

TOWARDS A REVITALISATION OF NON-FORMAL LEARNING FOR A CHANGING EUROPE

Report of the Council of Europe Youth Directorate Symposium on Non-Formal Education

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Promoting and practising non-formal education for young people has a long and honourable tradition at the Council of Europe, where the European Youth Centre's work¹ in developing and supporting intercultural learning and training courses for those involved in youth organisations is widely acknowledged to have led the European field since the mid-1970s.

In political terms, non-formal education is a privileged vehicle for promoting the aims espoused by the European Ministers responsible for youth in their 1998 Budapest Declaration²: strengthening solidarities, cohesion, participation, active democratic citizenship, partnership and co-operation in a rapidly-changing Europe. The Declaration invited the Committee of Ministers to develop **non-formal education as a means for social integration**³ and proposed that the CDEJ⁴ should regard this as a **priority area for action**. In this context, attention should be paid to **valorising competencies** acquired non-formally, by working towards a system for **European-level recognition** and developing relevant **training programmes**. The CDEJ has set up a Working Group to look at how to implement these recommendations.

In early 2000 the Parliamentary Assembly issued a Recommendation underlining the increasing importance of non-formal education⁵ and acknowledging the **key role played by community and youth NGOs** in its provision. It proposed that member states should increase the recognition and resources accorded to non-formal education, provide initial and in-service training for practitioners, ensure open and equal access to non-formal learning opportunities, co-operate more fully with NGOs in this area and encourage innovative approaches (such as peer education).

This Symposium on Non-formal Education is one element of the Youth Directorate's response to these policy developments. It brought together a diverse group of practitioners,

¹ See here: Lauritzen, P., Intercultural learning – big bluff or learning strategy for the future? Concepts, objectives and practices in informal education, Ch. 3.1 in CYRCE (Ed.) *Intercultural Reconstruction*, European Yearbook on Youth Policy and Youth Research, Vol. 2/1999; and Chisholm, L., The Council of Europe's Youth Centre past, present and future: an interview with Peter Lauritzen, Ch. 2.2 in CYRCE (Ed.) *The Puzzle of Integration*, European Yearbook on Youth Policy and Youth Research, Vol. 1/1995, Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/New York.

² Young people: active citizens in a future Europe – human rights, participation, solidarity. Final Declaration of the 5th Conference of European Ministers responsible for youth, Bucharest, 27-29 April 1998, Doc. MJN-5 (98) revised, 4 May 1998.

³ Alongside two further priorities: promoting youth participation and active democratic citizenship, and reinforcing social cohesion.

⁴ The Steering Committee for Intergovernmental Co-operation in the Youth Field.

⁵ Non-formal education "is an integral part of a lifelong learning concept that allows young people and adults to acquire and maintain the skills, abilities and outlook needed to adapt to a continuously changing environment" (§3, Recommendation 1437(2000)1, adopted 24 January 2000).

policymakers and applied researchers from 26 countries, furnishing a rich spectrum of experience and expertise to bear on the issue. The following report begins with a brief introduction to key underlying questions for debate. It continues with a synthesis of five transversal themes that were discussed throughout the different plenaries and workshops: definitions and understandings; teaching and learning methods; links and bridges between learning domains; quality and standards; and equality and social justice. The report concludes with a list of recommendations for action and further debate followed by brief final reflections.

INTRODUCTION

Probably the single most important finding of this study is that we know amazingly little about non-formal education practices in general, and even less about those occurring within the youth organisations.⁶

No-one at this symposium would have been surprised by this conclusion; indeed, the symposium's daily newspaper reported that participants were finding it **difficult to pin down a common and clear definition of non-formal education**, as did the passers-by interviewed for the newspaper in an ad hoc Strasbourg street survey. Equally, non-formal learning practitioners⁷ certainly know what it is they do and why they do it, at least in their own working contexts. This suggests that non-formal educational knowledge and expertise remains largely tacit and context-bound, which inevitably constrains the exchange of good practice that underpins the continuing professional task of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Symposium participants broadly accepted the **need to make non-formal educational knowledge and expertise more visible and transferable**, but were keen to recall the **risk of diluting** the very specificities that make non-formal learning so worthwhile. The absence of formalised canons, procedures and outcomes is very much seen as a guarantor for **the creative, open-ended, experiential and participatory quality of non-formal learning**. The key task for the future is to identify ways of negotiating this tension

⁶ Sahlberg, P. *Building Bridges for Learning. The recognition and value of non-formal education in youth activity*, Report for the European Youth Forum in co-operation with the National Board of Education Finland, Brussels, December 1999, p. 20.

⁷ This is the term proposed here to replace the frequently-used phrase 'teachers and trainers in non-formal education'. The term 'practitioners' unites 'teachers and trainers' into one category, overcoming the sectoral divide that these two words typically connote in English (teachers work in the general education sector, trainers work in the vocational education and training sector). The word 'learning' replaces the word education for two reasons: to bring general and vocational education and training under an integrating umbrella of purposive learning activity, and to place more emphasis on the person-centred 'doing' of education.

successfully, so that non-formal learning's genuinely complementary and innovative roles can be effectively developed and its individual and social outcomes better recognised.

Non-formal learning is hardly a new phenomenon – and neither is it unique to the youth sector – but its present status and identity has been very much shaped in the shadow of the increasing social and economic salience of formal education and training systems and outcomes. The very word 'non-formal' defines the activity in terms of what it is *not*, rather than what it actually is. The more schooling is judged in negative terms – constraining creativity, divorced from real life, overly competitive and instrumental, individually hurtful, helping to maintain inequalities – the more other ways of learning are seen to promise the opposite virtues, or at least to provide opportunities to salve the wounds. The history of progressive education movements – right back to the Enlightenment – is marked precisely by diverse efforts to build and justify alternative kinds of learning contents, contexts, processes, outcomes and their respective evaluation. Non-formal education is part of this tradition, which, it should be added, notably includes alternative visions of schooling itself.

This means that the non-formal sector's sense of collective self has always included opposing the mainstream, as well as complementing it. The opposition is grounded in a set of social values and educational principles that could be described as more visionary and idealistic than those mainstream schooling embodies. A focus on complementarity is more pragmatic, arguing that the complex and rapidly-changing demands of modern life require more than slow-moving institutionalised learning environments can possibly provide on their own.⁸

Policy interest in non-formal learning is rapidly rising – not only for young people but for people of all ages, and not simply for personal and social education but increasingly for acquiring vocationally-relevant skills.⁹ What should be the **appropriate balance between vision and pragmatism** in revitalising the quality and the outcomes of non-formal learning in today's Europe? What kinds of action are needed on the part of which organisations, groups and individuals to achieve that balance? These were key questions that lay behind the symposium debate as a whole.

⁸ The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly report on *Non-formal Education* places this more pragmatic approach in the forefront: "The Assembly recognises that formal educational systems alone cannot respond to the challenges of modern society and therefore welcomes its reinforcement by non-formal educational practices. The Assembly recommends that governments and appropriate authorities of member states recognise non-formal education as a de facto partner in the lifelong learning process and make it accessible for all" (summary statement, Doc. 8595, 15.12.99, Committee on Culture and Education).

⁹ This is closely linked to the importance attached to implementing lifelong learning in the context of promoting both employability and active citizenship in knowledge-based economies and an integrated Europe; see here the European Commission's *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels, November 2000 (SEC(2000)1832).

FIVE TRANSVERSAL THEMES

1. Definitions and understandings

Symposium participants may have been hesitant to perceive and adopt a single and unambiguous definition of non-formal education, but there is **in fact no shortage of existing definitions** from which they might have wished to choose.¹⁰ Taken together, such definitions are united in describing non-formal education as both purposive yet highly-varied learning contexts. They are more likely *not* to specify that non-formal education is directed at particular age-groups, but definitions that come from the youth sector and its representatives at the Council of Europe are inclined to suggest a specific link between non-formal education and young people's needs and demands. In contrast, the OECD definition (included in the appendix) tends to give the impression that non-formal education relates more to adult learning.

All definitions refer in some way to differences in the degree and type of organisation of learning activities between the formal and non-formal sectors; they generally also make reference to differing styles of learning, suggesting that the non-formal sector provides alternative and complementary styles. The Council of Europe and European Youth Forum definitions notably and explicitly refer to particular contents and methods as additional defining characteristics of non-formal education.

Finally, the certification of learning outcomes as a distinguishing criterion between formal and non-formal education is included in EU, OECD and Council of Europe definitions, but interestingly, the latest CDEJ definition makes specific mention of the fact that non-formal learning experience “might also be certificated” as well as the fact that “these programmes are carried out by trained leaders”. These elements clearly mark the direction taken by current discussions around the need for greater recognition of the full range of learning outcomes and of the professional expertise of non-formal learning practitioners.

¹⁰ The appendix to this report provides a set of relevant examples.

Common elements in existing definitions of non-formal education

- purposive learning,
- diverse contexts,
- different and lighter organisation of provision and delivery,
- alternative/complementary teaching and learning styles,
- less developed recognition of outcomes and quality.

Specific accents in any given definition then result, as one would expect, from the particular interests of the definers and the broader social context in which a definition has been produced.¹¹ These accents will include, for example, a focus on particular target groups; the differential weight given to structural features of provision and delivery as opposed to features of learning content and process; or the emphasis given to intrinsic versus instrumental and personal versus social aims of non-formal education.

How does this compare with the views expressed by the symposium participants, all of whom are working in, with or for the youth policy and action domain? The strong emphasis placed on the link between non-formal education and young people's needs and demands is readily explicable and defensible, but **whence the definitional hesitancy?** Part of the answer must lie in the **tacit and context-bound nature of knowledge and expertise in the non-formal education sector** as a whole, an issue raised in the introduction to this report. Previous attempts¹² to elicit views on what non-formal learning is and the role of youth organisations as education providers have certainly resulted in low response rates, lack of consensus on definitions and understandings, and relative lack of awareness of the nature and scale of the contribution being made.

But this is not the only reason. Youth sector actors are reluctant *on principle* to subscribe to common and clear definition and understanding of non-formal education – this in itself can be seen as **a formalisation process that risks imposing unnecessary constraints** on teachers'

¹¹ Differing understandings of 'neformaly' at the close of the Soviet era provide an example: see Siurala, L., *A broader strategy for non-formal learning and education?* Note prepared for the Symposium on Non-formal Education, Council of Europe Youth Directorate, October 2000.

¹² See here: *Lifelong Learning – A Youth Perspective*, European Youth Forum/Free University of Brussels, Brussels, December 1997; *Building Bridges for Learning*, European Youth Forum/National Board of Education Finland, Brussels, December 1999; *Synthesis of and replies to the questionnaire on non-formal education*, report

and learners' autonomy of action. The consensus at the symposium was that **a universally valid definition is neither possible nor desirable**: no-one wants to risk 'fossilisation' and everyone wants to respect diversity of perspective and practice. The catalogue of written contributions¹³ from the participants reinforces the consensus that emerged in discussion: non-formal education is perceived above all in terms of freedom from authority and from constraints on what and how to learn. Nevertheless, in practical terms participants were in no doubt about the essential features of non-formal learning in the youth domain. These are summarised immediately below.

Essential features of non-formal learning

- balanced co-existence and interaction between cognitive, affective and practical dimensions of learning
- linking individual and social learning, partnership-oriented solidary and symmetrical teaching/learning relations
- participatory and learner-centred
- holistic and process-oriented
- close to real life concerns, experiential and oriented to learning by doing, using intercultural exchanges and encounters as learning devices
- voluntary and (ideally) open-access
- aims above all to convey and practice the values and skills of democratic life

This list includes reference to content (the values and skills of democratic life) but emphasises, above all, a range of framing conditions for learning that might have a variety of purposes and contents. In sum, the **symposium participants subscribe in the first instance to practice-based and contextual understandings of non-formal education**. Their list contains far less reference to the way learning is organised, delivered and recognised than the more formalised definitions discussed earlier. This is not surprising: institutionally-produced understandings have different purposes and priorities than do those developed closer to and in the field. But this does help explain why it is that defining non-formal learning becomes such a contentious and fraught issue. It also suggests that **what is really needed are multi-layer**

to the second meeting of the CDEJ Working Group on non-formal education and social cohesion, 15-16 February 1999 (EDU-SOC/GT(99)2).

definitions, which relate to each other but express common understandings at different levels and for different purposes.

More broadly, useful understandings of non-formal education are necessarily relational in character. It is **time to move beyond regarding formal and non-formal learning as a binary opposition**, in which non-formal represents all that is ‘good’ and formal represents all that is ‘bad’. In reality, the boundaries between the two are not firmly fixed. Their respective features fade into one another towards the centre of what is ultimately **a continuum of learning contexts, contents and methods**. Furthermore, the specificities of given national and cultural traditions and systems mean that the boundary lines between what is understood to fall into the formal and non-formal sectors are objectively placed at different points on that continuum. Finally, in practical terms, the symposium’s catalogue of projects itself shows up very significant differences between countries both in policy perspectives on non-formal education and in the levels of human and financial resources on which the sector can rely. Productive communication, dialogue and exchange across borders, sectors and groups demands that educational activities are placed in explicit relation both to their specific context and to the continuum of teaching and learning as a whole. This is the basis for demonstrating and improving the quality and standards of learning in the non-formal sector, no less so than in the formal sector.

2. Teaching and learning methods

The palette of non-formal teaching and learning methods derives quite directly from the essential features of non-formal education.

Non-formal teaching and learning methods

- communication-based methods: interaction, dialogue, mediation
- activity-based methods: experience, practice, experimentation
- socially-focussed methods: partnership, teamwork, networking
- self-directed methods: creativity, discovery, responsibility

¹³ *Catalogue of projects*, Symposium on Non-Formal Education (Sympto/Edu(2000)1, 2 October 2000).

Quite evidently, **these methods are not unique to the youth sector** – they have equally long been used in a wide range of community education and adult education practice. Indeed, it can be argued¹⁴ that basic education for adults, most especially those living in isolated regions and developing countries, has been the paradigmatic context in which non-formal teaching and learning methods were developed and practised. By contrast, youth work traditions have been strongly influenced by social pedagogies of ‘care and control’, whereas youth organisations have always incorporated – implicitly or explicitly – a socio-political role and mission. Conscious awareness of the educational dimensions of youth sector activities has developed relatively slowly and patchily, and with some resistance at times since, after all, the whole point is *not* to be ‘like school’.

Greater awareness of the educational dimension and the concomitant development of appropriate methods has been, above all, shaped on the terrains of **political education**¹⁵ **and intercultural learning**. These themes have provided the teaching and learning content that lies at the heart of non-formal education in the youth sector, and it is the demands of this kind of content that **have influenced the choice of methods**. A key aspect of this choice is the conviction that learning to be interculturally competent and to become an active democratic citizen can only succeed if the words match the deeds, and if the theory is accompanied by direct practice. Speaking about equal rights must be matched by symmetrical relations between teachers and learners. Tolerance of the unfamiliar and the ambiguous is acquired through (carefully prepared) exposure to and confrontation with the strange and incomprehensible. An appreciation of the virtues of parliamentary debate as a form of democratic decision making becomes real and useful when young people also learn the practical skills of group discussion, negotiation and compromise.

Practitioners who work in formal education settings would immediately argue that they, too, make use of these kinds of teaching and learning methods – and in most cases their claim would be justified. The difference lies in the fact that this is not all that formal learning environments do, and in many respects it is not the majority of what they do. Firstly, schools and colleges literally *must* cover a much wider curriculum, which is still almost wholly subject-based and for which subject-specific didactics have been firmly established. The adoption of more ‘open’ methods of teaching and learning has taken place more easily in

¹⁴ As does Sahlberg in *Building Bridges for Learning*, p.8ff.

¹⁵ In schools, this would be more typically called ‘civics’ or ‘citizenship education’, perhaps even ‘personal and social education’ or ‘social studies’.

some subjects than others – for example, history over against physics. An extensive literature tries to understand and explain these kinds of differences, further discussion of which is not appropriate in this report. The interesting question that arises for non-formal education in the youth sector is rather: **are there particular kinds of content that are genuinely unsuitable for non-formal learning contexts and methods?** If so, why; if not, why not? Asking these kinds of questions would help to clarify more precisely the *genuinely salient* distinctions between formal and non-formal learning. The answers could also help to demonstrate the value of non-formal methods *across the board* of learning contexts altogether.

Secondly, whatever the content at hand, there is **one crucial difference between the formal and non-formal education sectors: learners in the former are assessed**, and these assessments have a critical and increasing impact on their life chances and risks. Moreover, assessment methods in Europe as a whole are still heavily dominated by quite traditional forms of testing and examination, perhaps most heavily of all in the secondary education sector. And whatever the precise form of assessment, there is plenty of evidence to show that its very existence influences teaching and learning methods (as in ‘teaching to the syllabus’ or ‘cramming for the exam’). Once again, there is an extensive literature on the complex effects of formal assessment upon learner motivation and learning outcomes. There are also numerous well-documented examples of committed attempts to modernise assessment methods, to make them not only more effective (i.e. valid, reliable and relevant) but also more ‘human’. Nevertheless, the fact that the youth sector regards with some circumspection the call¹⁶ to “valorise competencies acquired non-formally” by young people, and to “work towards a system for European-level recognition” of non-formal learning practitioners, is perfectly understandable. Appropriate teaching and learning methods must be matched by appropriate methods of recognition and evaluation for the non-formal sector.

¹⁶ In the Youth Ministers’ 1998 Budapest Declaration (see p. 1 and footnote 2 of this report).

3. Links and bridges between learning domains

This is a sensitive theme for the youth sector, where noticeably divergent views are held, including amongst the symposium participants. Nevertheless, on balance there is an emerging, if still hesitant, **consensus in favour of building firmer links and bridges between non-formal and formal learning domains.**

Building links and bridges

- Non-formal and formal domains can *learn and profit from each other's distinct expertise and experience*: communication and co-operation should be strengthened. For example, conflict can take place in schools as well as on the street – practitioners in both contexts could profit from gaining mediation and conflict resolution skills, and from exchanging good practice in this area.
- The youth sector has not yet begun to exploit the *positive potential of mixed-age and intergenerational learning processes*. Where are the links to be made here with adult educators, who often work in similar ways with older age groups?
- Non-formal learning is a tool for integration and empowerment of the excluded, but this is not enough by itself – for the most part, people need jobs to survive with dignity, maintain self-worth and have meaningful access to active citizenship in all its dimensions. This means that non-formal and formal learning provision and practitioners must *work together to maximise the chances of the highly disadvantaged* to build meaningful, independent and satisfying lives.

The proposed formula for building firmer links with other learning sectors and their practitioners is therefore a simple one: **capitalise on complementarities and minimise unproductive competition**. NGOs in the youth sector – the main providers of non-formal learning for young people – can profitably seek dialogue and co-operation with (for example) new social movements, digital communities, innovative youth training schemes, community school projects, and social reconstruction programmes in regions hit by armed conflicts and natural catastrophes.¹⁷ This underlines that the proposal for building links and bridges applies not only to the formal education sector, but also to **a wide range of social contexts** in which non-formal learning takes place alongside other activities. The ultimate aim could be that the youth sector claim a specific and recognised role within an organically interconnected process of **lifelong and lifewide** learning.

¹⁷ As suggested by Siurala in *A broader strategy for non-formal learning and education?*

4. Quality and standards

Addressing the quality and standards of non-formal learning provision and outcome is no less sensitive a theme – perhaps even more so, because here the spectre of ranked comparisons between providers and status differentiations between ‘qualified and unqualified’ practitioners looms large and close. State-organised regulation (monitoring, validation, accreditation) is highly problematic for NGOs and civil society associations engaged in non-formal learning, perhaps particularly so in western Europe, where distrust and scepticism of established democratic governance systems has become widespread. This trend has significant implications for education and training systems as a whole.¹⁸ Their **established procedures and practices are coming under increasing scrutiny and challenge by citizens** – whether as parents looking for the ‘best’ education for their children, as university students bringing a case that their examinations have not been justly assessed, or indeed as young people who decide that schooling has nothing to offer them and drop out to ‘do it their own way’.

Nevertheless, the symposium workshop on recognition concluded that “the non-formal education sector has arrived at a point at which the majority of partners at European level agree that there is a need to go deeper into the issues of accreditation/certification and assessment”, in terms both of practitioner qualifications and of learning outcomes.¹⁹ In effect, symposium **participants overall agreed that quality standards for teaching and learning processes and outcomes would help to give non-formal education the social recognition it deserves**. As indicated earlier in this report, for the youth sector the absolute proviso must be that assessment and evaluation methods are ‘indigenous and appropriate’, i.e. based upon the distinctive characteristics of non-formal learning, not imitating the formal sector.

Participants judged three considerations as fundamental to the formulation and implementation of coherent measures to assure quality and standards. Firstly, non-formal learning outcomes typically centre on generic and transferable skills, which enable people to ‘do’ as well as to ‘be’ (such as teamworking and problemsolving skills; capacity to take responsibility and to exercise tolerance; sustained ability to learn and to be adaptable; capacity to act on one’s own initiative, be enterprising and use one’s creative powers).

¹⁸ See here Chisholm, L., The educational and social implications of the transition to knowledge societies, in: von der Gablentz, O./Mahnke, D./Padoan, P.-C./Picht, R. (Eds.) *Europe 2020: Adapting to a Changing World*, Nomos Verlag: Baden-Baden: 2000, pp. 75-90.

¹⁹ Report of Workshop 1 on Recognition of Non-Formal Education, (rapporteur: Andreas Carsten), 15 October 2000, p. 2.

Secondly, the expertise of non-formal learning practitioners emphasises process skills over content skills, so training courses should reflect this balance appropriately. A recognition system at European level must also reflect the specific added value of European-level non-formal education in the youth sector. An initial list of key competencies is shown immediately below.

Key competencies of non-formal learning practitioners

- using collegial and participatory methods
- facilitating international and intercultural groups
- using diversity as a positive learning tool
- making critically reflective links between the concrete and the abstract, in order both to facilitate learning processes and continuously to improve their quality
- knowledge about European societies and politics, including the European institutions and integration issues
- knowledge about young people's lives and cultures in Europe (not only in one's own society)

Thirdly, **assessment procedures should be formative** (i.e. continuous, process-oriented) **and essentially self-evaluative**, so that the system is owned and operated by learners themselves (as in, for example, personal records of achievement). The role of the teacher/trainer in assessment and evaluation processes should be designed to reflect the qualities of being a mentor, guide, facilitator, resource person – in effect, the supporting partner on a learning journey. The learners in question, of course, could also be non-formal learning practitioners themselves on initial or in-service training and professional development courses. Such assessment methods are intrinsically appealing – but they are **neither a cheap nor a simple option**. On the contrary, if they are to work well they need a solid raft of good quality mentoring and guidance support, as well as professional expertise in evaluation and assessment itself. Currently, these resources are just not widely available in the youth sector, nor in non-formal education as a whole; this is an important policy issue to be addressed.

5. Equality and social justice

The Youth Ministers' 1998 Bucharest Declaration gives distinct **priority to promoting equal opportunities and social cohesion**, and suggests that non-formal education can contribute to this broad aim of youth policy. Interestingly, in the case of encouraging equal opportunities, the Declaration takes the field of vocational training. Young people acquire vocationally relevant skills and experience through non-formal learning. **Recognition** that this is so **would open up alternative and complementary routes to qualification**, especially for those who have done less well in the mainstream education and training system. The Declaration proposes that ways should be found to endorse these outcomes as qualifications that can achieve practical currency (for further education and training or with employers). This is an important statement, because non-formal education in the youth sector has not, in the past, construed its purposes and outcomes in terms of explicitly vocational skills or as a contribution to building individual employability. Persistently high rates of youth unemployment and their consequences for young people's social integration, together with the changing skills demands of the transition to knowledge-based, globalising economies in Europe,²⁰ have prompted the youth sector to reconsider the potential scope and benefits of the educational work they do.

In the case of encouraging social cohesion, the Declaration gives the example of promoting **mediation as a means of preventing and resolving conflicts**. Mediation and conflict resolution have attracted increasing attention in recent years, most particularly in the light of inter-ethnic violence, armed conflicts and social breakdown in South-Eastern Europe. International youth NGOs are actively involved in the reconstruction effort, and young people from the region themselves participate in Council of Europe meetings and courses supported through the Youth Directorate. Intercultural learning is one element of a response strategy; learning to use democratic communication, negotiation and advocacy skills effectively to bring people together is another. As pointed out earlier in this report, these are classic terrains for non-formal education in the youth sector.²¹

²⁰ The European Council Presidency (of the European Union) Conclusions in Lisbon (23-24 March 2000) constitute a milestone document in specifying the economic changes underway and the implications for education and training as a whole. The introduction of the European Voluntary Service pilot scheme (fully integrated into the European Union's YOUTH action programme from January 2000) had already provided a concrete impetus to consider how young people's participation in voluntary activities could be appropriately recognised, including with an eye to their transition to employment and self-employment.

²¹ The use of mediation and advocacy skills by young people on behalf of young people is also an element of non-formal learning in more everyday contexts. The Council of Europe's Education for Democratic Citizenship

The mandate of the CDEJ Working Group set up to implement the Declaration's recommendations reflects the view that **non-formal education is an important means for promoting social cohesion**. The symposium participants themselves expressed strong commitment to giving priority to the needs of young people at risk of marginalisation and exclusion, arguing – to cite one participant – that “non-formal learning takes over when the social fabric is broken ... we are dealing with people whose whole life has crumbled”. Non-formal learning offers an affirmative and integrating space in which to recover and grow. Providing low-threshold opportunities close to home are essential to reach this kind of public. Here, too, there is **potential for closer co-operation with local social services** in designing multi-purpose learning projects.

Nevertheless, non-formal learning exists in the here and now – it is not a paradise apart, but is woven into existing social and economic structures and interests. If non-formal learning – perhaps especially at international level – is *also*, in the words of another participant, “the playground of tomorrow's leaders”, then it can, in principle, just as easily contribute to maintaining social and educational inequalities rather than dismantling them. Where the relevant data is available, research and statistics leave us in little doubt that as far as education and training is concerned, those who already have get more – and generally want more in the first place.²² It is perhaps time to confront this problem more directly: does the same pattern show up in non-formal learning in the youth sector, and what kinds of counter-strategies might be effective to redress current imbalances in participation?

These are not comfortable questions, but they do encourage more critical reflection on the intended and unintended consequences of current patterns and styles of provision and participation in non-formal education. The more visionary values that underpin the youth sector's involvement in non-formal education suggest that **learning as a tool for personal and social change must guide quality practice**, and not only the more pragmatic approach of learning for social integration into the world as it is. But drawing the balance between the

project has supported the development of diverse ‘sites of citizenship’ throughout Europe, including youth-oriented projects, that use such skills in the context of practising active citizenship in local community settings. See **cite brochure and website**.

²² Whilst overall levels of education and qualification has risen continuously in the last forty years, social inequalities in educational participation and outcome have not lessened. Polarisation trends have become more marked in the past two decades, with a significant minority at risk of long-term social and economic exclusion. Trends in access to and participation in continuing education and training continue to show that those who are already well-qualified, better-paid and better-placed in the labour market are more likely to be offered and to take up learning opportunities. There is no *prima facie* reason to assume that the non-formal youth education sector does not tend to produce similar patterns, although this remains to be demonstrated one way or the other in concrete terms.

two remains unresolved – which returns us to the key underlying issues identified in the introduction to this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION AND FURTHER DEBATE

1. Information, resources and networking

- Provide a comprehensive basis for communication and dialogue between non-formal learning practitioners and between NGOs as providers of non-formal education.
- Develop a more precise, distinctive and interculturally robust terminology and conceptual framework.

Action points

Establish a European-wide inventory, database and network for information, resources, research and good practice in non-formal learning, using proactive and ICT-based communication and dissemination tools. These facilities should be thematically differentiated; areas for priority attention include conflict resolution/mediation; learning for democracy.

Mandate an expert working group to produce an annotated multilingual dictionary of concepts and terms for the non-formal education sector in Europe.

2. Policy strategies

- Achieve greater acceptance of the complementarity between formal and non-formal learning domains.
- Work towards integrated policy approaches to combat social exclusion, including through non-formal learning and better recognition of its outcomes.
- Raise the profile of the non-formal learning community in the policymaking domain.

Action points

Conduct reviews of national policies and measures to improve access, participation, resources and recognition in the non-formal education sector.

Found a European professional association of non-formal learning practitioners.

Set up a professional internship programme for non-formal learning practitioners in regional and national ministries and regulatory authorities, and in relevant departments of international organisations.

3. Improving quality and standards

- As a spur to innovation, co-operation and critical reflection, promote cross-sectoral exchange of experience amongst practitioners working in formal and non-formal settings, with different target groups and in different countries or cultural contexts.
- Develop comprehensive in-service training courses for non-formal learning practitioners, especially at European level.
- Develop shared European-level guidelines for common key/core qualifications profiles for non-formal learning practitioners, which could ultimately lead to a kind of ‘qualified teacher’ status.

Action points

Set up an Active Learning Forum to build up a body of coherent and critical knowledge, to act as a professional reference point and to create a peer advisory body for quality assurance.

Continue and extend the mandate of the Curriculum and Quality Group (established under the Council of Europe-European Union covenant in the youth domain) to develop training courses and key competence guidelines.

Continue and extend co-operation and partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Union in the youth domain, both through the existing covenant and through effective use of appropriate actions under the new Community action programmes in education, training and youth (SOCRATES II, LEONARDO II and YOUTH).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The renewed wave of policy interest in non-formal learning is welcome to all concerned, whether for more visionary or more pragmatic reasons. European societies and economies increasingly need what mainstream education and training systems simply have not provided for the majority of the population: critical and independent thinking, personal autonomy, proactive problem-solving and, last but by no means least, **quality learning outcomes across the full range of capacity, knowledge and skill**. This offers a window of opportunity to revitalise the non-formal sector by enhancing its recognition, by raising its available resources and by consolidating the quality of its contribution to individual learning and social life.

Opportunities inevitably bring risks, and such concerns were clearly voiced at the symposium. Is the essence of non-formal learning genuinely endangered by greater dialogue and partnership with formal education, or by placing quality of teaching and learning explicitly at the forefront? Perhaps still a little hesitantly, the consensus amongst the participants is that **the non-formal education sector can and should look forward with confidence to meeting these challenges**. Precisely because of the strength of NGO and practitioner commitment to young people's well-being and futures, all fully endorse the view that where people have entitlements to learning opportunities, they also have rights to quality learning experiences and outcomes.

This means considering the implications of professionalisation, the need for training and recognised qualifications, and rendering learning outcomes visible and valued. The non-formal education sector – and particularly in the youth field – has a renewed opportunity to show with pride and confidence what it already does very well, to exchange its fund of knowledge and expertise with other non-formal learning contexts and to develop complementary partnerships with those working in formal education and training. This symposium provided a fruitful forum for debate on how best to meet these challenges in the best interests of non-formal learning providers, of non-formal learning practitioners, and – above all – the young people who participate in non-formal learning. This symposium has marked the beginning of **a new phase of development for the youth sector**, and the impetus it has provided should be firmly carried forward.

APPENDIX

Examples of existing definitions of non-formal education

UNESCO

Non-formal education is organised educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives.

EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM

Non-formal education corresponds to a collection of teaching tools and learning schemes that are seen as creative and innovative alternatives to traditional and classical teaching systems.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Non-formal education {is} educational activity which is not structured and takes place outside the formal system ... {which is} usually provided or supported by the state, chronologically graded and running from primary to tertiary institutions. ... Non-formal education covers two rather different realities: on the one hand education activities taking place outside the formal education system (for example a lecture on social rights organised by a trade union) and on the other the experience acquired while exerting responsibilities in a voluntary organisation (for example being a member of the board of an environment protection NGO).

EUROPEAN COMMISSION MEMORANDUM ON LIFELONG LEARNING

Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups (such as in youth organisations, trades unions and political parties). It can also be provided through organisations or services that have been set up to complement formal systems (such as arts, music and sports classes or private tutoring to prepare for examinations).

OECD

The formal system refers to all those aspects of education within the sphere of responsibilities and influence of the Minister of Education, together with private schools, universities and other institutions which prepare students for officially recognised qualifications. The non-formal sector comprises learning activities taking place outside this formal system, such as those carried out within companies, by professional associations, or independently by self-motivated adult learners.

EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM/NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION FINLAND

Non-formal education is defined as organised and semi-organised educational activities operating outside the structure and routines of the formal education system. This view expresses the way in which education is delivered, and is formulated in terms of two criteria. One criterion is concerned with {the degree of} organisation and the other with the {nature of the} relationship to the schools system.

CDEJ WORKING GROUP ON NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Non-formal education may be defined as a planned programme of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competencies, outside but supplementary to the formal educational curriculum. Participation is voluntary and the programmes are carried out by trained leaders in the voluntary and/or public sectors, and should be systematically monitored and evaluated. The experience might also be certificated. It is generally related to the employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual young person, and may require in addition to the youth work sector the involvement of a range of government or non governmental agencies responsible for the needs of young people.