Youthpass

Youthpass and recognition essays

Recognition needs zero stage:

Convincing ourselves!

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Recognition needs zero stage: Convincing ourselves!

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In order to reach societal recognition of non-formal learning and of youth work, prior to any other actors we first of all need convinced non-formal learning (NFL) practitioners.
The article tackles the concept of 'internal' recognition and the reasons for uncertainties and modest participation of a number of NFL practitioners and providers in the recognition processes. Finally there is a discussion on some of the possible ways to overcome the identified reasons.

What kind of recognition are we talking about?

Recognition of non-formal learning is an extremely wide field. Therefore it can sometimes be unclear what recognition actually is and how one can get involved in this process. There are several ways to look at it, for example:

- Recognition of NFL in the youth field is about recognising the work and learning achievements of young people and those active in youth work and youth organisations. Resolution of Council of Ministers on recognition in the European youth field directly states that the work and achievements of young people "should be given due consideration by employers, formal education and civil society in general" (2006). Greatest benefits however are envisaged for marginalised and underprivileged youth to whom NFL

may be the only accessible educational setting. In the following discussions, it is mostly the recognition of non-formal learning taking place in youth work activities that has been kept in mind.

- Recognition of NFL **in general** is about acquiring new competences under the framework of lifelong learning. As it is explained in A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning - lifelong learning comprises "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective"(2000). And, lifelong learning is "no longer just one aspect of education and training" but there is clear political will for it to be "the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts" (ibid.).

Following the political will expressed in numerous official documents, different tools were developed to facilitate and foster the recognition of NFL for:

- **young people** / e.g. **Youthpass** - the Europe-wide instrument to confirm participation, to describe an activity, and to validate learning experience gained in projects of the 'Youth in Action' programme;
- **youth leaders and youth workers** / e.g. **European Portfolio for Youth Leaders and Youth Workers** - a tool to identify, assess and describe one's own competencies based on European quality standards; and
- **everyone and anyone** / e.g. **ePortfolio and Europortfolio** - a purposeful (digital) selection of evidence demonstrating achievements of a reflective learner or professional.

These instruments mentioned above are essentially based on reflection upon the personal learning process and learning outcomes. Furthermore, all those tools are aiming to strengthen the employability of learners and their active participation, if nowhere else then in their learning process. Finally, they all contribute to raising the profile and visibility of the experiences learners gain and accommodate for the 'transfer' of learning to other domains, such as application for prospective employment or formal education.

To answer the question in the title of this chapter, I would say that we should be talking about 'internal' recognition. It is obvious that the recognition process (re)lies largely on the learners and practitioners. I would argue that learners' and practitioners' attitudes toward recognition shape the overall success and final outcome of the recognition process. Unquestionably, only convinced practitioners can bring the change. Thereby the power and responsibility coming along with the role of an educator gets emphasized even more. The slight variations in the quality of facilitating non-formal learning and presenting the recognition tools and processes as part of it may become the decisive factors for the learner either to disregard the whole recognition process, or to become a multiplier and advocate for the value of NFL. Having all that in mind, it is clear that recognition processes at this stage should essentially focus on advancing practitioners' understanding and trust in the value of recognition of NFL.

Uncertainties about the use of recognition instruments[1]

Why emphasize the need for convinced practitioners? Among other reasons, because from various discussions on the use of recognition instruments it seems that practitioners could be more eager to use them. Some practitioners and learners even perceive those instruments as an additional administrative requirement (ECORYS, 2011). That bluntly reveals the questions of understanding recognition processes among practitioners, clarity about the nature and use of the instrument, transfer of information about recognition instruments from providers of NFL to learners and thus, usefulness of the instrument to the end user…

Furthermore, there is evident lack of consistent understanding and agreement among practitioners of what recognition of NFL means – "Is it really possible to formally show non-formally gained qualifications?" It seems to be the biggest doubt around recognition within practitioners. It is understandable – it is our field that those policy makers want to arrange and organise. What if they formalise it on the way? We may deny it and stay in our safe circles and fight for absolute non-formality. Or, we could join the process and make sure the end results are NOT - formalised.

[1] In order to analyse the use of recognition instruments, especially Youthpass, I have exchanged ideas on this topic with several youth workers and youth leaders whom I know from European Union and South-East Europe. Following paragraphs are inspired by those discussions.

Practitioners seem to share a certain level of disbelief that recognition of NFL can at any time soon directly and substantially contribute to (not employability as broader term, but to actual) employment – "most employers don't know about the Youthpass and other locally developed instruments and therefore don't know how to assess those certificates". The thing about employability is that it seems that everything contributes to it, but not much can be evidenced and proven to have actually contributed to it. What does employability mean anyway? If the end result is not a job then who cares how high on employability scale am I? And finally, would it be enough for an employer to recognise the abilities of a potential employee who presents the learning outcomes, regardless if he or she possesses an actual certificate verifying it?

Many practitioners share a sceptical approach towards the use of recognition and validation instruments in shorter activities (up to ten days): "I don't see the point – we all agree that acquiring knowledge, skills and values takes time – how can we really assess what is acquired after a few days of an educational activity that is not necessarily a part of a longer-term educational process?". This could be the core question. Are we disregarding the concept of recognition instruments because we don't believe they are flexible enough to cover the variety of educational activities and acquired competences? Can't we think of ways to make distinction when assessing learning outcomes for shorter and longer term activities?

"Stage zero"

It is wrong to suggest that all practitioners know what recognition is about, that they are all in favour and are actively involving themselves in the process. As practitioners, we tend to think that our only problem is those outsiders that just don't understand or don't want to understand the great things we are developing and achieving. However, it might be that WE are a part of the problem. In the ever-lasting debate on how to recognise non-formal

learning without formalising it, there is an element of doubt and uncertainty louring around the providers of NFL opportunities. This is potentially the biggest obstacle we are facing in this process. Never mind the political will, the instruments developed, the information shared and the training activities organised – it seems we are not convinced. Many of us are not convinced and are not putting recognition of NFL in direct practice in our work, but we still expect recognition from others.

Hopefully, WE can be the solution, as well. I believe that there is a need for, what I would call, a **'stage zero'.** 'Stage zero' should include targeted efforts to convince the sceptics among us and reinforce our motivation to actively take on board the recognition issue. This stage should be about informing, awareness raising and educating practitioners on the recognition – its value, tools and desired end-results. It should be about re-evaluating and re-inventing all process, as well. At the end, it will lead to reaching the critical level of 'internal' recognition of NFL that makes possible the desired external and societal recognition.

'Stage zero' should result in convinced and motivated practitioners pursuing their own development and career path by active use of recognition tools. Also the employability/employment aspect of recognition would be important to consider in this 'stage zero'. It is especially the employment markets for NFL practitioners that should be aware of and thus more responsive to the recognition instruments of NFL. The starting point for creating such responsive markets is the employers in the youth field. Societal recognition of youth work and non-formal learning can't be achieved without convinced (and recognised) practitioners and their (equally convinced) employers. Therefore we need to observe more advertisements for youth workers and trainers clearly recognising the value of NFL and at least giving it the same importance as to formal education certificates. Let's make sure that future recruitments for competent NFL practitioners have this inscribed in the process, starting with the wording of the advertisement and finishing with the interview.

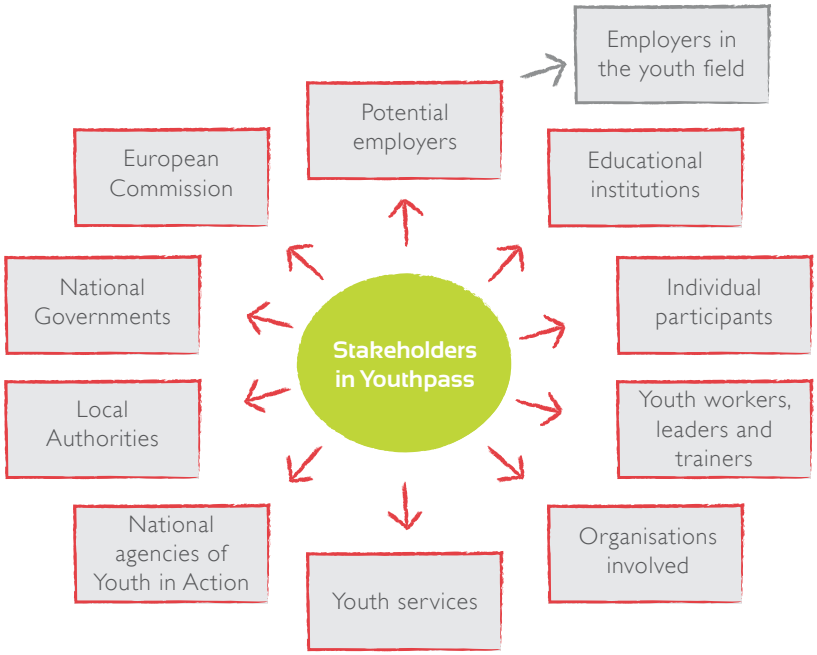


Figure 1.[2] Stakeholders involved in the Youthpass development and implementation process

Therefore, the 'stage zero' should include employers in the process in a more substantial way. The employers can contribute to the development of recognition instruments and the means of its implementation. They can help identify more tangible ways of evaluating and proving the causality between NFL, acquired competence and employment. This brings us also to the need to finalize the processes of occupational profiling and recognition of youth workers, youth leaders and other practitioners in the youth field. Therefore, the above shown figure describing stakeholders of the Youthpass

[2] Amended figure from the Youthpass Guide (2009).

implementation is amended to reflect the need to integrate at least one more specific sub-group. Employers in the youth field – those that are creating the market for NFL practitioners and can revise the market to fully integrate recognition of NFL. They are crucial for taking the 'recognition of NFL' beyond 'increasing employability' and to 'increasing employment'. It could be worth identifying further sub-groups of employers that are specifically looking for NFL practitioners and young people with sets of competences that are most probably developed through specific youth work programs (e.g. Youth in Action Programme). But, that could be one of the activities in the 'stage zero'.

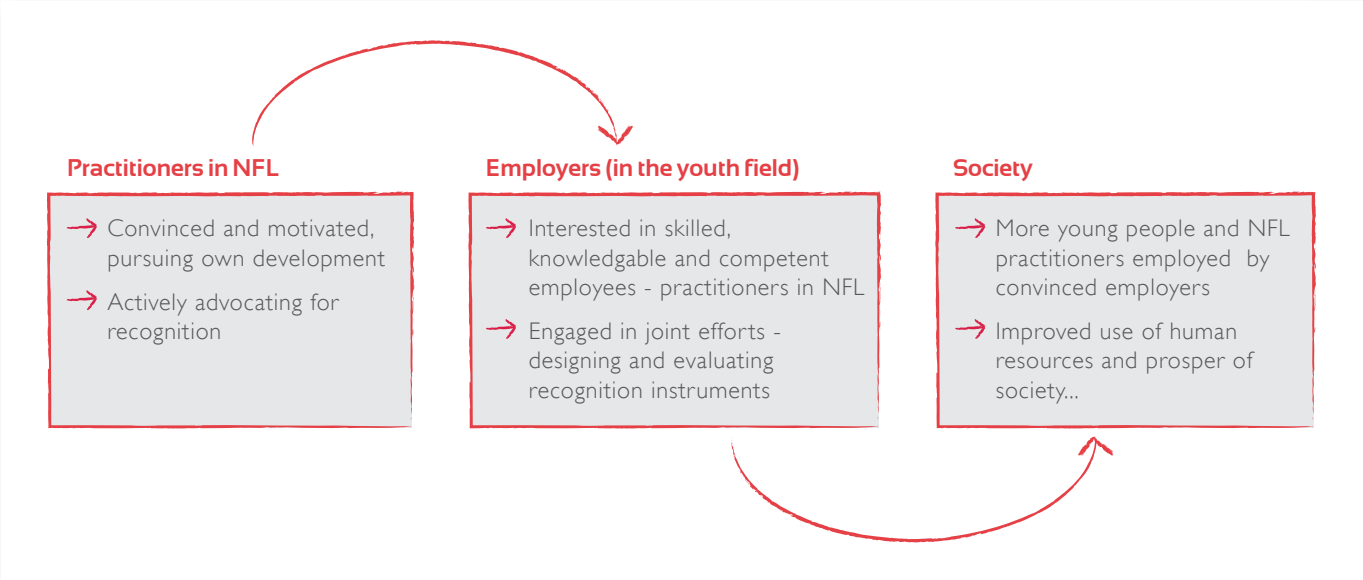
In conclusion, 'stage zero' could include some of the following actions:

- **Discussing recognition** – NFL practitioners should be in constant dialogue about recognition and not only among themselves but also with employers. Those exchanges can be critical for further developments in this field.
- **Using examples of achievements.** For sure, recognition instruments such as Youthpass have made wonders for some youth. Let's hear those stories and give them the deserved recognition.
- **Bringing fresh blood of convinced and competent educators to take some leading roles in the process.** Younger practitioners also need to feel that their competences and work are valuable and recognised.
- **Involving sceptics in the design of some of the 'stage zero' activities** – who can better address some of the difficult questions than the people having them. Let's hear the arguments, let's analyse the solutions, let's find the ways to improve the practitioners' trust in the recognition tools and the end results.
- **Involving employers in the design and evaluation of the recognition instruments.** Furthermore, identify specific subgroups and have them engaged directly at all stages. Clearly they are interested in the end result and clearly they can contribute to the process.
- **Facilitate exchanges between teachers and NFL practitioners.** NFE is based on the development of competences and learning outcomes are the foundations of NFE programs. This is something that formal education is only now learning to do. Instead of being afraid that NFE will be formalised,

or that formal education will use and integrate all of NFE, we can confidently and competently cooperate – for the benefit of youth.

- **Discuss quality assurance models for NFE programs in relation to recognition of NFL.** It is evident that not every subject can be covered in short periods of time and with the same quality. It is also clear that not everyone understands this. Therefore it is essential to explore various ways of identifying evidence of learning outcomes for both shorter and longer term activities, as well as to discuss the quality of design of NFE programs and ways they are carried out.
- **Introduce the complexity of causal links between stakeholders and processes of recognition, as presented in the following diagram[3].**

[3] Diagram developed by the author with specific employers in mind – employers in the youth field



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The essay 'Recognition needs zero stage: Convincing ourselves' discusses the internal obstacles to a better recognition of youth work. Some youth workers and youth leaders may feel uncertain about the use of recognition instruments why? A few possible ways to overcome these reasons have been proposed.

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