



Cornerstone Challenges for European Youth Work and Youth Work in Europe Making the Connections and Bridging the Gaps

**Some preparatory thoughts for planning the 3rd European Youth Work
Convention and implementing the European Youth Work Agenda**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper seeks to capture and delineate the key challenges that continue to face youth work in the 21st century.

Youth work in its many forms has always had to adapt to variable and changing **contexts**; the risk of ever attempting a precise formulation of youth work as a practice is that external expectations of its role – from young people on one side and those who support it through funding and advocacy on the other – may rapidly change. Nevertheless, certain principles have guided the diversity of youth work practice over time, even if they themselves remain subject to challenge and debate. The first part of the paper therefore considers not only the contemporary context of youth work policy development in Europe, notably through the 1st and 2nd European Youth Work Conventions and the political outcomes they produced (the EU Resolution on Youth Work in 2010 and the Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work in 2017) but also the many lessons that emerged from the History of Youth Work in Europe project that produced seven volumes of youth work knowledge and highlighted what might be called the ‘tension triangles’ within which youth work has to navigate with some skill. The history project identified twelve such triangles. The final, unexpected, context is clearly the Covid-19 pandemic that has been afflicting Europe throughout 2020, the outcome of which remains unpredictable but the impact of which – on youth work as much as on all other aspects of established life in Europe – has been dramatic and transformative in many different ways.

The second substantive section of the paper focuses on what are considered the nine persisting **challenges** facing youth work in Europe, and European youth work, today. First, despite the apparent consensus across the youth work community of practice that all youth work is simultaneously about providing young people with ‘spaces’ (for youth autonomy and self-determination) and ‘bridges’ (to support positive transitions to the next steps of their lives), that common ground remains disputed and contested. It needs to be strengthened further. Secondly there are at least five challenges that have always prevailed within the youth work debate: how to manage the diverse *pressures* and expectations placed upon youth work; where (in what kinds of *spaces*) youth work needs to operate; balancing the different *rationales* for the provision of youth work; establishing the balance in different *styles* of practice; and how to evaluate youth work – agreeing a basis on which to judge its *value*. Third, there are equally traditional disputes about the boundaries of youth work. Where does youth work start and stop in relation to *age* (very different forms of youth work operate across a broad age range of young people), *target groups* (what should youth work be ‘targeted’ on, if at all) and *issues* to be addressed (can, and should, youth work be engaging with all issues caused or experienced by young people)? Clearly, youth work does not cover everything that affects the lives of young people but, as that is the case, what are its parameters?

Fourth, there are important questions about the structural arrangements for the delivery of youth work, from the European level (and the concept of ‘European youth work’) to national and local provision. Fifth, there is the challenge of *building rapport*



with other agencies, professionals and groups that work, in many different ways, with young people.

The sixth challenge relates to *education and training* for youth work, particularly as most youth work continues to be provided largely by volunteers, raising questions about *professionalism* if not professionalisation. Relatively little is known in detail about the diversity and delivery of youth work across Europe, even at the local level, which has inevitably invited questions, and criticisms, as to what exactly does youth work *do*? What kinds of outcomes and impact does youth work produce? This raises a seventh challenge concerned with the *quality assurance* dimensions of youth work.

Proponents of youth work often talk about it as if it is a pervasive practice imbued with shared understanding and relatively uniform provision throughout Europe. A small scratch below the surface reveals this to be a patent myth. There are, as an eighth point, at least three striking *missing links*. The *urban-rural* divide is a huge fault line for youth work. The transnational divide conveys starkly that there is not yet any kind of *level playing field* throughout Europe. And there are still huge debates about the distinctions and (lack of) connections between *European, national and local youth work*. Understanding, traversing and bringing closer together these three, and other, missing links remains a significant challenge for youth work.

Finally, there is the perennial cry and challenge to do with winning *recognition for youth work*. If youth work was everything that those within its community of practice proclaimed it to be, it would not have to struggle to secure its place within political advocacy and youth policy development. But rarely, if ever, has this yet been the case. Winning hearts and minds beyond those already converted to the value of youth work remains the ultimate 'political' challenge for youth work.

The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly affected all aspects of societies. The third section of this paper considers the impact of the Covid-19 **crisis** on young people, on youth workers and youth organisations, and on youth work practice. Many negative consequences have been well documented but innovation and responsiveness, particularly through digital practice, has provided youth work with an opportunity to claim its stake in the process of rebuilding and refocusing Europe in a post-Covid world.

The paper, in **conclusion**, and in preparation for the development of a European Youth Work Agenda, proposes that attention needs to be given to four key strands of youth work. The **conceptual** challenges are, at one level, self-evident, yet their resolution remains elusive; as soon as some definitional consensus is reached by some, others are eager to dismantle it. There are challenges to do with the **competence** of youth workers: what kinds of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical understanding are needed for the practice of effective youth work and how should these be engendered? Then there are the challenges around the **credibility** of youth work, in terms of its social and political recognition and the security of funding and occupational pathways that may flow from that. And finally there are the challenges of making appropriate **connections**, both vertically within youth work (from the 'European' to the local) and horizontally between youth work and other sectors.



Such challenges need to inform the deliberations of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention and contribute to the shaping of an emergent European Youth Work Agenda.

1 CONTEXT

Contemporary youth work policy development in Europe

European youth work and youth work in Europe – both, broadly, the process and practice of ‘facilitating agency’ or enabling young people to develop ‘navigational capacities’ (see Williamson 2015), or the way of securing ‘spaces’ and providing ‘bridges’ for young people (see the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention) – is on the map (see Vanhee and Williamson 2018). Or perhaps, arguably, on a map, one that is looked at and helps to guide largely those already within its orbit and territory – the European youth work community of practice. Together with the academics of youth work, the researchers and those who contribute to the education and training of youth workers, this community of practice constitutes:

all those actors and stakeholders who consider themselves part of the European youth work sector, including among others youth leaders, project carriers, youth organisations, Ministries responsible for youth and civil servants responsible for youth policy, European institutions and their programmes of youth work support, National Agencies of the Erasmus+ and other youth relevant education and mobility programmes, multipliers and youth activists associated with the institutional programmes, trainers and their representative associations or the pools they form, even young people themselves (Ohana 2020, p.2)

Since the end of the 20th century, this youth work sector, as part of a larger ‘youth sector’, has arguably comprised a mutually supportive so-called ‘magic triangle’ of research, policy and practice (see Milmeister and Williamson 2006). However, and this is the key point for our current deliberations, the extent to which youth work is understood or considered in wider contexts and domains, *beyond the youth work community of practice*, remains debatable.

There is, nevertheless, little doubt that, certainly over the past ten years, following the 1st European Youth Work Convention (2010)¹ and through the 2nd European Youth Work Convention (2015)², analysis and documentation of youth work from – and robust debate between – various sources (European institutions, governments, youth organisations, researchers, campaign groups and more) has proliferated³, though this has not (yet) necessarily translated into recognition, acknowledgement and support. The youth work sector has certainly become proficient and confident about talking

¹ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262202/Declaration/2f264232-7324-41e4-8bb6-404c75ee5b62>

² http://www.alliance-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/The-2nd-European-Youth-Work-Declaration_FINAL-2015.pdf

³ For example, the European Commission study of youth work: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf; an Erasmus+ study of youth work, see Ord et al. (2018); the RAY [Research based Analysis of Youth in Action] study of European Union youth programmes: <https://www.researchyouth.net/reports/>; and the work of the European Youth Forum: <https://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/PP-Youth-Work.pdf>



about itself and, on occasions, persuading others at both political and professional levels to endorse the value, purpose and contribution of youth work, culminating in a call for a European Youth Work Agenda at European and national levels. This trajectory has been reflected over the past decade within the European Union (with its 2010 Council Resolution on Youth Work⁴) and the Council of Europe (with its 2017 Committee of Ministers Recommendation on Youth Work⁵), and registered in detail for the past five years in the comprehensive European discussion on youth work 2015-2020 developed for the 3rd European Youth Work Convention by the German Youth Institute⁶. The idea of a European Youth Work Agenda is now enshrined in both the European Union's 2018 youth strategy⁷ and the Council of Europe's 2020 youth sector strategy⁸; as a result, they provide horizons for such an Agenda that stretch towards 2030.

Relatively recently (2017), the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth (routinely known as the Youth Partnership) undertook a mapping exercise of the education and training pathways for youth workers in Europe. Its report⁹ was subjected to further analysis by Tomi Kiilakoski (2018¹⁰), who drew on Stephen Kemmis' (2008) ideas around 'practice architectures' and the trilogy of 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' that may either, when present, strengthen or, when absent, weaken the professional practice concerned. In the context of youth work, it is suggested, the 'Sayings' (the more pervasive discussion of practice alluded to above) has generally not, however, been transported into either 'Doings' (the commitment of sufficient resources to the provision of youth work and the resultant strengthening of youth work practice) or 'Relatings' (establishing the place of youth work in dialogue beyond its core practice, notably in wider 'work with young people' across the realms of education and employment, health, housing or justice, or in relation to wider 'social policy' challenges such as social inclusion or supporting the interests of migrants or minorities). There are exceptions to this perspective, of course, but by and large the 'practice architecture' for youth work – particularly a robust commitment to youth work policies – remains relatively fragile within most European countries (and indeed throughout the world). There may now be a lot more talk but there is still the challenge of establishing more action ('Doings') and more recognition of the contribution to be made by youth work ('Relatings'). That is the mission for the European Youth Work Agenda. The 3rd European Youth Work Convention provides an opportunity to reflect on and address at least some of the persisting challenges facing

⁴ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262202/Resolution+of+the+EU+Council+of+18-19+November+2010+on+youth+work/065f18e1-7392-4d88-b4f1-f0fcf2d33cc0>

⁵ <https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78>

⁶ See Hofmann-van de Poll, F., Pelzer, M., Riedle, S. and Rottach, A. (2020), *The European Discussion on Youth Work 2015-2020*, Munich: German Youth Institute. Available online at <https://www.dji.de/en/about-us/projects/projekte/centre-for-european-youth-policy/projekt-publikationen.html>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy_en

⁸ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-strategy-2030>

⁹ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/01-Mapping+for+printing+without+maps.pdf/192e0cd5-5e74-7d38-76cd-2ba3d108bb43>

¹⁰ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262400/Kiilakoski-final/525aef72-4871-1855-8fb2-72f2b7824d74>



youth work in Europe today, some of which are paradoxically emergent from the increasing attention focused on youth work that has been the successful outcome of the two previous Conventions. The 3rd Convention seeks to make stronger connections and bridge the gaps between some of the weaker links in policy and practice related to youth work. And though Europe, like the rest of the world, has been engulfed by the Covid-19 crisis that presents enormous challenges across the policy spectrum, particularly in relation to employment and health, Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union as Europe emerges from lockdown not only necessarily states its priority commitment to responding to the Covid-19 pandemic (see Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2020, Chapter I) but also expresses its commitment to 'support all young people... with a European Youth Work Agenda' (Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2020, Chapter III, p.13).

The concern now, therefore, is to move beyond debate to securing the policy commitment and sense of purpose to embed youth work on the ground throughout Europe. More strategically, it is time to set out the framework for a European Youth Work Agenda that will enable youth work to put down solid roots. To that end, it is imperative to connect the many forms of 'youth work' that prevail across Europe and a 'European youth work' that can supplement, support and perhaps even re-shape that local youth work practice. Yael Ohana has helpfully endeavoured to define 'European youth work':

European youth work shall be understood in a broad sense, as that work with young people (mainly of an educational nature) which a. considers 'Europe' or 'European issues' as a key framing consideration or context and / or b. which uses funding from European youth work support programmes or which is organised centrally by one of the European youth work support institutions and / or c. which takes place between different countries in Europe (international) or in one country in Europe (national with a European dimension) and / or d. which is conducted by organisations that [*sic*] whose capacity has been built by European youth work support programmes. In our understanding, any combination of at least two of these criteria would qualify a youth work project as European youth work (Ohana 2020, p.2; text original)

This paper seeks to delineate some of the key challenges that demand the continued attention of those responsible for research, policy and practice in the fields of both youth work in Europe and European youth work.

The History of Youth Work in Europe project

First, it is useful to reflect briefly on the project concerned with the History of Youth Work in Europe and its relevance for youth policy today. This project was conducted almost in parallel to the sequence of European Youth Work Conventions. It started in 2008 and concluded in 2019 (the Conventions have run from 2010 to 2020). Its main output was seven volumes¹¹ exploring the evolution of youth work from a variety of perspectives. These have generated some concluding thoughts that suggest it is

¹¹ see <https://pip-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/knowledge-books>



inappropriate to try to pin down youth work conclusively but to acknowledge and accept that youth work invariably operates within a variety of competing narratives, demands and pressures. Inevitably, these produce dilemmas and tensions that can be addressed, if not ever be fully resolved, in different ways. The challenge for youth work is first to understand them and then to be able to position itself appropriately within them.

The imagery in the concluding chapter of Volume VII of the *History of Youth Work in Europe* is one of 'trilemmas'. These are more than dilemmas because, invariably, they are embedded in a *triangle* (or three-cornered space) of often competing pressures and tensions, within which youth work has to find a meaningful place. There is no clear or fixed spot for youth work within each triangle; positioning will depend on and derive from the context of the particular youth work practice and the judgment of the youth work practitioners involved. Twelve trilemmas were drawn out from the history project, each of which requires a reflective 'trialogue' at different levels of research, policy and practice, sometimes simultaneously.

Twelve trilemmas for youth work:

- 1 Roots: what is youth work? Education, social work, counselling
- 2 Method: how is youth work done? Education; advice and information; coaching/training
- 3 Delivery: who does youth work? Paid workers, volunteers, young people
- 4 Pressures: why youth work? Policy, principles/philosophy, priorities of young people
- 5 Space: where does youth work happen? Street, buildings, online
- 6 Rationale – regulation, recreation, emancipation
- 7 Focus of attention – individual, groups, society
- 8 Style of practice – proactive, negotiated, reactive
- 9 Locus of practice – projects, issues, contexts
- 10 Target of practice – delinquent/excluded, 'ordinary' kids, talent/privileged
- 11 Making the connections – health, employment, justice
- 12 The value of youth work – process, outcome, impact

Some of these trilemmas have limited bearing on *contemporary* challenges for youth work, though they were relevant for deliberations from an historical perspective. Others are addressed distinctly later in this paper. Some will be subject to further elaboration in the next section. All of these triangles, however, individually and in sum, suggest challenges for formulating and activating youth work policy. As Williamson and Coussée (2019) maintain,

The great beauty of the Declaration arising from the 2nd European Youth Work Convention¹² and the subsequent Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work¹³ was their essential simplicity: the idea that all kinds of youth work share the common ground of winning *space*

¹² https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/The+2nd+European+Youth+Work+Declaration_FINAL.pdf/cc602b1d-6efc-46d9-80ec-5ca57c35eb85

¹³ <https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78>



and supporting *bridges* for young people. This is achieved through the careful and considered weighing and balancing – never resolution – of all of the ‘trilemmas’ outlined above: within each of them and between all of them. What such documentation does not do, however, is to assert, with any precision, what that balance should be. If this was to be done – and some youth work policy at certain times has sought to be prescriptive in this way – this would prohibit the very reflexivity of *practice* (praxis) that is the very soul of youth work. Yet it is this need to ensure the maintenance of the possibility of reflective practice, allowing youth workers to reconcile the corners of these triangles according to the specific realities and demands of the contexts within which they are working, that makes the shaping of youth work *policy* all the more problematic. Indeed, there was no youth work policy in the beginning; as youth work became entangled with wider dimensions of public policy directed towards young people, so it became subject to the same public policy frameworks and expectations, including the increasing pressure to delineate and deliver specific outcomes.

The history project was never just about documenting the past. It was also about looking to the future and seeking to distil the lessons of history in order to inform contemporary thinking about youth (work) policy. Though clearly neither exclusive nor exhaustive, there do appear to be three paramount policy-related questions for current youth work policy. The first is concerned with the **conceptualisation** of youth work. This remains a central theme and challenge of this paper. As Williamson and Coussée (2019) concluded:

Working out the realistic *boundaries* of youth work as well as the potential within which it can deliver its promise will be an essential task if it is to make a plausible argument about its place and value within the wider canvas and framework of youth policy (emphasis original)

The second, related issue is the competence of those engaged in youth work. It is related because the more youth work practice is – and is perceived as – competent, the broader the canvas on which youth work can stake its claim for relevance and recognition. This generates a set of questions that are already being addressed at European level around the education and training pathways for youth workers in Europe and the kind of curricula that is needed to shape the learning and professional development of youth workers¹⁴. Again, as Williamson and Coussée (2019) suggested,

If youth work is as complex as is often asserted, demanding carefully calibrated reflection, judgment and intervention, then presumably even its army of volunteers need well-honed *professional skills* (emphasis original)

The third, and once again related, question is that of the **credibility** of youth work. This rests on its ability to demonstrate that there are real outcomes to the practice that it preaches. The evidence base, to date, remains rather thin, and there continue to be robust arguments about what kinds of methodologies are best suited to gathering and processing ‘evidence’ about the outcomes and impact of youth work. That notwithstanding, it has to be admitted that, currently, there is limited knowledge and understanding as to what really goes on within a youth work setting, project or programme that can be conveyed with authority and confidence to a wider audience.

¹⁴ See <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-work>; https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/01-Mapping_for+printing_without+maps.pdf/192e0cd5-5e74-7d38-76cd-2ba3d108bb43; <http://education-and-training.humak.fi/conference-documents/>



It may be relatively easy to map and measure output, but gauging outcomes and impact is rather more elusive. There have been some recent attempts at this, notably an Erasmus+ funded study of the impact of youth work across five European countries (Ord *et al.* 2018), but even research findings such as these are vulnerable to 'being dismissed as the self-indulgent ramblings of those already inside the youth work bubble, who have found a methodology to suit their case and cause' (Williamson 2019). There is, no doubt, considerable pressure on the youth work sector to produce evidence about its 'effectiveness'. Yet, as Williamson and Coussée (2019) observed,

whether from within or without the youth work sector, this may be a quest for the holy grail: the history of youth work tells us very clearly that youth work works precisely because of the room and space it makes accessible to young people, physically and intellectually, as they explore and learn from the world (and the youth workers) around them. Youth work is, by definition, loose-knit and flexible; when it is regimented, harnessed, institutionalised in one way or another, it ceases to be youth work. Youth work may have to find ways of securing credibility other than through outcomes.

The overarching conclusion of the history project was that youth work can never be detached, divorced or defined separately from other fields and methods of social and pedagogical work. The idea of youth work cannot be suspended from the social, cultural and political context within which it takes place. Nonetheless, there are also some features of youth work that are almost constant, irrespective of context. There is nearly always the question of social cohesion (how to shape society) and the question of what young people should be experiencing (how to shape young people). There are invariably (though certainly not always, throughout its history) the linked questions regarding democracy, diversity, equality, solidarity and liberty. Together, these questions raise further questions about balances of power, certainly between the haves and have-nots but perhaps most significantly between the old and the young. *Whose hands is youth work in?* On rare occasions, it has been exclusively in the hands of the young, thereby denying and limiting its role in addressing the social – integration – question (if admirably responding to the youth – empowerment – question). More often, it has been used by policy-makers as a vehicle, even a weapon, for other externally defined objectives. We still know little about resistance to such instrumentalisation, other than young people walking away, if they had the opportunity to do so. More typically, the 'answer' to challenging questions for youth work seems to have been to retreat in the direction of a different question, one concerned with method. So rather than considering what youth work might be for, the question became how should youth work be done.

This is not an unreasonable question but the major challenge for youth work (and youth workers) – according to what is now a comprehensive European youth work knowledge base – remains concerned with forging links with and respecting the *existing* life-worlds of young people while simultaneously *enlarging* them in order to widen horizons and provide an optimum platform for identity and personal development. As Williamson and Coussée (2019) concluded the ten-year history project,

Youth workers need the resources to offer a safe harbour to young people, from which they can set sail: somewhere to go, something to do, a place of their own where they can experience and exercise autonomy, and where they find friends and role models. The quartet



of association, activities, autonomy and advice. And youth workers also need the social pedagogical space to move forward with young people, from bonding to bridging, from consuming to producing and from participation in youth work to participation through youth work into their wider worlds.

The Covid-19 crisis

That wider world transformed dramatically in 2020. The Covid-19 coronavirus global pandemic has clearly had an unexpected and pervasive impact on national and international perspectives, across policy domains from (obviously) public health to the economy. Significant and serious attention has had to be paid to formal education, as children and young people remained at home during the protracted lockdowns of 2020 and the possibility of having to do so again in the event of localised or more widespread 'spikes' in the future.

This strikingly and starkly altered context for everybody, including young people, has inevitably had a range of implications and consequences for youth work in Europe and across the world, presenting significant threats to the predominant methodologies of youth work that involve physical proximity, group work and sometimes transnational travel. Lockdown, social distancing rules and other public health regulations have rendered many of the traditional contexts and methods of youth work either impossible or impractical. This unforeseen context has also, however, challenged youth work, once again, to demonstrate its capacity to display and demonstrate creativity and flexibility in response – just as it has done throughout its existence, as social conditions and demands have evolved, on issues ranging from citizenship and multi-culturalism, unemployment and criminality, and radicalisation and migration.

The embracing of 'digital youth work' over the past decade or so has, arguably, enabled youth work to accelerate, extend and diversify its use both as a stand-alone element of youth work practice and in consultation and collaboration with other initiatives that have sought to support young people, particularly those experiencing isolation and worsening mental health during the crisis. Some further thoughts on the specific challenges and opportunities for youth work arising from – indeed emerging from – the Covid-19 crisis are presented at the end of this paper.



2 CHALLENGES

The Challenges for youth work today

1. Defining youth work – strengthening common ground

The 2nd European Youth Work Convention successfully achieved some reasonable consensus on what constituted and defined 'youth work' – after a celebration of its *diversity* during the 1st European Youth Work Convention, but which subsequently was recognised as appearing somewhat chaotic to anyone looking in from the outside. This was expressed as '*common ground*' [in the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention], the shared platform that linked the diversity of youth work throughout Europe, from self-governed youth organisations, through open youth centres, to street-based work.

Youth work is, usually to its credit, a self-critical sector that very actively promotes the questioning of established 'wisdoms', but conceptual and definitional in-fighting has not always helped the broader advocacy for youth work. Internal debate may strengthen youth work's mission for continuous improvement and its quest for improving quality. Indeed, that is exactly what youth work should be doing – adapting to new contexts and new challenges, and both maintaining and developing its common ground. However, externally expressed differences of opinion and perspectives can suggest a divided field and prove counter-productive if publicly aired disagreements discredit youth work in the wider world. In contrast, the shared position agreed and adopted across diverse forms of youth work in Europe *and* European youth work, at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention in 2015, provides a powerful mantra through conveying a simple representation of the complexity of youth work: to *win spaces* (for young people to experience and enjoy the present) and *build bridges* (for young people to take informed and purposeful steps on their pathways to the future). The 'spaces and bridges' message inevitably has to be interpreted carefully according to context (the 2nd Convention identified, in particular, the contexts of multiculturalism and digitalisation, the latter of which could not have been more prophetic given the current Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for youth work – see below) but it remains a meaningful platform on which to further develop youth work policy and practice.

2. Historical challenges still prevalent today

(a) Pressures on youth work – why youth work? Policy, principles, priorities

Youth work typically proclaims that it exists to 'meet the needs of young people'. Needs, or wants? Sometimes the wording is adapted to talk about 'responding to the priorities of young people'. Clearly it would not be 'youth work' if the agendas of young people were ignored, but that is not the only pressure on, or indeed *raison d'être* for, youth work.

Youth work is also guided and governed by its own principles and philosophy. Those most commonly expressed are treating young people 'holistically' and that all forms of



youth work are premised on a 'voluntary relationship', but these are not completely cast in stone. There are, furthermore, value-based positions such as ensuring 'anti-oppressive practice', a commitment to equalities, and the promotion of human rights and democracy. Some youth workers talk about youth work being laboratories for democracy, yet others would claim that part of their role is to defend the minority of one or challenge the tyranny of the majority. The value-base of youth work is not completely fixed, though some core principles would probably secure a reasonably broad consensus.

Yet youth work is also subject to considerable policy pressures. Youth work has, over time, been routinely harnessed by governments to address issues of concern to *them*. There may not always been a need for resistance to such pressures. Youth unemployment is no doubt as much of a concern to young people as it is to public authorities! The question for youth work is then not whether to engage with public policy initiatives on this front, but *how*.

Youth work is, many (though not all) would say, not an outcome-focused practice, but an open practice. Youth work is not about equipping young people with qualifications and skills that may strengthen their position in the labour market; that is the task of the formal educational system, vocational training and careers agencies. Youth workers may, of course, inadvertently support young people's 'employability', refer them to relevant agencies responsible for youth transitions, and encourage young people to make full use of them. The aim of youth work, however, is – as so many attempted definitions suggest the 'personal and social development of young people': youth work is not about learning to earn a living, but to learn about fully living a life. One component of that is, of course, to address social problems such as high youth unemployment. Youth workers may well work with young people (and indeed other stakeholders) on such matters, through discussing issues such as barriers to the labour market, the creation of better and alternative opportunities, or innovative projects that may strengthen young people's positive opportunities and experiences in that policy domain. But youth work is not a supplementary labour market preparation or placement agency.

Indeed, striking the balance between responding to public (youth) policy priorities, maintaining fidelity to youth work principles *and* meeting the needs of young people is a paramount, ever-present challenge for youth work. Getting sucked into any one corner of this triangle is a recipe for paralysis – enslavement by government, purist ideologies that simply do not connect with the 'real world', or an uncritical compliance with the demands of young people. Sliding towards any corner of the triangle will attract accusations and negative criticism from the other two.

(b) *Spaces for youth work – where does youth work happen? Street, buildings, online*

Youth work has classically taken place in dedicated physical space, albeit often shared with others (community centres, cultural centres, churches/mosques¹⁵) though sometimes exclusively for the use of young people (youth centres). For some time,

¹⁵ One challenge for a European Youth Work Agenda may be to discover how much and what kind of 'youth work' resourced and organised through faith groups is taking place throughout Europe.



however, there has also been an incremental growth of 'street work', whether as a form of 'outreach' designed to make contact with young people in order to attract them to projects or centres, or as 'detached' work with young people wherever they are to be found. More recently, there has also been the emergence of 'virtual' youth work, most lately manifesting itself in the form of 'digital' youth work (see Kiviniemi and Tuominen 2017). Clearly, this has been a prominent feature of effort to sustain youth work practice during the lockdown and social distancing regulations arising from the Covid-19 crisis during 2020. Nonetheless, as we all increasingly inhabit a digitalised world, youth work will have to continue to look deeply into how it makes appropriate connections¹⁶.

Youth work has classically taken place in defined spaces, not just in youth centres and on the street, but also through volunteering programmes and summer camps. For the future, however, it is likely that youth work will increasingly have to connect and combine physical, virtual and undefined (uncontrolled) space in pursuit of relevant youth work practice. Indeed, the loss of buildings – whether the hobby education centres favoured under state socialism, or the Albemarle dedicated youth centres in England and Wales – means that youth work will need to think more creatively than ever about the *location*, as well as the methodology of its practice.

(c) *Rationale for youth work – regulation, recreation, emancipation*

Youth work has often been perceived, from the outside, as little more than recreation – the classic allegation, certainly in some parts of Europe, remains that it is largely about 'table tennis and pool'. Of course, it could be argued that youth work is most definitely about *re-creation*, providing young people with associational space within which positive activities (including table tennis and pool!) take place. Youth work has certainly always claimed that it is, one way or another, about emancipation – through the provision of developmental experiences and opportunities. However, as Coussée (2008), *inter alia*, has argued recurrently, youth work has historically also always had a strong regulatory dimension, particularly for some groups of young people. He makes the point that while youth movements for students were emancipatory, youth programmes for working class youth (boys) were far more concerned with regulation – nipping trouble in the bud and promoting behaviourally acceptable and healthier lifestyles.

This is an old debate, but it remains pertinent today. Youth workers are neither exclusively agents of social change nor agents of social control: they are some mix of the two, though quite how they determine that mix is a matter for professional judgement. The mix will undulate over time, in the context of different activities and in relation to different (groups of) young people. For young people themselves, knowing when to display more autonomous self-direction and enterprise and when to be more

¹⁶ See the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership's *Perspectives on Youth (Volume 4): Young people in a digitalised world 2018*; see also Theben *et al.* (2018), *Study on the impact of the internet and social media on youth participation and youth work – Final report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union



acquiescent and compliant to authority is arguably a critical contemporary competence, and it is also arguably a contemporary responsibility for youth work.

(d) Styles of youth work practice – proactive, negotiated, reactive

Just as youth work is not *just* about meeting the needs of young people (see above), so youth work is not just about responding to the needs and wants *expressed* by young people. It is also about, to some extent, making (pro)active interventions in young people's lives, whether in terms of ideas (through conversation), relationships (through constructed activities) or experiences (through planned opportunities). Indeed, it would be an abdication of a youth work role if practitioners did not find ways of moving young people from their comfort zones into circumstances that stretched their imaginations, perspectives and horizons. Young people can always retreat from such contexts (and will do so if the youth work is done badly) but it is contingent on youth work to try.

And the best way for youth work to try is, of course, not through imposition but through negotiation, exchange and persuasion. There may, however, be times when more forceful cajoling and encouragement is desired, even required (who, after all, really likes to be jerked out of their comfort zone?), though this should fall short of a compulsion that jeopardises the 'voluntary relationship'¹⁷.

Youth work functions most effectively within a culture of mutuality and reciprocity. Where youth work responds well to the expressed wishes of young people (and that may well often be around leisure and recreational aspirations), there is a much greater possibility of persuading young people to try out new experiences and contemplate new ideas. In short, the quality of the *relationship* developed between youth workers and young people will invariably be the weather vane of what can be attempted within the framework of youth work practice.

(e) The value of youth work – process, outcome, impact

Outcomes and impact have become critical concerns in relation to all public services. Youth work is not immune from the challenge of demonstrating the return it provides (produces) as a result of investment in it. Yet youth work is premised, as reported above, on the journey it takes with young people; part of the strapline of the radical British 'In Defence of Youth Work' campaign is that youth work is 'conversation without guarantees'¹⁸.

Would, we have to ask, the youth work process in fact be pointless if there were no outcomes or wider impact? Perhaps. But the pervasive claim by youth workers is that, beyond the value of the process, there are multiple benefits derived from youth work, not only for young people involved but for the communities in which they live and for

¹⁷ This is part of a huge current policy debate about how youth work is conducted within semi-coercive environments, such as schools or institutions for young offenders. Can voluntary youth work relationships be forged and formed within involuntary settings?

¹⁸ The full strapline of 'In Defence of Youth Work' is a practice that is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees.



society at large. The list advanced is endless, from numerous 'soft skills' and competencies developed by individuals, through social inclusion and civic and community responsibility, to wider social and political participation.

Demonstrating such impact and outcomes is, however, rather more difficult. Quite how they accrue from youth work, over what period of time and precisely in what way, is currently exercising the minds of many in the youth work sector. Retreating back to assertions of the value of process, relationships, and the centrality of time, patience and trust is no longer an acceptable position to adopt (if it ever was).

However, as Coussée and Williamson (2012) have argued, both process and outcomes have to be 'scaled' appropriately. If youth work becomes too heavily preoccupied with outcomes and impact, *at the expense of process factors*, then it will cease to be youth work. Equally, if youth work is dismissive of demands to 'prove' its effects, it will fail to secure public recognition and support and be sidelined in favour of other public service priorities. It is for youth work to balance its arguments accordingly.

3. Boundaries and Parameters - Where does youth work start and stop?

There are three questions here: the age question, the target question and the issue question.

(a) The age question

Access to youth work spans a huge age range, usually linked to national age-related definitions of 'youth'. These are often somewhat different, though typically they encompass young people from around 14 to 30, though they can start earlier (cf. at 11) and end later (sometimes to 35 or even 40).

The kind of 'youth work' that is conducted with the younger end of that age range is likely to be very different from youth work being done and experienced by adults in their mid-20s. Both forms of youth work practice justify inclusion under the broad banner of youth work but they require very different frameworks. An organisational and individual duty of care may prevail at all age levels, but child protection responsibilities and legal requirements in relation to 'safeguarding' usually end at 18 (the UN upper threshold of the definition of a child). Self-organised youth work is likely to be more prevalent in young adulthood, while it is more likely to be supported by adults in the younger age range, sometimes by professionally trained youth workers in some countries.

The 'age' challenge is to consider what kind of youth work might be most needed, in the context of answers to the 'target' and 'issue' questions posed below. If, for example, youth work is perceived as a preventative practice for young people at risk of engagement with risky or extreme behaviour (drug cultures, gangs, far-right groups), then it needs to start early. This would be a long way from the 'adolescent childminding' of which some youth work with younger age groups is sometimes accused.



(b) The *target*¹⁹ question

Though youth work, in more abstract discussions, suggests that it is a universal service with no eligibility criteria other than (sometimes) age, history tells us that youth work has developed in very different ways for different target groups of young people. This is what Filip Coussée has referred to as the youth question and the social question. The youth question was concerned with providing *emancipatory* space for autonomous expression, largely for student groups seeking some form of escape from adult-controlled milieux of school/work and family. The social question was how to integrate working-class youth into society, often through more regulatory and disciplined forms of youth work, led by adults. Throughout, at least some forms of youth work, especially when financed by public authorities, has been directed towards – or directed itself towards – specific target groups: young people not in education, employment or training (those who are depicted as ‘NEET’), isolated rural youth (though ‘mobile’ youth work), girls and young women, gang-affiliated young men. The targets have sometimes been behavioural categories, sometimes geographical locations, sometimes groups according to specific characteristics, and sometimes something else. Youth work has sometimes responded positively and purposefully to such expectations, but has at other times ended up colluding with wider political agendas that are not compatible with youth work principles and values, producing the memorable remark made by Lord Victor Adebowale, the Chief Executive of the charity Turning Point, about ‘hitting the target but missing the point’!

Collaboration on ‘targeted’ youth provision may not necessarily be a bad thing. Indeed, a slick phrase that might be attached to youth work is that it is a ‘universal service differentiated according to need’²⁰, offering more resources and greater support to young people in greater need. Clearly, youth work always needs to establish priorities within its capacity and resources. It is a question of *who* determines the targets for youth work, not whether target groups should ever be determined. That is the challenge.

(c) The *issue* question

Is youth work, as some claim, a ‘laboratory for democracy’ or, as others claim, a mechanism of social inclusion? Multiple claims are made for the efficacy of youth work, most recently around agendas such as the inclusion of refugees and as a counter-weight to the radicalisation of the young. Historically, it was differentially argued to promote the (physical) health and well-being of young people (young men in particular, making

¹⁹ The ‘target’, as noted later in this section is often some hybrid of group, issue and setting, though the policy debate invariably focuses first on target *groups* for youth work (young men, refugees, students), only subsequently adding behavioural *issues* (teenage pregnancy, drug taking, violence) and/or *contexts* (public space, schools, rural areas). Issues are sometimes considered separately (see below). Youth work *methods* are expected to adapt accordingly.

²⁰ This was the rather clever mantra of the English Connexions policy, a ‘youth support service’ established at the start of the 21st century designed to provide a ‘personal adviser’ for every young person. Most would hardly need their support at all (perhaps an annual ‘check’), some would like more regular contact and the provision of advice and activities, and a few (those with serious difficulties and challenges) would need help in being signposted to specialist services. That was the ‘Connexions triangle’.



them less likely to be rejected as military recruits), to combat juvenile delinquency, to confront cultural invasion and to promote political participation. None of these agendas has wholly disappeared; indeed, some have reappeared, though often in a different guise. Youth work and the (mental) health and well-being of young people are again being discussed in the same breath, albeit for new reasons. Yet one of the primary claims of youth work is that it considers young people 'holistically' – in the round, as young people, rather than as a category of young person, such as offender or student²¹.

The essential challenge for youth work is how to maintain this generic commitment to addressing the needs of all young people in a holistic fashion (and therefore across a range of presenting issues) while at the same time producing a more specific focus and objectives that are within its capacity to deliver. How to develop such a narrative has hitherto eluded the youth work sector – there have either been absurd claims that it can serve a vast population of young people on all fronts, or such narrowly constructed parameters that it risks becoming a niche speciality. The former position attract ridicule; the latter threatens its identity. Can youth work really accommodate an all-age, all-groups, all-issues position on the work it does and maintain its credibility as a distinctive profession?

4. Structures for the delivery of youth work and 'European youth work'

One of the conundrums about debating 'European' youth work is that youth work is fundamentally a *local* practice (see de St. Croix 2016). It is generally decided on and delivered locally. The presence of local and more well-known youth organisations (such as the Scouts or the YMCA) is variable and municipalities prioritise youth work in very different ways, if at all in some cases, allocating different budgets, and setting different approaches. Support for youth work is almost always a discretionary decision, rarely a legal obligation, so much depends on municipal commitment; the authority of higher-level structures routinely remains limited.

In all European member States²² without exception, youth work is rarely subjected to any rigid or narrowly defined national policy prescription unlike, for example, formal education or child protection. If there is national legislation, it is usually open to wide interpretation. And if there are questions and doubts about national competence and/or authority to intervene in the youth work arena, where does that leave a 'European' agenda?

At a wider youth policy level, there has certainly been a desire on the part of many countries to exchange with and learn from the European context. There have, for

²¹ As the 1st Minister of Wales noted recently, the special characteristic of youth work is that it sees young people first, not the issues they (re)present. Youth justice workers see young offenders; teachers see pupils; housing services see prospective tenants; doctors see patients. Youth workers, in contrast, he said, stand by and stand up for *young people*, and see them 'in the round' (Mark Drakeford's speech to the 25th anniversary Youth Work Excellence Awards, Conwy, Wales, June 2019).

²² Incorporating not just the 27/28 Member States of the European Union but also the additional 20+ countries that comprise the member States of the Council of Europe youth sector.



example, been 21 Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy over the past 20 years²³. Their purpose was threefold: to provide a constructively critical view of the shape of youth policy in the country under review, to draw lessons for other member States from the country concerned, and to increasingly build a framework (though not a prescription or blueprint) for thinking and implementing purposeful and opportunity-focused youth policy throughout Europe.

Could that be a role for European structures in informing and influencing national, regional and local structures responsible for youth work? There are, of course, some European structures that support forms of youth work in Europe – National Agencies for the Erasmus+ programme, the SALTO centres, the Youth Partnership between the EU and the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Youth Department, its European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest, its network of youth centres with its Quality Label, the European Youth Foundation, and more. Should these be consolidated or developed? What kinds of platforms should European structures provide? Should European structures be reactive or proactive, perhaps provide the trigger for reflecting on youth work in the light of or in anticipation of new developments? Should they provide instruments for training and peer learning? Should they serve as a reference point or conduct reviews? And if they were/are to do any of these things, what would be their relationships to the governmental and non-governmental structures within member States, when the most relevant structures for the development and delivery of youth work are almost certainly at local level?

None of this is intended to propose a 'one size fits all' approach to youth work throughout Europe. There is, however, some balance to be struck between any form of central dictate and such a level of local self-determination that access to youth work, and different types of youth work, becomes a 'postcode lottery', completely dependent on where one lives. Should consideration be given, as with the Charter on Local Youth Work²⁴, to some core youth work offer that could be available to all young people in Europe? If so, what should it be? And how could it be secured? And if not, why not?

5. Building rapport – the case for permeable boundaries

There has, necessarily and reasonably (and notwithstanding the observations made in the previous section), been a focus on strengthening structures for youth work at the level of the European institutions, but equally important is the case for strengthening relationships. There comes a point where self-advocacy is vulnerable to the law of diminishing returns and it is far more productive to marshal and enlist the support and advocacy of others. Youth work has proclaimed for some time its value and contribution to wider youth policy agendas, but rarely do we hear those other youth policy fields singing the praises of youth work. Rarely do we hear political speeches celebrating youth work, unless the politicians are speaking to the youth work sector itself.

One of the countries in Europe where youth work has apparently established a strong foothold is Scotland. At its national youth work conference a few years ago, what was

²³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/national-youth-policy-reviews>

²⁴ <https://www.europegoeslocal.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/20190603-egl-charter.pdf>



striking was how few keynote deliveries were given by those from within the youth work community of practice. Indeed, virtually all speeches were made by senior figures from *other* youth policy domains – politicians and civil servants responsible for formal education, health, vocational training, employment and youth justice. All sang the praises of youth work for both similar and different reasons – building confidence, responsibility, engagement, participation and so forth. It was a practical and policy confirmation of the research evidence produced in England that suggests that youth work supports the *personal* change that is often a critical pre-requisite for *positional* change (see below) in relation to, for example, re-engagement with schooling or desistance from offending. The case for youth work was made by others; a challenge is how to win their hearts and minds.

6. Education and training of/for youth workers

It is easy to say that there is a need for more education and training of youth workers. This, however, immediately becomes a tougher proposition as soon as it is recalled that the vast majority of youth work, throughout Europe, is carried out by volunteers or, at most, paid part-timers. Full-time youth work professionals are thin on the ground. The ratios are variable, as the EU report on the Value of Youth Work (p.114)²⁵ notes; Wales²⁶ once conveniently used 'the 3s' which, though somewhat contrived, was in fact a reasonably accurate and therefore plausible proxy for profiling youth work in a country of 3 million people:

- 3 governmental civil servants dedicated to youth work
- 30 senior (municipality and NGO) youth work managers
- 300 full-time youth workers
- 3,000 paid part-time youth workers
- 30,000 volunteer youth workers
- 300,000 young people
- 3,000,000 people

The argument made was that the relatively small numbers of 'fully' qualified and experienced youth workers at the apex of the pyramid enabled and ensured the strategic direction, quality (professionalism and, to some extent, professionalisation) of youth work practice delivered largely by volunteers, through supporting them with both formal and less formal training and staff development.

If that is the reality, but the aspiration is to strengthen the professionalism (though not necessarily the professionalisation – that is another matter) of youth work, then this raises questions and challenges with regard to the type of training, its content and its delivery. How should it be done, and by whom? What should be its 'curriculum'? Significantly, what should be the balance between more theoretical and more practical

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf

²⁶ We are aware that this paper draws disproportionately on policy and practice illustrations from the United Kingdom (England and Wales), but we are sure that there are as many examples from elsewhere in Europe that could make very similar points.



dimensions of youth worker education and training? And what should be the balance between the dissemination of the big European ideas about youth work (revitalising democracy, access to rights, dialogue with the European Union) and the absorption of key ingredients of youth work practice: safety and protection, environmental health? In between lie myriad learning possibilities, from project management, funding applications and developing mobility projects, for example, to understanding the psychology of adolescence and the sociology of youth, grasping 'youth policy essentials'²⁷, or developing a repertoire of techniques for intervening in young people's lives.

Such curricula could be delivered at almost any level in any location – from university studies over a protracted period to a two-hour session in a rented building once a month. The challenge for youth work is to determine whether or not there is yet a case for a 'training blueprint' that might be adopted across the disparate youth work contexts of Europe. There is certainly a strong case for advocating, at national level, for a stronger policy commitment to education and training in youth work, within which some European dimensions could be accommodated.

7. Quality assurance

And once 'in the field', what should be the nature of enabling and ensure an appropriate 'professionalism' in the execution of youth work practice. In some corners of Europe, there has been considerable debate about who should be 'allowed' to call themselves a youth worker. In other parts of Europe, though the practice of youth work may go on, there is no occupational designation of 'youth worker'. For these reasons, the youth work terrain is uneven, unclear and sometimes uncomfortable. Unlike other 'fuller' professions, there is no regulatory body for youth work in any country, and though there may be codes of practice or codes of ethics, and occupational standards, there is rarely a registration body that can set criteria for membership and expel those whose practise falls beneath expected levels of professional practice.

This all raises further questions about whether or not youth work possesses a distinct 'body of knowledge' to merit being considered a profession, and the extent to which continuing professional development – through participation in further training and perhaps evidence of non-managerial supervision – should be a requirement for maintaining grounded contact with young people. There are as many within the youth work sector who oppose such a trajectory for youth work as advance the case for it. There is little common ground in relation to this particular challenge. Though all parties endorse the need for 'quality', there is little consensus as to how this might be achieved, with both those involved with self-governed youth organisations and those doing youth work at the sharp end on the street often forming an unexpected alliance around the importance of their own 'experiential learning' (the bedrock of what most youth workers think youth work *does*) rather than more didactic or imposed forms of education and training. Nonetheless, most of those involved in youth work do accept the need for

²⁷ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/Youth+Policy+Essentials+updated.pdf/92d6c20f-8cba-205f-0e53-14e16d69e561>



some shared quality standards and some agreed principles of youth work²⁸. It is exactly what these should be and how they should be 'assessed' in the context of youth work practice that remain a matter of some contention.

8. Missing links – horizontal and vertical gaps in the development and delivery of youth work

Throughout the evolution of youth policy, and youth work policy and practice within it, there has always been the challenge of endeavouring to establish an equitable offer – if provision is deemed to be important, then all young people should have reasonably equal access to it. Yet clearly, this is not the case. There are huge inequities in youth work availability and opportunities within and between the countries of Europe.

The urban-rural challenge

Within countries, one feature of what has been termed the 'youth divide' is through the urban-rural dichotomy, though this may in fact be a continua, with youth work experiences in smaller conurbations representing some kind of middle ground.

There have, of course, often been attempts at improving (out)reach, something that is now more possible through technology, social media, transportation and communications. What is sometimes called 'mobile youth work' is by no means new, but despite such practice and further innovation, young people in rural areas are often significantly disadvantaged when it comes to benefitting from youth work provision. A key issue is whether or not there should be something like a 'basic youth work offer' – comprising information, opportunity and experience – that can be made available to all.

A level playing field across Europe

Between European countries, there are huge disparities in youth work provision, a point firmly reinforced by the history project. One might hope that the Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work (2017) may contribute to producing a more level playing field, though the empirical material for the 2nd European Youth Work Convention revealed enormous unpredictabilities in the evolution of youth work in just the five years since the 1st Convention (see Williamson 2015). Some countries with no traditions of youth work had quite dramatically embraced the concept and the practice. In contrast, others, with long traditions of youth work had, equally dramatically, chopped youth work resources.

Advocating, securing *and then sustaining* an adequate (or sufficient) resource base for youth work across Europe is, therefore, a critical challenge for the European youth work

²⁸ It is over 60 years since seven key principles for social work were established: Individualisation, Purposeful expression of feeling, Controlled emotional involvement, Acceptance, Non-judgmental attitude, Client self-determination, and Confidentiality: see Biestek, F. (1957), *The Casework Relationship*, Loyola University Press



sector. It has been argued that a useful yardstick of 'adequacy'²⁹ in the national financing of youth work should be 2% of the national budget for formal education, though this is clearly a matter for debate. It does at least represent an illustrative benchmark that might constitute a development goal for youth work in Europe.

European, national and local youth work

As noted above, the recent Erasmus+ project 'Europe goes local', anchored within a strategic partnership of National Agencies³⁰, has produced a [European] Charter on Local Youth Work. This is a commendable 'manifesto' for enabling and ensuring quality in local youth work provision. Yet it is one of myriad 'charters' on youth work, most of which continue to swing, seemingly unproblematically and without controversy, between overarching European youth work perspectives and quite specific local youth work practice. At the start of this paper, reference was made to Ohana's definition of European youth work, as opposed to youth work that may take place in rather different ways at national and local levels. Most of those within the European youth work community of practice (also defined above, using Ohana's definition) would acknowledge, however, that European youth work is strengthened through being informed by local youth work practice, just as local practice can be diversified and reinforced by reference to the European debate and action in relation to youth work policy and practice. A key challenge for youth work is the construction and maintenance of the lines of communication between the two, so that each does not continue in some kind of splendid isolation that does not produce the value-added benefit of mutual exchange. Structures, as discussed in section 5, are important, but knowledge and information sharing across the different levels of youth work activity are essential, too.

9. Politics, youth policy and practice – recognition for youth work

Last, but absolutely at the forefront of any deliberations about the challenges facing youth work, is the challenge of building political recognition of youth work to a point where this translates first into the appropriate and proportionate positioning of youth work within broader youth policy, secondly into meaningful youth work policy that, thirdly, in turn converts into relevant youth work practice on the ground.

²⁹ The legal term used in legislation for youth work in England and Wales from 1944, though it has been argued that a more embracing legal term should be 'sufficiency', which is a platform not a ceiling (see Bell et al. 1994).

³⁰ 'Europe goes local' (www.europegoeslocal.eu), a long-term co-operation project supported by the Erasmus+ programme, was established in 2016. Its core aim was to raise the quality of local youth work in particular through enhanced co-operation between various stakeholders that are active at the municipal level. It involved 21 National Agencies (AT; BEFL; BG; CH; DE; DK; EE; FI; FR; HU; IS; IT; LI; LT; LV; NO; NL; PT; SI; SK), the SALTO-YOUTH Participation Resource Centre, the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, the European Youth Forum and two networks (POYWE and InterCity Youth) and thus, around 120 municipalities. The project ran from July 2016 till May 2019. Its main result was the development of a European Charter on Local Youth Work (<https://www.europegoeslocal.eu/charter/>).



What should youth work claim when it comes to the consideration of its role in relation to other critical policy themes in young people's lives? Over time it has undulated between proclaiming a precious independence from the wider youth policy agenda (and, as a result, often being dismissed as marginal and irrelevant), and committing to, or being committed to, engaging with some of the key youth policy challenges of our time: reducing or preventing school drop-out, supporting entry to the labour market, tackling youth crime and violent extremism, and so on. Volume V of the history project considered 'autonomy through dependencies', suggesting that the recognition and status of a 'relatively' independent youth work might be enhanced through progressive partnerships with youth policy initiatives on similar or parallel paths. After all, youth work has no interest in colluding with youth unemployment, youth criminality, poor youth mental health or young people's substance misuse.

The challenge is how youth work maintains a *sufficient* level of autonomy to sustain its own agenda, principles and methodologies, and avoids enslavement by wider policy agendas. This is a tough challenge and there is no fixed point for the position of youth work to be secured. It is yet another tension that requires skilled negotiation and agreement with the 'other side'. Even *within* the broad youth policy pathway of learning and development – which youth work and 'non-formal' learning shares with formal education and schooling, boundaries and mutuality are not easy to establish. Youth work is not, as sometimes claimed, a substitute for formal education, though it may increasingly be an important supplement.

Research tells us that youth work makes a critical contribution to *personal* change, which itself is a crucial pre-requisite of *positional* change (see Merton et al. 2004). In other words, youth work that connects with vocational training and labour market insertion policies cannot create jobs, but it can, and does, provide a forum (spaces) for precariously positioned young people to think about their situation and support (bridges) in their moving some steps closer to 'employability' and labour market future. This is, therefore, consistent – as noted already – with the common ground of youth work. Similarly, youth work does not prevent crime, but it may enable young offenders to consider different ways of taking their lives forward, and be guided in doing so. The challenge for youth work is how to develop this narrative in order to become a full and equal partner in youth policy initiatives across these domains, rather than subordinated or ignored by them. Even more critically, the challenge is to win the hearts and minds of those domains so that *they* develop a narrative in which youth work figures prominently in the contribution it can make to *their* priorities.

Though only relatively commonplace in the past two decades, most countries (in the world) now have some version of a national 'youth policy' or 'youth strategy' that is subject to review and revision every 3-5 years. These are constructed in many different ways, sometimes accommodating and addressing a fairly narrow set of youth issues, at other times embracing a wide range. Some are fairly prescriptive as to what needs to be achieved, with clearly defined budget lines and locus of responsibility attached, others are more aspirational and less specific. Most will, inevitably, consider education (retention, progression and achievement), vocational training and employment (knowledge and skills for labour market futures) and healthy lifestyles (particularly diet and exercise, sexual and mental health, and substance misuse). Some will address



housing issues, and/or youth offending and youth justice. Many will focus on broad aspirations such as prevention and participation. Some will explore questions of citizenship and community engagement, including social action and volunteering.

The place of non-formal education and youth work within such frameworks is rarely assured and certainly by no means guaranteed. Even when it is considered, perhaps even advocated, it is routinely *not required* in legislative provision. Furthermore, responsibility within public authorities (national, regional and local) for youth policy – with or without youth work – often ebbs and flows between ministries and departments, sometimes prominently in their titles, sometimes not. Typically, it can be found within education, culture, sports or leisure, though it is not unknown for ‘youth’ to be positioned within other policy domains covering issues as libraries, parks and gardens, or even museums and cemeteries!

This begs serious questions (and challenges) about the importance of the youth portfolio within political priorities. Youth policy and youth work often suffer either from a lack of continuity or from a lack of influence. It was noted at the start of this paper that youth work is now ‘on the map’ – within its community of practice. The next step, and a major challenge, is to secure its place on the political map, with proportionate advocacy for its contribution and value to educational, social, cultural and political policy agendas concerned with young people.

There is, however, both a shrinking space and an expanding space for youth work. In some European countries, a traditional commitment to youth work is being consolidated, even enlarged, and in others, there is now a focus on the role of youth work that did not exist before. In contrast, elsewhere in Europe, there remains very limited interest in and attention to youth work and, of even more concern, there are countries where a long-standing tradition of youth work has been diminished or refocused.

All of this remains in a state of flux and uncertainty, despite the endeavours of the current momentum on behalf of European youth work³¹ to provide some shape and direction to youth work *throughout* Europe. Political commitment to youth work will no doubt continue to ebb and flow; the European youth work community of practice will need to continue to advocate for youth work that is positioned within its common ground. The challenge here is to seek to advance political support – and the resources that flow from it – for a diversity of youth work practice that is neither too individualised (youth work is essentially a *social* practice) nor too institutionalised (youth work should not be controlled or enslaved by wider youth policy agendas). Youth work does not seek independence from wider youth policy concerns around, for example, formal education, health or employment, but it does wish to be recognised and rewarded as an equal partner when contributing to those policy initiatives, not subordinated to them.

³¹ Notably the Council of Europe *ad hoc* High Level Task Force on Youth Work, but also the European Academy on Youth Work, the annual Offenburg Talks and other initiatives.



To that end, the challenge is to ensure that youth work is built into youth policy documentation not as an afterthought or peripheral resource but as a more central component, both in its own right and in partnership with other youth policy domains.

3 CRISIS – and opportunity?

The Covid-19 pandemic that struck the world in 2020, and Europe specifically in February/March 2020, has changed the landscape for youth work practice dramatically. This may not last forever, but it has certainly compelled youth work to think differently about its practice, though not its purpose, and to accelerate its reflection on the place of digital and online youth work within its broader repertoire (see European Commission 2018). Moreover, it has raised deeper questions about the conduct of risk assessments, gatherings in groups, safeguarding and the ethics around interpersonal online contact (see RCPCH 2020), as well as wider ethical issues to do with matters such as the environmental impact of transnational mobility, and the priorities that should be attached by youth work to working with more vulnerable, isolated and excluded young people.

There have been three areas of inquiry that are most relevant to this paper about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis:

- Its impact on young people – their well-being and mental health
- Its impact on the youth (work) sector – the NGOs and personnel
- Its impact on youth work practice³²

There has already been a great deal of research during the Covid-19 crisis about the implications and issues facing young people, from anxieties about their occupational futures to more pronounced mental (ill-)health (Beatfreaks 2020; Young Minds 2020). In Flanders, the children's rights commissioner has launched a survey to look at the experiences of children and young people. There has also been some evidence and research on the effects on youth workers³³ and youth organisations³⁴ of the effects of the pandemic (for example, the survey by the RAY network) and, indeed, the measures being taken to address those effects. Youth work (particularly international youth work) has had its resources depleted and youth workers have generally been subjected to lockdown, limiting their room for manoeuvre. They have not usually been designated as 'essential workers'.

³² Writing in July 2020 from my own lockdown situation in Wales, I have not heard or seen a great deal of evidence of youth work *practice* during the past three months, except in my own back yard at both municipal and national level, where I have a voluntary appointment as a 'Covid-19 community resilience worker' and have been working with the national Interim Youth Work Board in arguing for recognition, taking responsibility, and maintaining resources in order to support young people in this crisis.

³³ For example, the Youth Work Trainers' Guild, constituted significantly of freelance international youth work trainers, has petitioned the European institutions and their youth work bodies to 're-structure' training and support services for international youth work in order to sustain it:
https://you.wemove.eu/campaigns/responding-to-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-international-youth-work-mobility?utm_campaign=sZaudDJeuk&utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=share&fbclid=IwAR23Xg27wPX8RzErmjYO1sgYkhRK8prJFhTRkWNarjn31lzWLBESYvACnM

³⁴ The European Youth Forum (2020a) has suggested some governments in Europe may be using the Covid-19 crisis situation as an opportunity to close down civic space for young people and reduce support for youth organisations.



Rather less knowledge seems to have been accrued as to what youth work has actually managed to do *in practice* during the crisis. There have certainly been calls at a high level (for example, through the Council of Europe's statutory instruments in the youth sector) for member States to continue to guarantee the protection of young people's fundamental and human rights and uphold the Council of Europe's values. There has also been guidance from the Council of Europe and the likes of England's National Youth Agency (2020) about how to sustain practice under the restrictive measures under lockdown and as lockdown eases. And there are plenty of plans for the future around recovery following the crisis (see, for example, European Youth Forum 2020b³⁵).

Throughout, there has been sustained advocacy for the importance of youth work both now and as societies emerge from the crisis. The emphasis has been on the deleterious effects on young people of prolonged isolation and, correspondingly, the critical importance of social contact and connection, to which youth work is able to make a key contribution; as successive definitions of youth work have stated, youth work is quintessentially a *social practice* (see Council of Europe *Recommendation on Youth Work* 2017).

The capacity of youth work to practice has, however, been heavily constrained and it will be important to know how such practice changed as well as whether the crisis altered the types of young people youth work services have been able to reach. Outreach and physical (socially distanced) presence has been restricted if not forbidden, and therefore youth work activity has been limited to largely online engagement. A small survey of NGOs delivering youth work in Wales, which elicited 35 organisational responses, drew one particular conclusion from this:

.... They were reaching different young people than they would usually see at their centres and projects, which was seen as positive. However, some expressed concern that the most vulnerable children and young people were either uncomfortable to engage online or had '*fallen off the radar completely*'. This has been troubling a number of [the youth work organisations] who have built up relationships, often over years, some felt that '*all that good work is being undone*' (italics original)
(CWVYS 2020)

Preliminary results of the first RAY³⁶ study on European youth work in the Covid-19 context also suggest that young people previously involved in youth work offers are not being reached any more. This is clearly of particular concern if more disadvantaged and excluded young people are disproportionately adversely affected. Youth work at all levels needs to be attentive to the scale and gravity of the negative effects on young people both generally and in relation to their attachment to youth work opportunities and experiences. Youth work, after all, though not formally a 'preventative service', is often considered to provide a Tier 0 (or Tier zero) intervention³⁷, through supporting

³⁵ Though, strangely, within a range of important policy recommendations, there is no explicit reference to youth work *per se* at all.

³⁶ RAY = Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes

³⁷ In health care, Tier 1 is universal consultation and care in the community; Tier 2 is specialist referral for treatment (talking, physical and pharmaceutical); Tier 3 is outpatient day care provision; and Tier 4 is



well-being and mental health. And if online and digital youth work is to retain a significant role in the youth work of the future (and, indeed, other contact with young people), then youth work will need to advocate for a more level playing field for young people, on which all young people have access both to suitable equipment and support for acquiring the necessary digital skills³⁸.

One broader, perhaps somewhat ironic, consequence of the crisis is, however, that many organisations working with children and young people – from the schooling still being provided for the children of essential workers to universities planning online teaching for the next academic year – are showing greater interest in the ideas and methods of non-formal education and learning, in order to support well-being and to tackle anxiety and boredom. Though youth workers themselves may have been significantly disabled from face-to-face engagement with young people and had to adjust and apply their activities to online environments, others (such as social workers and psychologists) have sometimes stepped into the breach.

Of course, the knowledge already accrued about the potential for online and digital youth work (see Kiviniemi and Tuominen 2017) has been invaluable and its application has been dramatically accelerated. Only days before the crisis exploded, in Vienna, an international conference took place on ‘Exploring the digital dimension of youth workers’ competences’; the previous year, the Youth Partnership had held a similar event, considering the crossovers between youth work thinking and digital practice. Youth work was, therefore, relatively well prepared to respond in ways that were open to it, if only given the chance to do so. There appears to be some sense that such a chance now needs to be afforded to the youth work community of practice.

At a European level, there has certainly been a strong case made for ensuring that young people’s needs are fully recognised and responded to both during the lockdown and as it loosens, within the constraints and instructions emanating from public health measures. For example, the introduction to one intervention made during the European youth ministers’ conference in May 2020 as follows:

The signals from civil society are numerous and worrisome. Children and young people need social interactions, space to exist, to play and unwind, assistance in their education and, above all, perspective as to their near future. In other words, it is important to resume as soon as possible activities that concern all areas of children and young people’s lives in safe conditions. In doing so, equal importance needs to be given to their right to play, to meet and to leisure time, as well as to the fact that they need space for their (mental) well-being (Intervention Belgium 2020)

institutional inpatient provision. More and more, generic, non-specialist, community and environmental support (where first-stage responsibility is viewed in an integrated, community-based way, as lying with teachers, youth workers, local business, police officers, leisure services and others) is talked about as a ‘Tier 0’ (zero), or ‘Foundation’ intervention.

³⁸ In July 2020, Eurostat reported the good news that four in five (80%) young people aged 16 in the European Union had basic or above average digital skills. The bad news, of course, is that 20% do not, and comparable data are not available for European countries outside the EU. See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200715-1?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=/eurostat/en/news/whats-new>



There were a number of references to youth work and to the training of youth workers peppered through this submission, culminating in the observation that 'flexibility and confirmation of long-term engagement for youth work seem to be key solutions to the crisis'. Clearly, there are many other elements required for a comprehensive 'solution' to the Covid-19 crisis, not least the prospect of economic futures, a return to regular schooling and timely psychological support, but youth work clearly has a part to play. To that end, the visibility of both *young people* and *youth work* within a European response to the crisis is imperative.

We are certainly becoming more aware of the need for youth workers to have contact with young people who, for many reasons (see Eurofound 2020), require the spaces and bridges that flow from the educative, participative, empowering, expressive and inclusive principles that inform youth work practice (Council of Europe 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown this into sharp relief. The German Presidency of the Council of the European Union that commenced in July 2020 has set out an agenda that is concerned, inter alia, both with paramount attention to Covid-19 (Chapter I: Europe's response to the COVID-19 pandemic) and, notably, as part of one sub-section of Chapter III, with youth work:

Young people provide important impetus for the future of our continent and they are particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. We will promote the involvement of young people across Europe. We want to continue to strengthen youth work programmes and therefore support all young people in the development of their personalities with a European Youth Work Agenda. (German Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2020, p.13³⁹)

The digital space for youth work has certainly accelerated and expanded during the Covid-19 crisis, as other spaces have closed down. We should, however, remain alert to the fact that digital and online methodologies remain a supplement not a substitute for the diversity of practice and responsiveness, notwithstanding the challenges that still prevail, that have characterised youth work throughout its existence and which, it is to be hoped, will be further strengthened throughout Europe within a momentum forged through a European Youth Work Agenda.

Having noted all of this, it could easily be alleged that these arguments are prospectively self-defeating and over-cautious. The Covid-19 pandemic may perhaps provide a wonderful opportunity to re-think and re-imagine youth work for a 'new normal' in the 21st century – to reinvent itself, once more, as it has, many times, over the years. There are already some, and we emphasise some, pioneering illustrations of what youth work has done (not will do) during the crisis. In Malta, for example, all kinds of energetic creativity has blossomed from the pandemic – Zoom profiles of the many ways young people are using their time, collective engagement through chats, youth cafés and other types of live session, and as lockdown has eased, supporting transitional arrangements for young people returning to learning. Through Messenger

³⁹ See also: <https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en>



and Zoom, youth workers have maintained contact with and support for young people and their families. Digital does not, as some fear, have to squeeze out the relational⁴⁰.

One of the overarching challenges for youth work is that of *reach*. The pandemic, as noted above, has arguably helped to develop youth work's potential, through online communication, to reach young people with whom, historically, it had struggled to make contact, aside from specialist outreach and detached youth work, or through open youth work.

What youth work appears to have been doing, differentially across Europe, and in different ways, has been the following:

- Practice – new ways of working
- Promote – the purpose of youth work principles
- Prepare – transitions to a post-Covid environment
- Persuade – the value of partnerships with youth work

The Covid-19 crisis may not, therefore, be the calamity for the long march of youth work, as some are suggesting or have predicted, but instead may present a great opportunity for the re-calibration and re-balancing of youth work, through the discovery of new ways of giving voice to young people, new methods of providing information and enabling choices, new possibilities of reaching young people whom youth work has classically not managed to reach, and new ways of building positive and purposeful relationships with young people – all elements that lie at the very heart of youth work.

Pandemics have, throughout history, brought social change. They have demanded reflection and restructuring of existing social, political, economic and cultural arrangements. The Covid-19 crisis, coupled with the momentum around the climate crisis that was coming to a crescendo before the pandemic, may suggest, for example, that the costly internationalisation of youth work through mobility and face-to-face training may need some reconsideration and that much of the digital creativity and innovation in youth work that has been cultivated and should be celebrated during the Covid-19 crisis may reasonably remain at the heart of youth work policy and practice.

The challenges for youth work do not, therefore, all point in the same direction. There are choices to consider and decisions to be made. The pandemic has thrown them into sharp relief and arguably calls for a more revolutionary (transformatory) rather than evolutionary debate about the place of youth work within the 'new normal' that will characterise the societies of contemporary Europe.

⁴⁰ See <https://youth.gov.mt/exploring-the-digital-as-relational/>

4 CONCLUSIONS

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has sought to delineate some of the key challenges facing contemporary youth work in Europe and European youth work. The two are umbilically connected: the core principles for youth work practice throughout Europe can be framed by a European Youth Work Agenda but, simultaneously, that European Youth Work Agenda can only be constructed from the experience of youth work practice across Europe at local and regional levels. The Covid-19 crisis in Europe and across the world has thrown such debate into sharp relief, with many questions needing to be asked about the role and expectations of youth work – from young people and from societies – in the context of a ‘new normal’.

The paper, initially, endeavours to provide both the context of contemporary developments in youth work in Europe (notably on account of the 1st and 2nd European Youth Work Conventions and the professional and political actions that flowed from them) and the historical context that has been illuminated through the decade-long History of Youth Work in Europe project. Most recently, it has of course also had to recognise the context of the regulations and expectations arising from the Covid-19 crisis that may both limit the possibilities for youth work but also herald its potential.

The challenges outlined in this paper have powerful contemporary resonance and relevance. They comprise conceptual concerns (Challenge 1) within which ‘common ground’ needs to be developed and strengthened, some of the ‘trilemmas’ that emerged from the history project (Challenge 2 – pressures, space, rationale, styles, and value), questions about the boundaries and borderlines for youth work practice (Challenge 3 – age, target, issues), particularly in relation to its connections with wider youth policy (Challenges 4 and 5), the development of suitable education and training that promotes professionalism and quality youth work (Challenges 6 and 7), the need for more robust attention to what are depicted as ‘missing links’ (Challenge 8), and the overarching political question of winning the recognition that youth work requires to become firmly embedded within youth policy planning and implementation (Challenge 9).

These challenges, which build significantly from both the current development of youth work in Europe and the History of Youth Work in Europe project (see Context) can be clustered and summarised within four key strands: Concept, Competence, Credibility, and Connections. **Conceptual** challenges are, at one level, self-evident, yet at another, frustratingly elusive; defining ‘youth work’ remains a holy grail. Challenges around **competence** are concerned with the skills and attributes that need to be engendered in youth workers, notably through education and training, and the ensuing quality of youth work practice that can be established. In turn, improved and consistent quality, demonstrable in a variety of ways, can enhance the **credibility** of youth work that should lead to stronger social and political recognition and more reliable and sustainable resourcing of youth work at all levels. And in turn again, a stronger framework of youth work policy and practice should strengthen the **connections** that need to be made both vertically and horizontally within the youth work field, and in relation to other



sectors as they express value and commitment to youth work for its contribution to their objectives. These are, as noted early on in this paper, precisely the Sayings, Doings and Relatings discussed by Kiilakoski in his analytical paper for the Youth Partnership's study of youth workers' educational paths in Europe.

We cannot, of course, avoid paying attention to the **crisis** presented in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic, something that was not even in the public consciousness when this paper was first being prepared. For youth work, this presents both a threat and an opportunity. On the one hand, the crisis suggests there will be a focus on other, 'bigger' political priorities, and other responses to the changed and changing lives of young people (not least their formal education and training, and their labour market prospects). On the other hand, the crisis has shown how youth work can, as ever, be responsive to new contexts, invoking new methods in the process ('online youth work' has certainly come into its own) within a framework of its classical principles and purposes. We must, however, avoid the Covid-19 crisis completely overwhelming the debate and to keep its implications and our learning from it in proportion and in perspective.

It is to be hoped that further reflection on these challenges, and a clearer sense of the way forward in addressing them, will inform the programme at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention and subsequently contribute to the shaping of the emerging European Youth Work Agenda.



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