

Youthpass – more than a certificate of participation

*Youthpass is the instrument of validation and recognition for the **Youth in Action Programme**. Through the Youthpass certificate, the European Commission ensures that the learning experience gained through the Youth in Action Programme is recognised as an educational experience and a period of non-formal learning.*

Valuing participation in the Youth in Action programme

With over 60,000 people participating directly each year, the programme has something to show for itself as it builds on nearly 20 years of experience since the original Youth for Europe Programme was established. Up until now there has been no overall strategy to help people show what they have put into or gained from their experiences in it. Some exchange and training course organisers have provided simple certificates of participation and most participants in the European Voluntary Service have received a certificate and an annex describing what they did. This is where Youthpass comes in. The mechanisms have been constructed after much thought, research, consultation and testing across the countries of the European Union to see what would be effective.

A whole range of people and institutions, (we call them “stakeholders”), could potentially be interested in the outcomes of implementing Youthpass - especially if we see it as part of the whole process of valuing participation in the programme and giving more recognition to the participants.

To produce change in any field is not easy. Youthpass is BIG change. To produce change in the educational field, you need a critical mass of opinion, research, practice and reflection and this is also true in the field of youth nonformal education across Europe. As Luc De Brabandere explains in *The Forgotten Half of Change*¹, for change to be effective, we need to change twice! We need to change reality within a given system and we need to change the perception of that reality.

Let's look at the reality:

- *there are an increasing number of initiatives to capture, document, and confirm the non-formal learning of young people and those who work with them – and Youthpass takes its place with them;*
- *the seemingly eternal debate about quality is beginning to bear fruit, looking at both the quality of specific non-formal learning opportunities and the relevance of the content and skills gained interested in non-formal education and learning”.*

Excitement mounts when we look at perceptions:

- *the value of non-formal learning in youth work is starting to get the codified or formal recognition it deserves*
- *individual young people have the chance to look at and demonstrate their competences and learning in new ways;*

- *practitioners can take new pride in their work*

Let's get explicit!

Putting Youthpass into operation within the different opportunities available in the Youth in Action Programme will have a lot of effects and it can be argued that the main one will be to motivate participants and their support workers to be EXPLICIT about what, how, when and why they have been learning through their experiences. And this will be new for many people. And it will be a challenge. And as people meet this challenge, they will see that they can build on much of what has become good practice in the Programme and within youth work in general over the past few years.

Recent research² has shown that non-formal learning practitioners have a tendency to base their work on a lot of shared assumptions about what is the right way to organise and facilitate learning in such contexts. But they rarely talk about the how's and why's openly, not because they have something to hide, but just because that is the way things are done, "naturally".

What we are discovering, increasingly, is that the quality of learning improves when people are more open about both learning processes and learning goals. This means here that all participants in Youth in Action activities will be encouraged to

- *define their learning goals at the beginning of their involvement review how they are learning during the process and adjust their learning goals as necessary*
- *reflect on their learning individually and with others after the activity has finished, and*
- *ensure that they have a written record, not only of their participation, but also of their learning outcomes.*

As we can see, using Youthpass is definitely more than just issuing a pretty certificate. It means looking at each project as a learning opportunity and paying attention to this aspect from preparation, through to running and then evaluating what we do.

These processes will use the Key competences for Lifelong Learning as their major reference point...

Potential pioneers

As far as we know, Youthpass is the first system set up using the Key competences as the basis for defining and recognising learning within a European programme. In this sense, we are all pioneers, everyone involved in the Programme!

For Youthpass to be exploited successfully, all of us need to have a good understanding of the Key competences and how they relate to youth work practice. An incomplete list of "us" must include at least these people: participants, youth workers and leaders, administrators in national agencies, mentors of volunteers, and trainers. This introduction will demand quite a lot of effort in the early stages as we get used to the terminology and to the suggested ways of implementing the system.

Certainly, there are those who are worried about extra workload and extra demands being imposed on them. In answer to this, during the test phases we have run so far, the participants have been overwhelmingly positive and excited about trying to run with the new experience and give voice to their evaluations. In this way, we have received much constructive criticism about how to implement Youthpass, from technical suggestions about improving internet compatibility through to guidance on feedback procedures within training courses. This publication shows how this is a continuing learning experience even for the people responsible for conceiving of and approving the way the system will work in the new programme.

Ripples, waves, quarks, strangeness and charm

What range of effects will the introduction of Youthpass cause? We don't know exactly! During discussions in the preparation stages, some have mentioned that Youthpass might well be described as "a sea change" in international youth work. A "sea change" is an expression people use when they talk of a development which alters a situation quite fundamentally. You have to change direction, you have to re-examine what you do. In the words of Max Dupree: "We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are".

In our increasingly complex societies it is not possible to predict all the effects of our actions or changes – many of us know of the chaos theory which tells us that a butterfly falling from the sky in Chile can lead to an earthquake on the other side of the world! But maybe we can take the opportunity here to gaze into our crystal ball:

Possible effects of Youthpass

- improved quality of Youth in Action projects
- influence on national systems of recognition
- easier entry into the labour market for participants
- more support for nonformal learning
- deeper reflection by youth work practitioners
- better links with the formal education sector
- increased recognition of (international)youth work