

Estonia: Involving all the actors in the development of youth workers ◆

The following article aims to bring forward some of the steps taken by different stakeholders in Estonia in order to enforce a systematic approach towards youth worker's training through strong cooperation between the formal and non-formal learning and training sectors.

In Estonia, we have taken a strategic approach to youth workers' competence development through a complex set of different measures over a longer period of time. Both the following have been considered important - guaranteeing the availability of youth work curricula in formal education as well as offering extensive non-formal training opportunities at national and international levels.

Currently there are three higher education institutions that hold youth work studies curricula in Estonia: [Pedagogical College of Tallinn University](#), [Narva College of University of Tartu](#), [Viljandi Cultural Academy of University of Tartu](#). As well there are numerous actors that are providing non-formal trainings on various levels. In recent years, one of the strategic aims at the national level has been to **establish greater synergies between** these two sectors through involving representatives of both fields in common training events. One measure that has been taken is the involvement of key actors from the youth field practice in programme committees of youth work curricula in the three colleges. Other measures include the following:

As part of the national occupational qualifications system, the **qualification standard for youth workers** was first adopted in 2006 and renewed in 2011. The qualification standard describes the main competence requirements for youth workers in 3 levels. The process to develop the professional standard as well as the committee responsible for assessment of applications for occupational qualification (awarded twice a year) involves an extensive range of actors from state institutions responsible for youth work on the national level (e.g. the Estonian Youth Work Centre and the National Agency for the YIA programme; umbrella organizations such as the National Youth Council, the Association of Youth Workers, the Association of Open Youth Centres, the Association of Estonian Cities and the Association of Municipalities. Included as well are the higher education institutions such as Tallinn University, Tartu University and respective colleges). Having adopted a professional standard on the national level is a step towards supporting the professionalism of the field and setting certain directions for training of youth workers. First of all, it presents a well-elaborated common ground for expectations towards professional competence

of youth work(ers).

Evidence-based approaches to training. The study “Competencies and the Development of Competencies in the Field of Youth Work” implemented both in 2005 and again in 2010, provides an in-depth perspective into what is the educational and training background of youth workers (in positions and levels as varied as existing in practice). As well, it provides insight into how they evaluate the impact of training on their competence development, what are the specific expectations related to trainings from the viewpoint of practitioners and their employers, etc. The 2010 study was commissioned by the Estonian National Agency for the Youth in Action Programme (YiA is responsible for offering non-formal learning opportunities for youth workers in Estonia) and has been carried out in cooperation with the Institute of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Tartu. The results have been elaborated by all three institutions that hold youth work curricula as well as by other key organisations in the youth field, and in events such as the trainers’ community, etc.

ESF Programme “Developing Youth Work Quality”. From 2008-2013 a complex national programme is being implemented in Estonia, co-funded by the European Social Fund and the national government. While the programme represents a very diverse set of measures aimed at supporting the employability of young people through high quality youth work, there are some strands that are specifically targeted at competence development of youth workers and involve networking and cooperation of training providers in the formal and non-formal field. Essential elements of this include:

- **Development of educational publications in the youth field.** The initiative to create a Textbook of Youth Work as an extensive cooperation process among key organisations from youth work practice together with academic staff who are involved in concept-developing, writing of chapters, test-reading, etc. Started in 2010, it goes without saying that the preparation process of such material, aimed to set some fundamental basis for future youth work trainings, has not been an easy process. The Estonian and Russian versions of the textbook are planned to be published in 2013.
- **Training programmes for youth workers** have been implemented in close cooperation with training providers both from academic and non-formal education sectors. Among these programmes are: Training of Basic Skills and Knowledge in Youth Work (where the National Agency has launched the Call for Tender and as result of it, the Pedagogical College of Tallinn University has been appointed to develop and carry out respective

training programmes) and the Summer Academy School of Youth Workers implemented by the Viljandi Cultural Academy at the University of Tartu in cooperation with National Agency. Also in open calls for trainers' teams, the involvement of trainers with experience from the non-formal training field together with academic staff from youth work programmes in universities continues to be encouraged.

- **Training of trainers sub-programme** has been established to support the development of a trainers' community and their competences in youth field in Estonia. As well it supports the networking and internationalisation of trainers, academic staff, and those responsible for the youth work curriculum development in formal and non-formal education in the youth field.
- The activities over the years have included reaching out to trainers in the youth field (as diverse and wide as that exists), discovering the competences essential for good quality youth field trainings, and developing the Competence Model for Youth Field Trainers. This has only been possible through the active involvement of key institutions and the trainers' community itself (the process was launched in 2009 and completed in 2011, and the Competence Model is now available both in Estonian and English). Based on the Competence Model, the practical handbook KOMA (only in Estonian) was developed for trainers, supporting them with tools for self-assessment and planning for professional development.

Also, over the years different training events have been organised for trainers at the national level. Included among these is a long-term programme on mentoring as a way to support the competences of trainers and the national 'Tool Fair' for trainers, which has been running since 2010. As well, there have been a multitude of calls launched to support the participation of trainers from Estonia in international training events. Open nominations for the Youth Field Trainer of a Year have also been launched in order to bring more transparency and recognition to trainers as important stakeholders for the quality of youth work. This recognition has now been observed for 3 years with increasing popularity when considering the number of nominees presented each year by participants from various training courses, youth field institutions, etc. All these steps have paved the way for greater understanding and links between all the various training providers.

Since 2009, each year a study visit has been organised by the National Agency for academic staff of youth work curriculum and the main youth work training providers at the national level (including the Ministry of Education and the Research Youth Department, the Estonian Youth Work

Centre and the Estonian National Agency). These study visits are aimed at getting acquainted with practices in youth (field) studies/education and training practices abroad, introducing respective practices from Estonia as well as establishing links for future cooperation. The study visits have been organised to take place in Wales Newport University, Malta University, Leopold-Franzens-University of Innsbruck in Austria and Istanbul Bilgi University Youth Studies Unit. It is now evident that these study visits have resulted in stronger coherence and co-ordinated cooperation at the national level between the stakeholders from both formal and non-formal education in the youth field. It has also yielded international cooperation between the involved higher education institutions in the format of seminars, summer academies, exchanges of students and academic staff, etc. that have been organised as a result of these study visits. None of this would have been possible without the financial support from YiA, LLP, the British Council and other programmes. It is important to note that in Estonia, the fact that the formal studies of youth work are of a rather “practical” nature, has probably been one of the supporting aspects, while at the same time, the need to enforce the research and development in youth work curricula is also one of the strategic objectives.

All these developments have affirmed the clear need to involve different stakeholders and training providers into further discussions on developing training policy for the youth field. Such initiative was launched by the Estonian National Agency in autumn 2012. The process is based on an analysis, carried out by an independent consultation and research company Cumulus Consulting, and involves all the key stakeholders from the national training field to contribute to the survey through focus groups and also to elaborate and interpret the findings of the survey. This exercise will fertilise the future developments of youth workers’ training in Estonia in an even more coherent way. It is also expected to feed into the development of the national strategic development plan for the youth field (youth policy and youth work) for the period of 2014-2020. It will undoubtedly point out some specific needs and perspectives regarding the training of youth workers to enforce its role in supporting the competence development of youth workers and trainers in the field as they respond to the needs of youth and society at large.

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