



# Non-Formal Education

Since its establishment in 1972, the youth sector of the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup> has been a pillar of the Organisation, contributing to the spread of democracy across Europe. Through its European youth centres (centres of knowledge and experience about youth and youth affairs in Europe), and the European Youth Foundation (the Council's funding scheme for European youth projects), the youth sector has contributed to the progress of freedom and democracy – from the fall of the Western European dictatorships in Spain and Portugal to the fall of the Berlin Wall – and radical changes in central and eastern Europe. This has been achieved through the strengthening of social movements and political education processes in the fields of: democracy, human rights, citizenship, intercultural learning and evidence-based childhood and youth policies.



## Non-formal education and learning: framework, methodology and philosophy

Non-formal education has a long and lively tradition in Europe, a tradition that is widely acknowledged to have been spearheaded and shaped by the Council of Europe, in particular its youth sector. It has been the core methodology and philosophy of the Council's youth programmes, although the term “non-formal education” as such was only introduced in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>.

Starting with the need for and belief in value-based education after 1945, to the focus on acquiring life skills in support of citizenship and employment in the present millennium, the European youth centres, the European Youth Foundation and the Youth

1. “One of the last remaining socio-topos of co-management in Europe and probably the only example of such within a European or international organisation (Eggs in a pan, p. 162).”
2. As Peter Lauritzen phrased it in a speech on life-long learning, non-formal learning and citizenship in December 2004: “Today, we speak of the same items as three decades back, but we have changed the language.” (Eggs in a pan, p. 64)



Partnership have been instrumental in: developing concepts and methodologies for non-formal education and learning; proving and developing its value; initiating and supporting its recognition; boosting and documenting its quality; and, facilitating and researching its contribution to education and social change.

40 years after the establishment of the first European Youth Centre in Strasbourg in 1972, as an arena to discuss the future of Europe and a laboratory for experimental learning and educational reform, non-formal education has become an extensively-used framework and well-documented concept within and beyond the youth sector. It stands for a range of core learning principles, methodologies and approaches, commonly emphasising the learner's intrinsic motivation, voluntary participation, critical thinking and active role in the democratic process. It is widely acknowledged and recognised as providing unique learning opportunities for millions of young Europeans on a daily basis. It is the educational rationale underpinning the institutional youth sectors of the Council of Europe, the European Union and their Youth Partnership, as well as representing the identifying and binding principle of youth work provision by youth organisations in Europe and beyond.

## -----> **Importance, relevance and political recognition of non-formal education and learning**

Over the past decades, the importance and relevance of non-formal education has been increasingly recognised by civil society, governments and European institutions alike. Non-formal learning and education have been consistently confirmed as key priorities and work areas of education-related organisations and institutions, particularly in the youth sector.

The European Youth Forum – as the pan-European platform of youth organisations, a vital partner of the Council of Europe – has highlighted the role and contribution of non-governmental organisations as providers of non-formal education<sup>3</sup>.

The European institutions have likewise given non-formal education and learning a high status and considerable momentum with high-level policy papers: the Council of Europe, with Recommendation (2003)8 of the Committee of Ministers on the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning of young people; and, the European Union, with Resolution 2006 / C168 on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth sector.

Consequently, non-formal learning and education have been indisputably established as key priorities within the European institutions' policies and programmes. For the

3. In resolutions in 2003, 2005 and 2008 and several thematic publications, including the Sunshine Report on Non-formal Education, which presents best practices from its member organisations.

Council of Europe, the Conference of Ministers highlighted in its Agenda 2020 that the recognition of non-formal education and learning makes a strong contribution to young people's access to education, training and working life. Furthermore, the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education refers to non-formal education as playing a central role for learning in education for democratic citizenship and human rights education. The European Union has reaffirmed, in similar terms, its own focus on the recognition of non-formal learning in the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth sector (2010-2018): "As a complement to formal education, non-formal learning for young people should be promoted and recognised, and better links between formal education and non-formal learning developed".

Political interest in the variety of learner-centred and practice-based educational processes that are subsumed under non-formal education and learning has shifted over the years – as becomes evident from the most recent policy documents – to focus on quality standards, validation and strategies for recognition. This shift has also been facilitated by frequently bringing together the youth sector's researchers, policymakers and practitioners, who have a common interest in explaining the actual and potential value of non-formal learning, in particular in settings beyond the boundaries of formal education and its characteristic forms of assessment and qualification. The Council of Europe, in particular its youth sector, has played a key role in these developments.

## -----> **Pathways towards the validation and recognition of non-formal education**

Embedded in this policy framework, several instruments were developed to facilitate the validation and recognition of skills and competencies acquired through non-formal learning. Among them is the European Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers, introduced by the Council of Europe to support youth workers and youth leaders in identifying, describing and assessing their competencies and, in doing so, contributing to the recognition of non-formal education and learning.

This shift towards quality standards, validation and recognition can be seen in the 2004 and 2011 *Pathways* documents<sup>4</sup>. Both are working papers jointly developed by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe and the Youth Unit of the European Union's Commission, within the framework of their Youth Partnership, in co-operation with, among others, the European Youth Forum. The papers provide a comprehensive overview of the political context and relevant

4. Pathways towards validation and recognition of education, training & learning in the youth sector (2004); Pathways 2.0 towards recognition of non-formal learning/education and of youth work in Europe (2011)



policy frameworks surrounding non-formal education, describe essential features and characteristics of non-formal learning in the youth sector and set out ways to achieve its validation and formal recognition.

The 2011 working paper *Pathways 2.0 towards recognition of non-formal learning/ education and of youth work in Europe* outlines ten steps for a renewed recognition strategy, arguing that it is time to implement concrete steps, including:

- Developing a common understanding and a joint strategy in the youth sector and improving co-operation and communication;
- Making the role of youth organisations visible;
- Assuring quality and training in non-formal education/learning;
- Increasing knowledge about non-formal education/learning in youth work;
- Developing existing tools further and making them accessible and transferable;
- Reinforcing the political process at European level;
- Linking youth to lifelong learning strategies and vice versa;
- Involving those concerned in the employment sector;
- Associating the social sector; and
- Co-operating with other policy fields and interested groups in civil society.

## -----> **Conceptual developments: the first symposium on non-formal education and learning in 2000**

A symposium on non-formal education organised by the Council of Europe's youth sector in 2000 started from the observation that most knowledge and expertise about non-formal education was largely undocumented, illustrated by the 1999 study *Building Bridges for Learning*: "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 youth organisations" (Sahlberg, 1999, p. 20).

## -----> **Common elements of non-formal education approaches**

The 70 youth sector professionals and activists participating in the symposium readily agreed that a universally-valid definition of non-formal education was neither possible nor desirable; nobody wanted to subscribe to a definition that rapidly became out-dated, and everyone wanted to respect diversity of perspective

and practice. But through identifying common elements and essential features across the various forms of creative, experiential and participatory non-formal learning, the first symposium on non-formal education nonetheless made a crucial contribution to documenting and verifying how non-formal education was perceived, understood and practiced in the youth sector.

### **Figure 1: Common elements in existing definitions of non-formal learning**

- purposive learning,
- diverse contexts,
- alternative/complementary teaching and learning styles,
- less developed recognition of outcomes and quality.

Source: Council of Europe Symposium on Non-Formal Education: Report (2001).

The symposium report also challenged the binary opposition between formal and non-formal learning, noting that: "their respective features fade into one another towards the centre of what is ultimately a continuum of learning contexts, contents and methods" (Chisholm, 2001, p. 62).

The first symposium also marked a terminological shift in the youth sector. The title used the word *education*, whereas the report introduced the term *learning* as an alternative, maintaining that that term drew attention to activities rather than systems and, by seeing people as the central concern, was closer to the rationale and value of learner-centredness in non-formal learning contexts.

Following the symposium, the discourse and understanding of non-formal learning gradually shifted. It was defined in 1974 by Coombs and Ahmed as "any organized, systematic educational activity, carried on outside the framework of the formal system". After the symposium, it was defined as, multiple learning situations positioned on a learning continuum and structured across multiple dimensions between formal, non-formal and informal of learning.

## -----> **Essential features and core methods of non-formal learning**

In *Informality and formality in learning*<sup>5</sup>, Helen Colley, Phil Hodgkinson and Janice Malcolm analysed attributes and aspects of formality and informality in learning – process; location and setting; purposes; and content – and came up with a list of 20 criteria, aiming to capture the complex links between informal and formal attributes of learning situations.

5. A report published in 2003 by the Learning and Skills Research Centre



These criteria were used for the external evaluation of the *Advanced Training of Trainers in Europe (ATTE)*, a two-year part-time pilot programme for non-formal educators in the youth sector. The report noted substantial progress since the symposium in 2000: “The educational principles and practices informing the sector’s work are now moving consistently towards the conscious development of greater theoretical and pedagogic coherence for a specific set of purposes, challenges and learners” (Chisholm, 2006, p. 24).

The evaluation report summarised, on the basis of the discussions at the initial symposium, essential features of non-formal learning:

**Figure 2: 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

*Source: Council of Europe Symposium on Non-Formal Education: Report (2001).*

The features emphasise conditions for learning that might have a variety of purposes and be very different – showing that people working in the youth sector understand non-formal learning as firmly rooted in practice and the relevant context – and which inform the palette of non-formal methods as shown below:

**Figure 3: Non-formal teaching/training and learning methods**

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

*Source: Council of Europe Symposium on Non-Formal Education: Report (2001).*

## The learning continuum: formal, non-formal and informal learning

Building on the list of 20 distinguishing criteria, synthesised by Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm, the ATTE evaluation reformulated the criteria to make their meaning simpler, separated some of them into their component parts, and placed each criterion into one of four clusters – process, location and setting, purpose and content – namely the one to which it was arguably most closely related. It then positioned ATTE, as a real example of non-formal learning in the youth sector, on a three-point scale for each criterion.

Formality/ Informality			Criterion cluster
			Process
1	2	3	Is this planned/structured or organic/evolving learning?
1	2	3	Is this explicit or tacit learning?
1	2	3	Is this compartmentalised or integrated/holistic learning?
1	2	3	Is this individual or collective/collaborative learning?
1	2	3	Are learning outcomes measured or not (and possibly non-measurable)?
1	2	3	Is this teacher/trainer-controlled or learner-centred/negotiated learning?

Formality/ Informality			Criterion cluster
			Location and setting
1	2	3	Is this an explicitly-labelled educational activity or not?
1	2	3	Does this take place in an educational setting or in the community?
1	2	3	Is learning the main and explicit purpose for all involved or not?
1	2	3	Is learning part of a recognised course or not?
1	2	3	Is the learning timeframe fixed/limited or open-ended?



Formality/ Informality			Criterion cluster
			Purposes
1	2	3	Is learning explicitly assessed and accredited or not?
1	2	3	Is assessment of learning summative or formative?
1	2	3	Are learning outcomes transferable/generalisable to other contexts?
1	2	3	Are learning objectives and outcomes externally determined or not?
1	2	3	Does the learning serve the needs of dominant or marginalised groups?
1	2	3	Is access based on explicit criteria or not?
1	2	3	Does learning preserve the status quo or foster resistance/empowerment?
1	2	3	Do agents or authority mediate the learning or is this a case of learner democracy?

Formality/ Informality			Criterion cluster
			Content
1	2	3	Is the professional/social status of the knowledge to be learnt high or low?
1	2	3	Is the knowledge to be acquired propositional or practical in nature?
1	2	3	Is the learning seen as purely cognitive or more 'embodied'/multidimensional?

These 22 clustered criteria, reformulated as tangible questions, are the most advanced attempt by the sector to analyse and position an educational activity or programme in terms of whether it is formal, non-formal or informal across the learning continuum. It remains to be seen to what extent it can capture the essence of non-formal education, which Peter Lauritzen once described as follows: “Participation has to be learned, as does democratic culture and the acceptance of minorities. Learning to be, acquiring life skills, developing an individual quality in tune with social qualifications, defending an interest, advocating specific agendas, and forming coalitions and teams – all make up the curriculum of non-formal learning, the educational approach of the associative movement ever since it appeared as a political subject, be it as *education populaire*, *folkeoplysnik*, workers’

education, community work or any other tradition of out-of-school education” (*The Making of the European Citizen*, *Handbook of Applied Developmental Sciences*, Vol. 3, p. 366).

## -----> Non-formal education and learning practice

For the better part of the 40 years since the creation of the European youth centres, the programme of the two educational centres was dominated by study sessions; international training and debate seminars for young people, requested and co-organised by youth associations, which aim to strengthen transnational European youth structures. These activities were based on a non-formal education methodology, although not referred to as such in the beginning.

In the 1980s, the first training courses were introduced into the programmes of the Council’s youth sector, clearly declared as educational activities, and with some resistance since they seemed to be in conflict with the political aspirations of youth movements and organisations.

In recent years, most notably through increased cooperation with the European Union, the programme priorities shifted towards an increased number of short and long-term training courses for those working in the youth sector in administrative, policy making, political and pedagogic capacities.

## -----> From disputed experiment to undisputed success: long-term training courses

ATTE was by no means the first long-term training course (LTTC), but rather the fruit of years of experimentation with long-term formats in non-formal education, including long-term training courses on intercultural learning. Discussions on this new format started as early as 1988. Some of the subsequent pioneering work was carried through in co-operation with the European Commission, for example, a long-term training course on social inclusion in the mid-1990s. Other well-established centres, such as the *Interkulturelles Zentrum* in Vienna, also developed long-term educational formats to train the trainers. These initiatives, and others like them, were all precursors of ATTE and the long-term training courses to follow, including ACTHRE (*Advanced Compass Training in Human Rights Education*, 2005-2008), TALE (*Trainers for Active Learning in Europe*, 2008-2010) and ENTER! (LTTC on access to social rights for young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, 2009-2011).





7. An integrated approach to intercultural learning. Intercultural learning is one of the foundations of the youth sector's educational philosophy and practice. Intercultural learning should be part of the formal education and training programme and inform the methodology used for the activities.
8. Adequate recruitment and selection of participants. The selection and recruitment of participants should be made in a way that ensures transparency, objectivity and equal opportunities for all those applying.
9. Consistent use of non-formal education principles and approaches. All activities respect and develop the commonly-accepted pedagogical principles of non-formal education, notably in being participant-centred, action-oriented and value-based.
10. Adequate, accessible and timely documentation. All activities must be documented, especially with regard to their results and outcomes, to ensure they are followed up by participants and that they can positively influence other activities and organisations.
11. A thorough and open process of evaluation. An adequate evaluation of the activities is crucial to ensure, among other things, stock-taking of the results, the evaluation of the quality of the learning process and the necessary follow-up.
12. Structurally optimal working conditions and environment. The working conditions and environment in which the activities are held play a crucial role in their success. As a general principle, the success of an activity should never be conditioned by the working conditions and facilities.
13. Adequate institutional support. Each activity should have administrative and institutional support and recognition from the organisation.
14. Visibility, innovation and research. Visibility is the recognition of the value of the activities, a condition for their viability and a guarantee of transparency. Innovation and research ensure that quality will develop and respond to the needs of an ever-changing society and youth scene.

## -----> The second symposium on non-formal education and learning in 2011

The 2011 Symposium *Recognition of Youth Work and Non-Formal Learning*, again with the involvement of representatives of the entire youth sector – and building on its predecessor's achievements, the analytical work of developing descriptive criteria as well as the strategies outlined in the *Pathways 2.0* document – tried to establish common ground for a medium and long-term coordinated strategy towards recognition of youth work and non-formal learning in Europe.

The participants produced a declaration to start a common European political process towards the recognition of youth work and non-formal learning, dubbed the *Strasbourg Process*. This began with discussions and reflections on the current situation and challenges relating to the recognition of youth work and non-formal learning, a common understanding of the milestones which led to the symposium, and a shared vision of what had to be achieved in a mid-term and long-term perspective,

Many people taking part felt the process was long overdue, as the *Study on the links between formal and non-formal education* had already observed in 2003: "For the first time in European educational history, non-formal education steps out of the shadow of marginal relevance for the future of the young generation and into the bright light of the centrality of learning as the most important activity of human beings at present. The application of non-formal education to a much broader public than adults alone, who in the past used non-formal education mainly to compensate for missed educational chances, must not be misunderstood as only one of so many well-intentioned measures in the field of youth welfare and youth policy, but must be understood as part of a development which changes the concept of learning as a human activity, and education as the societal organisation of it. These changes are irreversible and must therefore be analysed with scrutiny to prepare a sound educational policy for the future." (*Du Bois-Raymond, 2003, p. 7*)

The symposium's declaration was addressed to: European institutions, ministries responsible for youth and education, structures concerned with young people at national, regional and local level, youth organisations, youth work practitioners, young people, education providers and the research community. It identifies eight challenges, namely:

1. Making the concept of youth work and non-formal learning or education better understood;
2. Keeping a balance between the various levels of recognition;
3. Risking formalisation of non-formal learning/education;
4. Assuring quality in youth work and in non-formal learning/education;
5. Maintaining and cultivating diversity;
6. Building knowledge;
7. Being dependent on other sectors;
8. Creating partnerships.

In response to these challenges, seven recommendations were developed to frame and guide strategies for the recognition and validation of non-formal education in youth work.

1. Initiating a political process for recognition and validation. The political process for better recognition and validation of youth work and non-formal learning/education in the youth sector should be reinforced by a joint strategy called the *Strasbourg Process*.
2. Reaching out at national, regional and local level. To improve the overall opportunities for young people to make the results of their learning in the youth sector visible, the European debate on the further development of the recognition of non-formal learning in the youth sector should be taken up and reflected at national, regional and, particularly, local level.



3. Making non-formal learning visible. Youth organisations and other providers of youth work should make the learning that is taking place in their programmes visible. To increase trust and credibility, the youth sector should highlight the positive outcome and impact of relevant activities.
4. Supporting a holistic approach to education. Non-formal learning/education has to be acknowledged as a process that gives young people a chance to develop competences that complement those acquired through formal education.
5. Building and providing knowledge. The continuing practical and theoretical development of youth work and of non-formal learning/education in the youth sector is essential for strengthening its capacity and recognition.
6. Reinforcing dialogue with other education fields. Youth work has its place within lifelong learning, thus the dialogue with other educational fields has to be reinforced. That partnership needs to take place between providers of education and ensure learning mobility between different sectors.
7. Building alliances beyond education. Strategic partnerships as well as more efficient communication channels must be built to increase the cooperation and coherence between the youth sector and social and other related fields.

An action plan underpins the seven recommendations, detailing that the Strasbourg Process – described as a political process comparable to the Bologna process in Higher Education – should be based on evidence and address the following:

- Making recognition of youth work and non-formal learning/education a priority of European cooperation in the youth sector, in both the European Union and the Council of Europe;
- Acknowledging the areas of concern that should become the political core of the process;
- Starting work on a legal text to be adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, including the *Strasbourg Process* and inviting the member states of the Council of Europe to encourage the adoption of specific measures to enhance recognition of youth work and non-formal learning/education in the youth sector at national, regional and local level;
- Actively supporting the initiative of elaborating a legal text by sharing expertise and creating links with other relevant European structures, e.g. the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of Regions;
- Developing a Joint European Framework on recognition of youth work and non-formal learning/education in the youth sector;





- Ensuring compatibility of legal structures related to youth work and non-formal learning/education in the youth sector, particularly regarding youth worker qualifications, to increase workers' mobility in the youth sector;
- Supporting development of national and local policies for the recognition of youth work and non-formal learning/education;
- Ensuring monitoring of the *Strasbourg Process*.

The Action Plan also calls for joint activities to foster co-operation between, among others, researchers, policy makers, youth workers and social partners within and beyond the youth sector, and for a European promotional campaign including a European Year on Recognition of Non-formal Learning/Education, signalling exciting times ahead for all of us.

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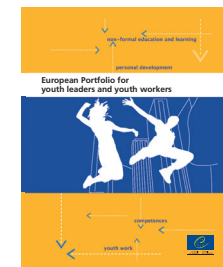
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Manual for facilitators in non-formal education



European Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers

