



Policy paper on
Recognition of non-formal education:
Confirming the real competencies of young
people in the knowledge society

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People First

*If you want a year of prosperity, grow grain
If you want ten years of prosperity, grow trees
If you want a hundred years of prosperity, grow people.*

Background

Non-formal education is an organised process that gives young people the possibility to develop their values, skills and competencies others than the ones developed in the framework of formal education. Those skills (also called 'soft skills'¹) include a wide range of competencies such as interpersonal, team, organisational and conflict management, intercultural awareness, leadership, planning, organising, co-ordination and practical problem solving skills, teamwork, self-confidence, discipline and responsibility.

What is special about non-formal education is that individuals, participants are the actors actively involved in the education/learning process. The methods that are being used aim at giving young people the tools to further develop their skills and attitudes. Learning is the ongoing process, one of its crucial features is learning by doing. "Non-formal" does not imply unstructured, the process of non-formal learning is shared and designed in such a way that it creates an environment in which the learner is the architect of the skills development.

Non-formal learning on the other hand is a process that is different to non-formal education and therefore can happen in different settings and environments. Youth organisations offer non-formal learning through their programmes at the same time non-formal learning experiences can be organised within the work place. It is important to acknowledge that individual skills acquired through involvement with youth organisations are not only related to employment prospects, but they contribute to the development of human capabilities and motivations. Such skills contribute more directly to a general motivation for learning rather than to specific tasks and responsibilities related to personal development. There is a thin line between those learning experiences, nevertheless it is important to outline the specificities of learning provided through engagement in the youth organisations and their programmes.

The European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations have long been engaged in the debate on recognition of non-formal education and have actively contributed to the knowledge and legislative developments in the area of lifelong and life wide learning. This policy paper builds upon our 2003 policy paper "Youth organisations as non-formal educators - Recognising Our Role"². We reaffirm our position that youth organisations are the most important providers of non-formal education and that the framework they offer is a determining factor for quality of non-formal education with a long-term impact. Moreover, the structure of democratic youth organisations gives young people the possibility to experience and learn about the principles of participative democracy and active citizenship.

¹ The concept of 'soft skills' used in this document is the result of an agreement in the policy paper on Youth organisations as non-formal educators - recognising our role (0618-03) adopted at the Council of Members on 21-23 November 2003.

² Policy paper on Youth organisations as non-formal educators - recognising our role (0618-03) adopted at Council of Members on 21 and 22 November 2003.

The European Youth Forum aims with this paper to **fuel the discussion and the emergence of concrete proposals to the development of quality and recognition of non-formal education**. Greater political and social recognition of non-formal education and the important role that youth organisations play is necessary.

1. Introduction

The move towards a knowledge-based society requires new criteria for education in the years to come. More than ever before, it is essential for everyone to learn and build competencies, *life long and life wide*. Already today and even more tomorrow, it is no longer sufficient to think only in terms of formal education. The further we move from the era of industrial societies, the more difficult it is for conventional education systems to meet the learning needs of individuals and communities³. It is therefore necessary to widen our understanding of education, making life-long learning a reality. **Non-formal education⁴ is an essential part of life long learning process⁵ and youth organisations are a space for and main provider of non-formal learning.**

As learning increasingly takes place in a life wide context, i.e. through non-formal education, systems of recognition of learning outcomes must also be adapted. In this context, certificates and diplomas of formal education systems do not give the full picture of people's real competencies. **Focusing on real competencies means valuing people's full range of skills, whether acquired through formal or non-formal framework. Real competencies⁶ are understood broadly as encompassing all competencies acquired through formal education, non-formal education and informal learning. Thus, this is a combined concept for those values, skills, qualifications and abilities - regardless of learning setting - that a person is able and motivated to apply.** Recognition of real competencies builds on the basic principle that the individual can build upon and use skills and competencies acquired through non-formal education schemes, in the formal education system and in employment situations. Enhancing transparency of qualifications benefits both the individual and society.

The European Youth Forum believes that flexibility between the different sectors of education should be strengthened and complementarities further explored. Recognising non-formal education and the value of youth organisations as providers of non-formal learning schemes, implies recognising young people's real competencies.

In desire to aid recognition, the European Youth Forum as the representative platform of youth organisations in Europe and its Member Organisations throughout the continent should

³ "Building Bridges for learning: The recognition and value of Non-formal Education"

⁴ By 'non-formal education' we mean 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. (0618-03 YFJ Position Paper)

⁵ Lifelong learning must be understood as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective (Council resolution of 27 June 2002 on life long learning (2002/C 163/01))

⁶ There is still no academic definition of real competencies. This is a rather new concept developed by some countries as Norway or Germany. The European Youth Forum proposes its understanding of such a concept.

be included in all processes developing concrete instruments that will serve to recognise and make the skills and competencies of young people acquired through non-formal education more visible. We underline that such tools must have a multidimensional approach, focusing not only on individual but also social and political recognition of non-formal education and its providers. We acknowledge that implementing a recognition system of real competencies implies a wider discussion on quality within youth organisations.

2. Recognition of non-formal education - process in progress

It is important to make the distinction between different forms of recognition that exist. In 2003⁷, YFJ called for schemes to enhance and support '*self-recognition*' (the individual assesses what she/he has learned by reflecting on the process) and therefore welcomes initiatives such as the Council of Europe 'Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers'. While keeping the impetus of development and consolidation of such self-assessment tools, we stress the importance of focusing on three kind of recognition: the political, social and individual. Political recognition should give legitimacy for the role and the work of the youth organisations and young people who voluntarily engage in their activities. Social recognition if facilitated by a political recognition, should offer a status for youth organisations and for the volunteers within the society at large. Recognition of the individual learning outcomes - in addition to a collective recognition (political and social) - gives the individuals the opportunity to have their real competencies recognised.

Political recognition

Political recognition for youth organisations as providers of non-formal education is vital.

In order to empower youth organisations, as already requested in 2003⁸, the European Youth Forum calls for substantial financial support in order to reinforce the work of youth organisations and to give them the means to support all young people, those who are already involved in their work, but also to reach out to young people who are so far less aware of their work.

Providing sustainable financial support to youth organisations is a demonstration of political commitment. Moreover, it supports youth organisations in promoting the ideas of knowledge-based society and last but not least enables youth organisations to improve their capacities, functioning, work and structure.

Given the composition and structure, truly representative youth organisations offer young people the opportunity to participate as active citizens, developing their skills as active and positive contributors to their community on local, regional and European levels. These skills will serve them not just in their youth, but also throughout their lives.

Youth organisations call for political recognition, not just in support of their work but also as bodies who represent youth. As organic structures, striving for quality programme delivery, youth organisations are adept at adapting to shifting realities in ever changing societies. Supporting organisations that represent youth and are founded on youth participation are an

⁷ Policy paper on 'Youth organisations as non-formal educators - recognising our role' (0618-03) adopted at the Council of Members, 21-22 November 2003.

⁸ *ibid*

opportunity to engage young people; they should be encouraged and fostered as the motor driving the society.

We call on both governments and international organisations to support research to document the extent of the contribution of non-formal education to the individual and society.

Social recognition

In many communities, young people's involvement in youth work and the related skills and competencies acquired in non-formal learning environments are not sufficiently recognised. This remains a challenge for youth organisations in attracting volunteers and participants, and for those who do volunteer, a range of hurdles in creating opportunities based on recognition of their contribution appears. In some cases, volunteering is seen as an unnecessary waste of time. There is a low level of awareness on the benefits that volunteering brings to the society. Achievement of social recognition of non-formal education means placing voluntary work as one of the key assets for the development of civil society.

The European Youth Forum calls upon local, national and international institutions, schools and universities, trade unions and employer organisations and companies, to recognise the values of youth work⁹. Especially the contribution of non-formal education to the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes gained through voluntary work by young people. Therefore public bodies from international to local level should engage with youth organisations to raise the awareness on the benefits of the non-formal education both to individual and the society.

Recognition of individual learning outcome

The European Youth Forum believes time has come to focus also on the individual learning outcomes - recognition of real competencies. Giving credits to people's actual qualifications contributes to a lift of competencies. Recognition of real competencies greatly serves to enhance flexibility and mobility within the education system and work life, increases individual's employment opportunities and supports the vision of increasing complementarities between the formal and non-formal education structures. In other words, **recognition of real competencies facilitates and supports the idea of lifelong and life wide learning.**

The concept of real competencies includes a person's combined knowledge, skills and learning achievements, whether they are acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal way. Recognition of real competencies is about focusing on the individual's combined competencies and capacities. It is asking for a change of paradigm away from a strict focus of formal education degrees to real learning outcomes, placing the individual in the centre of attention. It sets new demands to the educational policies and the development of relevant methods that can ensure a reliable validation of a person's real competencies. Such a process requires not only international organisations and governments to establish needed legislation, but also of employers and social partners, youth organisations as non-formal education providers and the individual herself/himself to take a responsibility to make

⁹ By youth work we are referring to activities organised by youth organisations and professional youth workers.

visible and document skills and competencies. In this process support towards disadvantaged groups of society is essential.

Developing instruments for recognition of real competencies is a process that should include both international institutions/governments, social partners, formal education providers and representatives of youth organisations.

Against the backdrop of such a process, it must never be forgotten that non-formal learning in youth organisations does not take place for the sake of receiving diplomas or certification. **Youth organisations underline yet again the importance of not letting processes of recognition lead to formalisation of non-formal education. Furthermore, there is still an obvious need to support and empower young people to self-asses, understand and explain their competencies acquired through non-formal education and to enable them to build upon existing qualifications gained.**

3. Tools and Methods for recognition of Non-Formal Education- presenting our view

3.1. Towards the labour market

While reaffirming that the work of youth organisations to contribute to the development of young people through engaging them in non-formal education programmes is not aimed to enhance their employability or competitiveness as work force, it should be noted that youth organisations make a significant contribution to the labour market also in this regard. Very valuable skills, competencies and attitudes are gained during engagement in youth activities and these are not normally developed through formal or informal education.

The contribution of non-formal education to the competencies of young people should be recognised by the employers and the labour market in general. The awareness of prospective employers on the real competencies of young people should be raised. While the value of non-formal education is recognised by a minority of employers, it needs to be championed more widely among them. Development of self-assessment tools while making the individual's learning more apparent should be encouraged. Development of such tools is however not sufficient but actions should be taken to promote such tools towards the labour market.

The situation of young people in the labour market is extremely difficult compared to the general population. The unemployment rate of young people is doubled in comparison to the average unemployment rates. Of those employed young people, many face difficulties reaching positions that would be relevant in terms of their skills, education and experience. This happens partly because of age discrimination and because the real competencies of young people are not recognised enough by the labour market and the society in general.

The European Youth Forum therefore demands that public authorities and labour market stakeholders should engage with youth organisations to develop concrete ways to make the benefits of non-formal education more visible. This could be done through creating spaces and processes which would bring together the different involved and enable the information exchange and networking between them. Also, research data on the contribution of non-formal education should be produced and disseminated.

At the European level, the European Council and the European Commission have special responsibility in taking active role and more commitment in these processes. The European Youth Forum is ready to initiate such partnership with labour market stakeholders and the European Commission.

The European Youth Forum welcomes the Council's invitation to Member States to "develop a framework for recognition of qualifications, building on the achievements of the Bologna process and promoting similar action in the area of vocational training" and supports such a framework but wishes that non-formal learning such as that achieved in youth organisations would also be taken into account¹⁰.

Proposed initiatives to recognise non-formal education that have already been taken up in Europe.

European Qualifications Framework

The objective of the planned European Qualifications Framework is to create a European framework which will enable qualifications systems at the national and sectorial levels to relate to each other. This reference structure will be used on a voluntary basis and will facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications held by individual citizens. The European Qualifications Framework would consist in three main elements:

- A set of common reference points referring to learning outcomes
- A range of tools and instruments addressing the needs of individual citizens
- A set of common principles and procedures providing guidelines for cooperation

The European Youth Forum welcomes the initiative of a European Qualifications Framework while referring to its Contribution of the European Youth Forum to the European Commission consultation on the European Qualifications Framework

3.2. *Towards formal education system*

The European Youth Forum is reaffirming its aim of finding ways to enhance complementarities of formal and non-formal education systems. We believe this is a political goal to be dealt with on a number dimensions that in connection will serve to unveil and develop the synergies of closer cooperation.

We encourage the **development of the infrastructure of the formal education system into spaces for learning**, based on our belief in a holistic approach to education (taking all its three dimensions into consideration) and the idea of complementarity between formal and non-formal education. This is not only a matter of introducing methods of and approaches to learning from the non-formal sector into the formal education system, but also of opening the latter up to youth organisations as providers of non-formal learning. It raises awareness about the advantages of volunteering, lifelong and lifewide learning as well as it gives non-formal education providers a chance to reach out to even more young people and finally, it stimulates motivation for learning as such. **Breaking down the physical barriers between formal and non-formal education is thus the next step on the road to enhance complementarity and synergies between the two sectors.**

¹⁰ "The European Youth Forum response to the Council resolution on life long learning" adopted 21 September 2002

Attendance to non-formal education schemes can be combined with the curricula of formal education, and if it implies absence from formal education programmes, special measures and flexibility should be developed for their complementarity. Too often however, there is made no differentiation between absence because of plain truancy or illness or because of participation in non-formal educational activities or learning schemes. **The European Youth Forum thus encourages decision makers at the appropriate level of competence, to remove such obstacles for participation in non-formal education programmes.** In the case in which it coincides with formal curricula we propose the creation of special measures that allow specific absence or to develop more combined curricula between both formal and non-formal education. In the case of absence, it can be justified if it had an explicit educational purpose based on a prior agreement between student and school and according to established and transparent quality guidelines.

The European Youth Forum calls for a widening of the concept of the “knowledge-based society”, avoiding a narrow and strict focus on the adaptation of learners to the new demands of the international labour market. Competencies contributing to **employment opportunities, adaptability, IT-literacy** etc. are not *a priori* more important than aims to increase learners **social responsibility, intercultural understanding and develop her/his spirit, mind and physic**, and should therefore not be subordinated but on the contrary included as equally important parameters in the assessment of real competencies. The cross-curricular competencies tested by the **PISA** study exemplifies a limited, employment-related focus on the human (cap)abilities ignoring cultural, social, artistic and ethical competencies. Alternative studies such as the civic-education study of IEA¹¹ or the programme “Definition and Selection of Competencies” (DeSeCo) - launched with the support of **OECD** - are two alternatives that offer providing a different set of competencies that matter both for the employment situation but also outside work life. **The European Youth Forum therefore supports widening the set of competencies by adding to the PISA study above mentioned crucial dimensions.**

3.3. Recognition of youth work

The **European Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers** is a self assessment tool for those involved in the work with young people. The European Youth Forum, which takes part in the development of this Portfolio, fully supports this tool as a self assessment tool and will test it in the following years with the contribution of its Member organisations. The European Portfolio could be a great help in terms of identifying skills and competences, strengthening them and improving them while making it more visible towards young person himself/herself and outside observers e.g. prospective employers, formal education system. Its structure gives a real opportunity to self evaluate the achievements of a strong involvement in youth organisations.

The European Commission recently decided to develop and to promote a different tool linked to its programme for youth, YOUTH Programme and the future Youth in Action programme. The **YOUTH PASS** is seen to be a certificate issued after a youth activities organized through the Youth programme. The European Youth Forum fears that the YOUTH PASS will lead to different kind of recognition for activities run through the Youth programme. Therefore requirements put in the YOUTH PASS should not lead to a formalization of youth activities, should not be taken as a framework for all youth activities whether they are organized with

¹¹ The international Association for the evaluation of Educational Achievements

the support of the Youth programme or not. Assessment of skills and competences acquired in the Youth Programme should be based on a voluntary basis and done with peers.

4. Ensuring quality

Recognition of non-formal education also implies responsibility of youth organisations in ensuring quality of the learning offer when it comes to organised learning schemes. Ongoing effort therefore should be sought in initiating a larger debate within the youth movement in developing quality guidelines and codes of conduct that should assist youth organisations in their everyday work while organising and elaborating non-formal education programmes. It is essential that quality is not a fixed set of standards but rather a process built on reflection, societal realities and evaluation. It is important to note that quality assessment is a very complex issue.

Quality is not necessarily a policy issue per se, i.e. policy measures dedicated specifically to quality. Involving all major stakeholders in an ongoing debate on the issue, focusing on its four basic elements is integral for insuring quality taking into consideration planning, implementation, evaluation, assessment and review based on the feedback of learners and providers. The European Youth Forum has in the past developed a set of key qualifications it considers relevant for an educator/trainer on the European level.¹² When it comes to developing any kind of measures ensuring quality in non-formal education, youth organisations and young learners shall not only be consulted but included in the design and implementation hereof.

Youth organisations provide a framework for non-formal education based on peer to peer learning and learning by doing that ensures long-term effects, sustainability of achievements and the passing-on of skills and experience.

5. Conclusion

Being convinced of the need to increase mobility and flexibility in education, strengthen the link between education and labour market and generally enhancing lifelong and life wide learning possibilities, we believe measures to recognise real competencies are highly needed.

Therefore, the European Youth Forum:

- Believes that the focus has to be put on real competences: valuing peoples full range of skills, whether acquired through formal, non-formal or informal education.
- Encourages decision-makers at the appropriate level of competence, to remove obstacles for participation in non-formal education programmes.
- Calls for the breaking down of barriers between formal and non-formal education as the next step on the road to enhance synergies between the two sectors.
- Underlines that non-formal education is an essential part of the life long learning process and that youth organisations are a space for, and main provider of, non-formal learning.

¹² see "Staying Alive - the non-formal learning domain in Europe", GA of YFJ October 2000, Brussels

- Calls for substantial political and financial support for the work of youth organisations engaged in non-formal education.
- Stresses the contribution of non-formal education to the competencies of young people should be recognised by the employers and the labour market in general.
- Demands that public authorities and labour market stakeholders engage with youth organisations to develop concrete ways to make the benefits of non-formal education more visible.
- Calls on both governments and international organisations to support research to document the extent of the contribution of non-formal education to the individual and to society.

Recognising and supporting youth organisations is about giving young people the rights, means, space and where necessary the support to experience democracy and above all to contribute to a better awareness by the younger generation of their role as citizens. It is also about laying the basis for the emergence of a public space for debate, for democracy which will encourage young people to become active citizens now and for the rest of their lives.