

“It seems that this document could be an excellent tool for youth leaders and youth organisations that feel the need for a clear and coherent youth policy at national and local levels”

On reading the White Paper I found myself wondering how the present situation regarding Polish youth compared with the analyses presented in the White Paper. Poland has been undergoing extensive transformation for more than ten years. There have been changes in terms of not only the country's government but also its policies in many different spheres, and Poland hopes soon to be part of the European Union. In what way are the young people of Poland different from other young people in European Union Member States? They have the same values, ambitions and dreams and the same problems as other young Europeans. Like other young people, they crave more independence. Strongly in favour of European integration, they are keen to play their part in building Europe, yet their participation in public life is actually very limited. In some regions of Poland, young people are also suffering badly from the effects of poverty and unemployment.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Polish young people and young people elsewhere is that young Poles do not have their own Ministry. The Polish Ministry of Education and Sport is concerned with the education of children and young people, but its remit does not include many other sectors connected with youth matters, such as mobility, European voluntary work, young people's participation in public life, their independence, efforts to combat discrimination, etc. Other areas that have links with youth matters, such as employment and health, are managed by other ministries but, unfortunately, they do not work together. There is therefore no specific youth policy, either at national or at local level, particularly with respect to the issues identified as

priorities by the European Union. There is a very wide gulf separating young people from the authorities, with the result that they feel abandoned and forced to fend for themselves. There are a number of non-governmental associations and organisations, schools and European clubs that try to fill the vacuum formed as a result of young people's lack of power and information, and that do their best to meet their needs and expectations.

Much of the information about the work of the European Commission in relation to young people and their problems and about the proposals put forward comes from the Polish National Agency, which has been doing a great deal over the past two years to make the Youth Programme more accessible to young people in Poland. The Regional Centres set up under the Youth Programme are an attempt to bring a source of information as close as possible to young people.

This admittedly highly simplified portrayal of young people in Poland should be sufficient for understanding and imagining the role and importance of the White Paper. Regarding the question of how it can influence youth policy in Poland, it would seem that it can be an excellent tool for Polish youth organisations and their leaders, who feel the need for a clear and consistent national and regional youth policy that everyone can understand. Publication of the White Paper may be the right time to launch discussions between the political bodies and youth organisations in Poland on the subject of a new youth policy. After all, one of the White Paper's aims is that more account should be taken of youth issues when other policies are being drawn up.

by Alicja Szpot



My job and the White Paper

My job as trainer in the Regional Centre set up under the Youth Programme is of course to provide as much information as possible, ensure the White Paper is easily accessible (the White Paper is currently (February 2002) not available on Polish websites), suggest activities in connection with the Youth Programme and help carry them out in accordance with the proposals set out in the White Paper.

The White Paper highlights some of the problems I am likely to face in the course of my job.

For example:

How can participation in projects be extended to include young people who are not members of associations?

How can young people who lack sufficient language skills be helped to take advantage of certain measures?

How can young people be encouraged to make their needs known to national political authorities and, more importantly, local authorities?

What can be done to ensure that the “open method of co-ordination” is more than simply a dialogue between the Commission and a coordinator and becomes a real inspiration for specific activities at national and Community levels?

Teachers, youth trainers and youth leaders are very badly paid in Poland, and the education reform has left them frustrated and weary. Will they be in a position to promote the European Union’s youth policy? Will they be interested in the “White Paper” and capable of putting its message across? Will they even be able to adapt? What about the associations themselves: are they prepared to adapt their programmes and working methods to cater to the new needs expressed? It would seem to be a mammoth task, and the available resources are very limited.

One of the key concepts developed in the White Paper, and reflected in all European youth measures, is that of “non-formal education”. Is “non-formal education” really so important for young people? Thinking about this question made me think about my own education, which ultimately enabled me to find my job as trainer under the Youth Programme. Although my own “non-formal” education was acquired without the help of any European programmes, it has been very important and has changed my working life completely.

Valuing non-formal education

I represent the generation of Polish people who were young in the 1980s, when the Polish government was “at war” with its own people, particularly young people. As young people in Poland at that time, we never dreamed of a common Europe. The political regime used to ensure any fresh initiatives were nipped in the bud and block any moves towards citizenship and personal freedom. Freedom of expression and association were banned. My own education and that of my friends consisted for the most part in opposing the Polish government and supporting activities directed against it. The feeling that we were not free was very strong, and we had a strong urge to emigrate. It was very difficult to travel outside Poland at that time, however, and very few of us had the opportunity to do so.

I was one of the lucky ones. As a student, between the ages of 20 and 25, I used to spend the holidays travelling in Europe on the look-out for odd jobs. As I was obviously short of money, I used to hitch-hike. These travel adventures were my “non-formal education” and a period of “intercultural learning”. All the different people I met on my travels, with their different living conditions and opinions, and the very strong sense of independence and freedom I acquired, or rather the sense that I was learning about freedom and mobility and responsibility were even more fascinating, I found, than the great wealth of regions and historic monuments. I used to come back after every holiday more mature, more self-confident and more fulfilled, full of enthusiasm and hope for the future.

This feeling I had of developing and progressing strengthened my desire to keep moving and keep making new discoveries. As a result, for the last ten years I have been in charge of youth exchanges at the Youth Centre in Cracow and for the past two years I have been employed as a trainer under the Youth Programme, in spite of my technical background which would not normally have marked me out for this kind of employment. And, even now, I have the feeling that I am constantly learning something new. Every activity, every exchange, every training course, and every seminar is for me a source of new and enriching discoveries. My education is therefore not yet complete, and there are still a few ideas I would like to see come to fruition.

I am therefore all in favour of developing any activities that give rise to “non-formal education”, which can give such a boost to all young people, and particularly those forced to switch careers or suffering from unemployment.

With “non-formal education” there are no qualifications or certificates but what it does do is encourage young people to become adaptable, while broadening their horizons and bringing them closer to other people. It is important to make the most of such education, therefore, because in many ways it is your future.

In the course of my work with them during training courses, I have noticed that youth leaders and teachers are often not even aware of the concept of “non-formal education”. Their ignorance is no doubt due partly to the general youth policy situation in Poland but possibly also to the efforts of the trainers under the European youth programmes. When presenting the Youth Programme, perhaps we have a tendency to pay too much attention to all the practical aspects involved, such as the applications, funding arrangements and deadlines, with the result that we neglect the educational aspects.

The White Paper signals to us that it is time to change our practices. “Non-formal education” must have the recognition it deserves and must be put to better use. We need better definitions of the concepts, as well as the skills acquired and quality standards.

The people involved in these activities need to know that their work is valued. With the White Paper we have a tool for drawing the attention of youth organisations and youth leaders to the importance and value of their “non-formal” work and its recognition by the European Commission. We can also make more specific suggestions. The “open coordination” method provides youth leaders with a way of ensuring that the European Commission knows about their initiatives and examples of good practices. They will also be able to take advantage of a great many initiatives, such as the establishment of a European consultation body for young people or the “information for all” project. This in turn will mean they are better able to bring their youth activities into line with the objectives regarded by the Commission as being important for European youth.

We, as trainers, can be the driving force behind moves, starting at grassroots level, to ensure that the full value of “non-formal education” is gradually realised.

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Non-references: websites where I searched (in vain) for information on Polish youth policy, but which might be worth consulting nonetheless:

Websites in Polish:

Ministry of Education and Sport:

<http://www.men.waw.pl/oswiata/ar-2001-2/strateg/cz1.htm>

The Polish “interclass” portal:

<http://www.interklasa.pl/portal/index/strony>

Websites in English:

Mission of the Republic of Poland to the European Union:

<http://www.pol-mission-eu.be/>

Poland’s Non-Governmental Organisations:

http://www.ngo_pl/NGO_basic_statistics_KLON.rtf

Poland’s Negotiation Positions:

<http://www.negocjacje.gov.pl/stne/stne2.html>

Polish Educational Institutions:

http://www.polska.pl/nauka_eng.html

President of the Republic of Poland-European integration:

http://www.prezydent.pl/bie/en_index.php3

