



For discussion

# THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM VISION OF EDUCATION IN THE FUTURE

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## **The Challenges for Education Policy in the Future**

'If we were to do it over again, we would start with education'. These were the words of Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union. The fall of the Iron Curtain provides young people with the challenge to rebuild Europe and to rectify the mistakes of the past. Education is one of the main tools by which societies:

- (a) empower young people to take an active role in determining their future (active citizenship);
- (b) prepare young people for the world of work (to be active employees);
- (c) help young people to broaden their mind and come to terms with their European identity (personal fulfilment).

The European Youth Forum held a Symposium in September 2002 to analyse recent trends in education policy development and to discuss how education systems can best be reformed to deal with these future challenges.<sup>1</sup>

### **Limitations of Formal Education Systems.**

It is generally acknowledged that schools and universities alone are no longer capable of transmitting all the skills and competences which young Europeans need to succeed in contemporary society.<sup>2</sup> In formal education systems, the emphasis is on the transmission of 'hard facts' by the teacher using traditional pedagogies in the classroom. However, the 'hard facts' of yesterday are not enough to play an active role in the information societies of today. 'Soft skills' such as adaptability, communication and interpersonal skills, conflict resolution skills, leadership and management skills, planning, problem solving, teamwork and above all the ability to take initiative and being self-motivated to learn are also necessary<sup>3</sup>. It is not always possible to teach these skills in the classroom since they are best 'learned by doing' in 'real life' contexts.

### **Alternative Learning Methods to Fill the Skills Gap**

Youth organisations provide these 'real life' contexts for learning 'soft skills' and thus serve as complementary providers to schools and universities to fill the skills gap. Through their participation in different activities, young people are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning process. Learning takes place in specific contexts and is therefore more meaningful.

In spite of this, non-formal learning does not always get the recognition it deserves. Even though non-formal learning is a structured process with clear learning objectives, the learning outcomes are not usually measured since non-formal learning experiences are difficult to quantify. The quality of the methods used is also difficult to judge due to their informal nature.

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<sup>1</sup> The Youth Forum adopted a policy on non-formal education cf. 'Non-Formal Education, A Priority for the Youth Movement', adopted by the European Youth Forum's Executive Committee, 20-23 November 1997

<sup>2</sup> See White Paper (2001), p.30; Symposium on non-formal education (2001); p.15ff; du Bois-Reymond 2000

<sup>3</sup> 'Staying Alive, The Non-Formal Learning Domain in Europe', General Assembly 19-21 October 2000, Brussels, p.3

This lack of transparency poses a problem for recognition.

While there is a growing need for validation of the non-formal system, there is a general fear among non-formal learning providers (such as youth organisations) that traditional methods (such as assessment and accreditation) will result in 'formalising' an informal system. Therefore, while there is a demand from society for greater transparency, there is divergence within the non-formal system concerning the best methods to use.

Validation of non-formal learning is one of the main challenges for education policies today, and youth organisations as providers of non-formal learning have a very important role to play in responding to this challenge. Four important questions need to be addressed:

- 1) How do we increase recognition of the *role* of youth organisations as important providers of non-formal learning?
- 2) How do we increase the level of understanding of and the level of trust in the *methods* used in youth organisations?
- 3) How can we best record *learning processes*?
- 4) How can we best record *learning outcomes* in youth organisations to make them transparent?

The need for mutual recognition of non-formal learning is greater than ever given the 'European' context in which young people will live and work.

## **I: HOW CAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS PROMOTE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP?**

A shift in values has contributed to a decline in the rate of participation of young people in their social and political communities. Young people are attracted by more spontaneous, individualistic forms of participation. There is growing distrust in traditional democratic institutions. Technological developments in mass media have led to the creation of a 'virtual community' in which it is possible to belong as an observer looking in from the outside without participating actively in the community itself. However, active participation of citizens is fundamental for the evolution and development of future societies and for personal development. Participatory learning processes are essential in teaching young people the 'habit' of active participation in their community.

### **Non-Formal Learning Methodologies to Fill the 'Identity' Gap**

In the traditional teaching methods of formal education systems, the student plays the passive role of absorbing the knowledge transmitted by the teacher. It is the teacher who takes the initiative and the students who respond accordingly. This form of pedagogy induces passivity. It does not encourage students to take responsibility, to become involved in their learning processes and to influence their learning outcomes.

## Compensation of Non-Formal Education

Youth organisations can be considered as microcosms of real society where involvement, participation and influence, three prerequisites for active citizenship, are the rules of the game.

Because of the voluntary and open character of youth activities, young people feel that they have more say in the learning process compared with the 'imposed' curricula of formal education systems. As a result, they play a more active role in the learning process, taking initiative and responsibility.

In addition, non-formal learning activities are often rooted in core values that are orientated towards the betterment of society.<sup>4</sup> Young people learn to show a sense of solidarity for a common cause. They learn important leadership skills and how to guide others to achieve a common goal. One study in Italy shows that democratic virtues, confidence and self-esteem are created through civil associations. Such organisations provide the individual with the opportunity to take responsibility for common concerns, to develop the 'personality of democracy'.<sup>5</sup>

### Promoting Methods of Recognition by Society

- What is the best means of encouraging society to recognise the role played by youth organisations in promoting active citizenship?
- What is the best method to inform young people of the merits of active citizenship?
- What can be done to promote recognition by society of the quality of training given in youth organisations? How can the quality be maintained?
- Would joint projects between NGOs and schools promote recognition of non-formal learning in youth organisations and how could these projects best be initiated?

## II: HOW CAN FUTURE EDUCATION SYSTEMS BEST ALLEVIATE UNEMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION?

Alleviating youth unemployment will be a major challenge for education policies in the future. As a recent Youth Forum study on youth unemployment shows, 'although average unemployment levels are declining in the European Union... youth unemployment has been a serious problem throughout the Union in the last twenty years. All member states have faced either high structural levels of youth unemployment or temporarily high levels during periods of economic recession'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Explanatory Memorandum for consultative meeting on the preparation of a preliminary draft recommendation on non-formal learning, Council of Europe, Directorate of Youth and Sport, Strasbourg 22-23 April, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Putnam, R, 'Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy,' Princeton

<sup>6</sup> Katy Orr, 'From Education to Employment; The Experience of Young People in the European Union', p.2

With significantly high levels of youth unemployment in the countries of Central Eastern Europe, measures to combat youth unemployment (and the social exclusion it generates) will become increasingly important in the future. Education policies addressing the high rate of early school leavers and reforms to include the most relevant skills demanded by the labour market are the most appropriate steps to do this.

### **Inadequacies of Formal Education Systems in Meeting the Challenge**

Even though it is well known that those with higher educational qualifications are less likely to be unemployed, a high proportion of young people still drops out of school at an early age. Nearly one young Portuguese out of two leaves school having only completed lower secondary school. In Italy, Austria and Portugal, only 10% of 25 to 29 year-olds have higher education.<sup>7</sup> While there are a number of reasons why young people leave school early, dissatisfaction with the content and methods used in schools and universities is one of the strongest. For many young people, school is a boring experience. They cannot see the relevance of what they learn and so lose motivation, leave school and are more vulnerable to youth unemployment and social exclusion.

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. Information and communication technology skills are increasingly required by employers, and in many areas there are skills gaps, skills mismatches and unfilled posts due to the lack of adequately trained young people.<sup>8</sup> In the modern information society, it is essential to know how to 'learn to learn' throughout one's professional life in order to be able to adapt to rapid technological change in the workplace. Formal education systems which transfer yesterday's knowledge to students will not adequately prepare them for the reality of tomorrow's labour market.

### **Non-Formal Learning Methodologies to Fill the 'Skills' Gap**

Because they are activity based, non-formal learning activities in youth organisations are considered by many young people as an attractive option to the static classroom-based pedagogies used in formal education systems. Whereas schools emphasise symbol manipulation of information which is abstract and conceptual, youth activities take place in 'real life situations' which put learning in context and make it much more meaningful. They can provide an important 'parallel' learning structure for those who have fallen outside the traditional education system.

However, they not only provide a 'parallel' learning structure but a 'complementary' learning structure to fill the skills gap by transferring the skills that formal education systems cannot. These 'soft skills' and competences that young people acquire such as interpersonal skills, management, planning, problem solving, teamwork, self-

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<sup>7</sup> Eurostat 1999, 'Youth Unemployment by Educational Attainment in the European Union.

<sup>8</sup> Katy Orr, 'From Education to Employment; The Experience of Young People in the European Union', p.6

confidence and taking responsibility are an important 'addition' to the 'hard' knowledge that schools provide.

#### **Methods to Encourage Recognition by Employers of Non-Formal Learning**

- What methods could be used to encourage employers to recognise the merits of non-formal learning in youth organisations?
- Should a database of youth organisations be created to provide employers with the necessary information?
- In what ways can greater links be created between schools and youth organisations to encourage the transfer of the appropriate skills to prepare young people for the world of work?
- Are job interviews sufficient to insure quality assessment of the methods used in youth organisations to transfer skills for the world of work?
- What other methods of quality assurance could be used?
- How can employers be made aware of the similarities and complementarity between the training methods used in NGOs and in the workplace?

### **III: HOW CAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS CONTRIBUTE TO CREATING A EUROPEAN IDENTITY?**

The growing supranational competences of the European Union have led to the creation of an EU citizenship and a 'community life' between nation states that transcend national borders. However, we have clearly reached the 'political-psychological limits of 'functional' integration'<sup>9</sup>. The European project now needs to capture people's imagination to insure citizens' allegiance and secure the future legitimacy of the European Union. Europe must seize its second chance to anchor its economic and political construction in the minds and hearts of its citizens by instilling in them the sentiment of belonging to a common European entity with shared values and ideals.

#### **Inadequacies of Formal Education Systems in Meeting this Challenge**

Nation states have traditionally been responsible for the regulation and provision of education. For centuries, schools have served as powerful 'agents of socialisation' by transmitting 'national' history, 'national' languages, 'national' geography among others. Successive attempts to introduce the European dimension into national education systems have failed.<sup>10</sup> As a result, national education systems remain introspective in

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<sup>9</sup> Otto Von der Gablentz, 'Introduction: A Learning Society of European Dimensions, p.2

<sup>10</sup> A Resolution on the European Dimension was taken by the Council of Ministers of the EU as far back as 1988 when they aspired to 'strengthen in young people a sense of European identity and make clear to them the value of European civilisation'. However, recent studies on the European dimension in national education systems reveal that little has been done to incorporate a real European dimension into national curricula.

nature and do not contribute to fostering awareness of a wider Europe beyond the confines of the nation state.

What is more, the way in which education is transmitted is not congenial to promoting self-reflection and awareness of one's own environment. Identity-building requires interaction and exchange. By interacting with others, individuals are encouraged to reflect on their own identity and values. However, in schools, the actual learning process mostly takes place in isolation from others. As a result, the opportunities for identity-building are limited.

### **Non-Formal Methodologies to Fill the 'Experience' Gap**

Transnational mobility and youth exchanges contribute to the construction of European identity. The opportunities they provide for cultural interaction and exchange can only have positive consequences for the promotion of European identity among young people. By sharing their ideas with people from other countries, they develop the sense of belonging to a 'larger world' beyond the national boundaries of their home country. Through their experiences, young people learn language skills, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication, solidarity, respect and tolerance and conflict resolution. The content of such exchange programmes also encourages young people to reflect on common European values such as human rights, freedoms, peace and equality.

#### **Methods of Promoting Recognition By the Individual of Non-Formal Learning Experiences to Promote a European Identity**

##### **Points for Discussion**

- Is self-recognition by the individual the best way of creating a European identity?
- What can be done to encourage young people to reflect on their own intercultural experiences?
- How can training methods best be used to create a 'safe space' for individual reflection on identity?
- What methods could be used to encourage young people to record them (eg. diaries, photos, videos etc)?
- What are the best methods of incorporating transnational exchanges into the formal education system?

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Formal education systems alone are not capable of preparing young people sufficiently to live, work and actively participate in the development of society in the future. The non-formal learning methodologies used in youth organisations provide an excellent complement to fill the gap left by the deficiencies of formal education systems. However, in spite of the essential role they play in the new learning

paradigm, non-formal learning methodologies do not have the same status as formal education systems. This is due to a lack of understanding of the methods used and a lack of transparency of the learning outcomes accomplished.

In order to increase the recognition of the important role youth organisations play in the non-formal learning process, it is necessary to:

- 1) inform young people and society in general about the *methods* they use so that they have a better understanding of what is involved;
- 2) carry out research on the *learning processes* themselves to see how learning potential could be maximised;
- 3) develop methods of recording *learning outcomes* to make them more transparent.

Youth organisations have a contribution to make to educating young people for the future but it is only by facing these challenges that they will be able to make a valuable contribution.