The Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Education through the Open Education Resource Tool of the NON-FOR-LESL Project

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Abstract

The article is a study based on the implementation of the innovative method and open education resource (OER) tool promoted by the NON-FOR-LESL project. The NON-FOR-LESL European project aims at preventing early school leaving through the recognition of non-formal learning and the production of a tool for the validation of the skills acquired through non-formal educational paths. The article is focused on the new innovative multidimensional method – My Key- www.my-key.online,- an OER validation tool which can be used along with the more traditional/official assessment procedures. My Key is a multi-dimensional electronic evaluation tool, an 'e-portfolio' where students can display their work in and out of school supported by reliable evidence. This is connected to school subjects and transversal competences. In doing so the students have to reflect on their own learning, their progress as well as their personal, academic and career development planning. The study also centres on the way the method was implemented in Romania: its main beneficiaries, steps, feedback received from the participants and conclusions drawn after the completion of the project.
Key words: non-formal learning, OER validation tool, students

1. Introduction: "MyKey" tool

The aim of the NON-FOR-LESL (Non-formal learning can prevent early school leaving) partnership (Germany, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Romania) has been to provide a high quality, innovative platform named "MyKey" to high school students, in order to help them take advantage of the skills gained outside school and validate their non-formal and informal learning [1] . It has aimed at addressing school failure by preventing early school leaving (ESL) in a holistic and innovative way. Nowadays students are more and more interested in non-formal/informal learning activities which encourage the development of key competences necessary in our society but which are not considered top priorities by schools [2] . The "MyKey" tool enables students to identify and validate the key competences they gained in onformal and informal activities. Students are engaged in extracurricular activities that help them develop personal and interpersonal team skills, employment skills (commitment, teamwork, leadership, time management), active citizenship skills, or enterprise and entrepreneurship skills, which school does not take into account [2]. The tool was initially expected to motivate students at risk; however, the tool seems to create opportunities for all students to reflect on their own learning as well as on their personal, academic and career development planning

The tool has a lot of potential and thanks to its novelty and accessibility appeals to students, and therefore it can be used successfully in schools. In addition, teachers and parents find it a valuable tool as it reveals information not only about students' strengths and interests but also about potential barriers to their learning. By getting to know their students better teachers can build solid relationships with them and develop effective inclusive classroom learning or career orientation programmes.

By creating their learner profiles, students develop a deeper understanding of who they are as learners and are empowered to have a say in their own development. They learn how to valorise the experiences and knowledge gained outside school and how to relate them to school and their career plans. In addition, the tool can be seen as an online version of the extracurricular activities section of a CV, which students need whenever they have to apply for a national or international project managed by their school or is required when applying for a European university [1]

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2. The implementation of MyKey tool

The tool was promoted and introduced to several schools before its implementation. Partners chose schools according to students' needs and teachers' open-mindedness and interest. In Romania the recruitment of students for the implementation project stage stemmed from their teachers' contradictory opinions about them, which varied from profound, intelligent and committed to superficial, apathetic and impossible to get a positive reaction from. Most of the teachers described them as difficult to work with not for disciplinary reasons but due to students' lack of response and commitment. The results of the observations, interviews and questionnaires during the implementation stage showed that the students were very shy and lacked self-confidence. For instance, it took students some time to feel confident about posting their informal activities because they thought that whatever they had done was not worth considering [2]

The steps of the implementation of MyKey tool were clearly outlined before its debut:

promoting the NON-FOR-LESL ideas and principles to students and teachers and

getting students and teachers familiar with the key competences, MyKey tool and its benefits;

identifying the group of students, their needs and problems;

assigning a group of teachers responsible for MyKey tool implementation in the school/ training of teachers;

meetings with students to guide them on how to create their portfolio.

took another 1-2 hours for students and teachers to create their school profile. After that, students and teachers had to create their own accounts and start using MyKey tool.

students' sign up: they created a username and a password;

- students created their avatar (personalised features);
- identified their extracurricular activities and matched them to the Key competences;
- students uploaded the evidence of their extracurricular activities (diplomas, certificates, albums, photos, teachers' references);
- checked/monitored students completing their e-portfolio (done through an exchange of emails to guide, advise and support students' work on MyKey tool);
- students revised their e-portfolio;
- teachers' final review of students' work;
- issuing/downloading the certificates;
- certificate event - celebrating the completion of the e-portfolio and inviting other schools to join in [1]

Once the validation has been undertaken by the assigned teachers, the skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning are officially recognized. Students can now receive the certificate attesting the acquisition of those skills. The certificates represent a kind of "parallel curriculum vitae" – presenting and validating students' competences in art, digital technology, communication, etc. – to be used while finding a job, applying for an internship, etc. But, most of all, thanks to the recognition of those skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, students who meet main difficulties in formal learning feel their extracurricular activities are valued and as a result their motivation not to leave school increases. The recognition, indeed, of skills acquired through extracurricular activities has a crucial effect on students' self-esteem and, hence, on students' motivation [3] .

The students using the tool had to go through the following steps:

- choose an extra-curricular activity belonging to non-formal or informal learning;
- link the activity chosen with a specific key competence;
- link the activity chosen with a specific "formal" school subject;
- upload evidence (certificate, link, video, audio, photos) attesting the competences acquired.

After undertaking those steps, the recognition of informal learning – through reference to the key competences – was possible. The assigned teachers involved in the NON-FOR-LESL project had to carry out their validation activity directly on the tool. They were asked to:

- check and validate the link done by the students between the extracurricular activity and one of the 8 key competences;
- check and validate the link done by the students between the extracurricular activity and the "formal" school subject;
- check and evaluate the certificates uploaded by the students as proof of the fact that they effectively carried out the mentioned extracurricular activity. The evaluation process should be consistent with the procedure defined by each school: the range goes from simply accepting or denying the uploaded link to a 3-step evaluation model (self-evaluation, presentation, evaluation by teachers) [3]

3. Benefits

The NON-FOR-LESL project raised teachers', parents' and students' awareness about the role that informal and non-formal education can play in students' development. As a result, the school involved has diversified the extracurricular activities they offer students.

The school also consideres the tool as an additional evaluation tool which could help them decide on the most suitable candidates when the school has more enrolment applications than available places in projects, programmes etc.

The NON-FOR-LESL project helped students create their complete profile incorporating skills acquired at school but also skills gained through extracurricular activities; undoubtedly this led to students' increased self-esteem, self- confidence, improvement in students' general performance and a remarkably positive change in students' self-image [2] .

By creating their learner profile, the students learned how to valorise the experiences and knowledge gained outside school and how to relate them to school and their career plans. The tool encouraged students to reflect on their own learning, as well as their personal, academic and career development planning (some students told us that they had realized what profession was best suited for them) Students were empowered to reflect on their own learning, to identify their progress as well on their personal, academic and career development planning. MyKey tool increased students' self-esteem/ self-confidence/ self-discovery ("My activities have been taken into consideration. I feel more appreciated by my colleagues and teachers," –S.A.,student; "I feel better at school. It is good to see that what you do (even if it is in your free time) counts a lot,"- M.D.,student [3] .

Teachers held that NON-FOR-LESL project is a valuable tool as it reveals information about students' strengths and weaknesses in learning. Needless to say, this enabled them to get to know their students better and as a result, their relationships improved. They all agreed that the tool was an incensitive they used to become better teachers now that they had understood their students'needs.

The teachers noticed that the tool enhanced students' motivation and empowered them to actively participate in the official assessment procedures of their performance by using existing knowledge gained in extra-curricular activities 'It gives students the unique feeling of satisfaction that everybody needs when learning' -M.V., teacher. 'It is closely related to students' personal talents and interests relying on intrinsic motivation',-M.V.,teacher.

The project provided opportunities for investing in the student-teacher relationship, thus creating a positive atmosphere, a new school climate and a new culture in which teachers viewed students as active citizens with talents and skills ("I can say that teachers and students, by using the MyKey tool, get to know each other better which in turn lead to closer relationships"- L.M., teacher). "Teachers' professional development was stimulated as they were engaged in the implementation of an innovative project which promotes the EC initiatives and aims to raise the quality of education provided by introducing the need for validating non-formal learning, thus changing the educational paradigm from a learning for learning to a learning for doing model, thereby preparing students for their role in the labour market" [3].

4. Conclusions

All participants in the project implementation were of the opinion that MyKey tool is very clear and easy to use and has an attractive design. All students said that MyKey was a great experience, because it made them realize what they had learned and what competences they had acquired. They also noticed a significant increase in their self-esteem ("My activities have been taken into consideration. I feel more appreciated by my colleagues and teachers," student) and self-confidence."Their self-esteem and confidence was enriched and they felt proud of their achievements." The Certificate can be developed into an additional formal evidence of students' extra-curricular performance. "I'll use MyKey for creating an additional CV and that it is a useful addition in order to apply for internships," student.

Participants agreed that non-formal and informal learning has a high impact on students' general knowledge, development and image and must therefore be taken into consideration: "such gains must be validated, recognized and introduced in their school report" [3] . In conclusion, despite its short duration the implementation of the project was very successfully and offered the project team good food for thought for future enterprises.

References

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