



The role and visibility of youth organisations in recognition

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Non-formal education – Why are we talking about youth organisations here? The reason is clear and concrete: youth organisations are the main providers of non-formal education and it would be just illogical to treat them separately from non-formal education topics. Youth organisations should be directly involved in the process of recognition of non-formal education and it is obvious that policies towards non-formal education will lose their role and aim without them.

KEY ROLES OF YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

Youth organisations as providers of non-formal education have several roles and purposes, the most important of which can be summarised as follows:

Role 1: assuring quality

Being the main provider of non-formal education, youth organisations must themselves ensure the quality of the activities they offer. There is no point in recognising something bad, is there? However, it is quite difficult to speak of concrete actions when dealing with such a wide and multilevel concept as “quality”. In its policy paper on non-formal education (NFE), the European Youth Forum provides us with a definition: “The quality of NFE in youth NGOs is the degree to which selected needs of society and of learners are reached and addressed”,¹ upon which youth organisations can build their activities. Quality gives them their reason for existence and being in demand. The recognition of

non-formal education can only be achieved where there is quality.

Role 2: contributing to the policy-making process

Policies of higher education cannot be discussed without universities, as they are one of the most concerned parties and should be treated as such. Therefore it should be considered as normal that questions of recognition of non-formal education are discussed with youth organisations. And youth organisations from their side should assume the responsibility to be active and represent the field with the aim of being treated as serious partners in the policy-making process and making beneficial contributions. Political decisions can't be made based only on theory and observations – practical input from real involvement and experience plays an enormous role here.

Role 3: keeping the discussion going

It is possible that among all the other topics which decision makers are dealing with, the question of non-formal education will not appear to be a high-priority topic where attention and energy are directed. Here is another area where the role and initiative of youth organisations are important: they should maintain the ongoing discussion and involve not only decision makers, but other stakeholders as well. It would be a smart move to put non-formal education into the context of lifelong learning to create a link between different actors. Together it is possible to discuss the question of whether and how different actors within the lifelong learning system can make each other better. Non-formal education fits perfectly in this context.

Role 4: mapping the benefits of non-formal education

Who can really map the benefits of non-formal education better than the main providers themselves? Probably nobody. That is why youth organisations have to show and explain to directly involved participants, as well as to indirectly involved stakeholders, the concrete benefits of non-formal education. It should be clear which skills are acquired with non-formal education programmes and how can they be transferred to other fields, keeping in mind that formal procedures and exams should be kept out of the field of non-formal education. Youth organisations have to play a key role in raising the awareness of society by demonstrating the additional value they create – if they won't, no one is going to do it for them.

VISIBILITY - AIM, TOOL OR RESULT?

“A little bit of everything” would be too easy and too boring an answer here. In terms of the visibility of non-formal education and the process of its recognition, it should be said that visibility alone can't be the aim. The aim in this context, as it was already discussed, is first of all quality, which because of its

importance rises above other possible goals. Taking visibility as an objective before quality is ensured, at least at a minimum level, would make no sense or even hurt youth organisations by drawing attention to their weaknesses. Is visibility a tool? In some sense, but not the only and most direct one as visibility alone won't lead to quality, to recognition and to wider understanding of non-formal education in society.

It should rather be said that visibility is the result of hard efforts made by youth organisations. As it was mentioned before recognition comes with quality, then it can be said that visibility comes with recognition. To achieve this, youth organisations should keep in mind their key roles in the context of non-formal education, and after successfully fulfilling them, the visibility will come.

Youth organisations might not have the capability to achieve a high level of visibility on their own, which is why support from different stakeholders is important. So, from one side, policy makers should involve youth organisations in discussions as equal partners so that society as a whole can accept them as serious actors. From the other side, relevant media channels (for example, youth magazines) should not underestimate the contributions of youth organisations but should put them at the top of the agenda.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Recognition of non-formal education is a multi-dimensional process which can find a place within interactions between different actors of society. Among these actors, youth organisations have the main responsibility and their efforts should contribute to fulfilling needs of the society and individuals and helping them to make more conscious choices. Although recognition of non-formal education is quite a young concept and is still in progress, it is already obvious that youth organisations are on their way!

1. European Youth Forum “Policy Paper on Non-Formal Education: A framework for indicating and assuring quality [0009-08]”, adopted by the Council of Members, Extraordinary General Assembly 2-3 May 2008.

