



DECLARATION
of
THE 1ST EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK
CONVENTION

Ghent, Belgium, 7-10 July 2010

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Preamble

The 1st European Youth Work Convention took place under the Belgium EU Presidency in July 2010. Nine years after the European Union launched the White Paper on Youth under the previous Presidency in Belgium, the youth work and youth policy community returned to Ghent. For the first time, the focus was exclusively on youth work. The Convention sought to connect the past, present and future thinking and practice of youth work. Over 400 participants from 50 countries took part in an intensive and robust debate – through plenary sessions, ‘youth work in action’ workshops, visits to local youth projects and thematic seminars over three days. The Convention was preceded by a conference exploring the history of youth work in Europe, a third such event following two previous seminars in Blankenberge, Belgium. It has produced the following ideas. This Declaration is addressed to the Ministers responsible for youth for the 50 countries belonging to the European Union and/or the Council of Europe, other European institutions, and political structures concerned with young people at national, regional and local government, and of course the youth work field and young people themselves.

History

There are many histories of youth work in Europe as well as a more recent history of European-level youth work. It is characterised by diversity, tension and development. It has been informed and led in many different ways – through social movements, youth organisations and associations, by faith groups, the non-governmental sector and national, regional and local youth policy. It has engaged with different groups of young people, often distinguished by social class, religious belief, political affiliation, or cultural interests. It has been organised in different ways, at times led by adults, at others co-managed or self-managed by young people themselves.

Youth work today

Youth work is both complex and often misunderstood on account of that complexity. Put simply, however, it does two things. It provides space for association, activity, dialogue and action. And it provides support, opportunity and experience for young people as they move from childhood to adulthood. In today’s Europe, it is guided and governed by principles of participation and empowerment, values of human rights and democracy, and anti-discrimination and tolerance. It is informed by a range of policies and research knowledge. It is delivered by both volunteers and paid workers. It is established through a voluntary relationship with young people. It is financed and managed in a variety of ways. It is quintessentially a social practice, working between young people and the societies in which they live. For these reasons, it has had to accommodate and deal with a range of tensions generated by this relationship. These include reconciling youth research, policy and practice, making sense of different youth policy agendas (European, national, regional and local), establishing a position in cross-sectorial activity, dealing with issues of training, competence and recognition, as well as furthering pedagogical, relational and methodological approaches to youth work practice.

Youth work is defined in the Council resolution on a renewed framework for European co-operation in the youth field (2010-2018) as

a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities also include sports and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ education as well as specific leisure time activities, managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation

During the Convention it was defined more briefly as the provision of ‘space and opportunity for young people to shape their own futures’. 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.

The focus of attention at the Convention has been contemporary youth work and youth work in the future – drawing from the lessons of the past. In the context of the changed and changing life contexts of young people, numerous questions were raised about whether or not youth work needed to change, the relationship between youth work and youth policy, and the contribution of youth work to the wider circumstances of young people. Specific challenges in the debates included the role of youth work in addressing youth unemployment, issues of quality and qualifications in youth work, and the forms of youth work required for living together in diverse societies. Participants invested significant energy on issues such as the accessibility, standards, recognition, resourcing and impact of youth work.

Youth work and policy priorities

There remains a relatively limited understanding and engagement between youth work on the one hand and politics and (youth) policy on the other. Politicians may need to establish a better knowledge of youth work, but youth workers also have to secure a stronger grasp of how policy is made.

Where policy development is concerned, authorities have tended to follow their own priorities and agendas rather than those of youth work and those of young people. Greater links between 'top down' and 'bottom up' priorities are needed. Youth workers should be involved in policy-making discussions in broader policy fields which affect the lives of young people; they should also be consulted on policy that may have more indirect effects on young people. It is important that policy development within the youth field and beyond engages both with organised and less organised young people. Youth organisations play a significant role in these processes.

Youth workers and young people should be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of youth policy. Specific initiatives in the youth field should be constructed on the principles and values of youth work: rights-based, opportunity-focused, with a positive orientation, and based on equality of access and involvement.

The 'structured dialogue' developed in recent years and dialogue with national, regional and local youth councils, as well as the European Youth Forum and the Advisory Council of the Council of Europe, are both illustrations of the progress that has taken place in recent years. However, such processes need to be strengthened in the future through broadening the base of this dialogue and more application of practices of co-management.

Position and cross-sectorial co-operation

Youth work has, historically, arguably operated in isolation. It is now expected, increasingly, to engage in far greater professional collaboration within a broader framework of cross-sectorial policy development in the youth field. Cross-sectorial co-operation takes different forms: between educational sectors, between agencies and policy domains affecting young people (such as health, employment or justice), between funding sources, and at different levels of administration. Few would disagree that more communication, co-ordination and co-operation is required. Yet, for youth work to engage better in such processes, there is the challenge of its identity and a fear of instrumentalisation. Youth work can sometimes be the weak partner within such arrangements, producing concerns about the erosion of its distinctive contribution to young people's lives.

Such co-operation makes the sharing of good practice and the development of more collaborative practice more possible. Youth work is, of course, well-placed to enable contact and intervention with young people. It can, however, feel that its privileged position and relationship with young people can be compromised through joint working with agencies such as the police or vocational training providers, even if ultimately goals are shared between the agencies and young people themselves. The trust and credibility youth workers command with young people can be rapidly undermined unless the 'rules of engagement' are carefully negotiated on an equal basis and from a starting point of mutual respect.

Information, impact and effect

Precisely because of the diversity of youth work, there needs to be an equivalently diverse approach to identifying the contribution it makes both to young people and to society. Classical evaluation tools need to be supplemented by the dissemination of good practice on which others in the field can reflect. There is a relatively thin knowledge base on youth work. Despite the development of the European Knowledge Centre on Youth Policy, other forms of collection, dissemination and translation of information on youth work principles, policy and practice are required; not all youth workers can read English! There are information resources at a European level, but there is a need for a stronger guide to their location and accessibility; it was suggested that youthwork.eu represents a promising start.

Only with better information and knowledge on youth work can its impact be better understood, disseminated and evaluated. Both quantitative and qualitative 'evidence' needs to be collected, collated and analysed.

The objectives of such information gathering are to promote the visibility of youth work, foster quality in practice, and thereby enhance the credibility of youth work. At another level, it is important to secure evidenced information on the living conditions of young people as a basis for strategic and operational thinking about youth work and youth policy. Both youth surveys and youth monitoring are relevant to this need. Through these and other mechanisms youth work can really 'start where young people are at'.

In relation to the outcomes and impact of youth work, the proclaimed 'triangle' of youth research, policy and practice needs to be enlarged into a square incorporating youth organisations and young people. Perspectives from all sides need to be a platform for any consideration of impact. A mapping exercise or inventory of the forms and volume of youth work in member states is urgently required both to understand and broadcast current examples of good practice and to establish the strategic direction for youth work in the future.

Youth work for all and in diversity

Diversity in youth work is linked to accessibility for all. The Convention stressed the importance of 'low threshold' practice that provided an open door. However, youth workers need more advanced training in, and commitment to universal values in order to face the rapidly changing demands of diverse populations of young people. The training proposed must move beyond understanding the need for tolerance to the acquisition of knowledge and competencies around cultural diversity. Furthermore, there is, today, a stronger case for role modelling through strengthening diversity within youth work organisations and youth work administrations.

Youth work must avoid seeing any group of young people solely as targets for inclusion and participation and more as partners in activism for the promotion of diversity in society. In the context of new inter-faith and intercultural conditions in Europe, some older forms of youth work such as community development and community action need to be reflected on and adapted to new times.

The quality of practice

Youth work is an unusual professional practice in that it is delivered both by voluntary and paid workers. There is no clear division of labour in the roles played by either; indeed, both can be found in virtually all arenas of youth work's diverse activities. Their relationship is often complementary and mutually supportive. However, because of their differences, there have been particular challenges around issues of quality, competence, and recognition. This has often distilled into a clash between professionalisation and professionalism. It is a complex debate, with concern about exclusivity if a certain level of qualification becomes the sole threshold of professionalism. While there is no doubt that there is a growing cluster of knowledge, skills and attitudes for doing many aspects of youth work – around, for example, policy, ethics, risk, management, budgeting and practical engagement with young people - these have often been acquired by those with a long experience of voluntary practice. Routes to individual validation through the accreditation of prior learning must therefore be established and respected. This can be achieved through the setting of quality standards and the identification of generic competencies. Such a framework could be developed at the European level and applied through national structures, delivered through flexible education and training systems, as well as self-regulated through a professional code of ethics governing the behaviour of youth workers in their contact with young people.

Competence, training and recognition

Though there may be no need for an homogeneous training system for youth workers, there is a need for a competence-building framework based on approaches to learning such as developing theoretical understanding, practice supervision (and co-supervision), coaching, e-learning, peer learning, observation and assessment. These need to be available over time, with appropriate reflection and follow-up. Just as for young people themselves, youth workers need to engage in recurrent learning in order to deal effectively with the changing circumstances in which they have to work. In order to promote understanding of the increasing youth work practice undertaken in other sectors, as a result of cross-sectorial developments, there is also a case for youth workers spending time learning in other youth research, policy and practice environments. In short, training needs to be flexible, appropriate and incremental. Where possible, its European dimension should be intercultural, transnational, and linked both physically and methodologically to a European programme.

Not only do the necessary resources need to be attached to such provision but there has to be stronger recognition of youth work, both within and outside youth policy structures, if a virtuous circle of quality, competence and improved practice is to be secured. There is an argument for having strategies for the recognition and validation of youth work at European, national and local, and sometimes organisational levels. Yet whatever tools and instruments for accreditation, certification and recognition are developed, there remain key questions about usage, currency and credibility. These need to be explored and, where necessary, weaknesses acknowledged and addressed. It is likely that such a process needs to set up platforms for dialogue on this front with those from other sectors of the public administration, different levels of youth policy and practice, and the private sector.

Mobility and networking

Exchange between youth workers and young people from different cultures, backgrounds and youth work experiences is important for quality development, for learning and support, for knowledge transfer, and for extending opportunities for developing and implementing youth work at an international level. Though the possibilities for exchange have been enhanced over recent years, there remain obstacles such as finance, language and personal and professional status. There was a call for mobility as a right for all, and therefore mechanisms for dealing with various obstacles need to be developed.

To improve networking and exchange, practitioners from across Europe in all sectors of youth work should have the means and opportunities for dialogue, contact and co-operation, and for those working in particular areas of youth work there should be more specific forms for association. There was also a call for stronger international mobility opportunities for youth workers. The Youth in Action programme goes some way to address these issues, but these need to be taken further. To that end, there should be more discussion of the value of face-to-face contact through international mobility, though there is already a strong consensus on the key elements of impact on youth work practice that derive from such experiences.

Sustainable support and funding

There is a strong imperative to develop a legal framework for youth work that ensures a core budget that guarantees the sustainability of infrastructure, projects and youth work development. This legal framework could require the production of local youth work action plans, identifying the resources needed for delivery from different levels of funding. Multiple funding sources should reflect different levels within the range of youth work provision and should not be played off against each other. There should be clear and transparent criteria for the funding of youth work; both established and new youth work initiatives and organisations should have equal chances of securing these resources.

National governments were held to be primarily responsible for the funding of youth work. European funds were viewed as playing a triple additional role in both the development and implementation of youth work. First, youth programmes at a European level – such as the Youth in Action programme - represent an increasingly critical provision, for social inclusion, youth mobility and active citizenship. Secondly, their distinctive contribution to the lives of young people and to youth workers, and to the conceptualisation of youth work itself, is important in framing and shaping, as well as supporting new forms of practice. Third, the programmes remain invaluable in ‘kick starting’ support for youth work activity, and demonstrating its value, in areas where there is little tradition or understanding of such practice. For 2020, the horizon for European strategies within and beyond the youth field, making such guarantees to Europe’s young people will be an essential plank for achieving their objectives. Youth work will, however, also have to explore broader sources of funding and youth workers will need improved competence in income generation.

Next Steps

The Convention recognised the responsibility of youth workers themselves to contribute when it can on the agendas outlined above, but they also need enabling politically and financially. At the European level, there is a range of political initiatives and actions in the youth field (and beyond but still affecting young people, youth work and youth policy) taking place over the next year. The content of this Declaration should therefore be taken into account in those debates. The Declaration is intended to encourage the maintenance of attention to youth work and young people within these policy debates. These include:

- Europe 2020 strategy and its flagship project ‘Youth on the Move’
- The anticipated Recommendation of the Council on the Promotion of Mobility
- The anticipated Recommendation of the Council on the Recognition of Non-Formal Learning
- The new generation of programmes that will follow Youth in Action in 2013
- The preceding debate that will inform the design of the future EU ‘youth’ programme
- The further development of non-formal learning dimensions of Europass
- The new Pathways 2.0 on the validation and recognition of non-formal learning
- The new training strategy on youth work in Europe within the Youth in Action programme

The 1st European Youth Work Convention, from which this Declaration has emerged, has started the debate on youth work in Europe. The Convention asks that the momentum established should be taken forward within the existing youth policy frameworks of both the European Union and the Council of Europe:

- The renewed framework for European co-operation in the youth field
- The Resolution on the youth policy of the Council of Europe

The Convention requests that, on the basis of this Declaration, the European Union, the Council of Europe and their member states, and the current and next trio Presidencies of the EU should build up an agenda, an action plan and the necessary resources for its realisation. The agenda should culminate in a 2nd European Youth Work Convention. To conclude, this Declaration also looks forward to the content and subsequent deliberations of the Resolution on Youth Work of the Council under the Belgium Presidency.