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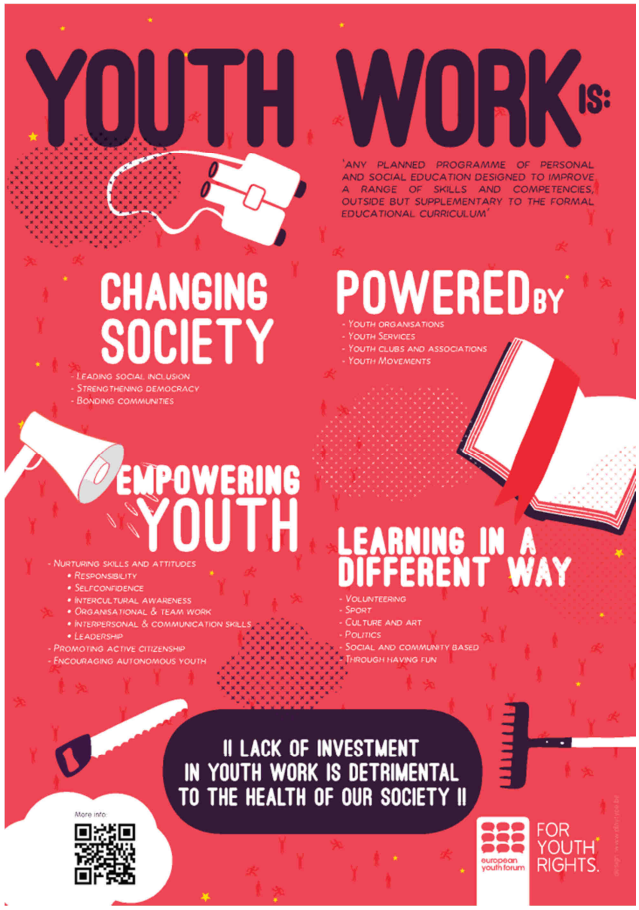
FINDING COMMON GROUND



European Youth Forum campaign poster

Mapping and scanning the horizons for European youth work in the 21st century

Towards the 2nd European Youth Work Convention

Summary paper

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This paper is a summary of a longer background paper intended to provoke some reflection on the state of youth work across Europe. It considers the extent to which there is sufficient 'common ground' in our understanding of 'youth work' to reinforce our convictions, strengthen our commitment and embolden our capacity to advocate for it in the context of challenging political and economic circumstances. The observations, though drawn from a broad and deep range of sources, remain a personal perspective. Others, from different cultural, national, professional and experiential backgrounds would have written something quite different. Indeed, the full paper starts with a preface concerning the demise of 'my' youth centre, where I did open youth work for almost a quarter of a century. It was one of the casualties of draconian funding cuts to youth services in 2013. Part of my intention in looking to the future was to draw on the past – in order to follow in the path of one of my teachers, the late Prof Geoffrey Pearson, and shed 'old light on new problems'.

One of those problems is that youth work is, far too often, quite devoid of theoretical foundations. On the relatively rare occasions that youth work has been connected to wider social theory, it becomes immediately clear that it is nearly always riddled with contradictions and competing pressures – between the individual and society, and between association and transition. Something called 'youth work' has done very different things, at different times, in different contexts. Quite how it manages the tensions and dilemmas routinely faced depends inherently on the relative weight of professional inheritance and contemporary economic and political realities. The histories of youth work published by the Youth Partnership[1] attest starkly to this.

Does anything go? The recent EU study of the value of youth work points firmly to its *diversity* and *variety*, from which it is said it can suffer but also constitutes 'one of its key strengths'. Yet the great eclecticism and flexibility that is routinely associated with youth work and its long histories (with continuity in some countries, but fracture and change in others) makes an attempt to define and describe 'common ground', at the level of both theory or practice, somewhat perilous. Myriad definitions of youth work have been advanced, across the globe, often saying more about those producing them and the context in which it operates than the practice on the ground. A significant fault line has often existed particularly between conceptions of youth work as guided (and sometimes governed) by adults and perspectives where youth work is firmly controlled by young people themselves, through youth-led youth organisation(s).

The European Youth Work Declaration in 2010 endeavoured to capture critical features of youth work, in the context of both the long-standing practices undertaken by the Council of Europe and the more recent assertions by the European Commission about the role for youth work in

[1] The Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe in the youth field

supporting all fields of action within the 2009 European Union Youth Strategy. But there remains a long continuum in perspectives on youth work, from projects and activities tied firmly to wider 'youth policy' objectives, through more abstract commitments to democracy and participation, to the recent proclamation of the UK In Defence of Youth work campaign, that youth work is 'volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantee'. This is seemingly light years from some more instrumental articulations of what youth work is about.

In terms of endeavouring to define 'youth work', it is always tempting to produce a lengthy, calibrated definition that seeks to take account of its complexity and diversity. Yet the more we seek clarification, the more we often contribute to confusion. Simplicity, strangely, may be the answer. There are two possibilities here. One is Howard Sercombe's notion of 'facilitating agency'. Through a range of diverse participatory and experiential practices, young people acquire the capacities and competencies for more autonomous, active and responsible decision-making about their lives and engagement with their society. And, though not specifically connected to conceptualising youth work, the thinking of South African youth sociologist Sharlene Swartz around 'navigational capacities' is also useful here: young people – particularly those in the most unequal and disadvantaged situations – need to build, and be equipped with, the capacity to understanding, articulate, evaluate, confront, embrace, reflect on, and resist their circumstances.

The 2nd European Youth Work Convention will need to consider how perspectives on youth work might *converge*, in contrast to the celebration of diversity, space, flexibility and fluidity – in effect, the divergent features of youth work – that informed part of the Declaration from the 1st European Youth Work Declaration:

> Whatever the definitional debate, it is not contested that different forms of youth work engage with different young people, use different methodologies, address different issues and operate in different contexts. Within this frame of groups, methods, issues and contexts, youth work practice adapts, unfolds and develops over time (Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention 2010, p.2)

The two positions are not incompatible. Whilst those inside the youth (work) field understand the need for celebrating youth work's diversity, there is also an imperative, particularly in relation to those beyond the youth (work) field, for communicating youth work's consistency and common purpose.

This imperative arises because youth work requires a different narrative in times of austerity, economic 'crisis' and significant public sector budgetary restraint. Although there is a mixed

story across Europe, youth work in many places is under considerable pressure – both in relation to the resources available to it and the expectations demanded of it. There has been a decline, even collapse, in open, unconditional, responsive youth work. There are growing pressures on youth work to demonstrate the value of its contribution to various wider policy agendas, not least employability and social inclusion. 'Youth work' throughout Europe has undergone significant change in the five years since the 1st European Youth Work Convention in 2010.

Not all countries in Europe have suffered the same dramatic destruction of youth work as England, but then few countries in Europe once had as robust a structure for youth work as England. Some countries are still treading an early path in their development of youth work. So the directions of travel for different forms of youth work in different parts of Europe are very different. Relative optimism continues to prevail in some countries, from those with longstanding commitments to youth work such as Finland, those with more recent but established youth work practices like Estonia and Lithuania, to those that have only recently constructed some infrastructure for youth work practice and development such as Serbia or Slovakia. In contrast, a more depressing picture emerges elsewhere, in countries such as Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Historically, we are increasingly aware – through the series of seminars and publications on the History of Youth Work in Europe – of the many forms of 'youth work' that have prevailed, at different times, in different parts of Europe. The most recent seminar examined the question of 'autonomy through dependencies', suggesting that the place of youth work in societies is never guaranteed and there is always a struggle to secure its position. And that position may be achieved both by co-operation and concession, and by challenge and conflict. Tensions and contradictions are endemic to youth work, often paradoxes that cannot be resolved but need to be managed.

Today, according to 18 cameo reports and an interpretation of a European Youth Forum policy paper, developments in youth work in Europe over the past five years reveal both common and contrasting trends. There have been processes of both decentralisation and more centralisation. There are expectations of closer links (particularly with formal education and employment) as well as the continuation of relative autonomy for youth work. There are greater concerns about quality, the training of 'youth workers', the demonstration of impact and the recognition of youth work. There are issues about the reach of youth work and its capacity to make suitable connections with 'disengaged' youth. Sometimes this has produced a differentiation between more 'open' youth work and a practice more associated with 'youth care' and links with childhood policy and welfare systems. There is often stronger emphasis on young people's volunteering and social contribution. And, in straightened economic times,

there are expectations that youth work will be supported by more diverse funding streams (including the private, business sector) as well as delivered by a more committed NGO sector.

The elasticity of the concept of youth work has permitted those responsible for youth work at national and European levels to move away from a classical position where youth work was perceived to be focused holistically on young people's needs and interests in voluntary relationships informed by some key values around rights, entitlements, participation and empowerment to a more socially attached position where youth work is depicted as capable of addressing a range of contemporary social concerns, not least youth unemployment and 'employability', health risk and even deviance and criminality. Though there may be grounds for asserting the potential for youth work having some intermediary impact on positive outcomes in these wider policy domains, caution needs to be exercised about any claims of the direct impact of youth work on concrete policy aspirations such as improved educational attainment, greater youth employment or more responsible health behaviour.

Yet this should not diminish the value of youth work. There is growing testimony to the value of many different forms of youth work. Various research studies have recently provided some evidence of the benefits that can accrue from youth work opportunities, interventions and experiences. Youth work can make a critical contribution *inter alia* to social and economic inclusion, health lifestyles, volunteering, youth (political and other) participation, employability and entrepreneurship.

Whatever may be taking place at national levels, this understanding of youth work is reflected in a range of developments at European level seeking to evaluate, promote and strengthen the position of youth work within youth policy. Between Belgium's Presidency of the European Union in 2010 and its Chairmanship of the Council of Europe in 2015, some key documentation has been produced, starting with her *A contribution to youth work and youth policy in Europe* and the *Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention*, which in turn led to the *Resolution of the Council of the European Union on youth work*. There have been some pivotal research studies, not least the LSE Enterprise report on Youth Participation in Democratic Life and the emergent findings of the 14-country MYPLACE study of how young people's participation is shaped by the shadows of totalitarianism and populism in Europe – with significant implications for the role of youth work. A study of central importance has been on *The value of youth work in the European Union*, which points to the many positive outcomes it can potentially engender. Work has continued on the recognition of youth work and non-formal learning across Europe, and how best to find the balance between self-recognition, political recognition and wider social recognition. By the time of the Convention a report will have been presented to the Youth Working Party from an *Expert Group on Youth Work Quality Systems in EU Member States and the role of common indicators or frameworks*.

All of this is in the context of the current *EU Work Plan for Youth*, in which youth work figures prominently, the *Erasmus+ Youth in Action* component of the new EU learning and mobility programmes and the continuing work in the youth work field of the Council of Europe through its training programmes, campaigns and projects.

Such developments at a European level suggest a space has been created for a strong and purposeful momentum for youth work since the 1st European Youth Work Convention. Yet there remain deep anxieties that the warm rhetoric at European level is drowning out awareness about the often very tough realities for 'youth work' on the ground. A unified European agenda promoting the case for youth work needs to be consolidated. Now is the time for a 'concentrated fusillade' from all actors in the youth field who are committed to strengthening the place and purpose of youth work to build on and develop the opportunities created by that space.

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The challenges for the 2nd European Youth Work Convention

At a time of a very mixed portrait of what 'youth work' is and does, and how it is evolving in different parts of Europe, it is important to seize the moment when the European organisations concerned with 'youth policy' (primarily the European Commission and the Council of Europe) are both proclaiming the imperative to strengthen youth policy and the place of 'youth work' within it. The current 'state of play' for youth work in Europe, coupled with its history and evolution that has taken many different forms, would suggest that the 2nd European Youth Work Convention needs to establish whether there are overriding, reasonably consensual ideas throughout Europe. Put simply, this is the complex challenge of **finding common ground** within the diversity of youth work practice:

1) What is the **meaning**, the 'raison d'être', of 'youth work'? What are the underlying concepts and theories that inform our understanding of youth work? Is there a vision for youth work in the future?

2) What are the **aims** – and anticipated outcomes, effect and impact - of 'youth work' at national, European and other transnational levels? Are they the same? If they are different, why, and do they complement each other?

3) What are the various **patterns and practices** constituting 'youth work' that remain consistent with those objectives; in other words, what is the range of activity that may count as youth work, and where are the borders and the boundaries?

4) Where are the **connections** between 'youth work' and wider work with young people (formal education, training and employment; enterprise and entrepreneurship; health; housing; justice; and more); how can and should such connections be made, while maintaining boundaries, through principles and 'distinction'?

5) How can youth work secure **recognition** (beyond the youth field) for both its distinctive and collaborative practice and contribution to the lives of young people and the communities in which they live? How best can self-recognition, political recognition and wider social recognition be linked?

6) What kinds of **education and training** should be established for the development of professional youth work practice and ensuring quality and standards? Are there minimum requirements that need to be advocated to ensure sufficient professionalism (without the need for professionalization)?

7) How can political and public authorities be persuaded, beyond the rhetoric and exhortations from within the youth field itself, of the **value of 'youth work'** in order to support its consistent development and delivery?

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3rd March, 2015