
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Malta – By Anthony Azzopardy (University of Malta)

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN MALTA

By Anthony Azzopardy (University of Malta)

1.1 Introduction

Although the debate on the importance of non-formal and informal education/learning as complimentary to formal education is almost exhausted, the ‘fear’ that the non-formal may reduce the academic excellence of the formal is prevalent in Malta. The inherent values of voluntary participation and experiential learning associated with the non-formal and informal processes of learning are still being investigated and openly questioned. However, with the launching of a conference by the Ministry of Education on the ‘Implementation of the National Curriculum’ (June 2000) and the subsequent publication of the ‘unofficial’ Strategic Plan (March 2001) and scattered validation initiatives have now started to contribute to the ‘political’ and ‘educational’ discourse on the recognition and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning.

It needs to be stated at the outset that the term ‘non-formal’ is not in common use and it is often confused with the term ‘informal’. Over the past ten years, the Youth Studies Programme at the University of Malta and the Employment and Training Corporation in particular, and other agencies/institutions in general, have consistently strived to mould political and educational perception policies into a mode whereby additional, though different, possibilities exist for the enhancement of one’s *curriculum vitae*.

It is also imperative for the reader to understand that, in a small country the size of Malta¹, the element of ‘oneness’ is very strong. This element contributes to various complimentary and conflicting issues at one and the same time. While co-ordination and amalgamation of efforts is overtly possible, individual entities tend to guard their specific domain so vigorously that fragmentation and duplication of work become inevitable.

This chapter will attempt to provide a brief description of the current state of affairs which, at the time of writing, does not include widespread accreditation processes.

Within the Maltese context, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment², often in conjunction with the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, is the main source of impetus for drastic changes in the realm of learning. The formal education system, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, the Institute of Tourism Studies, Employment and Training, and Youth all fall under its remit. The political implications are that the Ministry is largely responsible for providing both direct and indirect financial assistance to these groups, without this assistance none of them could function effectively and efficiently.

¹ Total surface area: 315 sq.km. (including Gozo and Comino); Population: c. 400 000

² Prior to May 2004, there was a Ministry of Education and a Ministry of Youth and the Arts – a situation which was preceded by the establishment of a Parliamentary Secretariat responsible for Youth affairs within the Ministry of Education.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

1.2.1 National

- a. The Ministry has a Department of Further Studies and Adult Education. This department consists of two units: the Vocational Education and Programme Development Unit which provides post-secondary courses in subjects such as, Animal Husbandry, Hair Dressing and Beauty Therapy and Health care; and the Lifelong Education Unit which provides educational, vocational and cultural evening courses for adults of all ages and from all walks of life. (www.education.gov.mt)
- b. The Ministry subsidizes heavily the University of Malta. (www.um.edu.mt). *In this institution, there are two initiatives directly related to the non-formal process of learning. Firstly, available for all university students, with the exception of First Years and Post-graduate candidates, an Extracurricular Credits System is in place. Briefly, under this system, students have the opportunity to engage in an activity / project which helps them manoeuvre outside of purely academic limits. On completion of the activity / project, the individual student is assessed both by his/her particular activity supervisor and by the Extracurricular Credits Board. The mark obtained will be weighted as 0.5% of the final global mark that is considered for degree classification purposes.*

Secondly, as part-fulfilment of the course requirements, participants at the Youth Studies Programme are required to undergo 300 hours of Fieldwork placement. As prospective youth and community workers who are considered as the major providers of non-formal learning, the Placement is formally recognised, validated and accredited by the University (Council of Europe & European Commission, Youth Research Partnership (2004), Draft Papers, p. 86). (<http://cedefop.communityzero.com/youth>)

Both these initiatives have been discussed at length with the present Minister of Education, Youth and Employment (27.01.04, 19.05.04) and the former Minister of Youth and the Arts (various dates). While there is full agreement on the purpose and validity of youth and community work in terms of non-formal learning, particularly within the formal parameters of schools, the recognition of the youth and community work profession, together with its subsequent implications, is still not possible. Financial difficulties and uncertainties seem to be the main cause of this situation.

- c. The National Minimum Curriculum envisages the development of a number of schools into Community Learning Centres. These centres are meant to cater for the education of adult members of the community and, as such, they can be seen as an extension of the Government's Adult Education Programme. Specific objectives have been proposed the foremost amongst which would be "to ensure that non-formal education is given its due consideration and is accorded the place it deserves in the national educational and cultural agenda" (Proceedings: National Curriculum on its Way,

2000:358). This is one of the few written declarations whereby the status of non-formal education is being specified in terms of recognition. In the build-up to this strategy, the Ministry, in conjunction with the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, has organised a Certificate of Attendance Course for prospective co-ordinators of the Learning Centres. The participants have been chosen from among members of the teaching staff in primary and secondary schools.

1.2.2 Sub-National

- a. The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, was set up in 2001 with the aim of providing ‘universally accessible vocational and professional education and training with an international dimension, responsive to the needs of the individual and the economy’ (Prospectus, 2002-3). The College provides a variety of courses of vocational educational training in, among others, Agribusiness, Art and Design, Building and Construction Engineering, Business and Commerce, Community Services, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Information and Communication Technology, Mechanical Engineering, and a Maritime Institute. The College is a major provider of the off-the-job educational training element of apprenticeship schemes. It works closely with the Employment and Training Corporation in ensuring these schemes meet the needs of local employees. (www.mcast.edu.mt)
- b. The Institute of Tourism Studies, set up in 1987, provides vocational education within the tourism industry on the Maltese islands. The accelerated growth in tourism increased the pressure on the local labour market for highly qualified technical and management personnel. Apart from certificate and diploma level courses, the Institute has apprenticeship programmes that falls under the ‘Extended Skill Training Scheme’ (ESTS). These programmes offer students the possibility to equip themselves with skills for entry into the hospitality and catering industry.

A more direct link with the concept of non-formal learning is found in the ‘Accreditation for Prior Experiential Learning’ – (APEL) whereby prospective candidates with documented and related work experience in the tourism industry will be awarded credits.(www.its.gov.mt)

- c. The Employment and Training Corporation was established in 1990 under the Employment and Training Services Act. It was set up as a corporate body with a distinct legal personality, to provide and maintain a national public employment service. In essence, this means assisting people in finding suitable employment and assisting employers to find suitable employees. It was also given the mandate to provide training courses to promote employability, and to gather the information required to establish labour market requirements in Malta.

The Organisation is based on the twin European values of solidarity and subsidiary. Its mission is “to provide and ensure equitable access to training programmes and employment opportunities and to contribute towards the social and economic development of the community” (www.etc.org.mt).

Training services, Placement schemes, Apprenticeship schemes and specialist and individualised attention to disadvantaged groups are the main services that the Corporation offers (Azzopardi, A.E. (2003), 'Strategic Review of ETC Services for Young People', Report, Employment and Training Corporation). (www.etc.org.mt).

- d. Trade Unions – The two main trade unions on the island are the General Workers Union (GWU – www.gwu.org.mt) and the Malta Workers Union – better known as the *Union Haddiema Maghqudin* (UHM – www.uhm.org.mt). While the GWU has the Reggie Miller Foundation as a branch for the organisation of courses for Youth Leaders and a number of academic and cultural study sessions (e.g. Music, Crafts, Health and Safety, and Information Technology) – for which a certificate of attendance is awarded (interview, 29.03.04) – the UHM does not include in its Activities list any form of non-formal or informal learning.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

The Federation of Industry does not offer any courses / activities related to non-formal / informal learning (www.foi.org.mt). However, individual organisations are now taking the plunge and moving away from the conventional mode of production bonus systems to reward employees for learning more skills and performing using these, in their department. A particular case in point is the 'learning strand' taken by Playmobil Malta Ltd. where a multi-skilling programme was introduced in September 1995. A three-tier approach to the skills process is taken in terms of must-know, good-to-know and nice-to-know skills. The company also launched a training programme in first aid and a computer-assisted learning technique among a representative group of workers from its various departments (Borg, undated in Haugøy, G., ed., *Open Learning Environments in Adult Education: A Guide to European Models* – www.statvoks.no/focal/).

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector

The Youth Policy of Malta has been described by an international group of experts, acting as a Review Team, as 'a sound piece of work' (Evans, 2003:62). More specifically, the Team particularly welcomed the 'reference to the accreditation of the acquired experience and skills through non-formal and informal learning' (*ibid*:63). The expert team also stated that 'it is our view that investment in youth work would be money particularly well spent in Malta' (*ibid*:30) since 'youth work is, of course, the location within which non-formal education can take place very successfully' (*ibid*:40).

Articles 6.4 and 6.5 of the National Youth Policy (Youth Information Handbook, 2004:18) confirm that the State will follow a policy that complements formal education with non-formal and informal education. The policy also states that the various education and employment bodies should ensure the implementation of measures for the accreditation of prior learning and skills acquired through non-formal learning/education (author's emphasis).

The Youth Information Handbook provides a list of 112 Youth Organisations with a social, political and religious orientation (2004:118) and 45 Sport Organisations (2004:171). Among

these organisations there are a large variety of opportunities for non-formal and informal learning experiences both in Malta and abroad. In particular cases, recognition is limited to terms of sponsorship for activities, such as exchange programmes offered by established institutions. There is no record of accreditation procedures being followed although participants in the various activities have claimed that Certificates of Attendance and Reference Notes have been given some consideration by employees' interviewing Boards (interview, 06.09.04, Teuma, M., president, Malta Association of Youth Workers (may@nextgen.net.mt) and president ZAK³ – www.zakmalta.org).

1.5 Conclusions

The overall situation in Malta is one where, while the structures and personnel for the delivery of 'goods' are available, the final step for the implementation of validation and accreditation processes still beckons.

The main conclusions that may be drawn from the above are that:

- a. there still exists a gap between the stated and written policy and the implementation process;
- b. the prevalent concern for government and private entities is the acquisition of skills outside the formal system of education for employability purposes only;
- c. recognition of non-formal and informal education/learning is a process that is not as yet linked to validation and accreditation; and
- d. research on the subject in reference is still at the embryonic stage.

³ ZAK (*Zghazagh Azzjoni Kattolika*), with a membership of 800, organises religious and church functions; personal & social education meetings and social gatherings (Ministry for Youth and the Arts, 2004:168).
