

The Impact)

of the White Paper on Youth on Non-formal Education

1. Introduction

The European Commission White Paper 'A New Impetus for European Youth' was adopted on 21 November 2001. It was the result of an eighteen-month long consultation process that involved different groups from the EU Member States, the EEA and the Candidate Countries. On the same day, the Commission launched its Communication on Lifelong Learning 'Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality'. The Communication was also the result of a six-month consultation process with Member States and members of civil society. As of now, no EU policy on non-formal education exists specifically for European youth. However, these two policy documents combined together represent a step forward on the road to promoting non-formal education for young people.

The Communication on lifelong learning, on the other hand, defines non-formal learning as 'learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective' (Commission Communication on Lifelong Learning, p.33). Youth organisations are a good example of non-formal education providers. By participating in youth organisations, young people develop skills relevant to different contexts and have the opportunity to put them into immediate practice.

Non-formal education in the White Paper

The actual White Paper on youth (excluding the annexes) is merely 21 pages long. It gives an overview of the challenges for youth in Europe, identifies the key messages from the consultation process and finally makes some policy recommendations that would be implemented using the open method of co-ordination and by taking youth into account in other policy areas. The policy proposals only cover seven pages - the actual provisions on non-formal education, no more than seven lines!

In the White Paper on youth, the first annex gives a summary of the consultation process stating 'what young people want' from a European youth policy. With regard to non-formal education, the many demands are not really translated into policy recommendations: the Commission promotes non-

formal education in general terms, but does not make concrete proposals to ensure recognition of it and putting it on an equal footing with formal education.

2. Proposals of young people on non-formal education

In the White Paper on youth, the first annex looks at the results of the consultation. Two clear messages relating to non-formal education were given by the young people who took part.

Greater recognition of non-formal education

According to the White Paper, young people seem to be very enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by non-formal education as an attractive counterpart to a formal education system that they often consider as inefficient. The consultation process highlighted the fact that there is a lack of understanding of the benefits of non-formal learning in general and that there is a need to strengthen the awareness of key persons and institutions in society in order to promote non-formal education as an integral part of learning and education. However, they believe that 'effective ways must be found for recognising skills acquired through formal and non-formal learning methods. The role of non-formal learning and the need for a better understanding and recognition of non-formally acquired skills through youth work should be emphasised'. (p.34) They ask that the 'relevance of non-formal education and the complementary character of formal and non-formal learning should be made more visible' and that 'dialogue between the relevant actors in the field, as well as social partners, researchers and policy makers will be needed with a view to improving the recognition of non-formal learning' (p.36) They ask that youth organisations should regularly publicise the wide range of non-formal learning opportunities and the outcomes of non-formal learning projects.' (p.37)

Greater links between formal and non-formal education

According to the White Paper, young people who took part in the consultation believe that 'non-formal learning should not lose its open character and turn into a formal structure by imitating the formal education system'. (p.35) but that both are complementary. Non-formal and informal learning are essential in developing the skills that young people need today.

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They believe that 'joint strategies on the part of the various organisations providing education (schools, training centres, enterprises, communities, youth work) would seem to be appropriate if we are to improve our understanding of what new basic skills are and how they can be taught and learnt'. (p.33) They ask that joint projects should be created to build bridges between non-formal and formal systems. They also ask that mobility and voluntary service be incorporated into the formal education system.

3. Policy recommendations of the Commission

While the aspirations of young people as highlighted by the annex on the consultation process seem to be reasonable and practically grounded, the actual policy recommendations made are limited compared to young people's expectations. The White Paper proposes two methods of driving youth policy forward; that greater account be taken of youth in other policy areas and secondly, by using the open method of co-ordination in youth policy. However, sufficient account is already taken of youth in education policy and the open method of co-ordination is already used here. Therefore, in terms of non-formal education, the methods proposed are far from revolutionary.

Taking youth into account in education, lifelong learning and mobility

The White Paper feels that greater consideration should be given to youth in education, lifelong learning and mobility policies. It recognises the work that youth associations are doing in non-formal education and believes that this should be promoted as part of their lifelong learning strategy. The Commission rightly states that the work of youth associations would benefit from 'a clearer definition of the concepts, of the skills acquired and of quality standards', 'a higher regard for the people who become involved in these activities', 'greater recognition of these activities' and 'greater complementarity with formal education and training systems'. Policy measures as to how these aims could be achieved in practice are unfortunately left open in the White Paper.

As a first concrete example of how youth could be taken into account in other policy areas, it is interesting to observe the Commission's Communication on lifelong learning. While the Communication mentions youth organisations, no specific provisions are made for youth. The Commission states that it will establish 'an inventory of methodologies, systems and standards for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.' It encourages the Member States to 'provide the legal framework to implement more widely the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning'.(p.17). Under the section on 'valuing learning', the Commission states that it will 'initiate by the end of 2002 a systematic exchange of experience and good practice in the field of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning.' (p.16) However, it is the 'European Forum on the Transparency of Qualifications' who should co-ordinate this'. This Forum is managed by the Commission and Cedefop, the European Agency for Vocational Education and Training. So far the Forum has solely concentrated on the recognition of non-formal vocational qualifications, but not on non-formal qualifications acquired in settings outside the workplace.

Clearly, stronger links need to be established between the work of the European Union in the field of youth and the field of lifelong learning. In this sense it is very positive that the Spanish presiden-

cy has recently proposed to look at lifelong learning as one of the first policy areas where greater account should be taken of youth.

Open method of co-ordination in voluntary service

In the White Paper on youth, the Commission recognises voluntary service as a form of non-formal education, and proposes to make voluntary service one of the themes to be dealt with under the "Open Method of Co-ordination" in the youth field. It states that at European level, 'it is important to ensure that voluntary service is recognised as an educational experience and a period of non-formal learning.' It states that 'it may be necessary to reflect on the situation of young volunteers in terms of legal and social protection'. This is a step in the right direction that should lead to concrete proposals to overcome the many difficulties volunteers are facing in this regard.

The White Paper suggests using the open method of co-ordination to 'develop voluntary service significantly at national, regional and local levels'. To do so, it would be necessary to define the strategic objectives in the context of a timeframe such as those for the European Employment Strategy or the Social Inclusion Process. The Open Method of Co-ordination has typically been used to co-ordinate national policies where the policy area remains the competence of the Member State. In the White Paper mention is made – ambitiously - of 'national, regional and local levels'. In the next steps, it would be necessary to clarify which measures are directed at which level and how they can be implemented.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the recommendations made by young people in the consultation process for the White Paper concerning non-formal education have been far-reaching, the actual policy recommendations made by the Commission are much less concrete. In order to take steps forward to promote non-formal education, more work needs to be done based on the White Paper. Therefore, the impact that the White Paper will have on non-formal education for young people will depend on the national governments: what level of priority will be given to the issue in the next steps of the process?

The Communication on Lifelong Learning with its concrete recommendations and clear division of responsibilities, even though it is not specifically addressed to youth, would seem to present a great opportunity for promoting non-formal education for young people.

Together, these two policy documents combined represent a step forward on the road to promoting non-formal education for young people. In this sense, the Spanish initiative to make the Lifelong learning a policy area where the youth dimension is taken into account is very promising.

The youth organisations, the national youth councils and the Youth Forum are working for a better recognition of non-formal education. Thanks to the White Paper, in the coming months we will have a chance to promote it. To get to the desired result, it is up to the youth sector to make the most of this opportunity!

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