

# Youth Partnership

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## Peer Learning Activity on Higher Education of Youth Workers

### Expert meeting on higher education in youth work Helsinki, 20-23 September 2022

#### Analytical report

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## Introduction

Education and training of youth workers has gained prominence in international forums in the last few years. Professor Howard Williamson has stated that “throughout Europe, and indeed in other parts of the world, there is a resurgence of interest in something called ‘youth work’ and in the education and training of a group of practitioners called ‘youth workers’ in order to ensure competence and quality, and to strengthen recognition” (Williamson 2019: 18). This development is supported and to some extent caused by youth policy developments at national and European level. With the proliferation of youth work documents, competences of youth workers to deliver quality youth work has come much more under scrutiny and hence education and training of youth workers has become of greater importance. One of the indicators for greater popularity of education of youth workers is a noticeable expansion of higher education programmes targeting, among others, youth workers too. Some research shows that youth studies programmes in Europe differ depending on the context, tradition and academic profile of an institution (Kovačić, Baketa and Grubišić-Čabo 2020).

In Helsinki, in September 2022, a meeting focused on higher education in youth work was organised within the framework of a peer learning activity (PLA) on Education and Training of Youth Workers. The PLA was initiated in 2019 by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, SALTO Training and Co-operation, Finland’s Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth Germany and Finland, Ireland, Portugal, policy makers and youth work structures from Serbia and Georgia. The [seminar](#) was organised by the Humak University of Applied Sciences, which has a strong youth worker education programme. The aim of the PLA was to develop a shared understanding of quality youth worker education and training between the participating countries, and make a step further on cross-sectoral co-operation, to study country approaches with regard to the formal education and training of youth workers, to examine the competence development of youth workers, and to explore how European and international standards, tools and approaches can be applied in such a context, and to create a network of educators in higher education of youth work.

The Council Conclusions from 2019 on education and training of youth workers noted that “High-quality, flexible and practice-oriented education and training for youth workers, supported by regular research, is a crucial precondition and a driver for promoting both the quality and the recognition of youth work” (Council of European Union 2019). This statement is supported by research which claims that having an established higher education programme is one of the indicators of the strong practice architectures of youth work (Kiilakoski 2020). Seminar participants

came from Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, France, Georgia, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Serbia, Spain and parts of the United Kingdom (Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales). In total there were representatives of 18 different countries and regions, most of them offering either a youth work programme or a related study programme. Some countries were in the process of designing or planning to design a youth work programme in higher education.

This introductory four-day meeting gathered approximately 40 experts and professionals in youth work (training and education) with the goal of exchanging contemporary practices relevant for understanding the youth work higher education offer across Europe. Although the intention of the meeting was to learn about the diversity of curricula and explore motivation and challenges in introducing and implementing higher education study programmes for youth workers, several important notions emerged during discussions. This report includes an overview of relevant ideas which can be used as inspiration and incentive for further discussion in this regard.

The analytical reports consist of three parts. They answer the following questions: how we teach youth work, what we teach, and where we teach it. In the first part we focus on the youth work didactics and analyse what was shared about what is being taught in youth work programmes at the higher education level. We continue with the part dedicated to the study of how much Europe there is in youth work curricula and in the last part we illuminate and deconstruct the discussion on where youth work is being taught and explore its connection with other (academic) fields). It is important to point out that all three aspects emerged from discussions among seminar participants and as such reflect ideas and propositions of this specific community of practice.

## Youth work didactics

The discussion on how we teach youth work in higher education uncovered a couple of interesting insights. Teaching youth work in higher education institutions in Europe is by all means diverse. This raises the question if there is a red line that connects all the curricula and their implementation mechanisms. Based on presentation from different stakeholders, it was evident that the development of youth work curricula in the higher education setting is rather context-dependent, and it reflects not only on the academic culture of a certain university but also the wider youth work architecture in the respective country. Two complex aspects, worth exploring more thoroughly emerged during the seminar are presented in this paper.

### The need for more grounded youth work theory

The first aspect that emerged from the seminar is a discovery that there is a notable theoretical thinness in youth work discussions. The participants concluded that there is a visible discrepancy between youth work as a practice and youth work as an academic field. The former has a longer tradition, it is often more developed and the number of actors is greater than the latter. Even though there is a noticeable increase in interest of introducing new youth work programmes in the last few years, there is still a dominance of youth work practitioners in comparison to the number of youth work academics in international forums, which means practical aspects of youth work, anecdotal evidence and conceptual stretchiness often prevail in discussions. The participants emphasised the need to overcome this dilemma by incorporating learner-centred methods and adopting youth work methodologies. This way youth work programmes could maintain their connection to the tradition of youth work in addition to being taught academic virtues.

The commitment to youth work practices and values was emphasised in myriad ways. The participants thought that becoming a member of a youth work community was important and consequently, the importance of maintaining connection to youth work was seen as an important goal: “We want our students to model youth work values.” While this commitment was widely shared, at the same time the academic context (theories, methodologies, central concepts, shared premises, scientific disciplines) of youth work was perhaps less clearly stated.

But why do we need theory? Couldn't we just rely on a practice architecture of youth work and summarise empirical observation without engaging in theory building? The short answer is no. According to the theory of practice architectures the task of education is to initiate newcomers into practices, and in this process, they bring some worlds of practice into being, and to constrain some other worlds of practice from coming into being. They achieve this task by initiating new practitioners into established ways of talking about the practice, doing the practice, and relating to the young, their parents, other professions and society in general (Kemmis and Edwards-Groves 2018). In the context of youth work, this was manifested in describing what youth work is and how youth work differs from more rigid and formalised academic professions. Of course, these remarks themselves are based on an understanding of what youth work is, i.e. theoretical understanding about youth work. While participants agreed on many things but lacked a common theoretical point of view to express this. This way, the seminar may be seen as an example of the common European task that “finding common ground for youth work remains a work in progress” (Schildt 2017: 332).

It has been estimated that models and definitions of youth work have been developed independently in various countries, responding to different conditions, and are grounded in different

disciplines (Cooper 2018: 5). Andreas Thimmel spoke of a strong commitment to establishing connections in the rich German pedagogical traditions. Examples from Georgia and Portugal showed that without strong practice architectures, it is difficult to argue for establishing higher education systems and programmes on youth work. The authors of this paper suggest that to find common theoretical ground, more understanding is needed on how thinking about youth work is connected to different theoretical traditions connected but not limited to learning, pedagogical traditions, social work, welfare models, human interaction, and the role of young people in society. In other words, in order to understand how youth work theories have evolved, one may need to look beyond youth work practice architectures.

Although creation of theory does not happen independently of the development of other aspects of practice architectures, it is perhaps relevant to point out that “Theory helps in assigning meaning to various social constructs, that is, in real world situations by describing their interrelatedness with observable phenomena and their variables”, as Chijioke, Ikechukwu and Aloysius (2020: 157) argue. The same authors continue their argument by claiming that “It is a systematic way of organizing and building body of knowledge and viewing the world around us by identifying facts and realities. Theory interprets, strengthens, clarifies, and differentiates the known from the unknown thereby helping in recognizing and coordinating our interpretation of various social phenomena and changes inherent in them” (ibid.). In youth studies, theory also plays an important role. Given that youth studies is an interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary academic field, it is of utmost importance to define constructs clearly and to extrapolate the anecdotal from the universal. This plays a particular role when researching youth work, as it is often levitating between contextual and universal, particular and general, individual and communal.

Theoretical underpinnings of youth work, as heard in the seminar, would increase the value and prestige of youth work academics in academia and consequentially help in recognition of youth work. Calhoun (2008), in his study on public intellectuals, examines the role of academics in shaping public discourse and creating knowledge for the wider public. Building on his argument it can be argued that when academics have solid knowledge, rigorous enough methodologies and incentive for public engagement, including through outreach tools such as (social) media, they can actively (co)shape public discourse. One can argue that one of the ways how youth work can get better recognition is by getting a legitimisation from academia and the prerequisite for that is theory building.

## Truncated youth work curricula

In his classic work on curriculum, Ralph W. Tyler (1949) presented a so-called Tyler rationale which states that curriculum consists of goals, selection of content, appropriate methods and evaluation. These elements should in turn be connected so that design of curriculum is constantly evaluated. Using the Tyler rationale, it can be stated that the most shared theme about the curriculum in the seminar consisted of methods which emphasised the use of non-formal methodologies, connections to the real-life situations that youth workers are facing and working in a youth-centred manner. Other factors such as goals, to some extent content, and ways of evaluating were less discussed. Also, while some of the presentations referred to youth work values, these values were not discussed thoroughly in the seminar.

The seminar had a session on a youth work curriculum developed by the city of Helsinki. This curriculum model was part of an on-going action research which has been developed through the co-operation between Finnish municipalities and the Finnish youth research community. According to Dr Sini Perho, the aim of the curriculum was to answer three different questions: What do we do in the youth division and what are our target groups? What are the goals and why? What are the methods used and why they are used? Using the Tyler rationale, the worker-based youth work curriculum relied on analysing goals and methods, while the actual content of youth work was created according to the needs of young people taking part in the process. Interestingly, this youth work curriculum had been designed independently of the development of the academic youth work curriculum in Finland. As such, it shows that practitioners may provide nuanced descriptions which cannot fully be anticipated by even the best possible youth work programme. This is an example of how local youth work communities build conditions for continuous development and how youth workers create new activities and ideas.

Practitioners and providers of youth work education have in some cases established links which help to secure that youth work programmes reflect the recent developments in the field. For example, to secure the legitimacy of their curriculum, the Humak University of Applied Sciences had a round of hearing for different youth work stakeholders when designing their current curriculum. The authors of this report dare to conclude that design of the youth work curriculum needs to consider the academic context, the youth work practice architecture of the country, the needs of the young and youth workers in society. In addition to this, the youth work curriculum must respond to developments in educational policies in a country.

## How much Europe there is in teaching youth work

Another notion that was raised during the seminar is the disparity between the national and European dimensions in youth work teaching. Most universities offering youth work education have a prominent national component in their curricula. In the academic discussion, the concept of methodological nationalism is used to criticise basing the analysis within the borders of nation states. Participants spoke of the youth field's temptations of methodological nationalism, as with other fields. The programmes of youth work analyse national context regarding youth work and national youth work policies and/or prepare future graduates for employment in national contexts. Of course, that does not mean that the international dimension is non-existent in curricula, but it was not clear how much the international and European dimensions support the analysis of current challenges. Several contemporary challenges, such as mental health issues affecting young people were emphasised as important themes. The discussion about it was focused on how to integrate this and similar challenges into teaching programmes. While youth studies and youth work programmes should address impending challenges, they should also offer more generic skills for youth workers, building a base to cope with all realities. to cope with topics. Discussion about the challenges tackled topics to be taught, models and types of youth work such as outdoor or digital youth work, but also on how to reconcile blended teaching with traditional one and how to incorporate student placement into the new online and blended teaching programmes.

The last day of the seminar was spent on creating spaces for co-operation between different organisations. Presentations showed that there are networks which promote co-operation and create spaces. Programme resources are also available for networking with different organisations. One of the dilemmas expressed in the seminar, however, was that these networks are dependent on external funding.

A particular aspect of this discussion was about European values and how different programmes, tools and mechanisms (both from the European Union and the Council of Europe) are reflected in the curricula or even shape them. As explained earlier, there is a problem with youth work research funding and most of the grants come from the Erasmus + programmes. If this is so, the question is if the research on youth work explicitly or implicitly disseminates Erasmus + values and to what extent can researchers and lecturers be independent from them. This discussion, even though brief, is most certainly important as there is no available empirical evidence on these issues, hence we can operate only with assumptions.

Some difficulties in coming up with a European framework were discussed. First, higher education needs to consider the existing traditions of youth work. Therefore, national context determines what



can be included in an academic youth work curriculum. Second, it was noted that since youth work is not a priority for many universities it might not be possible to expect strong commitment of universities to the European level. This notion is closely linked with the funding architecture which was portrayed as weak and insufficient for quality teaching programmes. Due to the low visibility of youth work studies, other university programmes are sometimes prioritised for university funding and even international co-operation. It was noted that most of the resources available are project based rather than core funding. Third, participants concluded that given the weak theoretical underpinning of teaching youth work, it is easier to set up master programmes as they are in principle more interdisciplinary. The link with master programmes and career placements is not so prominent as it is when it comes to bachelor-level studies. For this reason, universities are more inclined to support master programmes as they do not need to promote them as a guarantee for job placements.

## Where we teach – institutions

Youth work provision is diverse, and it appears in various forms, types and models in different cultural, political and social settings, as often emphasised in different international documents and in discussions among community of practice members. Similarly, the same statement can be translated into the academic sector – not only content-wise, but also in terms of the location where youth work is being taught.

Across Europe there are different types of higher education institutions offering educational programmes, depending on their orientation, mission and cultural or educational context. Two of the dominant models of higher education provisions are universities and universities of applied sciences. While universities focus on academic knowledge and strive towards theory development, universities of applied sciences are mostly practical and profession oriented. On the one hand, universities mostly focus on the “why” aspect of the knowledge offering competences to understand concepts, their development and the processes that led towards their current form. On the other hand, at universities of applied sciences the attention is on acquisition of practical skills offering concrete tools to help employability, and the focus is on the “how” aspect of the knowledge. Henceforth, the youth work educational offer in higher education settings follows this logic.

There are universities that offer youth work studies and hence they are being taught in a way that youth work is seen as a unit of analysis observed from the perspective of different disciplines (social work, sociology, political science, psychology, education science, kinesiology etc.). The focus is to understand the concept of youth work and to position young people in the youth work practice, to understand why it is appearing in a specific form and which models can be beneficial for a given

context. It would be incorrect to say that these programmes do not offer student placements, practice in a community or certain types of internships; however, the focus is on the acquisition of theoretical and methodological skills relevant for the study and understanding of (predominantly) contemporary youth work.

At the universities of applied sciences, youth work is being taught as a social practice. The focus is more on skills rather than knowledge and greater attention is put on the practical aspects of youth work. Most universities of applied sciences have a very tight connection with a community and, practitioners often give classes as their experience is highly appreciated. Universities of applied sciences train future students to be youth workers and offer a plethora of methods to be used once students graduate.

These two models of provision of higher education of youth workers were a topic of discussion at the seminar. Participants discussed advantages and disadvantages of both models and how each can integrate positives from the other. Despite these epistemological differences, participants raised one common aspect – the position of youth work lecturers in universities. Interestingly, the prevalent sentiment is that youth work lecturers, professors, instructors, and researchers do not have the same prestige as other colleagues from more traditional or “established” academic fields. Participants (mostly from academia) claim the reason for that is the nature of youth work and its position in the academic community. These seminar discussions resonated with earlier observations about the dilemma of teaching youth work in academia: the practice of youth work is based on non-formal learning, which is based on the needs of young people, but the academic context is by definition formal, and more controlled (Seal 2019: 24). Bridging the non-formal and the formal is not an easy choice to make, but participants stated that “Youth workers need these experiences – not only sitting and thinking, but also doing”.

Due to the conceptual stretchiness explained in the previous chapter, youth work is not perceived as a “real” science and is often neglected in terms of funding or put under education sciences, social work or social pedagogy. These *modi operandi* aggravate the position of youth work academics and complicate youth work development in academia. Perhaps for these reasons, the co-operation of the youth ministries with the universities has remained rather high, as was evidenced by the examples of Estonia and Finland. The example of Portugal showed that ministry-level support is needed to establish a youth work higher education programme (Portugal has a programme on sociocultural animation, but not on youth work).

## Closing reflections

The seminar clearly showed that bringing higher education experts together raises different topics compared to other meetings involving practitioners, trainers, and youth researchers. In this paper, we have sought to point out three themes emerging from the conference: how we teach youth work; what we teach; and where we teach. The authors emphasise that conversations were varied and covered many topics. Therefore, simple and concise conclusions would be misleading. The following observations and questions for the future can be offered.

*How we teach.* Many participants emphasised the need to combine youth work values and methods with academic traditions. Therefore, perhaps the easiest way to find common ground in youth work higher education would be to look at teaching methods and theoretical underpinnings instead of other determinants of curriculum such as aims, content and evaluation. An interesting but little discussed theme in the seminar was evaluation. Looking more closely at the evaluation of youth workers in higher education institutions could shed light on how the competences and/or capacities of youth workers are being developed. Furthermore, analysing how much of the content in higher education curricula is shared across Europe would perhaps help in understanding the common theoretical ground of youth work in Europe. Relatively little is known about the shared concepts, common points of reference (such as textbooks and/or research reports) or shared theoretical traditions.

*What we teach.* Universities have autonomy, but they are also dependent on national policy processes and intellectual traditions. Based on the seminar, more discourses are needed to understand to what extent European youth policy developments are integrated into national processes.

*Where we teach.* Universities and universities of applied sciences are by definition a formal context. Seminar participants emphasised the need to maintain connections to youth work practice. The seminar showed that relatively little is known about the connections of higher education institutions to other institutions and organisations of youth work. If quality education is a key element in youth work recognition, knowing more about the role of higher education structures in the community of practice in different countries would help understand ways to promote and develop youth work.

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