

## The Potential of Practical Learning

### A solution on how to deal with the 6,604000<sup>1</sup> NEETs in Europe

*In the field of employment, we face two important challenges in Europe today: on the one side, we have a group of countries with a much too high NEET-group. On the other side, we lack qualified workforces in certain sectors of the labor market. How do we meet these two challenges? Based on the experience of assessment and documentation in European Production Schools and Youth Workshops, this article puts forward some suggestions on how to meet these challenges.<sup>2</sup>*

#### Introduction: the problem and a possible answer

European countries and their labor markets are facing two main problems:

1. All over Europe, young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is an urgent matter! This massive NEET-group continues to be a problem throughout Europe and represents a high degree of uncertainty for the future of our society. NEETs are estimated to cost European economies €162 billion pr. year and findings highlight that young NEETs participate considerably less in democratic and civic processes and risk suffering lifelong consequences of prolonged disengagement<sup>3</sup>.
2. All over Europe, a big amount of job openings cannot be filled because of the lack of adequate manual skills and behavioral competences among the unemployed candidates. For example in France, approx. 280,000 manual job openings cannot find a match among the unemployed.<sup>4</sup> This lack of recognized competences is critical in many companies, all over our industry, specifically in construction and services areas.

How is it possible to meet these two needs for the benefit of our European society? How can we decrease unemployment among young people and at the same time increase manual competences existing in our companies? How can we increase competence recognition among e.g. early school leavers? Moreover, how can we make it easier for companies to find the certified manual skills and behavioral competences they need?

Here is a suggestion for improvement of the situation: let us take the young people seriously. Those who learn a lot (learn 'to do' and learn 'to be' in terms of knowledge, skills and

<sup>1</sup> Eurofound (2016), Exploring the diversity of NEETs, Publications Office of the European Union. p. 11

<sup>2</sup> The article is based on the experience from a range of production schools/workshops in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany and Slovenia. The majority members of the umbrella organization IPSO ([www.ipso.li](http://www.ipso.li))

<sup>3</sup> Eurofound (2016), Exploring the diversity of NEETs, Publications Office of the European Union. p. 47-48

<sup>4</sup> Le Parisien, ÉCO (april 4th, 2016), Emploi : 280 000 postes à pourvoir! Le Parisien, <http://bit.ly/25GT5xn>

attitudes) in settings of non-formal learning such as production schools. A lot of our early school leavers and youngsters in the NEET group have valuable competences, and the potential for developing them further. Competences that should be documented and taken into consideration, e.g. in the labor market. So let us assess and document the wide range of manual skills and behavioral competences - for the benefit of the youngsters themselves and for the benefit of our common European society.

Being in the NEET category is generally related to the level of education and it is clearly stated that youngsters leaving formal education without any diploma (e.g. because they do not respond to the teaching in classic school settings) will face major difficulties in finding a job and entering society.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, many of these young people lack an understanding of the basic codes needed for taking part in society. In other words, social behavior must be improved together with the development of their professional skills.

Consequently, a large group of young people needs to find alternative paths to education and/or the labor market. These are the people officially called NEET by the European Commission since 2010; they are between 15 and 29 years old, and throughout their lifetime they will be an economic burden to society. Thus, we need to help them become fully active and employable citizens.

#### Assessment and documentation experience in non-formal learning

Some of these youngsters will successfully open the door to a non-formal learning center such as Production Schools or Youth Workshops. For decades, these institutions have helped young people to reach vocational competences in European countries such as Denmark, France, Germany, Austria, Finland as well as Slovenia.

Thus, Production Schools and Youth Workshops have gathered considerable experience in assessing and documenting non-formal learning, and, thereby, being able to produce competence certificates for its participants. In this process, the institutions embrace the whole person, and assess his or her vocational/professional as well as personal and social competences. A competence certificate or other formal documents from a non-formal learning experience will help the young people to be integrated into jobs in the industrial and service sector, or into further formal vocational education and training. These institutions work as preparatory institutions to further education and training or as stepping-stones into the labor market.

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<sup>5</sup> NEETs: Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions (2012).

[https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef\\_publication/field\\_ef\\_document/ef1254en.pdf](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1254en.pdf)

### Learning by doing

In order to understand the assessment and documentation processes in the production schools it is necessary to bear in mind, that all the activities are based on 'learning by doing'. The production of real goods and services for real customers is always at the center of the training, and it is through this activity that the participant develop his/her professional, personal and social skills. However, at the same time, it is important to understand that the schools have a holistic view on the young people, considering their personal circumstances, trying to help them, also in personal matters. This holistic view, together with the practice-based learning, produces the specific possibilities of documentation and assessment in these non-formal learning settings.

In the following, we will investigate the assessment and documentation processes further. Why and for whom it is necessary, and how it is done.

### Why and for whom do we need to document and assess?

Formal learning is aimed at formal assessment, i.e. national diplomas or certificates. The diploma or certificate has the same value all over the country (and for some, all over Europe). Any recruiting company or higher-level school knows the value of the diploma and, thereby, the level of the owner's qualifications. In this way, diplomas are forming the basis in recruiting new employees.

In the case of non-formal learning, the assessment and documentation play a similar role for both the individual and the society/labor market. The documentation and assessment of learning are necessary tools when inspiring to learn more and to motivate towards further education/training. The usual goal after a Production School or Youth Workshop is that participants continue in and finish formal education or/and find their place in the labor market.

### From the individual point of view

For all of us, recognition of work, acquired skills and competences is important. Therefore, assessment in non-formal learning settings is necessary not only at the end but continuously throughout the training. It proves the participant's development of competences to him/herself, and, consequently, the person gets encouraged to continue his/her learning path.

Thus, along with the training, assessing and documenting learning outcome is necessary for the participant in order to continuously evaluate own progress, to check own acquisitions, and to be motivated to pursue progress. For many youngsters, self-confidence is generally very low when entering a Production School or Youth Workshop. The reason for entering is mainly that they have been unable to stay in formal education. This means that they often

carry the defeats of being compared to the ones who – in contrast to themselves – benefit from a formal learning setting.

In the Production Schools and Youth Workshops, learning takes its departure in practice. As soon as the young person can understand and is able to fulfill a task (even an easy one), which has value for professional life, this is recognized and the self-confidence is, thereby, improving. Thus, in many Production Schools, tools such as competence boards are used to visualize the progress for the individual participant as well as for the whole group.

### From society's point of view

For the companies looking unsuccessfully for competences among the possible workforce, it is important that abilities of young unemployed people can be proved in recognized documents, in certificates validated by professionals and approved by authorities. Therefore, the participant needs to be able to show a trace of what he/she has learned and what he/she now is able to do in order to continue into education, vocational training or professional life.

It is abundantly clear, when working closely together with the labor market, professional associations and trade unions, that the skills they require are professional as well as behavioral skills. When all these entities work together and Vocational schools (VET), companies and trade unions all clearly validate the work that is done at the Production Schools and Youth Workshops, it benefits the society as a whole. Thus, it is of utmost importance that educational institutions and companies alike both take non-formal learning environments and the competences the participants obtain in these, seriously by recognizing and valuing the types of certificates that are issued.

Production Schools and Youth Workshops play an indispensable part when it comes to reintegrating NEETs into society. The reasons for early school leavers to drop out are learning difficulties, social factors, or a lack of motivation, guidance or support<sup>6</sup>. When a young person starts at a Production School or Youth Workshop, these issues are dealt with head on through guidance and working in the workshops.

### How to assess and document in non-formal learning

In Production Schools and Youth Workshops, non-formal learning always has been and still is based on *Learning by doing*. The training is based on real production for real and often external customers, who will buy the goods and services, produced by the participants. This sale to an external customer is the ultimate assessment of the competence of the young people. It means that the product and the producer have proved their value. For many

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<sup>6</sup> Eurostat. *Early leavers from education and training* [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early leavers from education and training](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training)

young people, this will be the first time they experience the concrete value of their own work. Consequently, producing and selling goods and services is at the center of the assessment in European Production Schools! Thus, it is important that this is assessed and documented for the participant and future employer/educational institution to see.

Furthermore, assessment is a base for social integration everywhere, and documentation of it is to be done in accordance with the requirements of the labor market and of the companies. That is why, documentation in Production Schools and Youth Workshops refers to individual professional *and* behavioral skills. And we should not underestimate the assessment of the last one. Asking VET schools, counsellors and teachers will often point to exactly the behavioral skills as the most important. E.g. if the young person is unable to be on time in the morning and unable to take responsibility, it will be hard to teach him/her any professional skills. In the same way, professional skills are of little use, if the young person's behavior is not acceptable in a company's everyday life. Consequently, assessment and documentation in non-formal learning settings, such as Production Schools or Youth Workshops can be a very important step for a young NEET in order to enter into social life whether it be a work place or a VET school.

Nevertheless, each country in Europe has its own history of non-formal learning, and each country has its own specific process of recruitment. That is the reason why *Paving the Way*<sup>7</sup> found it relevant to set up a list of explanatory and very tangible assessment and documentation tools used in the partners' organizations. The *Catalogue* presents the details on how professional, social and personal competences are acquired and puts forward 'best practice' examples on how best to promote and make the competences visible. The *Catalogue* can be found on the project website.

### Tools of assessment and documentation

In Production Schools as well as Youth Workshops, a wide range of tools is being used such as different kinds of observation sheets, assessment sheets, skill maps, etc. Here we have chosen to present one, namely the competence board. The example is Danish, but competence boards are used in other countries as well. In many production school workshops, you will find a competence board, listing on one side, the competences, which are possible to obtain in the workshop, on the other side the names of the participants in the workshop. Dots of different color indicate the level of experience/competence.

The competence board visualizes progress, both for the individual and for the whole group. It is an instrument for discussing the participant's continuous progress and his/her wishes

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<sup>7</sup> Paving the Way website: <http://ipso.li/projects/paving-the-way/>

for further progress as well as a strategy on how to obtain it; i.e. individual guidance talks can take their point of departure at the board. Additionally, the board documents the actual state of the whole group, and makes it clear where/by whom to look for more experienced assistance.

Name	Machine Processing	Manual Processing	Assembling Methods	Measuring and Drawing	Boat Maintenance	Boat Equipment	Safety	Navigation	Generally	Generally Professionally
	Leveling Planing Sawmilling Drilling Milling Turning Finish	Tool sharpening/grinding Planing Sawing Drilling Finish	Nailing Screwing (wood screws/boots) Glue (biscuit/dowel) Tapping Dovetailing Latching	Measuring technique Understanding of drawings Sketching Understanding of materials	Lacquering Painting Caulking Rope work Daily Supervision	Sails Ropes Iron Splicing Motor Check	Personal Vest Williams Turn (man over board)	Collision Regulations (navigation) Helmsman	Rowing Cooperation and Overview Maritime Language	Planning Quality Assessment Cleaning Assessment of Working Place Safety Waste Sorting Calculating Worksheets Danish Mathematics
Christopher	●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Rikki	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Mathias	●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Kenni	●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Mads	●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Nikki	●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Inuk	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Robin	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Christoffer	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
Sebastian	●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

- Beginner (1)
- Practiced (2)
- Experienced (3)
- Competent (4)

### Final documentation

At the end of the participant’s stay, documentation that is more ‘formal’ will be issued. In the French production schools, almost all of the participants are provided with a formal certificate of the same value as those from a formal VET school. In Austria, participants are provided with a Certificate of Participation including a list of all fulfilled tasks and acquired skills and competences, issued on the background of the competence boards and the regular tutorial talks. In Denmark, the final document is called a Competence Certificate, and it is issued on the background of the competence board and the individual course plan – just to mention a couple of the used tools.

### Where do we go from here?

As stated in the beginning of this article, if we want to meet our education- and unemployment challenges, we have to take young people and their potential seriously – for the benefit of the individuals, the companies looking for competent personnel and our societies in general. In doing this, assessment and documentation of learning are important tools when inspiring and motivating to learning. Here the experiences from Production Schools and Youth Workshops could and should be used in much wider contexts. As the NEET group is still too big, especially in Southern Europe, it also means that many projects targeting this group is launched. Our wish is that all those working with this target group,

share and build on top of already existing tools and practices, and, thus, all project members of *Paving the Way*, is at *your* disposal. It is important that we move this youth group from unemployment to employment. The harsh reality is that they are – and will continue to be – an economic burden if we do not look at other ways to reintegrate into education and/or the labor market. Some young people need us to take another approach to learning. One of those is learning by doing, and in this, the Production Schools and Youth Workshops have decades of experience.

From the partners in *Paving the Way*



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