in parallel to work in IMS on the IMS-TI v2.0 Tools interoperability specification. The Horizon scan report also includes specifications and standards developed through the traditional formal standards models and formal bodies alongside those developed through pragmatic community projects in the sector.

The report does not include recommendations for levels of mandation, merely comments relating to the uptake and further development of the standard in question. Whilst there are no recommendations regarding mandation it is likely that guidance on use will be provided by the ISB based broadly on the UK eGIF initiative mandation model [1].

The report does not make any distinctions regarding the take up and usage of specifications and standards between the sub-domains or sectors of the LET domain. The requirements, application and use of standards are markedly different for the schools and for further and higher education sectors.

The information provided will be included as baseline activity in the ISB “dynamic” registry. The report is presented in seemingly clear and accessible text. However, what emerges is a picture of often-conflicting approaches within the formal standards bodies competing for supremacy within the domain; a

situation further complicated by emergent “community” specifications driven by business “needs”.

With both community and formal /consortia approaches there are inherent risks of enthusiasts distorting the process. Formal standards bodies have established procedures in place that should theoretically reduce this risk. Evidence does however suggest that in most cases these processes fail to some degree.

Further, community based specifications, by their nature, receive far less critical evaluation than those emanating from the formal bodies. It is argued that these specifications are grounded in “real needs” and based on established community practice, but whose needs and whose practice? Momentum is often carried by a small number of enthusiastic knowledgeable individuals who perhaps free from the perceived “constraints“ of the rigour of formal specification processes “just get things done”. What also emerges are concerns that work on new specifications and standards is often not based on existing guidelines or specifications with little backwards compatibility.

4. Discussion

When practice is codified, one needs to ensure that quality mechanisms are in place, that the right candidates for recommendation are put forward and bad decisions or obsolete recommendations withdrawn.

The authors have identified weaknesses with the standard boards’ approach concerning their interface with the LET domain. During the first phase of establishing standards catalogues, their attention seems to be solely populating the registry. Consequently, the process models have weak feedback mechanisms, and point more or less in one direction (ref. Figure 1): towards the registry.

Furthermore, we question the effect that standards catalogues will have on what we term the *standards discourse*. There is a growing awareness in the standards bodies, of the need for a meta level discussion on “the way we do standards”. The standards catalogue approach may steer discussions in the direction of the standards that are listed, and the level of mandation these standards are assigned.

Standards catalogues are a means by which governments may lead and coordinate development in certain domains. We have highlighted that in the LET domain this might not be effective, and alternative approaches should be found.

Standardisation can be considered as harmonising views at different levels of interchange between systems, e.g., people, organisations, and technologies. Focussing on this discussion should be a priority for Government.

Horizon scanning may be a good enough means to give direction to the standards discourse within the LET domain.

This brings up the question of the different interoperability levels, defined by IDABC [5]. Registries of learning technology standards and specifications address the

technical level of interoperability, as the candidate entries in these registries often are technical standards. However, there are within the LET domain a number of challenges on a more abstract interoperability levels that also need attention, and do not fit in the registration schemes of the standards catalogues. We have semantic, organisational, cultural, political and legal issues that need clarification.

5. Conclusions

As EU governments play a more active role in standards policy this presents a challenge to those in the LET domain

High-level top-down policy driven initiatives, might risk at the best to be ignored; or more damaging, lead to a stifled development of learning technologies.

The authors concur that government leadership in the domain is both valuable and needed recommending that policy initiatives should also address the non-technical interoperability levels. Horizon scan reports may help achieve this through stimulating technology tracking activities, and focus their approach on stimulating a transparent open debate.

6. References

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