

Estonia

Youth work in Estonia is generally understood as involving the social, cultural and health education of young people to promote their mental and physical development¹. The objective of youth work is to create conditions that will facilitate young people's development and enable them to be active outside their families, formal education and work, to support them in their socialisation process and to promote their development towards becoming well-coping members of society.

The concept and development plan of youth work in Estonia are the basis for specific action plans in eight subdivisions of youth work, involving horizontal themes of integration and criminal prevention. These eight important subdivisions are:

- special youth work concentrating on young people living in risk circumstances and/ or exhibiting problematic behaviour
- youth hobby education activities outside formal education
- youth information
- youth counselling
- youth work training (existence, availability and quality of the possibilities for the acquisition and development of the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary for quality youth work and its successful performance)
- recreational activities for young people (mainly spare time activities and camps)
- work education for young people which aims to increase youth employment readiness
- international youth work.

All these youth work activities are targeted to a rather broad age group because the Youth Work Act defines the target group between 7 and 26 years of age. But depending on their possibilities to participate in social life, different target groups are defined in the course of project and programme planning, for instance disadvantaged groups based either on geographic, economic, linguistic, social or health aspects.

The range of people who can be considered as youth workers is rather broad as well, because the status of youth workers in Estonia is somewhat obscure, and there is no coherent understanding of who is a youth worker, and who is not. At the moment there is a debate about the professional standards of youth workers in Estonia. Nevertheless, most youth work in youth associations is performed by volunteers.

Many youth work activities are carried out by youngsters themselves or with their help. According to the Estonian non-profit associations register, there are approximately 150 youth associations and a dozen youth workers' associations in Estonia. Youth associations are engaged in one or several fields of youth work, depending on the decisions of their members, because the objectives and activities of youth associations are established by

¹ Conception of Estonian Youth Work (2001)

joint decisions of members. Youth associations may operate a separate office, a youth work agency (e.g. a youth centre, youth camp, etc.) or a youth club.

In recent years growing attention has been paid to developments at local level, for instance structures and programmes to support youth participation and open youth centres. Several traditional Estonian forms of youth work, such as youth summer camps and hobby education schools (concentrating on music, art, dance, etc.), are currently undergoing a renewal process in order to fulfil the changing needs of young people better.