

Preliminary Benchmarking Exercise

Countries selected (16) randomly based on population size and geographic spread:

Austria, Belarus, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden.

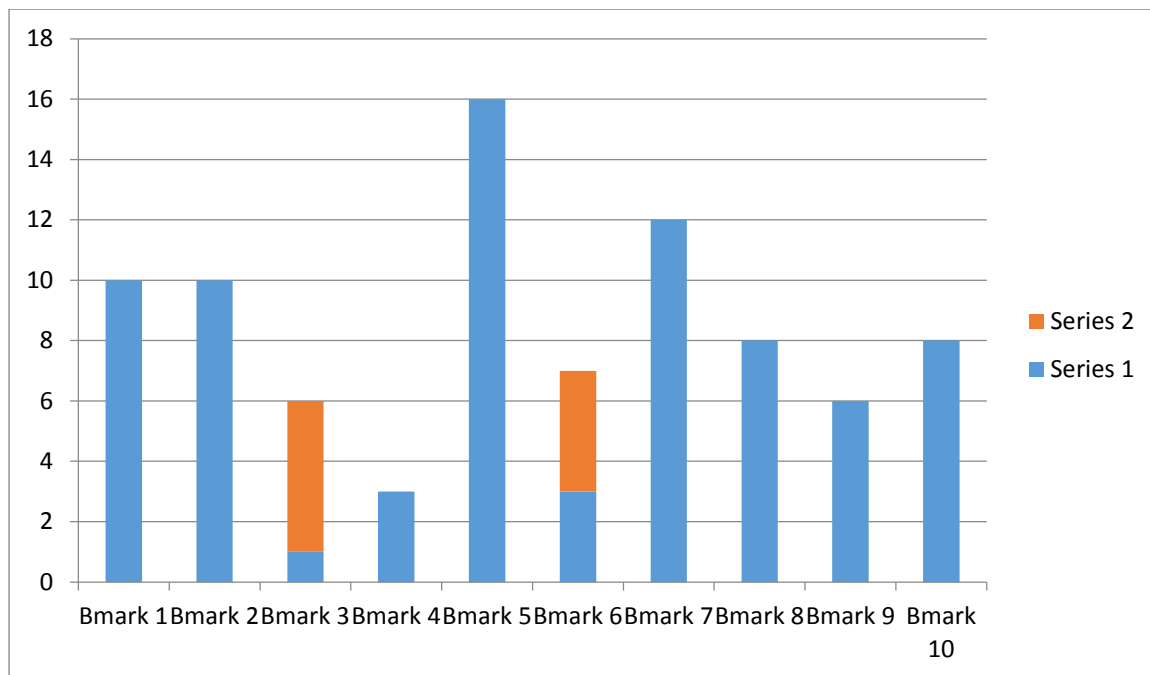
The sample also reflects questionnaires returned to end August.

Benchmarks employed:

1. A national framework/strategy for youth or youth work is in place.
2. A legislative framework for youth or youth work is in place.
3. Youth work is a regulated profession.
4. Formal and accredited courses for youth work are available at degree level.
5. Non-formal education and training for youth workers is available.
6. A national quality or competency framework is in place.
7. Associations/networks of youth workers are in existence.
8. Figures are provided as to the number of paid and/or voluntary youth workers.
9. Minimum qualifications for employment are in place.
10. Viable employment/career options are available for youth workers.

The benchmarking is not meant to be a score sheet but rather a tool to explore and map the landscape of pathways for education/training and employment. The benchmarking tells us some things, but not others and it also raises many questions not only about pathways for education/training and employment but about youth work itself. While in some cases the data is reasonably clear, in others e.g. professionalisation, quality/competency frameworks and employment/career paths, it is less so and some interpretation has been used.

Each benchmark needs to be viewed in context and is subject to significant qualifications in all instances. Accordingly, I have included a summary commentary on the benchmarks out of which I have extrapolated some outline features and emerging issues that need further consideration.



Series 1: The number of countries that have reached the benchmark.

Series 2: The number of countries that are moving towards or already have features or aspects of the benchmark.

- Benchmarks 1 and 2: Policy and Legislation.

10 of the countries surveyed have a national policy framework or strategy in place and 10 have legislative frameworks in place, while seven have both. In all cases the policy/strategy is on youth, with a focus in some instances on addressing youth risk and needs. To what extent such policies/strategies include youth work would need further examination.

10 of the countries surveyed had a legislative framework in place for youth, with a focus in some instances on social care and welfare. Only three countries (Finland, Ireland and Malta) appear to have legislation specifically on youth work. Of the other seven, only two appear to define youth work and while this does not necessarily mean that "youth work" issues are not addressed in the legislation, the absence of a definition means that it is not included in the legislation.

There are a number of features in particular that might be noted as regards policy and legislation. In some of the countries surveyed (Austria, Italy) policy and even legislation appears to be largely at regional level. This of itself has implications for data collection and evaluation. The legislative framework in a number of the countries surveyed appears to be relatively recent (last ten years) and this may be an indication of development, transition or innovation. In addition, in a number of countries surveyed (Belarus, Greece, Italy), where

youth work is not embedded, there appears to be at least some steps towards policy development.

- Benchmark 3 - Professional regulation

Only one of the countries surveyed (Malta) appears to fulfill all the requirements of a regulated profession. Others (Netherlands, France, Finland, Ireland, and the Czech Republic) might be considered to be professionalised to a greater or lesser extent. One of the problems is the definition of profession. In some countries it may be regulated by the state or the state may recognise professional bodies; in others a looser definition may be in place with a focus on employment regulation. Professionalisation is in some respects the end of the education and training path and it is only in those countries which have well established educational and training pathways that professionalisation may be an issue.

- Benchmarks 4 and 5 - Formal and non-formal education and training.

Only three of the countries surveyed (Finland, Ireland and Malta) have degree level courses available in youth work while Latvia has two postgraduate degree courses. There may be a number of reasons for the relative paucity of degree level courses in youth work, but two in particular might be noted. First, formal and accredited courses appear to be a feature of those member states with a history and embedded system of youth work. Second, the blurring and overlapping of the lines between youth work and other areas e.g. education, welfare and care in some member states (Netherlands, Sweden) and the non existence of the term youth worker in others (Poland, France) may be a further complicating factor.

Conversely, all of the countries surveyed identified varying levels of non-formal education and training - in the case of France it appears to be more regularised. While proportionally there is fair amount of information and data provided it is often patchy and uneven.

This question was in some respects the most difficult to formulate and has 10 subsections. In a sense it was designed as a window on the voluntary/NGO youth sector. Further consideration needs to be given as to how best to collect much needed information and data in this field particularly as regards funding, provision, accreditation in particular.

- Benchmark 6 - Quality and Competences.

Only three of the member states surveyed (Austria, Czech Republic and Ireland) could be said to have quality or competence frameworks in place at national level. But in some others (Sweden, Netherlands, and Finland) quality/competence frameworks are being developed at either state, regional and municipal level by various actors. This is a field in which there appears to be a considerable amount of experimentation and innovation and consideration needs to be given on how to further expand the knowledge and information base and identify emerging trend and practices.

- Benchmark 7 - Associations/networks of youth workers.

In 12 of the 15 countries surveyed, some form of youth workers' association/networking is in place. In some instances, this networking appears to be between youth centre/organisations rather than youth workers. To what extent such associations/networks are professional bodies - promoting good practice and providing training - or lobby groups and what their relationship with the state is might be further researched. Their presence across most of the countries surveyed might be a factor in the development of training and employment pathways.

- Benchmarks 8 and 9 - Paid and voluntary youth workers

Only eight of the countries surveyed (Austria, Belarus, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Latvia and Malta) identify the approximate number of paid and/or voluntary youth workers. Compiling such data, given freedom of information, may be a matter of access and time for most member states; in some others there may be sensitivities about collecting such data centrally. Not knowing the relative number of paid and voluntary youth workers and the relationship between them - do they work in different spheres or in parallel; do paid youth workers supervise voluntary workers - is an important policy consideration and also has relevance for training and employment paths.

Six of the countries surveyed (Belarus, Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Latvia and Malta) indicate minimum requirements for employment purposes.

- Benchmark 10 - Employment opportunities and career paths.

Only eight of the countries surveyed (Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands and Sweden) could be said to have viable employment and, to some extent, career paths for youth workers. In most of the other countries surveyed employment opportunities, to say nothing of career paths, are from sparse to non-existent: any employment tends to be low paid and insecure.

Some emerging issues and features

- Access to reliable and up-to-date data and information continues to be a policy issue in its own right. The information and data gaps in the questionnaire may, for the most part, be a result not of lack of information and data but the time and capacity to collect it. To what extent the gaps can be filled from other data sources needs further consideration.
- Where central government plays a defined role in youth work there tends to be a clearer picture of the nature of youth work and information about it. Where however the state's role is at regional, municipal or local level, the picture is less clear and less information is readily available.

- A complex, if not stark, picture of youth work across the countries surveyed is evident. In a minority, with a history of youth work and where it is embedded, education/training and employment pathways appear reasonably clear - career paths perhaps less so - regardless as to how youth work is defined and operates. In other countries surveyed, where youth work is not embedded, education/training and employment pathways often appear sparse to non-existent.
- The "blurring" of the lines between youth work and other related fields is a complicating factor as it also tends to blur education/training and career paths. The nomenclature associated with youth work - social worker, youth specialist, pedagogical worker, leisure-time based educator, animateur, animatore socio-educativo, youth affairs specialist - and the extent to which such "youth workers" meet the definition of youth worker in the questionnaire is another issue. Such related fields as education and social work appear, in general, to have clearer education and career paths than youth workers. It may be the case that their designated title is less important than the type of work they do and where they do it.
- The relative inadequacy of accredited third-level courses in youth work, while perhaps less significant for voluntary youth workers, may be an impediment for those seeking employment or a career in the field. Lack of parity of qualification and professional recognition with those working in related fields such as teaching and social work may result in poor pay, lack of pay-parity and job security.
- The role of the voluntary youth sector needs to be further explored. Unless voluntary youth organisations and NGOs are linked with funding lines at either member state or European level it is not always easy to access information on them or the roles they play or could play, though this is less so in the case of major national or multinational youth organisations.
- The first three topics covered in the questionnaire, policy/legislation, professional recognition and formal education are large mainframe issues, for the most part determined by and under the remit of member states. Employment and career paths can also be strongly influenced by issues other than education and training.
- Non-formal education and training, the development of competences and effective youth work practice and networking may prove more fertile ground for information and data gathering to enhance knowledge and awareness and help formulate future pathways for education and training.

