

Status of the recognition of Non-Formal Education (NFE)

Guillaume Mernier – AEGEE Education Working Group expert on NFE

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Learning is a continuous and life-long process. It is not restricted to schools and universities. As Thomas Merton said: “The least of learning is done in the classrooms.” There are in fact three different kinds of learning:

Formal learning, which is given in schools – ex: mathematics class (= knowing)

Non-Formal learning, happens in any organisation outside the formal system (e.g. youth organisations) – ex: learn how to organise an event (= doing)

Informal learning, in every kind of context – ex: learn how to drive a bike (= being).

All kinds of learnings make people acquire a set of competences, combination of Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes, as described in the [Coyote of June 2006](#). The European Parliament and the Council of Europe write in December 2006 a [recommendation](#) on the key competences needed for personal fulfilment, social inclusion and employment in a knowledge society.

Non-Formal Education first appears in countries where not everybody has access to the formal education system. It is a community-based program, attractive for the under-privileged groups in terms of accessibility, duration, curriculum and teaching-learning environment, e.g. by adult education during night schools in order to diminish illiteracy. In the countries where everybody has access to the formal education system, NFE is rather a complementary education scheme alongside of the formal system. It is often provided by youth organisations.

The recognition of NFE is discussed during among others an UNESCO conference in 1992 and later incorporated by the EU in the Lisbon strategy in 2000. This strategy is further continued by the implementation of [European Youth Pact](#) to achieve its objectives. The European Youth Forum writes in November 2005 a [policy paper on NFE recognition](#), defining NFE it as:

“...an organised process that gives young people the possibility to develop their values, skills and competencies others than the ones developed in the framework of formal education. Those skills - also called ‘soft skills’- include a wide range of competencies such as interpersonal, team, organisational and conflict management, intercultural awareness, leadership, planning, organising, co-ordination and practical problem solving skills, teamwork, self-confidence, discipline and responsibility.”

The recognition of NFE can take different forms:

Political recognition is the legitimacy given to youth organisations by a political commitment. It can be improved by e.g. supporting the work of youth organisations and recognising them as bodies representing youth.

Social recognition is the recognition given by communities to the contribution of voluntary work. In many cases, young people's involvement in youth work and the related skills and competencies acquired in non-formal learning environments are not sufficiently recognised. This remains a challenge for youth organisations in attracting volunteers and participants, and for those who do volunteer, a range of hurdles in creating opportunities based on recognition of their contribution appears. In some cases, volunteering is seen as an unnecessary waste of time. There is a low level of awareness on the benefits that volunteering brings to the society. Achievement of social recognition of non-formal education means placing voluntary work as one of the key assets for the development of civil society, and its contribution to the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes gained through voluntary work by young people. That is why we have to work on more recognition of the benefits of NFE both to individual and the society.

Individual recognition means acknowledging the real competencies, i.e. a person's combined knowledge, skills and learning achievements, whether they are acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal way. In other words focusing on the individual more than on the degrees he obtained.

Several steps have already been made towards the recognition of NFE:

In the labour market

The Commission adopted in September 2006 a proposal on the establishment of the [European Qualifications Framework](#) for lifelong learning (EQF). The EQF will provide a common language to describe qualifications which will help Member States, employers and individuals compare qualifications across the EU's diverse education and training systems. This reference structure can be used on a voluntary basis and facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications held by individual citizens.

In the formal education system

Formal and non-formal education are complementary. The synergy between the two can increase by overcoming the traditional barriers between them, e.g. by the development of the infrastructure of the formal education system into spaces for learning, introducing ideas from non-formal learning into this system. This is not only a matter of introducing methods and approaches to learning from the non-formal sector into the formal education system, but also of opening the latter up to youth organisations as providers of non-formal learning. It raises

awareness about the advantages of volunteering, lifelong and lifewide learning as well as it gives nonformal education providers a chance to reach out to even more young people and finally, it stimulates motivation for learning as such. Breaking down the physical barriers between formal and non-formal education is thus the next step on the road to enhance complementarity and synergies between the two sectors.

The attendance of non-formal education schemes often implies the absence from formal education programmes. Special measures allowing specific absence could be taken in order to avoid such obstacle, by improving the flexibility and complementarity of the two systems.

First implemented in 2000, the Programme for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)) of the OECD assesses every three years how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society. It is nevertheless limited, with an employment-related focus on the human (cap)abilities, ignoring cultural, social, artistic and ethical competencies.

Recognition of youth work

In November 2001, the European Commission has written the white paper '[A New Impetus For European Youth](#)', describing the innovative impact of youth work as part of the overall package of lifelong learning measures and demands: 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, a greater recognition of these activities, and a greater complementarity with formal education and training. The Council of Europe decides in 2003 to develop the '[Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers](#)', which gives a real opportunity to self evaluate the achievements of a strong involvement in youth organisations.

In December 2004, the European Parliament and the Council agreed on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences, called [Europass](#), made of five components: CV - Mobility - Diploma Supplement Certificate Supplement, and Language Passport.

From 2005, the SALTO Training and Co-operation Resource Centre is working on development and implementation of a special European level validation instrument for Youth in Action, the [Youth Pass](#), a certificate issued after youth activities organised through the Youth programme. It supports the reflection on the personal non-formal learning process, the social recognition of youth work and the employability of young people and youth workers. It is officially launched in June 2007, together with the Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers. This initiative is interesting as long as its requirements do not lead to a formalization of youth activities.

Conclusions

European institutions have already taken different initiatives towards the recognition of non-formal education. These initiatives may be improved in order to better reflect the full spectrum of human real competences. The recognition of NFE should be taken very carefully though, as non-formal learning in youth organisations does not take place for the sake of receiving diplomas or certification. It is important not letting processes of recognition lead to formalisation of non-formal education.

References:

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http://www.youthforum.org/en/our_work/Policy_areas/education_priorities.htm

Coyote nr11 (June 2006) on NFE: [http://www.training-](http://www.training-youth.net/INTEGRATION/TY/Publications/coyote/coyote11/coyote11.pdf)

[youth.net/INTEGRATION/TY/Publications/coyote/coyote11/coyote11.pdf](http://www.training-youth.net/INTEGRATION/TY/Publications/coyote/coyote11/coyote11.pdf)

Discussion of AEGEE-members with the MEP in charge for the recognition of NFE, Manfred van Hebel (Directory-General for Education and culture), November 2006

Further reading:

Websites

[Bibliography of the Council of Europe on NFE](#)

[2004 Council Conclusions on validation of non formal and informal learning](#)

[European Commission – Education and Training](#)

[An Expanded Vision](#) – UNESCO World Conference on Education for All, Paris, 1992 (document in French)

Books

[Non-formal Education: Flexible Schooling Or Participatory Education? - Page 4](#) (by Alan Rogers - 2005)

[International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education - Page 129](#) (by Peter Jarvis – 1999)

[New Paradigm for Re-engineering Education: Globalization, Localization and Individualization - Page 130](#) (by Yin Cheong Cheng - 2005)

[The philosophy and services of non-formal education in Thailand](#) (2004)