

## **Continue the Pathway towards Recognition: recognition of non-formal learning in the youth field: the point of view of researchers**

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This workshop is being held under the title 'Continue the *pathway* towards recognition', but I would like to begin by saying that I would always prefer the plural, that is 'pathways'. I asked myself whether perhaps the singular was used in the title to suggest that it is important that people work together to move forward on achieving specific aims, so that energies are not dissipated by going off in different directions. On the other hand we also know very well that there is more than one pathway to recognition - a phrase which you can approach at different levels and in different dimensions. I would prefer to say that there are several relevant pathways; we have to identify them and to work in a coordinated way to pursue them in coherent ways, each contributing from our own corners.

What follows is not the 'Ten Commandments', but two sets of five points that I would like to make. The first five points are of a general nature, in response to the task of giving the point of view of researchers. The second five points are areas of action that may be worth considering in continuing the pathway towards recognition.

In brief digression at the outset, I am sorry to say that I shall be unable to stay for the whole workshop: formal educational institutions and those who work and study in them cannot always be as flexible as we might ideally wish, so that it is extremely difficult to re-arrange one's term-time lecturing schedule once the semester has begun. The main reason for this is because today's university students cannot easily change their daily and weekly time schedules - at least this is so for those studying educational sciences (who will become, or already are, community education workers, youth workers, counsellors, educational administrators and similar). Many of our students take up degree studies in education after having several years work experience, either in educational and social fields or in quite different fields of work; some of them will already have begun degree studies in another subject, some will have completed a degree in a different field altogether. For a range of reasons they will have decided somewhere in the middle of their lives that they want to change their occupation, or perhaps to begin a serious career for the first time. So, many of our students are older than average and many have to juggle family, employment and studies all at once. But those who are younger and do not have family responsibilities are still very likely to have to earn money to finance their studies. Our students' lives are busy and complicated; when they have organised their course schedule for the semester, they usually find it very difficult to shift pieces around if their professor has to go somewhere else at the time when the course is usually held.

I mention all this because it is indicative of what it means to be a young adult today - being young does not stop when you reach the age of majority at 18, after all, which is one reason researchers have begun to use the term 'young adults' to signify a

period of life that stretches across 'youth' and 'adulthood'. Juggling with many unknowns, contingencies and incoherencies is a complex game – constructing a life that puts all the pieces together, at least provisionally, is a major challenge. This has consequences for what young people experience and learn as they are growing into young adulthood – and it therefore has consequences for what young people need to learn and to be able to do in order to construct and manage a life in a very complex society. We should be thinking about the exploding discussions on competence and competences, both as a concept and as lists drawn up by experts and policymakers, from this point of view – from the perspective of the real-life conditions in which young people are positioned and with which they must negotiate and come to terms, hopefully positively and creatively.

### **Take five: researchers' point of view**

#### **1      *Who are the researchers in the first place?***

The request to contribute with the researchers' point of view made me feel rather helpless, because I am not sure who the researchers would be or whose point of view I am supposed to be expressing. I certainly do not know of any collective view of what researchers might think, so I can only really say what I think, which might provide some clues, having worked with lots of other researchers for many years. To be honest, the best answer I can offer with respect to researchers' point of view on the recognition of non-formal learning in the youth field is to reply: 'I draw a blank'. There is no clear group of researchers who address themselves to this issue. There are individual researchers working in many different disciplines in many different kinds of institutions with many different kinds of interests. Sometimes those things all come together, but most of the time they do not. You could surmise that this is an inevitable characteristic of any specialist field as it develops – it takes time to differentiate out into definable thematic sub-fields – as, for example, in the case of European youth research, whose first twenty years or so have been spent establishing the field as such. On the other hand, one would have thought that by now, the topic of non-formal learning would have become a distinct thematic specialism within youth research, rather than just a few individuals who are involved with the topic, but not necessarily as the main focus of their research and writing.

On reflection, I think one reason could be that few youth researchers are specialists in educational science; the majority come from sociology, social psychology and political science – this is also true for me, I am a sociologist who has always worked in education, but in fact most sociology of education is about *formal* education and training settings, processes and outcomes. On the whole, few youth researchers are centrally interested in educational questions at all, so very few are likely to place non-formal learning at the centre of their activities.

It has also proven very difficult to recruit young and upcoming researchers to specialise in this field, because it does not deliver the opportunities and rewards they need to build an academic career. For example, the SCI (Science Citation Index) is becoming an increasingly powerful indicator for evaluating where researchers stand

in relation to each other – it provides a ‘points system’ for publications in specific peer-reviewed journals according to their (apparent) professional prestige, as adjudicated by senior academics. It is not relevant in all disciplines, but it is very important in some (such as psychology) and it is increasingly used in universities and ministries to evaluate individual and institutional performance and quality. These kinds of indicators can make a real difference to whether someone is able to get and keep a job or not – most young researchers are on temporary contracts and must ensure they fulfil a set of formal expectations, typically in competition with their peers, in order to stay in the game. To put it simply and clearly: a journal like *Coyote* is not even on the list of SCI-reputable journals – but nor are the peer-reviewed youth research journals that are the main orientation points for European youth research, whereas a publication with the Council of Europe or the European Commission may count amongst the real specialists, but is meaningless for most standard research assessment exercises, whether individual or institutional.

In effect, young youth researchers who invest in and engage with the field are unlikely to receive professional rewards for doing so; this is a demotivation to stay in the field. In a feasibility study I undertook last year for the youth affairs department of the Austrian Ministry for Health, Family and Youth, analysis of the authorship of reports and articles showed that most people had contributed to only one or two research or writing projects and had then disappeared from the youth research field altogether. My hypothesis is that the situation is similar in most, if not all countries in Europe. With the lack of a clear and stable reference group, with the lack of rewards and prospects, it is difficult to establish a stable professional community of belonging and identity – except amongst those who are already well-established and do not have to worry about the SCI or the next month’s income.

If I reflect on the four years that have passed since the first ‘Pathways’ document, then it is quite correct to identify an enormous dynamism, so much so that it is fully justified to ask whether things are happening so quickly that there is hardly time to digest and understand what is happening and what should now happen. The statement is correct with respect to policy and practice in the field of non-formal learning and its recognition. It is incorrect with respect to research into non-formal learning and its recognition. Little serious research has taken place and no coordinated research as taken place. The immediate reason is that there is little dedicated funding to do so, but the more important point is to ask why the priority attached to this topic is so low that little funding is made available. What lies behind the fact that there is little concern to establish a credible evidence base?

## **2**     *What is it we want to know about?*

To achieve greater recognition for non-formal learning, the first step has to be that one knows the nature of the beast, that is, what it is that requires greater recognition. What is non-formal learning? Recent years have seen considerable progress in constructing definitions of non-formal learning, but we still know very little about non-formal learning processes, that is, what actually happens in non-formal learning settings. Do we really know what we are looking for?

When we begin to study strange cultures, we understand very little of what happens, why it happens and what it means; with time, we begin to understand, to decode the images, the words, the episodes, the ways of doing things. This all takes time, and there are no short-cuts; one can turn to insiders to ask for help and explanations, but as often as not they will scratch their heads and reply that they do not really know, they have never thought about what this or that means and why they do things this way. Understanding non-formal learning is like discovering and exploring a strange culture, in this case, a half-submerged culture of teaching/training and learning that exists both inside and alongside the mainstream of formal education and training. Learning about non-formal learning requires time, systematic application and conceptual analysis – these are, in other words, research-based activities that can produce a knowledge-base, which can then be exchanged and shared with others and can contribute to building a collective knowledge-base about non-formal learning as a distinct category of goal-directed human and social activity.

There will always be someone who is interested to invest time and effort into gaining a particular kind of knowledge, and this is valuable in itself. But the lone non-formal learning researcher is unlikely to be able to produce a knowledge-base of sufficient weight to carry the whole field forward. For non-formal learning to act as a thematic magnet that attracts a large number of researchers, it has to be seen as an important and valuable topic – something that everyone wants to know more about, that is useful to know about, that there are good reasons for knowing about. Until now, this has not been the case, though the development of National Qualification Frameworks in the EU Member States may raise the value attached to understanding both non-formal and informal learning. These frameworks are intended to establish sets of equivalences on the basis of the nature and quality of learning outcomes, whereby the ways in which specific kinds of knowledge and competences have been acquired are not the main factor. The frameworks are also intended to improve the variety and accessibility of pathways and progression through the sectors and levels of education and training systems. This all means that knowing the ‘what, how and why’ of non-formal and informal learning is becoming more important in the sense of their integration into a broad-based system of recognising learning outcomes.

### **3     *The need for a conceptual and theoretical knowledge base***

In our societies, valued and recognised bodies of knowledge display explicit conceptual and theoretical qualities. To some extent, this is a purely normative expectation, that is, knowledge that is tacit and (presents itself as) practical is simply less highly valued, even though it may well be equally as important and useful as codified and theoretical knowledge. However, it can be argued that all knowledge must necessarily encompass conceptual and theoretical qualities, though these may be developed and expressed in different ways, and may remain highly implicit, as in the case of knowing how to act in the everyday.

The field of non-formal learning does not display a strong and explicit conceptual and theoretical base; in contrast, it overflows with an abundance of localised and practical knowledge. This means that the field in itself faces a recognition problem in the research world, whose trading currency is the development and exchange of

explicit, codified knowledge. Those researchers who have addressed themselves to the topic of non-formal learning in the youth sector therefore call on concepts and theories that derive from other specialist areas. The concepts of tacit, implicit and hidden curricula and knowledge derive from workplace learning and from theories of the production and reproduction of (school) knowledge in the sociology of education. Concepts of competence and skill derive from psychological learning theories and from theories of labour process and capital formation. The popular concept of communities of practice derives from cultural anthropological approaches to social learning theories, whereas concepts of innovation and expertise were largely developed in management studies and organisational science.

Indeed, key concepts like these are highly contested, that is, there is little consensus over their definition and implications, not only between disciplines but also within them. Educational scientists, for example, take sharply diverging positions on the meaning and significance of competence. Many who work within a humanistic tradition of educational studies decry the term altogether as a highly mechanistic notion that undermines the essential meaning of education as personal and social development. Such researchers would not be in the least interested in looking at how non-formal learning contributes to (any kind of) competence development amongst young people. The blindness is mutual, however: most people working in the youth sector have heard of John Dewey's pioneering work in establishing a conceptual and theoretical basis for the philosophy and practice of progressive education in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, we are more likely to use the term *critical pedagogy*, which derives from contemporary theories of resistance and change in education – yet I have never seen the work of writers such as Michael Apple, Stanley Aronowitz or Henry Giroux cited in the youth sector with respect to non-formal learning, though they (and many others) have made key contributions to modern educational science.

Non-formal learning in the youth sector is a field that has long since begun to borrow concepts and theories that were developed in other contexts for other purposes, but which has not seriously begun to weld these together and adapt them for its own context and its own purposes. It is also a field that has restricted its vision with respect to where relevant and useful concepts and theories can be found and re-tooled. The time has come to realise that conceptual and theoretical development *inside the field itself* is essential for the field's capacity to improve the quality and reach of its work. It is also the means by which the field can establish its own legitimacy within the broader field of education and training with which it is rapidly developing closer links. Without solid research-based knowledge, which by its nature must entail conceptual and theoretical development, it will remain difficult to achieve greater recognition of non-formal learning in the youth sector.

#### **4**     *Research and practice*

In the past five years or so we have seen the rapid development of a series of portfolio-type instruments for documenting and presenting non-formal and informal learning participation and outcomes, not least those supported through the European Commission/Council of Europe Youth Partnership and the development of

Europass as a differentiated set of components for use throughout Europe. Gradually these instruments are becoming better known and more widely used (although it never fails to surprise me how few of my own students have ever heard of them). At the same time, we know very little about how these instruments are really being used in the everyday, and we know nothing at all about how the different instruments measure up to one another in terms of their respective relevance and effectiveness. In order to know more, targeted systematic studies are mandatory; only then can we begin to understand how best to use and improve these instruments in everyday practice.

Evaluation studies of examples of non-formal educational practice are becoming more widespread, if only because EU programmes increasingly require monitoring and evaluation not only on a summative but also on a formative basis. The ATTE study (the report is available via the Youth Partnership website) is probably the largest and best-known example to date in the youth sector. In educational practice, professional development and quality improvement typically occurs through learning from concrete experiences and examples, resulting in transferable knowledge and competence that can be adapted and applied to new situations and problems. Building up research knowledge typically works in a similar way: individual studies provide examples, which are accumulated into sets of examples from a range of studies, from which potentially transferable interpretations and abstractions are drawn.

The problem in the field of non-formal learning is that we have little accumulation of examples: few studies take place and they do not 'speak' with each other in an active community of research-based discourse. It is the accumulation of examples and their reflection within a scientific community that drives conceptual development and analysis at a level beyond that of the individual thinker or context. In order to strengthen the theoretical foundations of non-formal learning in the youth sector, we need more hands-on examples that are documented and interpreted through research-based monitoring and evaluation studies.

## **5**     *Evidence-based policy and action*

Subscribing to the importance of evidence-based policymaking and professional action is virtually an article of faith in expert circles at European and, increasingly, national levels. One wonders how policy and action could ever have proceeded without evidence, but what the phrase actually means is that systematic, empirically grounded and (within the limits of what is epistemologically possible) objective knowledge should underlie the formulation of (in this case) social and educational principles, measures and practices. There are, of course, other categories of evidence, not least those founded in extant values, norms and beliefs. Quite apart from the debate over whether science (including natural science) is or can ever be genuinely value-neutral, it has to be said that research-based evidence does not ultimately replace decision-making. It can only provide a range of more or less well founded information and insight that lends a rational basis for deciding what to do and how best to do it.

Good quality research-based knowledge is most useful for policy and action when it comprehensively describes and documents situations, processes and outcomes; and when it is able to demonstrate conclusively what is *not* the case and what does *not* work. Research-based knowledge operates through negation, not through confirmation, so it is not necessarily a clear and reliable guide for decision-making, which must focus on knowing how best to respond to given problems and issues. Nevertheless, if research-based knowledge can draw accurate maps and indicate where the crevasses are located, this is actually quite useful for those trying to find their way. The basic point is that evidence-based policy and action requires, above all, evidence, and collecting evidence to draw the maps requires exploration and discovery, that is, research. And as a rule, research requires resources.

Non-formal learning is only one topic amongst many in educational research generally, and in general educational research does not attract large proportions of science budgets, neither at national nor at European level. Research funding at EU level for the humanities and social sciences was first introduced in the mid-1990s, which means that this was the point at which educational research could, in principle, have received funding, with the exception of isolated studies for particular purposes that had been commissioned in preceding years in connection with specific education and training policy questions (such as Erasmus student mobility or transitions between school and work).

The new EU 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Research Programme (FP7), which runs from 2007 – 2013, has a total budget of 50,5b€, which represents a large increase over the previous FP6 budget of 17,5b€. The largest action line under FP7 is ‘Cooperation’, which has a total budget of 32,5b€; it is the action under which multilateral (transnational) research projects can be funded. The Cooperation action covers ten thematic research fields, one of which is for research in the humanities and social sciences. This field has been allocated 623m€ for the seven years of the FP7, which represents just 1,9% of the total Cooperation action budget – and of course a miniscule proportion of the total FP7 budget. The 2008 Work Programme for the humanities and social sciences thematic field runs to 61 narrowly-typed pages; these pages contain a total of just 18 mentions of the words education, training or lifelong learning. None of these mentions occur in a sub-theme title or specific topic; the words all appear in the middle of paragraphs of text whose specific focus lies elsewhere. It is clear that educational research plays a very marginal role in FP7, and this will not change unless there is a radical shift in thematic priorities.

Analysis of the place of educational research in previous EU framework programmes since the mid-1990s shows that in general, about 10% of the available funding for the humanities and social sciences went to projects that could, on a broad definition, be categorised as educational research. To my knowledge, no FP project has ever been funded that has focussed on non-formal learning, with the partial exception of one project under FP6 that was concerned with the biographical development of active participation and associated non-formal learning amongst adults. But this is undoubtedly also due to the fact that few applications for research projects on non-formal learning have ever been submitted, as well as there having been little explicit emphasis given to this topic in the annual work programmes to which potential project applicants orient themselves.

Against this rather dismal picture, it should be added in more positive terms that the new EU Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), which also runs for the period 2007 – 2013, will extend the opportunities for accessing funding for applied and policy-relevant research in education and training, both under the specific actions themselves and through the transversal and complementary measures, which also enable studies to be carried out across education and training sectors. It remains to be seen how these opportunities will be used by those working in the non-formal research field, most particularly in the youth sector. This brings me to the issue of what we should think about doing in coming years.

*One interim remark as a preface to the second five points:* Many of the issues that are being discussed in a routine way at this workshop and which are taken as matters of consensus amongst researchers, policymakers and practitioners would not have been so only a decade ago. It is very important to keep this in the back of our minds. Significant changes in perspectives have certainly taken place, but in the day-to-day the changes are imperceptible; only those who have been working in the field for a very long time can register the extent of change and development that has taken place in these past fifteen years or so.

## **Take five again: continuing the pathway to recognition – action points**

### **1      *Conceptual and theoretical development***

As pointed out earlier, conceptual and theoretical development is essential to for strengthening the capacity and the recognition of non-formal learning as a field of research and practice. Significant development requires a critical mass of information and reflection; a coordinated applied research programme, anchored in the ‘magic triangle’ between research, policy and practice, could deliver that critical mass. This is the route towards the consistent exchange and accumulation that the field needs to build up a solid raft of specialist knowledge that can carry high-quality evidence-driven policymaking. Clearly such a programme must pay attention to designing and conducting policy-relevant research (and this is distinct from policy-driven research, which leaves little room for critique and innovation). It is likely to have to assemble its funding from a variety of sources, but the important strategic point is consciously to design a coordinated programme of studies that relate to each other.

### **2      *Exchange and cooperation across sectors***

Those working in non-formal and informal learning in research, policy and practice must not only communicate more amongst themselves, but also much more across education and training sectors. This means strengthening exchange and cooperation between different kinds of formal, non-formal and informal learning settings that serve different groups of people – that is, for example, not only young people. This is necessary not only to develop the knowledge base, but equally to dismantle the continuing barriers of ignorance and prejudice between formal and non-



formal/informal communities of practice. Communication across boundaries encourages the discovery of commonalities and complementarities, as well as lending impulse to critical reflection and quality improvement in all kinds of learning contexts.

Work placements and exchanges, job shadowing, joint professional development courses, shared curriculum development projects and similar activities are by no means unusual proposals in themselves, but it remains unusual for these activities to take place across occupations, sectors and settings. The EU LLP certainly offers ways of organising and funding such initiatives, and there is no reason why educators and trainers in the non-formal youth sector should not apply for and participate in LLP-projects across a whole range of its actions.

The readiest cross-sectoral links for the youth sector would be with adult education, where established perspectives and practices are in fact quite similar, and work-based learning, for which learning processes as embedded in everyday tasks and problems is a central guiding idea. Higher education is probably the most challenging sector with which to establish common understandings, although there are obviously universities that are very progressive and open-minded with respect to access, pedagogy and evaluating learning outcomes. Here we hope that the M.A. in European Youth Studies, which is currently under development (information is available on the Youth Partnership website), will contribute to a breakthrough in the coming five years or so.

### **3**     *Alliances with other sectors and fields*

Extending the reach of recognition means building alliances and strengthening levels of trust between people working in different sectors of education and training, but also employment; this should be one of the main outcomes more exchange and cooperation between the respective actors. Employers and Social Partners, agencies that validate and accredit courses and qualifications, university admissions tutors – they all belong to the broader field of relevance for those working in non-formal learning in the youth sector. They are direct gatekeepers to education and training opportunities and to employment and careers, but they are also gatekeepers on the pathway to greater social recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

### **4**     *Stocktaking of recognition instruments*

It is time to take stock of the nature, purpose and effectiveness of the recognition instruments that have been developed in the past five years or so. What do these instruments aim to achieve and what do they actually achieve? Who uses them and for what purposes? How are their contents understood and interpreted by different categories of users, including young people themselves? Stocktaking is a relational mapping exercise that can suggest future directions for further development and minimises too many isolated re-inventions of the wheel. The aim should now be to consolidate what has been developed so far and to build a recognised body of tried and tested good, holistic learning assessment practice that can stand its ground over against fragmented and mechanistic assessment technologies.

## 5 *Revitalise quality frameworks*

Quite a lot of pioneering work on defining and characterising quality in non-formal youth education was initiated in the first half of the current decade; after an interlude, interest is rising again, with new links to forge between quality criteria and training methodologies as well as with more complex conceptualisations of learning outcomes. The development of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) together with the (voluntary) development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF; as noted earlier) is strategically of great importance here. It is crucial that the youth sector participates actively in the process of setting up equivalences by clearly specifying and demonstrating the quality of non-formal learning processes and outcomes.

We can register a clear shift of perspective at European level, by which what has been learned and how this can be demonstrated are more relevant than where and how the learning has taken place. This works to the advantage of non-formal and informal learning settings. However, the shift is not necessarily taking place at national level in all countries, and for the most part it is certainly not taking place at institutional level. There is clearly a need for a well-designed information and sensitising initiative in the coming two or three years – a very good road show that offers practical workshops and expert training seminars for gatekeepers and multipliers, so that the potential of non-formal and informal learning is well and truly brought home, not only for enriching the quality of life and personal development but also for the range and quality of learning outcomes highly relevant for living and working in contemporary Europe.

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