

After European Youth Work

Will my experience in the European youth sector be valued on the labour market? Hrönn Pétursdóttir's answer is: Yes, employers increasingly look for skills and competencies that can be gained in youth work. But it is also up to us to use this chance.

Two years. To begin with, I was committed to spending two years as a professional in the European youth sector. The decision was made more out of a sense of adventure than because of an expected professional advance. In fact, relatives, friends and colleagues at work had a hard time understanding why I wanted to leave a fast-track plum management position in the broadcasting industry to become a professional Guide/Scout.

Then the two years turned to six because it was an amazing adventure. I even moved within the European youth organisations, from being the Programme Executive at the Europe Office of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts to the post of Secretary General of the European Youth Forum. At the end of the six years it was time to face reality again however, and admittedly I was not sure how the job market would value my experience in the European youth field. Having decided to move back home to Iceland, and being career-minded and fairly ambitious, it was something of a concern.

It was therefore a very pleasant surprise when it turned out that my experiences were in demand. Within two weeks of starting to look for a job I had three offers, all different but all very interesting. I ended up accepting a job as General Director of EDUCATE – Iceland. My employers were the Confederation of Employers, Federation of Trade Unions and cooperation committees for universities and vocational educational institutions in Iceland. They hired me to set up and run an association providing support and cooperation actions for them in the field of education and training, at the levels of upper secondary education, university and adult education. At the beginning of 1999 I started work in

my car and with my mobile phone, having to find and set up offices, identify what the operation of the association should be all about, negotiate work-contracts and find funding for the work. Now, one and a half years later, EDUCATE has an office staff of six, more work than it can easily handle and the prospect of needing to hire further staff in the near future.

A few months ago, I discovered that I had been the youngest of the numerous applicants for the post. The reason I was selected was that the group was looking for somebody who was flexible and with learning power, had experience of networking, working with people from different backgrounds, and who possessed facilitation skills, a capacity for rapid analysis of new situations, competence in motivating others and technical skills in project and administrative management. They were also looking for someone with first-hand experience of working with the EU institutions. Most of these skills and competencies I did not acquire through my university studies or my work experience in the private sector, but through my years of being involved in youth organisations.

When looking at the skills and competencies one gains in national or European youth work, as a professional or a volunteer, they are often the ones increasingly demanded by employers but not necessarily provided by the formal educational system. The European Round Table of Industrialists did a survey among companies a few years back as to what skills they were looking for in prospective employees, but found lacking in those coming directly from the formal educational system. The skills they mentioned included communication,



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ability to work in teams and multicultural groups, decision-making and problem-solving, leadership, etc. I heard the list of the ERI at a European Young Entrepreneurs Conference in Brussels, and as it was read I could actually tick off most of the items as something taught and learned within the non-formal educational system, for example, in many youth organisations. It clearly showed the different but complementary roles of formal and non-formal education.

Youth organisations often provide a venue where young people can experiment with a variety of tasks and with new situations in a relatively safe environment. While some of the learning experiences may be of a topical nature, the most important ones are of a social nature. How to work with people, deal with new situations, have confidence in one's abilities and so on.

My current employers recognised that while I had an educational background in social communication, I primarily had the experience from my European youth work that fulfilled their requirements. If I had managed to go to one country after another and in a few days earn the trust of the locals, analyse situations and set up strategies for work to be done to meet their needs—then I should also be able to do so in other complex situations. If I had managed to put together motivated and active international groups of volunteers, then I should also be able to do so with people with very different interests in the educational sector.

Everybody active in the European youth field experiences the same sort of learning opportunities. These opportunities are to be found in the everyday work of most European youth workers. Running training courses or camps, writing material with an educational intention, reading documentation in different languages, motivating volunteers, giving speeches at conferences, following world affairs, lobbying policy makers, networking with people from different cultural or ideological backgrounds, all these are included. Furthermore, many youth workers are also responsible for the operation of projects or small offices. There they need to know about bookkeeping and interest rates, balancing budgets, finding funding, employment law, hiring and firing practices, setting up communication channels with numerous countries, running board meetings—and so the list goes on.

These learning opportunities are those found within the organisations we work with but also outside them. Many European youth workers participate actively in cooperation with institutions such as the Council of Europe or the European Union, or on common actions with other non-governmental organisations. This cooperation can be set up with the explicit intention of providing the youth worker with further skills or knowledge, but can also aim at providing venues where there

will be opportunities to use competence that already exists. A feature of such cooperation is that it provides a fair knowledge of complex networking, of how the institutions work and first-hand competence in how to work with the institutions.

If there is one lesson to be learned from my experiences and that of others, it is that involvement in the youth sector is valuable and appreciated. However, the skills and knowledge we have gained may not always be obvious to ourselves at the time, nor to others afterwards. How we ourselves perceive and analyse how we have benefited, and how we convey that message to others is important.

In general it can be said that knowledge is never superfluous and neither is competence. What is certain is that any environment can provide as much or as little learning opportunity as we want. The question is how we use the opportunity, perceive the experience and place it.

Given the changes in the working environment, the greater awareness of the role of non-formal education and the real need for learning throughout one's life, involvement in activities such as the youth sector offers, will be of increasing value in the future. An early start at dealing with complex situations and an understanding of and confidence in one's abilities can provide advantages that may be crucial for further involvement in professional life.

What we need to do now is to increase our efforts in selling that message and showing society what is gained from such involvement. A greater awareness of the role of non-formal education can be clearly seen in the emphasis that the youth sectors within the Council of Europe and the European Commission place on it. Other institutions, such as CEDEFOP (The Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training)—an institution attached to the European Union that primarily focuses on the formal educational system—is giving it increasing attention. What remains to be seen however, is whether the value of non-formal educational youth work will also be increasingly recognised. It undoubtedly should be, but it is up to us to make sure that it will be.

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