



# **POLICY PAPER ON QUALITY EDUCATION**

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## Executive summary

Quality education is without doubt one of the key topics of interest for society because of its impact on all dimensions of the life of a person and in turn, in the life of a community as a whole. However, it is a complex concept and changes according to the conditions and expectations of the context in which it operates. There is therefore no one understanding of quality agreed upon by all stakeholders or supported by empirical research. The European Youth Forum proposes in this paper a rights and principle-based definition to be adapted to the context and the given system in which education is provided; it is therefore not a word-for-word definition of what quality education means.

The European Youth Forum affirms that education is a human right and that all young people are entitled to a quality education. This policy paper defines the driving principles behind our call for quality education, and further describes how they should be reflected in the key elements of the educational practice, namely the learner, educators and providers, the structures and environment, the process, and the content and outcomes. The framework provided here to address quality education reflects a humanist approach to education, that sees the education process in its entirety and acknowledges the unique value and the complementarity between formal education, non-formal education and informal learning and of the different providers involved. It reflects our understanding of education as a lifelong and life-wide learning process where the learner plays a fundamental role.

In spite of some efforts made to reform education by governments and institutions at national, European and global levels, we still see an overall gap in providing a holistic approach to the matter. The current global economic crisis in today's societies has led to an increasing economisation of education, creating a "value for money" approach to the notion of quality while focusing on the outputs of education, rather than on the learning process and its conditions. On the other hand, in recent years, education policy-making has focused on quantitative aspects, concentrating on quality education strategies on early school leaving and access to higher education. In addition, quality analysis and improvement efforts have tended to turn to specific aspects of education, often in isolation from one another. This fragmented vision of education has often led to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory remedial interventions, with uneven and imbalanced improvements of aspects of quality.

The European Youth Forum proposes to refocus the debate on quality education beyond specific issues of access and quantitative outcomes of education. We call for a comprehensive approach that addresses the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of education and their links to the context in which it operates. We firmly believe that education needs to be viewed not as the sum of sub-systems but as a whole process of preparing and supporting young people's development throughout life. All types of learning at all points in life have an accumulative value for the learner and are interlinked. As a result, the quality of each educational experience will have an impact in the learning journey of the person. Quality education must therefore be a priority from the early years of a child, as well as in the transition from childhood to adulthood; as a continuation of the process, adult education requires equal attention. The recognition of the unique contribution of each of these fields is therefore essential to reinforce their complementarity and foster cooperation among educational providers between sectors as well as countries.

Quality education concerns everyone in society and it is essential that each of us play a role in contributing to such quality. Investing in quality education is a long-term return on investment for society at large, both in economic as well as social and cultural terms. Quality education contributes to improving the quality of life of an individual and the development of society as a whole. For governments to fulfil their ultimate responsibility as duty-bearers in guaranteeing the right to quality education, the broad participation of and commitment by all actors concerned is crucial. As key quality educational providers, youth organisations take up their responsibility very seriously. Encouraging and promoting youth organisations through financial and technical support represents an investment in quality education for young people. The Quality education that young people receive will determine the quality of the human capital we want for our societies. Investing in our societies requires investing in quality education for all.

## 1. Introduction

This policy paper presents and sets a framework of what the European Youth Forum understands by quality education and the main elements for its advocacy work on education for young people. This paper builds upon the existing documents by the Forum on its position on different elements of education, including the recognition of non-formal education, the role of schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, early school leaving, vocational education and training systems, global education and life-long learning.

Built upon a rights-based approach to education and youth, this paper defines the driving principles behind our call for quality education, and further describes how they should be translated into the various factors that influence quality. The definition of quality education proposed here reflects a holistic approach to the topic, that sees the education process in its entirety and acknowledges the unique value and the complementarity between formal education, non-formal education and informal learning<sup>1</sup> and of the different providers involved. It is built upon the understanding of education as a lifelong learning<sup>2</sup> process where the learner plays a fundamental role. The specificities of how to have quality education in each education system are therefore not addressed here; nor does the paper propose any indicator to measure and evaluate the quality.

Likewise, this paper aims to serve as a common framework for youth organisations on our responsibility in providing quality education to young people.

### 1.1. A New Look for Education

Society is ever changing and now at a faster pace than ever before. The rapid evolution of technology, the increased globalisation and the unpredictable developments in society are some of the challenges to today's societies and, in turn, to education. Yet, are policies in education adjusting in the right direction to the ever-changing realities and paradigms?

The omnipotence of the new knowledge-based economy and a competitiveness-driven society has turned employability into the primary goal of educational policies and reforms. As a result, the debate on competences development – particularly of young people – is mainly limited to the needs of the labour market.

In addition, the teacher-centred approach inherited from the Prussian schools model of the 19<sup>th</sup> century remains a reference in the educational policies of various governments. Still too often, formal education systems have a standardised curriculum that the educator/teacher is mandated to deliver and aimed at achieving the same learning outcomes, and in the same way, for all its learners. This is exemplified by the general use of summative tests and qualification systems that unify the common outcomes the learner must have achieved. It is our belief that this system alienates the learner from its role in their education, and is real barrier for the overall empowerment of young people; this approach also clashes with the principles of inclusion, cooperation and participation of today's democratic societies.

The issue of access remains a great concern for many young people, who are discriminated against on the basis of gender, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, language, disabilities, ethnic or cultural and socio-economic background, special education needs or any other barriers. In addition, limitations and barriers to international mobility are still undermining young people's opportunities to participate in learning programmes outside their home country.

In spite of some efforts made to reform education by governments and institutions at national, European and global levels, we still see an overall gap in providing a holistic approach to the matter, as pointed out in several of our policy papers and reactions.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Non- formal education is an organised educational process that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to certification. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis and as a

2 "All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (European Commission Communication: Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality', November 2001)

3 0618-03 Policy Paper on Youth Organisations as Non-Formal Educators – Recognising our role;  
0007-08 Policy Paper on Global Education: a global vision on education - an education for global citizenship  
0622-07 European Youth Forum contribution to the public consultation on Schools for the 21st Century

Therefore, the European Youth Forum firmly believes that:

- Education requires a real paradigm shift in policy and practice that puts the learner at the centre of the learning process while taking into account the learning community.
- Educational systems should be inclusive, norm-critical, non-discriminatory, flexible and culturally sensitive, avoiding any type of “one-size-fits-all” approach.
- Education needs to reclaim its mission in the development of a young person’s key competences for a fulfilled life, while unleashing their full potential.
- Education should be looked at holistically as a lifelong and life-wide process that enables the person to (continuously) develop key competences for its role as an active and informed member of a global society, with the capacity to adjust to the continuous changes in culture, society and life.

## **1.2. The Focus on Quality Education**

The issue of the quality of education has always been present in the educational discourse, yet addressed from different perspectives. The current global economic crisis in today’s societies has led to an increasing economisation of education, creating a “value for money” approach to the notion of quality. Similarly, today’s knowledge-based economy has also led to a focus on the outputs of education, rather than on the learning process and its conditions. This has resulted in recent policy developments in the European Union focusing on the connection between the learning outcomes and the labour market, that are driven by the economist perspective on the notion of quality education.<sup>4</sup> In opposition to the economist tradition, a number of institutions such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO have championed a humanist perspective, which puts more emphasis on factors related to the learning process.<sup>5</sup> The humanist perspective is also at the core of the educational work of youth organisations.

On the other hand, in recent years, education policy-making has focused on quantitative aspects<sup>6</sup>, concentrating on quality education strategies on early school leaving and access to higher education. In some cases, this quantitative approach has left issues such as motivation and participation opportunities in education, as a lower priority.

In addition, quality analysis and improvement efforts have tended to turn to specific aspects of education, often in isolation from one another. For instance, the gaps in transversal competences developed have primarily been addressed within formal curricula<sup>7</sup> not considering neither other interconnected dimensions nor the education provided through other settings, including vocational education and training as well as non-formal education. This fragmented vision of education has often led to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory remedial interventions, with uneven and imbalanced improvements of aspects of quality.<sup>8</sup>

The European Youth Forum proposes to refocus the debate on the quality of education beyond specific issues of access and quantitative outcomes of education. We call for a comprehensive approach that addresses the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of education and their links to the context in which it operates. We firmly believe that education needs to be viewed not as the sum of sub-systems but as a whole process of preparing and supporting young people’s development throughout life.

## **2. Quality Education: the Pillars of our Framework**

The European Youth Forum’s work on quality education is based on our mission to promote and defend youth rights, ensuring that the best interest of youth is guaranteed at all times in any policy-making process. Within the field of non-formal education - our core area of action - we have contributed to the further enhancement of the quality through the development of a framework for quality assurance of non-formal education.<sup>9</sup> Looking at the quality discourse for education as a whole, the Forum proposes here a framework to define quality education based on a rights-based<sup>10</sup> and humanist<sup>11</sup> approach to education.

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4 UNESCO Education for All Monitoring Report: The Quality Imperative, 2005.

5 Further information on the different perspective on the notions of quality can be found at UNESCO’s Education for All Report 2005.

6 UNESCO Education for All Monitoring Report- The Quality Imperative, 2005

7 Eurydice Report “Developing Key Competences at School in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy”, 2013

8 UNESCO Education for ALL Monitoring Report: The Quality Imperative, 2005

9 0290-11 Revised Policy Paper on Non-Formal Education: A Framework for indicating and assuring quality; Manual

## **2.1 Quality Education and the Right to Education: an Indivisible and Universal Call**

We strongly affirm that education is a human right and all young people are entitled to a quality education. Given the interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights, fulfilling this right means contributing to the right to life with dignity and to the development of young people as autonomous, supportive, responsible and committed citizens. The European Youth Forum calls for free and equal access to education, as part of a commitment to quality education for all. We consider access and quality as indivisible elements for the exercise of the right to education.

As recognised duty-bearers of all human rights, states are responsible for the fulfilment of the right to education and should be made accountable for the education that young people have access to. Governments should take the necessary steps and measures to invest in educational opportunities for young people, life-long and life-wide. Given the key educational role of youth organisations, particular support should be provided to them, including the further recognition of non-formal education and the validation of competences gained in this setting.

Despite budgetary pressure, education should not be considered a monetary burden but rather a strategic long-term investment for society: education is a value by itself. Investments in education should therefore be excluded from deficit targets.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.2 Education for Life**

As a platform that considers the social dimension to be at least as important as the economic one, the European Youth Forum views education as a lifelong and life-wide learning process that pursues the objectives of personal and professional fulfilment, social inclusion and active citizenship. Education should not only enable young people to build up their personal and professional competences, but also to learn to be part of multicultural and complex societies and to take up the rights and responsibilities that this entails.

The aim of education is therefore connected to an individual's personal development, equipping the young person with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to take up their role as active, responsible citizens in the different dimensions and stages in life. This requires education to focus on the development of the young person's full potential and focusing on key competences for lifelong learning.<sup>13</sup> A balance is therefore needed in the development of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities, which should be ultimately aimed at contributing to the goals of a democratic, peaceful and diverse society we strive for, in which citizens have a strong sense of solidarity and commitment.

## **2.3 The Learner at the Centre of the Educational Experience**

Education must be driven by the role that the learner is to play in this process. By putting the learner at the centre of the education process, we provide them with the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning; this in turn reinforces their confidence in their capacities and their motivation to learn. A learner-centred approach also implies bringing the educational experience close to real-life concerns of the learner and their community.

Therefore, a learner-centred approach to education means putting education at the service of the learner's dispositions, needs, capacities and possibilities, to be developed to their full potential lifelong and life wide. The support from the entirety of the learning community, including peers, educators and parents, is crucial.

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on Quality Assurance of Non-Formal Education: A Framework for Youth Organisations, European Youth Forum, 2013 (available at: [http://issuu.com/yomag/docs/nfeqa\\_manual\\_single](http://issuu.com/yomag/docs/nfeqa_manual_single))

10 See Annex for further references to the legal framework of the right to education.

11 For a description of the humanist approach to education and other education traditions you may read UNESCO's Education for All Monitoring Report 2005.

12 0570-12 Position Paper LoveYouthFuture: a new European Deal for and with Youth.

13 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC).

### 3. Defining Quality Education

The concept of quality education is complex and changes according to the conditions and expectations of the context in which it operates. The definition of quality education is intrinsically linked to the understanding of the purpose of education in a given society and in view of the existing individual and collective development needs and aspirations.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, it is connected to the identified needs of the learner, to the equal valorisation of different educational paths within each system, as well as to the educational provider's vision and mission.

There is therefore not a static definition of quality education. There is no one understanding of quality agreed upon by all stakeholders or supported by empirical research. It is to each community to identify what makes their education of quality through a mutual consent process among all actors involved, from government authorities and policy-makers, to educational institutions, communities and the learner. This process requires that all stakeholders enter into dialogue to agree on the aims and objectives of education, and on the framework that will guide any analysis and improvement of the quality of education. Dialogue between the different stakeholders is therefore essential in any process of development and monitoring of policies as well as in the delivery and evaluation of quality education.

What the European Youth Forum proposes in this paper is therefore not a word-for-word definition of what quality education means, but rather a principle-based definition to be adapted to the context and the given system in which education is provided.

#### 3.1 Principles of Quality Education

The following sets of principles and claims are at the core of what the European Youth Forum stands for when striving for quality education. They are relevant for both formal and non-formal education systems and aimed at serving as a core reference in any process of (re) formulating quality education.

- **Accessibility:** any kind of access barriers (including hidden costs) or fees linked to each stage of education and training should be abolished, and free and equal access to education for all must be guaranteed free from discrimination on any ground. The learner must have the right to choose and have access to any educational path that best fits their individual needs, personal talents and aspirations.
- **Equity & Inclusion:** to ensure effective access to quality education for all young people, educational policies must provide equal opportunities for all from the earliest years. They must ensure that neither personal nor social circumstances such as gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disabilities, ethnic origin or family socio-economic background are obstacles to achieving educational potential and that all individuals reach a level of competences that will allow them to become autonomous, motivated and responsible active citizens.<sup>15</sup> This requires inclusive and norm-critical educational policies, using intersectional approaches that respond to the diverse needs and circumstances of the learner. Adequate, timely support and guidance to those at higher risk of exclusion are essential.
- **Community Impact:** education should respond to the specific needs of the learner and have a sustainable impact on the development of the community. This requires education to be an active part of the community and sensitive to its needs, while acknowledging the learners' socio-cultural circumstances and the environmental and economic context.
- **Participation (of the learner):** the learner has the right to take part in all stages throughout the educational process, from curricula design and shaping of the learning activity, to participation in any decision-making process both within a given education system as well as in the wider framework of policy-making processes. Placing ownership of the learning process and outcomes with the learner is an essential principle to ensure motivation and fulfilment of learners and the sustainability of

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14 UNESCO Education for All Monitoring Report: The Quality Imperative, (page 228) 2005

15 Further details on the concept of equity and inclusion in education can be found at OECD Report "Equity and Quality in Education, 2012

learning outcomes. In addition, peer learning should be fostered as a means to promote social interaction and a sense of responsibility and solidarity towards the other.

- **Parity and Reciprocity in the Educator/Learner Relationship:** participation of the learner in the educational process requires considering the learners as partners in the learning process, identifying their different roles, responsibilities and competences. This principle calls for symmetrical learning relations characterised by cooperation, respect, trust, appreciation and parity between the educator and the learner. It also strengthens the reciprocity of the learning process: educators are also learners, and the learner can also be a source of learning for the educator.
- **Cooperation & Complementarity:** the relationship among educational institutions/providers (formal and non-formal) should be built upon the firm belief that cooperation maximises their resources and enhances their capacities to achieve the desired goal. The underlying principle of this is that the different educational systems (within a country and internationally) are complementary and bring a particular added value to the overall educational development of the young person. Such cooperation should also be the guiding principle in the relationship among educators, including links across borders. Cooperation among the different actors involved in the educational process is key to translate these principles into action.
- **Support:** quality education is resource intensive and that should not be seen as a problem. Education should be publicly supported, as it is a public responsibility and public good. Resources should be allocated, managed and used to keep a balance between the achievement of the goals set and the availability of such resources.

### 3.2 Dimensions that Influence Quality Education

The European Youth Forum calls for the principles above to be reflected in the key elements of the educational practice, namely the learner, educators and providers, the structures and environment, the process, and the content and outcomes. For each of these elements the specificities of the different educational systems and settings should be considered.

- **Learner:** the unique characteristics of each learner need to be acknowledged and fostered in any educational process; potential inequalities among learners - which may stem from their socio-economic background, sexual orientation, gender and gender identity, health, place of residence, cultural and religious background, or the family context - must be recognised and addressed through personal support and counselling/guidance.
- **Educator:** The multidimensional nature of the competences sought to be developed by the learner requires a broad range of competences by the educator, in terms of themes addressed as well as in the methods and the organisation of the learning process. Relevant training opportunities for educators should be offered, as investment in the regular development of the educator's capacities is crucial to ensure the quality of education. Specific support and training are required in situations of multilingualism and cultural, socio-economic, religious, sexual and gender diversity. Enabling working conditions should be guaranteed by appropriate remuneration for professional staff and relevant support for and recognition to volunteers. A high educator-learner ratio is essential to ensure the specific needs of the learner are met.
- **Content & outcomes:** The content of education needs to be consistent with its aims and objectives, and the expected outcomes.
  - The *competences* acquired through any educational process should cater for a person's needs on different dimensions. Thus, they need to address both social and personal as well as professional and technical competences. A balance is needed between cognitive and non-cognitive skills ("soft" skills), paying special attention to critical thinking, problem solving and creativity as a means to reinforce the young person's ability to cope with challenges and changes in a positive and constructive way. Language competences need to be a key element of the educational process, both in terms of gaining new language skills as well as in respecting and fostering learning in the mother tongue. Special attention should be given to social and intercultural competences, given both the needs of an individual and of changing societies.

- *Outcomes* should be assessed in the context of the agreed objectives for education, and should include benefits for the learner himself as an individual as well as a member of society. In this context, assessment of transversal competences (such as learning to learn, social and cultural competence) should be given stronger attention. A progressive process approach should be used as a means of measuring the learning over a period of time, in a flexible manner, focused on each learner's individual progress. It is a powerful development tool as well as an effective way of checking the learner's progress, not in competition with others, but in comparison with previous stages of learning.
- **Process:** Any educational process must be learner-centred and guided by the principles of participation and cooperation, and of parity and reciprocity in the educator/learner relationship.
  - *Educator/learner relationship:* procedures must be put in place to allow for the learner to provide feedback to the educator as regards both the content as well as the learning process, as a way to improve the overall learning experience. Learning in a group of peers allows in fact for social integration and fosters the development of a sense of responsibility and solidarity. Peer-learning activities must be a common practice, both among learners as well as educators.
  - *Non-formal education methods:* the experience of youth organisations in non-formal education has shown that these types of methods enable young people to engage in their learning. The emphasis is put on experiential learning, thus building learning from practical experiences rather than from mere theoretical explanations. These experiences are extremely valuable in shaping transversal competences, preparing for and supporting young people's development throughout life. Teamwork, cooperation and inter-personal methods foster the learner's creativity, discovery and responsibility through a process of self-awareness and self-reflection.
  - *Learning mobility:* young people should have an opportunity to participate in mobility programmes (short as well as long-term, in both formal and non-formal education) from an early age. Through these international encounters they develop intercultural understanding and respect towards other cultures, which are crucial elements for the creation of a peaceful society. Legal frameworks should therefore provide favourable environments for youth mobility programmes and financial and personal support should be assured for less-privileged young people.
  - *Innovation & creativity:* the educational process must be designed and run in a way that it fosters creativity as a means to stimulate the emotional capacities of the learner. Innovative approaches need to be inserted in the educational practice; for instance, by promoting the arts as a means for self and collective expression. The use of new technology needs to be promoted based on the principles of accessibility and social inclusion of all learners; adequate support and training to educators must be provided.<sup>16</sup>
- **Learning environment:** this refers both to a physical and a psychosocial enabling environment.
  - A *supportive* learning environment is key to the success of the learning process; a climate of mutual respect, trust and solidarity must exist where creativity and authenticity is fostered, and that puts value on collective learning as well as strengthens the relationship among learners. Such context is interconnected with the type of relations established among and between learners and educators, as well as with the learning process.
  - *Principles of democracy and non-discrimination,* appreciation of diversity and gender sensitivity should be reflected in the learning environment. Human rights need to be experienced in the daily activities and relations the learner engages in during the educational process. Likewise, adequate protection support measures need to be in place to ensure a safe environment where all learners are kept safe from harm and any kind of violence, bullying, abuse, neglect or exploitation.



- The *space and infrastructure* available needs to be adequate for the type of learning activities that will be developed, and should always cater for the learner's well being.
- **Providers:** the autonomy of the educational provider is essential to better respond to the specific needs of the learner and of the context. In line with the principles of participation and cooperation, the learners are to be considered as co-managers of the educational institution/organisations. Learners should have a say in the decision-making processes that concern them, such as curricula/programme design and content, evaluation of learning outcomes, and budget allocation. Involvement of the community is also a key factor to maximise the potential of any educational provider; parents as well as the social community where the education takes place need to be involved as a means to ensure quality education is provided.
- **Resources & support structures**  
Resources and support structures are closely connected to the effective implementation of the principles of accessibility, equity and efficiency; it refers to both material and financial as well as human resources.
  - *Support structures* need to be made available to cater for the specific needs of learners, be it in the form of learning guidance/support or as physical spaces. In addition, the necessary support *learning materials* need to be available and accessible to all learners and in the format that best suits their characteristics and learning styles.
  - *A welfare system* is needed to provide all young people with basic financial security, which allows them to invest their time in their education, regardless of their socio-economic background. Such support may take the form of grants to cover living costs (including housing and transport) or of financial support to allow participation in learning mobility programmes. Additional specific measures targeting migrant youth, youth from marginalised groups, and youth in other disadvantaged conditions are also needed.
  - *Public expenditure* in education must reflect the government's duty to ensure that all young people have access to quality education. There needs to be legal provisions guaranteeing a percentage of the budget for education. Such legal safeguards will allow stakeholders to hold governments accountable for ensuring access to education - overall, not only the public formal system - and in turn, its quality.

## 4. Quality Education: a Good Investment

### 4.1. Synergies in the Lifelong Learning Journey

Education is a lifelong and life-wide process. Therefore all types of learning at all points in life have an accumulative value for the learner and are interlinked. As a result, the quality of each educational experience will have an impact in the learning journey of the person. Quality education must be a priority from the early years of a child. Investment is needed to ensure that children benefit from an enabling learning environment where they can develop themselves to their full potential. This process involves paying attention to what happens at school but also within the home and community life to ensure that children benefit from an enabling, free, safe and inclusive learning environment where they can develop themselves to their full potential.

Likewise, in the transition from childhood to adulthood, special attention must be paid to the education young people receive. Young people should have the choice to take different educational paths with the possibility of multiple entry and exit points, and with accessible and relevant opportunities for educational mobility. This requires a process of recognition of the competences gained in each of the different educational systems, including vocational education and training and non-formal education, as well as in different countries in Europe. The training opportunities available to facilitate the transition phase into professional life are also central; quality internships and apprenticeships are key in tackling this problem. In parallel, the young person needs a conducive environment in which they can develop their individual interests and personal talents and practice the responsibilities linked to their role as active member of a democratic multicultural society. Youth organisations are key in providing such a space.

As a continuation of the process, adult education requires equal attention. Quality learning opportunities need to be accessible to all, and to fit different purposes, from continuous professional training and access to formal education, to volunteering opportunities and educational mobility.

Therefore, the importance of investing in the quality of both formal education and non-formal education, as well as paying the necessary attention to informal learning is crucial. The recognition of the unique contribution of each of these fields is therefore essential to reinforce their complementarity and foster cooperation among educational providers between sectors as well as countries.

#### **4.2. A Means for Development of Societies**

Investing in quality education is a long-term return for society at large, both in economic as well as social and cultural terms.<sup>17</sup> It contributes to higher lifelong earnings and more sustainable economic development while helping individuals make informed choices about their lives.<sup>18</sup> Investing in quality education means investing in a productive and stimulated labour force, and in resourceful and pro-active citizens. This in turn equates to investing in building democratic, peaceful and inclusive societies. All in all, quality of education contributes to improving the quality of life of an individual and the development of society as a whole.

#### **4.3. The Contribution of Youth Organisations**

Youth organisations are key educational providers. Every year in Europe, they provide quality-learning opportunities to millions of young people. Through an organised educational process, young people get a chance to develop their personal and social competences through co-operative and experiential learning, often engaging with the community. They also acquire a wealth of key competences (particularly the transversal ones, which are not sufficiently covered by formal curricula) that enhance their employability while building their social capital.<sup>19</sup>

Youth organisations take their educational mission very seriously. They are aware of the essential role young people can play in bringing about progress in society, and work to their best to prepare them to contribute in an active and responsible manner. Citizenship, intercultural and global education are key integral components of youth organisations' educational practices.

As acknowledged in the World Programme of Action for Youth<sup>20</sup>, youth organisations are "important forums for developing skills necessary for effective participation in society, promoting tolerance and increased cooperation and exchanges between young people". Encouraging and promoting youth organisations through financial and technical support represents an investment in quality education for young people.

### **5. Conclusion: Quality Education for All, Our Common Duty**

The quality of education is without doubt one of the key topics of interest for society because of its impact on all dimensions of the life of a person and in turn, in the life of a community as a whole. It therefore concerns everyone in society and it is essential that each of us play a role in contributing to such quality.

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17 According to OECD's report "Education at a Glance 2012", on average OECD countries receive a net return of over USD 100 000 in increased income tax and other savings for each man in higher education, almost 4 times their investment.

18 UNESCO Education for All Monitoring Report - The Quality Imperative, 2005

19 The research commissioned by the European Youth Forum on "The Impact of Non-Formal Education in Youth Organisations on Young People's Employability" (2013) provides evidence of the contribution of youth organisations and non-formal education to skills development by young people and their value in the professional field.

20 United Nations: The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), 2010 (page 43).

For governments to fulfil their ultimate responsibility as duty-bearers in guaranteeing the right to quality education, the broad participation of and commitment by all actors concerned is crucial. The European Youth Forum calls on:

1. Policy and decision-makers at local, national, European and global levels to assume their responsibility to bring about sustainable reforms towards quality education;
2. Youth organisations, education and training institutions, and other non-formal education civil society organisations; student unions; faith-based communities; social partners and companies; peers and parents; and academia, to become aware and take responsibility for their role as educational providers;
3. Learners to take an active role in their own learning, becoming an agent of change within the educational process.

Any policy reform in education in the coming years needs to keep in mind the holistic, inclusive, non-discriminatory and norm-critical approach to education and the guiding principles proposed in this framework. In practice, this entails acknowledging and recognising the contribution of all educational systems – including both formal and non-formal – to a young person's development, as well as ensuring adequate support to all educational providers, including youth organisations and adult education institutions. This needs to be complemented by appropriate national systems of validation of acquired competences, including those gained through non-formal education in youth organisations.

We need a long-term vision for education, not subject to a given political party in power but rather built upon the common understanding by all members of society of the Europe we want to live in; we need a common societal project across borders that commits to achieving a holistic educational improvement.

The quality of the education our young people receive will determine the quality of the human capital we want for our societies. Investing in our societies requires investing in quality education for all.

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## **ANNEX - Quality education and the right to education: an indivisible and universal call**

The right to education is a formally recognised human right. It has been widely affirmed in numerous international human rights instruments, where explicit reference is made to the quality of education and its key role for the full exercise of the right to education.

### **International legal framework**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) establish that education should be aimed at the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity. The Committee on the Rights of the Child further develops the Convention's provision on the right to education in Article 29 by emphasising the requirement for an education that is "child-centred, child-friendly and empowering, and that goes beyond formal schooling to embrace a broad range of life experiences through which positive development and learning occur".

Several legal instruments have recognised the right to education "as encompassing not only access to educational provision but also the obligation to [...] improve quality".<sup>21</sup> The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) - the first legally binding international instrument in the field of education - makes explicit reference to the obligation to ensure quality in education. Likewise, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises quality as a key component of the right to education: "education offered must be adequate in quality, relevant to the child and must promote the realization of the child's other rights"(General Comment No. 11 (1999), paragraph. 6).

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## Political commitments at International and European level

Beyond the formal obligations toward the right to education and its quality undertaken by governments through the ratification of these international human rights treaties, political commitments have been made both at international as well as European levels.

At international level, the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990) and the follow-up Dakar Framework for Action, adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar, in April 2000, both recognise quality of education as a crucial component in the global movement to achieve Education for All. The Dakar Framework explicitly affirms that quality is at the heart of education.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action issued from the World Conference on Human Rights (1993) recalled the right of every person to quality education, and emphasised the role human rights education plays for its quality and general fulfillment.

In the framework of the review of the progress of the Millennium Development Goals, States explicitly committed to ensuring quality in education by “providing equitable educational and learning opportunities for all children and ensuring quality education and progression through the school system”.<sup>22</sup> Launched in 2012, the United Nations Global Education First Initiative put the improvement of quality of education at the core of its priorities.

At the European level, the 2012 *Recommendation on Ensuring Quality Education* adopted by the Council of Europe defines the role of public authorities in making this a reality. The recommendations from the European Congress on Global Education (Lisbon, 2012) organised by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe recalls the right of access to quality global education and calls for support in international coordination and joint strategies.

The European Union has issued various recommendations and conclusions in the framework of the Education and Training 2020 strategy. The Council Conclusions on *'The Social Dimension of Higher Education'* (May 2013) highlight the need to develop high quality education and training systems. The European Union Youth Conferences in 2013<sup>23</sup> called for equal access to free and good quality education; explicit references were made to the necessary provisions for it.

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<sup>22</sup> Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education: Normative Action for Quality Education (2012, page 9)

<sup>23</sup> In 2013 the European Union held two Youth Conferences; one in March under the Greek Presidency, and another one in September, under the Lithuanian Presidency.