

# Research of Awareness and Preferences Consumers of Non-formal Education Services\*

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A pilot marketing research made by the author in February-October this year shaped a basis for this article. The research had the following aims: to identify consumers' awareness and preferences in respect of non-formal education. The term “non-formal education” was broadly interpreted, it covered any kind of short-term or medium-term education program of non-commercial and commercial organizations. It was purposely done to clarify what position third sector education programs take in “common people” mind; whether a consumer distinguishes between civic education and other kinds of non-formal education; what a consumer prefers – commercial or non-commercial training courses and programs. The results of the first part of the research (Minsk inhabitants were questioned) were presented at the Festival of Non-Formal Education at the round table talks “Research Development in the Field of Non-Formal Education”. Discussion and work in groups at the round table let to set goals and objectives for the second part of research, focused on education programs of public organizations. It was a qualitative research carried out by focus-group method. The article is composed of two parts, first of which describes the main results of quantities survey research, the second – results of focus-group.

## Part 1. Quantitative research

Before we come to describing the questionnaires' results I briefly explain why the research turned to be as it is. The main difficulty was in shaping the offer and goals of the research. The initial goal which was set by the researchers was identification of needs in education and preferences in the field of civic education to promote it widely in Belarus. By first discussions of goals and methods of the research it became clear that questions and target groups of concern of different organizations differ significantly. Besides that, the organizations differently interpreted the term “civic education” and possible strategy of its development in Belarus. Thus, the initial goal “research on civic education” was transformed into research “on non-formal education”. There was no agent which either made an order for civic education or defined research goals in the field of civic education. There were separate organizations – representatives of the third sector each of which had own target group and its attitude to education program.

Thus a compromise was achieved: to carry out a pilot, “investigating” research of consumers' opinions, which could be useful and interesting for the majority of organizations engaged in the field of non-formal education.

### Key questions of this research:

- Our consumer – who is he/she?
- What does he/she want to learn?
- What does he/she need it for?
- What organizations and events does he/she choose?
- How does he/she get information on our events?
- Is he/she ready to pay for education service?

Before asking questions, the third sector organizations should clarify the following:

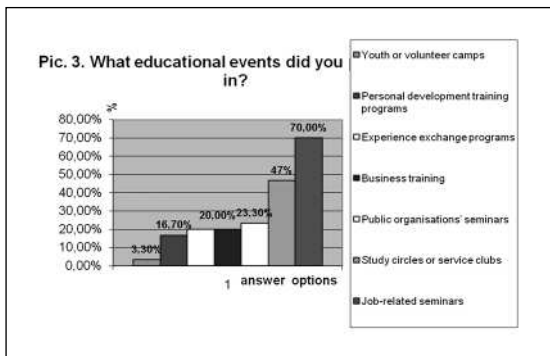
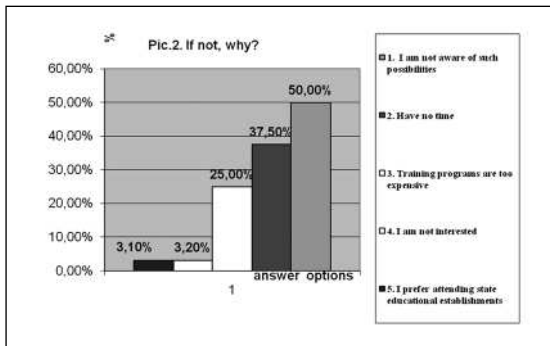
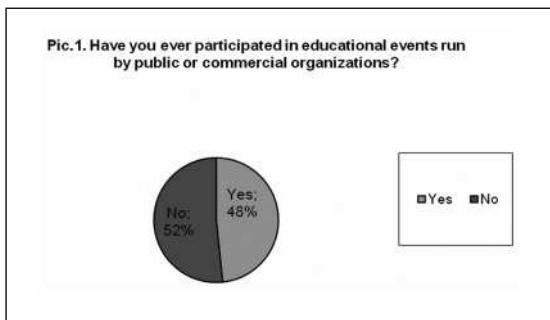
- Are there many of them – people interested in studying?
- Are people aware of services of non-formal education?
- What is the position of educational events of the third sector among other educational services?

The research was carried out by questioning. Respondents were accidentally chosen, a number of respondents – 124 people at the age of 20 through 56; 59 men, 65 women; Minsk inhabitants.

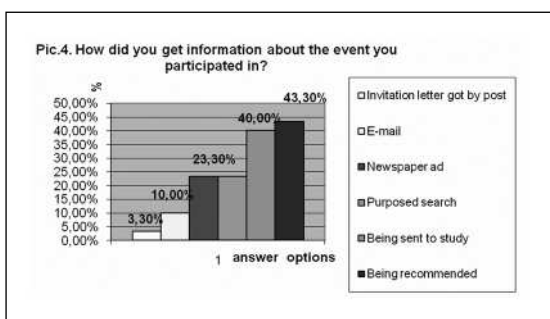
\* Рябова Н. Исследование осведомленности и предпочтений потребителей услуг неформального образования // Адукатор №3(9), 2006. – С. 30–35.

**Results and main conclusions:**

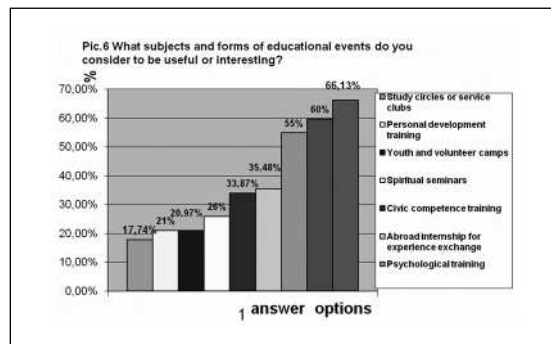
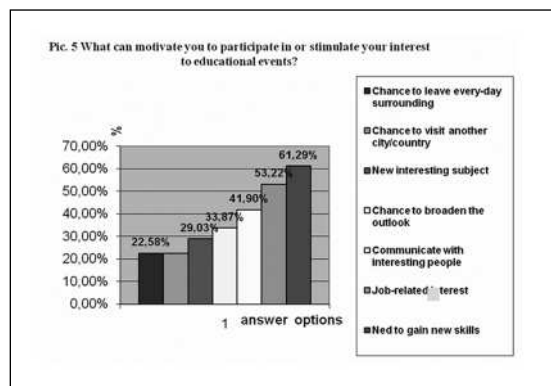
1. Awareness about non-formal education services is low even in the capital. More than half of survey respondents answered that they had never participated in education events of commercial or non-commercial organizations (pic.1). Answering a question "Why didn't you participate?" they chose an option "I do not know about these opportunities". (pic.2).



2. The most widespread information channel about educational events is recommendations, except advanced training (pic.4).

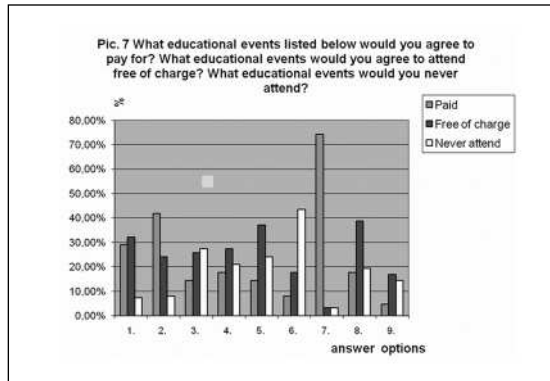


3. Job-related and advanced training programs are the most attended and interesting education services for the consumers (pic.3, pic.6).
4. The main motive for participating in educational events the respondents consider to be a need to gain new skills and professional interest (pic.6).
5. Despite the fact that the consumers show clear functional attitude towards educational events treating them as means for advancing qualification and own competitiveness on the labor market quite high percent of respondents show the interest to civic education (pic.6).



6. Cognitive interest and communication possibilities can be a motive to participate in events of non-formal education (relevant both for the respondents who are not experienced in such events and for those who participated) (pic.5).
7. The majority of the consumers are ready to pay for courses providing exact skills and training courses raising professional qualities and chances to succeed on the labor market. Less than 10% of respondents relied that they are ready to attend paid training courses raising civic competences (pic.7).
8. Study circles are still "unusual" form for Belarusian consumers provoking rejection in a group of population (pic.7), nevertheless some consumers are ready to pay for this service.





**A list of educational events (was followed by exact samples and explanations):**

1. – Psychological seminars
2. – Training courses raising professional qualities and chances on the labor market
3. – Spiritual seminars
4. – Personal development training courses
5. – Study circles and service clubs
6. – Training courses raising civic competences
7. – Courses for training new skills
8. – Abroad internship for experience exchange
9. – Youth or volunteer camps

9. The following questions are required more detailed study:
  - What are the preferences of different target groups: youth, women, elderly people, rural population?
  - How to attract consumers' attention to information on non-formal education services?
  - How to develop tools for informing and promoting civic education services relevant to current situation in Belarus?
  - How to use resources of the program participants for the purpose to extend the awareness about the services?
  - What new themes and forms of events can attract new participants?
10. As it was the pilot research and sampling was limited it is recommended to make statistically-reliable investigations of the consumers' opinions in the field of non-formal education service including regions and small towns. The obtained data can be used for specifying questions and shaping hypotheses for qualitative research (interview and focus-groups).

Unfortunately a magazine article format does not let to present the results of all focus-groups. In this respect we present the results on the quantitative research on the subject "The Youth and Non-Formal Education".

The results of the analysis of the views given by the respondents of the "youth" focus-groups on main questions under discussion are as follows.

**Awareness about non-formal education services and attitude towards them**

It was found out that a great part of the respondents are not aware of possibilities given by the non-formal education services. According to their responds they have never taken interest in such events and paid any attention to information about the courses and training programs. The respondents among students of the educational establishments specified that the only reason for focused search for information on non-formal education services can be a need to get exact information and skills (foreign language was set as a sample).

Some respondents impressed by a wide range of services stated in the questionnaire although the majority said they had been aware about such offer on the education service market or assumed that subjects and forms of education services are varied. Some respondents noticed that they are surprised with study on the subject "civic competences" including the consumers' rights.

**Experience gained by participating in educational events of commercial and non-commercial organizations**

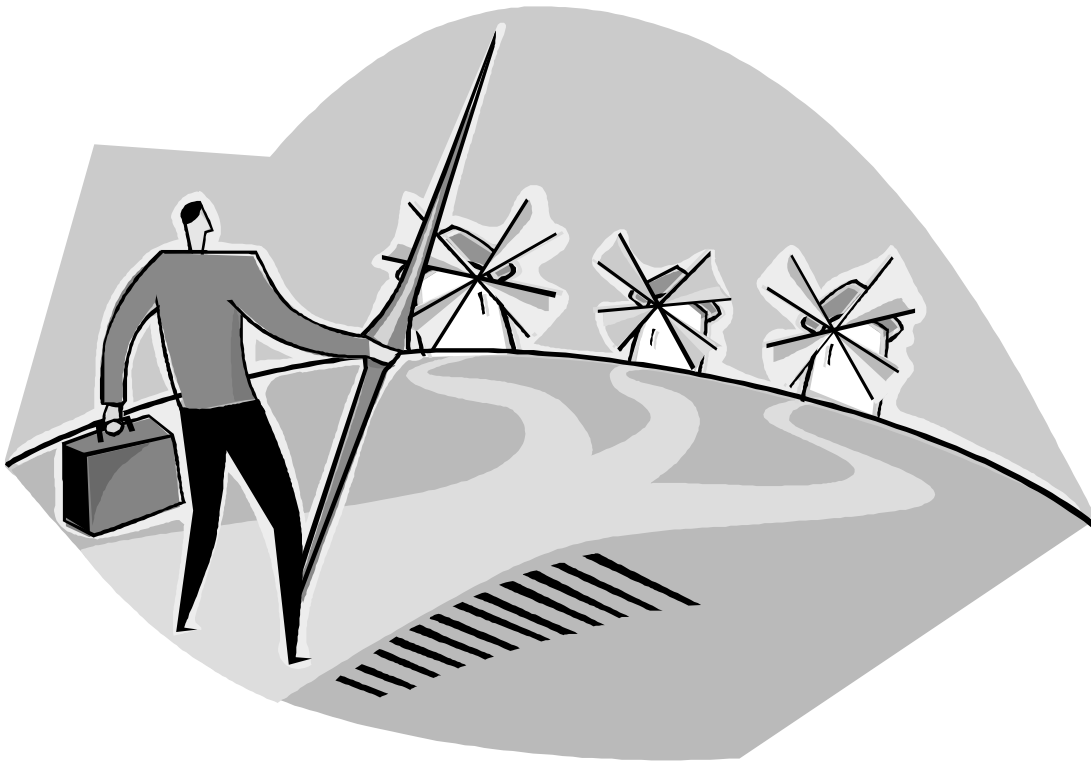
Only three respondents had participation experience in educational events of public organizations; the rest had no experience in participating in seminars and training programs in general; some respondents attended foreign language courses. It is typical that respondents being experienced in educational events of public organizations showed great interest and positive attitude to non-formal education in general and they got interest in a much wider subject spectrum. Due to the experienced students exactly that experience made an influence on their further commitment and stimulated a strong interest to non-formal education. They are ready to recommend non-formal educational events to their contacts. Their commitment and participation is restricted by lack of time due to study at the educational establishments.

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**Part 2. Qualitative research**

The second part of the research was carried out by a focus-group technique and was aimed at deep study of two questions: 1) youth's attitude to non-formal educational events, in particular to the events conducted by the public organizations; 2) attitude of the youth and employed people of the middle age to such educational form as study circles. The study circles as a subject for the qualitative research was chosen because the development of this new-for-Belarus form of adult education is one of the priorities of a network of organizations of non-formal education (ACE).

4 focus-groups were conducted: 1) youth, 3 to 5 year university students; 2) youth, college students; 3) middle-aged people, pedagogues (subject – study circles); 4) employed people of the middle age, with different jobs (subject – study circles). The participants of the "youth" focus-groups were asked to fill-in a questionnaire which already used in the first part of the research, later on they discussed. The participants of the focus-groups on study circles were given promotion materials (booklets, multimedia presentations); later on there was a discussion in a group.



Respondents never participated were asked whether they could imagine themselves to be a person actively attending educational events and giving recommendations to their contacts, they gave the following answers:

- "I cannot imagine myself being such a person, I am interested in another activities."
- "I cannot still imagine that I am interested with such things and spend my spare time on it, but I think it is quite possible. Never knows how the life interests will change and what I will do in future."
- "Probably it is interesting indeed, judging on variety of subjects indicated in the questionnaire."

### The reasons for lack of participation experience in non-formal educational events

The majority of participants stated deep involvement in study at university, life problems and lack of time as a reason for having no interest to participate. One respondent viewed an idea that "lack of time" is a typical excuse in all life situations and the main reason is a lack of interest or participation experience.

### Preferable ways to get information about non-formal education services

All respondents prefer getting recommendations on educational events for their contacts. Some respondents consider commercial to be an acceptable way. They think that commercial for educational events should be "attractive" and persistent. All respondents without any exception showed a negative attitude to information and advertising e-mailing.

### Educational event subject range

The majority of interviewed university students consider job-related educational events to be the most interesting and important. The majority of respondents named the subject "Career Planning" as the most attractive.

The prevailed part of participants of the focus-group showed an interest to the subject "Consumers' Rights".

Some respondents showed an interest to "unusual" subjects (as a sample they mentioned archeological digs), some – to personal development training courses, spiritual development.

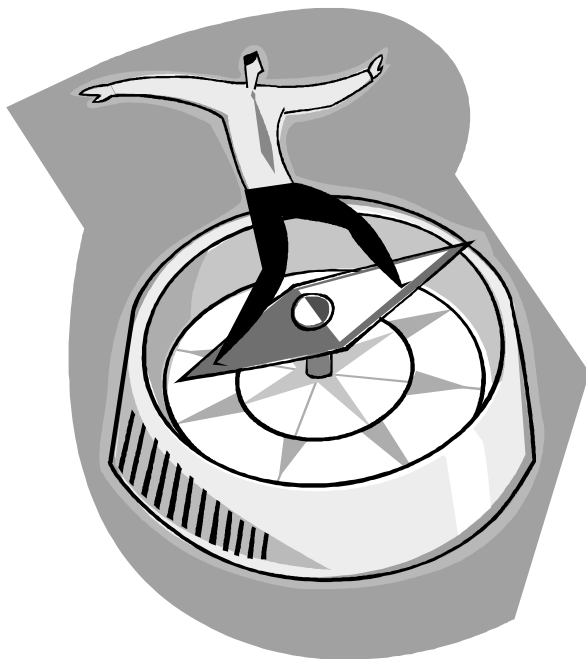
Respondents without participation experience almost did not show any interest to volunteer camps and international exchanges. Experienced participants took an interest to a wider spectrum of subjects in comparison with other participants of focus-groups.

### Motivation to participate in educational events

The following factors were listed, they are supposed to influence the motivation to participate in educational events: a need to get knowledge and skills, job interests, meeting interesting people. The majority of respondents also specified subject attractiveness as a motive.

As a sample I can quote the following: "I think that the most important thing is subject attractiveness. Of course, some courses can be necessary for advanced training. But I am happy with the education I have at university, thus it would be much more important to attend something interesting".





### Attitude towards civic education and public organizations

The majority of the respondents, according to their words, while filling-in the questionnaire did not pay any attention to information on public organizations training programs, raising civic competences (consumers' rights, democracy, leadership, ecology, etc.). Answering to clarification questions they specified first of all their interest to professional growth and advanced training, personal development (college students). Nevertheless some respondents showed an interest to this subject. The following statements are sampled:

- "It was interesting for me personally. I paid attention."
- "I think that consumers' rights is very important subject. It is complicated and takes much time to search for information on this matter and it turned to be very interesting and useful to attend the seminar."
- "The matter is that I have already participated in such events, thus it generated my interest. I consider these events to be interesting and useful, thus if there is a chance to participate I will use it."

Respondents' awareness about "third sector" and its activities is rather low, although all respondents are aware of a significant number of public organizations, which goals and activities are variable. The respondents specified that activity of these organizations is developing "aside", "in shadow", there is not much information about them and there is no time and wish to search for it purposely. The Belarusian Republican Youth Union is widely known but it has a negative image because of "total participation", too formal, and as respondents said – "uselessness".

As a sample of respondents' attitude to public organizations I quote the respondents' answers to the following question of the moderator:

**Questions:** As far I understand nobody of you participates in public organization. Why do you think people participate in their activity?

**Answers:**

- They are fanatics.
- No, I disagree. I think that different people have different lives and never know what will be interesting.
- I think that these people are doing what is interesting for them.
- If I do not do anything like that now, it is because I spend my entire time on working and studying. When I have some spare time I just want to spend it on myself, relaxing. But if I have had means of living enough and spare time, if I have had any need to study all the time and think about earnings, I would be interested to do something like this.

### Attitude to informal status of educational events (no state specimen certificates)

Informal status of educational events according to the respondents' answers is not a reason not to use this service. In contrary respondents think that quality of education services provided by both commercial and non-commercial organizations probably higher, the subjects are more important and diversified. Besides that, even people without participation experience specified that non-formal education can be characterized by innovative methods.

There is a quotation of such kind (a respondent is inexperienced in participating in non-formal education): "I think that there are such training programs which are simply not conducted at the state educational establishments (for example, speaking to the press or dealing with officials or the consumers' rights). This training will not be provided at the university. And such training courses are interesting to be attended as they make alternative to the state education, and there are other subjects which are considered to be out of priority of the state universities. Besides that, the organizations providing non-formal education services have drafted techniques for these training courses. This is also very interesting as the university provides lectures and take examinations – that's all."

### Attitude to paid/free of charge non-formal education services

A significant part of respondents viewed an opinion that the majority of non-formal education services should be free of charge. According to what the respondents answered they are ready to pay for educational events relevant to advanced training, professional growth, and gaining new skills. Those who were experienced in participating in international camps said that they were ready to participate and pay for it as the experienced gained was very interesting and useful. Other respondents viewed an opinion that they probably would agree to pay such events partially.

The following statement is typical: "I know that some training courses can be expensive but I would agree to attend them on free-of-charge basis, because I am curious."

### Attitude to duration and form of educational events

The majority of the interviewed students viewed an opinion that it is more comfortable for them to attend training course 2-3 times a week in the evening (2-3 hours) then find time for two- or three-day course. This was also marked by the students attended the two- or three-day training course. Some respondents also marked that they would prefer a systematize course than a set of training courses on different unrelated subjects.

### Attitude to study circles and service clubs

The majority of participants of two focus-groups consider study circles to be an acceptable form for common implementation of the youth interests. Some of the participants are experienced in participating in such circles (bands and amateur photographer studio). Respondents specified that advantage of this form of education is self-sufficiency of participants and wide opportunities in choosing subject, duration and periodicity. It was viewed that the name "service club" better corresponds to the sense of these common meetings than "study circle".

## Conclusions

The most important conclusions and recommendations which can be made on results of the research carried out are the following:

1. Events of non-formal and particularly of civic education need more intensive promotion.

2. It is needed to use more resource of participants of educational events of the "third sector" for promoting civic education.
3. Organizations of the non-commercial sector can use more active a niche of "advanced training", skill training.
4. While making quantitative and qualitative researches it was identified that educational events raising civic competences attract interest of a number of respondents. Apparently a consumer is slightly aware of these educational services, thus public organizations should offer a wider spectrum of subjects characterized by availability and attractiveness and are practice-oriented to attract attention to civic education.
5. As cognitive interest (interesting and useful subject, possibility to broaden outlook) is an important motive for participation in educational events. Thus, it is necessary to make advertising and information messages focusing on attractiveness and new character of the event's subject. During the qualitative research it was identified that many respondents think that bright and attractive advertising can trigger their interest to educational event (if the subject is interesting).
6. By the qualitative research it was identified that participation experience in non-formal education raises interest to these events and awareness in this field. It was also identified that studying youth without experience in seminars and training courses prefer evening classes of 2-3 hours each, 2-3 times a week to two -or three-day training courses. These data can become a fundament to recommend non-formal education organizations to make experiments with forms of educational events. Next recommendation is to use wider short-term presentations and workshops to involve possible participants of long-term educational programs.
7. By the qualitative research it was identified that the subjects "Career Planning" and "Vocational Guidance" attract young people. Accordingly, these subjects can be recommended to commercial and non-commercial organizations to work with young people.
8. By the qualitative research it was identified that interviewed students consider study circles and service clubs to be acceptable form of common implementation of youth interest that can be a basis for recommending active use of this educational form for this target group.
9. By the qualitative research it was identified that respondents without participation experience in non-formal education are not ready to pay for these educational services. The results of the quantitative research testifies that the consumers are ready to pay for the subjects related to employment, advanced training and gaining need skills. Accordingly, individual approach to developing strategy on promoting paid services in the field of non-formal education basing on specifics of exact target groups can be recommended to organizations.

More precise information on this research is available on [www.adukatar.net](http://www.adukatar.net).

Translated by Victoria Dronova

