

Developing social and emotional skills through non-formal learning

Headlines

- Social and emotional skills are becoming more and more relevant not only for education results and success on the labour market, but also to cope with uncertainties such as those related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Non-formal learning seems to have a potential to fill emerging skills gap, as it enables the development of social and emotional skills across lifetime.
- Despite recognised benefits, the participation in non-formal learning is still low in the EU, especially among young people.
- Outdoor education, participation in music or dance classes, volunteering or restorative practice are well known examples of non-formal learning activities which contribute to the development of social and emotional skills.
- Non-formal learning projects aiming to develop social and emotional skills need more evaluation e.g. by collecting feedback from participants.

Social and emotional skills are relevant to face uncertainty

Skills such as flexibility, resilience, cooperation and team work are becoming nowadays more relevant for citizens. These skills allow us to better adapt to the changing nature of the labour market, which is subject to automation and changes in job content and working conditions, among other recent trends¹. There is still a lack of consensus in labeling these skills (see Box 1), and in this brief, we will call them social and emotional skills, interchangeably with non-cognitive skills. These are skills involved in achieving goals, when working with others and being aware of and managing emotions, attitudes and beliefs. As such, they manifest themselves in countless everyday life situations.² Research has shown better employability and earnings³ as well as higher productivity⁴ for individuals equipped with non-cognitive skills, which, together with digital skills, are expected to be required for most jobs in the future (see Figure 1). A recent, more focused meta-analysis of the impact of social and emotional skills on labour market outcomes shows that 'favourable'

skills like conscientiousness and openness are rewarded on the labour market with an increase in earnings, although to a limited extent compared to cognitive skills.⁵ At the same time, training programmes with a particular focus on the development of social and emotional skills can yield a positive and significant effect on earnings.⁶ In a world driven by fast technological change, skills like awareness of emotions and coping with stress are needed more than ever before. Social and emotional skills such as conflict resolution, resilience, flexibility, cooperation, self-awareness, creativity and empathy are becoming relevant in the different spheres of our life to cope with this uncertainty in a healthy way.

This policy brief aims to strengthen awareness on the growing importance of social and emotional skills in our life. We are discussing the existing policies targeting to foster their development. In particular, we focus on the role of non-formal learning in developing social and emotional skills. This policy brief also highlights a lack of evaluation of non-formal learning programmes that may hinder participation.

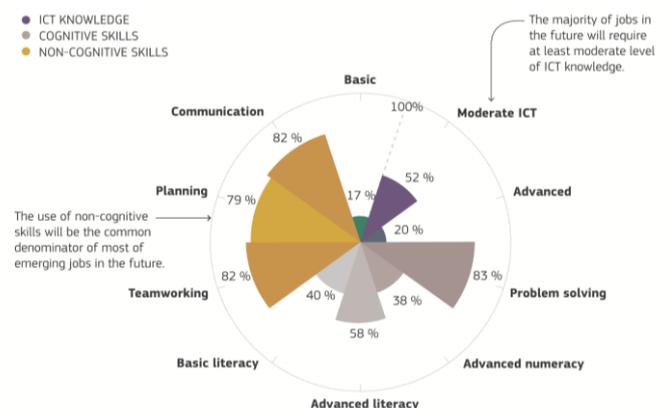


Figure 1. Average degree of importance of skills across jobs with a positive employment outlook, 2015-25, EU28.

Note: Information about the levels of skills is based on multiple choice question and was self-declared.

Source: Cedefop European skills and jobs survey; Cedefop European skills forecasts after Gonzalez Vazquez et al., 2019, p.32

What are the basis of non-formal learning?

Non-formal learning refers to learning in structured programmes for developing skills and knowledge, but with different mechanisms of personal development than formal learning. Non-formal learning does not involve formal assessment processes (e.g. exams), and, therefore, usually does not lead to any certification required by workplaces, communities or individuals. These do not lead to nationally or internationally accredited formal qualifications. Both UNESCO and the Council of Europe stress almost the same understanding of non-formal learning features as: voluntary participation, being purposive and being targeted to certain groups of people. Non-formal learning could take place in “diverse range of environments and situations for which teaching/training and learning is not necessarily their sole or main activity” (Council of Europe). Non-formal learning activities and courses are “planned, but are seldom structured by conventional rhythms or curriculum subjects”, and usually such programmes “do not necessarily follow the ‘ladder’ system, and for that reason may have a differing duration”¹⁶. Non-formal learning is also learner-centred, starting from where the learner is at and engaging with the learner’s life experiences. Depending on country contexts, it may cover educational programmes to impart adult literacy, basic education for out-of-school children, life skills, work skills, and general culture¹⁷.

Benefits from attending non-formal learning programmes

Participation in non-formal learning gives people the possibility to develop their values and social and emotional skills. Non-formal learning participation has the advantage of being geared to the specific life-long learning needs and interests of the potential learners. For instance, it may respond to work-related skill needs, and at the same time, it may also help people to understand how to get more involved in their local communities, or could serve their personal development and fulfilment. The usefulness of non-formal learning for individual learners is greater when it can be complemented by formal learning and learners can decide about their preferred style of learning.¹⁸

The EU enhances the role of non-formal learning in developing people’s skills

The EU actively develops non-formal learning opportunities. EU financial resources supporting non-formal learning are linked with the initiatives leading to the development of youth (e.g. Erasmus+ projects). The EU undertakes efforts to encourage people’s interest in participation in such activities not only by providing financial support but also by strengthening the recognition of non-formal learning. There is also a potential of non-formal learning to be used in the process of upskilling or re-skilling of the workforce.

Low participation in non-formal learning of young people in Europe

Although in the last few years participation in non-formal learning has increased among the youngest age groups in the EU (see Figure 3), it is still quite low, at 14% for 15-19 year-olds. In comparison, 78.8% of adults (people aged 25-64) reported participation in at least one activity (e.g. course, training) that aimed at developing their skills in a non-formal way in the last 12 months (Adult Education Survey, 2016).

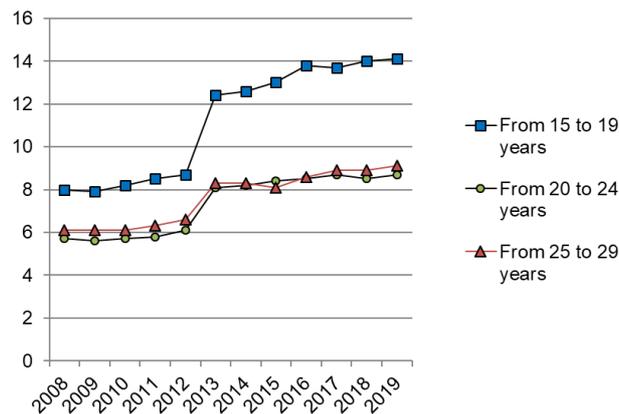


Figure 3. Participation rate in non-formal learning and training by age (last 4 weeks)

Source: Eurostat [yth_educ_060]

Putting aside a problem of comparing these shares due to different phrasing of question on participation in non-formal activities, such low participation rates among younger people could be explained also by the fact that, at this early stage of life, most people still attend formal education, which may entirely cover their education needs. At the same time, the increasing trend in the last years may result from the fact that individual needs for education have become more diverse and are changing so rapidly that formal education alone is unable to satisfy them. Yet, the recent changes introduced in the implementation of EU policies had an important impact on this trend too. In particular, from 2014 non-formal learning programmes targeting the problem of youth employability were accepted to receive financial support from EU. There was a significant shift from focusing on “personal and cultural development, and inspiring a sense of active citizenship among young people”, towards “the acquisition of professional skills of youth workers, validation systems of non-formal learning, and greater complementarities with formal education and training”¹⁹. Although there is no direct reference to non-formal learning programmes, the recently published Youth Employment Support²⁰ confirms further financial support of programmes aiming at upskilling unemployed or inactive young people focusing on e.g. digital, green, entrepreneurial and career management skills.

Highly educated people have higher participation rates in non-formal learning

In general, across EU Member States, financial support is targeted to more vulnerable groups e.g. low-skilled or low-qualified workers²¹ whose participation in non-formal trainings is still more than 5 percentage point lower than for highly educated people (AES 2016).

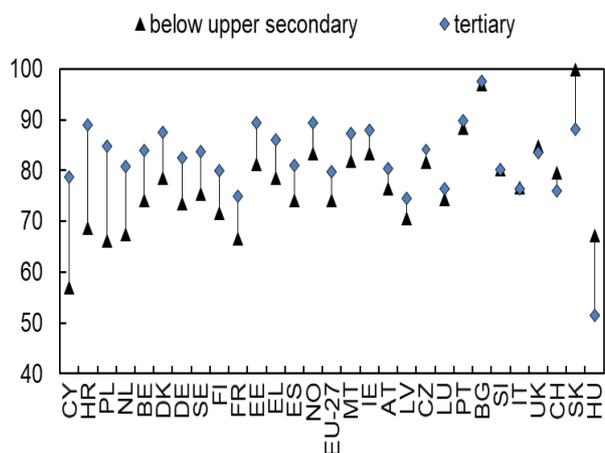


Figure 4. Participation rates in non-formal learning by education level (2016)

Source: Eurostat [TRNG_AES_122]

On average 74.1% of people aged 25-64 with below upper secondary education participated in at least one job related non-formal learning and training activity in the 12 months preceding the survey. Whilst for those with a tertiary degree this share was 79.7%. In three countries, Cyprus, Croatia and Poland, those differences were much larger (19-22 percentage points). Only in Slovakia and Hungary these shares were reversed, with much higher participation of lower educated people than people with tertiary education. Interestingly, higher participation rates in non-formal learning and training do not always mean higher intensity of participation, in terms of hours of instruction, which allows, at least partially, for compensating this gap according to education level.²²

Lack of financial resources may hinder participation in non-formal learning programmes

The lack of financial resources may hinder participation in non-formal learning programmes.²³ A majority of adults who attended non-formal learning and training activities for job-related trainings admitted those were mostly sponsored by their employers (AES, 2016). The active financial involvement of employers in organising the courses could explain higher participation among working adults.²⁴ Other deterrents to non-formal learning participation can be divided into three clusters: situational, dispositional and institutional, similarly to formal education.²⁵ The first ones refer to lack of time because of balancing multiple roles (such as caring for children or parents); or to health conditions or disabilities. Dispositional deterrents refer to learners' self-perceptions

and attitudes, such as low confidence, negative past schooling experiences, or fear.²⁶ Lastly, institutional deterrents may relate to lack of information, inconvenient course times, or prohibitive tuition rates. It is important to increase visibility of benefits from participation in non-formal learning to encourage young people to participate in them.

Box 2. A review of non-formal learning projects

A recent JRC review, carried out by Paul Downes from Dublin City University, on education and training for non-cognitive skills identified and reviewed a total of 1 388 projects from EU programmes which promote social and emotional skills, with 1 058 Erasmus+ or Lifelong Learning programme projects, and 303 Youth projects, mainly in English language.

Additionally, a literature review using the Web of Science and ERIC search engines was carried out. It found 821 articles covering topics of social and emotional education, soft skills, personal development education, non-cognitive skills in the context of non-formal learning. Relevant policy, scientific and technical reports not included in the Web of Science search were also examined. Finally, relevant projects were also sought from leading EU networks in this broad area, namely the Lifelong Learning Platform, European Network for Social and Emotional Competence, Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training, European Association for the Education of Adults and the Learning for Wellbeing Foundation.

Eventually these research activities led to the creation of the database of 154 examples of promising practices for Personal and Social Skills in non-formal learning in Europe. This word cloud summarises the skills most often mentioned in those projects. The results of this project will be presented in a forthcoming article²⁷.



Note: Size of the word corresponds to the number of programmes that transmit this particular skill. Only displayed skills that appear in at least 5 programmes are displayed.

Abundance of non-formal learning programmes to develop social and emotional skills

A JRC review of projects for non-formal learning allowed identification of at least 154 relevant examples for future development of social and emotional skills (see Box 2 for the project description). Their further analysis reveals that social and emotional skills are a multidimensional issue pervading a wide range of domains. The promising practices analysed cover different areas that could help to develop social and emotional skills, mostly in the area of outdoor education, arts education, restorative practices, volunteering, empowerment of marginalised parents, and intergenerational empathy.

Outdoor education fosters development of social and emotional skills

There is strong research evidence, mainly from outside the EU, showing multidimensional benefits of outdoor education, which among others include increased social connection and leadership skills.²⁸ For example, children's participation in dinghy sailing confirms benefits of outdoor education in enhancing social and emotional skills, in particular in developing problem solving and communication, providing social support, and controlling emotions and personal feelings.²⁹ Outdoor programmes can help address the problem of the negative health impacts from young people's excessive screen time.³⁰ Activities such as canoeing, rock-climbing and hiking could improve mental health and wellbeing, including personal development and team building skills.³¹ Moreover, outdoor activities such as backpacking, canoeing and kayaking could help reduce psychological stress.³² Participation in forest schools could also play a role in promotion of resilience, independence and wellbeing.³³ Another study reveals that outdoor education contributed to promotion of resilience and a growth mindset.³⁴ Not only young people benefit from outdoor education. For older people a positive relation between their participation in microadventures close to home and individual well-being and maintenance of skills is observed.³⁵

Enrolment in music education boosts young people conscientiousness and openness

There is a widespread recognition that artistic disciplines, including music, have a positive effect on children's and adolescents' social and emotional development. For example, the German Socio-Economic Panel data brings evidence on causality between participating in a music training outside of school and developing personal and social skills. Based on this study, learning a musical instrument leads to higher performance in and engagement with school as well as higher conscientiousness, openness, and ambition.³⁶ The outcomes of another project highlights the clear benefits for personal and social development from participating in a music group.³⁷ The multidimensional benefits offered by such participation as well as the ease in which such a project can be expanded and scaled up for wider contexts, combined with the universality

of the appeal of music across diverse cultures, make this a clear candidate for further skill development.

Dancing classes contribute to the development of social and emotional skills

Although the impact on social and emotional skills development from participation in dancing classes requires more research to be confirmed in a similar way as for music education, it may still bring benefits.³⁸ Adolescents who dance are more optimistic about their future and have an increased perception of control. It is to be noted that dance as a medium for emotional expression and self-reflection is emphasised as being particularly helpful for young women in a recent Australian qualitative research study.³⁹ In light of the COVID-19 situation, at least some dance approaches are amenable to social distancing while taking place in school and non-formal learning settings, and such approaches can also be developed in an enjoyable and structured way for learning from home.

Volunteering strengthens the development of leadership skills

Volunteering is another component of non-formal learning whose beneficial effects on health outcomes have been well documented.⁴⁰ Participation in voluntary services is proved to be a significant predictor of better mental and physical health⁴¹ and has positive influence on self-esteem⁴² or level of happiness.⁴³ Volunteering may also contribute to the development of leadership skills by fostering the growth of emotional intelligence.⁴⁴ And the importance of promoting leadership skills has been emphasised with regard to future roles in the workplaces. Early signals of leadership qualities during school can be valid predictors of labour market outcomes during adulthood: individuals with leadership positions in high school earn between 4 to 24% higher wages about 10 years later.⁴⁵ The Commission is working to improve and promote volunteering among people, particularly young ones via various established programmes, e.g. Erasmus+ and the European Voluntary Service.

Restorative practice helps improve social contacts and reduce conflicts

Restorative practice is "*the science of restoring and developing social capital, social discipline, emotional well-being and civic participation through participatory learning and decision-making*".⁴⁶ The application of such practices aims to improve and repair relationships between people and communities. This strategy can be applied across a wide range of age groups from young children to adults. Restorative practice is based on observation that teaching students the ability to navigate challenging experiences and effective communication can be easily paired with

development of their social and emotional skills. Learners become conscious and aware of their feelings and learn how to proactively address them.^{47 48 49 50} Restorative practice programmes offer strategies also for engaging alienated students.⁵¹ Restorative practice could also play a strategic role in building relational competences of teachers to resolve conflicts and learn classroom management skills, particularly in initial teacher education. The results of assessment of Restorative Practice Programme carried out in Tallaght, a highly vulnerable and socio-economically excluded area in Ireland,⁵² shows that programme participation improved social contacts and reduced conflicts by developing social and emotional skills, such as empathy, perspective taking, conflict resolution, relationship and listening skills.

The role of non-formal learning projects in developing social and emotional skills needs more impact assessment

The JRC review and comparative analysis of non-formal learning projects engaged in development of social and emotional skills⁵³ reveals that their evaluation is either non-existent or weak. While many projects had clear goals, specific target outcomes were less present. Only a few projects involved a pre and post-test methodology and only some adopted a control group. Moreover, it is notable that almost no project was evaluated as ineffective or even detrimental to children and young people with unanticipated negative effects. Many of the project examples are generally loosely structured and are not directly replicable.

More specifically, for numerous EU-funded volunteer project examples in non-formal learning, there is a need for more structured and context sensitive feedback from local groups on success and areas for development in volunteers' activities. The question arises in particular for lack of feedback provided from the recipients of the volunteers' work to assess if they found such work to be beneficial for them and their peers in a local community context.

This area requires much more investment in impact evaluation. Such research is key to addressing the need for more comparative analysis of the transferability of the various thematic approaches and long-term impact assessment, as well as for more evaluation and feedback from participants. This will also require commitment to moving beyond initial pilot projects in a given thematic area to more sustained and sustainable projects, interventions and practices.

Policy implications

Based on the JRC review of non-formal learning projects that aim at social and emotional skills development (see Box 2), we may consider the following possible policy implications:

- More comprehensive funding strategies could be developed in order to promote projects targeted to the development of social and emotional skills through non-formal education. This will ensure sustainability and expansion of these projects over time.
- The thematic activities discussed in this policy brief (outdoor education, music education, dancing, volunteering and restorative practice), could be part of strategies to develop the EU key competence on personal, social and learning to learn.
- An assertive outreach approach⁵⁴ would help to increase engagement in non-formal learning, in particular of marginalised groups.
- While recognising that it is always difficult to isolate the impacts of non-formal education projects from other educational interventions, more evaluation of ongoing benefits of projects appears to be needed, also with a longitudinal approach.⁵⁵
- Impact evaluation could include more explicit and consistent processes, such as feedback from all project participants.

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