

Over 120 000 Youthpasses issued – So what?

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Laimonas:

When I saw the title, I thought: “Wow! So many?!” The exclamation point is for the excitement over the scope of the Youthpass, while the question mark stands for wondering.

Here I must ask myself several questions:

- ❖ What does that really mean for young people/youth workers/politicians?
- ❖ What value can be given to a document that certifies non-formal learning experience and outcomes?
- ❖ What can we, practitioners of non-formal learning, do in order to provide good value to the Youthpass?
- ❖ What does it all mean in terms of wider recognition of non-formal learning among formal education providers, employers and others?

To answer the first question from my own perspective – what does this number mean for me – I would say it means that 120 000 people can prove their non-formal learning experience not only through words, but also with a document. Unfortunately, official papers are still an important matter, especially for governmental structures where experience comes only after all the papers (meaning diplomas, certificates, etc.). It also means for me that at least 120 000 people stopped and thought about their own learning process and learning outcomes, which is a value in itself. I believe it gave more weight to their experience in Youth in Action projects and gave them more self-confidence when explaining to others that such learning is not just about having fun, but also personal growth. I believe that the Youthpass helped young people to get some level of recognition of what they do among their friends, parents, teachers and hopefully employers.

What do you think?

Rita:

Let me correct you already! In the last 14 days 10 000 more certificates have been awarded, so we have already reached 130 000 – it is getting to be a real success story!!!

I totally agree on the value of the Youthpass for young people themselves! And this is still one of the biggest aims we had in mind when developing it: young people who are aware of their learning in the project and who are able to talk about it. This is what we now call “individual recognition”. Interestingly enough a lot of project organisers, youth workers, youth leaders and even trainers are asking for the Youthpass ... so at least on an individual level there is significant value.

But when one asks about all other stakeholders, then indeed questions remain.

Does the Youthpass have this high value for young people facing disadvantages when they apply for a job? Yes, we have some individual success stories but in general how do employers accept the Youthpass? (This is the question we receive most often!) And the answer is not that easy. I would like to explain why. The question here is which employers are we talking about? Are they big global players who need highly qualified and well-educated young people? Depending on the human resources department, they will take non-formal learning experiences into account or not, and of course if they do young people will be able to sell themselves and their experiences in the best possible way. So we are talking about small- and medium-sized companies, with and without human resource departments, and sometimes we talk about the butcher around the corner. So how can we encourage the acceptance of the Youthpass, non-formal learning and youth work? When are the good moments? Where are the best areas? Do you have any ideas?

Laimonas:

I just got this vision of a butcher saying to a young candidate employee-“Hey bro! This is your knife and that’s how you should cut this piece!” When I observe what young people are aiming for after good (!) non-formal learning process, I can’t really imagine too many people are going for very low-profile jobs. I see young people gaining a lot of self-confidence, courage to dream, ambition to meet new challenges and get a job with higher levels of responsibility, freedom for creativity and not too much hierarchy. The process of reflection and the educational pathways for obtaining the Youthpass add valuable awareness of what the young person has gained.

Concerning the acceptance of the Youthpass, I think it is starting to have a certain critical mass of people who are clear about their achievements and the competences they possess. When such people go to employers and are able to speak out and support what they say with tangible proof such as the Youthpass, acceptance will happen.

Rita:

You are maybe right about the butcher. What I hear a lot from young people facing disadvantages, after a “good and successful” non-formal learning experience, most of them go back to a formal learning programme (even if they were drop outs) to finish it. Interestingly enough, during non-formal learning experiences something happens that makes them use formal education instead of being “abused” (maybe totally wrong word here) or not knowing what they are there for! And maybe then they are on their way to becoming ambitious young people and citizens who hold their lives in their own hands.



YOUTH PASSES

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I see a lot of opportunities for the support of non-formal learning, youth work and the Youthpass. Of course the recognition of international youth work as such is the core topic and the recognition of the Youthpass is an entry, a catalyst or a motor – we will see! In this regard the number of 130 000 Youthpass certificates counts a lot! I experienced it myself. This is no longer a tool that has to prove its existence and people are impressed by this number. So in my opinion the number is an entryway for discussions on the value of non-formal learning and youth work.

Here I'd like to continue our discussion on what it means for youth workers/leaders to use the Youthpass and especially its potential for awareness raising and the learning dimension of a project.

Laimonas:

First of all I think the existence of the Youthpass motivates young people to enter a reflection process. They know it won't stay just among young people and youth workers/leaders, but that the learning process and outcomes will be visible in the document, officially registered and recognised by the European Commission. For youth workers, it means they can get young people more easily on board for a learning journey and they can back up their good educational intentions with the Youthpass. It also gives greater confidence to youth workers when they have to explain the value of international youth work to parents, teachers and partners of young people who would like to get involved.

Apart from the benefits, I see certain responsibilities that should be taken by youth workers. First of all the youth worker or youth leader is the one to spread the message about the value of non-formal learning and the meaning of the Youthpass. It could start at first in the nearest neighbourhood, community, town, etc. No public relations campaign can substitute the word of mouth from a person who is trustworthy and reliable, and deals with youth on a daily basis.

Rita:

What you described is a perfect start for a recognition strategy for me: having a good experience, learning lots of things, raising awareness about

it with young people and youth workers/leaders and then using it for the purpose of guaranteeing funds and further resources (such as space to meet), contributing to the development of the local community and society and caring for a broad approach to education. The highest value again here can be reached at local level and in the immediate environment of young people. But of course even bigger projects for developing policies in this area are possible. By the way, we are currently working on a publication which deals exactly with the development of recognition strategies for any context. It is based on a training course which happened under the "Let's..." strategy of the regional SALTOs. It will be published very soon and will be available at www.youthpass.eu.

Now let's get back to some initial questions and one of them is related to political recognition – what does it mean for politicians to start thinking about the value and the way of recognising youth work and non-formal learning as well as to guarantee and provide enough resources?

Laimonas:

Here I would like to rephrase the question: "What should be done by us, practitioners, so that politicians might start thinking about non-formal learning and its value?" We need to make sure politicians come to visit our projects or we go to them; we make them aware how many valuable things are happening and the value non-formal learning and youth work create. The Youthpass and existing EU support documents help us to back up our work and gain recognition at the very local level. Usually young people and their work speak for themselves; we just need to make sure they are visible and understandable for others!

Going from here, I spoke about the need to increase the number of people who have the Youthpass and the need to make the world (or nearest community at first) know about things we do. For the last three years, I have found myself thinking how the Youthpass (and outcomes of the non-formal learning process) can be more accessible, more usable, more visible and "shareable" on social networks and other virtual spaces. What can be done in this direction?

Rita:

Yeah, I agree and not surprisingly we are currently working on an information strategy which should include some of what you described and I see as well users being the ambassadors for the Youthpass and doing something with it in their own contexts. This will guarantee its future existence.

So far our main focus has been on developing the Youthpass instruments and strategy further, but more on the educational side. By the end of next year we will hopefully have an external impact study about the Youthpass, so that we finally know if we have reached our aims and where there is room for doing better... Let's see and let's cross our fingers for the future!

Laimonas:

I actually let myself dream of the possible developments of the Youthpass in the near future. I let myself be influenced by various aspects of life today and have a session of "what if". By this I invite readers to think of lots of other ideas for developing and promoting the Youthpass.

For a few years I have been thinking of possibilities to link the Youthpass with Europass. What if Europass, like the Youthpass, could be based on a central database where various data from other passes, such as a language or mobility pass, link together into one document? So far it has felt like the Youthpass does not have clear links (also information wise) with Europass, but perhaps it could make sense because the latter is much more known by now.

What if a virtual platform could expand and serve not only for generating the Youthpass but also providing online tools for young people and youth workers to reflect on their learning outcomes, to map them, to relate to specific activities they undertook, and later on to use this information for entering learning outcomes to the Youthpass?

Considering all the IT and mobile technology developments there are online or with smartphone apps, which could be used by participants of Youth in Action daily for reflecting on the learning process and outcomes. What if these could be linked with the virtual Youthpass platform and personal learners' profiles, which would allow us to generate the Youthpass based on data entered through those apps?

Moving from technologies to the recognition field, officially one can see that the Youthpass is an initiative of the European Commission. What if the European Commission would give some bonus points or priority for people having the Youthpass, when announcing vacancies for jobs or internships? We speak so much about recognition of employees and therefore the Commission should be the first one to set an example for others. If all the youth-related institutions and departments continue requiring higher education degrees, the recognition of non-formal learning won't go too far. What if the Commission or national agencies gave equal importance to both types of learning in reality, and not only in documents?

Rita:

Great ideas, Laimonas! I would love to see some of them become reality. Let's see the future developments. For sure we will support the sustainable existence and use of the Youthpass. But we definitely need more political support on all – European and national, and even regional, levels – to make further recognition steps! I hope that the results of the Youthpass impact study the Commission is undertaking in 2012 will bring fantastic results for the support of further existence! And then we will have good energy to develop the Youthpass further!

Note

Since this article was written, the number of Youthpasses issued has increased to 151 876 (as of 7 May 2012).