"Should you wish for a better life, engage in lifelong learning"

The Experiential Learning Theory investigating the relation between non-formal education and youth employability in the Republic of Armenia

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Abstract

The paper examines the relationship between non-formal education activities and youth employability in the Republic of Armenia. A case study has been conducted in order to identify soft skills competitive in the labour market and see to what extent non-formal education increases youth productivity thus helping them get engaged in the job market. Another thing that the paper aims to study is the role of the Government in overseeing the quality of skills offered by non-formal education activities. Firstly, the paper presents previous research conducted on non-formal education and youth employability as well as talks about Armenian context. The experiential learning theory developed by David Kolb guides the analysis and helps identify the main reasons for the popularity of non-formal education activities among the youth. The data for analysis was gathered through interviews with three key informants and 18 alumni of non-formal educational centers that are engaged in the labour market. The study shows a notable relation between non-formal education and youth employability as the majority of respondents could enter the job market due to the skills developed through non-formal activities.

Key words: non-formal education, youth employability, soft skills, lifelong learning, Armenia

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALLL	Armenian Lifelong Learning League
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ELT	Experiential Learning Theory
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IT	Information Technology
LSI	Learning Style Inventory
LLL	Lifelong Learning
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NEET	Neither Employed nor in Education or Training
RA	Republic of Armenia
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RVA	Recognition, Validation and Accreditation
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WDR	World Development Report
WHO	World Health Organisation

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1. Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in developing strategies, policies and agendas for achieving development on national and international level. Dezelan et al. (2014) make reference to human capital theory, according to which education is the main tool for individuals to acquire new skills and capacities, thus contributing to social and economic development. The rapid transformation the world is facing today such as globalisation, automatization of many fields and the application of artificial intelligence (AI) have considerably changed the requirements of the labour market, thus impacting the format of education as well (ILO, 2020).

In the last decade, the employment situation of the youth can be marked by high rates of unemployment and underemployment, lower quality jobs and hard labour market integration (Brewer, 2013). According to the World Development Report 2018, many young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, fail to successfully finish their formal education. As a result, most of them become unemployed or stuck in low-wage jobs without many opportunities for further education. People try to fill the gap left from incomplete formal education through lifelong learning, getting involved in out-of-school technical and vocational education and training (TVET) that is mostly provided via informal and non-formal education (NFE) (WDR, 2018).

As the International Labour Organisation (2020) states, the problem of youth unemployment can be addressed in a collaborative way by integrating governments, employers and employees. In the name of governments, education and training systems should follow the trends of the labour market and lay special emphasis on digital skills. On the other hand, employers should enlarge their involvement in education through new investments and workers should upgrade their skills or gain new ones through training, education and lifelong learning that includes non-formal and informal education activities (ILO, 2020).

Since 1972 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also referred to the essential role of lifelong learning for human development with the release of

"Learning to be" report which is a detailed research on lifelong learning with a special focus on promoting equality and sustainable development all around the world (Singh, 2015). Currently the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning is taking measures for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning, playing a central role in the international vision of developing and expanding lifelong learning. The Institute encourages UNESCO member states to improve mechanisms and establish frameworks for the recognition of all norms of learning (Ibid).

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relation of NFE activities and youth employability in the Republic of Armenia (RA). On the way of answering this question, there is also a need to find out what kind of skills are competitive in the job market nowadays and to what extent NFE programmes help the youth to develop them. In order to have valuable findings, the study aims to answer the main research question and the following subquestions:

How do non-formal education activities contribute to youth employability in the Republic of Armenia?

- Which "soft" skills are competitive in the labor market?
- To what extent do NFE activities reskill or upskill the youth for more productivity?
- What is the role of the Government in overseeing the quality of skills offered by NFE activities?

1.2 Definitions

Formal education

Formal education is a systematic and organised education model which is structured and administered in accordance with laws and norms and follows a set curriculum in regard to objectives, content and methodology (Dib, 1988). Hence, formal education programmes are recognized by national educational authorities or other institutions that cooperate with national or

sub-national educational authorities. The formal education system includes vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education (UNESCO, 2012).

Non-formal education

Non-formal education is defined as "any organised, systematic educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population, adults as well as children" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974:8). It can take a variety of forms in response to the needs of different individuals and groups in order to ensure the accessibility of education for all (Hamadache, 1991; UNESCO, 2012). Non-formal education can either provide qualifications that are not recognized as formal by educational authorities or not provide qualification at all (UNESCO, 2012).

Informal education

Informal education occurs in situations where either the learner or the source of information consciously intend to promote learning but not both, otherwise it would be classified as non-formal education (Hamadache, 1991). Though being capable of keeping a close relationship with both formal and non-formal education, informal education does not include the objectives and subjects and does not necessarily provide degrees or diplomas (Dib, 1988). Informal education may include learning activities taking place in the family, workplace and daily life such as visits to museums, fairs or exhibitions; listening to radio or watching TV; reading texts in journals, magazines or social media, etc. (Dib, 1988; UNESCO, 2012).

Youth

According to the definition suggested by the United Nations, "youth" are people between 15 and 24 years of age. This age group may be changed based on demographic, economic and socio-cultural settings. However, the 15-24 age cohort is used by international organisations for identifying the needs of the young and providing instructions for youth development (UNDESA).

Hard skills

Also known as Specific Competences, hard skills are "subject-based skills" that are usually gained through formal education and are applicable in a certain field or technology (Hendarman & Cantner, 2018). Professions equipt a person with hard skills that allow her/him to be what (s)he is: an engineer, a doctor, a philosopher, etc. In other words, they are specific capabilities performed in a particular job (Cimatti, 2016).

Soft skills

Soft skills are often called life skills that are developed through teaching or direct experience and help to manage situations/ difficulties in daily life (Veeramuthu & Elavarasan, 2020). World Health Organisation (WHO) (2003:8) defines life skills as *"abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life"*. Veeramuthu and Elavarasan (2020) categorise soft skills into three groups: personal qualities, interpersonal skills and additional skills/knowledge. In other words, soft skills are not directly connected to a specific job but rather to relations with other people in the workplace (Cimatti, 2016). Practicing soft/life skills may positively impact a person's self-esteem, thus making him/her more sociable, tolerant, independent and competent to take action and generate change (Veeramuthu & Elavarasan, 2020). Besides, soft skills are complementary to hard skills and make them more flexible to keep up with changing circumstances. Among the most competitive soft skills are critical thinking, communication skills, leadership skills, problem-solving, group work, digital literacy, etc. (Cimatti, 2016).

1.3 The Relevance of the Study

As the title indicates, the purpose of this study is to investigate the potential of NFE programmes in RA for developing professional skills of the youth and see to what extent the field is coordinated by the state. The case of post-Soviet Armenia is chosen as in spite of the increasing popularity of NFE programmes in the country, its impact on youth employability has not been studied before. Hence, there is a huge gap to be filled, thus contributing to the upcoming

research. The scarcity of research is a common issue in the post-Soviet world. As Lovakov and Yudkevich (2020) state, among post-Soviet countries only Russia, Lithuania and Estonia have more than 100 publications on education. They further note that post-Soviet researchers usually do not publish articles and academic papers on education-related topics such as learning/teaching issues, the quality of education, academic performance, student experience, etc. Besides, after the Armenian Velvet Revolution in 2018, the Government and the Ministry of Education and Science in particular has set a goal to significantly reform the field of education (Demytrie, 2018). Hence, the study may help understand the response of the new government to NFE.

1.4 Research Gap

The concept of NFE has been transformed from oral practices into institutionalized and written practices in the modern and postmodern era. Being far from "supplementary education" or "extracurricular activities", the NFE stepped into a worldwide education industry in the second half of last century, aimed at challenging the traditional formal concept of education (Romi & Schmida, 2009). In the postmodern era the NFE has already shown its considerable impact on the development of individuals and has full potential to strengthen its status, becoming the dominant mode of education. In spite of this fact, the survey of literature review indicates that the NFE is underresearched and the paucity of research becomes more eye-catching against the abundance of research on formal education (Chazan, 2003; Romi & Schmida, 2009). Beckerman and Silberman-Keller (2003) and Schmida and Romi (2007) explain that the small number of research conducted on NFE is conditioned by its lower esteem compared to formal education which is the result of the lower price of NFE. They further state that research on NFE is more often documented as research reports rather than refereed papers or as documents for the meetings of educational associations (Romi & Schmida, 2007).

2. Navigating Research on Non-Formal Education and Employability

2.1 Research on Non-Formal Education

This section defines NFE in more details and highlights the main characteristics that distinguishes it from formal education.

2.1.1 Defining Non-Formal Education and Its Types

Giving a precise definition to NFE that can distinguish it from other modes of education is not that simple. Romi and Schmida (2009) explain the difficulty by the plurality and ambiguity of various names given to NFE throughout the period of its development. The research on NFE, its types and its role on human development started to be carried out in the second half of the 20th century. Fordham, Poulton and Randle (1979), for instance, note that the concept of NFE can be perceived differently based on the way of representation and wording: e.g. out-of-school, alternative or complementary education shows its juxtaposition while, for instance, non-formal, a-formal education have negative connotation as they points at the lack of formality (Ibid.). However, both scholars and international organisations have their own approach to NFE. According to UNESCO (2006), NFE is a structured education taking place out of formal school settings and any educational activity not corresponding to formal education can be classified as non-formal. Yet, NFE can function both within and outside formal education institutions and involve people of different ages. The peculiarity of NFE is the diversity of the services it offers. Though not necessarily conferring certification of learning achievement, NFE includes programmes that can provide adult literacy, soft and hard skills demanded in the labor market, basic education for out-of school children or general cultural knowledge (Ibid.).

La-Belle's (1981) framework for NFE views the educational system as tripartite comprising formal, informal and non-formal education. According to Coombs and Ahmed (1974) and La-Belle (1981), formal education is chronologically graded and hierarchically structured

system, informal education is a lifelong education that provides skills, knowledge and insights required in everyday life and finally he defines non-formal education as any organized educational activity that functions out of formal frameworks and provide targeted groups with selected type of learning (Romi & Schmida, 2009). La-Belle (1981) further states that all three modes coexist simultaneously within the system and all people are engaged in one or more modes in different periods of their lives. Malcolm et al. (2003) note that though functioning independently, all three modes are interrelated as there are elements of formal learning in informal context and elements of informality in formal context.

2.1.2 Formal VS Non-Formal Education

Formal and non-formal education have some similarities in terms of their main goal: both are organised by societies in order to improve the learning processes. The main difference lies in their institutional and organisational arrangements (Eshack, 2007). However, it is possible to merge their differences in so-called "hybrid" programmes and combine the features of both as non-formal learning may be a good complement to formal learning (Fergusson, 2013). The debate over the practicality of formal and NFE already started in the second half of the 20th century. As Ward (1974) states, a systematic analysis of the characteristics of NFE shows that the participants are more prone to NFE programmes. This choice is conditioned by the fact that due to NFE they gain more practical experience and knowledge that help deal with everyday problems and understand their own self and the environment they live in (Dib, 1988). Non-formal out-of-school learning is able to present skills and knowledge compatible in real-life situations and can effectively evaluate and address possible risks and uncertainties (Rennie, 2006).

Braund and Reiss (2006) state that out-of-school learning has an essential impact on non formal school science. They describe five ways due to which out-of-school learning can complement and improve formal learning: extended and authentic practical work; improved development and integration of concepts; attitudes to school science: stimulating further learning; access to rare material and to "big" science; social outcomes: collaborative work and responsibility for learning

(Braund & Reiss, 2006: 1376). Table 1 below more clearly explains the main features that distinguish NFE from formal education.

Formal Education	Non-Formal Education
Usually at school	At institution out of school
May be repressive	Usually supportive
Motivation is typically more extrinsic	Motivation may be extrinsic but it is typically more intrinsic
Compulsory	Usually voluntary
Teacher-led	May be guide or teacher-led
Learning is evaluated	Learning is usually not evaluated
Sequential	Typically non-sequential
Finite, limited to the period of 'being taught' as against a period of life and work	Life long with learning integrated with life and work and life upgraded and enriched by learning
Geared to impersonal goals of knowledge acquisition	A process of understanding the individual's own needs, the environmental situation, the social goals and mutual interrelationships
Motivated by employment and status orientation	Motivated by individual growth, self-renewal and maximising human potential
Has fixed predetermined curricular concepts and content	Has a diversified flexible curriculum, responsive to learner and environmental needs
Imposed by 'giver' on the 'receiver' with little interaction between the two	A process of sharing exploring, analysing and judging, together with full learner participation
Nurtures the status quo and discourages deviation	Provokes questioning, encourages healthy points of departure towards progress
Works within a contemporary social frame and hence gets quickly out of-step with social change	Provokes questioning, encourages healthy points of departure towards progress
Prepares individuals and society for a state of being in a static social and cultural frame-work	Anticipates and prepares for change, for the unknown future

Table 1: The main differences between formal and non-formal education (Eshach, 2007:174)[1]

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[1] The data of the table can also be found here (pg.36-38).

2.2 Research on Employability

This section defines employability as well as presents the list of competitive skills in the global labour market. It also talks about the importance of developing soft skills and organising the recognition of skills gained through different modes of education.

2.2.1 Defining Employability and Its Models

The concept and definition of employability has been an attractive topic of research for many decades but the interest towards graduate employability has decreased since the 2000s (Lowden et al., 2011). In recent years the big number of employability models have been suggested which left some space for confusion. Some people carelessly use the term interchangeably with enterprise and associate employability with just the outcome of getting a job (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Today there are both simple and in-depth scholarly interpretations of employability and most of them relate to the propensity of students to obtain a job (Harvey, 2001). However, Pool and Sewell (2007) note that the fact of finding a job within six months of graduating should not serve as an indicator of measuring employability. They further argue that it should also be considered whether the graduate is using all the skills, knowledge and understanding acquired in degree studies.

Yorke (2006: 8) defines employability as "*...a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy*".

Carrying out studies on employability, scholars and researchers have come up with several definitions and models for its measurements. Yorke and Knight (2006), for instance, try to put the topic of employability on a more academic and scientific basis by proposing the model USEM. USEM is an acronym that combines four main interrelated elements of employability: understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs and metacognition. Though USEM is the most well-known

and largely used model in the field, there is criticism that it is too scientific, thus not easily comprehensible by non-experts. Hence, students themselves or their parents may not understand what employability actually means by using the USEM model (Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Following Law and Watts (1997), Watts proposed another model of employability called DOTS:
Decision learning – decision making skills
Opportunity awareness – knowing what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are
Transition learning – including job searching and self presenting skills
Self awareness – in terms of interests, abilities, values, etc. (Watts, 2006: 9-10)

However, this model could not avoid critique either. In contrast to USEM, DOTS is criticised for its simplicity and non-inclusion. As McCash (2006) states, the model is built on the natural matching of a person and environment and ignores other important contexts such as social, economic and political. He also argues that its simplicity may prevent students from developing more difficult analyses.

Taking into account all the existing models of employability measurements and analysing their limitations, Pool and Sewell (2007) proposed a model called "The key to employability" which is built on the following definition:

> *Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful* (2007: 280).

The model suggests the main components of employability (see figure 1), acknowledges the absolute value of each of them, stating that even one missing element may noticeably reduce a graduate's employability. The components will be more clearly explained in the figure.

Figure 1: The essential components of employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007: 280)

2.2.2 Skills for Competitiveness

The ongoing increase in the number of young people not involved in the labour market has become a worrisome problem. Though the global youth population has increased from 1 billion to 1.3 billion between 1999-2019, there has been a decrease in the number of the youth engaged in the labour market from 568 million to 497 million (ILO, 2020). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted a research built on the results of the 2012 Survey of Adult Skills and estimated that in some OECD countries one in four young people (aged 15-24) were neither employed nor in education or training (NEET) (OECD, 2015). The estimates of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) shows that in 2018 the number of NEET youth reached 21 percent, meaning that more than one fifth of the world's young people were idle (Gammarano, 2019). On the other hand, the situation is not satisfactory for the youth

engaged in the labour market. Out of 429 million young workers 55 million or 13 percent live in extreme poverty[2] and 71 million or 17 percent live in moderate poverty[3] (ILO, 2020).

As Pirzada and Khan (2013) note, for addressing the issue of youth unemployment and promoting graduate employability, a special emphasis has always been put on the importance of developing skills. Becoming a major part of modern societies, economies and education, skills and qualifications have developed strong relations with employment and can also influence service and salary (Pirzada & Khan, 2013). Brewer (2013) finds that young people can secure their first job and easily navigate in the labour market if they develop not only technical skills for performing tasks but also core work skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication and learning to learn. Lowden et al. (2011) prolong the list of skills by adding transferable skills, skills for life, generic skills and enterprise skills that will be discussed below. The combination of all these core skills, understanding of entrepreneurship and the acknowledgment of worker's rights are the main pillars of lifelong learning and adaptability to change which is essential in life (Brewer, 2013).

According to the Resolution about training and development adopted by 175 member states of ILO back in 2000,

> *"Employability skills are the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labour market at different periods of the life cycle. Individuals are most employable when they have broad-based education and training, basic and portable high-level skills, including teamwork, problem solving, information and communications technology (ICT) and communication and language skills. This combination of skills enables them to adapt to changes in the world of work"* (Brewer, 2013: 6).

Throughout last two decades a considerable number of research has been conducted both by scholars and organisations at international and national levels to finally define the skills that are compatible in the labour market and highly demanded by employers (Dyson & Keating, 2005;

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[2] Living on an income below $1.90 per day (ILO, 2020)
[3] Living on an income below $3.20 per day (ILO, 2020)

Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Lowden et al., 2011; Froy et al., 2012; Brewer, 2013; Pirzada & Khan, 2013; OECD, 2015, 2019; ILO, 2020).

Brewer (2013) gives a broader picture of the skills required in the labour market (see figure 2) and states that they are all interrelated and the combination of all of them corresponds to the needs of an employer in the 21st century. There has long been a debate over the terminology of the essential skills being called differently such as "core skills", "key skills", "transferable skills" (Pool & Sewell, 2007). "The key to employability" model proposed a new term "generic skills" which present a set of skills that can be transferred to different contexts and support a person both in higher education and in the workplace (Ibid). However, for avoiding confusion, the term "core skills" will further be used.
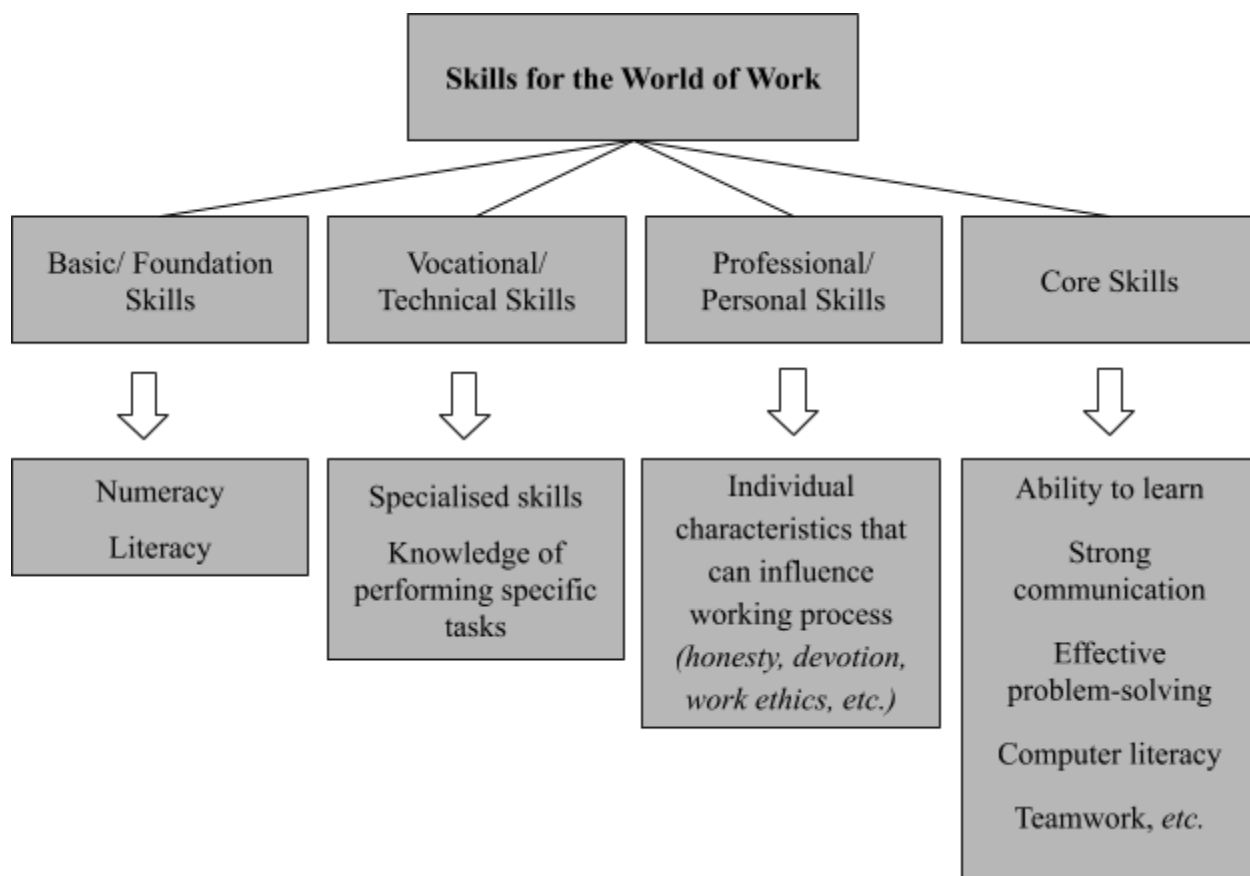
Figure 2: Skills for the World of Work (Brewer, 2013)

2.2.3 The Importance of Soft Skills

For years both employers and educators have been expressing their concern about the graduates lacking soft skills after finishing their tertiary education (Schulz, 2008). As Schulz (2008) states, those lacking skills range from communication skills to management skills that are so much compatible in the labour market.

Referring to the research studying the compatible skills demanded by employers over the past 25 years, Pool and Sewell (2007) made a list of core skills which has undergone some minor changes but are still applicable today. Most of the skills in the list correspond to the definition of soft skills that many formal education institutions usually fail to provide (Yasunaga, 2014). Among them are:

- Creativity
- Adaptability
- Open to new knowledge and practices
- Ability to work both individually and within a team
- Ability to work under pressure
- Good oral and written communication
- Attentive to details
- Ability to use modern technologies
- Strong time management
- Knowledge of foreign languages
- Sense of responsibility
- Effective decision-making

Lowden et al. (2011:12) research on the graduate skills valued by employers has identified the following skills:

- Teamworking
- ICT knowledge
- Problem solving
- Ability to use own initiative but flexibility in terms of following the instructions
- Leadership skills where necessary

It is important to remember that the core employability skills are very context-specific. Depending on the type of employment, number of employees or peculiarities of duties, some of

core skills may be more relevant than the others and they can even overlap. Brewer (2013) has categorised the core employability skills under four groups: learning to learn, communication, teamwork and problem-solving (see Annex A for more details).

In spite of the applicability of the skills mentioned above, the need of a considerable amount of new core skills has been created to meet the requirements of the drastically changing world. As OECD Skills Outlook (2019) states, technological progress has noticeably changed the way we live, work, communicate and consume. Hence, only those people, organisations and countries who manage to adapt to the existing reality and develop in line with the requirements of the market, can benefit hugely (OECD, 2019). Though young people are proven to be early adopters of the change, today the youth of the world considers the new technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics as a serious threat to their employability (ILO, 2020). There is also a concern that digitalisation can not only broaden the existing inequalities but also create new ones, making some core skills obsolete (OECD, 2019). In order to mitigate the undesirable threats, the employees of the 21st century should work hard in improving computer, internet skills and acquire advanced digital skills (Pirzada & Khan, 2013).

2.2.3 The Recognition of Skills

Once the core employability skills are defined, it is necessary to understand how and where those skills can be developed. Today it becomes obvious that with so many learning opportunities available in the world, the learning process takes place not only in the classroom but also in non-formal settings (Dyson & Keating, 2005). In some countries higher education institutions (HEI) provide only vocational skills/knowledge and the gap of soft skills is filled by extra-curricular activities such as short-term internships, volunteering, online courses as well as meetings with employers, seminars and training about building CVs or practising interviews, etc. (Lowden, 2011). Besides, they can start developing since school years through the involvement of out-of-school activities that make children more communicable, confident, easy-going, tolerant and inclusive (Souto-Otera, 2016).

Though soft skills are highly demanded in the labour market, there is an ongoing debate over their recognition. As Dyson and Keating (2005) note, the majority of policy documents and studies on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) have long focused on the skills and knowledge gained within formal education and training, ignoring the outcome of non-formal and informal learning. Yet, some countries like Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom adopted frameworks and developed a system, recognising skills obtained both through formal education and informal/non-formal activities (Dyson & Keating, 2005). However, in other countries such as Chile, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic and Turkey the lifelong learning both formal and non-formal are not developed enough to reskill people throughout their lifetimes (OECD, 2019). Hence, first there is a need to acknowledge the positive relation between lifelong learning and employability and then to work towards the certification and recognition of the outcomes of informal and non-formal learnings which can be achieved through strong collaboration between governments, education/training providers and employers (OECD, 2019).

2.3 The Impact of Non-Formal Education on Youth Employability

The number of research conducted on NFE is not sufficient to be able to draw certain conclusions. Its impact on youth employability has also been underresearched mostly because youth organisations, as key providers of non-formal education, do not systematically record and communicate the results of the learning achieved through their activities and programmes. Hence, the role of NFE is not sufficiently recognised (Souto-Otero et al., 2013). However, Pilav-Velic et al. (2019) and Souto-Otero et al. (2013, 2016) studied the relation between non-formal education and youth employability.

One of the biggest challenges that the youth face today is the transition from school to work as the needs of the labour market are constantly changing due to globalisation. Recognised as the key factor of personal and professional development, formal education sometimes fails to provide knowledge and skills competitive in the job market (Pilav-Velic et al., 2019). Skills mismatch creates different types of imbalances between the knowledge/ skills acquired from

formal education and employer expectation. Since formal education is adapting changes in the world too slowly, Souto-Otero et al. (2013) and Pilav-Velic et al. (2019) find that these imbalances can be addressed with the help of NFE. Non-formal and informal learning gained through participation in youth organisations equip the youth with "soft" skills that are highly valued by employers (Ibid.).

3. Contextual Background

3.1 Education in Armenian Context

Education and training has always been of utmost importance and value for the development of social and economic life in Armenia. In different harsh periods of its history, Armenian society could survive and keep its traditions and identity due to craft. For decades, the country's lack of natural resources has been compensated with the investment in a skilled workforce. However, the transition succeeding the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war and the unstable political environment in 1990s have considerably shattered the quality of education, making it less reliable for pursuing quality life (Sargsyan & Soghomonyan, 2013).

For the past three decades trends in education indicated strong dependency from formal education and schooling (Ibid.). However, as Sargsyan et al. (2013) state, currently globalisation is drastically changing the way of life and the processes of rapid social and economic changes make Armenia reevaluate the requirements of and from education. As Kalashian (2012) notes, formal education can help citizens form a part of them which, yet, is not enough for the full development of the personality and competitiveness in the labor market. He finds that citizens are the leading actors for development and social integration both within the country and internationally. Hence, they must be required to acquire modern labor skills, thus enlarging their capabilities. Because of the big mismatch between the knowledge gained through formal education and the requirements of the labor market, there is an urgent need for transition to a knowledge-based economy which will provide people with access to education and training at any age (Sargsyan et al., 2013).

3.1.1 Institutional Framework and Stakeholders

After Armenia joined the Bologna Process back in 2005, the principles of lifelong learning have been more prioritised in non-formal and adult education policy documents. In order to apply a certain framework for the implementation of the policies, several key stakeholder institutions

were founded. Among them are Department of Supplementary and Continuous Education; National Center of Educational Technologies (2004); Assessment and Testing Center (2004); National Information Center for Academic Recognition and Mobility (2006); National Centre for Vocational Education and Training Development (2008), National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA) (2010) and National Training Fund (2011) (Sargsyan, et al., 2013:3). However, the list of main stakeholders is not limited to only local institutions. The international community, including developing agencies and organisations like GIZ, European Union, UNDP and USAID has considerably invested in projects that promote NFE and lifelong learning (Sargsyan, et al., 2013). Civil society organisations (CSO) have also active participation in the implementation of LLL policies and among them Armenian lifelong learning league's (ALLL) role is significant (Ibid.). Sargsyan et al. (2013) add that CSOs have enlarged the possibilities of getting communication, negotiation, leadership, management and other transferable skills, making their projects more inclusive. Another serious contribution that CSOs have made is the popularisation of Armenian non-formal education at the grassroot level through participation in EU neighbourhood programmes. This action has allowed the youth to get actively involved in non-traditional, out-of-school activities (Ibid.).

Armenian both formal and non-formal education systems have traditionally been teacher centered, following a fixed theoretical learning plan (OEB Insights, 2018). This system usually fails to provide comprehensive knowledge that youth can apply in professional life. Luckily, in recent years there has been a tendency among children and youth of getting involved in NFE programmes simultaneously with formal education. The tendency is conditioned by the establishment of some technology centers and laboratories as well new NFE programmes that play a crucial role in skills development (Avanesyan, 2020).

4. Theoretical Grounding

The first part of this section introduces the theoretical perspectives of NFE existing in academia. The second part refers to the theory selected for this research: the experiential learning theory developed by David Kolb.

4.1 The Overview of the Existing Theories

Analysing the role of NFE in postmodern era, Romi and Schmida (2009) discuss the theories that scholars ever proposed, making reference particularly to Brubacher's "The theory of relevance" (1974), Cremin's "The ecological theory" (1976) and Kahane's "The code of informality" (1997).

Brubacher (1974) had been following the development of NFE since the times when education functioned as a part of daily life available to both youngsters and adults. By the time formal education was institutionalised in a separate framework, it was criticized by Brubacher for not being relevant to real-life experiences and preventing the young from adapting to the present and future (Romi & Schmida, 2009). However, NFE still continued to exist in the Middle ages defined as out-of-school or on-the-job learning and soon lifelong learning and adult education started developing within the framework of NFE (Romi & Schmida, 2009). Though Brubacher did not propose a systematic theory for NFE, his approach to the concept of NFE was characterised by the importance of its being relevant to the needs of everyday life (Ibid.).

Cremin's (1976) theory of education is built on the ecological perspective, according to which education is a lifelong process that can happen in multiple situations. He also argues that schools are not the only education providers as the learning happens due to a wide range of social institutions such as media, families, libraries, galleries, etc. Marking the importance of out-of-school venues, Cremin views NFE as an essential part of education which helps to reskill, gain practical knowledge, enrich world outlook and update attitudes/values (Romi & Schmida, 2009).

Cremin was not the only scholar who added a sociological aspect to the theory of NFE. Kahane, for instance, studies specific situations and analyses the changing functions and roles of education in broad social context (Romi & Schmida, 2009). Kahane's (1997) argues that the leading difference between formal and NFE should not be seen in their goals but more in the code of behaviour which is a set of rules that considerably impact people's behaviour. Kahane identifies the code of behaviour that relates to non-formal education as "code of informality" and distinguishes eight structural components of informality that can affect the behaviour and worldview of a person (Romi & Schmida, 2009; Cohen, 2015). These components include *dualism, voluntarism, multiplexity, symmetry, modularity, moratorium, expressive instrumentalism and pragmatic symbolism* (Kahane, 1997).

4.2 The Theory Relevant to the Study

This section discusses the key characteristics and implications of the Experiential learning theory which has been used as a supporting theory for this study.

4.2.1 Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory was developed by David Kolb though John Dewey had done considerable groundwork for the theory. Dewey is the ancestor of the NFE theory whose "Democracy and education" (1966) and "Experience and education" (1963) discuss and analyse the importance of experience in the learning process (Gross & Rutland, 2017). He builds the philosophy of NFE upon three main areas of thought: the theory of interest, the bond between democracy and education and finally the theory of learning by experience (Romi & Schmida, 2009).

According to Kolb (2014), experiential learning can be understood as a form of learning that is achieved through real life experience which is usually contrasted with classroom learning. Some educational institutions that believe in the power of experience, offer experiential learning activities such as internships or field studies (Kolb, 2014). Back in 1978, Keeton and Tate described the peculiarity of experiential learning by the fact that in this form of learning the

learner not only reads about, talks about, writes about the realities but also becomes a part of it and gets practical skills (Keeton & Tate, 1978). In addition, Kolb et al. (2001:2) define it as *"the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience"*.

The experiential learning theory (ELT) aims at explaining how experience can be transformed into learning and valuable knowledge (Kolb et al., 2011). The scholars studying experiential learning theory agree on the following six propositions (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009) :

- Learning should not be considered in terms of outcomes but more as a process. Education during which learning occurs, is an ongoing reconstruction of experience.

- All learning is relearning. The learning process becomes more effective when a person's ideas and beliefs about the topic can be tested, argued and supported by new more refined ideas.

- Disagreement, conflict resolution, differences are key to learning.

- Learning is a process of adaptation to the surrounding we live in.

- Learning occurs as a result of interaction between an individual and environment. People create themselves with the choices and decisions they make that are influenced by the possibilities of each new experience.

- Learning is the process of creating knowledge. Social knowledge results from the personal knowledge of a learner.

Lewin proposed a model of the experiential learning process which views learning as a four-stage cycle (Kolb, 1984). The model distinguishes two modes of gaining experience- Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) and two modes of transforming experience- Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) (see figure 3) (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009).
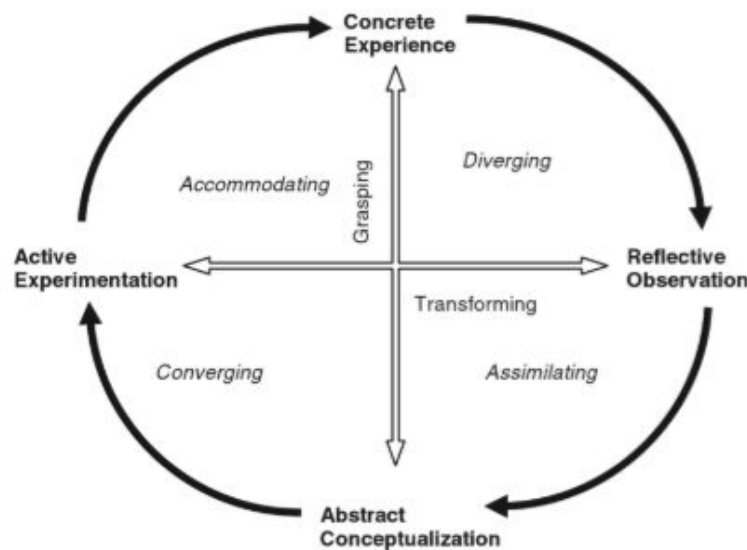
Figure 3: Experiential Learning Cycle (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009:44)

The cycle of experiential learning can be described in the following way. Observations and reflections are based on immediate concrete experience. The observations may serve as a "theory" to deduce new implications for action. These implications or hypotheses can be tested and lead to actions that create new experiences (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004). Kolb (1984) highlights two important aspects of Lewin's experiential learning model: *here-and-now concrete experience* and *feedback processes.* He finds the immediate personal experience essential for learning as it gives life and meaning to abstract concepts and makes it possible to test the implications that arise during learning. The second aspect Kolb values is the existence of feedback. According to him, feedback should be provided to the goal-directed action that has been taken as a result of learning (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004; Armstrong & Fukami, 2009). Kolb (1984) further notes that much individual and organisational ineffectiveness and failures are resulted from the lack of evaluation of the actions.

Built on the experiential learning cycle, Kolb developed the learning style inventory (LSI) to discuss learning styles. It identities four learning styles: *diverging, assimilating, converging* and *accommodating* (see figure 3) (Kolb et al., 2001).

As it can be seen in figure 3, the main characteristics of the Diverging style are Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation which means that people with this learning style are good at considering specific issues from different angles and generating new ideas (Kolb, 1984). Such people are interested in people, more inclined to teamwork, they are open to learning something new and getting personalised feedback (Kolb et al., 2001).

The characteristics of the Assimilating style are Abstract Conceptualization and Reflective Observation. Unlike the Diverging style, people with Assimilating learning style are not much interested in people. Instead, they focus on abstract concepts and ideas and perform better in information and science careers (Kolb et al., 2001).

The Converging style is achieved through Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation. People with this learning style are more effective in specialist and technology careers as they prefer technical tasks over social and relational issues (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009). Besides, they are good at processing new ideas and experimenting in labs (Kolb et al., 2001).

The fourth learning style is the Accommodating style which is characterised by Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation. According to Kolb et al. (2001), action-oriented careers such as sales or marketing suit people who have this learning style. These people like working with others so that the assignments get done (Ibid).

The above mentioned learning styles are shaped in different phases of life and they can be influenced by a number of factors including an individual's personality, upbringing, formal education, professional career, work experience, etc. (Kolb et al., 2001). To be able to fulfill one's potential in a desired field, Gross and Rutland (2017) emphasize the importance of "learning identity". According to them, it can be better developed through problem solving education that uses experiential learning techniques rather than in a teacher-dominated classroom. People who have learning identity consider themselves learners who acknowledge the value of personal experience in obtaining compatible skills and knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

5. Methodology

5.1 Site Selection

The Republic of Armenia has been chosen as a site for doing research for a number of reasons. First, it is my home country where in all probability I will enter the labour market after graduation. Exploring core requirements of the market and getting acquainted with the local context would be beneficial. Second, NFE is the field I want to be engaged in as an employee. Hence, I would get a chance to identify key shortcomings and opportunities of the system. And finally, the relation between NFE and youth employability in RA has not been studied which is both challenging and rewarding at the same time. This study may have at least a minor contribution to the research on NFE in the Republic of Armenia.

5.2 Research Design

The qualitative method of research has been chosen for conducting the study and revealing the relation between NFE and youth employability in the Republic of Armenia. As Creswell (2013) notes, qualitative research is carried out with the help of individuals or groups of people whose experience can serve as data for analysis. As a result, face-to-face interaction created a more natural and informal environment for gathering information relevant to the study. In order to have significant findings, the phenomenon of NFE must have been considered through different lenses. It would ensure a better understanding of the field and allow answering the question *"how"*. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), this is one of the main indicators for using a qualitative case study approach. Hence, a case study has been carried out to answer the research questions. Though there is a huge misconception over the findings of single case studies as if they cannot be generalised, Flyvberg (2013) states that a case study is a widely used method of research in social sciences and its findings can essentially contribute to the development of further research.

5.3 Data Collection

One of the peculiarities of qualitative research is its diverse sources of data including interviews, observations, documents, etc. (Creswell, 2013). Interviews, being the most commonly used method of qualitative research (Bryman, 2015), have also been the primary source of data for this research. The interview guide (see Annex B) included semi-structured questions to leave room for follow-up questions in case the respondents brought up interesting details on the topic (Kvale, 2007). The interviews were conducted within the period of 23 days.

5.3.1 Sampling

Purposeful sampling is an essential stage in the process of social research, accordingly one of the key elements of any investigation (Bryman, 2016). To ensure the significance of the findings, key informants have been chosen based on their rich work experience in the field of education and knowledge of weaknesses and strengths of NFE in the country. Besides serving as a source of information on the topic, one of the key informants also provided new contacts and made recommendations on the selection of other informants. As a result of data collection, three people were interviewed through video call as key informants and 18 interviews were conducted with the alumni of NFE programmes from two educational centers.

Key informants

Name	Position	Organisation
Varuzhan Avanesyan	Director	Armenian Lifelong Learning League
Haykuhi Gevorgyan	Director	Professional Orientation Methodological Center
Serob Khachatryan	Education Expert	Armenian Research Center in Humanities

Table 1: List of key informants

The Armenian Lifelong Learning League is an umbrella organisation that unites 12 non-governmental organisations specialised in non-formal and informal education in Armenia. The main purpose of the organisation is to contribute to the formation and development of an effective lifelong learning system in collaboration with both private and public sectors, thus supporting people to fulfill their potential and get engaged in the labour market [4](Avanesyan, 2020).

The Professional Orientation Methodological Center was founded in 2007 upon the Government decision of the Republic of Armenia aimed at assisting the youth in the selection and planning of their future career. The center monitors the requirements of the labour market and trains social teachers and school psychologists so that they can provide professional consultation to students in choosing a competitive career (Gevorgyan, 2020).

Other Informants

As mentioned above, 18 interviews with the alumni of NFE programmes have been conducted to get a more comprehensive data from people with personal experience. Part of the interviews were organised face-to-face while others were carried out with the help of online form because of the inconveniences caused by COVID19. Based on the recommendations of key informants, the alumni have been chosen from two educational centers that organise NFE programmes/courses/training/seminars and are competitive in the field with the number of participants. This fact makes them representative samples for the study. Here is the profile of informants:

Centers: The alumni of Business Development Group (BDG)[5] and ISTC Foundation[6] have been interviewed. The BDG organises courses in programming, management, marketing and PR, human resources, finance and accounting and design. The courses of ISTC Foundation include business, design, programming, artificial intelligence.

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[4] For more information about ALLL please visit here.
[5] For more information about the Business Development Group please visit here.
[6] For more information about the ISTC Foundation please visit here.

Sex: 5 male and 13 female participants took part in the research.

Age: Alumni aged 15-24 have been targeted as according to international definitions, people of this age group are considered the youth (see Section 1.2).

Education: All the interviewees have completed tertiary education.

Courses: The NFE courses that the interviewees took part in include programming, design, project management, social media marketing, accounting.

5.5 Data Analysis

The research has been carried out in Armenia where the national language is Armenian. Hence, all interviews were conducted in Armenian. After getting consent from informants, the interviews were recorded to make sure that important information would not be lost (Creswell, 2013). As suggested by Silverman (2013), the data collected from each interview was immediately translated and transcribed even though all interviews were not completed yet. In order to "reduce" and organise the big amount of gathered information, the data was coded and categorized (Kvale, 2007; Bryman, 2016). All the transcriptions were carefully read and the ideas of key informants that seemed informative were underlined and categorised in accordance with research questions. As for the transcriptions of the alumni interviews, thematic coding was applied (Gibbs, 2007). The words, phrases and expressions that were repeated in several interviews, were coded and categorised into different topics taking into account the relevance to the research questions and the experiential learning theory.

5.6 Ethical Issues

All the details about the aim of the study have been introduced to informants before the start of interviews to avoid possible complexities of "researching private lives" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). Though the topic of the study was not a sensitive one, the alumni of educational centers were given a choice to stay anonymous if they wanted to. It was agreed that their personal data would not be shared.

5.7 Limitations

The major limitation that created many obstacles throughout the whole research was COVID 19. Face-to-face interviews were preferred to be conducted but because of the lockdown in the country some interviews had to be organised online through calls or surveys. Besides, the lockdown considerably affected my productivity which prolonged the process of writing. Another limitation was the lack of previous research on the topic. The findings of the study must have been supported or contrasted with the studies of this kind which became a challenging issue. The phenomena of NFE and youth employability have been studied separately but the relationship between those two has not got enough attention. The same problem was encountered when writing about Armenian context. One of the characteristics of qualitative research is its possibility of using multiple sources for data collection (Creswell, 2013). However, there is a serious gap as the number of academic papers or reports on the topic of NFE and youth employability in Armenia was not sufficient for analysis. Hence, the data gathered through interviews comprised the fundamental share of data that was analysed.

6. Findings

Once in twelve years international conferences on the topic of non-formal adult education (CONFINTEA) are organised in the world. CONFINTEA V taking place in Hamburg in 1997, finalised the definition of an adult and identified their needs. According to it, an adult can be considered a person who has completed the first phase of formal education, i.e. 15-16-year old people who can already decide how to use the acquired knowledge: whether continue education in HEI, take a gap year or upgrade skills through NFE activities. On the other hand, this definition creates some disagreement. The thing is that 15-16-year olds still have a couple of years before reaching adulthood (18 years of age). However, there is an assumption that after completing the first phase of formal education, a person is mature enough to make his/her own decisions.

For assisting people in such decisive periods of their lives, centers of lifelong learning have been established in all education institutions in the Republic of Armenia (schools, colleges, universities), aiming at developing soft skills. For instance, those college students who try to master skills in winemaking, husbandry or other professions without four years of formal education at the university, the EU sponsors to organise short-term education sessions and training in regional colleges that equip them with necessary soft skills and help realise their potential (Avanesyan, 2020).

There are some problems that may complicate this process. Avanesyan (2020) identifies the lack of critical thinking among the young as one of the main challenges. It is an important point for behaviour change when the youth acknowledge the value of education, understand what they want to study and most importantly why.

> *"There is a strong "mania" of studying and learning among the young but most of them are unable to understand where they want to "invest" the acquired knowledge and skills. Some decide to apply for a graduate programme and get a master degree just for having a diploma that may or may not be ever used. Different factors can influence the*

behaviour of this kind: family, school, personal values, cultural peculiarities, social pressure, etc." (Avanesyan, 2020).

Another problem that emerges as a result of the lack of critical thinking is the theoretical knowledge overload and absence of practical experience.

> *"... very often we come across the following situation in Armenia: after school the young get all possible degrees, doing four years of bachelor, then two years of master followed by three years of PhD. Afterward they decide to study abroad as well and take a course of a year or two in another country. As a result, in this long chain they never get engaged in the labour market and in spite of their rich education they are not viewed as competitive candidates by employers" (Gevorgyan, 2020).*

In addition, Gevorgyan stated that it is extremely important to have the ability of putting the theoretical knowledge into practice and identifying possible educational gaps in the workplace.

6.1 Soft Skills Competitive in the Armenian Labour Market

Like the rest of the world, the labour market in the Republic of Armenia has recently been greatly impacted by the development of modern technologies. IT sector has conquered the market, making ICT skills the most competitive and required ones (Khachatryan, 2020). However, according to Gevorgyan (2020) today the labour market is a bit messy and will become even more unpredictable in the future. This ambiguity is conditioned by global changes and a big number of challenges the world is facing today. As Gevorgyan (2020) states, one of the main challenges is caused by the trivial transformations some professions go through due to the new technologies. For instance, in the medical world many services that were once provided by doctors, have become automatised today. Another challenge is climate change. Though the Armenian government has adopted a strategy to transform the country into a technological hub, the majority of the rural areas are still engaged in agricultural activities (both husbandry and crop production) and in recent years they have suffered a lot due to the hardships caused by climate change. Some people step out of agriculture while others try to create and implement new solutions to address the difficulties. As a result, this process generates the need of developing new professions and skills, thus impacting the requirements of the labour market as well.

Though Gevorgyan agreed that IT is developing very fast and was once considered a leading sector, she also admitted that today it is not stable either as COVID19 will entirely change the market. In the current state of uncertainty the ability of making conscious decisions can be the key to success.

> *"If a young person is curious, informed, clearly knows what profession (s)he wants to obtain and has a clear image how to use that profession in life, (s)he will definitely succeed and get engaged in the labour market" (Gevorgyan, 2020).*

However, it is important to clearly understand differences between a profession and a skill. During the Soviet times there was a precise list of the competitive professions the young could choose from. Yet, this practice is no more applicable because of the continuously changing labour market and mismatch between formal education and the needs of the market. Instead, it becomes common to acquire or/and upgrade soft skills together with hard skills (for definition see Section 1.2) (Avanesyan, 2020). In 2017 within the framework of the World Economic Forum in Davos the leaders of the represented countries discussed the challenges and opportunities of the labour market. They came to the conclusion that it is better to identify the list of competitive skills but not professions (Gevorgyan, 2020).

Special emphasis on the skills does not undermine the value of knowledge. As Gevorgyan mentioned, today employers look for fundamental knowledge (the professional skills developed through formal education) accompanied by the following soft skills and personal qualities that can be obtained through lifelong learning including informal and non-formal education activities:

- *Be easy-going and not make conflicts.*

- *Be a team worker.*

> *"... Armenians are usually "individual players". The phenomenon can be explained by making reference to the history of our country. This is best seen in sports- we score in individual sports such as boxing, wrestling, weightlifting. Instead, we hardly succeed in*

team sports like football, basketball, etc. Because of this cultural peculiarity, sometimes the youth have a hard time working in teams" (Gevorgyan, 2020).

- *Have strong communication skills*: the lack of proper active listening skill is a serious issue among the youth. They may show off and try to prove that their knowledge is more valuable and valid. Within the communication skills Gevorgyan (2020) also highlights the need of improving non-verbal communication, stating that during job interviews the young candidates' gestures are either disturbingly active or too passive.

- *Have presentation skills:* in this regard the employers in the Armenian labour market note that during the interviews the candidates fail to present themselves in a proper way. According to Gevorgyan (2020), this is mostly caused by the inadequate self-esteem that prevents them from shortly and directly introducing their strong points. In such situations even the candidates with better developed professional/hard skills may not be competitive.

- *Strong knowledge in employee rights:* this skill is of great use in almost all stages starting from job search to labour market integration. The youth usually lack awareness about their responsibilities and most importantly about their rights as a candidate for a certain position and later as an employee.

- *Language skills*: sometimes the youth may have an impression that the knowledge of languages is a profession but it is actually a skill. In order to be more competitive in the 21st century, the knowledge of languages is a big asset regardless of profession. As Gevorgyan (2020) states, perfect knowledge of Armenian is also required. Though speaking the language on a daily basis, the youth face some challenges while using Armenian in formal settings.

- *Basic mathematical and financial literacy.*

- *Entrepreneurial skills*: this is a very broad notion that combines a number of key stages for productivity and success such as strategic thinking, brainstorming, definition of the

main goal, planning, identifying innovative solutions, time management and decision making.

- *Cognitive skills:* the youth should learn how to learn in order to be able to implement the mechanisms of non-formal education in a useful way, i.e. have a clear idea how to use the knowledge/skills gained through educational programmes and get engaged in the labour market.

Unfortunately, not all skills mentioned above are developed through formal education, thus the gap can be filled due to NFE activities (Gevorgyan, 2020).

6.3 The Role of NFE in Reskilling and Upskilling the Youth

Lifelong learning, that non-formal education is a part of, emerged in response to human need of getting integrated into the environment and functioning in line with technological development (Soghomonyan, 2015). In addition to this statement Avagyan (2015) notes that there are a number of problems people have to solve in order to feel full members of the society they live in. These problems include 1. finding a job, 2. increasing productivity, 3. achieving career goals, 4. organising leisure, 5. developing life skills (driving, managing personal finances, paying bills, etc), 6. being aware of civil and political rights and 7. learning something new to later teach someone else both within the family and out of it. The fulfillment of these points is not a one-time process and people achieve them in different phases of their lives through lifelong learning (Avagyan, 2015). As formal education does not necessarily cover all aspects of life and sometimes fail to provide essential life skills, non-formal education comes to fill the gaps (Tadevosyan, 2015). In Armenia the need for the improvement of lifelong learning mechanisms became more urgent during the years of the "perestroika"[7](restructuring) and after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). This was the period when all spheres of the country including education were undergoing vital changes thus making people look for information to understand pros and cons of the Soviet Union (Hakobyan, 2016).

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[7] A set of political and economic reforms initiated and implemented by the President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985-1991 (Cox, 2005).

Today cognitive psychology argues that a person can perceive information and gain new skills in an environment which generates knowledge and provides favorable opportunities for learning (Soghomonyan, 2015). Though formal education has a longer history and has long been more demanded and profitable, today classroom-based learning is gradually losing its effectiveness, creating the need for finding alternative skill developing means and tools (Ibid).

Formal education in the whole world has a problem: it is too academic and provides mainly theoretical knowledge, not putting enough emphasis on the practical experience and soft skills that are so much appreciated in the labour market (Avanesyan, 2020). Apart from professional knowledge, today an employer asks for flexibility to fit in with the requirements of the market that are changing periodically (Soghomonyan, 2015).

> *"Having one profession and sticking to it for a lifetime is not applicable anymore. In these times in order to be competitive one should enlarge the circle of interests and constantly gain new skills in new spheres. Here lifelong learning comes to create a platform for developing vocational and soft skills without spending years in academia. The mission of lifelong learning is to contribute to people's economic activity and to make sure they are not excluded from the labour market" (Soghomonyan, 2020).*

However, this statement is not meant to underestimate the importance of formal education. Avanesyan (2020) underlines the noticeable role of NFE in reskilling and upskilling the youth at the same time stating that non formal setting is not applicable to all professions.

> *"... Let's say, if a person wants to work in the shipbuilding industry not having completed formal education, most probably NFE cannot provide the fundamental knowledge and all required skills competitive in that field. Formal education, for instance, is a must for becoming a doctor. If a student graduates from medical university and wants to get qualification or narrow down the vocational skills, (s)he can take short non-formal courses to develop her/his soft skills on the basis of hard skills gained through formal education. Here NFE serves not as an alternative but more as a compliment to formal education. On the other hand, in Armenia one does not necessarily need to complete formal education for getting engaged in a number of up to date fields. For instance, there are many non-formal educational centers that provide courses for becoming tour guides, accountants, project managers, IT specialists, web designers, social media specialists,*

> *etc. In other words, nothing is clear-cut and the role of NFE can be assessed based on the profession" (Avanesyan, 2020).*

In Armenia the interest towards NFE programmes has been growing among the youth lately for a number of reasons. First, formal education is not flexible and up to date and sometimes even boring. The number of teachers and lecturers who use non-formal techniques and make the teaching process more entertaining is scarce. (Gevorgyan, 2020). Second, trying to find a job after finishing the first and the second phases of formal education, the youth find out that neither the amount nor the quality of their knowledge is compatible with the requirements of the labour market. Hence, they feel the need to either change the field and learn something new or add more practical soft skills to their formal education (Avagyan, 2015). In both cases the youth mostly prefer to fill the gaps through NFE programmes as these programmes are more concrete, practical and less time-consuming (Khachatryan, 2020).

Coding the data gathered from the alumni of NFE programmes, the following reasons for taking NFE courses have been identified:

- The knowledge and skills developed through formal education does not meet the requirements of the labour market.
- Employees usually require practical experience which cannot be gained through formal education.
- Many up-to-date professions are not taught in the formal system.
- The lack of soft skills hinder career growth.
- Within the framework of personal development there is a need for exploring new areas.

By the time of interviewing, 72.2 percent of respondents were engaged in the labour market due to the skills they had acquired in NFE. According to them, NFE programmes helped them develop not only professionally but also personally. The youth agree that the feeling of being more competent than before considerably impacts their self-esteem, making them more confident and presentable during job interviews. As they state, hard skills are definitely essential but the practical soft skills sometimes play an even more crucial role in making a good impression on employees. Key soft skills that helped the informants get engaged in the labour market are

presented below. These skills were initially acquired through NFE programmes and later developed in the working process.

- Emotional intelligence
- Communication skills
- Teamwork
- Better public speaking and presentation skills
- Creative thinking
- Time management
- Ability to openly express one's opinion
- Networking skills
- Persuasion skills
- Analytical skills
- Computer literacy

As the findings indicate, the youth highly appreciate the role of NFE in increasing their productivity. There are many professions in the fields of technology, innovation and management that are quite competitive in the global labour market and attract the youth more than many conservative professions. However, degree programmes in Armenian formal education adapt to the changes of the market very slowly. Unfortunately, in Armenia public universities lack programmes that equip the youth with up-to-date skills matching the requirements of the market. On the other hand, NFE has more freedom and capacity to monitor the job market, explore its needs and develop programmes/courses that can fill the gap of formal education. This phenomenon has formed an opinion among the youth that NFE is gradually surpassing formal education by its effectiveness. They agree that in an ideal scenario formal education must provide fundamental knowledge and minor gaps caused by the development of technologies can be filled with the help of NFE. In such situations the collaboration of formal and NFE can create highly competitive and skillful youth that will easily get engaged in the labour market. However, in Armenia the quality of formal education has a long path of improvement to undergo. As the alumni of NFE programmes state, short-term NFE programmes they took were more effective and knowledgeable than 4-year degree programmes they pursued through formal education. They find it quite possible that NFE will soon become equivalent to formal education in many professions, especially taking into account the increasing number of

creative employers who break the stereotypes over the mandatory requirement of state diploma. 61.5 percent of respondents noted that they were hired based on their skills but not diploma. Normally, employers in the private sector pay more attention to work experience and personal characteristics and very little emphasis is put on the existence of state diplomas. However, this does not apply to the public sector where a state diploma is a must.

6.4 The Response of the Government to NFE

6.4.1 The Overview of the Validation of NFE Outcomes

Starting in the 1990s, attempts were being made to identify types of learning. However, it was not until 2000 when the European Union officially documented three types of learning/education: formal, non-formal and informal (Avanesyan, 2020). The creation of these types was conditioned by EU member states' true realization that formal education would not be sufficient for organising people's professional, social and economic lives. As a result, different countries started developing policies for making informal and non-formal education more accessible and most importantly for validating the outcomes of NFE (Ibid).

> *"The recognition and certification of the outcomes of NFE can shorten the duration of the learning, thus solving an important social problem. This means that a person would not have to spend another 2-3 years in academia if (s)he can fill the gaps through short-term NFE programmes. Validating the outcomes of NFE includes the creation of a state body that would be responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of the programmes. If they correspond to the standards and guidelines adopted by the state, they get a certificate equivalent to formal education"* (Gevorgyan, 2015).

The mechanisms of validating the outcomes of NFE differ from country to country. Gevorgyan (2015) mentions three most common types of recognition and certification of NFE outcomes. First, when the validation occurs within the formal system. The country admits that all the skills and human abilities need to be recognised even if they are not acquired through formal education. In this case the outcomes of NFE programmes are tested using the same mechanisms (tests, exams, interviews,etc.) that are used in formal settings. Second, when the validation mechanisms are independent but they are based on formal educational institutions. In this case

the NFE outcomes can be recognised and certified either by the state or the employers using the methodological and institutional capacity of the country. Third, when the validation mechanisms function independently. In this case the NFE outcomes are certified by employers or smaller groups of experts but this type of validation is not applied at the national level.

6.4.2 Policy and Legal Framework

In 1999 the Government of the Republic of Armenia adopted the "Law on Education" that includes the strategies and policies that are meant to provide and coordinate the financial and methodological support to the field and reform the entire education system (MoJ, 2015). The law makes a reference to the problems of external studies/ additional education in Article 26 and creates certain frameworks for organising adult education.

> *1. Additional educational programs are implemented with a purpose to satisfy the needs of the citizens and the public in education. Within the framework of each level of professional education the main objective of additional education is the continuous growth of the qualification level of a person.*

> *2. Additional education is provided by educational facilities of general, vocational and additional education, as well as through individual pedagogical activity, the regulations of which are established by the Government of the Republic of Armenia (MoE, 2008:4).*

The next legal reference to non-formal setting of education by the Government of RA is the approval of "The Strategy of Preliminary (Craftsmanship) and Middle Professional Education and Training" in 2004. It aims at ensuring the compatibility of the learners' abilities and the needs of the labour market so that everyone has the potential to succeed in their lives (MoE, 2008). On the basis of it, the key document on NFE "Concept of non-formal education in the Republic of Armenia" was adopted in 2006. It highlights the priority goals of adult education in RA and targets vulnerable individuals and groups as main beneficiaries of non-formal and informal education. The document develops new mechanisms to ensure maximum participation of vulnerable groups in NFE activities so that they can be engaged in the labour market (Yang, 2015). In accordance with the "Concept of non-formal education in the Republic of Armenia",

"The goal of Adult Education is to provide the citizens, according to their abilities and health conditions, with new professions and jobs as well as to facilitate their ability to get adjusted to social conditions" (MoE, 2008: 7).

The Armenian National Qualification Framework was adopted by the Government of RA in 2011 and updated in 2016. This is a system adopted by different countries aimed at ensuring that skills obtained in all levels of education are recognised and validated (ETF, 2018). Following the policy objectives of the framework, the RA approved a decree on t*he organization and implementation of additional education programmes as well as recognition and validation of the preliminary outcomes of non-formal and informal learning* in 2015 (Ibid).

6.4.3 The Practical Application of Legal Framework

In 2018 after the Velvet Revolution in the Republic of Armenia, the Government of the country changed. As a result, all spheres including education have gone through major adjustments (Demytrie, 2018). Both the President of RA Armen Sargsyan and the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan voice the importance of developing lifelong learning strategies but the measures taken in this regard are very slow (Avanesyan, 2020). In this transitional stage the "Concept paper of non-formal education in Armenia" does not get much consideration by the Ministry of Education and Science in order to make fundamental reforms in the field. Local NGOs and international organisations such as DVV International and GIZ try to study the existing gaps and address them. As Khachatryan (2020) notes, the strategy adopted by the Government concerning NFE is reactive but not proactive. This means that the Ministry of Education and Science does not hinder the activities of centers and organisations that are engaged in the provision of NFE. On the other hand, it does not fully use the potential of the field either. However, the private sector does not have sufficient power to make fundamental changes to the sphere of NFE. There are issues that can only be addressed with the participation of the state. The most urgent problem is the recognition of the outcomes of NFE. As mentioned above, one of the policy objectives of the Armenian National Qualification Framework is the certification of skills obtained through NFE.

In spite of this fact the country has not yet developed a system or a state body responsible for the validation of the preliminary outcomes of NFE (Avanesyan, 2020).

> *"Based on European experience, a pilot project for validating the outcomes of NFE for cooks was implemented a couple of years ago. Many highly paid cooks who were working in famous restaurants did not have any qualification. They took theoretical and practical tests and the successful ones were granted certificates by the state. Unfortunately the project was not continuous" (Gevorgyan, 2020).*

As a result, the vast majority of the youth choose to pursue degree programmes for getting a diploma even if the same skills can be developed through NFE which is less time consuming and cost-effective. However, this can hardly fully solve the problem of youth employability because having a diploma does not guarantee involvement in the labour market. Combination of both hard and soft skills makes a competitive candidate in the labour market (Gevorgyan, 2020).

> *"Monitoring the requirements of the labour market we came across a paradox: IT companies usually do not require state diploma hiring an employee. Skills and flexibility to learn and adapt to the new environment are valued more than the existence of a certificate or a diploma" (Gevorgyan, 2020).*

Following the Bologna Process joined in 2005, the Ministry of Education and Science established career centers in all schools of the country aimed at monitoring the requirements of the labour market and directing the youth to particular specialities either in formal or non-formal systems. The evaluation of the centers showed that their employees were not competent enough for providing necessary guidance. In other words, the centers were not serving the purpose (Gevorgyan, 2020). In order to address this problem, through the period of 2013-2016 the Professional Orientation Methodological Center which is a state institution, trained 800 social teachers and psychologists in all regions of the country so that they can develop critical thinking among the youth for choosing education programmes wisely (Gevorgyan, 2020). As it can be seen, some steps are being made for the development of the field but they are either slow or temporary.

7. Discussion

The study was designed to identify the competitive soft skills in the Armenian labour market and assess the role of NFE in obtaining them. As the findings of the research show, there is a huge mismatch between the knowledge taught in formal education and the needs of the job market. The employers seek for candidates who apart from professional hard skills also possess soft skills and easy going personalities.

The quality of formal education in Armenia is assessed as low, unable to provide the youth with a comprehensive set of skills that is sufficient for getting engaged in the labour market. The youth having completed tertiary education state that formal education is too theoretical and its learning outcomes are hardly applicable in daily life. As the eligibility criteria of job announcements mostly include the knowledge of practical tools and possession of a set of soft skills, the youth have to look for alternative sources for filling the gaps left from formal education. In other words, as one of the propositions of the experiential learning theory (ELT) indicates, they have to adapt to the needs of the surrounding through learning. As a result, all the respondents got engaged in non-formal and informal activities to develop as individuals and obtain practical skills. This comes to prove the point of the ELT that knowledge is generated in an environment where a learner actually becomes a part of what (s)he is doing instead of reading or talking about realities.

According to ELT, education during which learning takes place, is a continuous reconstruction of knowledge. As the study shows, the soft skills that have been identified as competitive in the Armenian labour market (see Section 6.1) are not obtained at once but rather developed through NFE activities and later reconstructed in the workplace throughout different phases of life. The analysis of the findings indicate that the main feature of NFE programmes that develop required skills in short terms is the *here-and-now concrete experience* they provide. The youth agree that the practical tools and the chance of first-hand experience offered by NFE programmes make them more effective than formal education. The application of NFE for increasing productivity

among the youth in Armenia is conditioned by the following key characteristics of the system: NFE programmes provide practical experience; they catch up with the changes of the labour market; they are less time-consuming and finally more affordable compared to formal education.

The findings of the study show significant relation between NFE programmes and youth employability. Lifelong learning in general and NFE in particular serve as the best source for acquiring knowledge and skills that make the youth competitive candidates and later successful employees. However, the question whether the NFE in Armenia is now considered an alternative to formal education is not clear-cut. For a number of professions (doctor, lawyer, engineer, etc.) fundamental theoretical knowledge gained through formal education is a must. Yet, if employees of these fields do not want to lose their productivity, they should apply NFE through different phases of their lives to catch up with changing requirements of the market caused by socio-economic development of the world. Here NFE is complementary to formal education rather than alternative. On the other hand, skills required for modern professions in the fields of innovation, technology and management (project management, SMM, programming, etc.) can be easily developed through only NFE. Here NFE can be considered an alternative. However, the youth agree that in Armenia the potential of NFE is increasing very fast attracting more and more young people who believe that in the 21st century a person cannot stay competitive in the job market without NFE.

In Armenia the number of private companies that hire employees on the basis of skill sets rather than possession of state diploma is growing. Yet, in the public sector the situation is a bit different and state diploma is a key requirement. Hence, the youth who want to be engaged in the public sector have no choice but pursuing degree programmes in formal education.

The role of the Government of RA in overseeing the quality of skills offered by NFE activities is not big. Though the country has adopted a number of frameworks aimed at developing NFE, the field skill lacks coordination, monitoring and evaluation. There are not any mechanisms or state bodies that are responsible for monitoring NFE programmes and recognising the preliminary outcomes of informal and non-formal learning. In other words, the skills obtained in informal and non-formal settings are not validated in the Republic of Armenia. There are many

international organisations and local NGOs that implement projects to increase youth productivity and fill the gaps of formal education. However, at some point they encounter serious challenges because of the little participation of the state in the development of NFE. The desired result and the recognition of skills acquired through all forms of education can be only achieved through strong collaboration with the state.

Taking into account all the points mentioned above the following conclusion can be drawn. In the Republic of Armenia NFE has a considerable role in the provision of skills competitive in the labour market but the field needs more coordination by the state.

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Annexes

Annex A: Core Skills for Employability

Learning to Learn	- think abstractly - use learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills - organize, process, and maintain information - interpret and communicate information - pursue independent learning - conduct systematic inquiry; and follow through to find answers - take responsibility for own learning - spend time effectively - stay on task - select the best approach for tasks - begin, follow through and complete tasks - manage own learning - adaptable - works safely - is willing to learn - uses time efficiently without sacrificing quality
Communication	- competent in reading - write to the needs of an audience - write effectively in the languages in which the business is conducted - listen and communicate effectively - listen to understand and learn - read independently - read, comprehend and use materials, including graphs, charts, displays - understand and speak the language which the business is conducted - use numeracy effectively - articulate own ideas and vision

Teamwork	- interact with co-workers - understand and contribute to the organization's goals - work within the culture of the group - plan and make decisions with others and support the outcomes - work in teams or groups - respect the thoughts and opinions of others in the group - coach, mentor and give feedback - lead effectively - lead when appropriate - mobilize a group for high performance manage oneself at work - accountability for actions taken - build partnerships and coordinate a variety of experiences - work toward group consensus in decision-making - value others' input - accept feedback - resolve conflicts
Problem-solving	- think creatively - solve problems independently - test assumptions identify problems - take the context of data and circumstances into account - adapt to new circumstances - ability to identify and suggest new ideas to get the job done (initiative) - collect, analyse and organize information (planning and organization) - ability to plan and manage time, money and other resources to achieve goals

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Annex B: Interview Guides

Key Informant Interviews [8]

Start with an introduction about the aim of the study and get consent for using the information they share.

- Can you please introduce your organisation/center and its mission?
- How long have you been working there ?
- How are the activities of your organisation/center related to non-formal education?
    - *Are the projects financed by the public or private sector?*
- What are the main goals of NFE programmes?
    - *What is the main reason for the growing number of NFE programmes in Armenia?*
- What is your opinion about the opportunities created by NFE programmes in the Republic of Armenia?
- To what extent do NFE programmes develop professional competencies of the youth?
    - *Do such programmes help the youth to get engaged in the labour market?*
- What do you think are key soft skills required in the labour market?
    - *Based on your experience, are they usually developed through formal or non-formal education?*
- How does the Government of the Republic of Armenia contribute to the development of NFE programmes?
    - *Is there collaboration between formal and non-formal education?*
    - *What are the main problems NFE programmes encounter?*

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[8] Follow up questions were asked upon necessity.

Alumni Interviews

Start with an introduction about the aim of the study and get consent for using the information they share.

- Personal information- name, surname (optional); age; sex
- What is your highest education level?
- Are you working by the specialisation gained through formal education or have you changed the sphere?
- What NFE programmes have you taken part in?
- Why have you decided to take part in a NFE programme?
- Which hard/soft skills were developed through the NFE programme?
- How did those skills assist in getting engaged in the labour market?
- What are the channels that helped you get involved in the labor market?
- In your opinion which soft skills are competitive in the Armenian labour market today?
- How do you assess the role of NFE programmes in increasing the competitiveness and productivity of the youth?
- Do you consider it realistic to be involved in the labor market only with the skills acquired through NFE programmes or is formal education (university, college) mandatory?
- To what extent do employers consider the existence of a state diploma when hiring?