Youth Partnership

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Desk study on the value of informal education, with special attention to its contribution to citizenship education, civic participation and intercultural dialogue and learning, European citizenship, peace-building and conflict transformation

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Content

Abstract

Acknowledging that the learning process occurs in a variety of ways across the continuum of learning formality, the concept of informal learning is one of the key terms within the lifelong learning approach. The purpose of this study is to provide insight into the value of informal learning and education, with special attention to its contribution to citizenship education, civic participation and intercultural dialogue and learning, European citizenship, peace-building and conflict transformation.

1. What are informal learning and informal education?

Informal learning is generally understood as "widespread practices of knowledge and skill acquisition undertaken by individuals and groups studying and experimenting outside formal setting and instruction" (Jeffs et al. 2005). Informal learning is highly contextual and learner-oriented (Colley et al. 2003 in Niemeyer 2018). Although the control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner, informal learning is usually defined as the forms of learning which are unintentional from the learner's perspective. They are less organised and structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support than either formal or non-formal learning. Informal learning is not institutionalised, although its learning outcomes may be validated and certified (Cedefop 2008). It may include learning activities that occur in the family, in the work place, in the local community, in daily life, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially directed basis (UNESCO 2015). Informal learning is therefore often referred to as experiential or incidental and random learning.

Informal education is defined as "The wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning which works through conversation" (Blyth 2008), and "the exploration and enlargement of experience" (Dewey 1933 in Smith 2008). The purpose of informal education is no different from any other form of education as it is concerned with "helping people to develop the understandings and disposition to live well and to flourish together" (ibid.). Informal education is therefore strongly focused on values, such as: Work for the wellbeing of all; Respect the unique value and dignity of each human being; Dialogue; Equality and justice; Democracy and the active involvement of people in the issues that affect their life (Jeffs et al. 2005: 95-6).

2. Why can informal learning be beneficial to the learner?

• Informal learning is increasingly important in the rapidly changing knowledge economy as it enables citizens to combine and build on learning from school, universities, training bodies, work, leisure time and family activities, allowing them to fully participate in their societies and to sustain democracy.

- Informal learning, particularly in youth work and all forms of civic engagement such as voluntary and civic services, plays a prominent role in building active and participatory communities and restoring solidarity.
- Informal learning plays an important role in developing key competences in a lifelong learning perspective in all contexts, including family, school, workplace, neighbourhood and other communities (EU Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning).
- Informal learning supports the development of essential interpersonal, communicative and cognitive skills such as: critical thinking, analytical skills, creativity, problem solving and resilience that facilitate young people's transition to adulthood, active citizenship and working life.
- Young people may acquire competences for democratic culture in informal learning through their experience of the world and the society in which they live (Council of Europe 2018a: 12).
- Informal learning additionally contributes to a more personally meaningful learning experience that is built around individual needs, goals and expectations. It is therefore possible to think of informal learning as increasing knowledge around personally relevant and meaningful content.
- The importance and relevance of informal (and non-formal) learning is evident from the experiences acquired through culture, youth work and voluntary work as well as grassroots sport.

3. What are the aspects of informal learning that one must consider to make it more relevant for the learner?

- Informal learning may not benefit young people equally. A variety of characteristics, including cognitive ability and motivation, influence how much an individual can take advantage of informal learning opportunities.
- Those individuals with more education and often greater levels of self-efficacy are able to benefit the most from informal learning; it is therefore recommended to provide specific financial support to those individuals coming from more disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to open informal education opportunities to as many young people as possible.
- Traits such as age, gender, and disability status have been shown to influence access to informal learning opportunities; special support measures must therefore be enacted to involve all groups in informal education.
- Technology has an important role in how learning occurs across all types of learning. Through opportunities such as online learning, massive open online courses (MOOCS), games and simulations, and mobile learning, technology may expand access to learning opportunities. At the same time, access to the Internet differs by socioeconomic status, and attrition rates for some of these opportunities are high; new media and online tools can therefore be used thoroughly to accompany informal education initiatives, taking into account issues of inclusiveness and the digital divide.
- Informal learning practices are often not well understood, nor clearly identifiable – and therefore difficult to measure, value, and research.

- Informal learning needs to be made more visible through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and recognised at social, political and individual level; this validation must be made without prejudice to the relevance and necessity of informal education and learning.

1. Introduction

Preparing young people for work, citizenship and life in the twenty-first century is daunting. Globalisation, new technologies, migration, international competition, changing markets and transnational environmental and political challenges all drive the acquisition of skills and knowledge needed by youth to thrive and succeed in the modern, knowledge-based economies. The ability to navigate these complex environments in a globally competitive information age requires learners to develop relevant life and career skills.

[EU Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning](#) sets a European Union reference framework for development of knowledge, skills and attitudes which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious life management and active citizenship. In the knowledge economy, memorisation of facts and procedures is not enough for progress and success. Skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, ability to co-operate, creativity, computational thinking and self-regulation are more essential than ever before in a quickly changing society. They are the tools to make what has been learned work in real time, in order to generate new ideas, new theories, new products, and new knowledge (C 189/2).

Key competences[1] are developed in a lifelong learning perspective, from early childhood throughout adult life, and through formal, non-formal and informal learning in all contexts, including family, school, workplace, neighbourhood and other communities (C 189/7). The EU Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning emphasises the importance and relevance of informal (and non-formal) learning which is evident from the experiences acquired through culture, youth work and voluntary work as well as grassroots sport. Informal learning plays an important role in supporting the development of essential interpersonal, communicative and cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, analytical skills, creativity, problem solving and resilience, that facilitate young people's transition to adulthood, active citizenship and working life.[2] Establishing better co-operation between different learning settings is also seen as helpful in promoting a variety of learning approaches and contexts.[3]

The Communication from the European Commission on [Rethinking education: investing in skills for better economic and social outcomes](#) generated an important momentum for policy makers and stakeholders to reflect upon what EU action in the field of education and training is about and what direction it should take up to 2020. Investment in education and training for skills

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1.[1] For the purposes of this Recommendation, competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, where: knowledge is composed of the facts and figures, concepts, ideas and theories which are already established and support the understanding of a certain area or subject; skills are defined as the ability and capacity to carry out processes and use the existing knowledge to achieve results; attitudes describe the disposition and mind-sets to act or react to ideas, persons or situations.

2.[2] Council conclusions on the role of youth work in supporting young people's development of essential life skills that facilitate their successful transition to adulthood, active citizenship and working life (OJ C 189, 15.6.2017, p 30).

3.[3] Council conclusions on enhancing cross-sectorial policy cooperation to effectively address socioeconomic challenges facing young people (OJ C 172, 27.5.2015, p 3.

development has been recognised as essential to boost growth and competitiveness while the scope and pace of reforms needs to be scaled up so that high-quality skills can support both growth and jobs. Particular attention is put on the development of basic and transversal skills (such as the ability to think critically, take the initiative, problem solve and work collaboratively) which will prepare individuals for today's varied and unpredictable career paths. Stimulation of open and flexible learning (including learning which takes place in informal settings) is seen as crucial to combat youth unemployment and facilitate school–work transitions.

While it is generally accepted that formal education must be transformed to enable the new forms of learning needed to tackle the complex global challenges ahead, there is no single prescribed approach to educating young people for the twenty-first century. It is clear, however, that the contemporary forms of learning must take place in contexts that promote interaction and a sense of community that enable formal and informal learning (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009). There is a clear consensus that new approaches to learning must accommodate the characteristics of today's youth, become more inclusive and address twenty-first century interdisciplinary themes (Carneiro 2007 in Scott 2015). The overall vision of twenty-first century learning comprises approaches such as personalisation, participation, collaboration, communication, informal learning, teaching for transfer, project-based learning and real-world contexts. These elements will be the key to stimulating the growth and central to the competences and skills learners are expected to develop as well as to the ways in which these skills are taught (UNESCO 2015).

The starting point for the development of the [Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) (CDC) was the belief that education systems, schools and universities should make preparation for democratic citizenship one of its key missions. The CDC model sets out the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding which an individual needs in order to be an active participant in a "democratic culture/society/group". Young people may acquire such competences in informal learning through their experience of the world and the society in which they live. They can also be learned in formal or non-formal education with the help of a teacher or other facilitator of learning (Council of Europe 2018a: 12).

Acknowledging the importance of learning to economic and life success, the purpose of this study is to provide insight into the value of informal education and learning, with special attention to its contribution to citizenship education, civic participation and intercultural dialogue and learning, European citizenship, peace-building and conflict transformation.

2. Understanding informal learning and informal education

Acknowledging that the learning[4] process occurs in a variety of ways across the continuum of learning formality, the concepts of formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning have become key terms within the lifelong learning approach.[5] There are several characteristics which seem to be useful when defining and differentiating these terms: whether the learning involves objectives, whether it is intentional and whether it leads to a qualification (referring to the learning outcome).

The concept of informal learning is generally understood as referring to "widespread practices of knowledge and skill acquisition undertaken by individuals and groups studying and experimenting outside formal setting and instruction" (Jeffs et al. 2005). However, various definitions of the term demonstrate the different level of consensus around the above-mentioned characteristics.

- EU-CoE partnership Glossary on Youth: "Informal learning, from the learner's standpoint at least, is non-purposive learning, which takes place in everyday life contexts in the family, at work, during leisure and in the community. It does have outcomes, but these are seldom recorded, virtually never certified and are typically neither immediately visible for the learner nor do they count in themselves for education, training or employment purposes".
- Cedefop (2008): "Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. Informal learning outcomes may be validated and certified. It is also referred to as experiential or incidental/random learning".
- UNESCO (ISCED 2011): "Forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate but are not institutionalized. They are less organized and structured than either formal or non-formal education. Informal learning may include learning activities that occur in the family, in the work place, in the local community, and in daily life, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially-directed basis".
- OECD: "Informal learning is never organised, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner's standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience. The idea is that the simple fact of existing constantly exposes the individual to learning situations, at work, at home or during leisure time for instance".

Despite slightly different interpretations of the level of intentionality, organisation and validation of outcomes resulting from the learning taking place in informal settings, it is true that, during a lifespan, people continue to learn informally in various everyday situations, dealing with challenges or tasks in a given context – personal, social or cultural (Colley et al. 2003 in Niemeyer

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4.[4] Learning is generally defined as a process which occurs through personal reflection, reconstruction and social interaction and by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences (Cedefop 2008).

5.[5] The concept of lifelong learning (LLL) refers to all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons (Cedefop 2008).

2018). Although often unconscious and incidental, informal ways of learning are learner-oriented and the control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner (ibid.). Examining the interrelations between the forms of learning and education in different contexts, Colley et al. (2002, ibid.) discovered that formal and informal dimensions are present in almost all learning situations, that there are no distinct categories, while the boundaries between them are blurred and interrelated. Thus: "Seeing informal and formal learning as fundamentally separate results in stereotyping and a tendency for the advocates of one to see only the weaknesses of the other. It is more sensible to see attributes of informality and formality as present in all learning situations" (Colley et al. 2003, ibid.). It seems to be observable that these theoretically defined kinds of learning overlap in practice.

Learning in informal settings is also described as "Educating so that people may share in a common life" (Dewey 1916 in Smith 2008). Informal education is defined as "The wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning which works through conversation" (Blyth 2008)[6] and "the exploration and enlargement of experience" (Dewey 1933 in Smith 2008). The purpose of informal education is no different from any other form of education as it is concerned with "helping people to develop the understandings and disposition to live well and to flourish together" (ibid.). Informal education is therefore strongly focused on values, such as: Work for the well-being of all; Respect the unique value and dignity of each human being; Dialogue; Equality and justice; Democracy and the active involvement of people in the issues that affect their life (Jeffs et al. 2005: 95-6).

Overall, a broad scope of informal learning and education places special emphasis on creating or deepening situations and building democratic relationships and organisations that allow people to share in community, to explore and enlarge experience and make changes. This is increasingly relevant and important in the rapidly changing knowledge economy as it enables citizens to combine and build on learning from school, universities, training bodies, work, leisure time and family activities, allowing them to fully participate in their societies and to sustain democracy. Informal learning additionally contributes to a more personally meaningful learning experience that is built around individual needs, goals and expectations. It is therefore possible to think of informal learning as increasing knowledge around personally relevant and meaningful content.

Attempting to understand various types of informal learning described in the literature, it is useful to focus on two broad categories: "organised informal learning" and "everyday informal learning" (Rogers 2014):

1. Organised informal learning includes several sub-types of learning, such as non-credit learning, work-based learning, service/civic learning, mentoring/coaching and communities of practice.

2. Everyday informal learning refers to the learning that occurs during the course of daily life. Three, sometimes overlapping, sub-types of everyday informal learning exist:

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6. Catherine Blyth has described conversation as "the spontaneous business of making connections" (Blyth 2008: 4). Source: infed.

- self-directed learning (occurs when the learners take the initiative and actively seek a learning opportunity or information on their own);

- incidental learning (occurs in the normal course of daily events without a high degree of design or structure, but the learner does not have awareness that he or she is learning before the experience takes place);

- tacit learning (occurs beyond the individual's awareness and relies on the learner's cognitive frameworks to transform information into knowledge).

Accordingly, there are various limitations to informal learning. Research evidence supports the claim that knowledge and learning that is made explicit for learners is better understood and learnt than knowledge and learning that remain tacit (see, e.g., Evans and Butler 1992 in Werquin 2008). Likewise, research on the teaching and learning of generic competences (such as planning and organising, or working with others) shows the need for teachers to make these competences explicit as part of the learning that is to take place. The evidence demonstrates the falsity of the simple assumption that learning of such generic competences will occur incidentally during traditional teaching sessions (Hager et al. 1996, 1997 in Werquin 2008). In short, not only does the notion of "tacit knowledge" often serve as an obstacle to inquiry, but it restricts the learning and understanding of learners in cases where such knowledge is able to be made more explicit.

Furthermore, like other forms of learning, informal learning may not benefit young people equally. Given the increasing importance of lifelong learning and thus the ability to engage in informal learning, it is important to note the implications for access and equity in terms of who benefits from informal learning. A variety of characteristics, including cognitive ability and motivation, influence how much an individual can take advantage of informal learning opportunities. Those individuals with more education and often greater levels of self-efficacy are able to benefit the most from informal learning. Furthermore, traits such as age, gender and disability status have been shown to influence access to these opportunities. In addition, technology has an important role in how learning occurs across all types of learning. Through opportunities such as online learning, massive open online courses (MOOCS), games and simulations and mobile learning, technology may expand access to learning opportunities. At the same time, access to the Internet differs by socioeconomic status, and attrition rates for some of these opportunities are high (Rogers 2014).

3. Validation and tools for recognition of non-formal and informal learning

There seems to be strong agreement that a lot of learning takes place outside the formal education and training system. Fewer consensuses, however, exist about the extent to which informal learning should be recognised. Challenges posed by the recognition of informal learning include (Werquin 2008: 25):

- "informal learning is typically of a different kind from the learning prescribed by the content of formal education courses;

- informal learning does not fit very well with the narrow view of knowledge that is usually taken for granted in formal education;

- learners themselves, influenced by prevailing assumptions about education and knowledge, are often unaware of the significance, range and depth of their informal learning;

- informal learning is highly contextual in contrast to the generality that is privileged in formal education."

Informal learning practices are often not well understood, nor clearly identifiable – and therefore difficult to measure, value, and research. There is still much work to be done in order to obtain empirically grounded valid evidence on the learning outcomes in informal settings. This needs to be done by investigating the learning potentialities of workplaces and youth organisations by according greater visibility and wider recognition to the learning outcomes. The question of how to value learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings must be addressed in a coherent way in policy and practical terms in order to strike a balance between the incidental and the intentional modes of education.

Still, both the Council of Europe and the European Union see the main role of informal (and non-formal) learning in providing young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, with additional support to personal development and integration into society. The EU Youth Strategy (2009) stressed the value of informal (and non-formal) learning to acquire cross-cutting skills while the new EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 invites member states to share best practices and further work on effective systems for validation and recognition of skills and competences gained through informal (and non-formal) learning, including solidarity and volunteering activities, continuing the implementation of the Council Recommendation of 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

These forms of learning need to be made visible through the validation of informal (and non-formal) learning, and by ensuring that they are recognised at social, political and individual level in order to enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training (at work, at home or in voluntary activities). Validation also offers another route to qualification that should be included in a comprehensive strategy aimed to increase access to lifelong learning. The validation of informal

learning is also seen as a concrete instrument to tackle rising unemployment and achieve a better match between jobs and skills by acknowledging those acquired outside the formal education system. It gives opportunities for second chances, improves access to education, fosters social inclusion and enhances motivation to learn. Valuing and rewarding informal (and non-formal) learning in all sectors – thereby recognising its intrinsic worth – and developing tools for individual assessment of skills, particularly in the areas of problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration and entrepreneurial initiative, is of particular importance.

The Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning represents a first step towards more satisfactory validation policy frameworks in the EU. The aim is to link the learning taking place in a variety of settings, namely educational institutions, in-company training, online learning, courses organised by civil society organisations, learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It follows from this that validation is not exclusively a tool for education and training institutions and systems – it is relevant for a much wider range of stakeholders and institutions, including those from the youth area, the voluntary sector and work. Yet, there is still a long way to go to acknowledge and co-ordinate validation practices for informal learning, so that all forms of learning are recognised. The data available show a lack of comprehensive national statistics on validation, exacerbated in many countries by the lack of a clear regulatory framework on validation and/or mandate for organisations responsible for validation to build up integrated databases or release annual data (Cedefop 2016c).

Validation opportunities available for individuals working and/or volunteering in the youth sector currently focus on identification and documentation. The types of tools identified include assessment, certification/attestation, self-assessment, portfolios, websites/platforms, publications/handbooks, events/seminars/workshops, videos/films and official documentation. In some cases these tools for documenting informal learning results are accompanied by, or embedded in, "broader" validation procedures. These might include workshops, assessments or skills audits as well as guidance for supporting young people to reflect on their learning experiences and identify competences gained. The approaches and tools used can also be distinguished by the degree of standardisation on which they are based (Cedefop 2016b). The tools used in these approaches support the first two phases of validation (that is identification and documentation) as mentioned above, because they mainly focus on identifying and recording experiences (some may also result in certificates). These procedures usually do not result in the awarding of a qualification since they are not based on specified competence standards to be achieved. In most cases these approaches are based on self-assessment but sometimes the validation opportunities include confirmation of the competences recorded by tutors or coaches.

4. Value and impact of informal learning and education

The existing evidence demonstrates the positive impact of learning mobility for personal development, social inclusion and civic participation – referring to informal learning as an added value. This is particularly true as regards personal recognition of informal learning. Learning mobility is generally seen as contributing to the development of a wide range of skills and competences among young people. Spending time abroad, getting acquainted with foreign cultures and interacting with peers from other countries represents an important occasion for informal (and non-formal) learning for many young people in Europe (Fennes 2013). Participation in youth mobility projects is also seen as contributing to the development of all the key competences for lifelong learning (although the role of informal learning has not been explicitly elaborated in this context) (ibid.).

Mobility is also important since it is considered to enhance intercultural competences and to contribute to the development of participation and active citizenship. In this respect, the learning dimension in mobility schemes is crucial: learning mobility in the youth field focuses on non-formal learning as a relevant part of youth work with links to informal learning as well as to formal education. It is understood as physical and organised learning mobility but does not neglect virtual mobility, which facilitates and supports physical mobility experiences (Friesenhahn et al. 2013).

The projects supported by the EU Erasmus+ Programme are generally viewed as non-formal learning but a big role in the projects is also played by elements of informal learning – unstructured and unplanned learning that happens in the context of the project, for example by interaction between the participants – and in some cases also by learning that can be characterised as quite formal. The latter cases can be observed, for example, when there is close co-operation in the project with a formal education institution, or when the design of the project does not leave space for flexibility determined by the participants (Bergstein et al. 2013).

In the European Voluntary Service (EVS), equal importance is given to experience and competences gained by volunteers in their work and their spare time (Brzezinska-Hubert 2013: 112). When it comes to Erasmus students, they learn formally in their host schools and informally by gathering with friends, living with host families or in dormitories, travelling or developing their passions in their free time. Thus, the boundaries were shifted and blurred. In this context, it is useful to look at the different purposes for mobility periods where two main contexts can be distinguished:

a) mobility periods that are not aimed at the acquisition of particular skills or competences – when much of the learning takes place in informal (or non-formal) settings and learners acquire or develop transversal skills by experiencing a new environment;

b) learning mobility aiming at acquiring specific skills and competences, in which case there is an agreed skills framework; it is more formal and controlled. These different purposes also mean different competences gained through mobility (Brzezinska-Hubert 2013: 112).

Some authors argue for the uniquely transformative potential of informal learning (and non-formal education) through youth work, and suggest that programmatic regulation and formalisation runs the risk of making such learning opportunities more exclusive than inclusive. If learning is understood as a targeted purposeful activity which assigns a purpose to individual intercultural experiences, then international youth work and youth mobility will be challenged to balance informal and formal recognition. As mobility activities organised and provided in the context of youth work are considered as informal learning, participation is voluntary by principle and there is at least no explicit selection of participants. However, problems arise when these outcomes of informal learning are transferred into formal recognition. Transformative learning needs exactly this under-regulated space of possibilities, which only youth work can provide (Niemeyer 2018: 53).

Another important challenge concerns the capacity to be inclusive and able to reach out and involve young people with fewer opportunities. The flexible and informal methods used in youth work practice help youth workers reach out to young people more effectively and develop trusting and qualitatively different relationships compared to the more formal and structured ones developed in schools or the workplace (Lejeune 2013: 30).

This is particularly relevant when addressing radicalisation leading to violence which has become a growing issue of concern in Europe and its neighbouring regions. This emerging concern has highlighted the need to work with young people in order to address the root causes of extremism, but also promote living together and community cohesion. Youth work can play an important role in this respect especially in areas closely linked to informal learning, such as: peer education; online campaigns and digital media; co-operation with other stakeholders; providing opportunities; and education and training. Youth work empowers young people to have a greater degree of autonomy, self-determination and control over their lives in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible way. It also supports young people to deal with challenges they face and strengthens their resilience and critical thinking, but the impact of informal learning in this context is yet to be explored (Youth Partnership 2018b).

Nevertheless, informal (and non-formal) learning, particularly in youth work and all forms of civic engagement such as voluntary and civic services, play a prominent role in building active and participatory communities and restoring solidarity. Building active and participatory communities cannot be solely based on knowledge. The report on Education to foster intercultural understanding and solidarity in Europe (LLL Platform 2016) emphasises that citizenship has to be both learned and lived. The strong added-value of experience should be taken into account, whether it is lived inside or outside schools, such as through volunteering. Inclusive democratic governance and participation in educational settings is a key to empowering individuals and creating a sense of ownership. Therefore, synergies between the different forms of education are of particular relevance.

Finally, the available studies (for example CAE (2018) The Value and Values of Culture; EC (2016) Cultural awareness and expression handbook) also show that the arts education prepares for the

future through development of "soft skills"; increasingly sought for at the labour market educational activities in the cultural sector spark curiosity and inspire children and youth to learn; enhances cultural awareness and expression; and supports democracy, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue. Recent policy reforms at EU level on validation of informal (and non-formal) learning should pave the way for a greater involvement of cultural actors and creative competences in the policy frameworks. To this extent, more skills call for more learning opportunities of all types, an ideal horizon which can only become reality with investment and a genuinely collaborative and cross-sectoral approach.

5. Conclusion

Attributes of informality and formality are present in all learning situations and the boundaries between them are blurred and interrelated. Traditional educational structures have largely discounted informal learning since the topic of the recognition of informal learning raises important issues which challenge many of the assumptions of the dominant grand narrative of education.

It is clear, however, that synergies between the different forms of learning and education are of particular relevance in a contemporary knowledge-based economy. Informal learning is seen as one of the key elements of the overall vision of twenty-first-century learning which will be the key to stimulating growth and central to the competences and skills learners are expected to develop as well as to the ways in which these skills are taught. It is clear that contemporary forms of learning must take place in contexts that promote interaction and a sense of community that enable informal learning in order to support the creative and innovative potential of young people.

Although the strong added value of experiential informal learning is not in doubt, validation of its learning outcomes seems to be challenging due to the specific characteristics of this type of learning process. These forms of learning need to be made visible through the validation of informal learning, and by ensuring that they are recognised at social, political and individual level in order to enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training (at work, at home or in voluntary activities). By having all their learning recognised, young people will gain increasing self-awareness and self-esteem, which they need for a successful future.

There is still much work to be done in order to obtain empirically grounded valid evidence on the learning outcomes in informal settings. This needs to be done by investigating the learning potentialities of workplaces and youth organisations by according greater visibility and wider recognition to the learning outcomes. The question of how to value learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings must be addressed in a coherent way in policy and practical terms in order to strike a balance between the incidental and the intentional modes of education.

To conclude, to be successful to the highest possible degree, any programme centered on informal learning of young people must consider the following elements:
- it must be learner focused;
- it should provide additional resources for those young people with fewer opportunities;
- it has to be voluntary and its educational nature must be explicit, with potential outcomes, benefits and objectives clearly presented;
- it needs to be focused on values, attitudes, skills and knowledge, and these foundations are to be clearly outlined;
- its learning outcomes must be traced, recorded, validated and recognised;
- it must link with formal and non-formal education offers and opportunities;
- it must foresee opportunities of participation, solidarity and citizenship engagement.

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