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Youth work (education) in flux:
contemporary challenges in an erratic Europe

Report on the EU youth conference, Helsinki, 1-3 July 2019

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The theme of the EU Youth Conference in Helsinki was the education and training of youth workers. This report starts by presenting the results of the group session workshops and dialogue on "Capacity-building for youth workers". It then goes on to present the main points which emerged from the discussions with experts. The final section offers conclusions and suggestions for the future.

I Results of the workshops

The dialogue part of the conference consisted of workshops. Participants analysed the needs of the young and proceeded to examine how youth workers could respond to those expectations.

In total there were 61 different suggestions. Those suggestions were grouped together in four different categories: knowledge; personal and professional requirements; working with young people and helping them to achieve their goals; and working with the local community and within the broader framework of youth policy. In the report, all the requirements are left as they stand in order to demonstrate the scope of what is required of youth workers.

The expectations for youth workers attending the conference are multiple and cover different fields.

I.1. What youth workers need to know (N=21)

According to the participants, youth workers require an extensive knowledge of various different topics. They require knowledge of a) young people and their needs, b) the economy and labour markets, c) digital tools and cultures, d) youth policy and the service system, and e) how to fund and run successful projects. They must:

- 1) have knowledge of social entrepreneurship;
- 2) have knowledge of political processes and channels for influencing decision-making;
- 3) have knowledge of the clear rules governing what is "allowed" (as youth workers);
- 4) know how to encourage people to share their own cultural backgrounds in order to enhance their intercultural competence/understanding;
- 5) be aware of, and respect, the different cultural backgrounds, religions and ethnicities of young people;
- 6) know how to use different media, platforms and technologies in order to enhance understanding
 - i. and be aware of the associated risks;
- 7) be actively present in and conscious of digital platforms;
- 8) know and understand the socio-economic background of the various media content users;
- 9) know where and how to find young people on digital platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, etc.;
- 10) be aware of and be able to discuss various aspects of the digital media;

- 11) be aware of the differences between digital and “real” life, know how to make them complement one other and have the ability to explicate these differences and similarities;
- 12) develop a knowledge of how the digital world works on a social, technological and informational level;
- 13) have knowledge of and skills relating to tools and methods of non-formal education;
- 14) YW need to know more about how to apply for, manage and fund projects in order to offer young people more opportunities;
- 15) have knowledge of the GDPR and online safety and privacy in order to be able to deal with such issues;
- 16) have knowledge of the policies, rules and political processes;
- 17) understand the processes within the labour market;
- 18) understand the needs of young people;
- 19) understand the policy context of vulnerable young people;
- 20) YW need to learn and understand the specific circumstances and issues facing “vulnerable” young people as well as more general principles relating to working with them;
- 21) have knowledge of specialist services, and be able to identify the needs of young people - including mental health issues - and refer them to specialist services.

I.2. What types of qualities should youth workers have? (N=12)

Youth workers should possess a wide array of skills. They should have personal qualities which help them make and maintain contact with the young. They should display a flexible, empathetic and positive attitude towards young people while at the same time possessing critical capabilities.

- 1) youth workers need to be open-minded and embrace diverse thinking, rather than placing all young people in the same box;
- 2) youth workers need to demonstrate critical thinking and be able to compare and distinguish networks and sources so as to be able to explain them to others;
- 3) youth workers must have the courage to support young activists;
- 4) youth workers must be creative enough to support young people in making sustainable life choices;
- 5) youth workers also have to be able to participate in digital platforms, such as Snapchat or Instagram, etc., as part of their youth outreach work;
- 6) youth workers should develop their emotional intelligence and skills such as empathy, agility and open-mindedness;
- 7) youth workers should be willing to receive feedback and be open to new ideas;
- 8) youth workers should recognise their own limits;
- 9) youth workers should have the critical capacity to self-reflect and acknowledge their own and structural limits;
- 10) youth workers should be open-minded, non-judgmental, empathetic, culturally aware and unbiased;

- 11) youth workers should display a persistent and positive attitude and a belief in the local community;
- 12) youth workers should be open-minded and embrace diversity.

I.3. How should youth workers work with the young? (N=21)

Youth workers should be able to make contact with young people in a way that respects a young person's identity and personality. They should also work with the young in way that produces good results and respects diversity and human rights. Youth workers should also produce positive outcomes. There are expectations about 1. how to initiate a relationship with young people, 2. how to maintain the quality process and 3. how to produce good outcomes. They should also have links to other professions and be able to connect the lives of young people to other social contexts and services.

- 1) youth centre workers must offer proper guidance and openness and inspire youngsters to adapt a sustainable lifestyle;
- 2) youth workers need to act as supportive mentors;
- 3) one of their most important skills is to be able to decide when one cannot pursue a case as a youth worker and when one needs to hand it over to an appropriate professional;
- 4) youth workers must encourage critical thinking as a lifelong process and as a tool for empowerment and for becoming an active citizen;
- 5) youth workers must adopt an attitude that allows young people to speak up and feel listened to;
- 6) youth workers must be close to the places where young people are found (physically or online);
- 7) youth workers must be able to help young people develop an attitude of critical thinking;
- 8) youth workers must facilitate dialogue that takes account of cultural sensitivities and has the potential to resolve the specific context;
- 9) youth workers should strive to remain objective on online platforms and apply the principles of equal treatment to all users;
- 10) youth workers should be able to facilitate online youth-related activities by means of digital tools;
- 11) youth workers should gain digital competences in a co-learning process together with young people;
- 12) youth workers should recognize the abilities of young people and create an environment which enables young people to develop and fulfil their own potential;
- 13) youth workers should encourage young people to take responsibility and let them lead the projects, even if it means failing;
- 14) youth workers should be able to take young people out of their comfort zone, while creating a safe environment;
- 15) youth workers should guarantee the recognition and validation of competencies acquired through internships, apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning, as well as volunteering and non-formal education;

- 16) youth workers should have the skills to ask the right questions;
- 17) youth workers should be able to adapt youth work to overcome practical barriers;
- 18) youth workers should be able to empower young people and other members of the community to run youth projects;
- 19) knowledge needs to be responsive to changes in the labour market, particularly as regards educational pathways, career expectations and viable perspectives in order to provide tailor-made guidance;
- 20) youth workers must approach all situations with an open mind and take account of all views, opinions and attitudes;
- 21) young people in vulnerable positions must be empowered/educated to become active owners of their own basic/human rights.

I.4. How should youth workers influence the local community? (N=7)

Youth workers should also be able to influence the local community and relevant stakeholders. They should be able to work with the local community. In other words, youth workers should engage in youth policy in a practical manner.

- 1) youth workers should understand how to apply human rights in practice by cooperating with stakeholders (politicians, institutions, NGOs, etc);
- 2) youth workers should encourage critical thinking as a lifelong process and as a tool for empowering and becoming active citizens;
- 3) youth workers should be able to reach out to young people and influence stakeholders;
- 4) youth workers should be key drivers for change;
- 5) youth workers should be able to identify the needs of the local community;
- 6) there should be an inter-sectoral approach towards and on the part of youth workers, self-organized young people and policy makers;
- 7) regardless of whether one is a volunteer or a professional youth worker, one should have access to high-quality professional education and/or training.

II Experts' observations

The experts at the conference delivered lectures and organised panel discussions. The scope of the experts' observations was broad. In this report, those observations are analysed thematically rather than in the chronological order of the conference. The experts' observations pointed out the variety of education and training available in the different member states, while the professional development of professional and volunteer youth workers was analysed and the reasons for the formal and non-formal education and training of youth workers was noted.

Bigger picture

Youth work is an art, a craft and a science, depending on one's perspective and specific reality. As an eclectic concept, youth work also depends on different cultural viewpoints,

and should therefore be treated accordingly. In order to develop high-quality youth work policies, youth work should be observed in a holistic matter, and therefore youth workers should never stop learning. It is insufficient to rely only on competences acquired during initial education, because the needs of young people and their characteristics and position in the world are changing. In addition, due to the demanding challenges which today's world is imposing on youth workers, their profession should be valued, and therefore recognition is needed on a legal, social, individual and political level. Only by recognising youth work as a profession can we guarantee its development and quality as such.

Prerequisites

In order to ensure the recognition of youth work across Europe, we need to answer the following questions:

- who youth workers are;
- how they qualify to be youth workers;
- what employment and career paths are available to them in Europe.

By answering those questions, we are helping to define common ground for youth work and allowing different countries to have a clear idea about what youth work brings to society and to young people. Moreover, in the absence of commonly understood concepts it is difficult to develop European and/or international guidelines on the quality of youth work.

The importance of education

If we are to have high-quality youth work, we need to have qualified youth workers. There is a need to combine formal and non-formal education because individuals' needs differ. Both voluntary and professional youth workers need to have competencies that are relevant to young people's needs, wishes, problems and realities. They need to focus on enhancing the participation and social inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, and therefore their education should be targeted in that direction. While the education of youth workers is complementary to the education of other professionals in social sciences, the distinct characteristics of youth work mean that it should rely heavily on practice and relationships with communities.

Adaptability

Youth work should respond to modern-day challenges. Even though it is sometimes difficult to keep pace with the needs and issues facing young people, we need to have tools to anticipate and adopt quickly to new realities. If climate change, for instance, is a relevant topic, youth workers must know how to recognise it, facilitate discussions about it and translate young people's point of view to policy makers. In order to meet this requirement, the training and education of youth workers should focus not solely on knowledge, but also on the skills which will allow youth workers to be flexible and receptive to social phenomena occurring in their surroundings. Moreover, youth workers need to know how to link such occurrences to the aspirations of young people. To that extent, the education and training of youth workers should include the development of such skills and attitudes.

Together we stand

The role of a youth worker is to create space for the healthy and high-quality development of young people. Only by ensuring an enabling environment can young people fulfil their individual potential and become active and contributing members of society. When creating an enabling environment, it is important to bear in mind the diverse backgrounds of young people and to incorporate their differences into those spaces. Diversity should therefore be seen as a resource or a potential rather than a problem. In order to achieve this, youth workers must reflect on their privileges and how to avoid imposing them. It is also important for youth workers to critically examine their position in society and teach young people to do the same.

During the conference, several issues regarding different aspects of youth work were addressed. Although not all of them were answered, it is important to identify them since they may provide an incentive when organising future events of this kind.

Food for thought or questions which we think require clarification:

- 1) What is the role of women in digital youth work?
- 2) How to connect the local and the global in youth work?
- 3) Does working with youth NGOs and youth workers really constitute youth work?
- 4) The question of the accessibility of activities - should young people be paying for youth work activities?
- 5) Do adults understand young people? What does meaningful participation mean? Creating time and space at conferences such as this one for meaningful youth contribution and participation.
- 6) What is the difference between education and schooling in terms of youth work? When is one more convenient, and when should we focus on the other?

The aforementioned questions are indeed valid points worthy of further analysis.

III Conclusions and recommendations

- 1) Conference participants pointed out multiple requirements for youth workers if they want to accomplish high-quality youth work in the changing social, cultural, economic and ecological context. They should have extensive knowledge of young people, labour markets and society, and of how to implement projects and influence society. They should develop personal and professional qualities which help them establish contact with the young. They should be able to maintain a good relationship with the young, and be able to oversee processes which produce good outcomes for young people and for European society as a whole. They should also be able to influence the local community.

These requirements are stringent. A flexible, well thought-out and systematic system of education will be required if youth workers are to do this job. These

requirements are so stringent that any assumption that youth workers can learn all of these things by themselves is out of the question.

- 2) There are specific challenges affecting European societies, such as youth unemployment, climate change, digitalisation and standing up for human rights. Youth workers need to be educated to face up to those challenges. Differentiating between basic education for youth work and education for tackling individual topics is likely to be required.
- 3) In the current societal context, different professionals require both initial and continuing training. Such training takes place on both a formal and an informal basis. The creation of an educational and training system that responds to the needs of continuing education will likely be required.
- 4) The conference dealt with the issues of *what* youth workers need to know and *why* youth work education is needed. The importance of systematic youth work education was argued for from many different points of view. The discussions did not tackle the problem of *how* flexible youth work education could be organised in Europe. It will be necessary to analyse this problem and define the roles of member states, European institutions and local stakeholders if the common European challenge of providing high-quality education is to be tackled.

As a general conclusion, one can say that this conference focused on the questions of **what** and **why**. While a great deal was said about the situation regarding youth work across Europe, education and why education is as it is, the conference did not offer any answers to the question of **how**. We still need to investigate in detail how to achieve the desired outcomes, and which tools to use to design quality curricula and to ensure the quality of youth work. The conference offered a very good analysis of the status quo and identified forces influencing different variations of youth work across Europe. Examples of good practice were identified and contextualised, but mechanisms for the potential implementation of such practices in different contexts were not covered. Therefore, in future it will indeed be necessary to focus on specific mechanisms for achieving certain targets.