

Does recognition lead to jobs?

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This is not a scientifically researched article but just a bundle of thoughts and reflections based on my personal experience and stories of friends and colleagues that I have spoken with on the topic.

I also only speak about the youth work field and more specifically my experience refers to Belgian and French realities, where I have worked as a trainer in European non-formal education training programmes.

As a person with quite diverse experience in different forms of youth work, but without a diploma in youth work, I have depended on the recognition of my non-formal training as well as my work and voluntary experience.

I do have the impression that work experience is quite well recognised in youth work, but when we talk about non-formal training it is not at all the same, probably because it is not yet very well known.

My experience showed me that the situation is already very different in Belgium and France, so I can imagine that it is very country specific. In the case of my two countries, differences exist mostly in the legal systems for children and the protection of young people, which make it possible or not to recognise non-formal education or experience.

In France, there are many more rules and laws concerning youth work, so youth workers are required to be more skilled in these rules, while in Belgium there is, in my opinion, greater trust in volunteers and youth work in general so they can also trust more in people. I also feel that the government does not have the urge to go and control everything, which makes youth work more youth centred and spontaneous. I believe that there should be laws and rules, but over-regulating has not done a lot of good for youth work in France.



I recently read a Belgian article about what employers find important on a CV and one of the highest-ranked items was experience in youth work (such as Scouting) because they assume you have a set of social skills, organisational skills and leadership skills.

In France, the system is different and recognition is present in society as people appreciate the work done, but when it comes to finding a job the system only accepts people with a certain level of certification.

At the moment I have managed to create my job as a freelancer, because I didn't find a fixed job in an existing structure. Recognition was not enough. It seems to be enough for working for a short time on projects, but when it comes to sustainable work it's a different story.

So for example, I can give training to youth workers and teach at the university (never with a fixed contract) but I cannot do the work my students will do in the future.

Both in Belgium and France, there are systems that can give you a diploma based on experience, which makes me believe that the system is slowly moving in a positive direction and this also means that society recognises that school isn't everything! BUT this doesn't mean that they recognise non-formal education, they speak about experience.

The whole question of recognition is also very complicated; we want to be treated on equal ground with the formal system, which is in my opinion very tricky as you

have to compare a centuries-old accepted learning system with something as new and under development as the non-formal training system.

In non-formal training we need to be well aware about what we can and what we cannot do. I strongly believe that both formal and non-formal education systems have strong points and are also not suitable for everything. So we need to co-operate better and learn from each other and not feed into the competition as this would result in all of us losing and making all our good efforts from the past pointless.

I think that one of the main factors of the lack of, or not enough, recognition is the fact that even though youth work uses non-formal education and learning, the framework of youth work is not at all loyal to the principles of non-formal education. I mean that youth work is like most other fields that are part of the larger labour market and therefore it also has a hierarchy to be followed, not always centred around young people, and often not really participative. So these beautiful principles are often forgotten because youth work organisations also need to answer to institutions, systems, laws and so on which make it difficult to hire or give a place to someone who is "not-qualified".

As a result of this I have seen on several occasions that associations or others play it safe and will choose someone who has the formal education certification instead of the person who does not.

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When looking at the future, I am as well a bit worried when I see some of the trends that are happening around me.

For many reasons I see a lot of subventions being cut. Financial means for youth work are less and less which means that there are fewer and fewer jobs for youth workers.

Because of this, youth workers are often doing less and less actual youth work and are instead spending a lot of time looking for subventions and writing applications and reports instead of being with young people.

This is, in my eyes, a scary evolution because if the job description changes in a more administrative direction it also means that people with higher education are supposed to have more skills in researching and writing than people who do not have this certification, so I do not see the future as very bright.

This also leads to a system of jobs based on projects without any long-term vision, thus a continuation of reacting to problems and not working with a vision of prevention, anticipation and long-term solutions. We end up with fewer and fewer jobs and people with more and more precarious jobs.

A last contradiction I would like to point out because of my experience with international youth work is that both the Council of Europe and the European Commission are promoting the recognition of non-formal education but I have never seen a permanent job opportunity within these institutions where experience or the fact of having participated in training courses is enough to apply! They do not have youth workers working for them, but I think a good example should also be given, and not only asked of member states.

So at all levels we should do what we say and not only say what we would like others to do!

To conclude, youth work is for me an integral part of society and it should have the place it deserves. Only if we manage to get and keep it there, can we go further towards having it recognised for its strengths. So I strongly believe that we need to keep on fighting, as we are doing. However, we might need to rethink our strategy because I often feel that the message does not come across. I like to compare it to how society looks at young people and says: "Yes, you are important. Yes, you are the future... but when it comes to budget decision making we will still decide for you because we know what is best." In the adult world, youth workers are the young people!

I strongly believe that recognition can and should lead to jobs, but in order to get there we need to have those jobs and we need to ensure that youth work stays youth work and keep on saying what we say even if no one likes to hear it.

