



**Youth workers in Europe**  
**Associations, networks and support**

*Working paper*

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper arose from a mapping exercise on educational and career paths for youth workers in Europe that aimed at strengthening knowledge on youth work and its practice. One aspect of the mapping exercise focused on associations and networks of youth workers and the extent to which they provided training and other supports. This paper takes a more in-depth look at the data provided, and related data, with a view to identifying some outline features of associations and networks of youth workers as well as experiences and trends that might inform a more knowledge-based and supportive approach to such association and networking.

The paper is effectively divided into two parts. The first part analyses the data on associations and networks of youth workers provided by the countries surveyed. The defining features of associations of youth workers, umbrella organisations and networks of youth organisations and bodies and organisations that place a particular focus on training and the provision of other support for youth workers are outlined and considered, and some features of European-wide associations and networks are also highlighted.

The second part of the paper examines the role and impact of three associations (one each in Finland, Malta and Serbia), one network (in Slovenia) and one youth support organisation (in Belgium), with a view to considering what can be learned from them in the broader context of developing and supporting educational paths for youth workers in Europe.

## **2. Context**

As part of the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership’s research initiative on mapping the educational and career paths of youth workers and strengthening knowledge of youth work, a questionnaire was compiled and circulated in June 2017 to the national correspondents of the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYC) and relevant ministries, institutions and bodies. The questionnaire sought data and information on:

- youth policy and legislation;
- education and training for youth workers (including opportunities offered in the fields of both formal and non-formal education and training);
- quality assurance and competence frameworks and systems;
- associations of youth workers;
- employment opportunities and career paths for youth workers and professionalisation.

Its main objective was to contribute to a better understanding of the nature and status of youth work in Europe and to gather and share information on the educational and career

paths available to youth workers, as well as on quality assurance and the competences youth workers are expected to have.

Question 6 of the questionnaire focused on associations of youth workers and requested data and information from each country on:

- the number of associations of youth workers at national, regional and local/municipal level;
- the approximate number of members of such associations; and
- whether or not associations provided in-house or contracted development and training courses for youth workers.

Of the 41 countries that responded to the questionnaire, 24<sup>1</sup> countries indicated that some form of association or network of youth workers was in existence. In the context of the “Diversity of practice architectures on education and career paths for youth workers in Europe”,<sup>2</sup> an analytical report based on “Mapping the educational and career paths of youth workers”,<sup>3</sup> 10 of these countries – Belarus, Belgium (French speaking), Estonia, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovakia and the United Kingdom (England and Wales) – are classified as having “strong practice architectures”; nine countries – Belgium (Flemish and German speaking), the Czech Republic, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia and Sweden – are classified as having “strong practice architectures with room for development on a certain level”; while the remaining countries – Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Slovenia – are classified as having either “practice architectures where some parts have been developed” or “practice architectures in need of development”.

### **3. Associations of youth workers**

The nature of associations of youth workers, as detailed in the responses received from the 24 countries, can be characterised under a number of headings. Seventeen countries – Belarus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia and the United Kingdom (England and Wales) – indicated the existence of associations of youth workers, with some providing the number of members and/or the role of such associations in the training and development of youth workers. The membership of these associations tends, in general, to be numerically small and the number

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1. Belarus, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, the United Kingdom.

2. Killakoski T. (2018), “Diversity of practice architectures on education and career paths for youth workers in Europe – An analytical report”.

3. O’Donovan et al., “Mapping the educational and career paths of youth workers” (2018).

that provide training and support even smaller. Membership of these associations varies from under 100 in Greece, Malta, Lithuania and Serbia to between 100 and 300 in Belarus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Iceland and the Netherlands and to several thousand in the case of the United Kingdom (England). The varying size of membership of such associations maybe due, to some extent at least, to the overall size of the youth population, as for example in Malta, Serbia and the United Kingdom, but may be more a reflection of the relative status and level of development of youth work in a country: NUOLI in Finland (population 5.5 million) has some 1 300 members while the Association of Youth Workers in Greece (population 11.15 million) has 50 members.

While the data on training, both in-house and contracted, provided by the associations is somewhat patchy, there are some examples of what it entails. In Belarus, for example, the Association of Youth Workers, which comprises some 170 members, does not provide in-house or contracted development and training courses and all activities are voluntary. However, the association's aims are:

[the] consolidation of youth workers' specialists for mutual support and co-ordination of activity by means of creating conditions for developing professional competence and raising the prestige of their work and determining the social status of youth workers, protection of rights and interests of association members.

In Iceland, Félag fagfólks í frítímaþjónustu (Association of Youth Workers), which has some 200 members, provides training on an ad hoc basis, primarily seminars and study visits, but rarely provides training courses. In Serbia, the National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR) is the only body providing training for youth workers at the national level.

In addition to providing training, associations also focus on promoting professional practice and recognition of youth work, including issues relating to ethics and standards. NUOLI in Finland provides practical ethical guidance tools for everyday youth work practice, while NAPOR has a code of ethics as well as an ethics council to monitor and make recommendations on ethical issues.

In countries in which there is an overlap or a blurring of the lines between youth work and related professions such as social work, there appears to be a consequent overlap in association. The Czech Republic has an Association of Educators of Leisure-time Child and Youth Workers, which is an independent non-political professional organisation, that:

supports the development of leisure-time centres – of which there are some 260 in the Czech Republic – provides training opportunities, defends the professional interests of youth workers and volunteers and is one of the main consultants of the Youth Department (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) concerning youth policy and legal framework.

BVJong, in the Netherlands, with some 150 members, is the national association of children and youth work professionals.

In some countries “youth workers” are effectively subsumed into associations of related professions. In Germany, Deutscher Berufsverband für Soziale Arbeit V. (DBSH; with 6 000 members) and Berufs- und Fachverband Heilpädagogik (BHP; with 5 000 members) are respective associations of social workers and remedial teachers, reflecting the close affinity between youth work and social work in Germany. In Luxembourg, youth workers appear to be subsumed into associations of educators and social workers. In contrast, the Federation of Detached Youth Workers in the United Kingdom (England) is a rare example of an association related to a specific aspect of youth work.

In some countries, associations appear to effectively be trade unions and are often described as such. NUOLI, in Finland, has 1 300 members (with approximately half in employment and half in training) and is an affiliated trade union that promotes both the recognition of youth work and good working condition for youth workers. Trade unions for the public and welfare sectors in Finland also promote youth work and good working conditions for youth workers. In the United Kingdom (Wales), the trade union Unison has membership specifically for full-time and part-time youth and community workers. It also provides subject-related training in such areas as safeguarding young people and diversity awareness, and also circulates newsletters about local training. Trade union membership is also available for youth workers through the British trade union UNITE. In France, there are major unions/professional organisations in the field.

These variations in both the role and forms of association tend to reflect the particular nature, role and status of youth work in the respondent countries.

#### **4. Networks of youth workers**

The second defining feature in the 24 respondent countries is networks and umbrella organisations of youth organisations, NGOs or centres at national, regional or local level. In all, nine countries – Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden – have such networks or umbrella organisations.

Kanuuna is a network of youth services in the 27 largest towns and cities in Finland – comprising 60% of the youth population under the age of 29 – that also provides training. In France, the Comité pour les relations nationales et internationales des associations de jeunesse et d'éducation populaire (CNAJEP) brings together over 70 youth movements and ensures that associations are represented in dealings with the public authorities. The Jeunesse au plein air (JPA) is a confederation of informal education NGOs promoting holidays for all children, while Union nationale des associations de tourisme (UNAT) is a



national union of social tourism NGOs. Some 200 organisations in France also provide training for those working with children and young people.

The Entente des Gestionnaires des Maisons de Jeunes in Luxembourg is an umbrella organisation comprising 37 institutions that manage 69 youth centres or service providers. It organises seminars, workshops and training for the staff of the member institutions. It also provides information and assistance for the member institutions concerning finances, accounting and insurance. The Federation Formaat in the Flemish Community of Belgium is also an umbrella organisation for some 400 youth clubs and provides them with information, training, education, support and advice. In the French Community of Belgium, 14 federations comprising some 90 youth organisations and youth centres also provide support and training.

Eesti Avatud Noortekeskuste Ühendus in Estonia is an umbrella organisation of 158 youth centres. In Slovenia, a network of youth centres, MaMa, has 47 member associations, while in Portugal the FNAP is the National Federation of Youth Associations. In Sweden, KEKS is a network of municipalities – 43 out of a total of 290 municipalities in Sweden – and organisations that practise open youth work and it supports them with training, seminars and coaching. Fritidsledarskolorna is an association for high schools that offer youth work training, while Fritidsforum is an association for recreation centres and youth clubs that also provides training for youth workers. In Sweden, as in other countries, the nature and size of these associations vary widely depending on youth population size and the extent of youth work provision.

While networks and umbrella organisations are not associations of youth workers per se they do provide information, training, education, support and advice to organisations, NGOs, youth centres, youth clubs, holiday camps and municipalities that provide a wide range of youth work activities and services for young people. Consequently, paid or volunteer youth workers can indirectly benefit from such networks and umbrella organisations in terms of training, advice and related support.

## **5. Support bodies and organisations**

A third defining feature of the responses received from the 24 countries is the existence of bodies and organisations whose primary function and focus is on supporting and promoting youth work.

Uit De Marge vzw, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, is a centre for youth work with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people that supports youth workers who work with them. The centre focuses on building and promoting quality youth work with disadvantaged children and young people as well as providing guidance and support for

local and regional youth initiatives that work with disadvantaged children and young people. Uit De Marge also supports youth work in general and other social sectors and services that address the needs of socially vulnerable children and young people.

In Liechtenstein, the Youth Work Foundation conducts training seminars, which are obligatory for its youth workers, and also pays half the costs for youth workers attending external courses. De Ambrassade, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, supports 106 youth work organisations that are officially recognised under the Flemish Parliament Act of 2012. It is a youth support structure relating to practice development, practice support and the provision of information to and about the youth sector.

The Institute for Youth Work in the United Kingdom (England) supports and promotes youth work as a profession through recognition of the benefits and values of youth and community work and by raising standards and increasing membership and support for the profession.

In its Strategic Plan (2018-2013) one of the three priority areas is raising professional youth and community work standards. The Training Agencies' Group (TAG) is a network for those delivering youth worker education and training in both the United Kingdom and Ireland, which also provides seed funding for additional training and learning events.

Allianssi (Finnish Youth Co-operation) is a national service and lobbying organisation for youth work in Finland. It is a politically and religiously non-aligned lobbying body with more than a hundred national youth and educational organisations as members.

## **6. European associations and networks**

In addition to associations and networks of youth workers at country level, there are also a number of pan-European initiatives that seek, through different methods and contexts, to promote both youth work and the interests and concerns of youth workers.

The European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC), established in 1976, represents a European network of youth work and youth club organisations that practise and promote open youth work and non-formal education. With 19 nationally represented organisations in 18 countries and reaching over two million young people annually, the confederation seeks to promote democratic and civil society and to encourage young people to be actively involved in their community by providing them with the skills and knowledge to make their own informed decisions.

The European Network of Youth Centres (ENYC), established in 2003, has 16 members in 13 countries and is a voluntary association that aims to develop standards for local, regional

and national centres; provide support to individual centres; facilitate study visits and other exchanges so that centres can learn from each other; and promote the study of the processes of intercultural and international learning in non-formal settings.

Other related initiatives are the Council of Europe's Quality Label for Youth Centres, which aims to support the dissemination of quality standards for youth centres that have been developed in the European Youth Centres, including quality standards for educational and youth work activities, while Professional Open Youth Work in Europe (POYWE) aims to strengthen the position of professional open youth work through heightening its visibility and adopting common approaches to quality development.

## **7. Examples of associations, networks and support from across Europe**

This second part of the paper will briefly examine and consider the role and impact of three associations of youth workers – MAY (Maltese Association of Youth Workers), NAPOR (Association of Youth Workers) in Serbia and NUOLI (Youth and Sports Experts Association) in Finland – one network of youth centres, MaMa in Slovenia, and one support organisation, De Ambrassade in the Flemish Community of Belgium. In particular, it will consider the role they play and have played in the development of youth work as a discipline, a practice and a profession and the influence they have brought to bear in the promotion and implementation of youth work as a non-formal learning process for young people in their respective countries.

### **7.1 Maltese Association of Youth Workers (MAY)**

The Maltese Association of Youth Workers (MAY) was established in 1998. Its founding members comprised the first graduates of the first degree course (part-time) in Youth and Community Studies in Malta. In 1992, the University of Malta established an Institute of Youth Studies (now the Department of Youth and Community Studies) to provide training for those who wished to pursue a professional career as youth and community workers. Up until the 1990s, however, youth work was exclusively the domain of the voluntary sector and while the newly established Ministry of Youth and Arts published the first document on youth policy in 1993, the state provided no material or financial support.<sup>4</sup>

From the outset MAY had three primary aims. First, to promote professional youth work practice with the ultimate aim of having it formally recognised as a profession. Second, to advocate youth work as a non-formal learning process for young people. Third, to engage actively with the relevant ministry, authorities and stakeholders with a view to establishing

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4. Teuma M. (2018), "The past made us: perspectives on the development of youth work and social work in Malta", in Williamson H. et al. (eds), *The History of Youth Work in Europe*, Volume 6, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

sustainable management, administrative and financial support structures for youth work and, consequently, enhanced employment opportunities for youth workers.

In pursuit of its aims, MAY developed and published a Code of Ethics for Youth Workers in 2001. The association also applied for professional recognition from the Maltese Federation of Professional Associations that resulted in youth workers being represented, along with other professional associations, on national consultative bodies in relevant areas of policy development.

However, it was not until 2010 and the establishment of Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, the National Youth Agency, that the state provided the sustainable management, administrative and financial support structures for youth work that MAY had long sought and advocated. As a consequence, youth work was formally recognised as a profession under the Youth Work Profession Act, 2015.

MAY was and is a youth work success story. It played a significant role in transforming youth work in Malta from a voluntary activity and service for young people into a fully state-supported, funded and professionally recognised discipline. However, there were bigger actors in this success story. From the outset MAY emerged from a clear, established and recognised education path: a university degree. It already had or soon acquired recognisable aspects of professionalisation. While the state took time to commit itself, its intervention in providing sustainable management, administrative and financial support was to prove decisive for the future of youth work in Malta.

## ***7.2 National Association of Youth Workers in Serbia (NAPOR)***

NAPOR (National Association of Youth Workers)<sup>5</sup> in Serbia is a union of civil society organisations (CSOs) established in 2008, in the absence of a state-recognised and supported national association for youth work. NAPOR's primary aims were, first, to lobby, advocate and introduce new policies and influence laws for the recognition of youth work as a tool for youth employment and social inclusion, and second, to enhance the capacities of NAPOR members in order to increase quality youth work and consequently make a greater impact on youth unemployment.

NAPOR brings together 90 CSOs and over 2 250 youth workers and adopts a consultative and participatory approach in partnership with the Serbian Ministry for Youth and Sport. NAPOR pools the expertise and experience of its member organisations in providing support for advocacy, capacity building, working with marginalised youth, employment, education and research. This expertise and experience also enable NAPOR to analyse relevant national regional and local policies, laws and regulations. NAPOR is also recognised by the

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5. [www.napor.net](http://www.napor.net)

professional public in the field of youth policy as the national body of civil society organisations representing the voice of professionals working with diverse young people. NAPOR has also played a defining role in the development and implementation of standards and curricula.

Since its establishment, NAPOR has gained an impressive list of achievements, including the development of:

- three vocational/occupational standards in the field of youth work and non-formal education (Youth Activist, Youth Work Co-ordinator and Specialist for Youth Work and Policies);
- standards for quality youth work and non-formal education and a mechanism for their implementation;
- non-formal education curricula for the youth field;
- a mechanism for validation of previously attained competences in youth work;
- a pool of licensed organisations and trainers for delivery of multi-modular training for youth workers;
- a tool for the recognition of competences of young people gained through youth work programmes; and
- a code of ethics for youth work practice.

NAPOR is funded by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and also seeks financial support from European funding programmes.

In addition to its code of ethics, NAPOR also has an ethics council which is an independent body to ensure that the code of ethics is promoted and adhered to. The council is also mandated to respond to any breaches in the code of ethics and to make recommendations to member organisations to address such issues.

As an association, NAPOR also pools resources of experts from the field in the areas of youth and social policies and non-formal education, as well as from formal education institutions. It maintains relations and co-operates with national authorities and international bodies and donor organisations. NAPOR uses established partnerships with relevant European organisations and institutions to build its capacity and seeks examples of good practices which can be applied in Serbia and advocates their implementation.

NAPOR's work in Serbia over the past 10 years has been comprehensive and wide-ranging, from helping to formulate youth policy, to developing curriculum and quality and occupational standards, while also providing training and other support for youth workers. Its role, it might be argued, was largely determined at its inception: NAPOR emerged "in the absence of a state-recognised and supported national association for youth work" and has

effectively sought to fulfil that role. However, the general absence of formal education and training for youth workers in Serbia and the measured and nuanced approach of the state, which appears to have adopted a partnership approach with NAPOR, may also be relevant factors. In this context, and while the results of its work and endeavours have still to be fully realised, NAPOR may be seen as *primus inter pares* in terms of the evolution and development of youth work in Serbia.

### ***7.3 Youth and Sports Experts Association (NUOLI) in Finland***

NUOLI (literally, Arrow)<sup>6</sup> is a professional association and trade union affiliate organisation in Finland working in the field of professional work in the youth and sports sectors and in higher education institutions. It aims to promote awareness of the youth and sports sectors and the professional profile, disciplines and skills of its members and enhance the career prospects and working and study condition of its members.

NUOLI, which was founded in 2001, has 1 400 members, half of which are in employment as youth specialists or in the sports sector and half are in higher-level institutions pursuing a relevant degree. It is one of 23 member organisations of Akava Special Branches, a multidisciplinary trade union and services organisation whose members work in expert and managerial positions in the fields of culture, administration, communications and well-being. Akava's negotiating organisations, Senior Officials (YTN) and the Public Education Training Association (JUKO), are responsible for negotiating with employers. NUOLI is also actively involved in the development and advocacy activities of member organisations of Akava and other partners.

Members of both NUOLI and Akava are entitled to a wide range of benefits, services and support. These include:

- employment and legal services, wages counselling, influence and lobbying;
- unemployment, layoff or alternate leave services;
- conditions of employment in the private sector, including recommendations for a minimum wage;
- special education services for unemployed members;
- self-employment and self-employment guide;
- travel insurance, leisure accident insurance, liability and legal expenses insurance;
- family and financial advice.

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6. [www.nuoli.info](http://www.nuoli.info)

NUOLI also provides training and related events for its members as well as offering them the opportunity to profit from state-funded scholarships.

NUOLI and Akava also publish reports and surveys that monitor members' interaction with the labour market and emerging trends and issues. In addition, recommendations and guidance are also available in related work environments such as camping and other leisure-time activities in the municipal sector.

For NUOLI, professional ethics is an expression of attitude and responsibility as well as a basis for reflection on youth work practice. Ethical guidance, as set out in two publications – “Professional ethics in youth work” and “Small acts, big issues – Ethics for youth work” – is seen as a practical tool that can be used in everyday youth work settings as well as an integral part of induction, training and problem-solving.

NUOLI, as a professional association and affiliate trade union organisation, not only reflects the essentially professional status of youth workers in Finland, but also the parity of esteem in which they are regarded by professional associates in related fields. This parity is also reflected in its formal negotiating and bargaining position with both the state and the private sector and in its role as advocate and provider of professionally recognised advice and support to its members.

#### ***7.4 Youth Network MaMa in Slovenia***

While there is no formal education or accredited qualifications for youth workers in Slovenia, there are many different generic training opportunities available for youth workers, both paid and voluntary, in project management, communication skills, public relations, intercultural learning, intergeneration co-operation, and fundraising and organisational management.

The main providers are the Slovenian National Youth Council, Institute Movit, the national agency for Erasmus+, various NGOs and the Youth Network MaMa.

The main public funding sources are the Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth, the Erasmus+ programme and local communities.

The MaMa Youth Network<sup>7</sup> is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that brings together and represents organisations that run youth centres in Slovenia. At present, there are 47 youth centres that are member organisations of the network. Youth workers are either employed or are volunteers in youth centres and MaMa's primary focus is on the training and professional development of youth workers.

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7. [www.mreza-mama.si](http://www.mreza-mama.si)

MaMa provides supports to its member organisations through a range of measures that include:

- connecting organisations running youth centres or other activities in the field of youth work;
- representing common interests of member organisations in relations with the state sector;
- regularly informing members and other interested parties on issues and activities relating to youth work;
- organising meetings and promoting communication and project interaction between member organisations;
- offering professional support to member organisations;
- providing non-formal education for young people and youth workers.

MaMa's Development Strategy (2016-2021) focuses on developing the potential of some 50 youth centres and the training of youth workers. Central to this strategic approach is the MLADIM project, which was co-financed by Slovenia and the EU's European Social Fund and aimed at strengthening the competences of young people to increase their employment prospects.

The MLADIM project, which was implemented over a two-year period, 2016-2018, encompassed 18 youth centres. Youth workers in these centres participated in the project to develop their skills and competences in order to be able to deliver training modules. In addition, 360 unemployed young people between the ages of 15 and 29 were also included in the project through the youth centres. Following the culmination of the project, the youth centres' aim was to employ 32 trained youth workers. The project sought to provide a sustainable model for the training and employment of youth workers in youth centres and to further strengthen the active citizenship of young people. The project employed innovative and inventive methods of training, based on non-formal learning methods, and provided support and visibility for youth centres at local, regional and national level.

The project's system of training for active citizenship and enhancing the competences of young people consisted of 10 modules based on non-formal learning methods, and comprised:

- the basics of youth work
- an evaluation of youth work
- project management
- international youth work
- public relations and communication
- peer-to-peer information for young people
- youth worker as mentors and instructors



- education for citizenship and social inclusion
- social skills for young people.

The MaMa Youth Network is an example of voluntary youth NGOs that are largely reliant on European co-operation and financial support. While it exemplifies the benefits of partnership and co-operation between countries, European institutions and European funding programmes such as the European Social Fund and Erasmus+, it also casts light on some of the limitations. Partnerships are reliant on mutual support and allocated funding. Projects are time bound, thus raising issues of sustainability and durability, and tend to focus on current and perhaps transient policy issues such as unemployment, where the training and employability of youth workers may be a welcome by-product rather than a sustainable commitment.

### ***7.5 De Ambrassade in Belgium***

While there are no associations of youth workers, per se, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, there are a number of national umbrella associations and centres that support youth work and youth workers. The Federation Formaats is an umbrella organisation that supports 400 youth clubs by providing information, training, education, support and advice. Other national umbrella organisations, such as Chiro Flanders and Scouts en Gidsen Flanders, comprise both professional and voluntary staff and support local youth organisations by providing training and exchanges and promoting mutual co-operation and working together.

De Ambrassade<sup>8</sup> is not an association of youth workers, but a centre that supports over 100 organisations that are recognised under the Flemish Parliament Act of 2012. De Ambrassade (youth support structure) is recognised and grant-aided by the Flemish Government and is mandated to carry out specific tasks that include practice development, practice support and the provision of information to and about the youth sector. Its stated mission is to put “youth, youth work, youth information and youth policy on the map ... strengthen the position of children and young people in society and contribute to the happiness and well-being of all children and all young people”.

De Ambrassade is at once:

- an expertise centre for youth work, youth information and youth policy;
- a support and network organisation for the youth work sector in Flanders and Brussels;
- the co-ordinator for youth information in Flanders;

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8. <https://ambrassade.be>

- the link organisation between youth and other sectors that have an impact on children and young people;
- the catalyst behind the Flemish Youth Council, the official advisory council for the Flemish Government on all areas that concern children, young people and their organisations in Flanders.

De Ambrassade's values are durability, solidarity and participation, which it seeks to promote through experiment and open public debate with the aim of fostering "a sustainable, inclusive and participatory society with room for experiment and open public debate", by providing both young people and youth workers with relevant information, inspiration and appropriate training. De Ambrassade sees itself as the engine in a network of youth players and cross-sectoral partners that includes the Flemish Youth Services Association (VVJ), the Flemish knowledge centre for international youth mobility and international youth policy, the national agency for the Erasmus+ programme in Flanders (JINT), the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (KeKi) and the Children's Rights Coalition. Participatory work and co-operation with relevant partners are common threads in De Ambrassade's internal and external organisational structures – "by continuously interacting with our co-owners, we continuously shape the organisation together".

De Ambrassade is, as officially mandated, a youth support structure in Flanders that also supports youth workers, among others. It is not *primus inter pares* but rather just one organisation in a network of mutually supportive and inter-related bodies that aim to strengthen and add value to youth work in Flanders. Despite its focus on experimentation, its values are those of sustainability and durability which of themselves reflect the long tradition and embedded nature of youth work in Flanders.

## **8. Summary and conclusions**

The fact that 19 of the 24 respondent countries are classified as having either "strong practice architectures" or "strong practice architectures with room for development on a certain level" in "Diversity of Practice Architectures on education and career paths for youth workers in Europe" may indicate that associations or networks of youth workers tend to be a feature of those countries where youth work is either well embedded with both status and support or at least in countries where youth work is being developed. Membership of associations of youth workers can vary widely in size and their provision of training for their members, whether in-house or contracted, tends to be patchy and uneven. While they all appear to have a role in advocating and promoting youth work as a profession, with due regard for ethics and standards and seeking to improve the working conditions and career prospects of their members, they also display and reflect issues related to youth work in general as outlined in the mapping report. Associations of youth workers tend to reflect the overlap and blurring of the lines between youth work and related fields such as social work,

child welfare and leisure-time activities evident in the mapping report. In some instances, associations of youth workers are effectively subsumed into associations of social workers and teachers. Finally, associations of youth workers can effectively be trade unions with the consequent bargaining power with employers in the state and private sectors.

Youth workers, whether paid or voluntary, working in a wide range of youth work settings can also benefit from information, training, advice and other support provided by networks or umbrella organisations, while there are also a number of bodies whose main task is supporting the development of youth work in general and who can consequently provide related support for youth workers.

The role, nature and features of the associations and networks of youth workers in Belgium, Finland, Malta, Serbia and Slovenia that we considered in part two of the paper appear to be very much determined by the status and role of youth work in these countries on the one hand, and, on the other, by the extent to which youth work is embedded and has a history in these countries and the support and recognition it gets, particularly from the state. This also appears to be generally the case in all of the 24 countries that have associations and networks of youth workers.

The associations and networks we considered in both Belgium and Finland appear to be specific, focused and tailored in relation to issues concerning youth work and youth workers. This is also the case in Malta, where the association of youth workers had two specifically focused outcomes for youth work and youth workers: state support and professionalisation. In the case of both Serbia and Slovenia, however, the associations and networks we considered appear to be looser, more fragmented and at the same time broader and more comprehensive in relation to issues concerning youth work and youth workers. For example, in Finland NUOLI is a trade union and professional association focused on the well-being of its members in terms of pay, employment security and prospects, working conditions and associated benefits and support. In Serbia, however, NAPOR has undertaken a very broad and varied role in relation to youth work and youth workers, including legislation, standards, quality, curriculum, training and validation. These different roles might be traced back to the nature and features of youth work itself in these countries, the extent to which it is embedded and has a history and the extent to which it is recognised and supported, particularly by the state.

While there are many aspects to the role that associations and networks can play in promoting youth work and in facilitating education and career paths for youth workers, three in particular may be worthy of further consideration: capacity, sustainability and value.

The mapping report singles out the respective roles of the state, either centrally, regionally or locally, through public-funded bodies or institutions; European support programmes; and the voluntary youth sector, in the provision of youth work. While each of these stakeholders or partners has its role, responsibilities and capacities, they are not commensurate or proportionate. The state, it might be argued, whether at national, regional or local level and in whatever manner or context, has the greater role, responsibility and capacity. Only the state has the legal authority, the legislative fiat and the financial muscle to determine both the role of youth work and youth workers. As indicated in the mapping report:

in a minority of countries, with a history of youth work and where it is embedded, education/training and employment paths 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 paths often appear both limited and sparse.<sup>9</sup>

In countries where youth work is embedded, the role of the state, in whatever manner or context, is a significant factor. The role of European support programmes, while relatively recent, is also significant, but such programmes tend to be measured, tailored and time bound in terms of both programme duration and funding.

When we come to the voluntary youth sector, however, we see a somewhat different picture. The capacity of the voluntary youth sector is potentially considerable in terms of its human resources, but it is not proportionate to the youth work load it often assumes and carries. While the voluntary sector is often the most active stakeholder in terms of its interface with young people “on the ground”, it is the stakeholder with least capacity in terms of financial and material resources. The voluntary youth sector does not have the capacity or resources of the state. The work and capacity of the voluntary sector, it might be argued, is often bedevilled by a lack of money and resources, which when available are often temporary and conditional. It can fall to the voluntary youth sector to involve itself in legislative, quality, standards and training issues for which it may not have the necessary expertise or capacity. Associations and networks of youth workers are a significant feature of the voluntary youth sector in Europe and as such share the lack of proportionate capacity that is a feature of voluntary youth work in general. As a consequence, it might be argued, responsibility for youth work and youth workers is not proportionally shared between the relevant stakeholders and partners.

Lack of capacity is intertwined with lack of sustainability. The state and, to a certain extent, European support programmes can provide sustainability, but for the voluntary youth sector, including associations and networks of youth workers, sustainability is an ever-present issue if not danger.

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9. O’Donovan et al., “Mapping the educational and career paths of youth workers” (2018).

Finally, there is the issue of value. What, we might ask, is the particular value of associations and networks of youth workers in the context of both youth work and education and career paths for youth workers? What in particular can or should associations and networks of youth workers do? What in particular can they not or should not do? And, what in particular can such associations and networks do that none of the other stakeholders in the youth field can do? As we can see from this paper, associations and networks of youth workers can take on many forms in response to different contexts, situations and needs. However, advocating and promoting the values and role of youth work, peer-to-peer learning and support, professional ethics and instilling self-esteem and pride in youth workers and the contribution they can make to young people's development and the general well-being of communities and society might be a starting point from which to further explore the value of and opportunities for associations and networks of youth workers.