



European Youth Forum
contribution to the
public consultation on
“Schools for the 21st Century”

Introduction

Independently established by youth organisations, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) is made up of more than 90 National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, which are federations of youth organisations in themselves. It brings together tens of millions of young people from all over Europe, organised in order to represent their common interests.

The European Youth Forum welcomes the European Commission consultation on Schools for the 21st Century. Bringing together youth organisations - the main providers of Non-formal education (NFE) - and being a democratic platform for youth organisations from all over Europe aimed at voicing their opinions, the YFJ has the responsibility to put forward the opinions of its members by contributing to this consultation.

Thinking anew about Education

At the beginning of the 21st century, European society faces many challenges, including that of transforming itself from an industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy, interacting with a globalised world. This change is increasingly recognised by the citizens of the European Union, and is being promoted by the European Union through the Lisbon Strategy and the Education and Training 2010 as a direct tool for achieving the objectives set. The EU commitment in relation to this transformation has also been reaffirmed by the European Youth Pact.

As an organisation which sees social aspects as being as important as economic ones, the YFJ must stress that despite the Lisbon commitments, the debate on knowledge in the EU should not only be tied to the economic level, nor should it focus solely on the, albeit important, issue of employment. The debate goes beyond these issues and should involve the whole of society and concentrate on the opportunities open to citizens for their self-development.

A knowledge society requires life-long and life-wide learning from its citizens: after leaving school in the evenings, and after graduating; in youth organisations; at home; in the work place, etc. Becoming a life-long and life-wide learner demands that people take responsibility for their own learning.

To be able to meet these demands and at the same time fully benefit from the opportunities life-long and life-wide learning can offer, an effective educational system is needed to support everyone. The current formal education (FE) system in Europe is struggling with these new demands. This often leads to people finishing formal education without being equipped with the necessary skills and attitudes for a smooth transition into employment and further life. The formal educational system has been successful in meeting certain challenges in these past years and many non-formal education methodologies and more dynamic curricula have already been introduced.

However Formal Education should not be expected to take over the role of Non-Formal Education and informal learning. Non-formal education providers and youth organisations, in particular, are much better equipped to provide specific learning experiences due to their long-term involvement in developing this type of learning and their voluntary and self-organised nature. They are continuous providers of high quality education especially in competences such as learning to learn, social and civic competence, initiative-taking and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression.

The Working Paper is correct in its assessment that school reforms should be comprehensive and based on long-term policy planning. That is among the main reasons why we need to approach education in a holistic way. Formal Education and schools need to open-up to other educational actors and with them form a single integrated educational sphere. This implies a paradigm shift and a new way of thinking about education. The word education should no longer conjure up in people's minds only pictures of school. Instead Non-Formal Education and informal learning should spontaneously spring to mind whenever someone hears about education.

This new vision of education does not imply a complete overhaul of schools, as this might destroy a lot of good practice and, indeed, the central idea of formal education. Based on the work and experience of youth organisations, the European Youth Forum wishes rather, to propose three practical reforms that will lead to all educational actors coming together to form this integrated educational sphere. These three reforms are linked and mutually reinforcing.

1. Framing education in a global world and seeing it as a tool to prepare young people for their role as European and global citizens.
2. Making citizens and especially young people, owners of their education and protagonists of educational reforms.

A. The complementariness of Non-Formal Education¹ and Schools:

Young people spend a lot of their time in school, however they often feel that what they do in school is not connected to other parts of their lives: their involvement in youth organisations, sports clubs, their friends and social circles. At the same time they do not often see those other activities as learning processes and learning opportunities. This is due to both the limited recognition of NFE and informal learning as well as the distance of formal education from other parts of young peoples' lives. Formal education is explicitly not a life-long learning experience as it usually stops at the age of 16 to 25. Nevertheless it should aim to provide learners with the skills and will to be curious and learn throughout their lives.

This gap in the perception between formal education and the rest of one's life needs to disappear, both in practice, and in the minds of students, educators, and society in general. The Staff Working Paper recognises this gap and asks the right questions, "to what extent [will] schools...need to reorganise to help pupils acquire this kind of skill, both inside and outside 'lessons'". However to really achieve comprehensive reforms and long term policy planning, the question should be, 'how can schools work with other educational actors to help pupils become life long learners with the skills for a knowledge economy?'

The European Youth Forum proposes to answer this question by bridging the gap between NFE and FE in the following ways:

- **Time for NFE:** education and learning should not be limited to 32 hours a week in formal education, but should be a continuous process. Every educational sphere should carefully assess the amount of time individual pupils need for their education. Within the educational sphere all actors should focus on what they do best. Formal education should consider the best ways of educating, by balancing which subjects are best approached in a formal style to those that are better left to other approaches or cooperation with other actors.

These other approaches, Non-Formal Education and informal learning, can be allocated specific time in the curriculum. School should respect students' free time by limiting homework and extra tasks. There should be time for young people to engage in youth organisations, sport, art, music and to spend time with their friends. Students should also have time to use the educational resources of the school: the ICT, the library, informal contacts with teachers, students' clubs, student unions etc.

¹ By 'non-formal education', the YFJ refers to an organised educational process which takes place alongside mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to certification. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis and as a result, the individual takes an active role in the learning process. Unlike *informal education* where learning happens less consciously, the individual is usually aware of the fact that he/she is learning through non-formal education. (0618-03 YFJ Position Paper)

Using the resources of a school, for informal learning about issues that students care about, positions learning in a more positive light and helps to create a positive environment that supports the learning. In such an environment, students can feel involved in school life, take much more initiative, and take over part of the responsibility for their education from the school.

- **NFE at school:** Turning schools into real centres for learning and education requires time for NFE but also sharing the educational facilities with NFE providers.

The Working Paper correctly points out that: '[T]he extended use of school premises for after-school activities or as an educational resource for the whole community can help promote lifelong learning opportunities.' A lot of resources are indeed invested in school buildings and equipment. This investment should be used to its fullest extent by sharing it with other educational providers. For example, youth organisations could be provided with offices in schools and use of school facilities. Having to provide only one infrastructure for all educational providers would not only lower costs for society but will provide recognition for non-formal education and build effective bridges between the different educational actors. These bridges, and the ensuing communication between the various educational providers, will enable schools to better assess the real competences of pupils.

NFE approaches can also be further introduced in schools in an additional way. An evolution that has already begun, but which needs to be further encouraged, is to make the learner more central and to change the power relations between the learner and institution, through the application of Non-Formal Education methods. In particular, by centring the whole learning process around the learners' needs and promoting curiosity and the will to explore through 'learning by doing'. This paradigm shift is vital for creating a mindset open to Life Long and Life Wide Learning.

Both time and space for Non-formal education and its providers will bring schools closer to the communities they serve.

- **Flexible and Learning Teachers:** The school should become the centre of the educational sphere in which all types of learning come together. This implies that all actors including teachers should be encouraged to switch between different educational fields (Formal Education, Non-Formal Education, adult education, etc). Teacher training needs to be improved to reflect the commitment of teachers to their Life Long and Life Wide Learning. Therefore teachers should be continuously trained in the use and development of inclusive and dynamic teaching methods. They should, at the same time, be encouraged to take part in international mobility programmes.

Teachers play a key role in the education of young people. They act as role models and can be a great example of self evaluation and reflection. Teacher training is already changing and focuses more on teachers developing themselves as guides to learning processes. This evolution needs to be further supported and encouraged.

These measures have the added value of making a teacher's career much more open and diverse, and are a way to tackle the problem of retaining experienced teachers - a problem endured by many Member States and also raised in the Working Paper.

The European Youth Forum believes that teachers are indeed 'key agents for change', they play a key and extremely worthwhile role in society, which needs to be further recognised. The dedication of teachers to their pupils also deserves praise.

The proposed educational sphere, with all educational actors working together, is not only a structure but also serves a joint purpose: to realise quality education. This quality needs two core components: evaluation and social inclusion.

- **A school reflecting upon change:** The introduction to the Work paper refers to the development of a culture of evaluation within schools which is a much needed reform. A good model for this reform would be the culture of evaluation that already exists in many Non-Formal Education providers and especially youth organisations, as feedback and evaluation is an integral part of the work of youth organisations. Their experience can be used a source of inspiration when Formal Education and Non-Formal Education work together.

Feedback is a condition for student learning; learning best occurs in settings that frequently provide learners with feedback about their learning as they are trying to learn. Self-evaluation and reflection play a key role in this: learners that are aware of how they learn, why they learn, and what works best for them, are able to perform much better and experience ownership over their learning and are thus much more motivated. Feedback from their peers and self evaluation are indispensable for acquiring the key competence of learning to learn.

A culture of evaluation, reflection and feedback should be present at all levels of the school, and among all actors. This includes the active involvement of students in the evaluation of educational institutions and teachers.

- **Schools for Social Inclusion:** The second quality aspect of education that needs full attention is the role of education and schools as actors promoting social inclusion. To be effective in the promotion of social inclusion, structures need to change but also specific measures taken.

The European Youth Forum sees the following issues as crucial inclusion challenges for which urgent measures need to be taken:

The Working Paper refers to a gap in learning achievements - girls perform less well in maths and science than boys, and there are other significant **gender disparities**: boys perform increasingly less well than girls in reading; and boys drop out of school more frequently than girls. To counter this trend, gender sensitive co-education should be promoted, that allows girls and boys to break free of stereotypes. A truly gender neutral education relies on self-reflection by teachers on the principles and values they may carry, allowing them to counter trends that increase gaps and thus encourage all children to realise greater achievements. Further requirements are: the creation of both an educational approach limiting gender specificity and of an environment equally supportive for all pupils; research into how curricula and textbooks etc. are reinforcing existing gender roles; and the introduction of anti-harassment policies in schools. Teachers have a key-role to play and educators should themselves be trained using gender-sensitive curricula, and methods, and be given specific training on gender-sensitivity.

Students with **migrant backgrounds** do often perform at levels significantly lower than their native peers. A special focus should be placed on integration and language support for children with migrant backgrounds. This includes support for the learning of an individual's mother tongue, as well as support to comprehend and master the language of instruction.

In an **inclusive** school there must be early support for children with disabilities and learning difficulties and extra support given to teaching staff working with children with behavioural particularities.

Schools also play an essential role in combating **child poverty**; they need to start breaking cycles of poverty early, through tailored support including financial support and quality childcare if needed, for single and working parents. Formal education, including activities taking place outside the classroom, should be free of charge.

“There is evidence that the **segregation** of children into separate schools based on ability before the age of 13 ('tracking') exacerbates differences in educational attainment due to social background, and leads to even more inequitable outcomes in terms of student and school performance.” To halt this segregation, an alternative approach could be envisaged: one where the ‘best students’ and the ‘slowest students’ are not separated in ‘special classes’ by level but giving the students that have reached the furthest the role of peer educators thereby acting as resource persons assisting and supporting the other students. The European Youth Forum sees this segregation as a serious issue and realises that it is not only a threat to achieving the Lisbon objectives but to a sustainable development of European societies as a whole.

B. Global citizens

Young people are growing up in a globalised world and are often at the forefront of dealing with the global issues e.g. by forming global communities on the internet, by joining global actions such as Live Aid, by studying or working abroad or simply by being aware of their responsibility as citizens. However, many young people also simultaneously feel overwhelmed by global processes and do not feel that they have a say in how this interlinked world is developing.

A worrying fact is that there is a digital and literacy divide among young people, often coinciding with a gender divide, which widens the gap and excludes many young people from participating in this global community as a result of a lack of access to the internet or as a result of not being able to speak English or other widely used languages.

Education needs to prepare young people for their role in the global society. This education should consciously place itself in the global space by asking what the relevance of its objectives are, and of its content, in a global context.

Global Education² aims at fostering European citizenship in a global context as European citizens are also citizens of the world. It should furthermore provide young people with the skills and attitudes that enable them to live in an environmentally sustainable way.

Global education, due to its diverse nature, needs to be included in the curriculum but cannot just be limited to one course. Global education needs to be embedded in the school culture and be transversally included in all relevant subjects. Global education is participatory and requires time and space for student-led initiatives. The European Youth Forum therefore proposes that the integration of Global Education into the educational sphere should be done in the following way:

- **Transversal inclusion in all relevant subjects**, thus bringing an intercultural perspective into history, languages etc. Ensure that history teaching assumes a global perspective and not simply a national focus.
- **A specific citizenship course** should be included as an essential part of the curriculum. This course could provide a background and framework for the work done in other courses or projects. It would also include education on Human rights.

² According to the definition of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, 'Global education is education that opens people's eyes to the realities of the world, and awakens them to bring about a world of greater justice, equity and human rights for all. Global Education is understood to encompass Development Education, Human Rights Education, Education for Sustainability, Education for Peace and Conflict Prevention and Intercultural Education - the global dimensions of Education for Citizenship'.

- **Learning by doing** should be the key method of participatory global citizenship education. Schools should provide time, space and recognition for projects initiated by young people themselves, including projects in which pupils go out and educate others in society, and through which pupils can act as peer-educators and multipliers. This fosters a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and so directly contributes to the development of the Key Competences for Life Long Learning. Entrepreneurship has a positive impact on economic growth and through providing space for personal initiative and learning by doing schools can contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe (Question 3 of the Working Paper)
- **First hand experience of another culture.** One of the most important intercultural learning experiences is spending time abroad and being immersed in a different culture. The *Comenius* Individual Pupil Mobility action is a step in the right direction but still does not provide the possibility for many young people to study abroad. We believe that all young people should be provided a possibility to take part in an exchange while being in secondary education, as this can be a defining experience in one's lifetime.
- **Approaching the learner as a whole person.** Formal education too often puts too much emphasis on the importance of knowledge and developing the rational side of people. To acquire the key competences of 'social and civic competence' and 'social and cultural awareness' more sides of one's personality have to have the chance to develop. NFE providers such as youth organisations have been working on exactly this for a long time and can provide cognitive, behavioural, social and emotional education.
For example, handling conflict, a situation that happens very often in everyone's life, is a skill that surpasses the rational level. To solve a conflict, a good understanding of what causes certain emotions and how they can be correctly communicated, is needed.
- **A sensitivity of the diversity of our own societies.** Global Education aims to make people aware of different cultural realities both in other parts of the world and in our own societies. This should not only help students become aware of their multicultural societies but also should adapt schools systems to new realities of diversity. One serious problem is that students who have a different cultural background than the mainstream culture and which is not sufficiently or accurately represented in the traditional curriculum are more likely to remain low achievers; so curricular reforms need to pay attention to the growing diversification of our society and should not reinforce stereotypes but support inclusion.

C. Young people as owners of their education:

Young people sometimes feel alienated from their education. Too often they equal education with schooling. A truly life-long and life-wide education requires people who want to learn because they feel it is important for themselves and because they feel ownership over their educational path.

It is often noted that young people from youth organisations do have that feeling of ownership, precisely because they are in control of the process and can make educational choices etc.

Giving ownership and co-decision power to pupils is sometimes portrayed as giving a “carte blanche” to pupils. Co-decision does not lead to students having absolute say over the school in the same way as being a citizen in a democracy doesn’t mean that the wish of the citizen is always taken into account. Ownership and participation supports young people in understanding the limits of individuals when living together with other individuals, that there are sometimes limits to what is possible and that accepting these limits does not mean giving up on questioning the system.

The Youth Forum proposes to give young people a real sense of ownership over their own education in the following way:

- **Youth as co-managers of the educational institutions:** In order to foster this feeling of ownership in Formal Education, it is essential to have students as co-managers of the educational institution. Much progress has been made in introducing student councils throughout Europe, however there is still a lot of room for improvement: some schools still don’t allow student councils and in some countries student councils have only symbolic value. To really be co-managing a school, student councils should have a say over budgets and the curricula, and their establishment must be guaranteed through education legislation.

The Austrian and Italian systems serve as good examples of student councils co-managing budgets and curricula.

This involvement of students is a factor that is sadly missing from point 2.8 in the Working Paper, ‘helping school communities to develop’. Sharing responsibility between students, parents and school councils will lead to school communities of which young people can feel part.

- **A Charter on student rights:** These educational reforms imply a rethinking of the position of all actors. The Youth Forum believes that the position of students should be based on rights and formalised in a charter of rights. The work done by OBESSU - the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions and ESIB - National Unions of Students in Europe, members of the European Youth Forum, on developing a charter of rights should be acknowledged and built upon.

- **The right to leave and re-enter formal education:** Almost 15% of 18-24 year olds leave school prematurely.³ Many young people feel that formal education does not provide them with what they need at that moment, and consequently 'drop-out'. However, very few educational systems allow those young people to re-enter Formal Education or support them in their search for alternative educational pathways. This has a big impact on young people, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they have much weaker support networks.

An educational sphere should allow young people to take different educational paths with the possibility of multiple entry and exit points. A modular system could facilitate these paths and provide the possibility of taking a pause in formal education, of trying vocational training or Non-Formal Education, and of re-integrating into Formal Education with recognition of the learning done in other fields. Competencies acquired through professional activities or civic activities, such as work in youth organisations, should be recognised in the form of credits. Recognition of prior learning achievements should be seen as a fair tool for encouraging students and enabling them to start at their level of competence.

At the same time, the reasons/nature for these students leaving formal education early should be investigated, to ensure that leaving school early is an option and not a forced choice.

- **Education crossing borders:** The Staff Working Paper poses the question of how school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe. One of the key answers is a better cross-border recognition of different educational achievements (within Formal Education, mobility programmes or Non-Formal Education and youth work) and a better comparability of national systems or even within national systems. The European Qualifications Framework, as a translation tool for national qualifications systems, can be a useful way of implementing this, provided that it gives due recognition to the specificities of Non-Formal Education.

Conclusion:

Our society is facing many challenges, of which globalisation bears perhaps the biggest impact. To meet these challenges, and to use the opportunities they present, we need citizens that are at ease in a knowledge economy and in a rapidly changing society; that have been given the skills and attitudes by their education to deal cautiously but fearlessly with it; citizens that are learning every day and everywhere; that feel ownership over their education; and that see themselves as global citizens.

If the European Union and its Member States are serious about their commitment to changing into a knowledge society, and about the demand that their citizens become Life-Long and Life-Wide learners, the Member

³ Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in Education and Training SEC (2006) 639

States need to rework educational systems to give citizens the necessary Life-Long and Life-Wide Learning support.

These new education systems need to put learners at the centre, not institutions. As our society moves towards a network-based society, our school systems cannot remain in their traditionally rigid structures. The schools in Europe cannot meet this challenge alone. Other educational actors need to interact with them and form an educational sphere in which formal education, non-formal education and informal learning are seen as three sides of an education triangle. This implies the active involvement of non-formal education providers, such as youth organisations, that provide a positive example of how young people can manage their education and that of their peers.

This cooperation by educational providers should be structural but also focused on content, and on a joint vision of the major issues to be tackled: the two main priorities are the development of a culture of quality and reflection and of education as an actor for social inclusion.

Developing a culture of evaluation and feedback means going beyond simply awarding grades to pupils, but rather, making them aware of their learning and making them able to steer their learning. Education has worked in the past as an actor for social inclusion but some old forms of exclusion still exist with new ones having arisen. Many disadvantaged groups in our society see their disadvantage not lessened and sometimes even worsened by education: this reveals a need for drastic reform with specific measures targeted at underperforming groups.

Education needs to provide all people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to be active citizens in a globalised world. Serious implementation of Global Education can open the windows of schools to the world.

This reform process is for young people and students and should be co-managed by them. A mere consultation process is not sufficient. Student organisations and National Youth Councils should be involved at the national level.

The European Union can play a crucial role in this reform, but education policy should be decided on the level closest to the pupils. The role of the EU should therefore be a facilitating role, bringing together and provoking debate among Member States and key stakeholders.

The 21st century goes on beyond 2010, and a communication by the European Commission should be much more visionary. The European Youth Forum hopes that, when asked in 2027 to reflect on education, the title of the Commission communication will not be 'Schools for the 21st century' but 'Educational Centres in the 21st Century.'