



Policy Paper on  
Youth organisations as non-formal  
educators - recognising our role

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## YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AS NON-FORMAL EDUCATORS - RECOGNISING OUR ROLE

### INTRODUCTION

Non-formal education has a long history and in many countries it is seen as an important way for people to learn and develop to participate in society. However, formal education institutions have systemically developed a monopoly on the provision of education, especially in the last century, due to their power to certify learning outcomes and due to the structure and visibility that they can give to the learning process.

One of the most important challenges that education policy makers will have to face in the coming years will be to find ways to increase recognition of the value of non-formal education among young people. Non formal education is essential for the personal development and life-long learning of individuals. The inadequacy of civics' courses in further and higher education institutions to ensure active citizenship among young people is also symptomatic of the need for complementary non-formal education methodologies where the skills and competences necessary to be an active citizen in society are acquired. In recent years employers are increasingly looking for people who have obtained not only academic qualifications but who can also demonstrate that they have a wider range of practical skills that cannot all be learned in formal education. These 'soft skills' cannot easily be 'taught' in formal education because they are learned through 'hands-on' practical experience and thus are much more effectively gained in non-formal environments.

Youth organisations are very important providers of non-formal education but young people are not always aware of the fact that they are acquiring a wide range of skills through their participation in youth activities. One proposal made to the European Commission during the consultation on the White Paper process was for youth organisations to '*regularly publicise the wide range of non-formal learning opportunities and the outcomes of non-formal learning projects.*'<sup>1</sup> The European Commission Communication on Lifelong Learning calls for an '*inventory of methodologies, systems and standards for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning*'<sup>2</sup>. The time has come for youth organisations to actively engage in the process of recognition and highlight their role as non-formal educators in society.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth, October 2001, p.37

<sup>2</sup> European Commission Communication: Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality', November 2001, p.17

## **What is meant by 'non-formal education'?**

The European Youth Forum has drawn on the various definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning elaborated by UNESCO, the European Commission and its member organisations and after much discussion has come to a consensus on the following common understanding: while *formal education* is typically provided by formal education institutions and is sequentially and hierarchically structured leading to certification, *non-formal education* is an organised educational process which takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to certification. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis and as a result, the individual takes an active role in the learning process. Unlike *informal education* where learning happens less consciously, the individual is usually aware of the fact that he/she is learning through non-formal education.

## **What do we mean by 'recognition'?**

It is important to make the distinction between different forms of recognition that exist depending on who is recognising the learning and for what purpose. Forms of recognition range from '*certification*' which is 'the process of issuing certificates or diplomas, which *formally recognise* the achievements of an individual,<sup>3</sup> to '*political recognition*' where legislation can be introduced giving individuals their right to the validation of competence acquired, to '*general recognition*' where society acknowledges the value of competences acquired in non-formal settings, to '*self-recognition*' where the individual assesses what he/she has learned by reflecting on the process.

## **The challenge of greater recognition without certification and formal assessment**

Due to the fact that it does not have many links with the formal certification system, non-formal education is not always given the same level of recognition as formal education. As a direct consequence of not being part of any certification system, it does not have the visibility and credibility it deserves. As a result, the status of non-formal education is often perceived as being lower. As Manuela Dubois-Reymond succinctly states 'it has a less clearly framed curricula and much less 'certification power' which gives it a weaker social and financial position.'<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is also more difficult to promote mutual recognition of non-formal education between different countries.

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<sup>3</sup> Communication From the Commission: Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality, p.31

<sup>4</sup> A Study on the Links Between Formal and Non-Formal Education', Manuela Dubois-Reymond, University of Leiden, p.5

For youth organisations, certification of non-formal education has the potential danger of formalising the non-formal process which can lead to a loss of the very essence of non-formal education. The challenge lies in promoting greater awareness and visibility of the methods used and outcomes achieved and ensuring quality standards among education providers without changing the nature of the non-formal education processes themselves.

## **I: WHY YOUTH ORGANISATIONS ARE IMPORTANT PROVIDERS OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION**

**A: Through their engagement in youth activities, young people acquire very valuable soft skills that cannot easily be acquired in formal education**

The *methods* used in non-formal education are very different in nature to traditional pedagogies used in formal education. Rather than learning 'hard knowledge' from text-books, young people 'learn by doing' through peer-education methods and voluntary work for example. Due to the participatory nature of the activities, young people take responsibility for their own learning and engage actively in the process. Youth activities provide 'real life' situations that cannot easily be reproduced in a classroom. Learning takes place in specific contexts and is therefore more meaningful.

Through their interaction with other people and the local environment in youth activities, young people learn very valuable '*soft skills*' such as interpersonal skills, people management skills, teamwork, self-confidence, discipline, responsibility, leadership skills, planning, project management, organising, co-ordination and practical problem solving skills. 'Non-formal education could empower young people....to set up their own projects, step by step, where they are at the centre of the educational activity, feel concerned, have personal interest, find strong motivation, get self-confidence and as result, develop capacities and skills by doing.'<sup>5</sup> These skills are extremely valuable for the personal development of the individual for active participation in society as well as in the world of work and complement the 'hard knowledge' acquired through formal education.

**B: Youth organisations are accessible to those whose education 'needs and wants' are not met by formal education institutions**

One of the greatest added values of non-formal education is the fact that there are opportunities at the national, European and international level, but it is most accessible at the grass roots level. Youth organisations can reach out to young people from a wide variety of backgrounds in the local context, and encourage them to learn and gain skills through their participation in non-formal education. Young people feel less intimidated in non-formal learning environments. Due to the fact that participation is

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<sup>5</sup> 'T-Kit on Social Inclusion', Council of Europe and European Commission Partnership, p.39

voluntary, they often find learning more enjoyable. Non-formal education can provide an alternative learning pathway to those whose 'needs and wants' are not met in the classroom. In addition, 'young people who have left school early or who are in precarious situations in society could benefit from non-formal education as a second chance that could have a strong impact in their lives'.<sup>6</sup>

### **C: Youth activities that take place in international contexts which provide the opportunity for intercultural learning**

While formal education tends to be embedded in national contexts, youth events, youth exchanges and seminars and conferences sometimes take place in *international settings*. This provides an invaluable opportunity for intercultural learning. By sharing their ideas with people from different countries, young people develop a sense of belonging to a larger world beyond the national boundaries of their home country. Young people learn language skills, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication, solidarity, respect, tolerance and conflict transformation, while also reflecting upon their own country's culture and values. The content of such exchange programmes also encourages young people to reflect on common values such as human rights, freedoms, peace and equality.

## **II: ACTION POINTS**

### **Youth Organisations**

Youth organisations have an active role to play in the personal development of those who are involved in their work. They have an important role to play in encouraging young people to learn as much as possible from participating in their activities. Those working in youth organisations have an important role to play in coaching and supporting them through the learning process.

- **Youth organisations should help young people to consider learning as part of their participation in youth activities and help them to identify and reflect upon what they have learned afterwards.**

Recognition starts with 'self-recognition'. Young people can be made aware of what they have learned and be able to describe the process. It is important that they are able to identify *how* they have learned so that they can maximise their learning potential.

- **Youth organisations should help young people use appropriate methods to describe learning outcomes so that the learning achieved is made more visible.**

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<sup>6</sup> 'T-Kit on Social Inclusion', Council of Europe and European Commission Partnership, p.39

This learning process is best carried out in as relaxed and enjoyable a manner as possible in order to avoid intimidating young people by 'over-formalising' the informal nature of the activities.

- **Youth organisations should maintain their non-formal nature by encouraging the role of volunteers in carrying out their activities.**
- **Youth organisations should make every effort to make their activities as accessible and attractive for as wide a range of young people as possible.**

If a greater value is to be placed on the role of youth organisations as important non-formal educators, society needs to be made aware of their work in the first place. The responsibility for raising this awareness lies predominantly with youth organisations. A more pro-active approach is therefore needed from youth organisations to raise awareness of the value of non-formal education.

- **Youth organisations should make greater efforts to publicise their activities and the outcomes of their work in the press and media.**

### **Governments and Political Institutions**

The European Youth Forum believes that 'political recognition' should not lead to 'regulation' since youth organisations do not want to 'regulate' non-formal education since they fear that by doing so, it would lose its essence. Political institutions can best promote recognition of non-formal education by funding and supporting youth activities and encouraging the creation of environments that are conducive to non-formal education such as youth organisations.

- **Governments should recognise the importance of the role of NGOs as providers of non-formal education and involve them on any political developments in the field.**
- **Governments should develop support measures for youth organisations so that they can continue to expand their role in society. These measures should include promoting legislative frameworks to reduce bureaucratic barriers for non-governmental organisations and increased financial support.**
- **Governments should improve the legislative procedures such as visa and insurance obligations in order to promote non-formal education through international youth work.**
- **Training should be provided for youth workers and youth trainers to ensure quality provision of non-formal education in youth activities.**

The European Commission Youth Programme provides a valuable source of funding for youth activities and thus has played an important role in the promotion of non-formal education. Excellent initiatives have been taken to publicise successful projects and raise awareness about the programme. However, greater efforts are necessary to make the participants themselves aware of the fact that the Youth Programme provides a valuable non-formal education opportunity for them.

- **The European Commission should take measures to ensure that the individual participants in the Youth Programme become aware of the skills they have learned from participating in the Programme.**

The activities run in co-operation with the Council of Europe and namely the Directorate of Youth and Sports have created an important ground for the development and implementation of non-formal education at pan-European level. Great efforts have been made to develop a set of training materials and publications from the results of youth activities.

- **The Council of Europe should further promote the ideals of non-formal education and all the skills and competencies gained through participation by increasing funding and support for activities that promote non-formal education.**

## **Employers**

A recent study states that 'the best passport to employment for young people is a specific bundle of attributes, particularly certain Skills and Attitudes. This bundle is the most important asset a young person can have when seeking a job. It is as important as formal qualifications'.<sup>7</sup> Awareness needs to be raised among employers of the role of youth organisations in providing these skills.

- **The European Youth Forum should promote non-formal education and its benefits for young people to employers**

With the decline in traditional manufacturing industries and the growth in new technologies and the service sector, there is a demand for new types of skills by the employment market that can often be acquired through non-formal education. Young people should be able to identify these skills so that they can describe them when needed.

- **Employers should encourage young people applying for jobs to highlight all the skills they have acquired through non-formal education on their application form so that young people are made aware of the value of those skills.**

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Attributes of Youth: Young People, Education and Employability', Andersen Consulting, p. 10

- **Employers should encourage employees to participate in non-formal education activities.**

### **Formal Education Institutions**

Many non-formal education activities already take place within formal education institutions (outside the classroom) but are allocated insufficient resources in terms of time and financial resources because these activities are under-valued. For example, youth organisations have been established within many formal education institutions yet the university authorities are not always given sufficient recognition, resources or space to support their activities.

- **Education institutions should provide space and funding for youth organisations that wish to organise activities outside class hours.**

While it is difficult to transfer non-formal education methodologies directly to the classroom, greater synergies could be created between formal and non-formal learning methodologies.

- **Formal education institutions should try and incorporate non-formal education methodologies into the formal education curricula.**
- **More education institutions and organisations should carry out research on non-formal education in order to come to a better understanding of the value of methods used and the learning outcomes. The results of this research should be disseminated as widely as possible.**
- **Formal education institutions should co-operate with non-formal education providers to develop extra-curricular activities using the knowledge and methodologies of both partners, respecting the principles of non-formal education.**

Prior experience outside the university is not always sufficiently valued by university selection panels when selecting candidates for entry to courses.

- **Higher education institutions should take inspiration from the Accreditation of Prior Education and Learning (APEL)<sup>8</sup> method of recognising prior learning used in the UK when setting the entrance criteria for courses in higher education institutions**

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<sup>8</sup> Accreditation of Prior Education and Learning - A system widely used in universities in the UK where candidates can use previous training and non-formal education experiences in addition to formal education qualifications or instead of them in applying for a higher education course or qualification.