

Youth work in the European Union political agenda

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Positive investment in young people is our priority. Not only does it help young people to get the best possible start in life, but it also enriches society as a whole by building a pool of qualified, autonomous and motivated young people. Against the backdrop of global competitive challenges and demographic trends, Europe's future actually depends on our ability to invest in the knowledge and skills of young people.

Investing in young people is exactly what youth work does. This is why we must put youth work at the heart of EU youth policy. It is obvious that youth work across Europe has many faces and caters for a variety of needs and groups of youngsters. Nevertheless, and for the sake of clarity, member states agreed on a common understanding of youth work as 'an out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary youth workers within youth organisations, town halls, youth centres, etc'.

In the EU Youth Strategy, endorsed by the Council of the European Union in November 2009, youth work is – for the first time – recognised for its contribution to empowering young people. In view of its broad array of activities, the EU Youth Strategy: 'Investing and Empowering' highlights youth work as a transversal issue. It contributes to all the strategy's goals to 'create more and equal opportunities for all young people in education and in the labour market, and to promote the active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity of all young people.'

The EU Youth Strategy values youth work for its contribution to life-long learning, especially regarding new skills in a changing economy, smoothing the transition between education/training and the labour market, reducing early school leaving, including marginalised youth in society, pro-

moting healthy lifestyles of young people and providing them with quality leisure time.

The recently launched EU's 'Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth' strongly builds on the above principles of investing in young people. 'Youth on the Move', one of the Europe 2020's flagship initiatives, gives particular importance to enhancing young people's skills through both formal and non-formal education, to strengthening their opportunities for mobility and to promoting the active engagement of young people in society.

To make the most of its potential, we need initiatives to promote youth work, to recognise the value of youth workers and to make their contributions broadly visible in society at large. We do not live in a static world, and whilst youth work is built on long traditions in some countries, it constantly faces new challenges in addressing the evolving needs of young people. This raises new questions such as whether youth work should see itself as a profession, with the attendant disciplines of a code of ethics, training, registration or a professional association.

We welcome the initiative of the Belgian EU Presidency to hold a Youth Work Convention to support the above objectives. By bringing together key players from across Europe to debate joint strategies, to learn from each other and to find new partners, the Convention will create fertile ground for progress on all fronts.

We look forward to working with youth workers on the good initiatives that undoubtedly will result from this Convention and, more generally, to realising our common goals for the benefit of Europe's future generations.