



Policy Paper on Non-Formal Education:  
A framework for indicating and assuring  
quality

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## **0. Executive summary**

Non-Formal Education (NFE), and the increase in its recognition, is a top priority for the European Youth Forum (YFJ). That the recognition has not been sufficiently achieved is in part due to a lack of confidence in the quality of NFE within society and within youth organisations themselves. The YFJ believes that youth organisations can further the recognition of NFE by clearly ensuring the quality of NFE through the setting up of a framework to assure and communicate this quality. With this Policy Paper, the YFJ proposes a Quality Assurance Framework based on a solid understanding of quality and coming from the specific reality of NFE as provided by youth organisations.

The Policy Paper provides a comprehensive set of concepts based on the cornerstone definition: *The quality of NFE in youth NGOs is the degree to which selected needs of society and of learners are reached and addressed.*

Based on this definition Quality Assurance (QA) is the process designed with a dual purpose: of improving quality and of communicating clearly with stakeholders about it. The definition further differentiates between needs of learners and of society and proposes different approaches for both.

The understanding of quality and of the needs that NFE wants to address form the basis for the proposed QA Framework which is an agreement between all stakeholders in a certain field on how quality assurance in the NFE field will be organised. This Framework, consisting of an internal QA process, an external QA component and a set of Quality Indicators should be formalised by all stakeholders in a common Charter. The YFJ proposes to base the external component of QA on the innovative concept of 'Peer Feedback'.

The development of a Quality Assurance Framework for NFE will be a long-term process. The European Youth Forum therefore proposes a Road Map with 2015 as a concrete deadline. Leading up to 2015 a political process, an expertise building process and a capacity building process need to be combined on the European, national and local levels.

Youth organisations provide quality education through their non-formal education programmes and the Quality Assurance Framework will provide the way for recognising this quality. With this Policy Paper the European Youth Forum therefore calls on all stakeholders to follow its lead in this process to assure and recognise the quality of NFE in Europe.

## **1. Introduction and background**

### **1.1 European Youth Forum and NFE**

Non-Formal Education (NFE), and the increase in its recognition, have been among the top priorities for the European Youth Forum (YFJ) over the last ten years. The YFJ has contributed greatly to the development of the concept and its practical implementation, and with pride we see that the youth field is now considered by the European Commission to be the most advanced field in the recognition of NFE.

Both on the European level and global levels, the European Youth Forum has been instrumental in developing the concept of NFE and initiating related political debate with institutions including the European Union, the Council of Europe,

UNESCO and the World Bank. Through YFJ policy papers produced in 1997, 2003 and 2005, this political process was led by youth organisations.

This process has, in recent years, also been accompanied by other more practical processes such as the European Qualifications Framework, the Europass and the Youth Pass, developed by the European Union; and the European Portfolio for Youth Workers and Youth Leaders, of the Council of Europe.

In the YFJ Policy Paper on the Recognition of non-formal education (2005), the issue of quality was defined as one of the core issues to be developed in conjunction with these concrete processes: 'Recognition of non-formal education also implies [the] responsibility of youth organisations in ensuring [the] quality of the learning offer when it comes to organised learning schemes.' The European Youth Forum believes that it is now time to take up that responsibility and take the recognition of NFE to the next level.

### **1.2 Aims and structure of the Policy Paper.**

To address the needs of YFJ Member Organisations within this specific political context, the European Youth Forum aims, through this Policy Paper on Quality Indicators for Non-Formal Education, to *maintain, improve and recognise the quality of NFE in youth NGOs.*

More specifically, the YFJ is seeking to define and describe the quality of NFE in youth organisations; to support reflection on the quality of NFE in Youth NGOs; to respect diversity among organisations and acknowledge the importance of context/specific situations, and the specific aims and target groups of different NGOs; to contribute to the European debate on the understanding of quality objectives in NFE; and to increase the visibility of NFE and Quality in NFE - thereby supporting the recognition of NFE by society and the self-recognition of the organisations and individuals involved in it.

#### **Structure of the Policy Paper**

In this paper, the YFJ explores the political situation regarding NFE and in the next chapter proposes the core concepts of 'quality'. This is followed by a thorough exploration of the needs addressed by NFE. The fourth chapter deals with the proposed Quality Assurance Framework; with the paper concluding with a Road Map to achieve this ambitious goal by 2015.

### **1.3 Recognition based on building trust**

Youth organisations, as the main providers of NFE, have, over recent years, assumed the responsibility of positioning NFE on the same level as formal education, within the education debate. Despite this continued effort, the recognition of NFE has not progressed sufficiently. The YFJ together with its Member Organisations believes that there is still a lack of confidence regarding the effectiveness of NFE: both within youth organisations and within society.

Quality and quality assurance are designed to build that confidence by providing a common language with which to describe the effectiveness of NFE. Quality assurance can therefore be the missing element taking the recognition of NFE to the practical level and increasing it.

Better recognition of NFE will prove to be beneficial for the individual learner taking part in NFE: through self recognition s/he will be able to make more

informed life choices and their learning will be given the weight it deserves, with respect to the available opportunities in formal education or employment.

Quality and quality assurance can also be instrumental for the further development of NFE providers. As youth organisations providing NFE engage consciously in the design of their educational programmes, quality assurance is a very useful approach through which they may ensure the high level of their work and identify areas in which further development is possible and welcome.

As stated in its 2005 policy paper ‘Recognition of non-formal education: Confirming the real competencies of young’ (0716-05)<sup>1</sup>, the YFJ believes that youth organisations have a responsibility to ensure the quality of the learning and learning activities they provide: with this current policy paper, the Member Organisations of the YFJ are assuming that responsibility. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the fulfilment of the obligations, as outlined in the *Common Principles on the recognition of NFE*<sup>2</sup> adopted by the EU Council, for NFE stakeholders to build confidence and trust through transparent quality management processes.

Developing a quality assurance framework at the European level is a long-term process - similar processes in other educational fields have taken many years to develop and launch, and are being continuously revised.

The European Youth Forum is convinced that a Quality Assurance framework could be a serious step forward for the recognition of NFE in youth organisations, if done well - yet recognises that this will not always be an easy process and is one that requires long-term commitment from all actors involved: both youth organisations and institutions.

#### **1.4 NFE in Youth organisations: the relationship with youth work**

The scope of this policy paper is the assurance of quality NFE in youth organisations. The paper will not, therefore, include NFE as practised in adult education, cultural organisations, trade unions etc, nor does it aim to propose a model for quality assurance in youth work or for the entire mission of a youth organisation.

*Non-Formal Education* is defined by the European Youth Forum as: an organised educational process which takes place alongside mainstream systems of education and training, and does not typically lead to certification. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis and as a result, the individual takes an active role in the learning process. Unlike *informal learning*, where learning happens less consciously, with non-formal education, the individual is usually aware of the fact that s/he is learning.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.youthforum.org/Downloads/policy\\_docs/learner-centred\\_education/0716-05.pdf](http://www.youthforum.org/Downloads/policy_docs/learner-centred_education/0716-05.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union, ‘9600/04 - Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning’, (Brussels: 18 May 2004)

<sup>3</sup> European Youth Forum, ‘Policy Paper on Youth organisations as non-formal educators - recognising our role [0618-03]’

*Youth work* is defined by the European Youth Forum as: Actions, activities, processes and projects, undertaken by or for youth with the scope to improve the status of young people, increase the level of their representation and active participation or build their capacity to undertake such actions. Youth work aims to improve the status of a sensitive societal element and subsequently takes part in the construction of civil society; therefore it should be considered a public good without lucrative connotations and treated as such by the corresponding authorities.

Various components of youth work such as advocacy, recreational activities, and civil society activism, are distinct from NFE and are not directly tackled in this policy paper.

Non-Formal Education in youth organisations takes place in the specific environment of youth work, and has evolved into a specific and successful type of education with the following characteristics:

- Voluntary: learners participate in NFE activities through their own compulsion.
- Intentional: activities are designed to reach set aims.
- Participative: young people participate actively in the design and implementation of the learning programmes.
- Conscious: the learners are aware that they are learning.
- Process-oriented: what happens during the learning process is of great importance as it allows the learner to choose what s/he wants to learn and achieve.

All Non-Formal Education taking place in youth organisations should have these characteristics, which are often referred to as the 'Qualities of NFE'. To avoid confusion with the concept of 'quality' proposed in this paper, the YFJ will here refer to these 'qualities' of NFE rather as 'characteristics'.

## **2. Quality and Quality Assurance**

Quality is widespread in business and policy making and has led to serious improvements. However it is also used by various institutions and organisations as a 'hip' term for marketing purposes; here, 'quality' is often undefined and assurance of its delivery often unclear. The YFJ believes that quality is a concept that should be taken seriously, and therefore wishes to define a common language, with a coherent set of key concepts, with which to discuss quality and quality assurance - both within the NFE field and with external stakeholders.

### **2.1 Definition of Quality of Non-Formal Education in Youth NGOs**

Various definitions of quality exist that range from the very vague ("Value to some person"<sup>4</sup>) to those very specifically related to a given process and/or field. Though most definitions are closely linked to a Quality Assurance process, discussions about quality are often diluted by misunderstandings over the term itself<sup>5</sup>.

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[http://www.youthforum.org/Downloads/policy\\_docs/learner-centred\\_education/0618-03.pdf](http://www.youthforum.org/Downloads/policy_docs/learner-centred_education/0618-03.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Gerald M. Weinberg

<sup>5</sup> We recognise that the term 'quality' is commonly used in the following contexts:

Based on an extensive comparison of various definitions and various quality assurance processes, the European Youth Forum proposes a simple definition: “Quality is the degree to which a set aim is reached”.

This definition of Quality can be adapted to the specific field of NFE in Youth NGOs as follows:

***The quality of NFE in youth NGOs is the degree to which selected needs of society and of learners are reached and addressed.***

This definition is a variation on the ‘fitness for purpose’ model of quality assurance and very similar to the definition of the International Standards Organisation<sup>6</sup>. It concentrates on the process and has two fundamental implications: Quality can only be defined if there are aims and if there is a way of comparing the aims with the results. This definition has various components that will be developed throughout this paper.

The definition further implies that the aims set by youth organisations for their NFE activities address **two different kinds of needs**: the needs of society and those of the individual learners. In the following chapters the following crucial questions will be answered: what are these needs? How are they addressed? How is meeting them measurable? Finally, how does the capacity and mission of the NFE provider affect the quality?

## **2.2 Definition of Quality Assurance**

While Quality is a concept, Quality Assurance is a process which can be implemented by an organisation in order to assure quality. As with the concept of quality, this concept also has many interpretations and ‘quality control’ and ‘quality assurance’ are often used interchangeably.

The YFJ thus proposes the following definitions:

Quality control is the measurement or assessment of quality. This can be done once or can be part of a process of Quality Assurance.

Quality assurance is a dynamic process used to ensure that the learning outcome will satisfy the requirements for quality. It involves assessing the organisation, not only the individual, with the individual outcome only able to be thoroughly assessed after completion of the education programme. Assessing the organisation therefore allows one to assure that the individual’s learning within the particular NFE programme will be satisfactory.

Next to this internal purpose, there is the external purpose to build trust with stakeholders by communicating clearly how quality is assured.

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- As a noun, to describe features of a subject. For example: the qualities of a certain football can be round, leather, light.
  - As a noun, to describe the degree to which a given aim is reached. For example: the quality of a certain educational exercise is good if 80% of the learners have acquired the skill taught.
  - As an adjective to describe a subjective notion of appreciation. For example quality food is food that is appreciated.

<sup>6</sup> ISO 9000: Definition of Quality ‘Degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfill requirements’.

### **3. Addressing needs by setting aims**

Non- Formal Education in youth organisations aims to address two different needs: the needs of the individual to receive a unique learning opportunity, and the needs of society for its citizens to be educated. Some needs will obviously overlap, as they can be felt both by the individual and by society.

#### **3.1 Addressing the needs of society**

Non-Formal Education in youth organisations aims to address the needs of society through facilitating peer-led educational opportunities for young people. Democratic societies need citizens that take responsibility for their actions and are aware of the influence their actions have upon society and upon the environment. For society, the core aspect of NFE is the fostering of active citizenship and the transmission of values: e.g. those of human rights and freedom; democracy; respect; diversity; peace and prosperity;; sustainable development; social justice; solidarity; and gender equality.

These are the values that form the core of the work of YFJ Member Organisations, and are both transferred through NFE and also form the basis for its practical implementation. While these values are shared by the different organisations, they are prioritised differently, due to the diversity of these organisations, and the different target groups with whom they work.

#### **3.2 Addressing the learning needs of young people.**

Young people have learning needs that are either insufficiently addressed or not addressed at all by other educational actors, formal education and the communities in which they grow up; furthermore, these are needs which the young cannot themselves address through informal learning.

In NFE the learning aims are set both by the learner and by the NFE-provider. Youth organisations select needs that they themselves identify, or that have been articulated by young people, and then develop NFE programmes that attract learners with these learning needs.

Even when young people with similar interests meet within an organisation or programme, they still all have their own individual learning needs: in order to best address these individual learning needs, NFE is built upon a learner-centred approach.

#### **3.3 Addressing diversity and sustainability needs**

Every youth organisation aims to address needs, and these aims are selected based upon the mission and capacity of the organisation. Therefore each youth organisation will have different NFE programmes catering to different target groups and addressing different needs.

The more diverse the NFE in the youth field, the more needs of society and of individuals will be addressed. The responsibility for assuring the diversity of the NFE in the youth field lies mainly with society and its institutions; with this assurance secured by providing sustainable funding to a great variety of youth organisations. A further important way to ensure diversity is to make it easy for youth organisations to develop new projects and to reach out to new groups.

The more sustainable the youth field, the higher will be the quality of the NFE provided. A diversity of skills and attitudes is not developed through a single event, but demands a longer educational process. To achieve quality when catering to

these needs, sustained effort needs to be made and the organisation must be enabled to live up to this responsibility.

Therefore before youth organisations can address the needs of society and of the individual, their own needs should be addressed. The core need in this respect is recognition by society, including by different actors in the field of education and by institutional partners. The greater the recognition of youth organisations as providers of quality non-formal educational opportunities for specific and targeted audiences, the greater the opportunities for their members, and their beneficiaries.

Such a climate, fostering diversity and sustainability, would be defined by the following aspects: a stable legal climate; an absence of rules and criteria, imposed by society and government, that do not come from the field itself; sustainable funding for youth organisations and their educational programmes; and the means and space to consent to cyclical work - since demands for too much professional experience can lead to the exclusion of inexperienced young people from youth organisations. The European Youth Forum intends to continue its work advocating for these necessary conditions, with all relevant actors.

#### **4. Quality Assurance**

The aim of this chapter is to develop a consistent approach to Quality Assurance for NFE in the youth field: a framework that describes the roles and tasks of the stakeholders and youth organisations working on and communicating quality. Furthermore, this chapter gives a clear proposal on how organisations can work with quality assurance in order to measure, recognise, communicate, ensure and improve quality. A common way of doing this is by developing quality indicators, either quantitative or descriptive.

##### **4.1 Quality Assurance Framework**

A Quality Assurance Framework is an agreement between all stakeholders in a certain field on how quality assurance in that field will be organised. This agreement should be in the form of a Charter signed by all stakeholders, and contain an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance. It should specify the role and obligations of all stakeholders, with a clear division of the responsibilities and financial support.

The quality assurance process consists of an internal Quality Assurance (QA) process within the organisation, followed by an external QA process. After careful investigation of several possibilities for this external QA process, the European Youth Forum proposes a 'Peer feedback' system.

'Peers' - practitioners from other youth organisations - would thus provide feedback to a certain NFE programme on the basis of agreed indicators. Peer feedback would provide opportunities for exchange between organisations through participation in the planning, execution and evaluation of an agreed NFE activity. Peers would contribute to the increased quality of NFE activities by sharing their experiences and taking part in the qualitative evaluation of the activity. The goal is two-fold: firstly, it is a useful method for ensuring quality - learning from peers and comparing methods and enhancing them. Secondly, it is a guarantee for stakeholders that the reporting undertaken is a correct reflection of reality.



#### **4.2 Quality assurance within an organisation**

The Quality Assurance process in each organisation should proceed according to the following Quality Assurance Standards:

- The organisation has a QA process gathering data
- The organisation uses the data to improve on-going and future processes
- The organisation reports to and consults with stakeholders included in the Quality Assurance Framework.

##### **The Quality Assurance process:**

Many youth organisations already work extensively on setting objectives and evaluation and should find that a QA process complements this way of working. A quality assurance process within an organisation for an NFE programme could thus follow the cycle below:

##### *1. Self review and Consultation*

The organisation organises an internal discussion and a consultation with stakeholders to gather information about the learning needs and to learn from previous NFE schemes.

##### *2. Setting objectives and themes*

Based on the information received in the first phase, the organisation sets out the objectives and the themes on which it wants to work during the proposed NFE programme. Setting out these objectives has to be accompanied by determination of quality indicators and how these will be assessed.

##### *3. Designing the NFE scheme*

*4. Implementation of the programme* using quality control and continuous evaluation and adjustment of the programme.

##### *5. Reporting and peer feedback*

As a result of the peer feedback process, a final joint report will be written.

##### *6. Adjustments of scheme and possibly the procedures*

An important part of the Quality Assurance process is to document systematically the crucial points of the process itself. This documentation will facilitate reporting and review procedures, but also enable the organisation to create support resources for following cycles.

#### **4.3 Quality Control and Quality Indicators**

*Quality control* is verification of how far set aims have been reached at a certain point, and should be based on thorough evaluation and constructive feedback. Every organisation can test or assess the points they find relevant for their programme at any appropriate moment.

Quality control of the NFE provider will take learning outcomes into account and compare them with the learning objectives.

However, not all learning outcomes can be easily measured as some can only be assessed in the long term. For instance, testing each programme or learner for the values transmitted through NFE is not necessary, although periodical surveys are needed to recognise changes and whether the particular values have actually been transferred. A good example is the evaluation of the Youth programme, which showed that NFE provided by youth NGOs and supported by the Youth programme

of the European Union had significant learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup> An important part of assessing learning outcomes therefore needs to be done through research by international institutions.

In addition, each learner should be able to evaluate for themselves whether their learning objectives have been met; and this evaluation should be facilitated by the provider youth organisation, through a conscious learning process - including reflection and self-assessment which makes visible the learning outcomes. The youth NGO needs to be aware of how all its individual learners perceive their learning experiences.

### **Quality Indicators:**

Non-formal education, as most educational programmes, is influenced by an immense diversity of factors: it is often impossible, and indeed, neither desirable nor efficient, to measure them all. To overcome this hurdle, indicators can be developed.

### **What are Indicators?**

Indicators are understood as an individual or composite statistic relating to a basic construct in education, and are useful in a policy context.<sup>8</sup>

Indicators can be of the quantitative (measured and expressed in numbers) or descriptive kind: for example, an indicator on inclusion could describe the '*level of involvement/participation*'(descriptive), or express the '*number of participants from disadvantaged background*' (quantitative).

### **How do they fit into the process of QA?**

With respect to Quality Assurance, indicators are a simplification used to represent reality, and are agreed upon by all actors involved.

Given that they represent valuable, relevant information, specific aspects of education and specific indicators are chosen from amongst all the possible options; moreover, they are chosen to ensure that most aspects of the educational process are covered. These are agreed upon by all stakeholders to represent reality and it is assumed that verification and review of these aspects and indicators will adequately reflect the whole educational programme.

**Within the QA framework proposed**, the indicators need to be agreed upon by all stakeholders. These indicators will be measured through the quality control; be reported upon; and be the subject of peer feedback.

**The European Youth Forum proposes the following list of Quality Indicators (QI):** The YFJ believes that a good QI list comprises the key areas of the NFE process and singles out one or more key points within each area. The list of QI proposed here will need to be tested and agreed upon by stakeholders: a final, definitive list is foreseen to be a part of the QA Charter.

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<sup>7</sup> Participation in the YOUTH programme has increased the sense of belonging to Europe for a number of participants. Three quarters of the respondents in Action 1 and 60 percent in Action 2 feel more positive about Europe, now that they have participated in the programme. (Study yet to be published.)

<sup>8</sup> Shavelson, Richard J., McDonnell, L. & J. Oakes (1991). What are educational indicators and indicator systems?. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 2(11).

The set of indicators proposed reflects then, four aspects of a non-formal education programme, namely: the resources; the educators; the content; and the learning process.

*Resources/coordination*

- The necessary resources are available
- Resources are used in a sustainable way

*Educators*

- Educators are prepared
- Educators are able to adapt to changing situations

*Content*

- The needs of the target group are translated into NFE
- The mission and values of the organisation or group are translated into NFE

*Learning process*

- The methodology selected is suitable for the learning process
- Learners influence their learning process.
- The learning process and its results are reflected upon
- The NFE programme is designed within a long-term perspective

It is then up to each individual organisation to create its own description of each indicator: for example, whether the necessary resources to deliver a quality programme are available, and whether they are available at the necessary time.

## **5. Roadmap to a Quality Assurance Framework for NFE**

The development of a Quality Assurance Framework will be a long term process that will take several years. The European Youth Forum proposes 2015 as a concrete deadline which provides both sufficient time and a clear horizon within which a detailed timeline can be developed.

This process should culminate in the realisation of an NFE field for youth organisations in which:

- Youth organisations providing NFE are widely recognised as quality education providers.
- The conditions necessary for NFE providers to provide quality NFE are fulfilled.
- All relevant stakeholders have clear roles and responsibilities.
- All stakeholders are comfortable with their defined roles.
- External actors - such as potential learners - can easily access information on the QA framework.

The European Youth Forum believes that this should be possible by 2015 with several processes running in parallel, in order to reach this goal:

### **A political process:**

All relevant stakeholders (EU institutions, Member States, civil society and the social partners, along with other international institutions such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the World Bank) should start a structured discussion based on an equal partnership between NFE providers and institutions, culminating in a **Quality Assurance Charter for Non-Formal Education**.

The European Youth Forum has, in recent years, organised two Dialogue Conferences on the recognition of NFE. As they are considered to be an excellent

space for discussion, the European Youth Forum will continue investing in this process.

However the European Youth Forum believes that the European Commission, Council of Europe and their mutual partnership for youth research, have a key role to play in this process by inviting the Member States and youth organisations to engage in structured dialogue.

**Expertise building processes:**

Quality assurance is a new concept for those youth organisations providing NFE, and this concept, although developed by the field, will need to be extensively tested and refined. Therefore, the European Youth Forum proposes to launch several pilot projects to test the day-to-day practical implications of the concepts developed.

The YFJ sees the following as crucial starting points:

- Quality Assurance cycle: how to enhance current practice in order to transform it into an efficient QA process.
- Peer-feedback: how to organise peer-feedback efficiently, with as minimal bureaucracy as possible, and a maximisation of learning.
- Indicators: the European Youth Forum proposes a set of indicators as a basis for discussion of the development of the QA framework. These indicators will need to be tested and used to see whether they fulfil the requirement of being a consistent indicator system.

**Capacity building processes:**

The outcomes of the pilot projects and the expertise gained, should be distributed as quickly, and as efficiently as possible, among the different organisations and participating states. The European Youth Forum calls for a co-managed support structure at the European level, for QA in NFE youth organisations.

The national educational authorities have a key role to play in supporting and providing training on QA. In addition, the European Youth Forum will mandate the YFJ Pool of Trainers to develop adequate methods regarding QA.

**A Multi-level process:**

The QA process needs to be initiated on the European level but needs to be fed by parallel processes at the national and local levels.

**6. Conclusion**

Youth organisations are providing quality education through their non-formal education programmes. That this has not been sufficiently recognised is due in part to the lack of a framework to assure and communicate this quality. Addressing this absence can only be done successfully, through the development of a quality assurance framework by the NFE field, taking into account relevant quality assurance work done in other educational fields.

The European Youth Forum therefore proposes an ambitious scheme to establish a European Quality Assurance framework for NFE by 2015. This framework will be a serious commitment from youth organisations to assure the quality of their NFE in a transparent and cooperative way. It will be a process that will take time, research and resources from both youth organisations as well as other stakeholders; however, youth organisations have never shied away from a challenge and with this paper the European Youth Forum calls on all stakeholders to follow its lead in this process to assure and recognise the quality of NFE in Europe.