

# Recognition of youth work as a profession

by Nik Paddison

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## 1.1 Getting ready for the future

*Youth work, a strange and often diverse something that many of us do all over Europe – and as well the world! I recently conducted a training course on youth work skills and began the opening session with the question: “What is youth work?” After a short silence and participants looking at me like I was stupid or something, the reply came back, “work with young people” – (note to self, learn how to better structure questions). Yes, I guess it is, but is it not so much more as well? After all, school teachers work with young people, sports coaches work with young people, parents work with young people, well kind of. Could we say that each of these areas is also youth work? Youth work is difficult to pin down to a single clear and acceptable definition. Filip Coussée, in Coyote 16,<sup>1</sup> develops the argument that only if we define young people as a single concept can we define youth work as a single concept. This is virtually an impossible task when it is a group of people from the same country, add numerous other countries with their different cultures, traditions and attitudes to this discussion and we start to have a real mess or an amazing diverse concept...*

*This article will explore the difficulties and issues surrounding the recognition of the profession of those who work with young people, it will not try to define it. I started with this opening paragraph to highlight that we are talking about the recognition of the profession of something that is not easily “boxed” and is not even called youth work in many countries. Our mutual levels of non-agreement extend to something as basic as what age is a young person; in some countries you are a young person from the age of 11 years, in others 16 years; in some countries you are a young person up to the age of 24 years and in others 30 years. Perhaps this is part of the problem, how to give recognition to something that even those who do it cannot agree completely upon what it is!*

## Around Europe, yesterday and today

Around Europe we have different histories and traditions of work with young people. In the United Kingdom, youth work goes back to the mid-19th century. The original basis was either to Christianise the young people or prepare them to be fit enough to work in the factories or fight in the wars.<sup>2</sup> The former communist countries of central and South-Eastern Europe had things like “Pionir” and “Omladinski” for children and young people. In what was Yugoslavia, Omladinski activities consisted of work camps for young people that provided cheap labour for the government to build highways, railways and tunnels and a free holiday away from home for the young people. In France, the singular concept of youth work does not exist; work with young people comes under various titles like social animation, animation, and pedagogy. Filip Coussée, in *Coyote 16*,<sup>3</sup> explores the contrasts of north and south Europe, already “professionalised” versus volunteer-based youth work, the pedagogical approaches versus the labour market approach.

As frustrating as all these differences may be on one level, on another it does mean that youth work remains with bits outside of the “box”. It’s quite nice being part of something that is a little indefinable, rather than something that can be neatly packaged.

## Are we professional or...?

Doctors, airline pilots, police officers, social workers, all go through years of training to be professionals in their field. Most professions are placed in tidy boxes with strict boundaries to show if you are in or not. Youth work seems to break most of the rules. Imagine arriving at the airport one day and

hearing: “Good day ladies and gentlemen, our pilot for today is Darko Smith, he is a volunteer pilot from Strasbourg in France, he has no training and no qualification but he is enthusiastic and has a natural ability when working with planes. He started off as a passenger and now after many years of hanging around planes and airports he wants to give something back and have a go at flying. Please fasten your seatbelts and get ready for takeoff.” Of course this is a ridiculous comparison, I use it simply as a provocation for thinking about what we do and what recognition can mean. Yet this is how many young people end up as volunteer youth workers, attending youth club/project workshops and sessions, spending half of their adolescent life involved in a youth organisation. Through natural progression they become a volunteer youth worker. It is also something that we encourage through active participation, from being a sheep following the others to making decisions and choices, from following the youth workers’ lead to being the leader – a volunteer youth worker in many instances!

## Youth work is this and yet it is also...

Youth work as a profession is so broad and vast and encompasses so many people and approaches. Most countries do not have strict structures and boundaries of who is and who is not a youth worker. Work with young people can be conducted by a couple of parents and an older young person in the village, using the house of someone because no other space is available. Work with young people can be conducted by voluntary organisations employing workers who may or may not have a recognised qualification. Work with young people can be studied at doctorate level and the work conducted at managerial level in municipalities or with government ministers deciding on national policy.



## Think inside the box

Is this current Europe-wide push for recognition and professionalisation of youth work a way to contain youth work in a box and therefore control it? I don't mean this in a conspiracy theory sense, merely that something that is concretely defined and recognised automatically becomes more controlled. Is that so bad? Could it be a good thing to control those who call themselves a youth worker, a way to ensure quality in our profession and weed out the do-gooders who actually do more harm than good! Recognition would mean our governments and the public around us appreciating better what we do as youth workers. On the negative side it could mean youth work being structured in such a way that only the "professionally" qualified could do it.

In the UK I ran an NGO youth project working with young people excluded from school. A key part of our work was the co-operation of the schools, in the beginning nearly every school in the city refused to co-operate with us. We were seen as something not serious, if we were social workers we would automatically have respect and co-operation. As NGO youth workers – and only me in the team actually qualified – we were not seen as professional. It took one year to gain the confidence of the schools, by the end of year two we were co-operating with nearly every high school in the city, various social services teams, the police and probation services. At the end of year three, we were regularly being called by the courts, probation service, social services and schools to help them with young people they could not deal with or who were extreme cases and needed the best possible support work. At the end of year three our money ran out and we closed. This work was carried out by people who were not qualified in youth work, who were not really qualified in anything, except that they understood the fundamental principles and values of work with young people. It was not about the authority and control; it was about building relationships with the young people they worked with; it was about building trust and listening to these young people.

So here is a double twist. Recognise the profession, put it in a box and my two main workers would not have been able to work for me with the many young people whose lives they changed. Recognise the profession and we would not have lost a year trying to convince people we could do what we said we could do, and we would not have had to close because funding would have been easier to access. I know I am painting a black and white picture and reality is never like this, I simply want to emphasise the point.

I was talking with a friend from France about this concept of recognition recently. She talked to me about Social Animation which received official recognition during the 1960s. This was in many ways a great and exciting step forward, finally there was recognition that this work was necessary, that society as a whole needed this work to be done. However over time for many individuals, projects and organisations, the values related to the work fell away and the all-dominant consumerism and need for governmental quotas to be filled to justify spending and resources took over. The work became a job, the quality of the work became focused on simply doing what needed to be done, producing numbers to prove the worth of the funding. The values related to the people being people with people's needs, to a great extent, disappeared. Something similar can be said of youth work in the UK despite the likes of Mark Smith<sup>4</sup> writing about this issue 20 years ago in *Creators not Consumers*. As a parallel, in the Balkans, social work has a terrible reputation; it is seen as being full of workers who don't care about their work or the client. It's just a job, just a workplace where the client is an object and not a person. The fault of attitude does not lie only at the feet of the social workers. Those I know personally who are studying at university to be social workers are full of enthusiasm and ideals. Social work as a state-run institution, at least in the Balkans, seems to suck all the energy and idealism out of its workers. Could this be the fate of professionalised youth work?

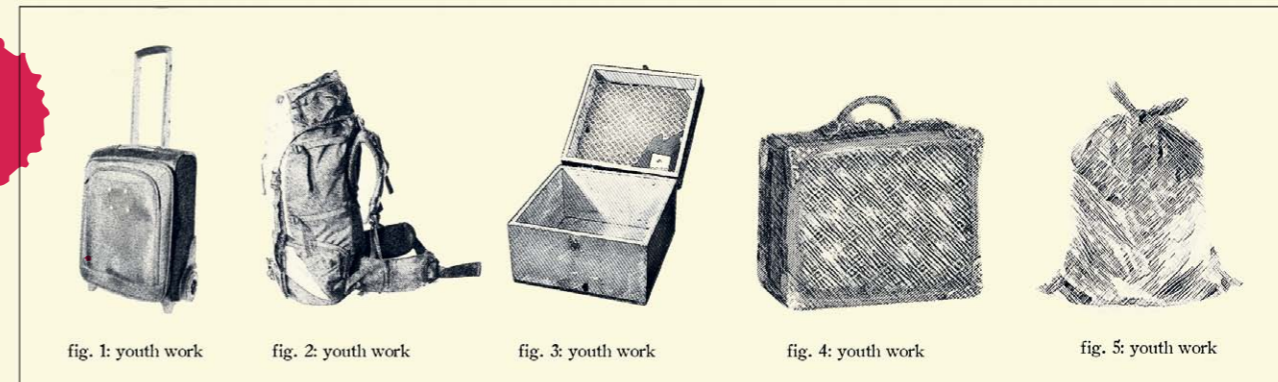


fig. 1: youth work

fig. 2: youth work

fig. 3: youth work

fig. 4: youth work

fig. 5: youth work

On a more positive note, today things are being challenged in France. Many *animateurs* are looking for the sense and values behind their work, where the empowerment of the communities and young people they work with are more important than playing number games. Yes, many organisations are still involved in consumerism but a few at least are starting to challenge this. There are signs of re-educating, not only themselves but the communities they work with as well, in the values of what they do and the values of non-formal education that are a key part of the whole.

## To be or not to be?

Youth work has up to now had a middle ground of recognition in the UK, it is called the "maintained sector". There is social work which is in the statutory sector, meaning it has to be provided by law, and there is the voluntary/NGO sector which does not come under the responsibility of the government. As the "maintained sector", youth work is optionally provided by most municipalities in the UK, but there is no consistency in how this is done or which part of the municipality it comes under. Some have an actual youth service, while in others it is under leisure or sports or even education. Recently in the UK there has been talk at governmental level of the professionalisation of youth work. This has been both welcomed and rejected. Welcomed because of the recognition youth work will gain, meaning a youth worker will have the same level of recognition as a social worker or teacher. One of the practical fears is that if this happens then the salaries of youth workers would need to be standardised and raised in order to be in line with social workers and teachers. Great news for the youth workers, not for the organisations that employ them! Some youth work positions do have

fairly decent salaries but these are either high-up positions, (not usually having much direct contact with young people), or from the biggest of the NGO sector organisations that have substantial amounts of money. Most employers of youth workers are small NGOs that would not be able to meet the salary demands of the next generation of youth workers. This is not a simple situation, to recognise or not to recognise that is the question!

## Recognition happening!

In the Western Balkans, the concept of youth work has been introduced, (or re-introduced if you include the former communist youth activities), over the last 15 years mostly by foreign humanitarian organisations. I was a part of one for many years teaching a youth work course. The youth work varied in quality across the region. The money was used and abused and then the humanitarian organisations started to leave, taking their money with them. I understand this moving but what I struggle with is that so much of the work that was started died out when the aid agencies left. Even those agencies that worked hard to establish the projects they created as independent NGOs, seem to have not succeeded. Many youth organisations I know of in the Balkans, that I have worked with, are no longer doing direct, face-to-face youth work, or if they are, they are limiting it. The reason: mostly money, there is no tradition of philanthropic giving in the Balkans, especially to small little NGOs. The concept of youth work as a profession does not exist in most of these countries, so the government, local or national, sees no need to support the employment of youth workers or the continuation of youth work. As a result some organisations fold, others close their youth clubs, sack their youth workers and change their focus.



## Recognition of youth work as a profession

They are still doing great work but the youth work disappears. OK, this is not being very optimistic. In reality there are still many exciting and amazing youth organisations doing fantastic face-to-face youth work. But it is not easy when there is no recognition of the profession and no understanding of what it is. If there is no recognition in these countries then there is no actual job position. In an NGO I work with in Macedonia, one of the youth workers is registered as a bar man, another as a secretary. They cannot actually be employed as a youth worker because the job does not exist by law.

In Serbia, in 2011, a great step forward was achieved. The National Association of Practitioners of Youth Work (NAPOOR) and the Ministry of Youth and Sport (MoYS) succeeded in pushing through parliament a law recognising youth work as a profession/vocation.

One of the practical results of recognition is that NAPOOR, in close co-operation with MoYS, has created a set of standards which will form part of the quality assurance for youth work in Serbia. Both organisations are negotiating on how these standards for youth work programmes can be officially recognised and implemented. One aspect of this is that if an organisation wishes to receive funding from MoYS for youth work activities, it must agree to and be able to deliver youth work at the quality standards that have been set. NAPOOR itself has begun a process of assessment of member organisations to ensure their quality of work against the soon-to-be-accepted national standards. The next step in Serbia will be the introduction of mechanisms for the validation of competences of the youth worker. These have already been developed by NAPOOR.

In Lithuania, in the autumn of 2010, the government decided to recognise, at least to a limited extent, work with young people by youth workers. The Lithuanian Association of Non-Formal Education developed a youth work course on a national level for new youth workers and tackled the issues

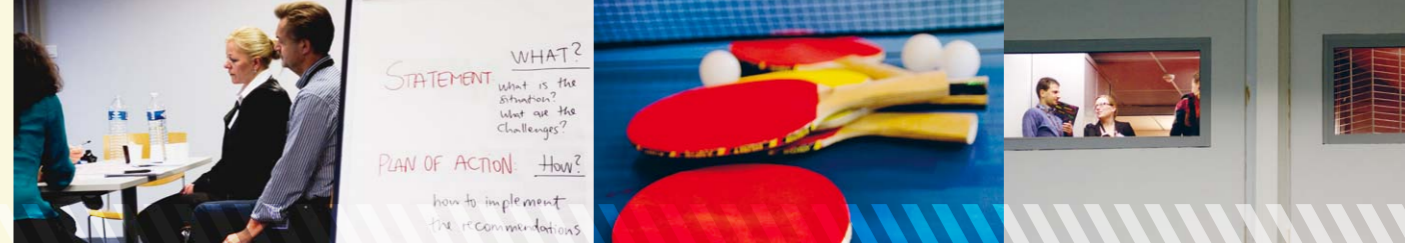
of how to assess existing youth workers. I worked with them on both aspects. However the second issue became more interesting for me: how do we recognise someone who has been working for years with young people? Probably they are highly skilled and competent with great values for work with young people but have never been on an educational course on how to be a youth worker! The association took this into account and developed a competences assessment programme for existing youth workers. I am sure it's not perfect but at least it is in place to recognise the professionalism of work that is being done without the burden of insisting that someone attend university and gain a bachelor degree.

With regard to the work of organisations in Serbia and Lithuania, I understand the importance of safeguarding the work with young people and ensuring quality but is there a danger of strangling the work with too many rules and regulations?

Regardless, this is really a fantastic step forward, not only for Serbia and Lithuania but for all the countries of their respective regions. If youth work as a profession can exist in these countries then it sets the precedence, meaning the other countries of their regions can follow suit.

### Seeking that illusive something!

In Macedonia, myself and some colleagues concluded that a perfect model does not, (in our limited knowledge), exist. But we did recognise that various countries had excellent elements in their recognition of the profession. CreACTIVE from Skopje and Kavadarci are working with others on the process of recognition. The Centre for Intercultural Dialogue from Kumanovo, again with others, are building models of youth work practice for youth centres. Both organisations want to explore as many different models as possible, to take the best and then develop their model, not just adopt something from France or the UK because it already exists. Things are moving.



To be a recognised profession do we have to be “educated” according to the formal system? If in the UK youth work gains official recognition then in the future anyone wanting to be a youth worker would be required to have a bachelor degree. What about the many great and amazing young people who become inspired to work with young people themselves but due to societal circumstances or their learning styles have little or no high school education and so really have little chance of gaining a bachelor degree? Do we now discount them because they are not “intelligent” enough? A great youth worker and good friend from Scotland gets really frustrated about the education of youth workers. He sees the education process as academically and intellectually stimulating youth workers but rarely teaching youth workers about the fundamentals and values of youth work. He sees potential future youth workers becoming intellectualised, formally educated robots looking for management positions and not seeing the bigger picture – the young people. His mantra is all about building relationships with the young people, something most of the youth work courses are not very good at teaching. I would include the one I taught in the Balkans region in this as well.

I am making a number of assumptions here and yet for many of our countries this is the direction that recognition is taking. Does recognition equal formal qualification? In most of the Western Balkans we have put the two together. In 2011 the bachelor degree in community youth work was supposed to have started in Macedonia, it has

already been running in Serbia for three years at least. It has been established in at least one university in Kosovo.<sup>5</sup> The status in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina is still uncertain. Are we somehow contradicting our own principles? Youth work in the Balkans is tightly connected to non-formal education, and yet we run down a path of recognition that demands formal qualification. Perhaps we sweeten the cake by insisting that the formal courses be conducted using non-formal education methodologies, but that does not change the reality.

### Final questions and challenges

Will recognition improve the quality of the work of youth workers? Maybe, but I don't know for sure if that is so. Will recognition bring greater respect for youth workers? Probably, but do we actually really need greater respect to do the good work we are already doing? I guess it would be useful!

The questions remain, how do we remain accessible for people from every part of every community to be able to be youth workers and yet maintain quality assurance? How do we gain recognition of the profession without over-professionalising what we do and losing the heart and soul of youth work? How do we gain recognition without insisting that everyone who even thinks about working with a young person ends up having to do a bachelor degree? How do we gain recognition for youth work without having to tidy it up to fit in a neat box? Recognition is important, but at what cost?

*Article written with thanks to: Vanja Kalaba, Duncan Dunlop, Solene Bouyaux, Dragan Atanasov, Ivana Davidovska, Laimonas Ragauskas.*

### Notes

1. Cousse, F. (2010) “Youth Work, a Social Practice!”, *Coyote 16*, p. 32.
2. Smith, M. K. (1999, 2002) “Youth work: an introduction”, *The encyclopedia of informal education*, [www.infed.org/youthwork/b-yw.htm](http://www.infed.org/youthwork/b-yw.htm), Date accessed 17 November 2011.
3. Cousse, F. (2010) “Youth Work, a Social Practice!”, *Coyote 16*, p. 32.
4. Smith, M. (1982) “Creators not Consumers”, *The encyclopedia of informal education*, [www.infed.org/archives/creators/index.htm](http://www.infed.org/archives/creators/index.htm), Date accessed 20 November 2011.
5. All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

