YOUTH WORK
ESSENTIALS

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth

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Introduction

At any time, in any part of Europe, enthusiastic, committed youth workers and young people are engaging in effective and productive youth work activities, regardless of the resources available to them.

If youth work is to have a wider and more enduring impact on the lives of young people across Europe, it needs to be widely recognised, resourced and implemented on a continuous basis. This publication looks at some of the essential features of youth work that need to be in place for this to happen. It does so by giving a general illustration of the main features of youth work in Europe and by offering tips for further reading.

OUTLINE

Part 1 – Youth work, young people and youth workers

- ► Defining youth work
- ► Young people and youth work
- ► How does youth work benefit young people?
- ► The role of youth workers
- ► Education, competences and ethical standards
- ► Quality assurance and professional recognition

Part 2 – Youth work policy, funding and support

- ► Support from national public authorities
- ► Role of the voluntary youth sector
- ► European support
- ► Knowledge, research and further reading

Part 1
Youth work, young people and youth workers

▬ The Council of Europe describes youth work as:

" *a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making. (Council of Europe 2017)*

▬ For the European Union, youth work is:

" *a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities also include sport and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the area of "out-of-school" education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation. (EU Council Resolution 2009)*

▬ European youth work conventions and other expert forums have contributed to further refining the definitions of "youth worker" and "youth work practice".

▬ Some countries in Europe also have their own legal or policy-based definitions of youth work. The terms in the word cloud below are often used to describe youth work:

YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH WORK

▬ Youth work happens where young people are and on their terms. It is based on their voluntary participation and trust. Youth work can take place at any level, in any space or interactive environment, including virtually, or through direct contact. It can be one activity or a regular programme of activities where young people interact with each other. In a youth work process, young people and youth workers grow together by, for example, challenging prejudice and individual, social and societal problems and by practising democracy. Youth work is based on non-formal education and learning processes, facilitated by youth workers, whereby young people learn to voice their aspirations – for themselves and for their communities – and work to bring about change. It is also a social practice, which often focuses on the social inclusion of young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

On their own grounds – targeted or universal

▬▬ Youth work can be offered universally to all young people in youth clubs, cafes or in one-stop shops. It can also be targeted, through detached, street or mobile youth work, where it is aimed at supporting specific groups experiencing discrimination and multiple disadvantages. For example, targeted youth work may take place in remote rural areas, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, juvenile prisons or in refugee camps.

On their own terms – voluntary participation

▬▬ Voluntary participation is one of the defining features of youth work. Another one is that it is non-judgmental. Youth workers and young people participate as equals – together they construct, develop and sustain their relationship. Youth work is a space for mutual support and encouragement, trust, learning opportunities, self-analysis and reflection, emotional development, social and cultural awareness and, ultimately, positive self-realisation.

▬▬ Through their participation in youth work, young people should not only develop autonomy, assume responsibility for their actions and take charge of their life, but also become active citizens who question and challenge established norms with a view to bringing about positive social and political change. In practical terms, youth work is a journey undertaken with groups of young people who change and evolve; it can take place in a variety of locations, focus on a variety of issues and use different methods.

HOW DOES YOUTH WORK BENEFIT YOUNG PEOPLE?

▬▬ The perceived benefits of participation in youth work are many and varied and can include the creation of spaces for young people and "bridges" in their lives. The bridge-building role of youth work has a particularly strong impact on the lives of young people who are experiencing inequalities, disadvantages and discrimination (Declaration 2015).

▬▬ Youth work:
- ▶ empowers young people to actively participate in society and politics, equipping them with essential life and labour market skills;
- ▶ is based on non-formal education methodologies and creates a space for informal learning;
- ▶ facilitates the transition of young people from childhood to adulthood, from dependent to autonomous life;
- ▶ helps young people to acquire and develop life skills;
- ▶ promotes peace, tolerance and intercultural learning;
- ▶ encourages critical thinking, thus combating radicalisation and preventing extremism;
- ▶ advances democracy, human rights, citizenship, European values, participation and equal opportunities;
- ▶ strengthens positive identities, a sense of belonging and autonomy;
- ▶ fosters social inclusion and cohesion and upholds civil society;
- ▶ engages in cross-sectoral co-operation and partnerships.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH WORKERS

▰▰▰ Youth workers and young people are both partners and stakeholders in youth work. However, youth workers have a particular role and responsibility. While they may have to adopt an administrative role, particularly in terms of programme and project management, funding, resources and the physical environment as well as being responsible for the creation of a safe and protective environment for young people, the primary role of youth workers is to facilitate young people's learning, to motivate and support them in becoming autonomous, active and responsible individuals and citizens. In doing this, youth workers need to display leadership, commitment, creativity and enthusiasm. While youth workers can be either paid workers or volunteers, their overall role and responsibilities may not necessarily differ much, but they must have the right set of competencies and carry out their work in a professional manner. Youth workers are often facilitators of young people's development, acting as role models for them. They are also seen as bridge builders to other social or public services for young people and the community.

EDUCATION, COMPETENCES AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

▰▰▰ Most countries across Europe provide some level of non-formal education and training for youth workers; just half offer degree-level courses in youth work or related fields, while a smaller number of countries provide vocational training for youth workers. European support programmes, in particular the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme, provide a wide range of education and training opportunities for youth workers.

▰▰▰ In some countries there are national or even local competence frameworks for youth workers, which establish what youth workers should know and be able to do.

▰▰▰ The Council of Europe's Youth Work Portfolio identifies 31 competences for youth workers on what youth work most commonly involves. It divides competences into two categories:

▶ specific youth work competences – competences that make the youth work field of activity unique; and

▶ more general competences – those relevant for other fields of activity but that are usually important for youth work as well.

▰▰▰ A complementary tool is the Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally, developed by SALTO Training and Cooperation.[1]

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1. For more details, see: https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio or www.salto-youth.net

All practices of a social nature are based on values, and youth work is no exception. The Council of Europe's Youth Work Portfolio (2015) states that "serving the higher purposes of inclusion and social cohesion, youth work has inherent moral elements representing a value-driven social practice which produces actions that have moral, social and political consequences". Due to its educational nature, youth work must also empower young people to be able to select their own values, according to their personality, choices and individual preference. It is not an easy job!

To ensure that youth work practice is ethical, youth work organisations generally develop and implement:

► codes of ethics: standard professional codes for youth work;

► codes of practice, which highlight how ethical principles can be effective in particular contexts and situations; or

► codes of behaviour, which guide youth workers' actions and behaviour when dealing with young people, particularly to ensure their safety and protection.

Ethical standards deal with such issues as confidentiality, professional boundaries, managing risk, dual relationships and well-being. They also cover issues related to the type of youth work practice (for example, open youth work, outreach youth work, faith-based youth work, street youth work, youth work with LGBTIQ+ young people). More information about ethics in youth work can be found in the research undertaken by O. Bárta and S. Petkovic. (https://go.coe.int/qSjvE).

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION

Developing and assuring quality in youth work is of increasing importance across Europe.

Approaches to quality assurance frameworks, systems and tools vary widely, from national quality marks or occupational standards, through certification of training providers, to evaluation of youth organisations or of youth workers. Examples of quality assurance systems can be found in the research by James O'Donovan (O'Donovan 2020).

European standard-setting sometimes inspires national and even organisational frameworks. The Council of Europe's Quality Label for Youth Centres has been awarded to 14 youth centres across Europe that provide safe spaces for young people, are educational establishments, promote youth work, are focal points for networking and promote the values, approaches and standards of the Council of Europe.

The European Union's guide to quality development, Improving Youth Work, provides a practical guide for young people, youth workers and youth organisations on how to promote and assure quality in youth work.

For inspiration about quality youth work at local level, including a European Charter guiding that work, visit: www.europegoeslocal.eu.

While only a minority of countries across Europe meet the requirements for professional recognition of youth work at national level, over 20 European countries have some form of legal or regulatory authority for youth work as well as standard occupational profiles for youth workers. Malta is the only European country to statutorily recognise youth work as a profession.

Part 2

Youth work policy, funding and support

Support from national public authorities

Policy

▬ Youth work is supported and recognised through policy, funding, co-operation and quality development at local, national and European levels. Increasingly, youth work has come to be seen as a means of addressing a range of issues affecting young people. National and local public authorities have put in place policy, funding and other resources for youth work in Europe. Most countries have a youth policy that also includes a legal and/or strategic framework for youth work, financial and other support services. Many countries also provide the formal education and training that underpin youth work as a discipline. In fact, investment in youth work could be seen as having a cascading multiplier effect on young people, beginning with a small group of decision makers, leading to a wider group of strategic experts, and then to an even larger group of implementers, whose work affects an impressive number of young people.

▬ Few countries include in their youth policy documents formal or legal definitions of "youth work" or "youth worker". In national policy, youth work is often reflected as an important means of delivering youth policy or as part of services to young people. Youth work is sometimes part of a wider field of intervention, for example that of social pedagogy, socio-cultural education, hobby or leisure time.

Funding

▬ The level and nature of funding for youth work varies widely depending on population, resources and capacity and the level of a country's policy commitments to youth work. State funding for youth work usually falls under funding for youth or youth services. In some countries, including Belgium, Estonia, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta, central government provides funding through the relevant ministry on an annual basis, usually in the form of grants to youth organisations and other support programmes and services. In others, such as Germany, Finland, Norway and Sweden, funding is more regionally or locally based. Funding at regional or local level also provides for greater autonomy in terms of policy implementation. In some countries, including Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Georgia and Montenegro, funding is more project-based and intermittent and is often heavily dependent on European or external funding resources.

▬ Even in countries such as Finland and Ireland, where youth work is well established and comparatively well-funded, state expenditure on youth work and youth services amounts to less than one per cent of the annual education budget.

Role of the voluntary youth sector

▬ The voluntary youth sector is a key provider of youth work in Europe. In many countries in southern and eastern Europe, the voluntary youth sector is the main provider of youth work, which is funded mostly by European programmes. The sector promotes recognition of youth work development and provides services to youth workers. It comprises non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, youth wings of political parties and political organisations, associations and networks of youth workers and national umbrella structures such as youth councils, as well as worldwide movements.

▬ While in many instances supported by state funding, the youth NGOs are strongly reliant on European funding (Erasmus+ Programme, the European Social Fund, the European Solidarity Corps, the European Youth Foundation), and European accreditation (Youthpass), where no state accreditation is available. Some national or international foundations also support youth work initiatives.

EUROPEAN SUPPORT

▨ Many policy recommendations, standards, strategic frameworks and quality indicators as well as funding and support systems for youth work are developed through co-operation at European and international level.

Policy

▨ At European level, both the Council of Europe and the European Union have youth policies and strategies that incorporate youth work.

▨ The Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/REC(2017)4 on youth work is a legal instrument which recommends that member states renew their support for youth work through a range of actions and measures and through establishing policies that safeguard and proactively support the establishment and further development of youth work at all levels. It is implemented under the Youth Sector Strategy 2030, within which youth work is one of the four strategic priorities, through its Joint Council on Youth (CMJ), its constituting bodies and the other instruments available for the youth sector.

▨ The European Union's Youth Strategy (2019-2027) Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people, provides for the development and implementation of a European Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work. The strategy foresees implementation including through the Youth Dialogue, aiming to include more policy experts and young people in decision making.

▨ The EU–Council of Europe youth partnership is a platform for co-operation between the two European institutions to promote and strengthen youth work and its recognition. It acts as a think tank and a laboratory, gathering and producing knowledge, translating it for its effective use in youth policy and practice. An important repository of general and thematic research, good practice case studies and educational material on youth work is available on the youth partnership website.[2]

▨ There are also a number of significant policy documents at European level on youth work, including:

- ▶ Council conclusions on the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people (2013);
- ▶ Council conclusions on reinforcing youth work to ensure cohesive societies (2015);
- ▶ Council conclusions on the role of youth work in supporting young people's development of essential life skills that facilitate their successful transition to adulthood, active citizenship and working life (2017);
- ▶ Council conclusions on smart youth work (2017) and on digital youth work (2019);
- ▶ Council conclusions on the role of youth work in the context of migration and refugee matters (2018);
- ▶ Council conclusions on education and training of youth workers (2019);
- ▶ Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention (2010);
- ▶ Report and Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention (2015).

Funding

▨ At European level, the main sources of funding are through the European Union's Erasmus +, European Solidarity Corps and DiscoverEU programmes. Some funding is also available from the European Social Fund. For information on EU resources, please visit https://europa.eu/youth/EU_en. The Council of Europe's European Youth Foundation also supports youth work activities run by youth organisations. For more information, visit www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation.

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2. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-work2

European organisations and structures

▬ The EU and the Council of Europe also fund number of pan-European bodies and support structures that provide information, training and other resources for youth work development, including the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA),[3] the European Youth Card Association (EYCA),[4] Eurodesk,[5] SALTO-YOUTH[6] and the European Youth Centres in Budapest and Strasbourg.[7]

▬ The European Youth Forum[8] and its members advocate for youth work development, support and recognition.

KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH AND FURTHER READING

▬ A lot of information, research and analysis about youth work is available at country and European levels. Although these sources reflect the reality of youth work on the ground, they are mostly used by the youth sector and do not reach the general public or other sectors to a sufficient extent.

▬ The EU's online encyclopaedia in the area of national youth policies *Youth Wiki*[9] contains a wealth of information about youth and other policies affecting young people. It also contains a specific chapter on youth work in the participating countries.

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3. www.eryica.org
4. www.eyca.org
5. eurodesk.eu
6. salto-youth.net
7. www.coe.int/en/web/youth/mission-and-mandate
8. www.youthforum.org
9. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/youthwiki

▬ The Council of Europe's Youth Work Portfolio is an assessment tool for youth workers and youth leaders, but also for managers and administrators, to assess and further develop their youth work competence. A complementary resource is the Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally developed by Salto Training and Cooperation.

▬ The following expert group reports and studies on youth work are also available:

▶ *Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union* (2014);

▶ *Quality youth work – A common framework for the further development of youth work* (2015);

▶ *The contribution of youth work to address the challenges young people are facing, in particular the transition from education to employment* (2015);

▶ *The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation* (2017);

▶ *Developing digital youth work – Policy recommendations, training needs and good practice examples for youth workers and decision-makers* (2018);

▶ *Taking the future in their own hands – Youth work and entrepreneurial learning* (2017);

▶ *The contribution of youth work in the context of migration and refugee matters* (2019).

▬ The European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) offers a repository of country sheets on youth work[10] and thematic analytical papers related to youth work and to education of youth workers in European countries.[11]

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10. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/country-information-youth-work
11. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/expert-group-researching-education-career-paths-youth-workers

▬▬ The EU–Council of Europe partnership has also published a series of thematic youth knowledge books and educational materials in the area of youth work[12]:

► *The history of youth work in Europe* – seven volumes containing country stories and thematic explorations;

► *Thinking seriously about youth work. And how to do prepare people to do it*;

► *Youth worker education in Europe: policies, structures, practices*;

► 13 T-kits – thematic publications written by experienced youth trainers and educators. They are easy-to-use handbooks for youth work training and educational activities;

► Coyote – the online magazine for youth workers and trainers that publishes articles on important issues on youth work in Europe and beyond.

▬▬ The partnership also hosts the content and the results of the two European Youth Work conventions[13] and an updated glossary[14] on youth.

▬▬ The EU–Council of Europe youth partnership organises Massive Open Online Courses, which translate some of the knowledge developed by the partnership into accessible, user-friendly learning materials.

I CHALLENGE US TO THINK OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND MOVE BACK TO POLICIES FROM THERE

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12. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/publications
13 https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/eywc-website
14 https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary

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▬▬ **James O'Donovan** is a former Irish civil servant with extensive experience in the education, training and youth fields both in Ireland and at European level. Most of his career has been spent in the education field, primarily in the development and implementation of policy in such areas as the third-level non-university sector; the development and implementation of a national qualifications framework; performance management and development systems for the civil and public sector; educational disadvantage; and the youth sector and the development of a national quality standards framework.

This third issue of "Essentials" closes the exploration of the youth sector triangle of governance, featuring the pillar of youth work practice. What is youth work and how is it defined? Who is involved in it and what are its benefits for young people? Where does youth work happen and based on which principles? What are the policies, programmes and funding that recognise it and support its quality development?

This issue zooms in on the essential features of youth work that need to be in place for it to have a wider and more enduring impact on the lives of young people across Europe. It does so by giving a general illustration of the main features of youth work in Europe and by offering tips on European standards, resources, networks and programmes that contribute to a better environment and experience of youth work at all levels.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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The Member States of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

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