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# European



# nformation, young people and non-formal learning

**You need it... we need it... they need it! So, what is it, where is it and how do we get it?**

## ► Young people and information

Since Eurodesk [<http://www.eurodesk.org>] started providing European information early in 1990, the information field has changed dramatically: it now appears that almost anyone can find whatever they want after a few mouse clicks. The Internet has become an important factor for all information providers and users today and perhaps especially for young people, who seem to be very much at home in this medium.

For us in the Eurodesk Network it has made our work easier in many ways. There is so much information around now - but the challenge remains to maintain the quality, reliability, and credibility of online information for young people. And

to remember that not everyone can be online whenever they want and not everyone has the skills to find exactly what they need.

We also need to remember that as well as those whose jobs involve working with young people and information, there are many thousands of people acting as multipliers with young people from the NGO sector, local communities, schools, libraries, youth clubs, sports clubs etc..., who play an important role in informing young people and in facilitating their participation in non-formal activities. This can be a big resource, if we can capitalise on it.

## ► Politics again ...!

When it comes to providing information for young people, there are real variations from country to country, in Europe,

in the levels of political support for information activities and the funding made available for such services. This is really a discussion for another time and place, but there is light on the horizon ...

At European level, information for young people has been slowly climbing the political agenda. There has been support for information activities with young people for many years, both from the Council of Europe and from the European Commission. The consultation on the white paper "A new impetus for European Youth", afforded young people the opportunity to make their voices heard. They said, loud and clear, that access to quality information was vitally important for them and availability of information had to be improved. Since then, information for young people has remained firmly

on the European political agenda, through the Open Method of Co-ordination and the Common Objectives on information for young people.

A high profile initiative at the end of 2004 by 6 heads of state resulted in a political commitment by the European Union to the European Youth Pact.

While this is more generally concerned

with the impact of major EU policies on young people, it also has real implications for the future development of information services for young people.

At the beginning of December, in the concluding session of the European Youth Week 2005, "Youth Takes the Floor" conference, the spokesperson for the young participants reassured the conference that, despite the recent referendum results, young people do still wish to be actively involved in the future of Europe.

**"Information is indispensable to young people developing active citizenship, and it continues to be an area from which young people expect a great deal..."**

(the European Commission's white paper - A New Impetus for European Youth, 2001)

Finally, the Commission's Plan D and the white paper "On a European Communication Policy", demonstrate the continuing importance of access to information on Europe.

### ► **What is European information and how do you find it? ...**

Well, "information about Europe" is the easy answer but there's more to it than that. In the context of Eurodesk's daily activities, 'European information' covers information relating to European activities for young people, such as exchanges, volunteering, work and study abroad and the European funding possibilities for these activities. This information can also be called "*mobility information*"; information about opportunities for young people to get involved in activities outside their own country.

Eurodesk has a major role to play for the European Commission in providing this kind of information to those who work with young people, as well as providing it to young people themselves. We consider that it is more effective if young people and their intermediaries both have access to European information. If both sides of this partnership are informed, positive action is perhaps more likely to result. The role of the multipliers should not be underestimated.

The European Youth Portal, which targets young people directly with information, also has content related to mobility activities (studying, working, volunteering, active citizenship, your rights, travelling Europe). These themes were selected specifically on the basis that the information offers young people practical opportunities to get involved. This will in turn encourage their commitment to active citizenship. Under the theme 'Studying' there is also a section on non-formal learning.

The link between European activities and developing active citizenship among young people is a major reason for supporting and promoting youth activities at European level. In Eurodesk we see all these "European activities", or "mobility opportunities", as a significant part of the non-formal education/learning curriculum for young people. You could say that much of the available European information is about non-formal learning opportunities aimed at broadening horizons, meeting young people from other countries, personal development, encouraging involvement and decision-making. Many youth workers regard European activities as among the most effective methods for encouraging young people "towards active citizenship, solidarity, personal development and self-fulfilment, voluntary activities and self-confidence." This is how the Council of Europe and the European Commission stated their main motivation in developing their common position on education, training and learning.

This is not new territory for Eurodesk either, since it was born out of the non-formal education field in Scotland 16 years ago and still operates with the same educational principles of encouraging personal development, capacity building and self help.

***If what we say is true, there should be a very strong connection between the providers of European information and the actors in the non-formal education and learning field.***

Reaching all young people with European information might be difficult ...no, it IS difficult; reaching those who work with young people has proved to be easier.

The chances of reaching 90 million young people in Europe with European information are remote!! However, using the multipliers who work on a daily basis with young people increases the chance of providing access to information where it is needed. In attempting to tackle some of the issues surrounding European Information, Eurodesk has found itself delivering more and more training modules for professionals working with young people.

This is one way in which we try and improve the knowledge and skills relating to European information in the youth field.

In Eurodesk we do not offer professional training to become youth workers or youth information workers but we do offer very practical training modules relating to European information ... how to find it and how to use it with young people.

There is not a huge body of academic data or previous training courses relating to work with European information and young people, so the professionals in the Eurodesk network represent much of the expertise available in this field. Their experience is vital to improving the training available in this field and we take care to use all their feedback in developing the modules.

In our training we ask the question, 'Who needs to know what?' Do the information workers need to know different things from the young people? The answer we always get is 'Yes.' The youth workers tell us that they need to know *generally* how things work at European level and, particularly, where to find the information that young people ask about. They don't need to *know* everything but they do need to know where to find it!

While it is true that on a day-to-day basis few of us need to know all the details of the EU's decision-making processes, etc., it is generally felt that people working with young people and information need a certain level of background information about Europe in order to be able to help the young people with their questions. One of the keys to this information world is knowing what kind of European information is likely to be available to answer a young person's question and then the next stage is where to find it.

As always, young people want to get information when they ask for it – not a few weeks later when we’ve done the research! This is a challenge for the intermediaries, so, in the training, we try to give information workers enough background knowledge to know what they are looking for and training on the relevant information tools so that they can find the information quickly and easily for their clients.

This includes being able to know when there is a European dimension behind a non-formal question even though the enquirer, the young person, might not know it and might not have asked for it. Young people are unlikely to know all the opportunities that exist, so they can’t ask about them. We see it as part of the worker’s role to give young people a comprehensive answer to their questions, and this often includes also telling them about European opportunities relevant to their enquiry, even though the young person may not have requested this specifically. This helps the young person to have a full picture of the situation before making their decisions.

***We are experiencing an increasing demand for this kind of training both from within and outside the Eurodesk network.***

***Most of the training we offer is designed to help the participants develop personal methods of finding the information they need, understand what young people need to know and how to answer their enquiries, create easy ways to stay informed in the “information jungle” and stay in touch with other professionals from other countries.***

#### ► what next ...

This article has taken a brief look at the links between European information for young people and non-formal education and learning from the perspective of Eurodesk - the Commission’s main information relay for young people.

The need for effective communication and access to European information is still high on the European agenda. Much more could be said here and certainly much more can be done in reality. Some final thoughts:

- Information is so prevalent and so important in today’s world that all youth intermediaries, including those involved in the non-formal education sector, could benefit from knowing about the tools and methodologies for finding and managing European information for the benefit of their young clients;
- European/mobility opportunities have so much learning potential for young people that every opportunity should be used to alert young people to these possibilities and encourage their participation. One way to achieve this is through offering training sessions and seminars to professionals on finding and using European information relevant to young people;
- Imagine if every youth worker, teacher, trainer, youth intermediary was able to help young people access, evaluate and use this European information ... ;
- Seeking ways of increasing co-operation between Eurodesk and the actors in the non-formal education sector could be beneficial;
- Training courses in the non-formal education sector could include a module on European information.

## Notes and references :

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