

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Arion is a European Community action of study visits for educational specialists and decision makers. It is a sub-action, part of the 6th action of the Socrates programme “Observation and Innovation”.

Its main objectives are:

- *to enable those exercising important educational responsibilities at local or regional (and in some cases national) levels to review and modify their work in the light of direct experience of educational structures and reforms in other Member States.*
- *to increase the amount of high-quality, selected and up-to-date information about education developments throughout the Community which is available to policy makers.*

The target group for this action are persons who, according to their professional duties and profiles, are qualified to report on their findings to policy makers, to implement their new knowledge into their professional environment and to act as multipliers.

Organisation

The organisation of Arion is generally speaking in line with the other actions of the Socrates programme. It follows the calendar of the academic year. A new programme announcement for the next academic year is published by the European Commission in January. Applications must be sent to the National Agencies before end April. The National Agencies send their approved list of applicants to the Commission before end May. The programme then runs from September until June of the next year.

The main partners involved in the Arion action are National Liaison officers (National Agencies of all participant countries), the SOCRATES & Youth Technical Assistance Office (TAO), DG Education and Culture of the European Commission, the hosting services (organisers of study visits) and a number of experts.

As Arion is a highly de-centralised action, the main role to organise and coordinate the Arion action at the national level is given to the National Agency. This comprises tasks as :

- (depending on the profile of the national agency) liaison between national authorities and the European Commission;
- the administration of the Arion programme for the country (including management of the fund provided by the Commission, contacts with the European Commission);
- the promotion of Arion among potential participants;
- organisation and coordination of the selection of participants (including selection issues);
- preparation of participants;
- responsibility for the offer of study visits taking place in the country;
- follow-up and dissemination of results and impacts of the Arion action at national level.

The duration foreseen for an Arion study visit is 5 days, usually from Monday till Friday. The group comprises typically 12-15 participants who should come from different countries.

school years :	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2002-2003*
real number of visits	132	138	155	
number of participants	1814	1620	1583	1758

* planned number of grants

Budget :

school years :	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Arion budget	1 450 000 €	1 575 000 €	1 750 000 €

Objectives of the evaluation study

The main purpose of the assignment is to produce an independent external evaluation of the Arion study visits programme for education specialists and decision-makers, as part of the Socrates actions. The evaluation covers the functioning, results and prospects of the Arion action.

The evaluation system used addresses the following different dimensions :

- ◆ Relevance : To what extent are the programme objectives justified in relation to needs ?
- ◆ Effectiveness : To what extent have the expected objectives been achieved ?
- ◆ Efficiency : Have the objectives been achieved at the lowest cost ?
- ◆ Utility : Are the expected or unexpected effects globally satisfactory from the point of view of direct or indirect addressees ?¹

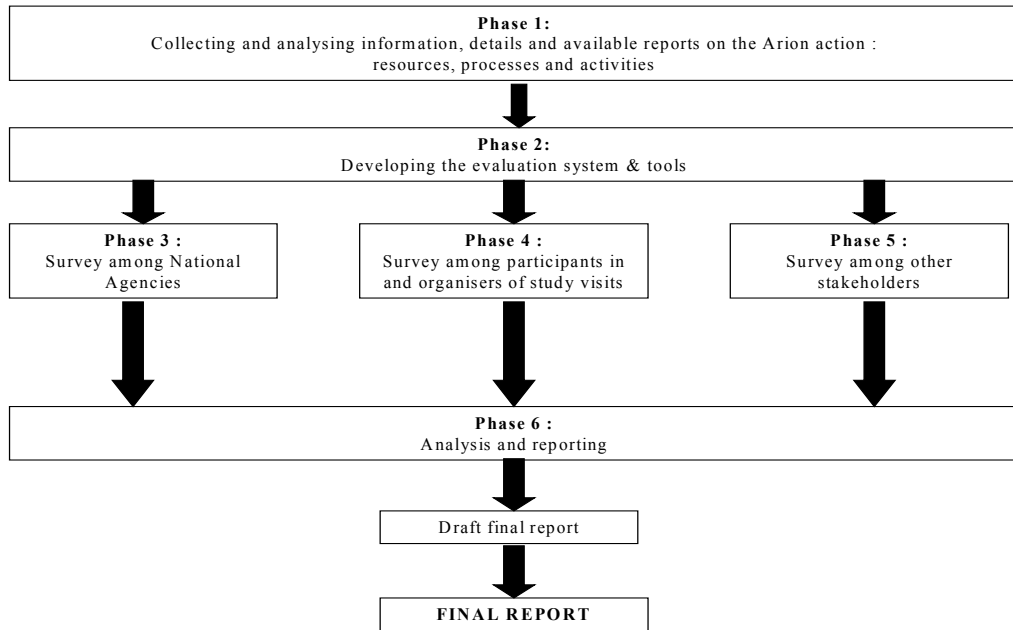
The evaluation was conducted in 6 main phases which ran partly in parallel and which are presented on the chart below.

The main data collection was based on 3 academic years covering years 1998 to 2001:

- 120 qualitative interviews spread over all types of stakeholders and all participating countries, were performed between February and early June 2002 ;
- a quantitative survey among participants and organisers: this was conducted through an on-line self-completion questionnaire. More than 50 organisers and more than 1250 participants answered the questionnaire. This survey took place between mid-May and the end of June 2002.

¹ Extract from *Evaluating socio-economic programmes*, Volume 1, p. 72, European Commission, 1999.

“EVALUATION OF THE ARION ACTION OF THE SOCRATES PROGRAMME ”– phases of the project



Conclusions

Overall conclusions

The overall conclusion of the evaluation is that:

- Arion is a programme that corresponds to a real need;
- the formula of study visits of a 5-day duration with 10-15 participants is functioning well;
- the satisfaction levels of the direct beneficiaries (participants and organisers) are extremely high;
- impacts are high and correspond to expectation on the first objective of the action;
- they are however poor on the second objective.

The value created for the money invested is very high, mainly due to:

- the motivation of participants and organisers;
- the non-monetary and monetary contributions of both groups.

On the ***first objective***, improvements are possible at various levels to:

- improve efficiency and effectiveness;
- further improve the satisfaction level of participants.

Most of these improvements have only practical and organisational and no significant budgetary consequences.

For the ***second objective***, the question should be asked whether it is not over-ambitious for an action like Arion. The way the action is designed and the resources available do not create the conditions to actually achieve the objective.

Relevance of the objectives

On the basis of the evaluation, there is clearly no doubt about the relevance of the two Arion objectives as they are formalised. This is confirmed by all stakeholder groups contacted in the evaluation process.

A difference can however be noticed between the Member States / EEA countries and the Candidate Countries. The original formulation of Arion objectives corresponds fully to the situation from Candidate Countries, whereas the needs of the Member States / EEA countries have significantly changed over the last 20 years due to a higher degree of integration and mutual knowledge. Consequently, expectations and motivations for participation in Arion are stronger linked to the Arion objectives in the Candidate Countries than they are among participants in the other countries.

The second objective of Arion is more ambitious and is far from fully attained. The relevance of the objective cannot be questioned, but it might be considered as over-ambitious taking into account the budgetary and practical limitations.

Relevance of the study visit approach

The study visit approach (including the choices made regarding duration, composition, focus on themes, etc.) is appropriate. It allows a high level of efficiency ² (a large target group is reached and significant effects are created with a limited budget).

To restrict the action to only one ‘technique’ (the study visit) is however a limitation as well.

Target groups reached

The target group for participation in Arion has been defined as “decision-makers and senior managers of educational institutions in any sector of education”.

The results of the evaluation show that this target group is reached:

- There is a good spread of profiles of participants, with as largest group principals from institutions (1/3 of the participants).
- These participants have the right level of seniority: very young participants are quite exceptional and more than half are in the age category of 46-55.
- Motivation levels of participants are high: for the large majority there is a direct link between the theme of the visit and priority areas on which they work daily.
- The different methods of targeting and selecting participants used by the National Agencies are not creating problems. Still, it would probably make sense to have more exchange.

The main problems that have been identified in this respect are:

- Repeated participation: our estimate is that between 10 and 15 % of participants are probably repeat participants each year.
- Reaching the higher policy-making levels is a weakness of Arion. Awareness levels of Arion are probably low, and results are only exceptionally reaching this level.
- Awareness creation on Arion is very different depending on Member States. Arion is an “old” action, therefore little resources are devoted to promote it in most countries.

Dissemination of results

Both group reports and individual participant reports have a very diverse quality: there are useless reports (merely a chronological description), and really excellent pieces of work.

The main responsibility for their dissemination lies with the participants themselves. One of the conclusions is that dissemination is good in the direct environment of the participants: within their own institutions, within their daily work, and towards their direct colleagues and hierarchy.

At national and EU level, little is done for dissemination: most countries do have dissemination activities, but these activities are a low priority, there is obvious lack of resources, and activities are rarely maintained over longer periods. There is a real motivation however, and a lot of good intentions, but time and resources are obviously lacking to have a significant use made of the results of study visits.

² Please also refer to point 10.3 on ‘efficiency’ of Arion.

Difference between Member States / EEA countries and Candidate Countries

Impacts and results are not comparable between the Member States / EEA countries and the Candidate Countries. This is linked to:

- the longer participation of Member States / EEA countries in the Arion action;
- the differences in education systems, in knowledge and exposure to other systems between participants from these countries before their Arion participation;
- the level of motivation of participants and the objectives they pursue.

European Added Value

The Arion programme produces a very high level of European Added Value. The degree of additionality (what would have happened if EU funds were not available) is also very high.

Still, there is scope for further improvement:

- through the reinforcement of the realisation of the second Arion objective (to provide input for the political administrators);
- in general, through an improved dissemination of the results and the lessons learnt;
- at the coordination and management level of the Arion action, initiatives could be taken by both the Commission as the coordinator and also by Member States to exchange good practice;
- before and during the visits, participants can be better informed about the other EU programmes that could be used for transnational cooperation projects.

An adequate offer of study visits, both qualitatively and quantitatively

Although the offer of study visits is not financially subsidised by the Arion programme, its quality and quantity is adequate.

The motivation of organisers, often former participants, is high.

The use of different techniques by Member States to develop the offer and to manage the visits does not create coherence problems.

The main problem identified in this respect is the lack of management authority on the organisers in most countries. Exceptions are the countries where the National Agency acts as sole organiser and also countries which are giving a subsidy to organisers.

The ideal visit

The overall concept of a study visit corresponds well to the objectives and the needs of both participants and organisers. Arion is positioned in a unique way through this 'product':

- it is neither a training or seminar, which could eventually have a shorter duration;
- nor a research activity, which would typically have a longer duration.

All stakeholders involved in this evaluation agree the concept should be kept un-changed: a study visit of a duration of one week, with 12 to 15 participants.

The critical factor in defining the ideal visit is at the level of the use of the time during the 5 days. Organisers have a need to pass on information and show a lot, and have tendency to limit the time available to participants for discussions and reflection. This is being solved by briefings for new organisers through a vademecum document, the National Agencies also

play a role, as well as the fact that many organisers have been participants before. It is however a critical factor that has to be managed adequately.

Language knowledge is another critical factor for the ideal visit.

Based on interviews with organisers and with participants, we would estimate that in 20 % of the visits, there are participants whose language knowledge is clearly insufficient to benefit adequately from the participation. This means that probably 5 % of participants have this problem.

Working languages:

Organisers who regularly organise Arion study visits show the tendency to reduce the number of working languages offered over time for reasons of efficiency. Although this corresponds with the opinion of the majority of participants and of organisers, we believe this is a potentially dangerous evolution for Arion. The consequences are twofold:

- a higher number of visits offered in English only, and a reducing number of visits in other languages particularly Germanic and Latin languages ;
- the loss of cultural diversity of groups: with only one working language, the risk exists that groups would be more culturally homogeneous.

Both aspects would mean a loss of European Added Value for the action.

Simplification of administration

The grant offered to participants is often not enough to cover the real cost. 58 % of the respondents to the on-line survey have said it had been the case for them.

This problem is definitely more important for:

- participants coming from peripheral countries;
- participants that have to participate in a visit in an expensive country or location.

Still, most participants manage to solve this problem. An increase of the grant is necessary but at the same time not an absolute necessity. The main reason is that participants are extremely motivated, and are in most cases ready to pay for part of the cost themselves or manage to find the money.

The problem of the administration around the grant is probably more sensitive than the actual financial aspects. The demand to prove all costs is considered as 'over the top', when it is clear that the grant barely covers the cost. Simplifying this procedure and working with daily subsistence allowances that are granted based on proof of actual nights spent in a location, would take away a lot of work to all parties, but also irritation levels would go down significantly.

Utility

We consider the utility of Arion as very high : all impacts obtained through Arion do correspond to concrete needs, not only within the educational area but of society as a whole, and do contribute to the realisation of significant European Added Value.

Indeed, both expected impacts (those directly linked to the Arion objectives) as well as impacts which realisation was not directly aimed at (e.g. the high value of Arion in terms of personal 'enrichment' experienced by all participants, the lowering of the barriers felt by participants from Candidate Countries towards integration in the EU) can be considered as contributing to the improvement of the general socio-economic conditions of the participating countries individually and of the EU as a whole.

Further proof of the utility of Arion is found in the very high satisfaction levels of all actors involved in the Arion action.

SWOT analysis³

STRENGTHS :

- High level of efficiency (value for money)
- High level of European Added Value
- Wide reach (geographically and in terms of profiles of participants)
- Formula is well-adapted to the objectives of the programme and the possibilities of actors (participants and organisers)
- Significant impacts regarding the realisation of the first Arion objective
- (Very) high satisfaction levels among all actors involved
- Flexibility of themes allows to keep close to political agenda

WEAKNESSES :

- Resources available for Arion (both at EC/TAO and at national level) are limited (for the management of Arion, for grants, for evaluation)
- Low level of impacts concerning realisation of second Arion objective
- Some operational aspects : promotion, Soclink, catalogue, administration regarding grants, tight timetable, lack of quality control on offer of visits, language knowledge of some participants
- Little focus on operational objectives (indicators and criteria to measure success or failure)
- Arion should be more linked to the future objectives of the European Education policy
- No procedures for dissemination of results embedded in the programme
- Exchange of good practice at European level about management issues is marginal

OPPORTUNITIES :

- Use Arion to raise awareness for and reinforce other European actions and/or programmes (high value for money, high satisfaction levels, strong networking effects)
- Use Arion to facilitate the enlargement process
- Scope for enhancing impact on policy-making level
- Potential to increase impact by combining study visits with other techniques

THREATS :

- Decentralised management can be used as an alibi for lack of leadership, leading to lost opportunities or significant differences in quality among Member States
- Administrative tasks consuming much of the available resources at EC / TAO and national level, at the expense of results dissemination
- Level of the grant in relation to the actual cost of the study visit for participants
- Absence of quality control and management authority on study visit organisers in most countries

³ Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Recommendations

Recommendations for improvements

Give a clear responsibility to the National Agency for the quality of the offer of visits

Overall, the quality of the offer of study visits is very good. This is the result of the overall motivation of organisers, who often are former participants themselves.

Formally speaking, nobody is in charge of controlling or managing the quality of the offer of study visits. National Agencies make sure they have a sufficient offer, they also take initiatives ex-ante to support organisers or make sure they have advice. The existing vademecum is also a good tool, even if it can be improved.

What needs to be improved is the actual control of the overall quality. This is at the moment happening only in the countries where there is financing of the organisation of study visits. On this aspect a best practice exchange should be organised among all Arion countries.

The cycle of the action

As the catalogue is being sent rather late, leaving to the National Agencies little time to send it out and reach all potentially interested parties, we would suggest to launch the call for the programme proposals earlier.

Also a potential solution to the problem above could be the publication of the catalogue in an electronic format only. That way, it can be put on line at the agreed date. Late arrivals would be added later with as a consequence that they would probably attract fewer participants and be penalised.

Participant selection

This is a critical factor for:

- satisfaction levels of participants and organisers
- efficiency of the visits.

The reality at the moment is of very motivated and carefully selected participants. Still, problems can occur that have to be avoided:

- participants who participate mainly for touristic rather than professional reasons
- participants who have insufficient knowledge of at least one of the working languages.

We do not believe it is feasible to work with standards and real controlling systems at the EU level on this aspect for an action that is and should be de-centralised. We believe the route for further improvement on these issues is more through transfer of best practice among Arion countries.

Matching offer and demand

Mismatches happen and lead to dissatisfaction. The way to improve on the matching is to:

- impose standards on organisers in terms of detailed and to-the-point description of the programme of the visit in the catalogue, as well as of the link between the programme and the theme of the visit;
- specify in the catalogue the target groups for whom the programme is regarded as particularly interesting;
- provide organisers with the profiles of participants in a language organisers understand and with additional information concerning jobs / professions of participants;
- countercheck with participants when the match is final : have them describe their ambitions and deliver it to the organiser before the start of the visit;
- ask the participants to specify expectations with regard to all chosen visits (not only to their first choice) as they do not always go to the place of their first choice.

Improve quality of reporting

Quality of reports is a critical factor to reach the objectives of Arion. At the moment, reports have a very high degree of variation in quality. Although standards have been set, there is little power to impose their application to a very wide group of persons with varying profiles. There is also little to no feedback. Writing reports where there is no guarantee that anybody would read them, and where the chance to trigger a reaction is low, is not particularly rewarding, and does not stimulate quality.

The technique we would recommend to improve quality of reporting is *by creating an award scheme for both individual and group reports*. This system could be organised in two stages:

- national nominations
- European awards.

This system would ensure:

- that all reports are read and reacted upon;
- that the better reports are identified and disseminated: National Agencies could make these reports available on their web site that are considered to be worth publishing and of sufficient interest;
- that outstanding work is rewarded.

The main trigger is however to:

- generate 'news' value and therefore attention to the programme and its results;
- to create an incentive for participants to produce high quality reports.

Reports having received an award will also automatically become the standard on which future participants will base themselves for their own reporting.

Dissemination of reports

In order to increase the impact of Arion action, efforts in this area should be reinforced. We would propose the following solutions:

- to oblige participants to send their individual reports to the organiser;
- to set up a database of all available group reports, that could be consulted through the Internet (indicating year, theme, location, contact persons);
- to make money available for the translation of group reports to the national language (as most group reports are in English), it would enhance the potential use to be made of them.

Exchanging best practice

There is significant room for added value creation by organizing more exchanges between the staff members of National Agencies in charge of Arion. Best or better practice examples exist, and could be copied by other countries. Motivation could increase, as well as the capacity to convince one's hierarchy to change or try out new approaches.

The simplest way to implement such an exchange at short notice, is by organizing a 1-2 day seminar.

Scenarios

Different scenarios can be envisaged to make Arion evolve. In the scenarios below, we have primarily looked at how Arion could better respond to the second objective of Arion, or another (less ambitious) objective.

We limit ourselves to two scenarios for reasons of clarity, and as a consequence of our own choice based on the results of the evaluation study. It is clear however those alternatives are possible. They could include dimensions taken individually or collectively like e.g.:

- a concentration of resources towards integration of accession countries,
- a reformulation of objectives and subsequently in the choice of themes to link Arion visits more directly to other actions within Socrates: this would mean the use of Arion as 'seed money' for generating better quality projects

Scenario 1

Objectives	Identical to present
Activities	Identical to present
Main change	Introduction of a two level award system to improve the quality and the dissemination of reports. Setting up such a system means resources should be made available, including for dissemination.
Budgetary impact	Significant if all recommendations are followed.

The first scenario proposed is to keep the present objectives and system, but look for improvements as described in the previous section. This would ensure a higher impact on all dimensions of the evaluation, and particularly on the second objective (effectiveness, efficiency and utility for the addressees).

For details we refer to the relevant section of this report. We emphasize, however, that our main recommendation in respect of meeting the second objective is to create an award system for both individual participant reports and group reports. This would have both organisational and financial consequences.

Scenario 2

Objectives	1 st objective: identical 2 nd objective: <i>Provide national and EU policy-makers with actionable evaluations and recommendations on the achievements on the road towards the concrete future objectives in education and training for the EU based on the peer review technique.</i>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Study visits according to the same principles as now• Peer review visits (new activity)
Budgetary impact	Not necessarily a budgetary impact. Present level of resources could be split over the two activities, although we would recommend to add resources for the new activity rather than to divert resources.
Main change	Introduction of a new activity, complementing the study visits, and more geared towards meeting a reformulated second Arion objective

The situation in which Arion now operates is significantly different to what it was more than 20 years ago when the objectives of the action have been formulated. In the pre-Socrates period, there was not even a legal framework for a common education policy at the EU level. Now, there are “concrete future objectives in education and training” that have been formulated with the ambition to reach these objectives by 2010. A benchmarking process has also started.

It is in this context we propose the reformulation of the second objective as mentioned above. The technique of peer review could be used to assist both the Commission and Member States in reviewing the advancement in achieving the objectives and corresponds to the spirit of the Arion action.