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## FINDING COMMON GROUND

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Mapping and scanning the horizons for European youth work  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention

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### ***A personal preface***

My own youth work practice started in 1968 and ended, apart from some very occasional volunteering, in 2003. Most of those 35 years – half as a volunteer, half as a paid part-time practitioner (*all* ‘professional’, I would hope!) - were spent working in one open youth centre with a huge diversity of young people, by age, gender, ethnicity, background, behaviour, experience, aspiration and need. The centre had opened in 1974. I started there, as a volunteer, in 1979, became the senior youth worker in 1985 and left in 2003. After some difficult final years of recurrent funding uncertainty and related staffing turnover, the ‘youth and community’ centre closed its doors to young people in 2013. It had lasted almost exactly 40 years, to which I had contributed 24 years of my life, and stayed in touch to the bitter end. I wrote a kind of obituary to the Centre and the ‘youth work’ I had sought to do there:

As I reflected on the demise of youth work in a centre I myself served for 24 years I thought about how it gave young people sanctuary, self-belief, new horizons, space to be themselves, advocacy and support, information and guidance, different ideas, and changed plans for the future. My youth work might sometimes have been largely leisure-based provision but at other times it held young people’s lives together when everything else in their teenage and young adult lives was going pear-shaped: school, work, lack of work, family relationships, girlfriends and boyfriends, peer groups and more. And I was there for the most troubled and troublesome, dealing unsensationally and often invisibly with issues to do with drugs, crime, sexual health and homelessness (Williamson 2013, p.21)

There are many other forms of ‘youth work’, but I remain in touch with many of the thousands of young people (between the ages of around 25 to 55) who bear testimony to what I did for, and with, them in providing a place for them to go, things for them to do, respect for and responsiveness to their ideas, and advice and support when it was sought.



## **Introduction**

This paper is designed not only to look forward to the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention and its quest for what we share in ‘youth work’ rather than what divides us, but also to look back in order to shed old light on new problems, as the sociologist Geoff Pearson once did in his attempt to show that ‘hooliganism’ was hardly the new phenomenon proclaimed for it but had always been with us (Pearson 1983). In the same vein, debates about the role, purpose, impact and value of ‘youth work’ have long been present, though particular paradigms of youth work have prevailed at different times, in different places, along the road.

The diversity of youth work has long been celebrated but it can also give the impression, to the external gaze, of a rather chaotic and disputed field of practice. This background paper is therefore, ultimately, designed to provide sufficient food for thought to assist those attending the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention in a quest for ‘common ground’. On-going differences in our understanding of youth work will, of course, persist – and, hopefully, continue to serve as the basis for robust debate and dissent – but there is also some imperative to explore and celebrate (even crow about!) those elements of youth work that we can agree we share. We are searching for convergence in our perspectives, rather than our differences.

## **A theoretical void?**

‘There is nothing more practical than a good theory’. Arguably, the frequently expressed words of Immanuel Kant are no more apposite than in the case of ‘youth work’. So often virtually devoid of attachment to any educational or learning theories<sup>1</sup>, it has rested its case on assertion that is plausible to the converted but subject to profound doubt amongst those who are more sceptical as to its intentions, actions and impact. Twenty years ago, Hurley and Treacy (1993, ii) were suggesting that “many youth workers are currently free to interpret the concept of youth work according to their own analysis, experience and competence”. Conceptually, too often, youth work is routinely defined in terms of what it is not rather than articulating more precisely what it is. It is, for example, *not* teaching (formal education), social work or counselling (see Jeffs and Smith 1990). There is some value, however, in viewing youth work as occupying various spaces adjacent to these professions, sometimes indeed vacated by them, and struggling with the tensions that arise from that professional inheritance (and continuing political requirements to serve on those fronts) while simultaneously seeking to respond to and work ‘holistically’ to the needs, demands, aspirations and circumstances of young people. The work carried out by the Partnership between

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Smith, in his seminal text *Developing Youth Work* (1988, p.81), maintained that the focus of youth work on practice and experiential learning has fomented and sustained a belief that “the only good theory is that which derives from experience, anything else can be dismissed as jargon”.



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the European Union and the Council of Europe in the youth field since 2008 on the histories of youth work throughout Europe testifies to such dialectics and tensions. Whether it is called social education, informal education, positive youth development, personal and social development, non-formal education or something else, 'youth work' is invariably positioned on the cusp of competing pressures and expectations – between the individual and society, between association and transition, and much more.

The opening words of the recent EU-funded study of the value of youth work in the European Union testifies to its *diversity* and *variety*:

The term 'youth work' encompasses a broad range of activities and measures, from those that offer leisure activities, support for inclusion and work to youth civic engagement, and many diverse actions in-between. A range of different actors are involved in the delivery of youth work, sometimes provided by the state and other times by the third sector and volunteers or a combination of the two, with backgrounds in diverse fields and a whole variety of life experiences and motivations. The aims of youth work are equally varied and can target all young people or be more targeted towards certain groups.

Whilst youth work can suffer from its own diversity, it is also one of its key strengths. However, it is difficult to define exactly what youth work is; even amongst youth workers from different countries, it can be difficult to convey what they do in one country and how it compares to the others. Therefore, to the outside observer it is a daunting task to understand firstly what youth work is and consequently to value the outcomes of youth activities. People often have pre-conceived ideas about youth work, possibly going back to their own experiences in their own youth. However youth work is a diverse and evolving sector, which cannot be reduced to such approximations. In the youth sector there is a conviction, and as will be shown later in this report, a growing body of evidence, that youth work has a great deal to offer to young people and our societies (Dunne *et al* 2014, p.40)



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### **Common ground<sup>2</sup>?**

'Youth work' in its many guises does indeed have a long and illustrious history, though its purpose, practice and effect has often been debated and contested, and always proved elusive. Starting at some point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Coussée 2008, Gillis 1974, Savage 2007, Springhall 1977), at least in some European countries, it has been concerned with child-saving, character-building, health promotion, delinquency prevention, cultural rescue (from the perils of American youth culture), autonomy and revolt, retreat, political education, and more.

Thirty years ago, the Republic of Ireland produced a seminal policy report on youth policy, known as the Costello Report, maintaining that the core objectives of youth policy should be the empowerment of critical citizens:

The vision of a fully participatory democracy has continued to inspire movement of social change and advance. Examples would include worker participation, equal opportunity for women and community development movements at different levels. It is with this vision and in this context that we place the aim of 'assisting all young people to become self-reliant, responsible and active participants in society' (National Youth Policy Committee 1984, p.15 para 3.6)

In anticipation of International Youth Year 1985, it saw youth work as concerned with personal development and social change:

Youth work must be addressed to the developmental needs of the individual: through social education, it must be concerned with enabling the individual to develop his/her own vision of the future and the social skills needed to play an active role in society. If youth work is to have any impact on the problems facing young people today then it must concern itself with social change. This implies that youth work must have a key role both in enabling young people to analyse society and in motivating and helping them to develop the skills and capacities to become involved in effecting change (National Youth Policy Committee 1984, p.116 para 11.9)

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<sup>2</sup> In a very thought-provoking and challenging response to an early draft of this paper, Professor Guy Redig of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel concurred that "there is an intrinsic impossibility to give an accurate description of youth work as an international phenomenon which distinguishes it from other youth facilities and initiatives", that "there exists little consensus on the identification of youth work" and that "it soon becomes clear that one concept (youth work) covers a very divergent practice, too broad even to use a clear policy context". Nevertheless, as a contribution to the discussion, he argues firmly "in favour of promoting and encouraging an active definition process and of formulating a 'common ground'" (Redig 2014)



Youth work has not always been invested with such a radical edge, and arguably has gravitated towards a more functionalist position at many moments and in many places. Indeed, twenty years ago, Hurley and Treacy published a delineation of 'models of youth work', impressively connecting theoretical perspectives, assumptions about the nature of society, the ways in which youth work was expected to be applied and the characteristics of that form of youth work. There were four ideal types:

- Character building (The Functionalist Paradigm)
- Personal development (The Interpretive Paradigm)
- Critical social education (The Radical Humanist Paradigm)
- Radical social change (The Radical Structuralist Paradigm)

All, however, assume a form of youth work that is guided and governed by youth workers or youth leaders, a view of youth work that is anathema to autonomous, self-governed youth organisations. They are adamant that they, too, do 'youth work' or at least provide a platform for non-formal learning experiences for young people. And here lies the rub: there remains a spectrum of contexts in young people's lives that potentially and practically offer sites for youth work experiences, sometimes facilitated by volunteer and professionally trained adult youth workers, sometimes organised in other ways.

After increasing recognition of the role and place of youth work in young people's lives, as both a space for association and a 'transit lounge' to adulthood (Verschelden *et al* 2009), the European Youth Work Declaration was launched in 2010 (see below). This followed hot on the heels of the 2009 EU Youth Strategy which put something called 'youth work' at the centre of much of its proposed work across all of its fields of action. Youth work of a different kind – one focused on participatory training, experiential learning and capacity-building across a spectrum of issues - had already been at the heart of the Council of Europe's youth programme for a number of years. Indeed, the recent framing of 'youth work' by the European Commission drew heavily on the thinking of the late Peter Lauritzen who had, from the establishment of the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg in 1972, been a central pioneer of youth work at a European level within the Youth Directorate (now Youth Department) of the Council of Europe. The 2012 Joint Report of the (European) Council and the Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-18) asserted the place of youth work<sup>3</sup> as a support to all fields of action, through cross-sectoral<sup>4</sup> co-operation, and defined youth work as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> In footnote 21 of the 2009 European Union Youth Strategy (Council of the European Union 2009), 'youth work' is elaborated as: Commonly-used term for work with young people - 'socioeducational instructors' is the legal term for 'youth workers', as cited in Article 149(2) of the Treaty establishing the European Community (TEC). By the time of the Council Resolution on youth work (Council of the European Union



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Youth work covers a large scope of social, cultural, educational or political activities by, with and for young people. It is about ‘out-of-school’ education and leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders. It is based on non-formal learning and voluntary participation.

This perspective – though emphasising activities rather than interaction (association) – lies firmly in the tradition articulated by the ‘informal education’ commentator Mark Smith, who sought to depict youth work and related activity as ‘local education’ (Smith 1994): educational work that is not organised by subject, syllabi or lessons, but a practice that is about conversation and community, a commitment to local democracy and self-organisation, and often unpredictable and risky. These views were elaborated two years later with his co-author Tony Jeffs, around the themes of conversation, democracy and learning (Jeffs and Smith 1996). Such formulations of youth work continue to be asserted (see below), but the idea of a youth work ‘without guarantee’ is, today, anathema to many of those who support and fund youth work, for whom outcomes are increasingly required to demonstrate value and effectiveness (see, for example, McNeil *et al.* 2012, Cabinet Office 2014).

In August 2014, the English National Youth Agency published its vision for youth work to 2020. Its front cover promulgated the commitment that “In 2020 every young person will have access to high quality youth work in their community”. The short paper defines youth work as follows:

Youth work is an educational process that engages with young people in a curriculum built from their lived experience and their personal beliefs and aspirations. This process extends and deepens a young person’s understanding of themselves, their community and the world in which they live and supports them to proactively bring about positive changes. The youth worker builds positive relationships with young people based on mutual respect (NYA 2014a, p.2)

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2010), this term is used initially and then ‘hereafter called “youth workers and youth leaders”’. But the term persists: clause 2 of Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) document (2012) includes the sentence that Union action shall be aimed at “encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe (European Union 2012, Chapter XII: Education, Vocational Training, Youth and Sport).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Cross-sectoral’ youth policy is a routinely invoked claim and aspiration, yet it is rarely clearly defined, let alone commonly understood – see Nico 2014.



Again, however, a very laudable stab at a definition that may well be very pertinent to the English (probably British) context risks falling down in other (political, institutional and cultural) policy and practice environments. The very mention of a ‘youth worker’ would once again produce some level of hostility from the many self-governing youth organisations that execute their own, different, form of youth work. It is therefore probably wise to avoid trying too hard to capture the complexity of youth work – as Sercombe (2010, p.15) has argued, “the attempt to define youth work has a long and diverse history” - and to aim for greater simplicity. I lean firmly towards his (2010, pp.23-24) assertion that youth work is essentially and distinctively about ‘facilitating agency’ – through a range of diverse participatory and experiential practices, young people acquire the capacities and competencies for more autonomous, active and responsible decision-making about their lives and engagement with their societies<sup>5</sup>. Others – teachers, social workers, psychologists, counsellors – may also facilitate agency but that is not their primary purpose. Whether self-governed or supported, youth work is explicitly and arguably exclusively about building autonomy and self-determination in young people through cultivating their knowledge, skills and understanding in relation to themselves and their social circumstances - about facilitating agency. A related concept has been developed, even more recently, by the South African youth sociologist Sharlene Swartz - the idea of ‘navigational capacities’. She does not refer specifically to the role of youth work. Her interests lie more in establishing theories around youth sociology for the ‘southern’ (developing) world that are distinct and do not simply transfer the ideas from the north. However, as she acknowledges, just as there is the ‘north’ in the south (a privileged elite), there is also a ‘south’ in the north, such as Roma youth, migrant youth, the youth in the banlieue of Paris, and so forth. These are the very groups of young people towards whom youth work constantly seeks to extend its reach. Swartz and Cooper (2014) link their emergent concept of ‘navigational capacities’ to established issues and challenges such as agency, capitals, power and outcomes, arguing *inter alia*, that young people need to build, and be equipped with, the capacity to understand, articulate, evaluate, confront, embrace, reflect on, and resist their circumstances<sup>6</sup>.

During the 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Convention, held in July 2010, youth work was also defined quite crisply, in similar vein to Sercombe’s perspective, as the provision of ‘space and opportunity

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<sup>5</sup> In line with both Sercombe’s perspective and the critical social education paradigm delineated by Hurley and Treacy (1993), the Belgian Steering Group advocated the strengthening of the vision for youth work as a vehicle for youth empowerment: “through giving young people keys to better understand the world they live in/around them, they can forge their own opinion on what they go through, their experiences, and develop a critical thinking” (feedback 14.11.14).

<sup>6</sup> Heathfield and Fusco’s forthcoming (2015) text arguably interprets these aspirations in relation to youth work: they maintain that youth work is essentially about illuminating and interrupting inequality and injustice. See also Fusco (2011).



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for young people to shape their own futures'<sup>7</sup>. Once more, however, diversity, space, flexibility and fluidity was considered necessary when describing the practice and process of youth work:

Whatever the definitional debate, it is not contested that different forms of youth work engage with different young people, use different methodologies, address different issues and operate in different contexts. Within this frame of groups, methods, issues and contexts, youth work practice adapts, unfolds and develops over time (Declaration of the 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Convention 2010, p.2)

Such a view of youth work is consistent with the ideas of the respected youth work commentators Alan Rogers and Mark Smith, when they talk of youth work practice as being about 'journeying together' along a path of learning (Rogers and Smith 2010).

### ***Youth work in (times of) crisis and youth work under pressure?***

Throughout Europe, as the 'crisis' took hold and produced dramatic consequences for young people and wider populations on account of austerity measures and levels of unemployment, 'youth work' in one form or another was evolving in both positive and negative directions. Since the 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Declaration of 2010, youth work, though devastated in some contexts (such as the UK – see below), has evolved in different ways. Indeed, the story of youth work over the past few years is very mixed.

Self-governed youth organisations, certainly through their European umbrella body, the European Youth Forum, would appear to be thriving. The Council of Europe youth department (formerly directorate) has, for decades, always been committed to the principle of co-management, between civil service governmental representatives and the representatives of youth organisations<sup>8</sup>. In recent years, through the 'structured dialogue', the European Youth Forum has cemented its contribution to the direction of youth policy within the European Commission. In stark contrast, there have been drastic cuts to the provision of more open youth work premised upon concepts of 'critical social education'. Within the UK, opposition to this trend has emerged on a number of fronts, notably the trade union sponsored Choose Youth! initiative ([www.chooseyouth.org/](http://www.chooseyouth.org/)),

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<sup>7</sup> This was, indeed, the opening sentence in a short note on 'Defining Youth Work' written in 2006 by the late Peter Lauritzen (see Ohana and Rothmund 2008, pp.369-370)

<sup>8</sup> Their respective bodies are the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the Advisory Council for Youth (AC) composed of 30 young people, 20 through the European Youth Forum and ten appointed by the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe. Together, they constitute the statutory bodies, the Joint Council on Youth. The chairs of the CDEJ and the AC alternate in chairing the Joint Council, which meets twice a year.



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arguing for a statutory youth service<sup>9</sup>, and the *In Defence of Youth Work* campaign. *Those particular protagonists, in their articulation of youth work, depict it as a practice that is 'volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees' (see In Defence of Youth Work 2012).* This collapse of open youth work, coupled with threats to street-based youth work<sup>10</sup>, despite research-based evidence of, *inter alia*, their 'first step' contribution to social inclusion<sup>11</sup> has led to the formation of a new European umbrella body: Professional Open Youth Work Europe (POYWE<sup>12</sup> – see [poywe.org](http://poywe.org)). This advocates the sustenance of open access youth work, supported by appropriately trained and educated youth work practitioners. It has recently embarked on a two-year project designed to map professional open youth work in Europe, supported by the new EU Erasmus + programme.

Not everything on this front is gloomy. In some countries (Norway, Austria, the Netherlands for example) street-based youth work continues to be a recognised and relevant element of youth work practice. In Serbia, there has been progressive and impressive development around the infrastructure and operationalization of broad-based youth work through the establishment of municipal youth offices and the work of the National Association of Youth Work Practitioners (NAPOR). In Finland, notably the Helsinki Youth Department, there has been a modest reduction in resources but a significant diversification of practice. Traditional open and cultural youth work has been supplemented by new forms of on-line and targeted youth work (LUOTSI), as well as innovative approaches to youth participation (RUUTI), though the latter has not been well received by the established practices of democratic youth representation (see Williamson 2012).

Flanders in Belgium continues to maintain an expressed commitment to youth work, theoretically in line with her former education Minister's memorable remark that young people did not cause the crisis and therefore it should not be for them to tighten their belts, though the reality has been recent budget cuts at the Community level and the removal of guaranteed support for youth work at the local level. Though the momentum has stalled somewhat, there appears to be a desire in Romania to establish the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People, in order to

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<sup>9</sup> Youth work as a professional educational practice uniquely inspires, educates, empowers, takes the side of young people and amplifies their voice. Unlike other interventions with young people it combines these elements in a relationship that young people freely choose to make with their youth workers. From this relationship a curriculum of learning an activities is developed that build on the positive and enhance social and personal education (from the Choose Youth! Manifesto).

<sup>10</sup> A transnational network for street-based youth work, Dynamo, was initially supported by funding from the European Commission (DG Employment, through the PROGRESS programme). However, it did not secure further support for the period 2014-17, though the reasons for this are unclear.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Crimmens *et al.* 2004, Merton *et al.* 2004

<sup>12</sup> POWYE is meeting in Rotterdam as I write



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provide a framework for all young people, potentially, to engage in this personal development programme<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, as noted above, since 2008, the Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Union in the youth field, with the support of youth authorities in Belgium, Estonia and Finland (and, later in 2015, Luxembourg), has been exploring the many histories of youth work throughout Europe. The 5<sup>th</sup> History of Youth Work in Europe seminar, held in Finland in June 2014, examined the question of ‘autonomy through dependencies’, suggesting that the place of youth work in societies is never guaranteed and there is always a struggle to secure its position. That position may be achieved by co-operation and concession, where youth work makes its contribution to wider ‘youth policy’ agendas, such as employment, health or offending behaviour. It may, prospectively, also be achieved through innovation and, of course, sometimes by challenge and conflict – yet, at every turn, youth work has to find its place between responding independently to the individual and collective needs of young people and becoming subordinated to the (usually much more powerful) agendas within education and training, employment, health and criminal justice policy<sup>14</sup>. The tensions and contradictions are endemic to youth work, paradoxes (Coussée 2008) that cannot be resolved but need to be managed. This is the case for ensuring the professionalism (though not necessarily professionalization) of youth work, through training, supervision and experience. If recognition and political championship is to be acquired, it is not helpful to have any Minister responsible for Youth describing youth work as the “can’t do, won’t do” service<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> This Award was established in the UK in 1956 at the instigation of Kurt Hahn, a refugee from Nazi Germany who was also behind Outward Bound and the United World Colleges. He was concerned about the ‘declines’ in young people in terms of skills development, physical capability, teamwork and service to others. To address this, with the Duke of Edinburgh’s support (Prince Philip had been his pupil when Hahn was headmaster of Gordonstoun, in Scotland), he developed a three-level (bronze, silver, gold) programme of personal development, to be determined at a young person’s own pace, incorporating skill, physical activity, teamwork (through an expedition) and service (now volunteering). At the gold level, young people also have to take part in a residential experience.

<sup>14</sup> In a speech I made recently in Narva, Estonia (January 2015), at an event addressing the relationship between youth work and youth unemployment, I gave a forty year history of that relationship from a UK perspective. I concluded that, in different ways and at different times, the role of youth work had been ‘independent’, a ‘partner’, a likely ‘slave’, or ‘irrelevant’. All had implications for both internal and external perspectives about youth work, including its philosophical integrity, political support and funding possibilities.

<sup>15</sup> This was a comment made by the then English youth minister Kim Howells in 1997 – he told me that he had said it because that was what his mates in the pub told him about youth workers: they stood, conveying negative messages, between young people and youth training and other opportunities. Howells was also the minister for youth training programmes.



### ***Some more detailed case studies from around Europe***

The following case studies represent somewhat impressionistic perspectives on changes in youth work over the past four years in different countries across Europe. They were produced at short notice, following an urgent request in the autumn of 2015 through a variety of channels, by willing volunteers with different knowledge of, and positions in relation to the ‘youth work’ field. They are, therefore, cameo portraits rather than scientific analyses, but they serve to outline and convey various recent directions of travel for ‘youth work’ in a number of European contexts.

#### *Austria*

Beyond some broader trends in the transitions and choices made by young people in Austria, four significant developments in relation to youth work have taken place in recent years that are notable departures from the open youth work and youth representation agenda that had historically informed ‘youth work’ in Austria (see Zentner 2012). First, there are stronger pressures for youth work to have clearer *connections* with, and demonstrate the way it can *support*, the goals of formal education and labour market destinations. Secondly, there are increasingly expectations that youth work should demonstrate its worth, by illustrating the kinds of *‘qualifications’* (knowledge and skills) young people acquire through youth work interventions and experiences and demonstrating the *quality* of its practice. Third, young people themselves are increasingly struggling and juggling with the choices they have to make between *desired volunteering experiences* that may be supported through youth work (and promote their engagement with civil society), and *required internship experiences* that are necessary to sharpen their competitiveness in the labour market. And finally, as more young people become entrenched in personal identities that are hostile to others, youth work is expected to make its contribution to the ‘de-radicalisation’ of young people and the promotion of their multiple *identities* and the sense of *belonging* to a diverse, multi-faith and pluralistic society.

#### *Belarus*

It is argued that developments in ‘youth work’ in Belarus are currently on ‘stand by’ – “no break through, no major change, not to the better, not to the worse”. The broad youth policy framework that had prevailed in the five years to 2010 stalled on account of the new five-year programme ‘Youth of Belarus 2011-15’ failing to secure approval by the government. There remains only one youth NGO mentioned in the state budget and circumstances remain difficult, at a domestic level, for the ‘underground’ (shadow) youth sector, although it is active at an international level. The underground National Youth Council, RADA, is, however, more visible and relevant for young people at local level in Belarus, though there is still no formal dialogue with state youth policy stakeholders. According to an overview of the civic education sector in Belarus in 2013:



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....civic education in Belarus is beating around in the water, neither drowning nor floating. The performance factor is getting low. At present you need to make three times more efforts to gain the same results you were getting ten years ago (OECD/ODD 2013, p.5)

Of course, the ideological system in Belarus is built on incorporating 'patriotic' values into all systems of education and socialisation. Nevertheless, as 2015 has been declared 'Youth Year', new opportunities will be presented for youth NGOs and more action in the youth field, though there is also a probability of more control by the state. There are new youth initiatives, including 'youth work', supported by donors and international networks, promoting values of active participation and democracy, and reaching out to the regions and to more vulnerable and marginalised youth, but these remain largely detached and divorced from the mainstream youth policy of the state.

#### *Belgium – Flemish Community*

The distinctive characteristics of Belgium's policy structures, where so-called 'cultural' matters (within which youth work sits) are the responsibility of the communities, means that 'youth work' plays out differently in the Flemish, French and German speaking communities.

Within Flanders, it is possible to consider something called Flemish youth work (see Coussée 2009, Gevers and Vos 2009, Baeten 2012). This is situated firmly as a categorical variant of social-cultural work, quite separate from structures of welfare or formal systems of education. The age range is between 3 and 30, extending to 35 when it comes to political youth work. Youth work in Flanders is carried out mainly by volunteers, and most of the people 'in charge' are under the age of 25. There is, as a result, a constant turnover of leaders, which is both dynamic and a vulnerability for youth work.

In contrast to the increasing ascendancy elsewhere in Europe of target-driven and outcome-focused youth work:

Youth work is not really product driven, the process is more important. Doing and enjoying drown the results. There are sports, music, arts & crafts, but with other methods. Seldom specialised, but with a wide spread of activities. Playing and fun are always crucial more than other, more instrumental targets.



Nonetheless, though youth work in Flanders does not have an explicit ideological profile, it does pay attention to values and concrete social engagement. Until very recently, it has remained detached from commercial engagement and sponsorship, unlike sports.

Youth work is, therefore, a low cost free time offer for young people, an autonomous free space for young people to 'play' and have fun. As such, it carries a very positive aura in the society and attracts a strong goodwill policy from the public authorities (though recently new types of financing, including through sponsorship and funding from the commercial sector, have been put in train). Its weakness, perhaps, lies in its difficulties in reaching more disadvantaged young people, though a relatively small body of paid professional youth workers tends to focus on young people from more deprived sections of the community. Further preoccupations with 'professionalism' and with 'quality' may, however, threaten the authenticity and strengths of traditional Flemish youth work: striking the 'social balance' between these different forms of youth work in Flanders remains the key challenge today.

#### *Belgium – French Community*

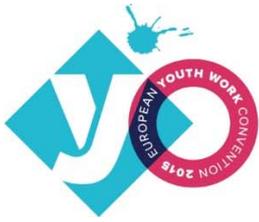
Although the youth sector in the French Community has relatively low recognition, it is strong in its quality and approach. For youth work, there are two distinct, yet complementary approaches: culture, and youth care.

Youth work with a cultural approach is provided through different youth centres (youth clubs, youth information centres and youth hostels), and through youth organisations and informal groups. Myriad projects and actions are developed, through the voluntary and collective efforts of young people, around the values of critical awareness, cultural expression, responsibility and solidarity, in order to foster a sense of citizenship and autonomy.

A different kind of youth work is focused on providing support for 'youth at risk'. This entails a more individual approach in the context of a young person's environment, especially their family. There is no voluntary work in this sector, though young people are still encouraged to develop collective actions and projects.

Youth work is developed with close consultation with advisory bodies and through strong structural support (for both staff and operational costs) for youth NGOs. All work in the youth sector is premised upon supporting young people's rights, combating discrimination and in particular promoting access to cultural participation by more socially excluded groups. There is a strong emphasis on training:

One of the key priorities is the training of youth leaders, be it volunteers or paid staff. Training young volunteers or professional staff responsible for activities with young people contributes to the development of 'Critical, Responsible and Active Citizens'.



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The most significant change for this work, in recent years, has been the growing challenges for youth work in the dual context of both the increasing social exclusion of young people (through higher levels of unemployment and decreasing social welfare), and financial pressures on budgets in the youth sector on account of the wider economic situation.

### *Belgium – German-speaking Community*

In a similar vein to the Flemish Community, youth work is considered to be socio-cultural work in the German-speaking Community and is therefore not linked formally to either education and employment or social welfare and family issues. Nevertheless, a new youth strategy plan anticipates a more ‘cross-sectoral’ approach.

The youth work system is ‘grassroots driven’; the decree on funding for youth work, which constitutes the legal basis for youth policy, provides the framework for supporting it. Youth work is about strengthening young people’s social and personal skills through leisure-time socio-cultural activities based on non-formal educational and informal learning processes that promote their their participation and autonomy. It is a diverse practice, including the work of youth organisations, open and mobile youth work and youth information.

As a small constituency for youth work, there are some 20 professional youth workers and over 600 voluntary youth leaders, clearly conveying that “the youth work sector in the German-speaking Community can be considered more than active”.

The two contemporary challenges concern the evaluation of youth work and the further development of evidence-based youth policy making, and bridging the gap between the youth work activity depicted above and wider youth policy in the interest of forging a more robust cross-sectoral approach.

### *Estonia*

Although the legislative foundations for supporting youth work in Estonia have been described as a ‘minimalist framework’ in terms of the responsibilities of local government, it is suggested that youth work development has been ‘boosted’ since 2010 through the commitment of the Ministry of Education and Science and the support of resources through the European Social Fund<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For a longer perspective on youth work in Estonia, see Taru, Pilve and Kaasik (2014)



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A voluntary quality assessment has been established, to assist with the planning of youth work and the exchange of good practice. This focused on four main goals:

- Non-formal education
- Inclusion and participation
- Information and counselling
- The environment of youth work

More recently, attention has been given to whether or not typical municipal youth work provision, in the form of activities established within youth centres, is effective in reaching more disadvantaged, older young people, including those defined as 'NEET'. Those young people under 18 not only have youth work opportunities provided by youth centres but also possibilities through hobby schools, supported sports activities, summer camps and working camps. Estonia is now grappling with the question as to whether such approaches may be 'out of touch and out of time' with the needs of young people, and whether those professionally involved in youth work should be working towards "new ways, goals, methods, co-operation, analyses and assessment".

#### *The European Youth Forum<sup>17</sup>*

At the end of November 2014, the General Assembly of the European Youth Forum, held in Cluj-Napoca in Romania (European Youth Capital in 2015), produced a policy paper on youth work, as it is understood within the European Youth Forum and Youth Organisations (European Youth Forum 2014b). It was concerned primarily with delineating the impact of youth work, considering mechanisms for its recognition, and making the case for increased support and funding. Significantly, the paper argues:

The diversity of youth work, especially in terms of sectorial, organisational and thematic approaches allows every young person to find their way towards youth work. Young people can be both practitioners and beneficiaries (European Youth Forum 2014b, p.3)

Youth work is understood as those practices "undertaken by, with or for youth with the aim of providing a space for young people, for their personal development and for their needs" (European Youth Forum 2014b, p.3). Youth work rests on the twin processes of education and participation. And, given the 'fault line' that is often drawn between the 'youth work' that takes place through self-governed youth organisations (cf. those represented by the European Youth

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<sup>17</sup> This is my interpretation of the EYF paper – the paper was not conceived for this purpose. For a broader understanding of youth work in the European context and the antecedents to the European Youth Forum, see Jaaberg Hansen (2010). For a more contemporary account of youth work and policy at a European level, see Mairesse (2009).



Forum) and other forms of ‘youth work’, the paper captures its essence of youth work in an instantly recognisable form:

[Youth work] starts where the young people are at, it provides the space for building interactions, friendships, peer-learning, developing young people’s competences, discovering one’s capacities and contribute strongly to the physical and emotional well-being of citizens, stimulating solidarity and engagement; outcomes which are often underestimated (European Youth Forum 2014b, p.4)

For the individual, youth work contributes to development and empowerment; for society, youth work attaches young people to civil society as well as to democratic political participation. Finally, evidence of this impact, in order to strengthen wider and stronger recognition of the value of youth work, needs to be advanced through both ‘top-down’ research-based data and ‘bottom-up’ experiential narratives grounded in ‘self-recognition’.

### *Finland*

In the context of Nordic welfare regimes (see Esping-Andersen 1990), youth work in Finland “is seen as one of the services the public sector has to provide for”. It has considerable public legitimacy (see Helve 2009, Nieminen 2012, Nieminen 2014). Local authorities have the overall responsibility for ensuring that a range of youth work services is available, though these may be delivered directly and by youth associations and other youth work organisations. These include: educational guidance for young people; facilities and opportunities for pursuing hobbies; information and advice services; support for youth associations and other youth groups; sports, cultural, international and multicultural youth activities; environmental education; and, where needed, youth workshop services, outreach youth work, and other forms of activity (such as the implementation of the Youth Guarantee) according to local circumstances and need.

However, though strongly supported by the national and local state, as a profession (or semi-profession) youth work maintains a considerably degree of autonomy, operating separately and independently from school or social work. Understood as a “non-formal variant of education”, youth work sits at the level of national governance within the Ministry of Culture and Education, yet benefits from the ‘radical decentralisation’ that characterises educational policy in Finland. Those evaluation measures and quality standards that do exist have been developed largely through bottom-up processes with the profession itself.

The most significant current development for youth work in Finland is making stronger connections between formal and non-formal education – between school and youth work. According to Kiilakoski (2014), the motivation to develop youth work in schools is based on the following:



- To reach those young people who do not attend youth clubs or engage with other youth work services
- To develop schools as youth cultural and inter-generational arenas
- To support group dynamics in schools
- To ensure that individual young people can have secure adult contacts

No longer should schooling and youth work be 'isolated islands' and, despite broader youth policy aspirations for schools to be growth environments for young people and agents for promoting welfare, the strengthening of co-operation between the two has largely derived from the youth work profession itself. Yet such cross-sectoral co-operation (even within the broad landscape of learning, development and education) has raised questions, issues and dilemmas for a youth work practice that, historically, has been associated, and associated itself, with operating in young people's *leisure* time. Different possible explanations have been advanced:

- Recognition of the value of more integrated, co-operative practice
- The status and education of youth workers now confers more parity of esteem with teachers, and so they can work in genuine partnership
- An awareness that independent youth work does not reach all young people
- An increased possibility of promoting youth participation, which is a shared agenda between formal and non-formal education

But this is all work in progress, with few prescriptive expectations or guidelines. Youth work is still exploring the relationship between professional autonomy and more effective collaboration between different professions.

Cross-sectoral or inter-agency collaboration is not the only issue. Finnish youth researchers are currently advocating a multi-dimensional approach to evaluating the service quality of youth work. This should include:

- Self-reflection by youth work practitioners themselves (see Schön 1983)
- Data collection on how satisfied young people actually are with youth work services
- More dialogic evaluation with young people, both service users and non-users, to enable them to suggest new ways forward collectively
- Expert evaluations of innovative youth work, and 'round table' discussions between researchers, young people and youth workers to debate the continuing relevance of youth work practice and to suggest new ways forward.

One instance of the last dimension concerns the use of game technology for building communities in youth work. In these respects, Finland is both protecting and valuing traditional forms of youth work and 'associative life' while simultaneously promoting and pioneering innovative youth work practice through using new technologies to respond to changing needs.



## *Germany*

Youth work in Germany, for different historical reasons, has a mixed and fractured history (see Spatscheck 2009). It has been tied, at different times and in different parts of Germany, to both social and cultural work and, more recently to community work and formal educational provision. From a broad perspective, most recently, there has been increased funding for services to children and young people but this has largely gone to day care and targeted work for those with problems. Youth work commands less than 10% of this overall resource and has experienced a small decline, though there has been some modest growth in the provision of youth centres and in detached youth work. In general, “the impression dominates that the resources [for youth work] are constantly running short”, and there has been a corresponding reduction and ‘precarisation’ (Prekarisierung) of the youth work workforce, jeopardising its professionalization despite the legal status of youth work in Germany’s Social Code.

A legal challenge<sup>18</sup> has been launched to compel municipalities to comply with their legal duty to provide infrastructure for youth work, but the pressure on resources is compounded by the demographic decline in the numbers of young people and an often negative image of youth work in Germany.

Current trends include, like Finland, greater co-operation between youth work and schooling though, unlike Finland, this is driven less in partnership and appears to be more about youth work filling in the free time of young people in school rather than complimentary curriculum development. Youth work is, arguably, struggling on a broader front in terms of maintaining its autonomy while exercising its responsibilities in relation to other agencies engaged with the learning and development of young people. At the same time, youth work faces the challenge of playing its part in strengthening the public image of child and youth services through a much more self-assured presentation of its contribution to young people’s lives.

According to Lindner (2012), youth work in Germany has “adapted itself beyond recognition and lost its clear socio-pedagogical profile”; this has led to the ‘professional erosion’ of youth work. Lindner quotes the head of a western German youth office:

If you go today in a facility of youth work, you don’t have the feeling that you must obligatorily feel good. The offers have not followed the concrete needs of young people. More and more takes place in school. The youth work aside has in the meantime built a wall around itself and says ‘we are anyway the urchin’. There is something like rigor mortis, little dynamics.

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<sup>18</sup> By the German Youth Council and the German Child and Youth Welfare Organisation



Other commentators have noted a mixture of stagnation and frustration amongst municipal youth workers, arising from the combination of financial cuts, failures to cement coherent youth policy, facilities seemingly resistant to change, distrust between different organisations and an ageing workforce that is not being renewed.

There is currently despondency about youth work in Germany. Youth work needs re-energising, some argue, through the ‘re-politicisation’ of the youth work field through more proactive engagement (‘interference’) with youth policy making processes at all levels.

### *Italy*

As with austerity measures elsewhere in Europe, there has been a detrimental effect on youth work, though in Italy the diminished and diverted resources flowed from a youth sector that had traditionally been weak and relatively unsupported politically. And, particularly in southern Italy, there has been a limited presence of youth organisations to fill some of this gap.

Such difficulties are made worse by a lack of co-ordination and integration across the youth sector, despite the proclaimed efforts of successive governments. There continues to be a serious disconnect between education and training systems, and the labour market. However, with the dramatic rise in youth unemployment, education and social services (including youth work) have come to be used as emergency tools to combat social disadvantage and school drop-out. Some youth work resources have been diverted to supporting enterprises with no apparent long-term vision. Youth work through the youth aggregation centres have, it is suggested, become simply a back-up for an inadequate education system.

Innovation, experimentation and development has taken place largely beyond the state, through youth associations, social co-operatives and informal groups of young people. In recent years, they have sourced funding from public and private foundations or from public resources not related to the youth sector.

Such a context of development inevitably produces patchy evolution. Some excellent innovation in youth work (for example, Bollenti Spiriti, which has promoted social inclusion and active participation through cross-sectoral policy in social, cultural, research and entrepreneurial fields) has certainly provided young people with aspirations and competence, but these have had to be realised through emigration, on account of a lack of opportunity at local and regional levels.

The political support and advocacy from local authorities, if not direct provision and funding, is still held to be critical. Public authorities are now becoming aware of the bottom-up recognition of youth workers (‘non-formal education trainers’) and the role they might play as “multipliers of youth opportunities’. But there needs to be a more strategic approach to youth policy development, within which youth work could play a pivotal part, at national, regional and municipal levels.



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Furthermore, there is a need for youth work itself to diversify, engaging with “other sectors such as environment, health and wellness, mobility, [as well as] education and training”. And there needs to be investment in the training and recognition of youth workers, in their role as hubs for facilitating active citizenship and fostering urban and social development. Regrettably, the wider economic situation in Italy has meant that

In the last years the priority in the field of youth has been shifted to employment policies thus giving limited attention to non-formal and informal education. This appears like a short-term approach aimed at tackling the youth unemployment emergency and it doesn't promote a wider support system for youth.

### *Lithuania*

In contrast to those parts of Europe where open youth work has never taken root or has, in recent times, been pruned back dramatically, it is the focus of the most recent initiative in youth work in Lithuania, after some 20 years of impressive evolution of a diversity of youth work practice (see Deltuva 2014). Today, open youth centres are being established across municipalities in Lithuania, designed to make youth work accessible to more disadvantaged young people. Unused buildings have been adapted to provide 'Open Space'. A formal Conception of Open Youth Centres was first debated between 2007 and 2009. It was approved by the Department of Youth Affairs in 2010, laying down the main principles of open youth work, defining the professional approach of the youth worker, and clarifying the roles of local self-government and other actors in the youth field in relation to open youth work practice.

Legislatively, Open Youth Centres are now part of a range of institutions providing minimum care services for young people. And they are enshrined in the National Youth Policy Development Program (2011-2019), with planning and indicators in relation to funding and staffing clearly defined in order to support the expansion of Open Youth Centres and Open Spaces: “a great deal of attention is being paid to support the implementation of open youth work”. An impressive infrastructure is also in place, including methodological tools, training programmes, individual and group counselling<sup>19</sup> sessions for youth workers, monitoring and evaluation, and – perhaps significantly – training courses in youth work and open youth work for those who work in other systems and institutions, such as policing, sports, culture, and children's day care.

In terms of the professionalization of youth work, a certification system for youth workers has been introduced, the activities of Open Youth Centres defined and approved, and the role and responsibilities of the 'youth worker' delineated and agreed. In 2014, a Lithuanian Association of

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<sup>19</sup> This term is drawn from the information provided in the case study of Lithuania. I suspect that it is meant to refer to 'supervision'.



Youth Workers was formed, and moves are in train for enshrining a general recognition of youth work within a new chapter of the Law on Youth Policy.

Beyond this impressive commitment to open youth work, Lithuania is also endeavouring to introduce other forms of youth work – detached, outreach and mobile youth work. This will require both legislative support and further capacity building through professional training.

### *Luxembourg*

The youth agenda in Luxembourg, at its start, was firmly embedded in education policy (see Schroeder 2014). The organisational unit responsible for ‘youth work’ had three primary tasks: psychological and educational counselling, the management of grants to youth organisations, and leisure oriented youth work. However, some 30 years ago, this trio of responsibilities divided, with counselling and grant-making remaining within educational policy and youth work developing separately into a youth policy concept with a more transversal identity not necessarily linked with formal education. Initially an independent small government department, youth policy was later subsumed within a large department of family affairs and integration. Since 2013, the youth department has returned to education, consolidating its status but also with the expectation of co-operation between diverse educational actors.

This has affected youth work practice in Luxembourg in a number of ways. That practice is anchored by four specialist Educational Centres which are managed directly by the National Youth Service (SNJ). Each has its own specialism: media education, sustainable development, outdoor activities, and health and well-being. These are the flagships of youth work, but there are other youth centres with more generalised access and activities, and the Maison des Jeunes that provide local and accessible youth work through very diverse and self-organised activities.

The content and balance of youth work provision has changed, though education and citizenship remain as core themes. Cultural creativity is a ‘rising star in the youth sector’ and there is now also more emphasis on promoting youth autonomy and contributing to the ‘transition to job life’ (which I have interpreted as the ‘employability’ agenda). At the level of youth work delivery, there is now more emphasis on planning, quality assurance, the sharing of good practice, and evaluation: through all this, it is argued, “ the youth sector becomes more and more a learning organisation, which consolidates its professional power and autonomy”.

Current challenges for youth work include the nature of its relation with formal education, and the integration of youth with childhood policy. And the capacity of independent youth research to influence debate and policy making has diminished significantly in the past few years.



### *The Netherlands*

Though youth policy in the Netherlands is coordinated at the national level, direct responsibility for implementation has recently been decentralised to the regional and local levels. Greater coherence and overarching prevention objectives are, politically and professionally, of paramount importance. Each municipality makes its own youth policy and funds youth work, sometimes with co-funding from partners such as schools and foundations.

This transformation agenda has been in place since 2010. A range of measures have been instituted to ensure change from a 'problem oriented' towards a 'well-being' approach that, it is hoped, will not only reduce the need for specialist care but also equip young people better with the necessary tools for success in formal education and entry to the labour market. To that end, all professionals working with children and young people, including youth workers, need new competencies and intervention skills.

Youth work in the Netherlands, comprising voluntary and institutional, youth led and adult led provision, "has a broad task" – offering positive activities in the neighbourhood, but also acting as a referral agent, and addressing nuisance behaviour. Municipalities may also finance youth work that is specifically focused on issues such as school drop-out, youth unemployment and delinquency. Youth workers are expected to connect with the three living environments of young people – the home, the school and the neighbourhood – and both to promote personal development and social inclusion. Voluntary youth work practice is largely independent and autonomous, providing positive activities and opportunities for mainly 'ordinary kids'. They operate "somewhat out of sight of the local authorities". In contrast, adult led youth (social) work, often positioned in social work or child welfare and commissioned by municipalities, work on a continuum of prevention and support in young people's leisure time designed to prevent further problems and exclusion.

There is little recent statistical data on youth work provision and practice, though there had been a significant increase in the number of youth work professionals in the first decade of the new millennium. Since then, there are no data. However, it may be assumed that growth has slowed, probably considerably, in the context of the economic crisis and budgetary limitations. What is certainly clear is the continuation of trends towards more individual guidance of young people at risk, and a stronger targeting of young people presenting problems with the objective of inculcating more acceptable behaviour. For a small group of young people with clustered and accumulated problems, youth workers are expected to work closely and collaboratively on joint programmes around issues such as addictions, housing or criminality.

There are grounds for concern that, in the face of budgetary pressures, more generic youth work and basic community education may lose municipal financial support, though there are also signals that these may be retained as a cheaper option than youth care institutions. But there is little



doubt that youth work is being increasingly harnessed to social work approaches, though this is in the context of the development of more generic social work.

Youth work in the Netherlands has no history in documenting its methods or results. This may hinder the further development of youth work and its position with the new local arena of prevention and support for young people. New networks have recently been established to keep youth work on the map and to stimulate the transfer of knowledge in the youth work field, as well as to gather research-based evidence of the contribution that youth work can make to the transformation approaches now prevalent at the local level.

### *Portugal*

There is no formal concept or agreed definition of 'youth work' in Portugal (see Orlando Quierós 2014). Nonetheless there is a strong momentum, promoted through the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth (IPDJ), for the promotion and development of non-formal education. The practice of 'youth work', which encapsulates a broad range of activities with young people, is made possible by a robust infrastructure for the youth sector more generally across each district of the country. There is central co-ordination, local and national partnerships and a transversal approach in many areas, involving other sectors (housing, health, employment), Ministries and organisations at all levels of governance. Youth work is

very closely tied to the frame(work) of intervention in Non-Formal education, and (...) the two concepts have come to assert themselves in close connection. Nevertheless, the concept of Non-Formal Education is also still publicly diffuse and little recognised, which constitutes an inseparable challenge for Youth Work affirmation.

Over the past four years, non-formal education has become more central in the planning of activities and strategies for youth development and consolidation. In this context, two particular objectives have informed the work of the IPDJ:

- The recognition and validation of skills required and acquired
- The establishment of a clear understanding of 'youth work' and the role of a 'youth worker'

To these ends, there are now measures to develop the profession of a 'youth technician', a process that is constructed on a series of consultations and events with actors in the youth field and a corresponding growing interest in the field of youth studies. The challenges are evident: what skills and competencies are to be validated, by whom and how?; how to connect and balance volunteerism and professionalization within the 'youth work' field; how to relate non-formal and formal education; forging appropriate links between national initiatives and the European and



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international level; and considering the education and training methods that may be necessary. Portugal is currently addressing all these themes.

### *Romania*

According to Mitulescu (2014, p.81-2), “Romania does not have much of tradition in what is today called ‘youth work’”, and most Romanian people “have no clue about the meaning of ‘youth work’”. Mitulescu concludes (2014, p.88) that

[m]ost of the developments in the field of youth work and youth policy do not fit well with current definitions and frameworks for youth work in terms of voluntary participation, equal treatment of participants, and professional youth workers....

There have been some attempts to professionalise informal learning, but all have been abandoned too early, before results were obtained.

Seemingly this story continues. The ‘youth work’ that takes place in Romania is primarily delivered by volunteers and it is significant that, since 2011 (the European Year of Volunteering), work has taken place on updating the Law on Volunteerism. This was achieved in 2014: volunteers now benefit from a certificate outlining their competencies developed through the services and activities they have provided. It is believed that this will be beneficial for entering the labour market. Moreover

The law is essential for the youth work field as it will definitely give a structure to the volunteers’ management mechanisms and is of high interest for young people

The other significant development in recent years has been an initiative supported by the European Social Fund focused on standards in ‘youth work’ and the training and certification of ‘youth workers’. However, since the end of the project, no clear evidence has been provided on how these newly trained ‘youth workers’ have been using their newly acquired certification; there are certainly few occupational prospects in the labour market. Further training of ‘youth workers’, using European funds, has been provided through the National Agency on Community Programmes on Education and Professional Development. However, no research has evaluated these initiatives and there is still no professional association of ‘youth workers’ that might serve as a partner for dialogue with the public authorities.



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There remains weak advocacy for youth work in Romania, with uncertain communication between the civil sector (the VOLUM Federation), the National Youth Council, the National Agency (which is a governmental agency subordinated to the Ministry of Youth and Sports<sup>20</sup>), and grassroots practitioners of youth work. The vast majority of youth work continues to be done on an *ad hoc* basis by volunteers and the ‘youth work’ that is done appears to remain contingent on external funding opportunities and framed by the expectations of those funding bodies. Within Romania, there are still huge challenges regarding the social recognition of a profession of youth work and of the value of the activities conducted by professional, though usually still voluntary, youth workers.

#### *The Russian Federation*

There have been some significant developments and debates about youth work and broader youth policy in the Russian Federation over the past five years. This, however, is simply consistent with the *recurrent* changes that have taken place at all levels (national, regional, federal, local) in the past 25 years. There has been constant restructuring, legislative reform and practical initiatives, some held by various stakeholders in the youth field to be positive and some less so.

Recent trends, however, have been the cause of concern and controversy, will policy increasingly formulated from the centre in the interests of the state (rather than young people), with little support or attention to youth research. Responsibility for youth policy has recently transferred to the Ministry of Education and Science, which will soon be preparing a new National Youth Strategy. The current strategy (2006-16), under the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Tourism, set a framework of priorities and issues but did not prescribe activities in the youth field, leaving regional bodies responsible for youth to develop different and distinctive measures through local legislation reflecting the different realities facing young people across the Russian Federation. This approach is now perceived to be under threat, with the prospect of a federal law on youth and a move to a unified top-down approach.

The contribution of youth NGOs to policy making is now minimal: they are “not in the picture any more”, and state institutions prefer to implement youth work activities and project “on their own”. The position of youth NGOs has been further weakened as a result of legislation concerning ‘foreign agents’ and other financial reporting requirements. In terms of the reach and focus of youth work in the Russian Federation, it tends to be concerned with either active and gifted young

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<sup>20</sup> The paper provided for me does not acknowledge some serious political determination by the State Secretary for youth to promote a youth strategy and framework for youth development. I am aware of this for other reasons and respect the integrity and commitment of the minister, though I understand the skepticism that prevails amongst many in the youth field, especially given the lack of sustainability of youth initiatives that arise recurrently as a result of frequent changes in the political administration.



people or those who are most vulnerable, “leaving those who are ‘in between’ with no special attention”.

In parallel with a lack of youth participation in decision-making and significant obstacles to youth NGOs developing youth work initiatives and activities is the increasing focus by the state on the patriotic upbringing of young people. This embraces a spectrum of activities, from social responsibility in the community to commemorating long-dead war heroes: “almost everything can be fixed” under this expression. In summary, there is constant churn in the youth field but a strengthening concentration of central control over the activities that are deemed permissible and will be supported by the state.

### *The Slovak Republic*

Striking positive developments in youth work have materialised in Slovakia in recent years. Within a framework of wide consultative and cross-sectorial youth policy formulation and implementation, and a stronger focus on the qualitative contribution of youth NGOs receiving government funding to the strategic goals of a new Youth Strategy (2014-2020), there is commitment and momentum towards establishing a sustainable infrastructure for the delivery of youth work that is

flexible to answer [the] fast changing needs of young people with trained youth workers able to provide [the] necessary support for young people and create attractive learning environments for them to grow

Political changes have postponed, but not abandoned a new Youth Work Support Act intended, amongst other things, to transform and modernise the work carried out by youth centres. Despite some opposition, there is broad consensus that youth work needs to revise its focus from largely preventative and leisure interventions and activities “towards non-formal education... developing competences of young people needed for their future working and social engagement”. Accompanying this changing perspective on the role of youth work has been the emergence of the profession of youth work, with the classification of youth work competencies, the profiling of youth workers into five categories, and the pioneering of university level interdisciplinary studies to become a youth worker.

### *The United Kingdom*

There is a long tradition of ‘youth work’, in many diverse forms, across the United Kingdom (see Davies and Gibson 1967, Davies 1999). At the very moment, however, that the EU was finally celebrating a place for youth work at the very heart of its ‘youth policy’ deliberations, the new British government administration was applying austerity measures that prospectively would sound



the death knell for many forms of youth work at the municipal level. At central government level, there has been little political will to support 'youth work', although the situation is somewhat different in each of the four parts of the UK (youth work is a devolved responsibility alongside most 'youth policy' domains such as education, health, social services and housing) and arguably most severe in England.

On International Youth Day 2014 one of the main trades unions for youth workers released a damning report revealing that, in the two years since April 2012, at least £60 million of funding was withdrawn from youth services in the UK. Over 2,000 youth work posts have been cut, 350 youth centres have closed, and 41,000 youth service places and 35,000 hours of outreach youth support have disappeared (Unison 2014). The main trends for youth work identified in England, beyond the ubiquitous reductions in services, have been the shift from open access to targeted activity (with professional youth work staff sometimes moved to support social care intervention), the growth of commissioning (though the limited development of other models of youth service delivery), the vulnerability of the local NGO sector (but the emergence of small social enterprises and community interest companies), and the protection of 'youth voice' but its separate delivery from 'youth work' (NYA 2014b).

### *Wales*

2015 is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first UN International Youth Year (concerned with the three themes of participation, peace and development) that sparked a range of initiatives in the youth field. In Wales, it led to a separate direction in youth work from England, through the formation of the Wales Youth Work Partnership and the establishment of the Wales Youth Forum, as well as Youthlink Wales, one of the first peer-led participatory youth organisations, concerned with the prevention of HIV and substance misuse (see Williamson and Wilson 1988).

The Wales Youth Work Partnership evolved into the Wales Youth Agency in 1992. For fifteen years, the WYA led the field on youth work issues as diverse as quality standards for youth worker training and staff development, collaboration between the statutory and voluntary sectors, voluntary youth organisation support and development, youth information and youth worker resources and information, and youth participation. Over time during the 1990s, it added responsibilities for European youth programmes (exchanges, mobility and initiatives), the funding of youth organisations, youth work in schools, and health promotion measures such as smoking cessation programmes. It had its funding withdrawn by the Welsh Assembly Government in 2005.

The Wales Youth Forum evolved, over time, into Funky Dragon, the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales, promoting and ensuring youth voice and participation at local, regional and national levels. Beyond, it provided Welsh delegates for United Kingdom ('national') youth representation at European and global levels. Amidst considerable controversy, its funding as an



'independent' youth council was withdrawn by the Welsh Government in July 2014 and responsibility for representative youth participation was contracted to Children in Wales. There is now no 'National Youth Council' for Wales.

The most recent National Youth Work Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government 2014) is firmly harnessed to the re-engagement and support of more marginalised young people, notably those who are defined as 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training). But it celebrates the prospective role of youth work in this agenda. The opening words of its Ministerial Foreword are as follows: 'High quality youth work has a crucial role to play supporting many young people to achieve their full potential. Through informal and non-formal educational approaches, effective youth work practice builds the capacity and resilience of young people and can change young people's lives for the better....'

Yet many local authorities have withdrawn support for more generic, 'open' youth work and have focused their dramatically diminished public resources very explicitly on the most disadvantaged young people, with referral and appointment systems, rather than voluntary and more spontaneous involvement, shaping so-called 'youth work' provision. At the first meeting of a Youth Work Reference Group convened by the Welsh Government, in December 2014, the Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology paved the way for a feasibility study looking at the funding and sustainability of youth work, including the possible establishment of a National Youth Service for Wales.

### ***But what might 'youth work' do?***

There is not only a recurrent, perennial search for some tight consensual definition of the *concept* of 'youth work' (see above), but also, increasingly, a quest for defining its *impact and outcomes* (McNeil *et al* 2012). In both cases, any real consensus remains elusive, despite the assertion in a recent review of the youth work literature that "youth work is attempting to make an ambitious contribution to improving outcomes for young people" (Dickson *et al* 2013, p.1).

That absence of consensus means that there is room for considerable manoeuvre in outlining and interpreting the roles and possibilities for youth work. It is, indeed, the elasticity of the concept that has permitted European institutions to move some way from the classical position that youth work is focused holistically on young people's interests in a voluntary relationship informed by some key values around rights, entitlements, participation and empowerment to a more socially attached position where youth work can address a range of contemporary social concerns, not least youth unemployment and 'employability', health risk behaviour and even deviance and criminality. This is certainly the position adopted by the European Union Youth Strategy (Council of the European Union 2009; see also European Commission 2009). Youth work, it is believed,



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can help to get young people back on track or keep them on the right track in their transitions to adult citizenship, active participation and insertion in the labour market.

Though there does need to be some caution in attaching too much hope and outcome expectation that youth work can have some direct effect on these public issues (which are also often ‘private troubles’<sup>21</sup> for young people, and therefore legitimate interests for the practice of youth work), the many histories of youth work (Verschelden *et al* 2009, Coussée *et al* 2010, Coussée *et al* 2012, Taru *et al* 2014) show quite clearly that it provides both a forum for young people’s associational life *and* a transit zone as young people move from childhood to adulthood and within which youth work can provide a spectrum of support in young people’s navigations of those increasingly complex and protracted transitions. Research on youth work in England (Merton *et al* 2004) suggests that youth work can contribute to *personal (psychological and motivational) change* in young people that is often a critical prerequisite for their subsequent *positional (structural) change*, whether that is labour market insertion or desistance from offending or health risk behaviour. But that research is insistent that youth work must not be judged on its direct capacity to enhance employability or reduce crime<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, McNeil *et al* (2012), though less specifically focused on youth work and more interested in the impact of broader ‘work with young people’, maintain that it is the *intermediary* social and emotional capabilities engendered by that work that have value to all young people in a variety of ways, including clear and evidenced links to concrete outcomes such as educational attainment, employment and health.

Nonetheless, perhaps more contentiously, in its articulation of ‘a new role for youth work’, the European Commission’s paper that paved the way for the current EU youth strategy is insistent that youth workers have a pervasive, central and therefore potentially *direct* contribution to make to all of its strategic objectives:

Youth work is out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary ‘youth workers’ within youth organisations, town halls, youth centres, churches etc., which contributes to the development of young people. Together with families and with other

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<sup>21</sup> The legendary sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that one of the central challenges for any public sociology was to analyse the ‘private troubles’ of individuals in order to convert them, where necessary, into ‘public issues’: “Do not allow public issues as they are officially formulated, or troubles as they are privately felt, to determine the problems that you take up for study.... Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues...” (Wright Mills 1959).

<sup>22</sup> There is, possibly, a line to be drawn from (not between!) promoting initiative and creativity in young people through youth work and fostering enterprise and entrepreneurship – but it is a dotted line, not a clear connection. However, the link was made initially many years ago as a result of the EU’s Petra programme: see Williamson *et al* (1993); De Wachter and Kristiansen (1995).



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professionals, youth work can help deal with unemployment, school failure, and social exclusion, as well as provide leisure time. It can also increase skills and support the transition from youth to adulthood. Despite being 'non-formal', youth work needs to be professionalised further. Youth work contributes to all fields of action and their identified objectives (European Commission 2009, p.11)

Such expectations have implications for the independence, autonomy and role of youth work and diverge considerably from the idea of 'journeying together'.

### ***The value of youth work?***

There is growing testimony to the value of many different forms of youth work, for different reasons. From street-based work that engages with young people on their own terms (Crimmens *et al* 2004), through youth club work (see McCardle 2014), to autonomous youth organisations (Souto-Otero *et al* 2012)), research is now demonstrating the value of youth work. Despite contrary 'evidence', epitomised by the memorable and widely reported comment made by a former British children's minister that 'it is better to stay at home and watch TV than attend a youth club'<sup>23</sup>, recent studies of youth work have pointed to the multiple benefits accruing from youth work opportunities, interventions and experiences.

Youth work, broadly defined, can – so it is argued – make a critical contribution, *inter alia*, to social and economic inclusion, healthy lifestyles, volunteering, youth (political and other) participation, employability and entrepreneurship. For example, a recent research study commissioned the European Youth Forum suggested that non-formal learning has a vital role to play in preparing young people for the labour

market. The 2012 study, carried out in cooperation with the University of Bath and GHK Consulting on the impact of non-formal learning in Youth Organisations on Young People's Employability, showed that among the six 'soft skills' most demanded by employers, five of these are developed through involvement in youth organisations. These skills are: communication, teamwork, decision-making, organisational skills and self-confidence. As former EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth Androulla Vassiliou registered in her Foreword to the report:

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<sup>23</sup> This comment was drawn from findings from the British birth cohort study of children born in 1970 (Feinstein *et al* 2005), suggesting that those who attended youth clubs around the age of 16 had worse outcomes in their lives at age 26 (in 1996). The political interpretation of these data has been challenged even by those academics who worked on the original analysis (see Feinstein *et al* 2006).



As our workplaces change under the twin impulses of globalization and technological progress, so do the skills required by employers.....

Formal education aside, it is increasingly evident that the learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings, for example through volunteering or participation in youth organisations, play a key role in providing young people with so-called 'soft' skills which are highly valued and appreciated by prospective employers....

It is in my view essential that this experience is adequately recognised. My proposal for a Council Resolution on the validation of non-formal and informal learning indicates concrete ways to improve formal recognition of youth work and other non-formal learning opportunities.... (Souto-Otero *et al* 2012, p.11)

### ***Developments relating to youth work at a European level since 2010***

The following section provides an outline of, and commentary on, some of the most significant documentation to have emerged at European level in the five years since Belgium's Presidency of the European Union in 2010.

#### *A contribution to youth work and youth policy in Europe*

Belgium's Presidency of the European Union in 2010, the second of the first 'trio' (following Spain and preceding Hungary), was firmly focused on youth work. In the same week of July 2010, the Flemish Community held the 1<sup>st</sup> history of youth work conference (though the third in the 'history' seminar series) and the EU Presidency event hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Convention. As the report of Belgium's EU Presidency contribution to the youth field asserted in relation to youth work: 'the time is ripe' (eu-trio.be 2010, p.5). But the Conference made the following important observations:

In all countries youth workers have to rethink their function and position in the social, cultural, economical and political integration of young people... As the social and political context is changing, youth work has to reflect on its identity and its relation to the state and to other socialisation institutions and environments (eu-trio 2010, p.7)

The Conference noted that, from an historical analysis, there were three primary perspectives on youth work: *regional*, *thematic* and *methodical*. Within a shared mission, therefore, that may be universally agreed, there is significant diversity around these three points of a triangle. Youth work evolves and adapts within it, in the broader context of anticipated educational, social, economical, recreational and political functions. A key conclusion of the Conference was that the diversity of



youth work must be celebrated, indeed defended – “neglecting or even destroying this diversity inevitably leads to reinforcing processes of marginalisation and exclusion” (eu-trio 2010, p.10). And the Conference also reminded us that youth work must always be attractive to young people – education can be fun, and fun can be education.

The 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Convention was a showcase for youth work practice, an attempt to find some unity in the diversity of youth work, and an opportunity for consolidating and advancing contemporary policy processes on youth work at a European level. The multi-level focus, using multi-dimensional methods, framed around youth work themes for a formal Resolution (see below), with facilitators and rapporteurs to capture emergent ideas and messages, contributed to the production of a Declaration that sought to connect past, present and future thinking and practice in relation to youth work.

#### *The Declaration of the 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Convention*

Critically, the Declaration asserted that “while politicians need to gain better knowledge of youth work... youth workers also have to get a better insight of how policy is made”. The Declaration continued:

Youth workers should be involved in policy-making discussions in broader policy fields which affect the lives of young people; they should also be consulted on policies that may have more indirect effects on young people. It is important that policy makers in the youth field, but also in other fields engage both with organised and less organised young people. Youth organisations play a significant role in these processes (Declaration of the 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Convention, p.3)

The Declaration welcomed the ‘structured dialogue’ processes but argued that in the future there should be a “broader base for this dialogue and an increased application of co-management practices”. Youth work should also become less isolated and more connected to wider policy sectors and agendas affecting young people, though not at the expense of undermining the trust and respect that is the mainstay of youth work’s relationships with young people. This was but one of the seven key headings embodied within the Declaration:

- Position and cross-sectoral co-operation
- Information, impact and effect
- Youth work for all and in diversity
- The quality of practice
- Competences, training and recognition
- Mobility and networking



- Sustainable support and funding

The first step, following this Declaration, was to secure a formal Resolution on youth work by the European Union. Though this was achieved, further steps have been patchy – more work has been done on most themes, but despite additional evidence on the value of youth work and seemingly greater political commitment at a European level, there remain significant challenges around recognition, training and resourcing of youth work in many parts of Europe.

#### *Resolution of the Council of the European Union on youth work*

In November 2010<sup>24</sup>, after the youth work deliberations during Belgium’s Presidency of the EU, the Council of the European Union backed a resolution that agreed that the following principles should be taken into account in implementing this resolution:

Young people, youth organisations, youth workers and youth leaders, youth researchers, policy makers, other experts in the youth field should be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of specific youth work initiatives at all levels;

The roles and responsibilities of any actors involved within their respective spheres of competences, should be respected;

Better knowledge and understanding of youth work needs to be gathered and shared;

Instruments mentioned in the renewed framework should be fully used to integrate a youth work perspective and to implement specific youth work initiatives;

Youth work should pay particular attention to the involvement of children and young people in poverty or at risk of social exclusion.

The Resolution exhorted both Member States and the European Commission to strengthen their resolve and community to youth work and invited both to:

Create better conditions and more opportunities for the development, support and implementation of youth work at local, regional, national and European level.

Fully acknowledge, raise awareness of, and reinforce the role of youth work in society.

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<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the Council also passed a resolution on children, youth and children’s rights (see Council of the European Union 2010b).



Enable youth work to further develop its quality.

Support the development of new strategies or enhance existing ones for the capacity building of youth workers and youth leaders and to support civil society in the implementation of appropriate forms of training for youth workers and youth leaders.

Identify different forms of youth work, competences and methods that youth workers and youth leaders share, in order to develop strategies for enhancing the quality and recognition of youth work.

Promote the employability of youth workers and youth leaders and their mobility through a better knowledge of their qualifications and the recognition of the skills acquired from their experiences.

Promote and support research in youth work and youth policy, including its historical dimension and its relevance for youth work policy today.

Make sufficient information on youth work available and accessible via mechanisms like for instance European and national campaigns on youth work, and to enhance synergies and complementarity between initiatives of the European Union, the Council of Europe and other actors on local, regional, national and European level.

Promote opportunities for exchange, cooperation and networking of youth workers and youth leaders, policy makers and researchers at local, regional, national, European and international level.

Within the context of youth work, promote, where appropriate, the development of a systematic assessment of skills and competences required for any form of training aiming at acquiring knowledge and upgraded skills.

This is a striking and impressive aspirational list that, if implemented, would certainly confirm that 'the time is ripe' and position youth work firmly in partnership with formal education and vocational training in contribution to the learning and development of young people. At a European level, certainly, some of the recommended research was soon put in train and further momentum was secured around the recognition and quality of youth work.

#### *Participation studies – LSE enterprise 2013 and MYPLACE 2014*

Youth participation is not the exclusive domain of youth work, nor is it youth work's singular raison d'être. It is, however, central to, and embedded within the practice of (democratic styles of) youth



work whereas it is an additional or explicit feature of other ‘work with young people’. Moreover, youth work not only equips young people with the competencies and confidence to engage in wider forms and platforms for youth participation, but also advocates for the involvement of young people in decision-making on matters of relevance and concern to them, in keeping with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. At a European level, it is the ‘structured dialogue’ that characterises formal youth participation in such decision-making (see Williamson 2015). This has been in place since 2010 and is organised around ‘trios’ of EU Presidencies. Four themes have so far been addressed: youth unemployment, participation in democratic life, social inclusion, and (now) empowerment. The second theme took place in parallel with a significant EU-funded research study on youth participation in democratic life (LSE Enterprise 2013). This drew conclusions of relevance to youth work, including the following observation that there was an urgent need to make sure that

there is structural public funding for places and spaces where adults and youth can come together as part of communities to help each other by volunteering time and skills – e.g. youth centres where older young people mentor younger youth and children or old people’s day centres where youth come to read to older people and learn a skill. (LSE Enterprise 2013, p.164)

With particular reference to more ‘excluded’ young people, the report’s almost final parting shot is emphatic:

One of the most important ways in which ‘excluded’ youth are being included in the social fabric of a local community is through what we call civic spaces, which include youth clubs, community (media) centres, libraries and sports clubs. Such spaces offer young people from various backgrounds, but particular for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a structure, stability, and opportunities to volunteer or to receive training and to learn transferable skills (LSE Enterprise 2013, p.165)

More recently, another research study concerned with Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement (MYPLACE) has drawn similar conclusions. The MYPLACE study - a 14 country study of how young people’s social participation is shaped by the shadows (past, present and future) of totalitarianism and populism in Europe - drew some important conclusions with prospectively important implications for the role of youth work: ‘While on the whole there is support for democracy as a system, many young people seem to feel that it is not working well for them... the majority of respondents in most countries felt that politicians are not interested in young people like them’. The policy implications of its findings are that there is an urgent need



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to advance and reinforce a genuinely democratic way of life, rather than focusing primarily on controlling youth unrest and its potential power to destabilise society. Politicians need also to show that they are giving sufficient priority to addressing the concerns and difficulties experienced by young people compared to other groups [Agenda for the MYPLACE Policy Forum, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2014, Greater Birmingham and West Midlands Brussels Office, Brussels]

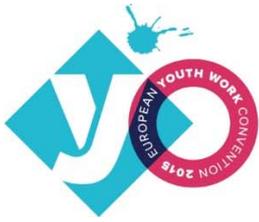
### *The EU youth work study*

The vast majority of those in the youth (work) field are, unsurprisingly, delighted with the findings of the recent study of youth work across the Member States of the European Union (Dunne *et al* 2014). Evidence of the value of youth work is often unequivocal. Though there is certainly sometimes a strange choice of national ‘youth work’ case studies – many are quite new and by no means established, small-scale and little known, some arguably not ‘youth work’ at all – the evaluation commendably endeavours to capture an impressive range of youth work projects and practice.

Acknowledging the variations in defining youth work and the diversity of its practice, the report opens with a flow chart that depicts both the stepping-stones within ‘youth work’ and its connection to wider society. The ‘meaningful activities’ within different forms of youth work contribute to the ‘personal development’ of young people that, in turn, produces empowerment, emancipation, tolerance and responsibility. It is these characteristics that combine in different ways to result in:

- Participation in democratic societies
- Prevention of risk behaviour
- Social inclusion and cohesion

Or so the analysis goes. The report outlines various trends in youth work, maintaining that as youth work has adapted and evolved it “is gaining increasing prominence on the political agenda at the EU and Member States levels” (Dunne *et al* 2014, p.6). That prominence, where it exists, has however led to further aspects of change, whether externally demanded or self-directed, including a stronger focus on measurable outcomes, evidence of impact, and targeted youth work (in terms of both social groups and social issues), especially in relation to the labour market. Some would argue that this calls into question the very nature of a ‘youth work’ constructed on universality and youth autonomy. Nevertheless, it is broadly agreed that youth work has always had to find and strike a balance between competing demands and agendas, so in some respects the current pressures and expectations are nothing new. The inherent contemporary tension, however,



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according to the report, is between the value of youth work processes and a clear specification of measurable outcomes:

The potential disconnection between the purpose and mission of youth work and the expectations of outcomes is a growing issue. There is a concern that youth work is increasingly expected to deliver what had previously been carried out by other policy sectors. Some of those within the sector can see this trend as putting extensive pressure on the sector and can take youth work away from its original purpose. On the other hand this indicates that there is growing awareness of the possible contribution of youth work. Though in many countries this does not yet come hand in hand with funding frameworks and commitment to develop the youth work sector (Dunne *et al* 2014, p.7)

But even that, for some Member States, is not particularly new (see Williamson 1993!). What the report does is to identify evidence that “successful youth work practice can result in a range of positive outcomes for young people” (Dunne *et al* 2014, p.7) and that, beyond the individual level outcomes, youth work yields social benefits both amongst young people as a social group and between the generations, as well as contributing directly and actively to many elements within each of the eight fields of action<sup>25</sup> that give shape to the most recent European Union Youth Strategy (Council of the European Union 2009; see also European Commission 2009).

#### *Recognition – the ‘Strasbourg process’*

But if the recent EU study conveys a strong sense of the value of youth work, why is any real recognition of youth work – either at international or national levels – still so difficult to achieve? The question has been an active one in some countries for many years (cf. the UK Ministerial Conferences on the Youth Service 1989-1992) but especially prominent in Europe since the Lisbon strategy was articulated in 2000. This set out the priority objectives of the EU for the next ten years within a vision expressed by the Heads of State and Government of the EU: ‘To make the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world capable of sustaining more and better jobs and with greater social cohesion’. There was considerable emphasis, predictably on formal and vocational education and training, but also on lifelong and life-wide learning encompassing the spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning for the promotion of personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability. Over the next few years, there were recurrent political and institutional exhortations to value non-formal learning, including youth work, through identifying and assessing its contribution and ensuring its

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<sup>25</sup> Education and Training; Employment and Entrepreneurship; Health and well-being; Participation; Volunteering; Social inclusion; Youth and the world; Culture and Creativity.



recognition and validation (see Council of Europe & European Commission Youth Research Partnership 2004). Yet even by 2004, paragraphs 15 and 16 of the same document, under the more general sub-heading of 'Need for social recognition of learning in the youth field' were registering the points that:

Despite all visibility and undisputed success rates, the **youth work** record in education, training and learning is easily overlooked or simply made a **sub-category within education** by decision-makers and stakeholders in established fields such as education and vocational education and training. But, youth work is more than a sub-category of education and training. It has to be seen for its own sake, but also for civil society purposes.....

**Non-formal learning** as a whole, but particularly in youth activities, is typically undervalued as not being 'real' learning. There is a lack of understanding of the benefits of non-formal learning and it is thus necessary to **strengthen the awareness** of key persons and institutions in society, business and politics, of the main players (the social partners, NGO's, education experts, etc.) and of young people themselves in order to promote non-formal education as an integral part of learning and to enhance its social recognition. (Council of Europe & European Commission Youth Research Partnership 2004, p.7, emphasis original)

Seemingly, some level of strategic success was soon afterwards achieved with the European Council resolution (Council of the European Union 2006) on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the youth field. Notwithstanding the occasionally inconsistent terminology, the message had been very clear and was now conferred with significant support. But that was a decade ago. Since then, what has become known as the 'Strasbourg process' has, with mixed success and progress, sought to consolidate, sustain and strengthen the case for the recognition of youth work and non-formal learning across Europe. An analysis of European developments pointed to momentum in policy, tools, studies, stakeholder engagement, and connections to wider developments in mapping qualifications and competencies at a European level (Jugend für Europa/Salto-Youth 2012). After a number of events, publications and political declarations, which are reasonably considered to be stepping-stones and milestones, there is considerable optimism that it is 'getting there' (see Youth Partnership 2013). Certainly, there have been significant developments in the mapping and recording of competencies acquired through non-formal learning. A wide range of 'recognition instruments' now exists<sup>26</sup>; whether or not such

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<sup>26</sup> One of the best known and most widely used is the Youthpass (<https://www.youthpass.eu/en/youthpass/>) which has been a significant achievement of the EU and made available to thousands of young people. This recognition tool could, it is argued, 'inspire recognition practices at national level (as foreseen in the Erasmus + Regulation)' (feedback to the draft report).



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certification is in fact *recognised* beyond the youth field – and if so, to what extent and in what ways – remains an issue that has been insufficiently addressed and, arguably, avoided. Nevertheless, the latest significant development in terms of formal political recognition of (and support for) youth work has been the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in response to ‘ENTER!’, the long-running training programme established by the Council of Europe Youth Department on the access of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to social rights (see Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe 2015).

Political recognition is one (albeit important) thing<sup>27</sup>; recognition in the (many different segments of the) labour market and in the diverse sections of civil society is something rather different. Barbara Wootton (1978), the eminent British social scientist and part-time magistrate, once wrote that a young offender trying to anticipate his (*sic*) sentence in the juvenile court was like a ‘drunken man trying to hit a moving punch-ball with a wobbling hand’. The analogy is perhaps forced, but it can inform the recognition debate: the punch-ball as the destination of young people (labour market and civil society), the hand is the unpredictability of political understanding and advocacy, and the ‘man’ is youth work, in all its guises. At the heart of the matter is the sobriety (quality) of youth work: consistency and predictability in the outcomes from the diversity of youth work practice would no doubt strengthen political recognition and championship and enhance its credibility *and* *currency* in many of the destinations to which young people seek to arrive.

The EU study of the value of youth work (see above) talks about ‘successful’ youth work, probably meaning ‘effective’ youth work, and ‘effective’ youth work clearly has to be defined and guided by ‘quality’.

*Expert Group on Youth Work Quality Systems in EU Member States and the role of common indicators or frameworks*

In 2013, under the Republic of Ireland’s Presidency of the European Union, with its particular youth focus - during the ‘trio’ concerned with social inclusion (Ireland, Lithuania and Greece) – on the quality of youth work, an Expert Group was formed to examine youth work quality systems and to consider the development of common indicators and frameworks<sup>28</sup>. At some risk of reinventing

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in the signing of a new ‘youth partnership’ between the European Commission and the Council of Europe for the period 2014-2016, on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2014, an expressed aim of the new partnership is ‘to improve the knowledge on youth and contribute to the development of youth work and the promotion of its quality and recognition’.

<sup>28</sup> The draft terms of reference and members criteria for the thematic expert group were set out in the Annex to the Council conclusions on the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people (see Council of the European Union 2013)



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the wheel, given everything that has gone before, the Expert Group will seek to illustrate the practice, process and product of youth work (for this kind of discussion, see Ord 2007) and the impact of youth work for the engagement, development and progression of young people. The publication of its conclusions is imminent.

Predictably, the Expert Group has encountered the challenge of the huge diversity of youth work provision, and the competing understandings that make any foundation of consensus immensely difficult to secure. Nevertheless, the aspiration remains for the group to construct a clearer map of the youth work 'landscape'<sup>29</sup> and the conditions required to ensure the best possible quality of youth work development and implementation. Though a report is not yet published, these are, of course, likely to include issues of youth worker training and competence, and the value base and ethical framework that guide the practice of youth work (see also Sercombe 2010).

Of greater political interest and concern will be answers to the question of impact and outcomes, at both the level of individual young people and for society more generally. Plausible indicators of such outcomes will, presumably have to be set against the resources required for effective delivery, if some measure of quality is to be determined. As a number of youth work experts have noted verbally in recent conference contributions, few dispute the benefits of youth work but when public resources are requested or required to support it, then expectations of outcomes are raised and evidence of a return on that investment is demanded<sup>30</sup>.

Quite how the Expert Group will produce quality frameworks that can be attached to different forms of youth work (for example, youth clubs, street work, youth organisations, youth information) remains to be seen. It will be important to embrace the arguments, which have occasionally been mooted, that it is the quality of intervention and input that is the critical issue rather than the specificities of outcome: poor youth work is, of course, very likely to produce poor outcomes, whereas good youth work is not likely to produce poor outcomes, even if it may not be clear how and when, or even why and who for, the positive dividends of good youth work may emerge. Hence the idea once advanced by the former Chief Executive of England's National Youth Agency Tom Wylie, that there needed to be a quality local youth work offer to which all young people

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<sup>29</sup> A term I first heard used in relation to youth work in 1981, when the great historian of British youth work, Bernard Davies, was introducing the idea of youth work to a cohort of apprenticeship students in training – he talked about the different terrain over which they would travel, with few shared markers to provide direction and the many destinations at which they were likely to arrive.

<sup>30</sup> In the UK, in September 2014, three organisations (NCVYS the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Project Oracle and the Social Research Unit) established the Centre for Youth Impact. With governmental start-up support, its central objective is to 'articulate how our work changes the lives of young people and how investment in youth services is of benefit to everyone (see youth-impact.uk).



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could have access, embracing a range of quality opportunities and experiences, including participation, information, activities, autonomy, and more. Yet recent evidence from England suggests that even a basic youth work offer has been withdrawn or abandoned by many municipalities: “the youth work ‘offer’ is diminished and has little currency: e.g. no council in the south-west [of England] currently publishes a youth offer” (NYA 2014b, p.3).

A similar proposition was made in 2000 in Wales, within its then new youth strategy *Extending Entitlement* (National Assembly for Wales 2000) which argued that all young people should have access to a ‘package of entitlement’<sup>31</sup> (access to a range of experiences and opportunities), even though many might not require much of it through public services because it would be available to them through more private means.

What is now eagerly anticipated is an overview of testimonies about the experiences of youth work from those who have been through them and are willing to write about them. These are being gathered and collated by the Youth Partnership as I write<sup>32</sup>.

### *EU Work Plan for Youth*

The most recent development, in the summer of 2014, supported by all Member States of the European Union with the exception of the United Kingdom (with a reservation concerning the European Semester), is the EU Work Plan for Youth for 2014-2015 (Council of the European Union 2014). Its first principle is ‘to give impetus and prominence as appropriate to EU level work in the youth field’ and its first priority theme is for the ‘Development of youth work and non-formal and informal learning and its contribution to addressing the effects of the crisis on young people’.

The EU Work Plan for Youth invites Member States and the Commission to establish or maintain<sup>33</sup> expert groups on three specific themes, two of which are explicitly concerned with youth work:

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<sup>31</sup> This package had ten elements: education, training and employment; basic skills; opportunities for volunteering and active citizenship; responsive and accessible services; careers advice, guidance and counselling; personal support, advice and information; advice on health and housing; recreational and social opportunities; sporting, artistic, musical and outdoor experiences; the right to consultation and participation. Clearly some of these things are firmly within the orbit of youth work, and some clearly outside it, with the remainder up for discussion about the extent to which youth work might make a contribution.

<sup>32</sup> These will be more sophisticated versions of the many stories I myself have told about the practice and effects of youth work in all its different ways (see Williamson 2007).

<sup>33</sup> For example, the expert group on youth work quality systems – discussed in the previous section of the paper - was formed prior to the EU Work Plan, but is one likely to be ‘maintained’ under the EU Work Plan.



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- Youth work quality systems in Member States and the role of common indicators or frameworks
  - Defining the specific contribution of youth work and non-formal and informal learning to address the challenges young people are facing, in particular the transition from education to employment (my emphasis)

Elsewhere in the paper, there is an invitation to ensure coherence between this work plan and the work plan of the Youth Partnership (in which youth work is prominent, see above), and encouragement for other sectors to 'take the youth dimension into account'.

#### *Erasmus + Youth in Action*

This paper has been produced in the early days of the new EU programme that incorporates the previous Youth in Action programme within an all-embracing learning and mobility programme called Erasmus +. Those activities targeting the youth field are referred to as 'Erasmus + Youth in Action'. They provide opportunities for young people, youth workers and youth policy makers to work and learn together, develop skills, knowledge and competencies and thereby become more proactive in building a sustainable and democratic European society.

The Erasmus + Youth in Action chapter places great store on making use of non-formal learning (youth work) practices to address the many challenges facing young people and youth policy in Europe today. Instruments such as Youth Exchanges, European Voluntary Service<sup>34</sup>, and Youth Workers' Training and Networking are held to enhance the empowerment and active citizenship of young people in Europe, support the development of their skills and competencies (as well as those of youth workers), and to build capacity and professionalism within the youth field. There is particular attention to innovation, quality and partnerships that will produce value-added impact of the work on the youth field on a wider canvas of activity relating to young people, not least to the eight fields of action (see footnote 18) within the European Youth Strategy.

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<sup>34</sup> European Voluntary Service (EVS) was established in 1995 as a strand of the EU Teaching and Learning White Paper (European Commission 1995). Voluntary activities were a key pillar of the EU White Paper on Youth in 2001, which was followed shortly afterwards by a resolution on the added value of voluntary activity for young people in the context of the development of Community action on youth (Council of the European Union 2002). See also Williamson *et al.* (2005).



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### *The Council of Europe and youth worker training*

Finally, it is useful to register that beyond the diversity or absence of dedicated programmes of training for youth workers at a national level, the Council of Europe has over forty years of experience in youth worker training, notably through its programmes at the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg (from 1972) and Budapest (from 1995). It also supports more local projects that often incorporate training (especially in capacity building and project management, as well as more substantive issues) though funding provided by the European Youth Foundation.

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Whatever may be happening at national levels, where the story of youth work over the past few years is certainly a more mixed and perhaps less optimistic story, one might surmise from recent developments at a European level that 'youth work' is a concept and a practice whose time has come. That it features centrally in a mosaic of documentation, including a current EU Work Plan for Youth and in the current work plan of the Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe in the youth field, as well as in the on-going work of the Council of Europe, supported by new research-based evidence on its value and impact, and an emergent understanding of quality systems through the work of a dedicated Expert Group, would appear to convey a strong positive resonance and policy commitment. The youth dimension of Erasmus + - Erasmus + Youth in Action – reflects these more strategic and policy directions and intentions. Yet doubts and concerns have already been expressed about both the efficacy and efficiency of the Work Plan for Youth and its influence on Member States (see, for example, European Youth Forum 2014a). There are deep anxieties that the warm rhetoric at European level is drowning out awareness about the often very tough realities for 'youth work' on the ground. On the other hand, there is clearly momentum and some awareness of what 'youth work' might do. Now is the time for a 'concentrated fusillade'<sup>35</sup> from all actors in the youth field who are committed to strengthening the place and purpose of youth work to build on and develop the opportunities created by that space.

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<sup>35</sup> This was an expression used in the ministerial address at the 1<sup>st</sup> Ministerial Conference on the Youth Service in the UK in 1989! The Minister contrasted it with a 'scatter gun approach'. It was not well received. However, the time has perhaps come to recognize that the call was not completely unjustified.



### ***The challenges for the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention***

At a time of a very mixed portrait of what ‘youth work’ is and does, and how it is evolving in different parts of Europe, it is important to seize the moment when the European institutions concerned with ‘youth policy’ (primarily the European Commission and the Council of Europe<sup>36</sup>) are both proclaiming the imperative to strengthen youth policy and the place of ‘youth work’ within it. The current ‘state of play’ for youth work in Europe, coupled with its history and evolution that has taken many different forms, would suggest that the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention needs to establish whether there are overriding, reasonably consensual ideas throughout Europe. Put simply, this is the complex challenge of **finding common ground** within the diversity of youth work practice:

- 1) What is the **meaning**, the ‘raison d’être’, of ‘youth work’? What are the underlying concepts and theories that inform our understanding of youth work? Is there a vision for youth work in the future?
- 2) What are the **aims** – and anticipated outcomes, effect and impact - of ‘youth work’ at national, European and other transnational levels? Are they the same? If they are different, why, and do they complement each other?
- 3) What are the various **patterns and practices** constituting ‘youth work’ that remain consistent with those objectives; in other words, what is the range of activity that may count as youth work, and where are the borders and the boundaries?
- 4) Where are the **connections** between ‘youth work’ and wider work with young people (formal education, training and employment; enterprise and entrepreneurship; health; housing; justice; and more); how can and should such connections be made, while maintaining boundaries, through principles and ‘distinction’?
- 5) How can youth work secure **recognition** (beyond the youth field) for both its distinctive and collaborative practice and contribution to the lives of young people and the communities in which they live? How best can self-recognition, political recognition and wider social recognition be linked?

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<sup>36</sup> Just as the current ‘youth policy’ activity of the European Union is anchored in the European Youth Strategy of 2009, so the ‘youth policy’ work of the Council of Europe is anchored in its Agenda 2020 of 2008 (see Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe 2008). Clearly both have their mandates from the political structures above them, including the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.



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- 6) What kinds of **education and training** should be established for the development of professional youth work practice and ensuring quality and standards? Are there minimum requirements that need to be advocated to ensure sufficient professionalism (without the need for professionalization)?
  - 7) How can political and public authorities be persuaded, beyond the rhetoric and exhortations from within the youth field itself, of the **value of 'youth work'** in order to support its consistent development and delivery?



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**24<sup>th</sup> February, 2015**



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