



MLADINSKI
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Policy Paper
YOUTH INFORMATION

■ **Introduction**

ON YOUTH POLICIES

In the past few years, youth policy in Slovenia has entered the socio-political agenda, and has become increasingly important and taken into account. Since 2010 it is also defined in the Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector (ZJIMS)¹ as: “ /.../ a harmonised set of measures of various sectoral public policies with the purpose of promoting and facilitating the integration of youth in the economic, cultural and political life of the community and appropriate support mechanisms for developing youth work and operation of youth organisations, which is carried out in cooperation with autonomous and democratic representatives of youth organisations and professional and other organisations /.../«.

The National Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), the umbrella organisation of national youth organisations and the key partner in the social dialogue in the field of youth, strives for the development of youth policies and, consequently, for the improvement of the situation of young people. With this in mind, MSS adopts policy documents tackling different sectoral policies, which call upon relevant stakeholders to implement the proposed actions. Such documents – the present one, tackling youth information, being one of them – are a basis for MSS to, inter alia, enter into discussions with policy makers, to react to current affairs, to inform young people and the wider public and undertake other measures.

A definition of youth says that one is young until one has reached the desired points of growing up (has moved away from one’s parents, has created a family, has become employed, has finished schooling, etc.), and has thus become autonomous and independent. Youth policies intend to properly regulate these key transitions in the lives of individuals. Through policy papers, MSS wants to form these processes according to the views of young people.

POLICY PAPER »YOUTH INFORMATION«

Information is one of the key elements affecting young people’s path to autonomy and their active participation in society. Youth information includes a variety of (non-commercial) social activities, which provide young people with information from relevant areas:

- education – formal and non-formal education possibilities;
- employment – employment and training possibilities, support for job seekers, employees' rights;
- housing – access to housing, support mechanisms and related rights;
- social protection – rights and mechanisms in this field;

¹ *Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector (ZJIMS)*, Ur. l. RS št. 42/2010. Available (in Slovenian) at <http://www.uradni-list.si/1/content?id=97951> (19 August 2010).

- youth organisations – involvement in structures and activities of organisations in the youth sector and in non-governmental organisations;
- participation – through youth and other non-governmental organisations, in the education system, at the workplace, and inclusion in public decision making through various mechanisms (political parties, running for elections, direct and indirect communication with decision makers);
- youth health;
- volunteering and free time activities.

The purpose of youth information is to raise awareness among young people about their rights and responsibilities, opportunities and possibilities, which will successfully lead to autonomy. Information can be an important contribution to higher youth participation and active citizenship, because it can – in a youth-friendly manner – bring young people closer to decision making processes. A good level of information among young people also has a beneficial impact to lowering the number of socially excluded young people.

DEFINITIONS

Information provision is a process in which the user alone or through the support of an information provider finds information within the given offer, and decides how to use it.²

Counselling in the context of youth information is linked to the act of guidance about where and how to obtain and evaluate the information, depending on the concrete context an individual is in.

Information providers are institutions that provide and/or are responsible for the provision of youth information, as well as providers of support mechanisms. These are: youth organisations and other non-governmental organisations, youth centres, schools, libraries, state and municipality structures, (other) specialised governmental institutions: social centres, the Employment Service of Slovenia, etc; European Union institutions and other international organisations, mass media, etc.

Information channels are defined according to the venue and manner of obtaining information. These channels are: the world wide web with an emphasis on social media and e-mail; classical mass media, particularly TV and periodical press; peer information, which is the most creative and most effective among youth; other individuals that young people communicate with – parents, relatives, youth workers and other experts etc; organised thematic events, gatherings, consultations, etc; events intended for mass information – fairs, festivals, etc.

² Koncept informiranja in svetovanja za mlade v Sloveniji. 2003. Ljubljana: URSM and MISSS.

Young people's critical literacy is their capacity to critically assess the value of given information in the process of information provision, with the aim to extract those pieces from the ocean of available information, which answer the question asked.

Information literacy is one's capacity to determine her/his information needs, to extract, assess and use information from different sources, and is a widespread concept of traditional literacy, because it is linked to the use of any system of symbols, and includes the understanding and creative use of information, which is provided also through modern computer, communication and reproduction technologies. It is developmental and is an element of lifelong learning. We learn to manage it, in order to be able to learn, to explore.³ For a young person to be information literate, one must be able to use information technologies and know the sources and ways of finding and critically assessing information.

Young people need information from the onset of the path towards autonomy. Critical literacy of youth is a key element for achieving independence.

■ *The value of youth information*

1. YOUTH INFORMATION IS DECISIVE TO FASTER ACHIEVE AUTONOMY FASTER

Access to information enables young people to take appropriate choices or decisions on their path towards independent life. Information available in an understandable language and provided through channels that young people mostly use, is of help. On the other hand, lack of information can mean a (too) large risk for social exclusion of individuals. Young people need information from the onset of their process of gaining independence – when choosing high school or graduate education. The choice of a profession that one is interested in and that is in demand in the society, ensures a higher level of social security and personal satisfaction. During education young people need information about opportunities for additional learning in youth and other organisations, about the possibilities to gain international experience and to gain practical experience in their profession. This gives them a comparative advantage in the labour market, a unique system about which young people also need information. One can reach autonomy and social security through employment and through the resolution of the first housing problem – this is how one can really be independent and responsible for one's own life. Information such as the possibilities to obtain means to rent, buy or construct own housing contributes to reaching full independence from the primary family. Due to the amount of available information, critical literacy of youth is key to reaching

³ Novljan, Silva. 2002. Informacijska pismenost. Knjižnica: revija za področje bibliotekarstva in informacijske znanosti 46 (4): 7–24.

independence. It is an important skill in the virtual and globalised world where information abounds but its quality diminishes.

2. INFORMED YOUTH ARE BETTER EQUIPPED TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN THE SOCIETY

»Participation goes hand in hand with the provision of information to young people.«⁴ Being informed positively influences the activation of individuals' potential to take part in societal processes. The state must strive for a well-informed youth, since this is fundamental for young people to take responsible decisions about their profession, education, employment, family, volunteering and participation in civil society organisations, etc. Active young individuals bring desired positive change to the society. In addition, systematically encouraged and recognised participation in the education system, at the workplace, in the local environment, in organisations, etc, brings knowledge and competences that cannot be gained through formal education, but may mean a considerable advantage in education, employment, autonomy and life in general. Correct and youth friendly information motivates young people to be active citizens, and therefore they need to be included in the process of planning and developing communication tools.

Correct and youth friendly information motivates young people to be active citizens. Thus, young people must be included in the process of planning and developing communication tools.

■ ***Key problems in the area of youth information in Slovenia***

Young people in Slovenia lack equal access to information. Information points for youth and information providers are not equally distributed and can mainly be found in major cities, which is an obstacle for young people living in remote areas. At the same time not all households in Slovenia have access to the internet, which prevents young people from obtaining information through this channel.

Young people in Slovenia lack equal access to information; when seeking it they face over-saturation. Here critical literacy is key, as it enables youth to distinguish quality, useful and reliable pieces of information from other ones.

⁴ European Commission. 2001. European Commission White Paper. A New Impetus for European Youth. Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52001DC0681:EN:NOT> (25 August 2011).

When looking for it, young people are over-saturated with information of varied usefulness and quality. Since quality information related to the areas of youth autonomy is available alongside much other information (mostly directly and indirectly commercial in nature), young people need to be **critically literate as a competence to distinguish quality, useful and reliable information** from other pieces of information. This is especially important for younger people, who are more prone to manipulation. We notice that education systems in Slovenia do not provide sufficient quality programmes which would enable young people to become critically literate enough, especially in relation to the internet, with the recurrent problem of safe use, and in relation to publicly available databases.

Youth information as a youth activity is not recognised in Slovenia.

Although the Council of Europe still⁵ recognises the Recommendation R(90)7 from 1990, which entrusted Member States to develop an information system at the national and local level already two decades ago, the development of this area has stalled in Slovenia. The lack of a systemic order is reflected in the **absence of a long-term vision of developing the field of youth information**, of a national coordinating institution, of unified criteria for the functioning of organisations and standards for their work and a lack of support to organisations providing information (in the sense of content, operation and finances).

The meaning of equal access to information for young people is not a priority policy, which **creates inequality among young people** in fulfilling the conditions for their independence. The absence of a unified system in the long term also means higher opportunity costs for the state, while partial information from each separate institution fails to bring the desired outcomes.

The lack of knowledge about youth information in the youth sector leads to disunited practices of information provision and reinforces unequal access to the same quality information.

A youth sector that does not understand youth information does not lead to united practice in information provision and reinforces the unequal access to the same quality information for all youth.

Youth information is known in the world as a particular branch of youth work, for over 40 years.⁶ Nevertheless, despite this long tradition it remains a rather **unknown field of youth work**. Organisations and institutions that practice it face various problems. Non-unified practices take place in the area of information, and they are passed between generations within these organisations. In Slovenia we do **not have the essential system of educating and training information providers**, as it has for example been developed by the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA).

⁵ Council of Europe. 2010. Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)8 of the Committee of Ministers.

⁶ Eryica. 2010. Youth Information Starter Kit, Eryica. Available at http://eryica.org/files/2010_Youth_Information_Starter_Kit_II_en.pdf (1. September 2011).

Despite two adopted concepts of developing a system of youth information, Slovenia still has no unified system of youth information. The first concept of youth information and counselling in Slovenia was elaborated in mid-1990s with the aim to boost the setting up of an information-counselling practice for youth. In 2003 it was complemented by a new national concept, which determined a united information-counselling system with its standards, criteria, work and development methodology. Although the basic foundations and principles of youth information remain valid (provision of information as a condition for participation and active citizenship, taking into account young people's needs, inclusion of youth in the process of information provision...), the 2003 concept does not take account of the changes which had taken place to date in the development of information and communication technologies as well as in the position of young people in the society and their ways of life. **An integral system of youth information must be of interest to every country,** because it works complementarily with all systems that individuals are included in. The education system, the employment system, the health system, civil society with youth and other organisations, etc. can immensely benefit from a well-developed youth information system. Youth information on a specialised issue (health, education, employment, volunteering, mobility, etc.) is often a side element of every individual system, which is or may be inefficient and often not adapted to the young population. Therefore, every country needs a unified youth information system, functioning according to agreed quality standards and reasonably linking all information required to support youth in reaching independence.

Slovenia still has no unified youth information system, which should be of public interest to every country.

The information system must adapt itself to the needs of young people, content- and method-wise; for this to happen, **regular evaluation of information processes and research of young people's needs for information are key.** We can add that youth information is successful when taking place in their environment, and when using tools which are accessible to young people and which young people use most themselves. Inadequate knowledge of young people's needs and habits in searching for information consequently prevents the development of successful and relevant methods for providing youth information; alternatively, these depend on the knowledge of every single provider.

The youth sector in Slovenia does not clearly define who should or who is able to provide youth information in a professional manner.

Youth structures are recognised⁷ as the most appropriate youth information providers but for the majority of them information provision is not their primary field of work. Due to non-unified practice, lack of knowledge about information and lack of appropriate capacity, incoherence appears in providing youth information. For this reason, organisations with appropriate space and trained staff should undertake this work at the local level, while being integrated in European, national and regional networks, in order to always obtain relevant information. Young people should be informed about this in ways that they themselves find appropriate.

Universal and free-of-charge access to information must be put in place. State and local authorities must set up a widespread network of information points for young people and a full-coverage ICT network across the entire territory of Slovenia.

■ **Recommendations**

Conditions for establishment of an effective youth information system as identified in this policy paper must urgently be improved. The National Youth Council of Slovenia strives for the implementation of a range of measures through the state, formal education institutions and employers – all these are the key agents of change in the area.

1. Universal and free-of-charge access to information must be put in place.⁸

State and local authorities are responsible to set up a widespread network of youth information points, and an ICT network with full coverage across the territory of Slovenia. **The Office for Youth** must, **together with local authorities**, establish a network of information points, which will have a balanced presence in all regions. In the medium-term the **ministry responsible for technology** must, together with local authorities, achieve Slovenia's full coverage in an ICT network enabling universal and free-of-charge access to the internet.

2. Youth information must become a unified process.

The Office for Youth, through a new mid-term strategy of youth information development and through short-term action plans, must:

- define youth information as a youth activity and separate it from counselling as an expertise;

⁷ URSM. 2003. Koncept informiranja in svetovanja za mlade v Sloveniji. Ljubljana: URSM in MISSS.

⁸ Universal access to information must also be ensured for young people with fewer opportunities and with special needs, e.g. blind and visually impaired people.

- establish a national youth information instrument (hereinafter: instrument), whose responsibility at the national level will be to set standards and criteria for information provision, ensure the implementation of standards and education of information providers, regularly evaluate the information process and adapt it to the needs of young people, gather information content and »translate« it into a language young people understand, as well as ensure that information reaches the local level, and ensure the implementation of national and EU policies in this field;
- set up a national network of info points with an appropriate regional spread, by linking with municipalities and local organisations;
- prepare an integral and youth-friendly national information-communication system in the form of an internet portal, which will provide a variety of non-commercial information and services as a one-stop-shop;
- Prepare a code of conduct for information providers with defined standards of work and ethical conduct in working with young people.

Information providers must ensure the quality of the information process and content. The formal and non-formal education sectors must develop mechanisms for critical literacy of youth.

The national information network under the responsibility of the **Office for Youth**, maintained and formed by the newly established **youth information instrument** must stand for a group of organisations and an extensive source of information, which should be provided to young people in a youth-friendly manner, through regional and local channels as parts of the network. **Regional and local providers** are responsible for the collection and provision of information relevant for their area, and must offer it to young people. The instrument must also encourage regular evaluation of information provision and must continually research which changes occur among young people in terms of information needs and channels they use to obtain it. The instrument must use such feedback to regularly adapt its methods and techniques, in order for the information always to be in a form attractive to youth.

Youth information must have the status of youth activity, whilst counselling must be a separate expert activity.

3. Providers of youth information must strive for regular improvement of the quality of information and its provision.

Providers of youth information must continuously ensure the quality of their activity and content. The quality assurance process must also give due attention to the »translation« of information from its formal into youth-friendly formats. Information that young people need to reach autonomy must reach them in innovative ways. We hereby emphasise the importance of peer information as one of the most efficient methods of youth information and as a process in which a group of peers exchange experience and knowledge, while simultaneously ensuring mutual help and support within their environment.

4. Permanent education for critical literacy must be ensured.

Both the formal and non-formal education sectors must together develop unified mechanisms for critical literacy of young people, since education systems in Slovenia do not provide sufficient quality programmes to enable youth to become critically literate enough. The goal of this measure is to teach the skill of critical literacy both in formal and non-formal education. This knowledge will ease young people's transition from youth to adulthood under the conditions they set themselves.

5. Permanent education for safe use of the internet must be ensured.

Youth information entails numerous traps, and the protection of young people from abuse by users (of the internet, of social networks, for instance) is the task of the state and local authorities. One should take awareness raising about the traps and about the protection from infringing upon one's privacy as a preventative measure with long-term benefits.

■ **Conclusion**

Holistic regulation of the youth information policy in Slovenia is a necessary step towards youth autonomy and towards young people's active participation in society; consequently, this will lead to sustainable development of the society. Young people are often the most ignored part of the society, often believed not to require special measures. Such attitudes are wrong, particularly due to the importance of life transitions that take place precisely in youth. If we thus desire a healthy, coherent and connected society, with a perspective for the future and as a space where people live happily and productively, youth need to be given proper care.

The National Youth Council of Slovenia strives for the cooperation of all social actors in this process, all those who can in a way contribute to improving the existing circumstances and conditions. We strive to develop a long-term and coherent policy in line with the needs of youth and supporting them on their path to independence. This is how we can make an important impact on the quality of life in Slovenia and on the future of our society.