

Evaluating knowledge

Getting the most from informal learning and non-formal education

Informal learning and non-formal education take place in youth organisations, youth projects and organised youth exchanges. The National Board for Youth Affairs has been commissioned to put forward methods for enhancing the value of informal learning and non-formal education and the skills that these promote.

Formal, non-formal and informal education

- **Education** is defined as knowledge conveyed from a specific systematisation and with a clear intention.
- **Formal education** is organised education within the framework of the formal education system, for example in pre-school, compulsory school and college/university.
- **Non-formal education** is organised education outside the formal education system, e.g. through labour market activities, popular education or activities within NGOs.
- **Informal learning** (often referred to as **informal education**) has no clear education situation and is an unconscious learning process outside organised education, e.g. through NGOs, the family and daily experience.

Validation

Validation can be defined as an evaluation of knowledge or abilities acquired formally or informally, through education, employment, or everyday life experiences. It can also be expressed as a measurement or recognition of actual competence. Validation means identifying actual competence through a structured assessment and being able to describe it in a way that is acceptable to the education system and to working life.

The general discussion

The present discussion on informal learning, non-formal education and validation is vivid. It takes place on many levels and involves several actors. The discussion in Sweden has centred mainly on the relationship to adult education, labour market projects and popular education. A number of actors are currently active in the area of validation. Validation in Sweden has mostly been in relation to upper-secondary level and adult-education course syllabuses, the exception being vocational testing for immigrants.

In Europe the discussion on non-formal education and validation has intensified during the 1990s. As in Sweden, it is mostly concerned with the validation of vocational competence, vocational training and adult education. However, work is currently under way within the European Commission and the Council of Europe to produce policy documents relating to non-formal education from a youth perspective.

Examples of validation methods

Validation of Foreign Vocational Qualifications, of the Youth Guarantee, (labour-market measures for youngsters aged 20-24), and the Norwegian Competence reform

are examples of state validation initiatives. As yet these proposals contain no concrete examples of how the measurement methods are to be devised.

Some NGOs have drawn up proposals for validation models. These include the Finnish Study Book for leisure activity, the European Youth Forum, UCO, Local Youth Clubs in Malmö and SUS, Stockholm Local Youth Clubs. It is not possible to translate any of these models directly into a new model for the validation of informal learning and non-formal education.

There are, however, a number of interesting perspectives, important issues and methods that offer exciting possibilities to consider.

The Norwegian Competence reform has a broad understanding of knowledge and the concept of voluntary involvement plus the chance to include experiences acquired non-formally and informally in admission to higher education. The validation of Foreign Vocational Qualifications proposes a competence test measuring the ability to work with others, to communicate and to solve problems; and the validation of the Youth Guarantee proposes a certificate.

The Study Book is an interesting example of how NGOs have taken the initiative for validation. Through the Study Book young people can choose to create a personal record of their involvement in organisational activities. There are similarities here to the proposed creation of a qualification portfolio. The competence and skills identified by the European Youth Forum, UCO and SUS are worth considering further as a basis for validation of informal learning and non-formal education.

NGO activities create social capital

NGO activities are an important arena for the development of democratic thinking. By taking part, the members acquire many of the skills considered essential for democracy, such as the ability to work with others and to communicate, plus respect for and tolerance of others. These qualities and virtues can also be collected under the term social capital. NGO activities create extensive social capital through informal learning and non-formal education. Representatives from NGOs emphasise the importance of this.

Informal learning and non-formal education take place to a large extent within NGO activities. Many NGOs run extensive non-formal training within the framework of their activities. There is no actual knowledge of how widespread this training is. There are, however, a large number of different approaches to education among the NGOs. With some organisations training is a major part of the activities, while others offer training only when it is needed. There are also examples of NGOs that are dissatisfied with the current system of education and are trying to challenge this and find new forms. Another variant is NGOs that now organise training within the formal education system. Most NGOs consider non-formal education and informal learning to be extremely important but have no methods for validating knowledge and skills.

Validation, both positive and negative

The difficult and decisive question is whether the qualifications acquired through informal learning and non-formal education should be validated and, if so, how. Many actors in society seem to agree on the need for validation of informal learning and non-formal education, but the motives vary. The most interesting question is: on whose behalf should this knowledge be validated?

For the *individual*, validation can be both positive and negative. Formal validation can, according to some NGO representatives, take away the enjoyment and the voluntary element in the activity. The organisation simply becomes a place where one is assessed, graded and given a certificate. There are, however, others who think that it is desirable to find methods of validation, since young people can then include the competence they have acquired as part of their total package of qualifications. They consider it to be a deficiency that the knowledge young people receive through their engagement in NGOs is not evaluated and cannot be counted in relation to the formal education system or when applying for a job.

For the *organisations*, validation of informal learning and non-formal education can mean an increase in status, and recognition of the importance of NGO activities in society. But a public system of validation can also mean greater elitism and competition with the commitment of the members being measured and evaluated. Such a development could lead to certain parties withdrawing from organisational activities since they can no longer run them on their own terms.

For *society*, validation of abilities acquired through NGO activities can be seen as a benefit and an effective utilisation of society's resources. The problem is to find methods of measuring and evaluating competence.

Conclusions

The informal learning and non-formal education carried out through NGOs are important to society. Involvement in organisational activities, non-formal education and informal learning all help to create democratic citizens with skills such as the ability to work with others, solve problems and communicate, citizens with the ability to show tolerance and respect for others etc. These are capabilities that must be highlighted and recognised. The status of those involved in NGOs should be raised. Organisational experience should be seen as a qualification in a wide range of circumstances, e.g. when applying for a job or a course of study.

Validation of informal learning and non-formal education involves both positive and negative aspects. Since there are negative aspects, both for the individual and for the organisations, the National Board for Youth Affairs are hesitant about recommending that forms of validation be developed through state initiative. A public validation of this kind could lead to organisations and their members feeling forced to belong to a system that they don't actually want. It will be difficult for an NGO not to use validation if all the others are using the method. None of the NGOs have expressed any strong, unequivocal desire that such a system should be created.

A general improvement in the status of NGO activities should be a priority for the future. Another feasible future main concern would be to support NGOs that initiate validation methods. A model such as the Study Book in Finland is also an interesting prospect for Sweden. The important thing is that validation should take place on the initiative of the organisations and that it should be a voluntary undertaking for all involved.