

Revised manuscript 20 August 2016

Consumer Education and Empowerment in Europe: Recent Developments in Policy and Practice

Abstract This article develops the findings of an evaluation of European Commission consumer education, information and capacity building actions conducted in 2011, with an examination of action taken by 2016 to address the recommendations. Based on empirical research of documents, in-depth interviews, focus groups and semi-structured surveys of Directorate General for Health and Consumers and Directorate General for Education and Culture policy networks, it discusses the journey taken to improve consumer education and empowerment throughout Europe. Implementation of the recommendations aims to transform consumer education and empowerment in Europe, with integrated and updated resources for the maximum number of teachers across the European Union, where teachers can focus the resources on consumer education activities relevant for their learners. A key focus of the new developments is to deliver higher European Union (pan-European) added-value, better coordination and synergies with national activities.

Keywords Consumer education · consumer information · consumer knowledge · consumer empowerment · European evaluation · consumer policy and practice

Introduction

The evaluation of the European Commission consumer education strategy was completed for Directorate General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) in 2011. It examined existing education actions which included multi-lingual education resources to information portals including the Europa Diary (aimed at Schools), TRACE (Training for Consumer Empowerment), Master Courses (specifically designed multi-national courses) and DOLCETA (online multi-lingual consumer resources), and emphasised capacity building, information and curriculum development. The aim was to better ensure that the target audiences were being reached efficiently and effectively across the (then) 27 Member States of the European Union. The evaluation supported and informed the European Commission's strategic planning in relation to consumer empowerment. The Consumer Policy Strategy 2007-2013 had detailed DG SANCO's remit both to work with consumer organisations and in education activities relating to the consumer issues relevant to the single market. The next sections set the policy, strategic and research contexts, highlighting the challenges and new thinking on behavioural economics. These are followed by an outline of the methodology, data analysis and the results. The article then gives an analysis of the impact of the evaluation and changes in consumer education implemented since 2011 and the expected improvement in consumer empowerment at European level.

The European Policy Context

The legal base for DG SANCO actions is specified in Article 12 of the European Treaty, and in December 2006 the Commission set out a Programme of consumer activities with two high level objectives: firstly to ensure a high level of consumer protection, notably through improved evidence, better consultation and better representation of consumers' interests; and secondly to ensure the effective application of consumer protection rules, in particular through enforcement cooperation, information, education and redress (DG SANCO, 2007).

The aim of European consumer policy is to make the European Union (EU) a tangible reality for 500 million citizens by guaranteeing their rights as consumers. The Europe 2020 Strategy calls for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In line with this growth strategy is the European Consumer Agenda, the new strategy for EU consumer policy – and the consumer programme

2014-20 – the financial framework complementing the strategy. The consumer agenda has four main objectives: improving consumer safety; enhancing knowledge; improving implementation, stepping up enforcement and securing redress as well as aligning rights and key policies to economic and societal challenges.

The 2012 European Consumer Agenda highlighted the role of consumer education, emphasising the importance of consumer empowerment, and enhancing knowledge as key for more effective consumer participation in the increasingly mobile and digital marketplace (DG SANCO, 2012c). Knowledge is increasingly important as EU citizens travel (and need to know their consumer rights in the countries they visit), and purchase across borders through e-commerce (and need to know how to seek redress for faulty products purchased outside their country). Building consumer skills at an early stage (through schools), researching into European-level consumer issues (through multi-national Master courses – building research capacity), and communicating consumer rights to the maximum number of citizens (through online consumer resources) were all important goals.

The consumer education evaluation examined four DG SANCO actions involving an investment of €30 million over the previous 10 years: (1) DOLCETA, a multi-lingual online consumer information and education resource targeted at teachers of adult, primary and secondary school students, and the general public. Its material covered consumer rights, product safety and other consumer education topics; (2) Europa Diary, a multi-lingual paper based diary, targeted at students aged 15-18 with a focus on consumer affairs. Accompanied by structured teacher resources and lesson plans, it was distributed to over four million students in more than twenty seven thousand schools throughout the EU; (3) TRACE provided training for staff of national consumer organisations; and (4) the European Integrated Master Programme with objectives to develop research and teaching in consumer affairs in EU higher education institutions, creating consumer ‘professionals’ to work in organisations that champion EU consumers (Blakemore and Smith, 2011).

The period since 2002, over which the four actions were developed was dynamic and turbulent for consumers. Developments in the European and global information society included

increasing access to the internet across the EU-27, rapid expansion of e-Commerce in some but not all Member States (MS), accompanied by associated developments in risks to consumers (IT security, cybercrime and data protection challenges), the rapid emergence of electronic communication forms (like Skype) and social networking tools (such as Facebook and Twitter) across the EU, as well as progress with information and communications technology (ICT) usage in EU-27 schools. There was also growth in the range of intermediaries (organisations and people) who deliver advice to EU consumers (Blakemore and Smith, 2011).

The Consumer Policy Strategy 2007-13 detailed DG SANCO's remit both to work with consumer organisations (through TRACE) and in education activities relating to relevant consumer issues. The single market could operate more effectively if the unevenness of the consumer landscape at Member State (MS) level was reduced. To promote cross border consumption across the single market, consumer competences are needed (through education), organisations and businesses need to focus effectively on consumer issues (the creation of high-quality consumer specialists started with the Master courses), and they need to be more prominent in education curricula (supporting teachers and educating young people).

European consumers have been faced with increasing opportunities to purchase across national borders (particularly through travel and e-commerce), but have been faced with a plethora of uneven quality of information (Brennan and Coppack, 2008). The internet has become an ever more important channel for information, education, advice and consumer purchases. E-commerce use had grown across the EU but remained uneven. Eurostat data showed that the number of consumers (aged 16-74) purchasing online over a three month period (usually the second quarter) had increased from 30% in 2007 to 53% in 2015, but with 2015 levels varying between the highest at 75% in the UK to the lowest at 11% in Romania (Eurostat, 2015).

Wider access to the internet brings challenges for the consumer and champions with growing digital risks, such as fraud, data protection and security, the power of fast and often, non-retractable communication via social media and networking. Seventy-six per cent of consumers agree that the risk of becoming a victim of cybercrime has increased with 12% of Internet users having had their social media or email account hacked (EUROPE, 2013). Consumers need to

know not just how to minimize consumer risks, they also need to know what to do if the consumer issues involve action in another country. In her report on consumer protection in the EU, Valant (2015) highlights that less than 50% of consumers were confident that their rights were protected. She discusses the Consumer Empowerment Survey conducted in 2011 where only 16% of consumers who experienced problems actually contacted consumer organisations or public authorities to resolve them. Building consumer confidence will continue to be an important goal.

DG SANCO's 2011 Consumer Summit reviewed the key target groups for education activities; young people and the elderly (an increasing segment of the EU 'ageing' population) emerged as important vulnerable consumers. The Summit identified the central role of intermediaries (underpins the activities of training and capacity building) and noted that capacity building was a priority. The Summit indicated that consumer information and education should be delivered through multiple channels. It acknowledged that the dynamism and uncertainty of the consumer landscape means that evaluation should be on-going and continuous, allowing interventions to 'grow' and 'mould' themselves to emerging consumer needs and channel opportunities. The Summit considered that a clearer understanding was also needed about the potential contribution of behavioural economics, involving a debate about whether educating consumers (providing them with the information and skills) then empowers them to make 'rational' choices, or whether consumers do not behave rationally and are subject to influences that diminish their rationality and supported SANCO's continued efforts in this area. Finally, the Summit made specific recommendations related to the actions being evaluated, including modernising them, prioritising the material so it addresses strategically important consumer issues, and bringing teachers and educationalists more directly into action in building the information resources (European Commission, 2011a).

The focus of this article is on the policies, strategies and actions taken to strengthen consumer empowerment to enable consumers to make choices based on accurate, clear and consistent information.

The Research Context

Rather than equipping consumers directly with the tangible skills to navigate the consumer landscape, McGregor (2005) argues that empowering them through education enables informed action. Thogerson (2005) acknowledges that consumer policy can support consumers to make informed decisions through the appropriate provision of education and information. Coppack and Brennan (2005) found that empowerment through education can lead to the development of skills to enable educated consumer choices. This is echoed by Williams (2006) who recognises that educated and informed consumers can take responsibility to influence organisations by using their power to voice opinions and switch to competitors, highlighting that many governments and regulators support this empowerment through consumer education policies.

Challenges faced

The single market goal of the EU generates challenges with legislation, political variances, and language differences, which can cause delays in any updates of information, and can demand more quality control. These variances, along with cultural differences, also affect how people consume, how informed they are about the market, and their levels of empowerment (Guo and Meng, 2008; Markkula and Moisander, 2012). Another challenge was the uneven computer access for schools across the Member States and consequent implications for design to take into account relatively slow access speeds in many schools. When the actions were being developed, some states had as many as 27 computers per 100 pupils, i.e. Denmark, while in Poland there were only 6 per 100 pupils (EUROPE, 2006).

Figure 1 provides a conceptual overview of the consumer educational challenges within the EU: this reflects the dynamic environment for consumers with developments in European and global information including rapid expansion of e-Commerce, increasing access to the internet with new risks including security, cybercrime and data protection challenges; and new communication services including social networking posing further challenges alongside the complex consumer landscape of organisations who can deliver advice on information for consumers.

Figure 1 here please

There is a plethora of consumer information provided by multiple agencies, and many channels through which it is available, all of which can overwhelm and confuse consumers, thus reducing confidence and trust, even in reliable sources. The four education interventions were developed separately, due to differing provider contracts; therefore there was some overlap of information and no clear standardisation, with each bringing varied value to the consumer education agenda (Blakemore and Smith, 2011).

Consumer groups vary in their education needs, with those classed as vulnerable or socially excluded requiring access to education and information through multiple channels (Blakemore and Wilson, 2009). Delivery was prioritised for three main groups: young people, elderly citizens and ‘vulnerable’ consumers (European Commission, 2011a). Nardo *et al*’s (2011) pan-European study found that those who were not working, and those in manual jobs were the most vulnerable to detriment, with empowerment through education, being directly related to age, gender and internet use. Hogg *et al* (2007) point out variances of culture, legislation, history, institutions and politics mean that individuals throughout Europe have differing relationships with their consumer environment. These variances will need to be embraced as consumer education policy is developed.

Throughout Europe, there are many consumer organisations offering consumer education and DG SANCO had designed TRACE courses in a bid to standardise the information they deliver and make it more readily available on a pan-European basis. DOLCETA’s focus was on delivering consumer education resources via the internet, at a time when broadband services were less sophisticated and slow. The Digital Agenda Scoreboard 2015 builds on the ecommerce statistics and reports that 63% of EU internet users now order both goods and services online. In the UK the level was 85% (EUROPE, 2015).

There is a current contest of approaches which focus on whether educating consumers (providing them with the information, and through education, the skills) then empowers them to make ‘rational’ choices, or whether consumers do not behave rationally and are subject to influences that diminish their rationality. In recent years DG SANCO has been exploring the relevance of such behavioural economics approaches in the development of consumer policy. As the

evaluation used insights from behavioural economics to inform this research, the next section analyses its potential contribution in the context of educating consumers.

Using Behavioural Economics

Behavioural economics seeks to combine lessons from psychology with those from economics (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). In broad terms, there are two ways of thinking about changing behaviour. The first is based on influencing what people consciously think about and this is termed the ‘cognitive’ or ‘rational’ model. Many traditional interventions that try to change behaviour follow this model. For example, interventions try to tackle obesity through educational programmes that try to make people think about why they should adopt a healthy diet and physical activity (Cecchini *et al*, 2010; Kinmonth *et al*, 2008). The problem is that a substantial proportion of the variance in behaviour is not explained by intentions. Meta-analyses imply that changing intentions account for less than one-third of the variance in behaviour change, and estimates based on experimental or causal studies report variance as low as 3% (Webb and Sheeran, 2006).

The contrasting model of influencing behaviour focuses on more automatic processes of judgment. Instead of providing information, this route to changing behaviour often focuses on changing the ‘context’ or environment within which many of our decisions are taken. In other words, behaviour is not so much thought about: it simply comes about. The human brain uses a number of heuristics to allow it to cope with the large burden of complex choices it faces every day, but these ‘rules of thumb’ can also lead us into systematic biases and errors (Kahneman, 2003; Kahneman and Tversky, 2000). An enhanced understanding of human decision-making provides opportunities of influencing choices that take better account of how people actually respond to the context within which their decisions are made – the ‘choice architecture’ - as it is called in the book ‘Nudge’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

The ‘dual process’ model has often been proposed as a unified theoretical basis for targeting rational/reflective behaviours with information and automatic behaviours with ‘nudges’ (Marteau *et al*, 2011). In particular, psychologists and neuroscientists have recently converged on a description of brain functioning that is based on two types of cognitive processes, also

interpreted as two distinct systems (or sets of systems): evolutionarily older ‘System 1’ processes described as automatic, uncontrolled, effortless, associative, fast, unconscious and affective, and more recent, characteristically human ‘System 2’ processes described as reflective, controlled, effortful, rule-based, slow, conscious and rational (Chaiken and Trope, 1999; Strack and Deutsch, 2004; Evans, 2008).

A team of behavioural and social scientists had developed an integrated behavioural approach based on ‘Messenger, Incentives, Norms, Defaults, Salience, Priming, Affect, Commitments, Ego’ or MINDSPACE as a supplement of the traditional approach to understanding and influencing behaviour (Dolan *et al*, 2010; Dolan *et al*, 2012a). The MINDSPACE framework is described in Table 1. It was used by the UK Government to develop and apply lessons from behavioural economics and behavioural science to public policy making.

Table 1 here

MINDSPACE was used by the Consumer Financial Education Body (CFEB) in the UK to illuminate how learnings from psychology and sociology can be used alongside more traditional policy interventions to transform financial behaviour – by developing approaches that build financial capability (Adriaenssens *et al*, 2010; Dolan *et al*, 2012a; Dolan *et al*, 2012b).

Experience was gained in the design of the messages during on an ongoing project ‘Investigating the effect of letter wording on taxpayer behaviour’ which aimed to help the UK government to identify more effective ways of collecting the debts owed to it by individuals (for 1.5 million research participants). The most effective messages are based on social norms which have increased the tax repayment by 7%, and messages prompting the omission/commission bias (people judge culpability for a consequence to be greater if it resulted from action than from an absence of action) have achieved a 20% increase (Hallsworth *et al*, 2014).

In summary, insights from the behavioural sciences can provide a powerful set of policy tools to use when trying to influence behaviours (Allcott and Mullainathan, 2010; Marteau, Hollands, and Fletcher, 2012). The use of such principles had been hindered by the lack of a coherent and useable framework and Mindspace was an attempt to provide a useful ‘checklist’ for policy

makers and practitioners. The importance of the ‘choice architecture’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) on human behaviour raises questions about who, and on what basis, decides on this architecture. Even though many consumers and citizens might dislike the thought of government intruding into areas of personal responsibility, they may also realise that the state should have a role in behaviour change, especially when one person’s actions have consequences for another person’s welfare. Mindspace has not been evaluated because there were no interventions designed using it as a guiding framework. Mindspace was used as a conceptual tool for the analysis of existing EU interventions, which enabled better classification and analyses of ongoing interventions in terms of the underlying psychological processes triggered by them (i.e. the mechanisms of action).

Methodology

The following research questions were used to evaluate the four consumer education actions:

(1) how relevant was the programme strategy and objectives to the needs of European consumers; (2) how effective were the outputs, results and impacts achieved measured against the objectives; (3) how efficient were the resources; (4) how was the utility of the programme measured in terms of the needs, problems and issues being addressed; (5) what was the added value from EU support, as an addition to any regional and national activities; and (6) was there any synergy of fit and connection, avoiding duplication of other national or EU activities.

The evaluation involved the research team in both primary and secondary research methods. Three countries were selected for the study: Spain, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. This included a range of older and newer Member States along with northern, southern and eastern European countries. Key background documents and evidence, including previous evaluations, were critically reviewed. Sixty-four in-depth interviews were held with stakeholders of the four actions and ten focus groups took place with teachers and students. The focus groups were interactive, with users undertaking realistic online testing of DOLCETA and the Diary. Focus group feedback from teachers was received from groups conducted independently by the education ministry in Latvia and a group of teachers in Ireland. Information Technology experts carried out a technical review of the DOLCETA website and national experts carried out a content review of two modules from the site. Semi-structured surveys were sent to DG SANCO

and DG Education and Culture (DG EAC) policy networks: responses were received from twenty Directors of the European Consumer Centres (ECCs); eleven Members of the European Consumer Consultative Group (ECCG); fifteen Members of the Consumer Policy Network (CPN); seven contact points for the Diary in other DGs; and eleven national education ministries officials.

Data Analysis and Limitations

The data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. Key points from the collected documents were extracted into an analysis grid and interview notes were 'mined' for evidence and quotes. This evidence was collated into an analysis grid mapped against the evaluation questions. Mind-mapping software was used to map out key evaluation themes from the evidence; and quantitative data (surveys, statistics, and financial data) were tabulated as spreadsheets and charts. This evidence was triangulated across and between the other sources, and used to formulate the findings.

The range of stakeholders and sources being covered across the countries generated challenges and resulted in limitations: focus groups in the Netherlands were difficult to set up as the timing coincided with examinations. Despite the lower participation level in the Netherlands, findings from focus groups were mainly consistent with those conducted in Spain and the Czech Republic, and therefore created robust results. In assessing the usage of DOLCETA, it was found that the website Google Analytics were not set up to distinguish between internal and external usage, which meant working with the best estimates of unique users, rather than full monitoring statistics.

Results and Discussion

Drawing from the analysis by all of the above methods, the evaluation of each intervention is presented, assessed for relevance, effectiveness, efficiency added value to the EU and synergy with other consumer education initiatives.

DOLCETA

Respondents communicated that the content was relevant, but that it was not updated sufficiently regularly. Therefore confidence in the accuracy of the content was low. Furthermore, the design, presentation and navigation of information discouraged use. This raised the question of whether the action was cost-effective, and could become much more widely used even if improvements were made to improve its relevance. Effectiveness of the website included measurement of usability, taking into account previous evaluations which had made recommendations to improve access speeds and navigation ease. There were issues of broken links, and ineffective search engine optimisation, mainly due to the name, which is not memorable nor would feature in searches for consumer information or consumer education. Users reported that the site was confusing, static, and lacking in interactivity. Upgrading the content and making it more dynamic could require significant resources. DOLCETA did not effectively meet its key focus of supporting cross-border transactions as its target groups had become diverse and with heterogeneous needs, so a 'one size fits all' approach was not working. DOLCETA was less recognised by school-teachers as being a valuable teaching and learning aid because adult learning was the initial focus. DOLCETA cost 13.63 euros per visitor, twelve times more per use than the hard copy of the Diary. Improvements suggested focused on better sharing of quality information, for example, better linkage between the Europa Diary and DOLCETA along with sharing good practice examples such as tools for education across the EU.

Europa Diary

The evaluation confirmed that the Diary was targeting the relevant group of 15-18 year olds. There were concerns that the Diary content was moving away from core consumer issues as DG SANCO had agreed cost-sharing with other DGs who inserted their own, consumer-relevant content into the Diary. The update process affected information currency, especially for the paper diary content, which cannot be updated as quickly as the online version. It was also observed that merely translating the content for different countries does not in itself provide pan-national relevancy, and information often needed to be made appropriate for the national context. There was considerable variance in take-up of the Diary e.g. Slovenia 92%, Estonia 56% and the UK less than 20%. Demand for the paper diaries often outstripped supply. No consistent records were kept of how the Diaries were used once delivered to the schools. Some respondents noted

that the Diary offered value when used as a teaching tool, but that it was a wasted resource if used passively. When measured against the specific objective of providing pan-European consumer education for the target group, the evidence did not clearly demonstrate reach and impact. Improvements suggested included more interactivity (emphasising online resources), a mobile phone app (responding to widespread smartphone usage by young people), and links to social networking sites. More teaching resources would be required to encourage teachers to embed the Diary content into their curricula. Participants highlighted the synergies in other consumer education products and suggested that these could be combined. They also identified an opportunity to share good practice between the Member States.

European Master Courses

The multi-national and interdisciplinary Master courses were developed by consortia involving universities in Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Poland, Denmark, France, Romania, Italy, Spain, and the UK. The courses were meeting the objectives set, although the outcomes for the graduates had yet to be measured. There were issues with the recognition of the courses by some government consumer organisations, therefore it was expected that students may have to find employment in the private sector. Funding ended in 2011, after which each course consortium was expected to sustain their programme with alternative options, as is the case with one of the courses, an MSc in European Consumer Affairs (EURECA), led by Technical University, Munich (2016).

TRACE

The training courses were seen to be relevant to the target group of consumer organisations, although some of the less stable or smaller organisations, such as those run mainly by volunteers and from newer Member States, were unable to commit to three days of training in Brussels. The content levels were deemed suitable, but the need to be responsive to the dynamics of consumer landscapes was highlighted including areas concerning financial awareness (highlighted by the economic crisis), digital rights, social media education, and funding sustainability for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). However, respondents did see responsiveness to feedback with courses being improved and updated. Feedback on the objective of capacity building within trainees' organisations showed that this was difficult to measure. Attendees did highlight that

networking was useful and fruitful and that they had improved their understanding of European consumer legislation and policy. Evidence highlighted that courses were not far reaching enough and further action was required to attract all the organizations that may have a need for them. Challenges included the time involved, language barriers (with the course solely being delivered in English), and the training priorities of organizations and home countries. The multiplier effect was limited, with little evidence of dissemination in the workplace. Some evaluation participants from the Consumer Policy Network (CPN) recommended that sharing best practice would bring added value to the courses. At the EU level TRACE was viewed as central to supporting organizations to cross boundaries, build networking, and develop an EU-wide view of consumer affairs.

Summary of Findings

The evaluation found that the combination of the four interventions, DOLCETA, TRACE, Europa Diary and the Master courses, had addressed the Consumer Policy Strategy 2007-2013 objectives. At the time of their production the resources were built to fit suitably with the current technologies, information and pedagogy. However, the consumer landscape had changed rapidly, with a plethora of diverse, new consumer information and education resources being produced both internationally and nationally. Furthermore, the ICT provision had improved, both in terms of access to the internet and in terms of device availability (laptops, smartphones etc.), albeit unequally across nations, schools and consumer groups.

The responses for the Europa Diary and DOLCETA revealed the differences in needs and practice throughout the member states. In countries which were still developing and growing their consumer landscape, information and education resources, they were more valued as being useful. The paper Diary lacked clear evidence about its measurable impact. Overall, the evidence indicated across the European Union that DOLCETA did not meet the objectives effectively. Overall, there was general consensus that DG SANCO's efforts in raising consumer and organizational competences were valued.

Intervention Recommendations and Actions

This section summarises the consumer education evaluation recommendations for each intervention, and develops them within the context of more recent research literature. In relation to the Master courses, due to the high cost and relatively low impact, the evaluation recommended that other areas of funding should be explored, in particular Erasmus Mundus (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission, 2016). Following the evaluation, the European Commission (2012a) concluded that due to the economic environment, the highly competitive education market and the loss of partners, these courses would not receive further funding. The evaluation of TRACE recommended that online courses continue, with improvements to ensure their sustainability, for example, sharing best practice. Synergising the materials from the Europa Diary and DOLCETA into a single resource with open access could ensure the full potential and value is realised and utilised. Given the variability of use, the concern about information saliency, and the variable take-up across the EU, the evaluation recommended that DG SANCO should undertake a full review into the feasibility and costs that would make the Diary fully updated and used across the EU. The evaluation concluded that the DOLCETA resource was outdated in its delivery mode, in a static, albeit online format, which also limited its accessibility to the target group of vulnerable people. Although the content was useful and broadly relevant, it was recommended that the mode of delivery should be reconsidered. The most effective areas from each intervention should be blended to produce a resource which is up to date, meets the needs of relevant audiences, with consideration of behavioural economics and consumer behaviour and implemented through effective channels, using digital and mobile technology, ensuring interactivity.

Impact of the Consumer Education Evaluation on Policy and Practice

Changing Consumer Landscape in Europe

Since the evaluation, the consumer and digital landscape has continued to change. By 2013, Eurostat (2015) found that over four fifths (83%) of people in Europe had accessed the internet. However there is less confidence for consumers buying online from other EU countries (38%) than in their own country (61%) (European Commission, 2015). The ‘Consumer Conditions in the EU’ study also found that cross-border online purchases are more popular in some of the smaller countries with language and cultural links such as Cypriot and Maltese consumers who

use UK websites. Cross-border online purchases cause a disproportionately high proportion of problems such as price discrimination or refusal to sell.

A quarter of all consumers encountering problems do not complain, discouraged by the perceived low likelihood of success, lack of information and length of procedure. From January 2016, an EU-wide online platform was set up for online consumer disputes. The platform links all of the national Alternative Dispute Resolution entities notified by Member States to the Commission and operates in all EU official languages. Consumer education developments will continue to be essential to build consumer confidence and encourage more consumers to complain and access redress.

Despite the increase in access to the internet, consumer awareness of some key consumer rights remains limited. In the EU as a whole, only 9% of consumers are able to answer correctly all three knowledge questions on unsolicited products, faulty product guarantees and distance purchase cooling off periods, with young people having the lowest levels of knowledge (European Commission, 2015). Further awareness raising campaigns are needed to address this substantial issue in addition to the consumer education actions.

Many of the lessons from the evaluation of consumer education showed that ‘broad brush’ actions such as the Europa Diary did not effectively combine education and support. Indeed, under the Juncker Commission the responsibility for consumers has moved to Justice, in the Directorate General for Justice and Consumers (European Commission 2016b). Here the consumer themes are stated as ‘*EU consumer policy; consumer safety; consumer rights and law; enforcement; consumer evidence; financial services; and solving consumer disputes*’, and a strong driver for all of these is the Digital Single Market (European Commission 2016c). The national-level network of European Consumer Centres remains active and promotes the understanding of EU consumer rights and assists in resolving complaints about purchases made in another country of the network, when travelling or shopping online (European Commission 2016d).

Changes made to Capacity Building Efforts in the EU

Since the evaluation in 2011, changes were made to the four capacity building interventions set out in the Consumer Policy Strategy (2007-2013). When consumers seek information and advice, their trust in authorities, and their social background, means that they look to varied sources: elderly people tend to seek information and advice within local organisations whereas the majority of consumers choose the telephone or the internet (European Commission, 2011b). It was recommended that interventions made at national level may be more closely aligned to citizens' needs and capabilities (European Commission, 2012a). An OECD (2009) study recommended that national policies should embed consumer education within the school curricula and life-long learning programmes, based on nation specific consumer research and on-going evaluation.

The European Consumer Summit (European Commission, 2011a) suggested that nations share best practice and this could be collated at EU level to provide a more focused learning resource for teachers and other consumer education professionals, with a 'forum for exchange and communication'. It also recommended that there needs to be clearer guidance on who should provide education, the EU, or organisations within nations. Goldsmith and Piscopo (2014) agree that these pan European educational resources face multi-national challenges and that more involvement by national educators is required to create the fit to countries' needs.

Changes Made to the Four Consumer Education Interventions

Extensive change in the consumer landscape prompted the redesign of these interventions. Funding for the Master programmes ended, with one course continuing to run due to its sustainability. DOLCETA was phased out, but its resources and the valued teacher's resource area from the Europa Diary were updated and combined, along with the European Database for Financial Education, and current material can now be accessed in the new Consumer Classroom, an online resource, co-created with teachers and other stakeholders. Educators can build lessons, share best practice, collaborate on work and discuss on forums along with accessing a range of resources to support them in teaching consumer issues to young people (European Commission, 2016).

The Commission ceased publication of the paper Diary with the final version in 2011/2012. Given the dynamic nature of consumer affairs and consumer law, it is essential that consumers have access to accurate information. Broader information which is more focussed on citizen and consumer rights while residing within the EU is now accessible on the ‘Your Europe’ (European Union, 2014) website. This includes rights when shopping, online rights, financial products and services, unfair treatment and energy supply. Citizens can expect these electronic resources to provide more accurate information, and this will enhance their empowerment.

A project team, named ‘Consortium’ was set up to further develop consumer organisation training (Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs (BEUC), 2013). Consortium consists of BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation, who ran the TRACE courses, along with, SIVECO (a Romanian IT company specialised in e-learning), and DARA Creative (an Irish web design company) who collaborated in creating the ‘Consumer Classroom’ for educators. This educational resource builds on the success of TRACE and promises to deliver a strong team, tools (interactive platform and online courses) and capacity building programme for a more effective consumer movement in Europe (BEUC, SIVECO and Dara, 2014). It addresses developing networks, which will make use of social media and more complex issues, for instance, building more country specific capacities. The programme is aimed at consumer organisations, but will also provide a broader inclusion for those involved in consumer activities, such as public authorities. Figure 2 demonstrates the programme’s aims.

Add figure 2 here

Conclusion

Developments in policy and practice have occurred based on the recommendations of the evaluation of consumer education, information and capacity building actions completed in 2011. **The European consumer landscape is continuing to change with insights from behavioural economics useful for identifying the needs of target groups for consumer education.** Improved internet access offers infinite information from countless sources, however, there is still not

equal access to consumer information, advice and education across all countries and societies, and often the most in need, the disadvantaged and vulnerable, are not being reached effectively.

Education and related support is now strongly focused on building pan-European capacity. The Commission is establishing a network of consumer professionals – Consumer Champion – taking skilled individuals at a national level and providing them with ‘*training, e-learning, resources and networking opportunities*’ (European Commission, 2016e). At the schools level a multi-lingual resource, the Consumer Classroom, is a website including learning resources, lesson plans and lesson builders, collaboration and networking opportunities, inter-school projects and competitions. Changes to interventions, along with new solutions, have been designed to address the findings of the evaluation, with resources linked more closely to individual nations, enabling collaborative work and networking to improve provision at the appropriate level using the most relevant method. The Consumer Classroom is produced in collaboration with educators and supports them in developing curricula for consumers, delivered via online learning within classrooms for 12-18 year olds (European Commission, 2016a). A significant change of emphasis has been moved away from the previously more prescriptive approaches (for example providing generic material), to supporting, informing, and mobilising teachers (the knowledge experts) across Europe, and building consumer skill and capacity (in young people) for the Digital Single Market. These new communities of practice are receiving support to grow and develop new solutions for more effective consumer education throughout Europe and internationally. Continuous evaluation of the new consumer education initiatives aims to ensure effectiveness, relevance and sustainability, which is what this analysis would recommend in such a vibrant, global landscape.

In summary, the actions taken aim to build consumer skills and competences at the EU level. Sensitive to the variable geometry of the EU consumer landscape, they complement what is happening at a national level, build synergies across stakeholders, adapt information to a national context, and enable a better understanding of consumer behaviour and needs. Information was rationalised and delivered flexibly, building knowledge, skills and competences in a diverse set of target user groups. Provided through their channels of choice, the European Commission is also engaging consumers as partners in the consumer education process, not just passive

recipients. Building a loop between consumer needs, behaviours, value-networks, information resources and channels, the consumer education and empowerment landscape has been transformed to align with the direction of the 2020 consumer programme and strategy.

References

Adriaenssens, C., Dolan, P., Elliott, A., Metcalfe, R. & Vlaev, I. (2010) Transforming Financial Behaviour: Developing interventions that build financial capability. Report for the Consumer Financial Education Body, UK.

Allcott, H. & Mullainathan, S. (2010) Behaviour and energy policy. *Science*, **327**, 1204-1205.

Anderson, J. R., Bothell, D., Byrne, M. D., Douglass, S., Lebiere, C. & Qin, Y. (2004) An integrated theory of the mind. *Psychological Review*, **111**, 1036–1060.

BEUC. (2013) *A capacity building programme for consumer professionals*. [WWW document].

URL

http://www.beuc.eu/publications/x2013_073_ssa_a_capacity_building_programme_for_consumer_professionals_promotional_sheet.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

BEUC, SIVECO & Dara. (2014) *A capacity building programme for consumer professionals*. P1

[WWW document]. URL

http://www.siveco.ro/sites/default/files/article_images/press_releases/Capacity_Building_Programme_Presentation_BEUC.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

Blakemore, M. & Wilson, F. (2009) *Study report on multi-channel delivery strategies and sustainable business models for public services addressing socially disadvantaged groups*.

[WWW document]. URL <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/life-and-work/public-services>

(accessed on August 10th, 2016).

Blakemore, M. & Smith, N. (2011) *Evaluation of consumer education, information and capacity building actions: Final report*. Ecorys/DG SANCO, UK.

Brennan, C. & Coppack, M. (2008) Consumer empowerment: global context, UK strategies and vulnerable consumers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **32**, 306–313.

Cecchini, M., Sassi, F., Lauer, J. A., Lee, Y. Y., Guajardo-Barron, V. & Chisholm, D. (2010) Tackling of unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and obesity: health effects and cost Effectiveness. *Lancet*, **376**, 1775-84.

Chaiken, S. & Trope, Y. (1999) *Dual-process theories in social psychology*. Guilford Press, New York.

Coppack, M. & Brennan, C. (2005) The case for educated UK consumers: the National Consumer Council's consultation on consumer education. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **29**, 418-425.

Consumer Focus. (2010) *Unleashing the new consumer power*, Consumer Focus, London.

DG SANCO. (2007) *EU Consumer Policy strategy 2007-2013 Empowering consumers, enhancing their welfare, effectively protecting them*, Health and Consumer Protection DG., Brussels.

DG SANCO. (2011) *European Consumer Summit, April 2011* [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/events/ecs_2011/ (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

Dolan, P., Hallsworth, M., Halpern, D., King, D., Metcalfe, R. & Vlaev, I. (2012a) Influencing behaviour: the mindspace way. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, **33**, 264-277.

Dolan, P., Elliott, A., Metcalfe, R. & Vlaev, I. (2012b) Influencing financial behaviour: from changing minds to changing contexts. *Journal of Behavioral Finance*, **13**, 127-143.

Dolan, P., Hallsworth, M., Halpern, D., King, D. & Vlaev, I. (2010) *MINDSPACE: Influencing*

behaviour through public policy. Report for the Cabinet Office, UK.

Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission. (2016) *Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses*. [WWW document]. URL http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/results_compendia/selected_projects_action_1_masters_courses_en.php (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

EUROPE. (2006a) *Benchmarking access and use of ICT in European schools*. [WWW document]. URL <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/> (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

EUROPE. (2006b) *Decision No 1926/2006/EC of The European Parliament and of The Council of 18 December 2006 establishing a programme of community action in the field of consumer policy (2007-2013)*. [WWW document]. URL <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:404:0039:0045:EN:PDF> (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

EUROPE. (2010) *Europe 2020: a new economic strategy*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/index_en.htm (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

EUROPE. (2011) *Consumer Scoreboard shows recovery in consumer conditions, finds cross border shopping trusted more once tried*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/enews/enews.cfm?al_id=1119 (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

EUROPE. (2013) *Online threats: survey shows impact of cybercrime*. European Commission, [WWW document]. URL http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-1130_en.htm?locale=en (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

EUROPE. (2015) *Use of Internet: Digital Agenda Scoreboard 2015*. Brussels: European Commission. [WWW document]. URL <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/use-internet#Article> (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2011a) *European Consumer Summit*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/events/ecs_2011/ (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission (2011b) *Eurobarometer*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/consumer_empowerment/docs/report_eurobarometer_342_en.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2012a) *Commission staff working document on knowledge-enhancing aspects of consumer empowerment 2012 – 2014*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/archive/strategy/docs/swd_document_2012_en.pdf. (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2012b) *Commission Staff Working Document. Report on Consumer Policy*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/archive/strategy/docs/report_consumer_policy_2012_en.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2012c) *A European Consumer Agenda - Boosting confidence and growth*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/archive/strategy/docs/consumer_agenda_2012_en.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2013a) *Comparison Tools Report from the Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue. Providing consumers with transparent and reliable information*, [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/strategy-programme/policy-strategy/documents/consumer_policy_report_2014_en.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2013b) *Report on consumer policy January 2012- December 2013* [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/strategy-programme/policy-strategy/documents/consumer_policy_report_2014_en.pdf (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2014) *Digital Agenda for Europe*. [WWW document]. URL <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/> (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission (2015) *The Consumer Conditions in the EU* [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/consumer_evidence/consumer_scoreboards/index_en.htm (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2016a) *Consumer Classroom*. [WWW document]. URL <http://www.consumerclassroom.eu/> (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

European Commission. (2016b) *European Commission Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers* [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/justice/mission/index_en.htm (accessed on August 2nd 2016).

European Commission (2016c) *Consumers* [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/index_en.htm (accessed on August 2nd 2016).

European Commission (2016d) *European Consumer Centres* [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/solving_consumer_disputes/non-judicial_redress/ecc-net/index_en.htm (accessed on August 2nd 2016).

European Commission (2016 e) *Consumer champion: strengthening the consumer movement* [WWW document]. URL <http://www.consumerchampion.eu/> (accessed on August 5th 2016).

Eurostat. (2015) *1 out of 2 persons in the EU purchased online in 2015*. [WWW document]. URL <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-press-releases/-/4-11122015-AP>. [Accessed on August 10th, 2016].

Evans, J. (2008) Dual-processing accounts of reasoning, judgement, and social cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, **59**, 255-278.

FSCP. (2012) *Defining disadvantage & vulnerability*. Financial Services Consumer Panel, London.

Goldsmith, E. B. & Piscopo, S. (2014) Advances in consumer education: European initiatives. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **38**, 52–61.

Guo, L., & Meng, X. (2008) Consumer knowledge and its consequences: an international comparison. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **32**, 260–268.

Hallsworth, M., List, J., Metcalfe, R. & Vlaev, I. (2014) The Behaviouralist as tax collector: Using natural field experiments to enhance tax compliance. *Journal of Public Economics*.

Hogg, M. K., Howells, G. & Milman, D. (2007) Consumers in the Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE): what creates and/or constitutes consumer vulnerability in the KBE? *Journal of Consumer Policy*, **30**, 151-158.

Kahneman D. (2003). Maps of bounded rationality: Psychology for behavioural economics. *American Economic Review*, **93**, 1449-1475.

Kahneman D. & Tversky A. (2000) *Choices, values and frames*. University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, Cambridge.

Kinmonth, A. L. N. J., Wareham, W., Hardeman, S., Sutton, A. T., Prevost, T., Fanshawe, K. M., Williams, U., Ekelund, D., Spiegelhalter, & Griffin, S.J. (2008) Efficacy of a theory-based behavioural intervention to increase physical activity in an at-risk group in primary care (ProActive UK): a randomised trial. *Lancet*, **371**, 41-48.

Markkula, A. & Moisander, J. (2012) Discursive Confusion over Sustainable Consumption: A Discursive Perspective on the Perplexity of Marketplace Knowledge. *Journal of Consumer Policy*, **35**, 105–125.

Marteau, T. M., Ogilvie, D., Roland, M., Suhrcke, M. & Kelly, M. P. (2011) Judging nudging: can nudging improve population health? *British Medical Journal*, **342**, 228.

Marteau, T. M., Hollands, G. J. and Fletcher, P. C. (2012) Changing human behaviour to prevent disease: the importance of targeting automatic processes. *Science*, **337**, 1492- 5.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22997327> (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

McGregor, S. (2005) Sustainable consumer empowerment through critical consumer education: a typology of consumer education approaches. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **29**, 37–447.

Nardo, M., Loi, M., Rosati, R. & Manca, A. (2011). *The Consumer Empowerment Index, A measure of skills, awareness and engagement of European consumer*. [WWW document]. URL http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/consumer_empowerment/docs/JRC_report_consumer_empowerment_en.pdf (accessed on February 28th, 2016).

OECD. (2009) *Promoting consumer education: Trends, Policies and Good Practices*. OECD, London.

Strack, F. & Deutsch, R. (2004) Reflective and impulsive determinants of social behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **8**, 220-247.

Technical University Munich. (2016) EURECA European Master's Programme in Consumer Affairs. [WWW document].
URL [http://www.masterstudies.com/EuropeanMasters-Programme-in-Consumer-Affairs\(EURECA\)/Germany/TUM-\(Technischen-Universit%C3%A4t-M%C3%BCnchen\)-BusinessSchool/](http://www.masterstudies.com/EuropeanMasters-Programme-in-Consumer-Affairs(EURECA)/Germany/TUM-(Technischen-Universit%C3%A4t-M%C3%BCnchen)-BusinessSchool/) (accessed on August 10th, 2016).

Thaler, R. & Sunstein, C. (2008) *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

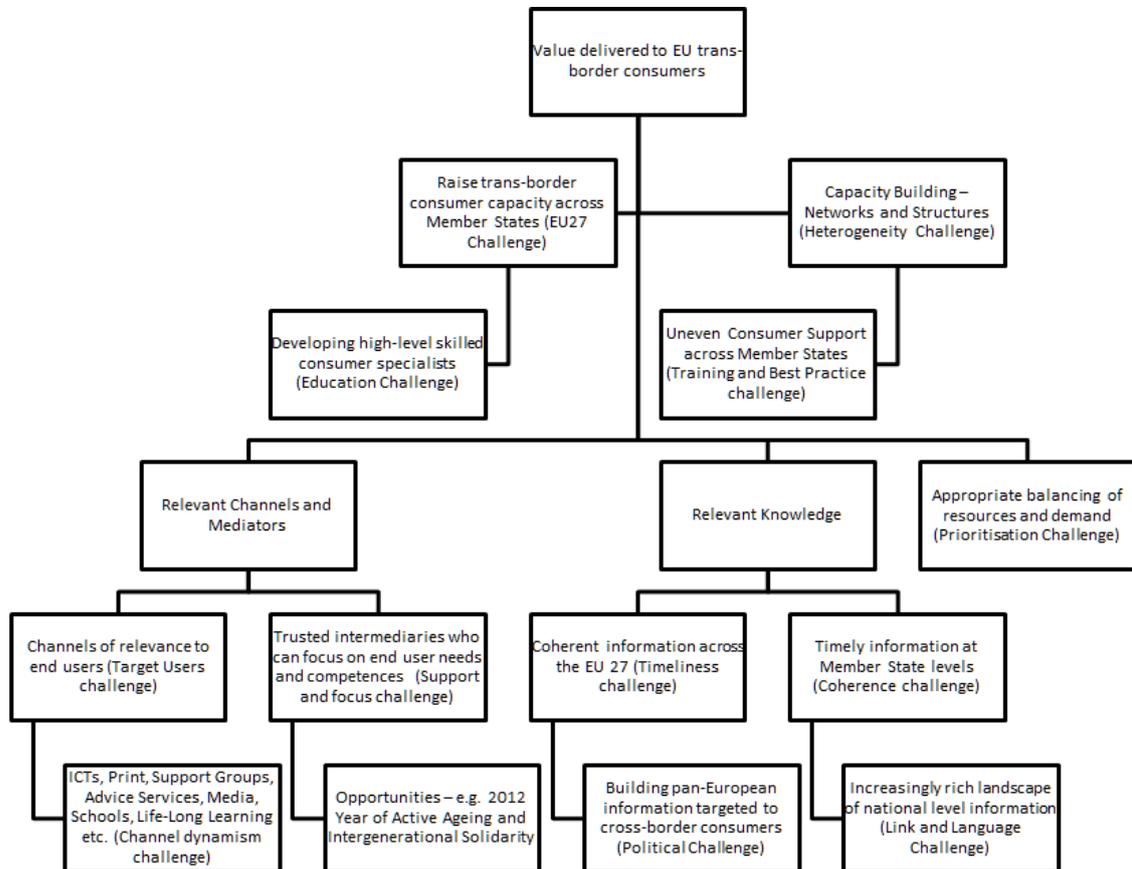
Thøgersen, J. (2005) How may consumer policy empower consumers for sustainable lifestyles? *Journal of Consumer Policy*, **28**, 143–178.

Webb, T. L. & Sheran, P. (2006) Does changing behavioural intentions engender behaviour change? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, **132**, 249-68.

Williams, T. (2006) Empowerment of whom and for what? Critical reflections on the ‘new’ regulation of consumer financial services. *Proceedings of the Consumers in the Knowledge-based Economy Workshop*, Lancaster University, Lancaster. 20–21 April.

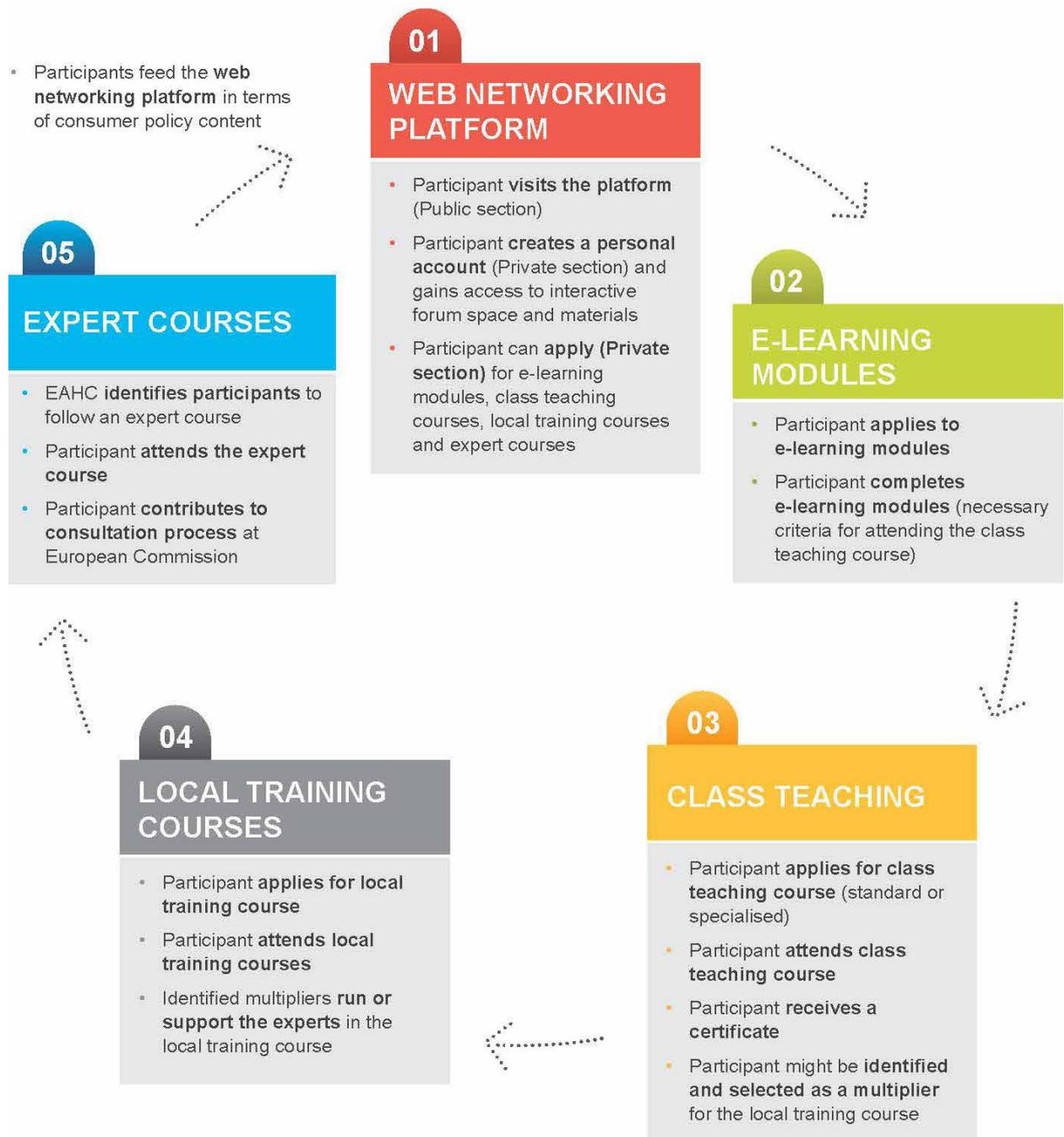
Figures and Table

Fig. 1: Conceptual Overview of the Consumer Education Challenge



Blakemore and Smith 2011

Fig. 2:



(BEUC 2013)

Table 1: The MINDSPACE framework for behaviour change

Messenger	We are heavily influenced by who communicates information
Incentives	Our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts such as strongly avoiding losses
Norms	We are strongly influenced by what others do
Defaults	We 'go with the flow' of pre-set options
Saliency	Our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us
Priming	Our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues
Affect	Our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions
Commitments	We seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts
Ego	We act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves