

The “slippery” road towards validation of non-formal learning in youth work: Competence development and profiles, validation and its procedures in touch with youth work settings

Since 2005, the SALTO Training & Cooperation Resource (SALTO T&C RC) has worked actively on the strategy of recognition of non-formal learning and youth work. By facilitating and supporting discussions and developments in the four different dimensions of individual, social, formal and political recognition, SALTO T&C RC supports various stakeholders in the youth field to develop their own strategies and contribute to political and educational discussion processes. Also, since 2007 SALTO T&C RC has contributed to the further development of the European Training Strategy (ETS) by developing competence models for trainers and youth workers and related training strategies. In this short article the connection between the two strategies will be reflected along with some theses in the light of current recognition and validation trends and debates.

1. Recognition of non-formal learning and youth work got a meaning

Looking back 10 years ago you could find already in a lot of political documents the demand to recognise non-formal learning and youth work better. But when it came to implementation

strategies and to look behind the demand, trying to understand what was meant by it, it was very difficult to find anything clear or understandable – using the words seemed to be *en vogue*. This has significantly changed during the last 10 years. Nowadays you hardly find any strategy – be it in youth policy, youth unemployment, etc. - where recognition of non-formal learning and youth work is not seen as one of the crucial paths! And it is also clear that recognition of non-formal learning is targeted to learning outcomes of individuals gained in youth work but also to a related framework and system, offering support to the young people. And recognition of youth work of course is also one of the key demands to guarantee spaces for and participation of young people. Nowadays there are more and more concrete strategies and implementation measures around Europe.³⁴

2. The EU key competences remain a challenge within Youthpass

Youthpass provides an opportunity to reflect on learning outcomes and to describe them under

34 <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/recognition>

the framework of the eight EU key competences for lifelong learning. Yes, the message encourages users to see the value of bridging non-formal and formal here. However, using a pre-defined framework makes it challenging for youth workers and young people to find the Key competence where specific learning outcomes fit best. This feedback was confirmed within the Youthpass impact study³⁵. But it seems to remain a challenge for young people and youth workers and for everybody in society to see the potential of individual learning outcomes in youth work and describe it in an adequate way; to see that learning outcomes gained in youth work provide learning in all competence areas and not limited to so called social competences. Many people still do this both inside and outside the youth work field. Maybe it is still too difficult to understand and imagine that learning can happen other than in formal settings.

3. The charming but tricky creation competence models

On the way to better recognition and especially when entering formal recognition debates, the question of offering fundamentals; providing contextual material and being able to describe frameworks, led recently to start setting up and developing competence models to start strategy development and steps into quality development by looking at the actors in youth work. First approaches to describe which competences young leaders and youth workers gain in youth work are there, first attempts are there to describe competence models of certain target groups like trainers and youth worker. It is also important to describe what is youth work, what is understood by this term in local, regional, national and international contexts, how can it be described – which settings are meant, where are limits towards other sectors like civil social services or formal learning. But looking at a competence model and working with has a lot of opportunities to finally see the full potential of either a youth work context or of the existing profiles in youth

35 <https://www.youthpass.eu/en/youthpass/downloads/youthpass-impact-study/>

work.³⁶ But of course the challenge remains, how to work with them, how to enable people in the youth field to use them, which instruments work to make them alive.

4. The long and “slippery” road towards validation of non-formal learning

In 2012 the youth work field was asked to contribute to content development related to the Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning³⁷. Validation systems will be developed in European member states, consisting of 4 different steps: 1. identifying learning outcomes, 2. documenting learning outcomes, 3. assessing them according to standards and 4. certifying this. These steps should also be accessible for young people and should provide tools which are youth-friendly. That said, the reality is not always that nice and friendly. During these processes it has become obvious how resistant, rigid and inflexible some formal systems are; but it also becomes obvious how difficult it is to imagine how future and alternative ways of learning can happen – most people still have in mind a strong and rigid understanding of learning and education and what has to happen from their own formal learning path. A lot of people of course agree that one can learn outside curriculum settings and of course most of them know somebody who has managed an interesting path without using a formal education one. And almost everybody confirms that the skills he or she needs to fulfil the job come from other than educational contexts, such as hobbies, training-on-the-job, and other non- and informal settings. When it comes to imagining validation procedures which enable people to describe their competences, being able to express the learning and seeing how they can fit to a job profiles usually causes the imagination to stop or it seems to be impossible to contribute to these debates – too technical, too difficult, not field related.

36 <https://www.salto-youth.net/trainercompetences/>

37 <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

The recent development of competence models of course contributes to the development of validation procedures. By making sure and showing what is possible in the context of youth work and by showing what profiles people have or in which area learning happens, a first important step is already made. It can make people proud and it can motivate them to further develop steps in validation to get the learning outcomes recognised.

Looking across Europe, discussions and processes to contribute the validation debate are different and it is good to look into the different countries, to learn from each other e.g. from the active contribution of the youth work field to care for recognition of youth work

occupational profiles (like youth worker, youth trainer) in Slovakia or from contributions of the international youth work field to develop validation procedures in Germany.

The continuation of this work needs expertise and the willingness to go down a long road, and trust in the potential of these debates; to give a push to reform educational systems; to support young people who fail in formal settings; to provide better opportunities for youth work to be more professional – in a good and innovative way!

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