



School Students View-Why Is Non-Formal Education And Informal Learning Important To Us?

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Abstract

OBESSU (The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions) is a platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. It brings together member and observer organisations from more than 25 European countries. All member organisations are independent, national, representative and democratic school student organisations. As such school student unions and organisations are without doubt, best examples of non-formal education whilst directly focusing to a population that is still in formal education and by this enhance formal education by varieties of non-formal learning activities and opportunities. As OBESSU we stand together to represent the views of the school students in Europe towards the different educational institutions and platforms and to improve the conditions of the secondary school students in Europe to promote greater solidarity, cooperation and understanding among the school students.

OBESSU organises between four and seven conferences a year, along with working group meetings, training courses and joint programmes with other stakeholders. These intercultural experiences are all peer-led and use many different non-formal education (NFE) and informal learning (IF) methods. This experience alongside the expertise of our member organisation means we are perfectly placed as experts within the non-formal education and informal learning sphere.

The Importance Of Non-Formal And Informal Learning

OBESSU strongly believes that positive experiences such those in NFE are essential to an individual's experience of school and school environment. NFE is to be seen as best in creating knowledge, skills together with attitude; rather than swallowing readymade facts and figures together with opinions but without any kind of evaluation.

It is immanent that within NFE school student develop the skills vital to active and aware citizenship with successful employment, including team work, democratic practice, or foreign language skills.

Bearing in mind Europe is increasingly competing on a global scale, we must ensure that our education can enable all young people to take up the skills for a changing work place. In the last ten years, youth unemployment in the EU 27 was around double that of the total population. [1]

Once youth are placed into employment setting, they are now expected to have varieties of jobs in their lifetimes. This means that alongside traditional knowledge based education, we must provide our students with the skills of adaptability, initiative and critical reflection that can only come through NFE.

The Role Of Formal Education In Non-Formal Learning And Informal Learning

Formal education can be considered as the best environment to encourage and develop NFE opportunities; as such formal education must encourage NFE and IL at every turn. The success of NFE relies largely on the willingness and cooperation of the participant individually. Thus, it is essential that school students must want to take part and, for the most part, enjoy themselves in both the formal and non-formal aspects of school. To achieve this, students must feel safe and secure



within their schools in order to participate fully [2], this community environment can be created using a variety of NFE methods such as peer mentoring programmes, creative clubs, student councils etc.

The school building is vital to enabling NFE to take place and must be used as open spaces that act as resource centres for young people to take part in NFE and informal learning. A sense of ownership must be created to allow school students to initiate projects. Funding must be available that school students can apply for directly and use to initiate NFE and IL experiences. OBESSU welcome programmes such as Youth in Action that allow school students and young people to take control of their learning using NFE methods.

Teachers and staff must be trained to enable (not teach!) non-formal education. The importance of teachers in encouraging informal learning is paramount. Teachers must create lessons that are ready for questioning; new ideas and that provoke thoughts that continue informally outside of the classroom. Informal discussion should be encouraged and teachers should become actively involved in after school clubs and be available to students throughout the day. In order for this to happen, funding must be made available, so that teachers are able to use their time in the implementation of NFE and IFL.

OBESSU supports:

- School buildings that create NFE and IFL opportunities through innovative design and giving ownership to the school students. Eg. Student groups should be able to book school rooms for their own use at times suitable for them.
- Teachers must be given full initial training and continuous professional development (CPD) in how to enable NFE and IFL.
- Teachers must be paid for any time they spend initiating or coordinating NFE opportunities. This must be timetabled into their workload.
- Schools and formal education environments must be spaces where all young people feel physically, emotionally and intellectually safe.

Validation of non-formal education

A main problem within NFE is that it is still seen as of lesser importance in comparison to academic education. This is primarily due to the lack of validation of NFE from formal education and the lack of recognition of NFE in the wider society (employers, universities etc). OBESSU therefore supports a Europe wide system of validation of NFE and as such, encourages systems like Euro pass. In order to successfully implement this, there must also be a change in formal education's attitude to evaluation and assessment. In contrast to current policy direction in several European countries (UK, France etc) approaches like coursework, portfolios or performances must be given equal weighting to traditional written exams.

Universities must also start to recognise NFE alongside academic achievements in their recruitment and acceptance of new students. A European system of NFE validation would also be of huge benefit to employers, who currently have to rely on the student to firstly recognise the importance of their NFE and then to eloquently explain their experiences on an application form or statement of motivation.

OBESSU is clear however that NFE should only act as an enhancement to formal education for school students. As we have seen with Vocational education and training (VET), there is a danger of schools pushing students into different educational qualifications in order to boost their exam league table results and to hide "statistics". NFE should never become a substitute for formal education; they both benefit each other and should work together simultaneously.

OBESSU supports:

- A Europe wide system of the validation of NFE, which sees NFE experiences as of equal value to formal education.
- Assessment and evaluation of education to take into account methods which employ skills learnt in NFE (performance, portfolio work etc).



Conclusion

Non-formal education is an integral part of the learning experience; here we learn skills not only vital for employability but also to flourish in the general society- democracy, social skills, responsibility.

In the 21st century, young people must leave formal education with a love of learning. We must create Lifelong learners, who expect new and different educational opportunities throughout their lifetimes. Encouraging and enabling NFE from a young age is the best way we can do this.

OBESSU believes that the benefit and power of non-formal education and informal learning is onus on student participation and leadership. Education must create this as an organic process, where students are encouraged to organise themselves and create new opportunities.

Case studies

Below are several examples of exciting NFE opportunities that OBESSU supports or finds interesting.

- 1st European School Student Summer Camp
- This OBESSU project, financed by Youth in Action was held in Konjic, Bosnia and Herzegovina. A weeklong event that looked at Global Education from a school student perspective, it used only NFE and IL methods. The mixture of organised activities and free time was a great success, as this allowed discussion to flow from session to session and to continue once sessions were finished.
- Creative Campaigning, Iceland
- A project coordinated by OBESSU member organisations SiF (Iceland) and UNSS (Serbia). This was a chance for European school students to create exciting and innovative campaigns, along with discussing the issues that come with campaigning. Equally important was the chance to work as a intercultural team, discover what issues affect other European young people and use different language skills.

References

[1] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

[2] "Safe, healthy and sustainable educational environments": Designing the schools of tomorrow; OBESSU 6th European School Students' Convention final resolution