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REFORMING the concept of education through the recognition of Non-Formal Education

“ Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them’ Hard Times
Charles Dickens, (1854) ”

So Charles Dickens opened his infamous novel Hard Times. Set around the time of the industrial revolution, the novel painted a grim picture of the education system of the time, shrouded in rules, rigidity and with little room for creativity. Now in the 21st century, over 150 years later, we must ask ourselves what has changed. Society and industry have both transformed enormously and the world is a much different place from the coal and dust covered images of the industrial revolution. So too the times have changed for educational systems.

Indeed, there has been increasing recognition over the years of the fact that not everyone is the same when it comes to educational needs. In today’s ‘knowledge-based-society’ it is essential that we recognise the need to fully exhibit the real competencies of young people and allow them the space and opportunity to flourish. To this end it is becoming more and more accepted that there are attributes and benefits to be found outside of the formal education sphere. Non-formal education (NFE), as a structured learning process, has been receiving mounting attention in recent years, but still needs more...

The European Youth Forum definition of NFE

The European Youth Forum, the pan-European platform gathering 93 members from both national youth councils and international youth organisations, defines NFE as a structured process that gives young people the possibility to develop their values, skills and competencies other than the ones developed under the framework of formal education. These include a wide range of competencies such as interpersonal, leadership, organisational, conflict management, planning and practical problem-solving skills, teamwork, self-confidence, discipline and responsibility

An understanding of Non-Formal Education

Working with young people from all over Europe and elsewhere, the European Youth Forum has the unique opportunity of gathering young people’s ideas and experiences of the learning process in a non-formal setting, that is, through youth organisations. Indeed at its Council of Members meeting (COMEM) in November 2005, delegates gathered to discuss and adopt a Policy Paper ‘Recognition of Non Formal Education: Confirming the real competencies of young people in the knowledge society’. As the title suggests, the Paper deals with the issue of recognition of NFE, at the political level but also at all levels in society; exploring ways in which this recognition can be successfully achieved. We believe that the paper accurately portrays the reality of the need to recognise non-formal education and its outcomes, together with the need to strengthen the complementarity between formal and non-formal education.

It is necessary to broaden and deepen our understanding of education so as to incorporate non-formal education in a perspective of lifewide and lifelong learning. For this to occur, traditional concepts and recognition of education must adapt. With so much emphasis today being placed on educational attainment through formal systems, such as Bachelor and Master Degrees, PhDs, diplomas, certificates and so forth, it is becoming necessary that we recognise non-formal education achievements. **Focusing on real competencies implies valuing people’s full range of skills whether gained through formal or non-formal methods. One such way to do so is through co-operation with youth organisations, one of the primary providers of NFE.**

Non-Formal Education through youth organisations

The youth organisations that compose our membership are some of the primary structures through which people can access NFE. Youth organisations are active providers of non-formal education at all levels in society from the local right through to the international. Consequently, it is important that these types of structures are empowered and given the support and recognition they need so as to continue with the valuable work they do.

Given their 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, national and European levels. Yet youth organisations and other such providers of NFE are not recognised enough for their role as providers nor are the skills and competences gained in this setting given the recognition they deserve.

Recognising Change

Recognition of any structure or mechanism needs to occur in a variety of settings for it to become valid, and the same is the case for non-formal education. Political, social and individual recognition are critical if non-formal education and its providers are to be given any real weight. It is thus the duty of public bodies to begin to raise awareness of the benefits of NFE, through engagement with youth organisations and other such structures.

Political recognition

Political recognition of the providers of NFE is necessary as a first step. Political structures at all levels in society need to recognise the importance of those providing and partaking in NFE in our knowledge-based society. Governments and international organisations should actively support research into the impact that NFE plays in the development of both the individual and society in general. Cementing this research, they should go a step further by providing financial support to youth organisations as a demonstration of their commitment. This would help ensure the sustainability and development of Youth Organisations.

Social recognition

Social recognition is an important element in the overall status and perception of NFE. It is important that institutions and individuals at all levels in society begin to change and adapt their perceptions of the value of NFE and of youth work. Society's attitude towards education needs to alter from one where formal education is valued over and above non-

formal education to one where both forms of education are weighed equally, for the different attributes they offer, and for the varied skills and benefits they bring to young people. It is often the case that both formal and non-formal education complement each other, providing an abundance of skills and knowledge from every walk of life.

Beyond the Labour Market

Many people regard education, in its formal context at least, as the essential first rung of the labour market ladder. However, this reality is somewhat selective in its nature, neglecting the fact that education does and should reach far beyond the needs of the labour market. It is essential that education systems and peoples' perceptions broaden to encompass an understanding of education as based on a plethora of aspects.

Until this attitude changes, people will continue to over concentrate on formal qualifications to the neglect of non-formal skills. Therefore, the European Youth Forum strongly believes 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 people involved and enable the information exchange and networking between them. Whereas research is already being carried out, concrete data and figures need to be produced and disseminated on the contribution of NFE to education and learning. In fact, the European Union, the Council of Europe and the World Bank have said separately that they are willing to conduct studies on the impact of non-formal education.

Whilst it is not the objective of youth organisations to enhance young people's competitiveness in the labour market, it should be noted that youth organisations make a significant contribution in this regard. Therefore, the very valuable skills, competencies and attitudes that are gained during engagement in youth activities need to be championed more widely among employers.

Getting involved in the shaping of the European initiatives and tools on recognition

At the European level, the European Council and the European Commission have a special responsibility to take an active role and give more commitment to these processes. 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" (*see final reference in end box*) and supports such a framework, wishing that non-formal learning such as that achieved in youth organisations would also be taken into account.

However, the step would be even greater if it was extended to include NFE. If NFE was included in such a framework youth organizations and other providers of NFE, would receive the recognition they deserve. This recognition would not entail substituting qualifications received in the formal process, but rather could act as a sister accompaniment. It is already foreseen that non-formal education learning outcomes should also be included as a full part of Europass. This will enhance its visibility and recognition.

In the field of youth work, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) is actively trying to maintain this 'recognition/non-formalisation' balance in its activities and with its members. Indeed, YFJ offers a good example of how this balance can be achieved. For example, YFJ is taking part in the development of a European Portfolio for Youth Leaders and Youth Workers, a self-assessment tool for those involved in work with young people, developed by the Council of Europe [see the article of Hans-Joachim Schild and Manfred von Hebel for more details about this portfolio]. This and other such self-assessment tools which aim to make the learner more aware of his or her own learning outcomes should be developed and promoted towards the labour market.

The recognition of the complementarity: a life long process

NFE and FE are complementary and together serve to provide the individual with a large amount of knowledge in many spheres of life. Non-formal education then should not be regarded as a replacement for formal education, but rather as a mechanism through which the education not provided in the formal system can be attained. Indeed, participation in non-formal education schemes can be combined with the curricula of formal education. Indeed, the formal education system should be made more flexible to ensure this type of education is easily accessible to all. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. NFE is not something that can be learnt in a year; it is a lifetime process that gains its success by continuously building upon the abilities, capacities and experiences of the individual. The formal education system should therefore leave greater room for NFE throughout the entire educational cycle; not only by giving the still valuable possibility to spend a transition year occurring mid-way through the secondary school cycle. Facts, Facts, Facts can be learnt, learnt, learnt, but skills need to be honed, fine-tuned and developed on a regular basis. NFE should therefore be seen as an essential element in the development of the fully-rounded individual, and as one that is gathering more relevance the deeper we dive into our knowledge-based society.

Conclusion

The days of 'facts, facts, facts' no longer suffice in meeting the diverse needs of today's young people. Indeed this is what Mr. Dickens' *Hard Times* luminously illustrates through its purposefully gloomy imagery; drawing our attention to the fact that, even in the 19th Century, it was clear to some that there should be much more to life than sterile facts. Now more than ever, with the world becoming more global, with more young people crossing borders and travelling, bringing with them a barrage of cultural differences, the needs and expectations faced by the education system present an enormous challenge to adequately meet the demand for different ways of providing education.

The European Youth Forum believes that youth organisations have long played their role in providing active opportunities for young people through the NFE methods used. Non-formal education, based on the concept of 'learning by doing', is a crucial part of young people's personal and professional development. Therefore, the time has come to recognise the benefits they help young people bring to their own self-development, knowledge and capabilities.

Notes and references :

- The European Youth Forum:
<http://www.youthforum.org>
- Policy Paper 'Recognition of Non Formal Education: Confirming the real competencies of young people in the knowledge society':
<http://www.youthforum.org/en/publications/reports/0716-05-EN%20Policy%20paper%20Non%20formal%20education.pdf>
- Europass: <http://europass.cedefop.eu.int>
- European Portfolio for Youth Workers and Youth Leaders:
www.coe.int/youthportfolio
- Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning (2002 / c 163 / 01)

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