

STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMPLOYABILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1 Non-formal education can be understood as an organised educational process that takes place alongside mainstream systems of education and training, and does not typically lead to certification. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis and the individual is usually aware that (s)he is learning.

2 Employability is understood in the context of this study as the relative chance of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment. It depends on fulfilling the requirements of a specific job and also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers.

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Project background

In January 2011 the University of Bath and GHK Consulting were commissioned by the European Youth Forum to carry out a study on the impact of non-formal education¹ in youth organisations on young people's employability² through the development of 'soft skills'. Youth organisations are core providers of non-formal education. The value of this kind of education in youth organisations is not geared only, or even primarily, towards the enhancement of employability. Indeed, it could be said that non-formal education is considered a value of itself in the youth sector. On the whole, however, the impact of non-formal education in youth organisations on employability through the development of soft-skills (which are a vital for employability) is not well understood and deserves further exploration. The research evidence available in this area is mainly anecdotal or case-based, including much valuable work on organisational 'good practices'.

While useful on a variety of fronts, previous research does not provide a comprehensive overview of the contribution of the youth sector to the employability of young people. The study thus contributes to the creation of a better evidence-base in this area and assesses the contribution of youth organisations as educational providers, which is often not sufficiently recognized. This study can thus be situated within wider debates on the recognition of non-formal education and non-formal learning, which have been central to the discussions on lifelong learning (learning 'from the cradle to the grave' that takes place in a variety of contexts: formal, non-formal and informal) that have taken place over the last decade.

Project aim and research questions

The aim of this study was to assess:
"whether the competences and skills obtained through non-formal education activities in youth organisations, contribute to the employability of young people."

In order to fulfil this aim the study addressed five research questions:

- RQ1 What soft-skills and competences, and at what level, are demanded in the labour market?
- RQ2 What soft-skills and competences are developed and at what level through NFE activities in youth organisations?
- RQ3 To what extent are young people aware of those skills and competences and how to present them to employers?
- RQ4 To what extent and under what conditions do employers accept the skills and competences acquired through NFE in youth organisations?
- RQ5 In what other ways does participation in youth organisations enhance employability?

These research questions recognise that in order for the skills and competences developed in youth organisations to contribute to the employability of young people, such skills need to be produced, and they need to meet a demand in the labour market. Young people need to be aware of those skills and how to present them, to effectively use them in recruitment processes, and employers need to accept their legitimacy. The fifth question looks beyond the development of skills, to review the role of involvement in youth organisations in the creation of social capital for young people and the broadening of their career aspirations.

Methodology

In order to answer the above research questions the study gathered information through:

- a literature review;
- the analysis of large-scale secondary datasets, such as the Eurobarometer 75.2 on voluntary work, and various surveys of employers;
- a survey of 245 youth organisations based in over 40 European countries;
- a survey of 1,301 young people;
- a stakeholder workshop (with employers, guidance services and youth organisations); and
- in-depth telephone interviews with employers (all interviewees had direct experience in recruitment, either as director or human resources managers or an executives in recruitment firms; they were based in different countries across Europe).

In terms of the primary data collection for the study, it should be noted that the survey provided quantitative information on most of the research questions, while the workshop and in-depth employer interviews aimed to provide qualitative details in particular in relation to RQ1 and RQ4.

Surveys' Samples

Regarding the **survey of organisations**, respondents were based in over 40 European countries. Spain, Lithuania, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and the UK were the countries most often present in the survey responses, but on the whole there was a good distribution of respondents across countries.

Organisations defined themselves as 'international non-governmental youth organisations (28%)', 'members of a European Youth Forum member organisation'

(21%), 'national non-governmental organisations' (20%), 'national youth councils' (10%) or other type of organisation (22%). They also often defined themselves as educational associations (53%), community-based associations (32%), exchange associations (27%) and/or cultural/artistic associations (20%) – multiple responses were possible.

The organisations surveyed mainly catered for younger age groups, in particular 15 to 25 years of age. They reported to cater for a variety of groups of young people in terms of prior educational attainment, from primary to higher education.

Regarding the **survey of young people**, most respondents (44%) were between 20 and 24 years of age, followed by individuals aged 25-29 (27%). 13% were 30 or over and 16% were below 20 years of age. The survey obtained a wide geographical coverage, as individuals from over 50 nationalities replied to the survey. The greatest percentage of respondents came from Italy (17%), followed by Serbia (10%), Romania (7%), Spain (5%) and Germany (5%).

More than 40% of the sample had been involved in youth organisations' activities for five or more years; 28% for 3 to 5 years, 16% for one or two years and 14% for a year or less. The frequency of involvement in youth organisations' activities of 30% of the sample was three or more times a week, while 35% of the sample was involved once or twice a week. The remainder 35% of the sample reported to be involved in youth organisations less often than once a week.

Findings

This report has presented findings from a review of available sources, analysis of large-scale secondary survey data, two purposely made large surveys (of young people and youth organisations across Europe), a

workshop involving a range of stakeholders and eleven in-depth employer interviews on the impact of non-formal education in youth organisations on young people's employability. A range of conclusions and recommendations can be formulated on the basis of the findings.

There is a match between skills demanded by employers and skills developed in youth organisations.

This study shows that there is a good match between those skills demanded by employers and those produced in the youth sector, with five of the six most frequently demanded soft skills also being amongst those skills developed to a greater extent in youth organisations –the exception being numeracy.

The soft skills that employers most frequently demand include: communication skills, organisational/planning skills, decision-making skills, team working skills, confidence/ autonomy and numeracy. These soft-skills are seen as a key element for successful job performance. Certain personality traits are also found to be important components of these skills and competences, contributing to their development. For instance, personal drive, sense of initiative and pro-activity are traits associated with confidence/autonomy and entrepreneurship.

There is less information regarding the general level to which the above-mentioned skills are required because this will vary by occupation, with 'levels' being understood differently across occupational fields. In spite of this, skills needs forecasts suggest is that the levels of skills required will increase across occupations in the mid-term, compared to current demand.

Higher skill levels are developed by young people with higher involvement in youth organisations

Those young people who report

higher levels of involvement in the youth organisations' activities (in terms of frequency and duration) also report higher levels of skills development. This held for all the skills for which the study gathered data.

Likewise, those who have participated in non-formal education activities in youth organisations **outside their home country**, even for short periods, report higher levels of skills development. Remarkably, this also held for all the skills for which the study gathered data, but the level of development was particularly strong in relation to foreign languages, intercultural communication and leadership skills.

Young people at the higher **levels of qualification** report greater skills development during their involvement with youth organisations (the reported skills gain is around 15% higher for those with higher education compared to those with secondary education). The improvements reported at lower levels of formal educational attainment, however, are still significant. For no skill the reported degree of improvement from involvement in youth organisations was lower than 2.0 on a scale of 5.

Furthermore, those youth organisations who have an **organised educational and assessment plan** for skills development report a higher level of skills improvement among their youth participants.

Young people are aware of the soft skills they develop.

Our results suggest that young people are aware that they developed skills and competences through their involvement with youth organisations, at least when directly asked about this topic. Strategies are in place in youth organisations to stimulate young people's awareness of the skills and competences they develop through their activities; the overwhelming majority of organisations reported that they assess whether young people have improved their skills (most often through peer-feedback)

"at least sometimes", although less than a third of organisations did this "always". Moreover, around 40% of organisations have recognised 'making participants aware of the skills and competences that they develop through their involvement in the youth organisation' an explicit objective of their work. However, for many organisations, ensuring such awareness depends on the specific group of young people or the activity in which young people take part.

Employers are positive toward young people's experience in youth organisations

Employers consider involvement with youth organisations as a positive experience, as they have implicit theories that associate certain experiences with certain skills sets. In fact, youth sector involvement can be seen to have a specialist skill set. Moreover, involvement with youth organisations also provides employers with information regarding an applicant's level of motivation and potential fit with the organisation. Young people also consider that youth sector participation helps them to obtain a job.

The importance employers give to experiences in youth organisations depends on their relationship to the qualifications and experience of the young person, as well as to the demands of the job opening. Thus, for instance, employers' acceptance of these skills in recruitment processes depends on the applicant's stage of involvement with the labour market –being more important for people who have less work experience. It also depends on certain conditions such as the number of experiences, their type (e.g. whether a leadership position has held) and the way in which they are presented (not only on the recognition/certification of the experiences, which has tended to be the main focus of policy action in this area, but also on the establishment of links with particular job openings, as already mentioned).

Young people need to be more confident in presenting the skills and competencies they develop in youth organisations

Despite these findings, according to employers young people do not provide enough information in their applications concerning the skills and competences they have acquired through participation in youth organisations. The employers consulted reported that they often only discover important elements of the engagement in youth organisations during the interview stage. This is, employers believe, because young people frequently consider that recruiters will not value their engagement in youth organisations.

Youth organisations need to "brand" themselves better to employers

Employers also reported being insufficiently aware of 'what's going on' in the youth sector and acknowledged that this may jeopardise the recognition of experiences in youth organisations during recruitment processes. Youth organisations do not often brand themselves well to employers, according to the information gathered during the employer interviews and stakeholder workshop, and they tend to develop networks with young people rather than employers. Moreover, there are instances where the information regarding involvement in youth organisations can be mistrusted, more than information regarding previous professional experience or academic achievement.

Beyond Skills Development: involvement in youth organisations creates networks and connections for young people

Involvement with youth organisations helps to enhance employability through other channels than the development of skills. Notably, it helped a large proportion of our sample of young people to develop networks and connections (social capital) that can aid in obtaining information about employment opportunities as well as in

securing employment. On the whole, such aspects significantly improve young people's chances of getting a job, especially for those people with previously limited levels of social capital.

Similarly, involvement with youth organisations has a strong impact on broadening the range of occupations that young people would consider in the future, providing young people with exposure to new vocations. Involvement also broadens the range of geographical locations where young people would consider taking-up a job.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions the following recommendations are put forward:

On Fostering Awareness and Participation:

- The existence of opportunities for involvement of young people from different ages and qualifications levels should be ensured. This is likely to require further joint work by the youth sector, public bodies and other stakeholders on issues such as financing and recognition, amongst others.

- Young people should be made aware of the additional benefits of sustained involvement in youth organisations. Young people should nevertheless be aware that even short periods of involvement can have significant effects in terms of skills and employability enhancement too.

- The participation of disadvantaged youth in youth organisations should be stimulated further given its value in developing social capital, which can aid to secure employment and bring additional benefits. Particular measures should be taken to reach out to and provide welcoming environments for, inter alia, NEETs, early school leavers and young migrants.

On Transitioning to Employability:

- Given that employers particularly value the involvement in youth organisation of young people with little or no work experience, their participation should be supported as one of the measures that help young people in their transition from education to work.

- There is also a need for greater guidance and coaching for young people so that they are better able to present effectively the skills and competences they develop in the youth sector in job applications and are able to better understand how these skills may be applied in working environments/contribute to the performance of specific job-related tasks. This is a process to which career-guidance services/advisors in schools and universities, the youth sector and public employment services as well as employers and international organisations can contribute. Providing information on 'top tips' to young people would also help in this respect.

- Young people should be made more aware of the value that employers place on the skills and competences developed in youth organisations. This is particularly the case for those individuals with lower educational achievement, who tend to be less aware of the value of this kind of activity for employers and less trained on how to present it.

On Mobility:

- Given the additional benefits of involvement with youth organisations outside the home country, opportunities for involvement with youth organisations abroad should be further supported and enhanced.

- Cost comparisons should be undertaken between the mobility of volunteers and other types of mobility that seek to achieve similar objectives in order to reach value-for-money calculations that can inform future public allocation of funds.

On Greater Recognition:

- Given the political emphasis on flexibility and mobility, the role of the youth sector in these areas should be better recognised at the political level. Involvement with youth organisations has a strong impact on broadening the range of occupations and geographical locations that young people would consider in the future, as well as on developing new vocations.

- Opportunities for youth organisations and employers –as well as private and public employment agencies- to interact should be promoted as a means to raise awareness and bring visibility to the meaning and value of non-formal education in youth organisations, while reinforcing mutual trust. Youth organisations, for instance, should be more regularly engaged in job fairs so as to develop a better understanding of their work amongst employers.

- The development of assessment and educational plans by youth organisations should be stimulated, as their existence is related to higher reported levels of skills development. In this respect, it should also be noted that the degree to which youth organisations assess the skills developed through their activities varies significantly, and that greater uniformity in the sector regarding this aspect should be promoted, as this would contribute to making more young people aware of the skills they develop by means of their involvement with the youth sector.

On Recognition Tools:

- Youth organisations should aim to provide certificates/proofs that detail the nature and outcomes of participation in their non-formal education activities, and should inform young people about the nature of their value. This is primarily related to their formative role (improvement of young people's awareness of the skills and competences they have gained in youth organisations and how to articulate them during a recruitment process), rather than their role as proofs of achievement.

- Taking the above point into account, self-recognition tools that help the learner identify and describe learning outcomes from youth organisations experiences, such as the Youthpass, should be promoted.

- Additionally, and given the frequency of use of the Europass CV by people who have taken part in youth related activities it will also be important to ensure that young people adequately use this tool to reflect their experience with youth organisations and that the tool facilitates the presentation of experiences and competences gained through non-formal education in youth organisations.

On Future Research:

- Continuous monitoring is required regarding current and future labour market skills needs in order to be able to assess the contribution of the youth sector to employability; in such monitoring stronger emphasis should be placed on the analysis of needs in a sectoral basis, and on skills rather than qualifications requirements.

- Further research could directly measure the skills developed by young people through non-formal education in youth organisations by measuring their skills levels before and after their participation in such activities, an approach that could not be adopted within the framework of this study due to resource and time constraints.

