TAKING STOCK
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Where are we now?
Youth Work in contemporary Europe

**Published on the occasion of Belgium's
Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

EU
NEEDS
YOUTH

Howard Williamson
2024

Colophon

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The author

Dr Howard Williamson is Professor of European Youth Policy at the University of South Wales in the United Kingdom. He holds visiting academic positions elsewhere in Europe and in other parts of the world.

He is a UK nationally qualified youth and community worker, ran an open youth centre for 25 years and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteered as a municipal community resilience youth support worker.

He has advised both the Welsh and UK governments on a range of 'youth policy' issues - formal education, substance misuse, housing and homelessness, criminal justice and youth training and employment. In respect of youth work, he was Chair of the Wales Youth Work Partnership in the 1980s and Vice-Chair/Acting Chair of the Wales Youth Agency from 1992 to 2006, and co-chair of the Youth Work Alliance (involving the four nations of the UK, and Ireland) as well as providing advice on subsequent youth work strategies in Wales. He has been an external examiner for over thirty years on numerous education and training programmes for youth workers. He is a member of the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership's Pool of Experts in Youth Work Development.

At European level, he has worked closely with both the European Commission and the Council of Europe on youth sector issues since the 1980s. Amongst many contributions to publications, conferences and other events, he co-ordinated the Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policies, co-edited the seven volumes on the History of Youth Work in Europe, and was rapporteur for the three European Youth Work Conventions between 2010 and 2020.

He has published over 50 books and 800 articles, roughly a quarter of them relating to youth work and almost all concerning young people's lives. He has spoken at well over 1,000 conferences, all over the world. He delivered the keynote professional address at the 1st UN Global Forum on Youth Policies, in Azerbaijan in 2014.

In 2002, he was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), for services to young people; and in 2017, Her Majesty the Queen appointed him as a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (CVO), for his services to royal youth charities. In 2019, he received an Outstanding Contribution to Youth Work Award (Youth Work Excellence Award) from the First Minister of Wales.

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My special thanks go to Jan Vanhee and to Koen Lambert of JINT, for involving me in and supporting my contribution to the 'youth sector' dimension of Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I would also like to thank the Informal European Advisory and Resonance Group for its thoughts, particularly those members who provided me with their particular insights. And very special thanks to those I will not identify, who have great expertise in certain areas, who were asked to contribute their understanding and ideas and did so willingly as a favour to me. That was really appreciated and I hope I have not distorted your views too much!

Introductory Note

Minister Dalle and Howard Williamson, October 2023

As Flemish Minister for Youth, I am deeply convinced of the inestimable value of the power and added value of youth work in the lives and development of children and young people. Youth work provides a safe context for children and young people. They meet peers there and find a moment of relief from their worries. Youth work connects them with others, gives them a sense of belonging and that they matter, and thus contributes to their well-being. Through youth work, they not only learn to cope with challenges, but they also build resilience for future changes and challenges. It is therefore crucial to support and further develop quality youth work based on simplified, well-organised and comprehensive youth work policy with a focus on support and funding mechanisms. Youth policy must ensure that youth work is accessible to all children and young people. In this vein, my ambition is to align the European youth policy efforts with both existing and future children's rights agendas, harmonizing European and international policy agendas concerning children, youth, and children’s rights.

The Belgian EU Presidency 2024 in the field of youth focuses on the development of youth work (policy) in Europe, with a special focus on quality youth work development, notably at the local level. We initiate the 'Resolution on Youth Work Policy in a New Europe' and organize the 'European Conference on Local Youth Work and Democracy'.

Our aim is to strengthen the implementation of existing policies and good practices while giving a new impetus to youth work (policy) in an ever-changing Europe. With more than two decades of youth work policy development in Europe, in which Belgium played an important pioneering role, we build on milestones such as the 2010 Council Resolution on Youth Work, the 2017 Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work, the European Youth Work Agenda through the Bonn Process and the 1st, 2nd and 3rd European Youth Work Conventions (EYWC) and their final declarations. The European Conference on Local Youth Work and Democracy also serves as a hub between the 3rd EYWC in 2020 and the 4th EYWC to be organised in Malta in 2025. European youth work (policy) has made significant progress, but with the fast-changing realities and urgent challenges facing young people in Europe, the question arises as to how youth work (policy) should adapt to support them effectively in finding their way in these challenging times.

Dr Howard Williamson, a leading expert in youth work policy and professor of European youth policy at the University of South Wales, brings valuable insights with more than 50 years of experience in youth and community work, youth research and youth policy. His advice to national (Wales and UK) and European governments has had a profound impact on youth policy, making him a valuable resource for contributing to shaping Belgium's 2024 EU Presidency in the field of youth. His publication "TAKING STOCK - Where are we now? Youth Work in contemporary Europe" offers a synthesis of the evolution of youth work policy in Europe. It is an overview of where we have come from, where we are now and where we need to go next. In this book, he identifies the essential building blocks that should be taken into account when shaping youth work (policy) in a new Europe.

Benjamin DALLE, Flemish Minister for Brussels Affairs, Youth, Media and Poverty Reduction

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Rationale

What can two Erasmus+ youth projects (*Europe Goes Local* and *Democracy Reloading*) tell us and teach us in terms of new insights regarding youth work development in Europe?

Under Belgium's EU Youth Presidency, these projects are co-bearers of the upcoming European conference on Youth Work. This will be one of our Presidency highlights. Building further on the content, richness and characteristics of youth work (eg. the European Union Resolution 2010; the Council of Europe Recommendation 2017; the European Union Resolution on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda 2020), they will help us as the vehicles for shaping youth work in a new Europe. Special attention will be paid to the local level and, among other themes, participatory culture, the right to play, the importance of public space, and mental wellbeing.

The European Youth Work Conference and the (new) EU resolution on youth work in a new Europe will provide a new impetus in youth work development in Europe from 2024.

(Jan Vanhee 15th February 2023, edited and adapted by the author)

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Author’s Note

This publication, though anchored in references to public documentation, also draws on the author’s personal engagement with youth work development in Europe over almost 40 years – within and beyond both the European Commission and the Council of Europe – and so, occasionally, makes use of requested and invited observations by colleagues in the youth sector, personal recollections and anecdotes, and notes made during various relevant meetings that may provide reflections and perspectives that are rather different from the official minutes!

Furthermore, this text is my personal tribute to my friend, colleague, confidante and mentor, Jan Vanhee, with whom I have worked on youth work and youth policy development in Europe over the past quarter of a century.

Howard Williamson
Treforest, Wales
January 2024

It is necessary to foster **forums and free spaces** where people – not just children and young people – can meet and play, and in doing so experiment with different roles and relationships, where they acquire and practice insights and skills not covered by the formal educational systems. Through youth work of this kind, young people develop biographical, institutional and political competences. Play may be the royal carousel that makes youth work both attractive and powerful, but there is much more to it than that. Youth work is also about building **bridges** between different groups (across all possible dividing lines in society). This is so necessary in our super-diverse societies where polarisation, populism and intolerance are growing hand over fist. And yes, youth work also has the potential to build bridges to school and social work (which are the cradles of youth work), and bridges to include young people more smoothly into the labour market….

We should not put too much effort into the discussion of what youth work is and what makes it of inestimable value to society. To put it simply: we need more youth work for more children and young people. It is indispensable for their development and for our democracies. Democracy is more fragile than ever. Reaching out to more young people, reaching out and bringing together more different young people, enabling them to orient themselves in an increasingly complex society… this may all be far more difficult than approximately two decades ago. This makes the need to invest in youth work (and other social pedagogical practices) more urgent than ever.

Filip Coussée, October 2023, emphasis original; personal correspondence

In his political guidelines, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker emphasised the importance of renewed attention to young people…. He has warned against what he termed 'a 29th state' that is emerging within the borders of the European Union, 'a state in which young people became unemployed, a state in which we see people excluded, set back and left by the wayside'….
Youth work helps young people to develop skills and competences in many areas; but it also helps them to strengthen their networks, to change their behaviour and to build positive relationships. In this sense, youth work contributes to society, offering the chance for contact, exchange and engagement among young people and across generations. At the same time it is of value in its own right.
Youth work continues to evolve…. The emphasis is on improving young people's life chances, and on giving them better opportunities on the labour market and in education. The remit has widened to include assisting them as they face more complex transitions…
Cross-agency work is a rising trend over recent years, accompanied by new challenges and opportunities; in this context it is important to understand what youth work can offer compared to other sectors, in terms of purpose, value or way of doing things. This is all the more important at a time when borders are blurring between youth work and other sectors, and when youth work is coming out of its niche to respond to issues facing young people, while reaching out to them in places where they can be found.
[T]here is also a clear and widely shared message that youth workers themselves can help to shape the future. Not only can they bring new and wider resources to their work with young people, they can also help to create a louder common voice that can influence policy and change in education and society (European Commission 2015)

In all countries youth workers have to rethink their function and position in the social, cultural, economical and political integration of young people… As the social and political context is changing, youth work has to reflect on its identity and its relation to the state and to other socialisation institutions and environments[1]

The flexible human being is exactly the one who is formed by all instances of socialisation and educational institutions in modern societies. Human beings should be flexible, agile, ready for lifelong learning, fast, creative and alert, while with all those attitudes not thinking critically on their own, but conformistic (Harald Welzer; translation anon.)

Or should youth work "be inconvenient, be sand and not the oil in the gearbox of the world"? (Günter Eich)

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[1] eu.trio.be (2010), p.7

Preface

The times when Belgium has held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union have a special place in the history and evolution of the youth sector generally, and youth work in particular, throughout Europe, not just the Europe of the EU member states but the wider, larger Europe, as reflected in the membership of the Council of Europe.

In 2001, following two years of preparatory work under the presidencies of Portugal, France and Sweden, Belgium presided over the launch of an EU White Paper: *A new impetus for European youth*.

In 2010, Belgium organised the first European Youth Work Convention, which led to the first EU *Resolution on Youth Work*. Now, 14 years later, Belgium will preside over events that seek to provide *a new impetus for European youth work*.

During the intervening years, not only has the 'frame' for European youth work – and youth work in Europe - developed significantly, as this book will recount, but 'Europe' has changed dramatically. There is, without any doubt, on account of a multitude of factors – including a financial crisis, the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and democratic backsliding – a transforming and arguably 'new' Europe, in which the young people of Europe are having to live their lives and shape their futures. It is a Europe of urgent new pressures (security, energy), emergent challenges (post-Covid health and learning recovery, democratic backsliding) and continuing and unfolding circumstances that will also put the European project to the test (climate, employment, technology).

Some might contend that the principles and values of youth work are inalienable and that the 'facticity' and 'validity' of the 2010 EU *Resolution on Youth Work* remains pertinent today. That may be so and there is no dispute that that Resolution forms a foundational anchor for European youth work. There is, however, no doubt that Europe is now a very different place for the next generation of young people. That begs the question of what, in relation to the concept, development and delivery of youth work, needs to be continued, what needs to be strengthened and reinforced, and what may need to be introduced as additional ways of thinking about youth work policy and practice in this changed Europe. Youth work at any level has, perhaps paradoxically through its 'holistic' philosophy of practice, always addressed multiple issues in the contexts of young people's lives and there is now a 'perfect storm' of prospective issues that could be addressed.

The question, therefore, is how youth work needs to position itself, and perhaps change too, in order to support young people in Europe in their efforts to navigate their pathways to autonomy in these challenging circumstances, through the exercise of agency, participation and inclusion, and in a context of optimum well-being, political and civic engagement and a sense of self-determination.

1. Context and Concept

At the end of September 2022, the Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies of the three communities of Belgium[2] proposed the organisation of a joint conference 'Local youth work and democracy', to discuss the role of local youth work in enhancing youth engagement and participation in local communities in the framework of the Belgian EU Presidency[3]. The event was envisioned as a common initiative between **Europe Goes Local** (co-ordinated by JINT vzw) and **Democracy Reloading** (co-ordinated by BIJ), designed to build on the synergies deriving from the two projects and thereby to contribute to the political goals of the EU Presidency of Belgium in relation to youth policy and youth work policy.

The initial proposal anticipated a cluster of outcomes accruing from the event, notably networking and peer learning, the gathering of good practices (around youth policy, youth work and democracy at the local level), and a mapping of the role and responsibilities – and needs - of local and regional authorities in improving democracy through youth work and youth participation.

In response to this proposal, the Flemish authorities (having the lead role on the youth agenda during Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the European Union) determined to pursue the concept, though with the additional political objective of producing a European (EU) Resolution on Youth Work, one that succeeds and supersedes its predecessor (2010) and which resonates more strongly with the conditions and challenges now facing young people in the 'new Europe', a Europe that has had to address the COVID-19 pandemic and is also grappling with war within its borders, the climate emergency, global economic competitiveness, the cost of living, and other proclaimed 'crises', though some might prefer to talk less dramatically of challenges, circumstances or even opportunities.

Youth work has been defined in so many different ways that its meaning has, too often, been lost in the ether of intellectual debate: in effect, it has become meaning*less*, save to capture and reflect some kind of work carried out by or with young people. Definitions have raged and ranged from bland statements about 'personal development' (whatever that may mean) to unashamedly political statements that it is about the interruption and interrogation of inequality (see Fusco and Heathfield 2015). The European and, indeed, global debate relishes the celebration of 'youth work' without any real sense of what it really means or whether those in the same room or space have a shared understanding of the term. This was a point made forcefully in Howard Williamson's preparatory paper (*Finding Common Ground*[4]) for the 2nd European Youth Work Convention (2015), an event that almost miraculously and certainly surprisingly established a consensus that all forms of 'youth work' across Europe were at least about 'spaces' and 'bridges' (see below).

---

[2] JINT vzw, Bureau International Jeunesse (BIJ), and Jugendbüro der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft

[3] See DRAFT CONCEPT PAPER 'Local youth work and democracy' 30 September 2022

[4] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/FINDING+COMMON+GROUND_Final+with+poster.pdf/91d8f10d-7568-46f3-a36e-96bf716419be

At a European level, certainly up until that point and indeed after it, the most ubiquitous and sustaining definition of youth work had been that provided by the late Peter Lauritzen (the first educational adviser in the Council of Europe's Youth Directorate and later its head of youth policy and research) or some elements or versions of it:

> The main objective of youth work is to provide opportunities for young people to shape their own futures.
>
> Youth work is a summary expression for activities with and for young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature. Increasingly, youth work activities also include sports and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the domain of 'out-of-school' education, most commonly referred to as either non-formal or informal learning.
>
> The general aims of youth work are the integration and inclusion of young people in society. It may also aim towards the personal and social emancipation of young people from dependency and exploitation.
>
> Youth Work belongs both to the social welfare and to the educational systems. In some countries it is regulated by law and administered by state civil servants, *in particular at local level*. However, there exists an important relation between these professional and voluntary workers that is at times antagonistic and, at others, co-operative.
>
> The definition of youth work is diverse. While it is recognised, promoted and financed by public authorities in many European countries, it has only a marginal status in others where it remains of an entirely voluntary nature. What is considered in one country to be the work of traditional 'youth workers' – be it professionals or volunteers – may be carried out by consultants in another, or by neighbourhoods and families in yet another country or, indeed, not at all in many places.
>
> Today, the difficulty within state systems to ensure adequate global access to education and the labour market means that youth work increasingly deals with unemployment, educational failure, marginalisation and social exclusion. Increasingly, youth work overlaps with the area of social services previously undertaken by the welfare state. It therefore includes work on aspects such as education, employment, assistance and guidance, housing, mobility, criminal justice and health, *as well as* the more traditional areas of participation, youth politics, cultural activities, scouting, leisure and sports. Youth work often seeks to reach out to particular groups of young people, such as disadvantaged youth in socially deprived neighbourhoods, or immigrant youth including refugees and asylum seekers. Youth work may at times be organised around a particular religious tradition.
>
> (Ohana and Rothemund 2008, pp.369-370, emphasis added for the purposes of this book)

This definition, first published in 2006, though it had been articulated earlier[5], verbally, has broadly stood the test of time. It has been adopted and partially adapted both by the EU and by the Council of Europe. If any of it is now at all controversial it is the reference to 'informal learning' rather than the now preferred 'non-formal education and learning', and the use of the term 'professional' to depict *paid* youth workers in contrast to voluntary workers, when the aspiration has always been for *all* youth work to be professional, and the debate about the professionalisation of youth work remains open. The rest of Lauritzen's text remains apposite today and should perhaps be considered in terms of questions of balance: between local and other levels, between paid and volunteer youth workers, and between more 'traditional' domains of youth work practice (such as participation and youth politics) and its engagement with wider 'youth policy' issues and concerns that put at risk young people's inclusion, independence, autonomy, transitions and capacity to shape their own lives. The two projects that were the catalyst for both this publication and the major European youth work conference under Belgium's Presidency of the EU and a subsequent EU Resolution on Youth Work in the new Europe lie firmly in one place and space within youth work – the *local* offer that is paramount and central within the final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (see below); and the imperative to support *youth political participation* in the interests of revitalising (reloading) pluralist democracy, which is a key pillar of the current EU Youth Strategy and the first thematic priority of the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030 (see below) – but they are by no means the only elements or trajectories for youth work in the 21st century.

---

[5] Personal note: Peter and I spent a lot of time discussing the many definitions around and perspectives on 'youth work'. I usually injected my thinking from Wales, first around its youth work curriculum statement (from 1990) that talked about youth work being educative, participative, empowering and expressive, underpinned by equality of opportunity [in Wales, later, 'inclusive' became a fifth pillar – see CWVYS/PYOG/EWC (2022)], and then around our advocacy to the new Welsh Government (in 1999) that youth work was concerned with active citizenship, lifelong learning, social inclusion, and personal and community safety.

It is, however, patently unhelpful to seek to construct yet another definition of youth work. It will be important to *supplement* the existing ones currently adopted by the EU and the Council of Europe (see Appendix 1), especially as 'youth work' is now more broadly and firmly accepted as occupying the learning and personal development ground between the structured curriculum world of formal education and the unstructured community world of informal learning; in other words, youth work embodies a diverse practice of *non-formal education and learning*[6].

Arguably the most useful basis for *developing* a definition of youth work lies within the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Youth Work*[7]:

> Youth work is a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making.
>
> Despite different traditions and definitions, there is a common understanding that the primary function of youth work is to motivate and support young people to find and pursue constructive pathways in life, thus contributing to their personal and social development and to society at large.
>
> Youth work achieves this by empowering and engaging young people in the active creation, preparation, delivery and evaluation of initiatives and activities that reflect their needs, interests, ideas and experiences. Through this process of non-formal and

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[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUT2KqlMAGA

[7] https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78

> informal learning, young people gain the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes they need in order to move forward with confidence.
> In order to facilitate these outcomes, youth work should create an enabling environment that is actively inclusive and socially engaging, creative and safe, fun and serious, playful and planned. It should be characterised by accessibility, openness and flexibility and at the same time promote dialogue between young people and the rest of society. It should focus on young people and create spaces for association and bridges to support transition to adulthood and autonomy.

What *might* be added here is some sense of youth work's connection to the variety of challenges present in the changing and transforming 'new Europe', suggested below, for young people in particular and for European societies as a whole. For those wanting yet another protracted, and arguably relentlessly tedious, debate on the definition of youth work, see the European Commission's final report on the proposal for the development of a dedicated youth work platform (Bárta 2023).

I end this section, however, with a composite understanding of youth work, put forward by a member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group, that draws from the definition above but also derives from other documents. It did, indeed, resonate with me:

> Identity and aim
> Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making.
>
> Its overarching aim is to contribute to the personal and social development of young people, motivating and supporting them to find and pursue constructive pathways in life.
>
> The core principles that constitute and guide youth work are that it is based on
>
> - Voluntary participation
> - Active inclusion
> - Co-creation of young people
> - Informal and non-formal education and learning
> - Equal access
> - …
>
> Taken together this makes youth work unique and a field in its own right.
>
> Method and approach
> Youth work reaches its aims by meeting young people as resources in their own lives and in society, engaging them in the active creation, preparation, delivery and evaluation of initiatives and activities that reflect their needs, interests, ideas and experiences.
>
> An essential component of youth work is creating safe, accessible, open and autonomous spaces in society, as well as supportive and experiential learning environments for young people.
>
> Foreseen outcomes
> Through this voluntary engagement in informal and non-formal education and learning activities young people will gain knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

> Through engaging young people in co-creating activities that meet their needs and interests, youth work enables young people to learn about and experience universal values such as human rights, gender equality, democracy, peace, pluralism, diversity, inclusion, solidarity, tolerance and justice, and at the same time promoting democratic awareness and active European citizenship.
>
> This will, taken together, empower young people to gain autonomy and become active citizens, contributing to the common good.
>
> Youth work is, through stimulating and supporting young people to be active for themselves and society, an important part of universal prevention, contributing to individuals and societies being more resilient to, and more capable of handling, crises.
>
> Form and content
> Youth work starts at the local level and is designed and implemented by, with and for young people, in groups or individually, in relation to their needs and interests.
>
> Young people engage on a voluntary basis, in an organised or self-organised manner, in youth organisations, associations, young people's initiatives or other open forms such as youth centres, dedicated projects, outreach, detached or street work.
>
> Thus, it will cover a wide variety of activities of social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature, taking place in different forms and setting. In this process of co-creation and personal development, young people are supported by paid and/or volunteer youth workers.
>
> (Source: a member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group)

This is a lengthy depiction of the meaning and purpose of youth work, perhaps necessarily so given the diversity of the European context. There may be some fundamental common ground but youth work across Europe takes very different forms and is associated with different perceptions, traditions, stakeholders and practices.

Whatever its current state of play in different places, the further development of youth work in Europe, regardless of the wider contexts of young people's lives (to which this book pays particular attention, in terms of the contribution youth work can make to it), requires:

- A clear youth work policy as part of youth policy on all levels
- Confirmation of a common basic understanding and shared principles
- The establishment of a foundational education and training curriculum
- Tools for continuous documentation, reflection and follow up
- …

It is with those objectives in mind that this book is a starting point.

2. Introduction

It is now a quarter of a century since the then European Commissioner responsible, *inter alia*, for youth – Viviane Reding –announced the intention to produce a White Paper on Youth, which culminated, two years later in 2001, as 'Hebe's Dream', as it was presented at Belgium's EU Presidency conference that launched it[8], and a European Commission White Paper: A new impetus for European youth[9].

The author with the White Paper team

For at least two reasons, however, it was an inauspicious start. Far from the blank sheet of paper that Commissioner Reding suggested was available to young people, for them to set out their aspirations and 'dreams', which most likely would enshrine big issues such as education and employment, the White Paper's themes were constrained both by the strict demarcation of the responsibilities of other directorates of the Commission and by the principle of subsidiarity. This meant that there were huge policy areas that were not legitimate territory for the White Paper and left it with its four relatively modest and somewhat generic themes: participation, information, voluntary service, and a greater knowledge and understanding of youth – to be cemented throughout the EU by a rather opaque 'open method of co-ordination'. Secondly, however, there were questions about its status as a White Paper, with Commissioner Reding increasingly unsure that it would command the necessary support; she was tempted to reduce the status of the final document to that of a Communication. Only through some rear-guard action and concerted lobbying, led by Sweden but involving other governments and the European Youth Forum[10], was the Commissioner persuaded to hold with the idea and status of a White Paper – which was symbolically so important for the youth sector, almost irrespective of its content.

Nevertheless, it is useful to note that the concept of 'youth work' was conspicuous largely by its absence.

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[8] There is a document entitled 'HEBE'S DREAM: a future for young people in Europe. A presentation of the EU-White Paper on Youth', but this is not available online.

[9] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a3fb3071-785e-4e15-a2cd-51cb40a6c06b

[10] Led by its Secretary-General, Tobias Flessenkemper, who in 2023 was appointed Head of the Youth Department in the Council of Europe

Over the following two decades, however, both youth policy more generally, and youth work in particular, gradually but steadily established itself, not only within the Member States of the European Union (15, then 25, then 27 and 28, and now 27 once again) but also more broadly across the member states of the Council of Europe (now 46).

Huge steps forward have been made in cementing the youth sector, and youth work, in the consciousness of both politics and policy, and in the realms of professionalism (if not always professionalisation) and practice. The Covid-19 pandemic has, arguably, concentrated attention on the future of Europe and the place of young people (and perhaps youth work) within it. As the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen said in her 2021 State of the Union speech:

> This is our most educated, talented and motivated generation. And it has missed out on so much to keep others safe.
> Being young is normally a time of discovery, of creating new experiences. A time to meet lifelong friends, to find your own path. And what did we ask this generation to do? To keep their social distance, to stay locked down and to do school from home. For more than a year. This is why everything that we do – from the European Green Deal to NextGenerationEU – is about protecting their future….
> But we must also caution against creating new divides. **Because Europe needs all of its youth**.
> We must step up our support to those who fall into the gaps – those not in any kind of employment, education or training….
> Because they too deserve an experience like Erasmus. To gain skills, to create bonds and help forge their own European identity. (emphasis original)[11]

And with those words, the Commission President announced 2022 as the Year of European Youth: 'a year dedicated to empowering those who have dedicated so much to others'.

Both the European Union and the Council of Europe today have their distinctive and dedicated youth (or youth sector) strategies[12]. Despite some concerns about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their resources and the pace of implementation, they have generally come through that particular crisis[13], although there has been a wider critique of the negative consequences for youth work and youth organisations arising from the pandemic. A survey by the RAY research network, for example, suggested that while youth work was experimenting and adapting very rapidly, the pandemic had shaken it 'to the core'[14]. And the European Youth Forum examined the deep social, economic and mental health challenges facing young people as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, conceptualising this, graphically, as a 'pandemic scar'[15]. Significantly, its report investigated promising practices as well as gaps in institutional policy responses and identified key recommendations for the way forward.

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[11] https://state-of-the-union.ec.europa.eu/state-union-2021_en

[12] https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en; https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-strategy-2030

[13] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/101043895/European+Youth+Strategies+-+reflection+paper.pdf/ba2cb002-9705-620d-3ddb-bc4939c6d3b4

[14] https://www.researchyouth.net/news/first-findings-corona-research-project/

[15] https://www.youthforum.org/news/beyond-lockdown-the-pandemic-scar-on-young-people

There is still, nevertheless, a proliferation of youth structures, strategies, and programmes, some of the more notable being the European Youth Forum (the YFJ), Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps, and the European Youth Work Agenda. There is a commendably wide range of projects supported by the European Commission's Erasmus + programme (with its heavy emphasis on young people and delivery of the aspirations of the EU Youth Strategy – including, of course, *Europe goes Local* and *Democracy Reloading*), and there are Council of Europe initiatives flowing from its own Youth Sector Strategy 2030, including those concerned with its thematic strands of, for example, revitalising pluralist democracy (such as the *Democracy Here Democracy Now*[16] campaign, supported by the European Youth Foundation[17]) and living together in peaceful and inclusive societies (through the active participation and autonomy of young people – the *Youth for Democracy*[18] programme). Both institutions are committed to strengthening youth work throughout Europe. One does not, therefore, have to look far to find both strategic and operational commitments to youth participation and the social inclusion of young people.

A more critical stance, however, might suggest at least two points of concern, applying certainly to youth work and probably to the wider youth policy context. The first is that we have not, in fact, come so far – there are still major challenges around key issues such as youth participation, mobility and learning, access to rights, and civic engagement, let alone making constructive and credible connections to the wider 'big' issues of our time. The second, ironically perhaps of greater concern, is that Europe is now arguably overloaded with disconnected and confusing measures directed towards, or alongside, young people, attracting a huge amount of rhetoric and aspiration but in fact often delivering not so much at all, especially to and for those young people positioned on the margins: hardly the vision President Von der Leyen had in mind when she delivered her State of the Union address in September 2021 and announced the following year as the Year of European Youth. Paradoxically, inequalities have deepened as resources and political commitment have increased. Perhaps the sector is now more prone to inventing yet more things to do, regardless of relevance and impact, rather than doing the things that need to be done. In a relatively short space of time, there has been a celebration of the diversity of youth work through the Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention[19] (2010) and the ensuing EU *Resolution on Youth Work*[20] in the same year. There was then some agreed common ground through the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention[21] (in 2015), which led two years later to the Council of Europe *Recommendation on Youth Work*[22]. None of this could have been foreseen just a few years earlier, yet this established the momentum that paved the way – through an *ad hoc* High-Level Task Force on Youth Work and then an equally high-level planning group for a 3rd European Youth Work Convention - for the Bonn process, following an EU *Resolution on a European Youth Work Agenda*[23] and the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, *Signposts for the Future*[24].

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[16] https://www.coe.int/en/web/democracy-here-now/home?pk_campaign=newsletter

[17] https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/campaign2022

[18] The Youth for Democracy programme is based on a co-management principle that actively involves young people in decision-making processes, see https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programme

[19] https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-2803/2010_Declaration_European_youth_work_convention_en.pdf

[20] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42010Y1204%2801%29

[21] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/The+2nd+European+Youth+Work+Declaration_FINAL.pdf/cc602b1d-6efc-46d9-80ec-5ca57c35eb85

[22] https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78

All this has certainly put youth work on the map, at the European level at least[25]. Yet, at both horizontal levels, across member states, and through vertical levels from the global to the local, disputes about conceptual understanding and disparities in operational implementation persist. Youth work often survives only within its somewhat introspective bubble. All the plans to reach out, forge connections, secure recognition and strengthen practice remain partial and piecemeal, with plenty of rhetoric and self-appointed aggrandisement but limited reality and actuality.

The 'cornerstone challenges'[26] identified in the run-up to the 3rd European Youth Work Convention at the end of 2020 remain. Youth work has been pushed and pulled in multiple directions, through both external pressures and expectations, and internal preferences and ideologies. Forms of 'youth work' have come to operate at multiple levels, from the local to the transnational. Efforts to find consensus across the diverse and disparate thinking and practice of youth work has been succeeded by entrenchment within particular traditions and trajectories. Despite the rhetoric of a 'community of practice' and the shared vision for youth work that was established in 2015, different segments of the youth work sector have positioned themselves at different points on different axes with regard to issues and methods, resulting in – as one respondent to my request for the views of others noted forcefully – 'arguing with each other instead of trying to articulate the relation between, for example, promotion and prevention, or between open youth work and [more structured] group activities'. In one camp is the promotion of participation; in another is the prevention of pathologies – the kind of dichotomy that the History of Youth Work in Europe series[27], in acknowledging both the educational and social welfare origins of youth work, and its relation to wider platforms for the making of 'youth policy', sought to dispel.

It is therefore important to ask: has youth work lost its way, entangled with wider youth policy and perhaps the youth participation dialogue (which youth work holds at its heart, though not uncritically[28]) that themselves have become fragmented and disjointed? At institutional, professional and practice levels, possibly even in research, the so-called 'magic triangle' of youth research, policy and practice has arguably fractured: the early days of diversity and collaboration, when the field was small and uncertain but determined to grow, has been replaced by reasonably well-resourced units of action that are increasingly confident in themselves but simultaneously overly self-referential, in the vernacular 'doing their own thing' oblivious to, sometimes in competition with, and even at the expense of others in the sector.

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[23] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2020.415.01.0001.01.ENG

[24] https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/2/89567f5ed19ce0dc9732a4415bc256fd/3rd%20EYWC_final%20Declaration.pdf

[25] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/putting-youth-work-throughout-europe-on-the-map

[26] https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/38/8adbb3a39302dda6f7a37c739ba6515f/Challenges_for_Youth_Work_Howard_Williamson.pdf

[27] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-1

[28] See Corney and Williamson (eds) (2021), *Approaches to youth participation in youth and community work: A critical dialogue*, Melbourne: CAYWA

Is it perhaps time to strip back the wallpaper and reconsider the basics of what such a context or sector is seeking to achieve? In a Europe facing the multiple challenges of economy/finance, the promotion of entrepreneurship[29], health (after Covid-19), war (in Ukraine), climate, energy, mobility and more, it is perhaps time to take stock of the youth sector and youth work within it, in order to move forward more confidently and critically. This book, after providing some sense of the path created for youth policy and youth work at the European level, seeks to unravel that legacy with the objective of distilling what need to be the essential building blocks for a youth work in the new Europe for the future, embracing play, participation and partnership, considering its economic as well as social value – the 'bang for its buck', and exploring the implications for youth worker education and training if 'quality' youth work is to be operationalised on the ground.

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[29] There has, of course, long been an argument that youth work can be a first step on the road to entrepreneurship (see European Commission 2017, *Taking the future into their own hands: Youth work and entrepreneurial learning*), through the cultivation of initiative, creativity and enterprise that is not only for 'active citizenship' (see European Commission 1998, *Education and active citizenship in the European Union*).

3. Where have we come from?

A historical timeline – the road paved since 1999 and earlier

There is a road no one has taken
before you
Maybe it's yours
If you find it, it will be.
It doesn't exist but comes into being when
you walk it.
When you turn around, it's gone.
No one knows how you got here, least of all
yourself

(from *What Became Words*, a collection of poetry by Finnish Minister of Culture, the late Claes Andersson, quoted in the first Council of Europe youth policy review *Youth Policy in Finland* 1997)

Deeper roots and routes – youth learning pathways at a European level before the 2001 White Paper on youth

As long ago as 1976, in the context of the first programme of pilot projects on the transition of young people from school to working life, the Ministers of Education of the then nine Member States of the European Community included an interest in 'youth information', though "the focus of our interest in the early days was vocational guidance and information and the challenges faced by schools in preparing young people for adult and working life in a society faced by economic uncertainty". Speaking ten years later in 1986, the then European Commission Director for Education, Vocational Training and Youth Policy maintained that, over the intervening decade, there had been radical developments in ideas and approaches:

> We have seen the emphasis switch from teaching to learning, from vocational skills to personal development, from the acquisition of paper qualifications and knowledge for its own sake to encouragement of entrepreneurship, personal initiative and creativity. We have seen too how the general task of preparing young people for adult and working life cannot be assumed by schools on their own. The whole of the local community – employers, trade unions, voluntary organisations, manpower agencies, youth and information services, parents – all these should also be involved in a collective effort pooling their resources to expand and diversify learning opportunities for young people. The second 'transition' programme of the European Community launched in 1983 has sought to develop these ideas, placing more and more emphasis on the needs and aspirations of young people themselves and the ways in which young people can be given more opportunities to express themselves and take more responsibility over their own lives.[30]

He noted, further, that "we are in fact witnessing the beginning of a gradual change in attitudes towards young people, treating them as *autonomous actors rather than pawns in a bad game of chess*" (emphasis added).

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[30] Extract from a speech by Hywel Ceri Jones in 1986 in his capacity, by then, as the European Commission's Director for Education, Vocational Training and Youth Policy.

In the same speech, he also expressed his hope that the Commission would adopt its “first major set of proposals to promote youth exchange in the Community” and ‘underlined’ that this programme could lead to further practical cooperation with the Council of Europe: “there can and should be no walls impeding cooperation between young people throughout Europe as a whole”. Those remarks foreshadowed the establishment of an EU student exchange programme a year later and, a year after that, the first youth mobility programme of the European Union.

When, in 1973, Hywel Ceri Jones left the UK for Brussels to head up a brand new Division for Education and Youth that had been established to coincide with the first enlargement of the then European Economic Community (EEC), he discovered that the word ‘education’ had hitherto been taboo. However, retiring European Commissioner Altiero Spinelli had the vision,

> to argue that a strong educational and cultural dimension was necessary to build an open, democratic Europe, dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation across the European continent[31]

With something of a *tabula rasa*, Hywel Ceri Jones drafted “the idea of promoting programmes of joint study between institutions of higher education” – the ‘little seedling’ that was to grow, 14 years later, into the Erasmus programme[32]. This was directed at university students but, one year later, in 1988, a ‘youth sector’ within the European Union was born, with the launch of Youth for Europe[33]. It was another quarter of a century before both programmes, alongside others relating to, for example, schools and vocational education, were subsumed within an overall learning framework – initially to be called the ‘YES’ programme (Youth, Education, Sports) but eventually labelled, primarily on account of brand recognition, Erasmus + (“Erasmus Plus”).

A further significant contributor to developments in the European Union youth sector at the time was a report presented to the European Council in 1985 by an Ad Hoc Committee ‘on a People’s Europe’ (the Adonino Report) which, almost at the start, demonstrates a long-standing awareness at the European level of the need to address issues that are still often depicted today as being the ‘crises’ that are only afflicting citizens in the ‘new’ Europe:

> … policies of interest to the European citizen… cover fundamental social and economic problems such as employment, technological progress, growth and the environment (para 1.2)

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[31] Extract from a presentation by Dr Hywel Ceri Jones to mark the 35th anniversary of the official launch of the Erasmus programme: “Origins of Erasmus, Development of Erasmus + and the Future”, Brussels 14 December 2022

[32] See Vasey, M. with Elphick and Hull, R. (2013), *Changing Horizons: Memories of Britain’s European Pioneers 1973*, London: UK Branch of the International Association of Former Officials of the European Union (AIACE)

[33] Both initiatives derived from a favourable political context that “echoed political commitment made earlier at the Hague Summit of 1969 to engage young people much more actively in building Europe and developing a mentality of cooperation” (Hywel Ceri Jones’ speech in Brussels, December 2022)

The Adonino Report did not cover these issues and restricted its attention to 'education, culture and communication, exchanges, and the image and identity of the Community'. It speaks of useful exchanges with the Council of Europe and makes dedicated proposals on a range of themes[34], including 'youth, education, exchanges and sport' (para 1.7). Within a wide range of proposals made in relation to young people, covering language learning, university studies, vocational education, and school exchanges, there is a section on the idea of a 'European exchange' scheme and, it being International Youth Year when the report was published:

> The Committee proposes that the European Council request the Minister to highlight International Youth Year by arranging a general policy debate in the last quarter of 1985 to give a concrete follow-up to all proposals made, or to be made, by the Commission and the suggestions presently made by this Committee (para 5.8.2, emphasis original)

The outcome of these deliberations in the 1980s, amongst other things, as many readers will know, was the first European Union youth exchange programme, Youth for Europe, which, through various iterations, continues within the wider framework of today's Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps initiative. A European Council decision of 16 June 1988 adopted an action programme for the promotion of youth exchanges in the Community — the 'Youth for Europe' programme. It was the start of a 'youth sector' within the European Commission. And the idea of building a 'people's Europe', in part through bringing the idea of Europe closer to its younger citizens, remains prominent, captured in the very first (#1 *Connecting the EU to youth*) of the European Youth Goals:

> Foster the sense of youth belonging to the European project and build a bridge between the EU and young people to regain trust and increase participation.

A 'youth sector' within the Council of Europe had long been established prior to 1988, with a physical location at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, opened in 1972. Peter Lauritzen, who composed the definition of youth work presented above that – with relatively minor revisions – has stood the test of time, was the Council of Europe Youth Directorate's first Educational Adviser and later became its Head of Research and Youth Policy. Its training courses, for different groups of young people and addressing a range of issues of significance in young people's lives, were rarely referred to as youth work though, with hindsight, they were clearly part of the rich tapestry that later came to be identified as part of the landscape of youth work. Furthermore, different forms of youth work were uncovered and sometimes explored during the Council of Europe international reviews of youth policy, the first of which took place (in Finland) in 1997. Twenty-one countries were reviewed over the following 20 years.

Many of the building blocks for 'youth policy' at a European level – and the place of youth work within it – were therefore established by the end of the 1990s, though there was relatively little debate about it in these terms. Rather it was a fragmented set of initiatives and programmes directed at and developed with young people, between and within the institutions of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, that could hardly be considered as coherent, comprehensive or cohesive 'youth policy'. The 'youth work' within it often still did not have a name, or it had disparate meanings for different actors within the sector and in different parts of Europe.

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[34] Of personal interest is that one member of the Committee was a 'Mr Williamson' who, on the proposal to establish a Euro-Lottery ('an event with popular appeal [that] could help promote the European idea') is quoted in a footnote as having stated that "this proposal would not be in line with the United Kingdom practice of not operating state lotteries". Less than a decade later, it did!

Over 20 years after he joined the Commission, in 1995, Hywel Ceri Jones spoke at a European youth conference in his home country of Wales, reflecting on some of the reasons that European policy and programmes had seemingly failed to secure the results to which those initiatives aspired. He noted the scale of youth unemployment, depicting it as a "*disgrace* to every one of us" and "*dangerous* to all our futures and to the very fabric of our society" (emphasis original). He commented that despite twenty years of 'special measures', the young people in most need continue to be at risk, and that one of the pivotal reasons was because:

> **measures were not part of a coherent and comprehensive youth policy**. The local and regional dimension is an indispensable part of all successful strategies, but these approaches must be related to coherent and comprehensive national policy on young people. Too often policies from different ministries, however good their intentions and conception, have been poorly coordinated, or not linked at all. They have overlapped or even contradicted each other. Young people see these contradictions. So do their parents. So do employers. And they take their confidence away. (emphasis original)[35]

Such observations could not have been more prophetic. The following 25 years endeavoured to pull together, within various levels of governance (European, national, regional and local), the multiple strands of youth policy and an understanding of the place and role of youth work within it.

A new impetus for European youth: The White Paper process – starts and stops

The 2001 EU White Paper on Youth – Hebe's Dream: a new impetus for European youth – is routinely taken, though mistakenly, to be the start of youth policy in Europe.

The aspiration expressed by European Commissioner Viviane Reding in 1999 heralded huge promise for, and expectations from young people: there was to be a White Paper on youth. Moreover, it was to start with a blank piece of paper, with young people – through a range of mechanisms, not just the democratic voice of youth as represented by the European Youth Forum – telling the Commission what they wanted. Those were inaugural pronouncements. Over the next two years, they were steadily reined in, to the point where even the status of a White Paper came to be called into question.

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[35] Hywel Ceri Jones, Deputy Director General DG V Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs, 'Practical co-operation to promote the successful transition of young people from school to adult and working life', European Conference, Cardiff 4 October 1995

The status of the White Paper *as a White Paper* was in fact sustained though there were some shaky moments that were dealt with by a hastily composed and *ad hoc* alliance of concerned politicians, lobbyists within the youth sector, and youth organisations themselves that managed to persuade Commissioner Reding to hold on to it, despite her inclination – particularly around May 2001 – to relegate its content to the status of a Communication, a lower status Commission document. The content itself was a somewhat pale shadow of early hopes expressed by young people, as policy domains such as education and employment were closed off to the White Paper on the grounds that they were either the competence of other parts of the Commission or indeed were the competence of the EU Member States, and therefore the principle of subsidiarity had to be respected. Yet there was a gritty determination within many parts of the youth sector (*inter alia*, ministers, senior civil servants, and leaders of youth organisations) to preserve the status of a White Paper at all costs and almost regardless of the compromises required, lobbying the Commissioner successfully to that end.

The White Paper emerged, in November 2001, under Belgium's Presidency of the European Union, after a process under the umbrella of three earlier Presidencies, held by Portugal, France and Sweden. Portugal had held a research event addressing some of the huge challenges of the day, including globalisation, health, and youth mobility. France had listened deeply to a host of issues raised by young people. And Sweden had hosted a final consultation with a diversity of experts from the youth sector. It was fitting, though, that Belgium launched the White Paper on Youth, given the driving force of the Flemish Community behind it. The White Paper launch had the mysterious and thought-provoking subtitle of 'Hebe's Dream' – presumably the dream to establish a new impetus for European youth. In the end, however, the White Paper contained just four core themes (that would hardly have been at the forefront of many people's minds as the key priorities for youth): participation, information, voluntary activities and a greater understanding of youth.

Moreover, the idea and role of youth work in relation to any of these themes was conspicuous only by its absence. There was a fleeting mention of 'non-formal and informal learning' but no reference to youth work, though today the latter is considered to be at the epicentre of 'non-formal education and learning'[36], positioned in the broad contextual and methodological terrain between formal education that, for the most part, takes place in schools, and informal learning that, for the most part, takes place in the community.

The Open Method of Coordination and the 'common objectives' around particular themes that flowed from it became rather inactive relatively quickly – subject to some criticism that it was neither open nor a method nor co-ordinated – but not before it had forged some direction for youth work in Europe. Though somewhat discrete and distinct, a 'Strasbourg process' had been set in motion to secure a greater recognition of youth work[37] and, arguably more significantly, the White Paper had spawned a commitment to a youth strategy for the European Union.

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[36] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUT2KqlMAGA

[37] See http://www.alliance-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Pathways_II_towards_recognition_of_non-formal_learning_Jan_2011.pdf
The first publication, a working paper published jointly by the European Commission and the Council of Europe in February 2004, had still not referred to youth work but rather to 'Pathways towards Validation and Recognition of Education, Training and Learning in the Youth Field'.

Two European youth strategies – and an awareness of 'youth work'

2009 heralded a new European Union strategy for youth: *An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering: A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities*. It was informed by an extensive consultation across Europe that revealed the following specific challenges as topping the list of young people's concerns: education, employment, social inclusion and health. Europe's youth, this reflection concluded, "need to be equipped to take advantage of opportunities such as civic and political participation, volunteering, creativity, entrepreneurship, sport and global engagement" (p.2). The strategy's overarching goals were to create more opportunities in education and employment, more *access* and participation, and greater *solidarity* across the generations – a trilogy that I often depicted for the purposes of recall as 'OASIS': Opportunity, Access and Solidarity in Society.

The EU Youth Strategy had eight fields of action – education, employment, creativity and entrepreneurship, health and sport, participation, social inclusion, volunteering, and youth and the world.

The presence and sometimes prominence of youth work as a methodology for achieving various objectives within and across these various fields of action is significant, for it is the first time that youth work receives some level of recognition in EU policy. For example, with regard to education, the strategy suggests that "enhancing formal education is a key priority, but skills can be acquired outside the classroom through *youth work* and the use of new technologies" (p.5, emphasis added). In relation to employment, it is proposed to "Develop *youth work* as a resource to support youth employability" (p.6, emphasis added), while under creativity and entrepreneurship, one aspiration is to "promote contribution of *youth work* to the creativity and entrepreneurship of young people" (p.7, emphasis added). Under the strategic banner of health and sport, one goal is to "promote training opportunities on health for *youth workers and youth leaders*" (p.8, emphasis added). Surprisingly, perhaps, youth work is not mentioned in relation to participation, though additional support for youth organisations and youth councils is proposed. Youth work reappears under the field of action of social inclusion: "realise the full potential of *youth work* and youth community centres as means of inclusion" (p.9, emphasis added) and is implicit under the theme of volunteering: "recognise contributions of youth organisations and non-structured forms of volunteering" (p.10). The eighth field of action is youth and the world, and the role of youth work is again acknowledged: "support the development of *youth work* on other continents" (p.11, emphasis added). Indeed, the EU strategy then goes on to dedicate a short paragraph to a new role for youth work, footnoting – rather loosely - that it is a "commonly used term for work with young people" and that 'socioeducational instructors' is in fact the legal term for 'youth workers', as cited in Treaty Article 149(2). The definition of youth work is as follows:

> *Youth work is out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary 'youth workers' within youth organisations, town halls, youth centres, churches etc., which contributes to the development of young people. Together with families and with other*

> *professionals, youth work can help deal with unemployment, school failure, and social exclusion, as well as provide leisure time. It can also increase skills and support the transition from youth to adulthood. Despite being 'non-formal', youth work needs to be professionalised further. Youth work contributes to all fields of action and their identified objectives (p.11).*

The anchoring role of youth work in the EU Youth Strategy produced an EU statement that *youth work should be supported, recognised for its economic and social contribution, and professionalised* (my emphasis) and proposed actions specifically in relation to youth work on the part of Member States and the European Commission within their respective spheres of competence:

- Equip youth workers with professional skills and promote their validation through the appropriate European instruments (Europass, EQF, ECVET)
- Promote youth work through, inter alia, Structural Funds
- Develop the mobility of youth workers as indicated in the EC Treaty
- Develop innovative services, pedagogies and practice of youth work

Furthermore, the Commission undertook to develop its analysis of the economic and social impact of youth work.

Less than one year before the EU published its own youth strategy, the Council of Europe had launched *The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020*[38], in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2008. Its three guiding themes were, first, the central *raison d'être* of the Council of Europe (human rights, and democracy), secondly, living together in diverse societies, and thirdly, the social inclusion of young people.

Youth work is relatively invisible in this medium-term strategy, though it should be recalled that the Council of Europe youth directorate had a long-standing pedigree in promoting non-formal and experiential learning, which does receive some advocacy. Moreover, the Council of Europe, following its 6th Conference of European Ministers responsible for Youth held in Thessaloniki in 2002, had already developed a Youth Work Portfolio that has since been subject to revision, the last of which was in 2015. Though developed at a European level, its website asserts that

> it is not primarily for people and organisations working at the European level or internationally. The Portfolio is addressed to youth workers and leaders working at any level from local to international[39]

Youth work *per se* does get mentioned in the elaboration of the second goal within *Agenda 2020*, diversity: "Supporting *youth work* with young refugees, asylum-seekers and displaced persons" (p.3, emphasis added), and implicitly in the third, social inclusion: "Ensuring young people's access to education, training and the working life, particularly through the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning" (p.3).

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[38] https://rm.coe.int/1680702429

[39] https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio

Youth work is then explicitly attached to education and training in discussion of appropriate approaches, methods and instruments for the delivery of the strategy:

> *As regards youth work, education and training,*
>
> 2.6. multilateral youth co-operation as an appropriate way of promoting international understanding in the spirit of the core values of the Council of Europe
>
> 2.7. working with multipliers as well as supporting the development of quality *youth work* and its recognition
>
> 2.8. intercultural learning as a non-formal educational/learning method particularly relevant for promoting intercultural dialogue and combating racism and intolerance
>
> (p.3, emphasis added)

Three European Youth Work Conventions – adding the politics to the professionalism

By the turn of the first decade of this century, then, there were glimpses of youth work in European strategy documents. Two 'history of youth work in Europe' seminars had also taken place, producing one publication by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership[40] and another in the pipeline[41]. The following decade cemented this embryonic momentum.

The catalyst for securing this momentum was the decision by Belgium (and particularly the Flemish Community of Belgium), as part of its role in the new 'trio' format of EU Presidencies (Spain, Belgium and Hungary), to focus on youth work and to host an inaugural European Youth Work Convention. This was, moreover, directly preceded by a European youth work history conference, the third 'history seminar' that produced a further publication[42].

The 1st European Youth Work Convention was held in Ghent in July 2010. It brought together over 400 individuals from across the youth (work) sector, who celebrated the *diversity* of youth work. The final Declaration[43] notes that other features of youth work across Europe are 'tension and development', suggesting that 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

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[40] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-1

[41] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-2

[42] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-3

[43] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262202/Declaration/2f264232-7324-41e4-8bb6-404c75ee5b62

> 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.

Some of this text foreshadows later 'scripts' about youth work and the Declaration draws from Lauritzen's definition when it captures youth work as the provision of "space and opportunity for young people to shape their own futures" (p.2).

The 1st Convention grappled with some contemporary issues and challenges facing youth work (such as its role in addressing youth unemployment, and questions of quality and qualifications in youth work), but focused its conclusions on the following themes:

- Youth work and (youth) policy priorities – what part does/should youth work play?
- Position and cross-sectoral co-operation – identity and inter-agency collaboration?
- Information, impact and effect – methodologies for evaluating youth work's impact
- Youth work for all and in diversity – accessibility of youth work and youth worker training
- The quality of practice – professionalism, professionalisation, training and quality standards
- Competence, training and recognition – a diverse competence-building framework
- Mobility and networking – opportunities for dialogue and exchange between youth workers
- Sustainable support and funding – for infrastructure, projects and development

The Declaration foresaw a potential EU Resolution on Youth Work as part of a wider agenda on youth work at the European level, culminating in a 2nd European Youth Work Convention[44].

The EU *Resolution on Youth Work*[45], confirmed at the very end of 2010, acknowledged that the 1st European Youth Work Convention had 'highlighted the importance of youth work' and took account of the ways in which youth work might 'contribute', especially in 'cross-sectoral youth policy initiatives', to the eight fields of action of delineated in the renewed framework for European co-operation in the youth field (the 2009 European youth strategy for 2010-2018)[46]. The Resolution added that 'Other important action fields in this regard are human rights and democracy, cultural diversity and mobility' which, it should be noted, were – and are – paramount concerns of the Council of Europe. The Resolution also noted that the European Council had already agreed that

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[44] Belgium produced its own reports on the periods in which it held the first two European Youth Work Conventions: in 2010, *A contribution to youth work and youth policy in Europe: Report of the Belgian EU Presidency Youth 1/7/2010-31/12/2010*; and in 2015, *Similarities in a world of difference – 2nd European Youth Work Convention*. These are not available online.

[45] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42010Y1204%2801%29

[46] The eight 'fields of action' are: Education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and well-being, participation, voluntary activities, social inclusion, youth and the world, creativity and culture.

> under this renewed framework 'youth work' is 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 sport and services for young people.

In the same vein as the Declaration of the 1st Convention, the Resolution repeatedly emphasises the *diversity* of youth work in terms of, *inter alia*, its organisational context, the background of those involved (both young people and youth workers), types of issues on which it focuses, styles of practice and methods of delivery. Moreover, the Resolution proclaims youth work's capacity to deliver positive outcomes on a range of fronts: young people's personal and professional skills, the transmission of universal values[47], participation and responsibility, voluntary engagement and active citizenship, community building and civil society (especially through intergenerational and intercultural dialogue), creativity and social awareness, entrepreneurship and innovation, and social inclusion. The Resolution called on both EU Member States and the European Commission for more commitment to youth work development through quality enhancement, professional training and qualification, information and research, and mobility and exchange. Youth work, the Resolution concluded, had a 'crucial role' to play in the implementation of a competitive, inclusive and sustainable Europe 2020 Strategy, through the provision of non-formal learning opportunities to all young people.

This is a majestic shopping list conveying belief in youth work, culminating in the assertion that youth work has 'considerable socio-economic potential'. Yet, just as the EU's mistaken conceptualisation in a footnote of youth work as 'working with young people' (it is not, though of course it is part of it), so the celebration of youth work's diversity can also suggest that almost 'anything goes' under the banner of youth work. Indeed, even for insiders, it can be hard to see what connects youth work on the street, or centre-based open youth work, with a human rights education project or the kinds of self-governed youth organisations or national youth councils represented by the European Youth Forum. What may be viewed as important diversity within the youth work sector risks being perceived as a rather chaotic *pot pourri* of disparate and seemingly often rather disconnected activity from the outside.

As a result of such concerns, the 2nd European Youth Work Convention focused on what youth work shared rather than what divided, or diversified, it – its 'common ground'. There were widespread concerns, even assumptions, that this would be elusive, perhaps unachievable. For many years, the term had been attached not only to diverse forms of practice but also to many levels of presumed youth work practice. It had been easy for one youth work silo not to recognise the practice of another as belonging – either philosophical or empirically, or both – to the same camp.

The 2nd European Youth Work Convention, convened once again by Belgium (and with the Flemish Community once more as the driver) in its role as Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, was anchored by a paper entitled *Finding Common*

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[47] Listed in the Resolution are the following universal values: human rights, democracy, peace, anti-racism, cultural diversity, solidarity, equality and sustainable development.

Ground[48]. It was an ambitious and somewhat risky event. Throughout Europe, different groups and organisations had invoked the convenient shorthand of 'youth work' but its meaning, process and practice was often very different. Could, for example, the Convention would ask, the self-governed youth organisations with a voice through the European Youth Forum find common ground with street-based (detached and outreach) youth work represented by its umbrella body Dynamo? Would human rights youth work projects in Armenia recognise fellow 'youth work' travellers in open 'centre-based' youth work in the United Kingdom? What about the relationship between youth information services and youth learning mobility experiences – how do they fall under the banner of 'youth work'? Can work with young people in prisons or schools, or on the football field, be covered by the concept of 'youth work' alongside youth political participation and supporting young people's involvement in decision-making?

In the event, the youth work community of Europe, though not yet formally designated a 'community of practice', did not blow apart in internecine strife but found common ground in an alignment around 'spaces' and 'bridges' – promoting, ensuring and defending *spaces* for young people's self-determination, discovery and autonomy; and supporting or building *bridges* for young people's next steps towards positive destinations in their lives. This outcome had in fact been foreshadowed in Volume 1 of the *History of Youth Work in Europe*, when the histories of youth work from a limited number of countries in Europe suggested that youth work was often both a space for association and a 'transit lounge' to adulthood[49].

The 2nd European Youth Work Convention took place at a time of one particular crisis in Europe – the repercussions of the global financial crisis and the imposition of widespread 'austerity' measures. *Finding Common Ground* reported very mixed youth work development across Europe since the EU Resolution five years earlier. Resources had sometimes been slashed, sometimes increased. Some classical open youth work practice had given way to more targeted approaches. More innovative approaches to youth participation had been developed, not always welcomed by more traditional channels. Notwithstanding contemporary shifts, two more 'history seminars' had taken place, the 5th noting very clearly the fragility of youth work in many societies and the constant struggle to secure recognition and position, particularly in relation to wider 'youth policy' agendas. Youth work, as the final volume indicated in its concluding chapter, has always had to confront a set of 'trilemmas' within which it has to navigate in order to establish its position and its place[50]. Hot on the heels of the 2nd Convention, however, was a substantial publication drawing together some of the themes of the Convention, but a lot more besides: *Thinking Seriously about Youth Work*[51].

Divided into three sections, this 439-page tome, considers theories and concepts of youth work in selected European regions and countries, key challenges of youth work today, and reflections on the recommendations made in the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention. The last section is especially instructive in its foreshadowing of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention and, indeed, for this current book. Its nine chapters cover the following:

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[48] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/FINDING+COMMON+GROUND_Final+with+poster.pdf/91d8f10d-7568-46f3-a36e-96bf716419be
[49] see https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-1
[50] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-7
[51] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/thinking-seriously-about-youth-work

- A further exploration of youth work's 'common ground'
- The place of youth work in Europe and in European idea(l)s
- The quality of youth work
- Youth worker training
- The evaluation of youth work
- The knowledge base of/for youth work
- Sustainable funding of youth work
- The place of youth work within cross-sectoral youth policy
- Participation and civic dialogue as a central plank of/for youth work

By the time the book was published in October 2017, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe had already (in May 2017) agreed a *Recommendation on Youth Work*, derived in large measure from the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention. Yet, tellingly, its opening chapter included the following paragraph:

> Reflections on youth work and its role and contribution for young people and for society at large must go on as the effort to provide high-quality youth work that meets the needs and expectations of young people has to be continued. This comes at a time – as many experts underline – in which young people are facing increasing challenges, in terms of transitions to adulthood, precariousness, uncertainty and insecurity. At a moment where youth work is needed more than ever to support and empower young people to realise their potential, many member states are limiting or diminishing their provision of youth work support, faced with increasing demand and competition for the limited resources and the proclaimed need to implement austerity measures (p.10).

The Council of Europe *Recommendation on Youth Work*[52] (see Appendix 2) was therefore a timely *political* statement in support of youth work development across its (then) 47 member States. It acknowledges the impact of the economic crisis on youth work provision 'in some member States', comments on the complexities of youth transitions and, significantly, draws

> on the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention (2015), entitled "Making a world of difference", which aimed to set a European agenda for youth work.

Within its advocacy for youth work, the Recommendation emphasises the importance of quality youth work and the need for a flexible competency-based framework for the education and training of youth workers that takes into account, *inter alia*, 'new trends and arenas'. It also expressed support for the setting up of an ad hoc high-level task force of the relevant stakeholders in youth work in Europe, "which can elaborate a mid-term strategy for the knowledge-based development of European youth work".

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[52] https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78

Meanwhile, by 2017, the 'history project' had almost come to an end, with just one seminar (on transnational youth organisations, and overall lessons from the seven seminars) still to be held. After its third seminar just before the 1st European Youth Work Convention, it had considered the reality that the form and content of youth work typically reflected the political complexion and ideology of the context in which it took place (Volume 4[53]), the relationships (both conflictual and collaborative) of youth work to other agents of youth policy (Volume 5[54]), and the social (sometimes therapeutic) as well as educational antecedents of youth work development (Volume 6[55]). The final publication (Volume 7[56]), in 2019, drew the series to a close with a discussion of the constant need for youth work to confront a cluster of 'trilemmas' and navigate – through 'reflective trialogue' – between the different pressures, assumptions and expectations (packaged in the publication as typically pulling youth work in three competing directions) that are invariably attached to the policy and practice of youth work. A long-standing 'trilemma', for example, is where and how youth work positions itself between the demands of public policy, the principles and values of youth workers, and the needs and demands of young people. There has also been a three way question around youth work as an educational ('developmental'), social work-related ('problem-solving'), or recreational (leisure time) practice. And, more recently, especially since the austerity measures of the 2010s and the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020, there has been the question of what kind of balance should be struck between building-based youth work, street-based youth work and virtual, online youth work. Effective youth work acknowledges, addresses and attempts to steer a path within each of the trilemmas. Moreover, these are not independent, stand-alone trilemmas; they weave together in myriad and often complex ways. As the summary 'blurb' put it:

> This anchors an invitation to the youth work community to consider and debate each trilemma, independently, and in relation to each other, in the context of both the local environments of youth work delivery and across the wider European youth policy context, in anticipation of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention.

Germany had indeed indicated its willingness, at the close of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention to host a 3rd European Youth Work Convention on the occasion of the coinciding of its Presidency of the Council of the European Union *and* its Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – December 2020.

Bridging the gap between the 2017 Council of Europe *Recommendation on Youth Work* and the 3rd European Youth Work Convention was an *ad hoc* High-Level Task Force on Youth Work, composed of relevant stakeholders in youth work in Europe, convened by the Council of Europe and designed to sustain the momentum for European youth work and youth work in Europe that had been established over the previous decade: the Recommendation to "elaborate a mid-term strategy for the knowledge-based development of European youth work". The Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth adopted a road map for European youth work development that was updated by the Task Force in the second of its four meetings through 2018 and 2019. Of particular concern to the Task Force was the very patchy pathways for the education and training of youth workers in different parts of Europe, as revealed in a study undertaken by the Youth Partnership[57]. It commented at some length:

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[53] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-4
[54] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-5
[55] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-6
[56] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-7

> The mapping confirmed very significant differences between countries both in policies and laws regarding youth work as well as in education, training and recognition of youth workers and the difference between certification systems and opportunities available for both volunteers and professionals in youth work. It was confirmed that countries with formal education offers for youth workers also had a sound policy context in which viable and stable youth work careers were possible. In other countries, the context was unstable and less predictable. Simply put: without qualified workers, be they paid or volunteers, youth work cannot adequately respond to its challenging mission. Fully recognising the diverse historical contexts of youth work in different regions in Europe a calibrated and needs-based approach is considered the adequate response to the different needs for further development.[58]

This is an important warning shot across the bows, echoing earlier expressions of similar concern and foreshadowing later calls – particularly in the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention – for improving the education and training of youth workers, and their subsequent career prospects and pathways, through greater recognition of youth work, if quality youth work is to be enabled and ensured.[59] The Task Force also re-emphasised the need to further develop coordination of the youth work agendas of the Council of Europe and the European Commission (through common goals and priorities identified where there was convergence between their independent pillars of principle and purpose), to sustain the momentum around youth work at a European level, to provide appropriate support measures, and to bring youth work more into the mainstream of youth policy. Deeper knowledge and information about youth work would also be required. There was also a range of more detailed proposals, particularly around recognition and training.

The *ad hoc* High-Level Task Force on Youth Work coincided with the launch of a plethora of pivotal transnational youth work initiatives, supported significantly through the EU's Erasmus + programme but also with the support of other funding mechanisms. Not that there was a complete dearth of initiatives prior to 2015. Indeed, a range of 'youth work' issues and questions had inevitably been 'bubbling under', within and beyond Europe, long before even the 1st European Youth Work Convention in 2010 and certainly soon afterwards. For example, as early as 2002, the United Kingdom established its National Occupational Standards for Youth Work[60] and, only a little later, England's National Youth Agency (NYA) published its Guide to Youth Work in England[61], both of which were routinely updated (last in 2020[62]). Shortly before the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, in 2014, the European Youth Forum circulated a Policy Paper on 'what youth work means for the European Youth Forum'[63] and the Commonwealth Youth Programme launched its Draft Code of Ethical Practice for Youth Workers[64]. The youth work field was hardly devoid of professional material for guidance and practice.

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[57] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/01-Mapping_for+printing_without+maps.pdf/192e0cd5-5e74-7d38-76cd-2ba3d108bb43

[58] Draft Final Report of the *ad hoc* High-Level Task Force on Youth Work

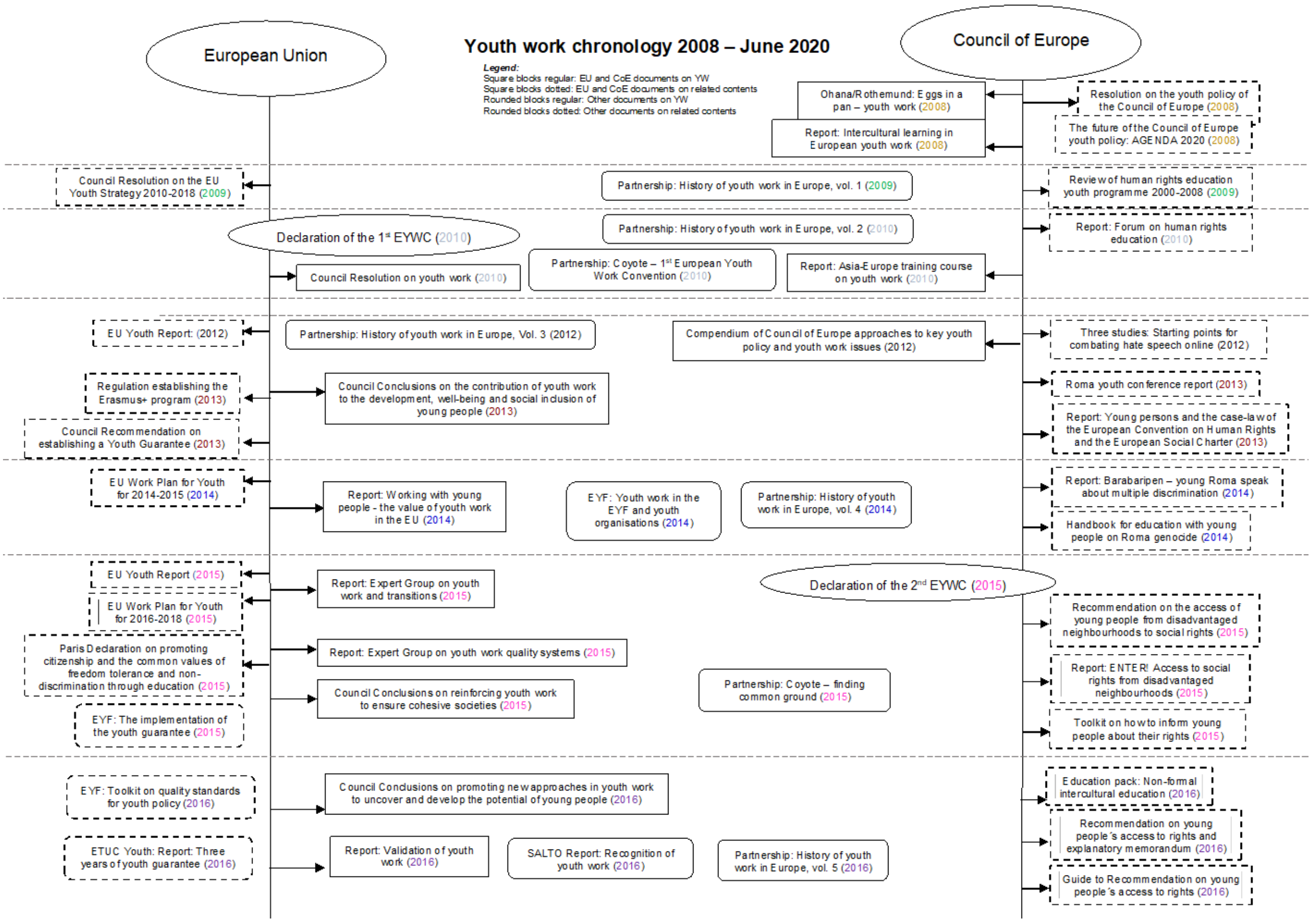
[59] Given that the majority of youth workers in most countries are volunteers and often 'unqualified', it is useful to note that, as long ago as 1990, Duncan Scott was suggesting how unqualified workers in community and youth work might be better valued and how their contribution might be strengthened – see Scott (1990).

[60] https://www.youthworkwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-Occupational-Standards-for-Youth-Work-2002.pdf

[61] https://pdf4pro.com/amp/view/the-nya-guide-to-youth-work-in-england-5e995.html

[62] https://www.nya.org.uk/national-occupational-standards-and-english-youth-work-policy-new-document-published/

In Europe, however, after the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, activity around youth work research, policy and practice took off with a vengeance. There was an explosion of initiatives directly or indirectly related to youth work, almost too many to mention, though an illustration of some of them will follow. In preparation for the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, however, the Deutsches Jugendinstitut (German Youth Institute) was contracted to document these developments and indeed those reaching back to before the 1st European Youth Work Convention in 2010, and it is an immensely useful reference point:


European Union
Youth work chronology 2008 – June 2020
Council of Europe
Legend:
Square blocks regular: EU and CoE documents on YW
Square blocks dotted: EU and CoE documents on related contents
Rounded blocks regular: Other documents on YW
Rounded blocks dotted: Other documents on related contents
Ohana/Rothemund: Eggs in a pan – youth work (2008)
Resolution on the youth policy of the Council of Europe (2008)
Report: Intercultural learning in European youth work (2008)
The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020 (2008)
Council Resolution on the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 (2009)
Partnership: History of youth work in Europe, vol. 1 (2009)
Review of human rights education youth programme 2000-2008 (2009)
Declaration of the 1st EYWC (2010)
Partnership: History of youth work in Europe, vol. 2 (2010)
Report: Forum on human rights education (2010)
Council Resolution on youth work (2010)
Partnership: Coyote – 1st European Youth Work Convention (2010)
Report: Asia-Europe training course on youth work (2010)
EU Youth Report: (2012)
Partnership: History of youth work in Europe, Vol. 3 (2012)
Compendium of Council of Europe approaches to key youth policy and youth work issues (2012)
Three studies: Starting points for combating hate speech online (2012)
Regulation establishing the Erasmus+ program (2013)
Council Conclusions on the contribution of youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people (2013)
Roma youth conference report (2013)
Council Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee (2013)
Report: Young persons and the case-law of the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter (2013)
EU Work Plan for Youth for 2014-2015 (2014)
Report: Working with young people - the value of youth work in the EU (2014)
EYF: Youth work in the EYF and youth organisations (2014)
Partnership: History of youth work in Europe, vol. 4 (2014)
Report: Barabaripen – young Roma speak about multiple discrimination (2014)
Handbook for education with young people on Roma genocide (2014)
EU Youth Report (2015)
Report: Expert Group on youth work and transitions (2015)
Declaration of the 2nd EYWC (2015)
EU Work Plan for Youth for 2016-2018 (2015)
Recommendation on the access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights (2015)
Paris Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom tolerance and non-discrimination through education (2015)
Report: Expert Group on youth work quality systems (2015)
Report: ENTER! Access to social rights from disadvantaged neighbourhoods (2015)
Council Conclusions on reinforcing youth work to ensure cohesive societies (2015)
Partnership: Coyote – finding common ground (2015)
EYF: The implementation of the youth guarantee (2015)
Toolkit on how to inform young people about their rights (2015)
EYF: Toolkit on quality standards for youth policy (2016)
Council Conclusions on promoting new approaches in youth work to uncover and develop the potential of young people (2016)
Education pack: Non-formal intercultural education (2016)
Recommendation on young people's access to rights and explanatory memorandum (2016)
ETUC Youth: Report: Three years of youth guarantee (2016)
Report: Validation of youth work (2016)
SALTO Report: Recognition of youth work (2016)
Partnership: History of youth work in Europe, vol. 5 (2016)
Guide to Recommendation on young people's access to rights (2016)

The German Youth Institute also produced a paper that endeavoured to capture the 'European discussion' on youth work between 2015 and 2020 (Hofmann-van de Poll *et al.* 2020).

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[63] https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PP-Youth-Work-1.pdf

[64] https://youthworkalliance.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/draft-international-code-of-ethical-practice-2014_v1.pdf

Europe goes Local is one of the two key partner Erasmus + projects that will guide the European youth work conference in February 2024 and contribute significantly to shaping the proposed new EU Resolution on Youth Work. Established in 2016 shortly after the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, it is a platform to build bridges between local and European levels, including municipalities in rural areas, and to make the European dimension an integral part of local youth work provision. It has produced both a European Charter on Local Youth Work, which is discussed in more detail later in this book, and a Changemakers Kit for the development of quality youth work at the local level. Given a second lease of life after the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, its current mission from 2021 to 2027 is as follows:

> Europe Goes Local aims to be a European platform supporting quality development in local youth work in the 2021-2027 programme cycle. A platform, which creates dialogue and cooperation, providing concrete activities, learning, and networking opportunities, tools, and sources of knowledge in the programme countries and neighbouring partner countries of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. A platform that supports the building of shared visions on the aims, practices and policies needed for local youth work and advocates them.

Its partner project for the European Youth Work Conference is Democracy Reloading (Govern with Youth). It has developed an online toolkit for supporting the establishment of 'youth-friendly municipalities', based around four key competencies and a four-stage process of learning and application: the municipality, young people, strategies and management. There is a reference framework of 24 competence elements, six at each stage, elaborating the four key competencies through relating them to attitudes and values, knowledge, and skills. The acquisition and achievement of these competencies produces the 'organisational environment' that enables and ensures a full level of participation by young people in their municipal context. The Democracy Reloading Partnership (2020-2027) organises training activities for municipality staff and young people, based on the online toolkit.[65]

Amongst the preparatory documents for the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, now contained within a valuable archive of publications and resources for the Convention overall (including its Declaration in many different languages!)[66], was a compilation of 'ongoing developments' within what, by this time, had come to be referred to as the European Youth Work Community of Practice.

Nik Paddison's (2020) paper is a rich source of detailed information about initiatives related to youth work in Europe that were established and developed between 2015 and 2020. There is no point in repeating that detail here but it is useful to draw out one or two issues, starting with the list of 'cluster topics' that Paddison (2020, p.12) identified: the 'large number of publications, policies, tools, activities, declarations and papers that have been clustered into different thematic areas'. His cautionary note is that the list is 'neither exhaustive nor complete'; I would suggest that it is one of the best 'lists' we have. Paddison's cluster topics are as follows:

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[65] https://democracy-reloading.eu

[66] See https://www.bonn-process.net/resources/publications/

- Youth Work as a Working Field
- Knowledge Base, Research and a Better Understanding of Youth Work
- Youth Work at the Local Level and Youth Work in Remote Areas
- Recognition and Validation of Learning in Youth Work
- Quality Development
- Education and Training of Youth Workers and Youth Work Trainers
- Volunteer Youth Workers
- Participation
- Citizenship
- Inclusion and Diversity
- Transition from Education to Employment
- Migration and Refugees
- Extremism and Violent Radicalisation
- Innovation
- Digitalisation
- Environmental Sustainability
- Youth Information
- The place of youth work within youth policy
- Funding Programmes and Mobility

One can see considerable repetition, or arguably reinforcement, in this list of youth work issues that had often both appeared before and have come afterwards (including in shaping the framework of the European Youth Work Agenda, as expressed in *Signposts for the Future*). More to the point, however, is that many of these 'cluster topics' had not featured prominently in most youth work debates earlier in the decade and therefore were not mentioned significantly in the initial EU *Resolution on Youth Work*.

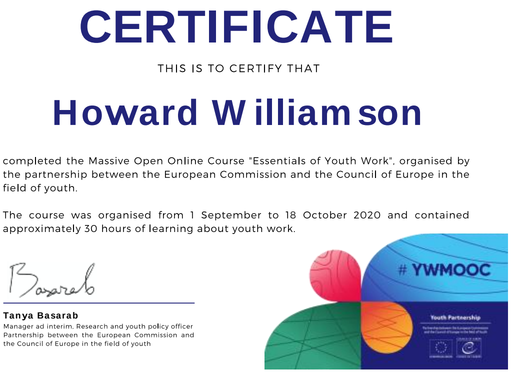
As I trawled through Paddison's list and its extensive footnotes, it seemed churlish to try to find initiatives that are not mentioned in his extremely comprehensive coverage (though I did not spot Dzigurski *et al.*'s 2017 analysis of *Europe in Transition: Diversity, Identity and Youth Work* in his footnotes). One almost has to look *beyond* Europe (see, for example, Commonwealth Secretariat 2017) to find additional material, and this was not Paddison's brief.

I did not see reference to the short-lived *International Journal of Open Youth Work*, developed and published through a relatively newly-established European youth NGO, Professional Open Youth Work in Europe (POYWE), which was formed after the 1st European Youth Work Convention and quickly punched above its weight through securing a number of Erasmus + projects, including one to create the Journal. Nor is any mention made of the Transforming Youth Work International Conference, held in England in 2018, though other than providing a platform for the launch of a useful research study on youth work, especially through its 'most significant change' methodology (Ord *et al.* 2018), it is not apparent what was actually transformed.

That study was of youth work in five European countries. Shortly before the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, the European Union had in fact conducted its own study of the value of youth work in the EU (Dunne *et al.* 2014) and there has been another EU study since, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and published in 2021 (European Commission

2021). These two – the only two – studies of youth work contracted to private consultancy companies by the European Commission therefore sandwiched Paddison's report. They have drawn widespread, though muted, criticism for a variety of reasons and from a range of perspectives, relating to the personnel involved, their understanding of the issues, the methodologies adopted and the conclusions reached. They have been largely ignored almost as soon as they were published.

The EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership had more success in promoting youth work in the years leading up to the European Youth Work Agenda. It launched two initiatives to support understanding of the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Youth Work* (2017), a 'MOOC'[67] and a publication (Paddison and Baclija-Knoch 2020). It developed another more general MOOC and an accompanying publication[68] on the essentials of youth work, which is currently in a further iteration.



CERTIFICATE

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

Howard Williamson

completed the Massive Open Online Course "Essentials of Youth Work", organised by the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth.

The course was organised from 1 September to 18 October 2020 and contained approximately 30 hours of learning about youth work.

Basarab

Tanya Basarab
Manager ad interim, Research and youth policy officer
Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth

Similar 'essentials' had already been published by the Council of Europe[69] as preliminary material for engaging with its European Youth Work Portfolio[70], established to enable youth workers throughout Europe to analyse and reflect on their practice, gather evidence of their competencies and explain what they do to a wider world. The European Union (2012) had already proposed approaches to the recognition and validation of youth work competences (within the concept of 'non-formal and informal learning'[71]). For youth work specifically, this was bolstered by a review of development and a set of proposals on the recognition of youth work and of non-formal and informal learning within youth work, conducted by the SALTO Resource Centre responsible for Training and Co-operation, in conjunction with the German National Agency JUGEND für Europa[72].

Some of the National Agencies for Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps, in strategic co-operation with some of the SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centres, established a European Academy on Youth Work, which to date has held two transnational conferences:

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[67] Massive Online Open-Access Course
[68] https://edoc.coe.int/en/youth-in-europe/9248-youth-work-essentials.html
[69] https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio/youth-work-essentials
[70] https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio
[71] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222(01)&from=EN
[72] https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3335/5%20Overview%20of%20recognition%20policy%20developments%20April%202016.pdf

> The EAYW aims to promote the development of **quality youth work,** to support its **capacity to react to current and future developments,** and to contribute to creating a common ground on youth work and youth work policy. To this end, **it focuses on supporting innovation in youth work, as a response to the trends, challenges and uncertainties faced by young people in today's fast-changing societies.**[73] (emphasis original)

Youth workers' own education and training pathways were also subjected to scrutiny and reflection after 2015, first within Tomi Kiilakoski's inspiring attention to the 'practice architectures' of youth work (Kiilakoski 2020), then through a critical and experiential conference convened under Finland's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2019), and also by some rather varied research and analysis, and ensuing publication (Taru *et al.* 2020). Nonetheless, as one report of the Finnish event indicated:

> "When high-quality youth work supports young people, civil society grows stronger and active citizenship is promoted. An active civil society is essential in building democracy", stated Sampo Terho, Minister for European Affairs, Culture and Sports of Finland. Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Council of Europe Director General of Democracy said "Youth work is essential if we want to keep a sense of civic engagement alive in the young people of today and tomorrow. Europe needs its young people more than ever, so as to make sure our democratic values live on."[74]

There is a growing political, as well as professional, understanding that *quality* youth work is a significant vehicle in promoting and sustaining democracy in Europe. All this has channelled into the contemporary consideration of a European framework for youth work routes to qualification. This is now more imperative in view of the developments already forged by the European Training Strategy to encourage co-operation within the sector to improve the quality and recognition of youth work, two key planks of the latest EU youth work study (see above) and which has developed a competence model for youth workers wishing to work internationally[75]. It is not completely clear, however, that all the ducks on this particular youth work front are yet lined up in a row.

Finally, there is an inevitable sense of 'pre-Covid' and 'post-Covid' youth work, not least because the rather exclusive and innovative ideas within 'online' or digital youth work became a godsend during lockdowns and social distancing, and ignited imaginations about what might be possible forthwith. Beyond the gloating of some who, pre-Covid, had already pronounced that digital youth work was the future and who then proclaimed they were proved right, few youth workers see a post-Covid end to digital youth work now that it is no longer the only option available. Many corners of the youth work community of practice are further exploring its potential and its parameters, as well as its possible problems, as a stand-alone practice as well as in conjunction with the re-establishment of other, more traditional, forms of in-person youth work.

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[73] https://www.eayw.net

[74] https://www.coe.int/en/web/presidency/finland-news/-/asset_publisher/JpB7bCHa1tS5/content/committee-of-ministers-chairmanship-of-finland-boosts-education-and-training-paths-of-youth-workers?inheritRedirect=false

[75] https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4385/ETS_Competence_Model_Youth_Workers_final_2023.pdf

There was already a growing commitment to the idea of ‘smart’ youth work even before the COVID-19 pandemic, with Estonia’s Presidency of the European Union in 2017 making it a key focus of its youth agenda. The subsequent EU *Council Conclusions on Smart Youth Work*[76] made this clear:

> Smart youth work means making use of and addressing digital media and technologies in order to:
>
> a) enrich the opportunities of all young people for information, for access to youth work, for participation, for non-formal and informal learning, by exploiting new spaces and formats for youth work in meaningful ways;
>
> b) support the motivation, capacity and competence building of youth workers and youth leaders to be able to develop and implement smart youth work;
>
> c) create better understanding of youth and youth work and support the quality of youth work and youth policy through more efficient use of data-driven developments and technologies for analysing data.

This was followed, some two years later, just as the Covid crisis was about to surface, by the EU *Council Conclusions on Digital Youth Work*[77], inviting the European Commission and the Member states of the European Union to:

> Encourage the exchange of best practices with regard to the implementation and development of digital strategies, including by making use of the opportunities provided by Erasmus+ and other relevant EU funding instruments.
>
> Promote and make use of existing digital and physical platforms for peer-learning activities on using digital technology in youth work as a tool, an activity or as content.
>
> Organise events bringing young people, youth workers, experts, researchers and ICT sector figures together to innovate new ways and approaches to using technology in youth work.
>
> Encourage and support Europe-wide research to increase the knowledge on the impact of digitalisation on young people and youth work.
>
> Improve the digital competences through non-formal learning and training, taking into account the updating process of the Digital Education Action Plan in view of extending it to youth work.

It might be contended that youth work was ready for the COVID-19 pandemic when it came; this is probably not true, but its attention to online, digital or smart youth work over the preceding decade did enable it to adapt relatively swiftly to the dramatically changed circumstances it encountered at the beginning of 2020. This is testimony to the flexibility of youth work in responding to new 'crises' and challenges as, indeed, so the history of youth work in Europe texts inform us, it has always done so.

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[76] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1207(01)&from=EN

[77] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ad692045-1b46-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF

With such an explosion of activities within and interest in youth work, over that five-year period 2015-2020, across many parts of Europe, one might have expected a corresponding growth in the education and training opportunities for youth workers. For exactly that reason, there was, indeed, one study that mapped the provision of 'youth work studies'[78]:

> Youth Work in Europe started to develop intensively in the last decades, mainly through civil society organisations. Up to now, civil society organisations kept their position as the main providers of Youth Work. With the increasing number and scope of Youth Work projects, the need for professionalism, standardisation, and quality assurance work within the CSOs became a necessity. This created a demand for professional youth workers and related studies at the Universities.

This study drew heavily, however, on the higher-level courses that were available in the UK (primarily England) at the time. Many of those have now closed or suspended recruitment. Other courses, both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, have since developed, though some (certainly in England) have mutated from dedicated youth work education programmes to more generic qualifications for 'working with young people' that, arguably, are more attractive to prospective students and offer a broader set of destinations in the labour market. As an excellent collection of essays on the issues within and around teaching youth work in higher education conveys, the context is riddled with 'tensions, connections, continuities and contradictions' (see Seal 2019). Some would argue that youth work cannot be 'taught' at all; many more would suggest that the formality of university-level education is not the proper fit with what is required to equip the effective youth work practitioner with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical understanding that they need to do the job.

The 'youth work studies' publication cited above reports the following:

> The first publication highlighting the importance of youth working was the "Albemarle Report" in 1960. The report highlighted the significance of youth clubs or youth centers. It argued that the primary aims of the youth service should be; associations, trainings and challenges

This is erroneous and misleading in a number of respects, though the Albemarle Report (*The Youth Service in England and Wales*) was probably the first governmental document to advocate for comprehensive youth worker education and training. The three pillars of youth work, according to Albemarle, were association, training and challenge (not in the plural) – these related to the development of young people, through coming together, learning the values and behaviour of good citizenship, and being stretched beyond their comfort zones. Albemarle argued, however, that young people needed to have places and spaces for association and that they needed youth workers who could train and challenge them appropriately. To that end, part-time youth worker training was established (called 'Bessey' courses, after their founder Gordon Bessey; not 'basic' courses, as some sometimes think they have heard) and the first full-time professional youth worker education programme was started, in Leicester, England.

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[78] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262400/KA2-Output1-Youth-Work-studies_Research.pdf/f32e6444-df83-9fe4-fd4d-99db15956ed4

It is important to be reminded of this history, accurately, if we are to consider how to move forward. The rapporteurs for an event in Finland on the education and training of youth workers suggested, for example, that a future education and training framework might encompass the following:

- A more vocational set of short courses for the operational delivery of youth work
- University degree level education and training for the strategic development of youth work
- Higher degree level study for those responsible for partnership and cross-agency collaboration between youth work and other sectors

This was just a proposal for debate (and even demolition) but it is indicative of the need for further dialogue about the type of education and training that may be required for youth workers in the context of contemporary Europe.

The author with Lady Diana Albemarle – 1990s

The 'wind in our back'?
New European youth strategies and a European Youth Work Agenda

A 3rd European Youth Work Convention took place in December 2020. It had been planned to take place in-person in Bonn, though the COVID-19 pandemic meant that it eventually took place online. It was organised by Germany, a joint venture between its government and its National Agency (JUGEND für Europa), on the occasion of Germany's simultaneous Presidency of the European Union and Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Both institutions had, relatively recently, produced their next 'youth strategies' (the EU in 2018[79] for the period 2019-2027, the Council of Europe in early 2020[80] for the period 2020-2030), within which youth work had featured more prominently than ever (see Appendix 1). And unlike the first two European Youth Work Conventions, where a political EU *Resolution on Youth Work* and Council of Europe *Recommendation on Youth Work* (respectively) had followed the events and their accompanying Declarations, the 3rd Convention was preceded by an EU *Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda*[81], resolving particularly that there should be improved quality, innovation and recognition in youth work. At the heart of this Resolution were the challenges that still prevailed for youth work throughout Europe, as suggested earlier in Howard Williamson's *Cornerstone Challenges for Youth Work in the 21st Century*[82] paper that had contributed to informing the thinking and the planning of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention. This related to Concept, Competence, Credibility, Connection and Crisis – what is youth work all about; what kinds of skills exist and/or are needed for the practice of youth work; what is the reputation and recognition of youth work in wider contexts; how does youth work link to other forms of practice in the lives of young people and with wider youth policy; and how might youth work respond to different crises affecting young people and wider society (a particularly salient issue in view of the COVID-19 pandemic)?

The 3rd European Youth Work Convention produced a Declaration[83] that, it was hoped, would build from the Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda and guide the implementation of what came to be known as the Bonn Process. Developed through a virtual gathering of some 1,000 participants from all corners of Europe and all corners of research, policy and practice in youth work (what quickly came to be known as and is now invariably referred to as the 'community of practice'[84]), the Declaration – *Signposts for the Future* – has eight core strategic aspirations:

- **Growing youth work throughout Europe** (providing a local youth work offer; strengthening the local youth work community of practice; and improving the funding of youth work and youth organisations)
- **Quality development** (through occupational standards, a youth work research agenda and national working groups)

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[79] https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

[80] https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-strategy-2030

[81] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2020.415.01.0001.01.ENG

[82] https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/38/8adbb3a39302dda6f7a37c739ba6515f/Challenges_for_Youth_Work_Howard_Williamson.pdf

[83] https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/2/89567f5ed19ce0dc9732a4415bc256fd/3rd%20EYWC_final%20Declaration.pdf

[84] The concept of a 'community of practice' has come to be widely and often inappropriately used. Developed as a theoretical idea, communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. The youth work sector might, with some critical reflection, arguably fall into this frame. See Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015), *Introduction to Communities of Practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses*. https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/

- **A common direction** (spaces for good practice, and co-ordinated learning and development)
- **Beyond the youth work community of practice** (communication and engagement with other sectors)
- **Recognition** (establishing a common narrative; showcasing impact; co-ordinating systems of learning for young people; pathways for validation, certification and accreditation)
- **Innovation and emerging challenges** (safety-nets and trampolines – youth work as responsive and relevant to new developments)
- **Policy frameworks** (integration with youth policies; co-creation and rights-based)
- **A strategic framework for youth work development** (greater alignment of commitment to and connection with the Bonn process, through partnerships, exchange, mobility, curriculum development and innovation hubs)

Signposts for the Future does open with a brief scan of the social situation of young people in Europe and attention to the concept of 'non-formal education and learning', but otherwise it does not consider the 'new Europe', except somewhat abstractly in the section on 'Innovation and emerging challenges'. Here it registers the COVID-19 'pandemic disruption' of youth work and notes the need for digital competence, technological infrastructure and 'green' youth work. Otherwise, it is a document that, quite rightly and reasonably, attends to the structural and strategic aspects of youth work, anchored within its values and principles and looking to strengthen its place and position within youth policy and, indeed, in wider policy contexts. What is not explicitly debated and so is conspicuous only by its absence is any explicit discussion of how youth work can or should relate to the multiple issues and challenges facing contemporary Europe. Nonetheless, the Bonn process set in train multiple initiatives to do with youth work, some largely rather introspective, others seeking to connect with wider constituencies and concerns.

4. Where are we now? After the European Youth Work Agenda

> **Answering the question ‘where are we today?’ is, in my opinion in one way totally impossible, since ‘we’ – the youth work ‘community of practice’ - *is all over the place***
>
> (Source: one response from a member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group, my emphasis)

This could be a cause for celebration (‘we’ are everywhere) but it is palpably an expression of concern (‘we’ have lost coherence and a sense of direction).

The Bonn Process & Growing Youth Work across Europe

As the COVID-19 pandemic both took its toll (on older people’s lives and younger people’s sense of their futures) and altered experience and perspectives to the point where narratives invariably referred to the ‘new normal’, the Bonn Process – purportedly for the ‘implementation’ of the European Youth Work Agenda (though that terminology came to be contested) – sought to put down roots. It was a huge challenge, as wider questions were being asked about the future of Europe and the pace of ‘Covid recovery’ in the context of its huge economic costs and the impending (and now widely acknowledged) climate emergency.

Axel Stammberger, from the German Government, provided an appraisal of the progress of the Bonn process at the 3rd meeting of the Youth Partnership’s Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda, in January 2023, almost exactly two years after the Bonn process had been established. He maintained that the ‘big ambitions’ for the Bonn process had been side-lined by both the COVID-19 pandemic, which had affected it from the start, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which took place in February 2022. He suggested that “these may be two significant reasons why the European Youth Work Agenda has not developed in ways that were anticipated”. The establishment of the Service Centre for the Bonn process, located within the German National Agency for Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps, JUGEND für Europa, was “one initiative to fill the gap so that the European Youth Work Agenda would not get forgotten”.

Despite these caveats, Stammberger expressed confidence that the Bonn process was evolving, not only through the work of the Service Centre, but also with contact points in 35 of the 46 member States of the Council of Europe, more emphasis on the EYWA in the work programme for Erasmus +, youth work having more profile at a European level in ‘regular [youth] policy making, and strong support from the two European institutions for the youth work activities within the work plan of the Youth Partnership. And, though he acknowledged persisting challenges (not least that the EYWA was still too much of a top-down process, and the absence of dedicated funds to contribute to the EYWA), he felt that, in the circumstances, there was good progress with the European Youth Work Agenda: “the ambition is now being discovered again”.

The formation of a Steering Group for the European Youth Work Agenda was considered to be an important development, enabling the Youth Partnership to have a central role, though the institutions, government representatives, researchers, practitioners, and representatives of youth organisations all had rather different perceptions of the authority of the Partnership and the role of the Steering Group. As one government representative remarked "We must find a common understanding within the Steering Group of where we are now and where we are going". A stronger 'roadmap' was required, many thought. This demanded improved horizontal co-ordination (between, notably, the two institutions and between the Partnership and the Service Centre for the Bonn process) and better vertical connection, including for research: researchers were being expected to report to those governing the European Youth Work Agenda, yet there appeared to be diminishing reporting *to* researchers by member States and practitioners on the ground.

The youth work 'community of practice' is a complex mosaic. Tying it all together is a hugely challenging task that may never been fully achieved. Nonetheless, as many actors in the youth work sector look forward to a 4th European Youth Work Convention (to be held in Malta during its chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, between May and November 2025), which will presumably review the progress of the European Youth Work Agenda and the goals of *Signposts for the Future* (or at least elements of these), it is cause for some concern when criticisms of the evolution and development are flying in from many directions, especially in relation to competing perspectives, a palpable lack of reference to others, parallel and sometimes overlapping developments and the persistence of 'silo' mentalities.

Despite such a critique, it needs to be recalled that the European Youth Work Agenda is a common political framework, agreed across the European Union through its Resolution of 2020 and by the Council of Europe through its Recommendation of 2017 and its Youth Sector strategy of 2020. Then there is the Bonn process, addressed as much to the youth work community of practice rather than solely to the member States. At the heart of all of this is the Youth Partnership's Steering Group, that derived from the 3rd European Youth Work Convention and constitutes one bridge to the 4th European Youth Work Convention that will, no doubt, report on the evolution and development of youth work across Europe in the intervening years.

No-one knows, of course, what any 'intervening years' will bring and any 'eco-system' theory of change has not only to hope for a project to have 'the wind in our back' but also to allow for ill winds that may throw a project *off* course. In the presentation of the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, that invoked the imagery of The Wizard of Oz[85], these were depicted as the 'wicked witches' not only of the East and West, but also possibly of the South and North – adverse pressures can arise from many quarters:

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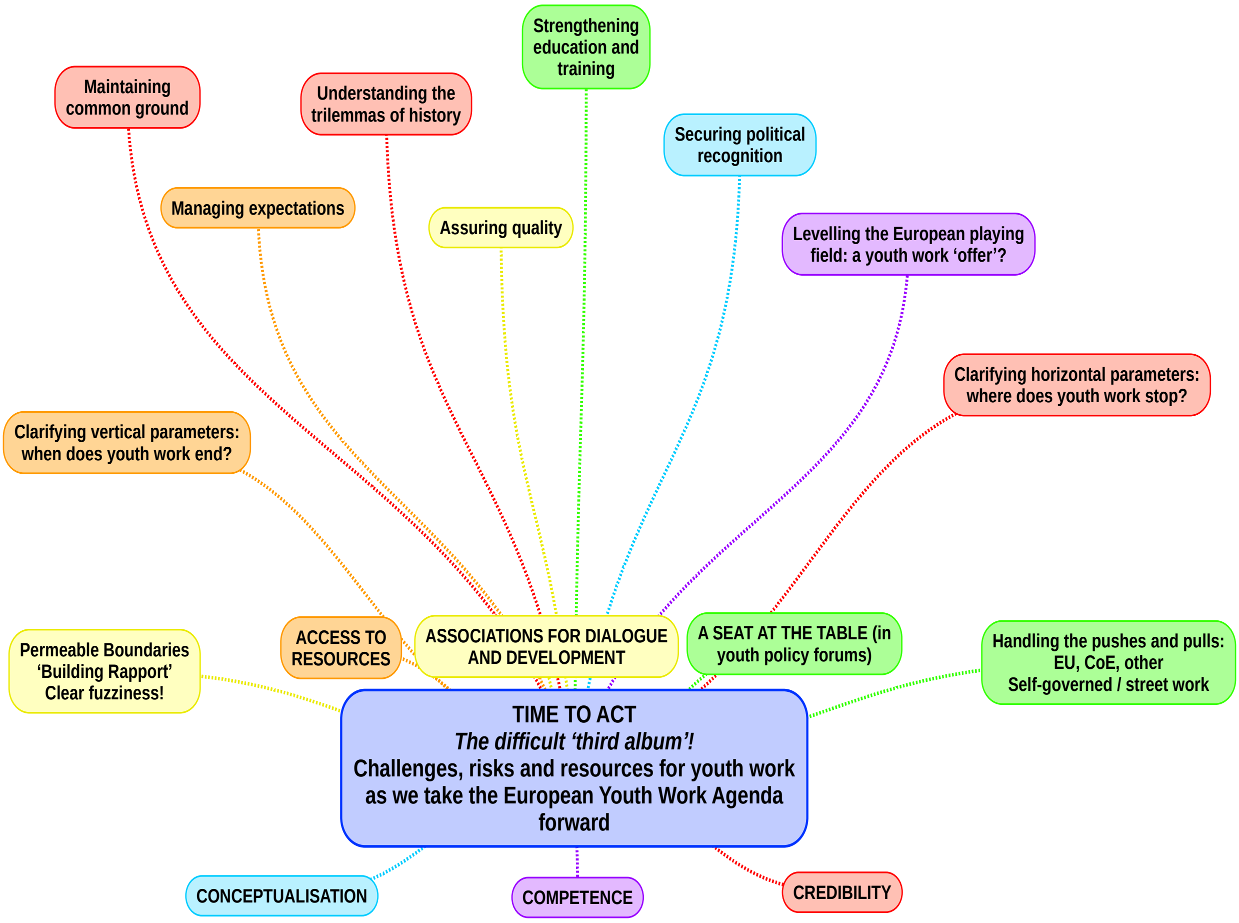
[85] The analogy was, arguably, almost too contrived but the Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda was considered to be an invitation to following the Yellow Brick Road. Over ten years it had encountered and dealt with the scarecrow and the tin man, and now the lion. The 1st Convention had considered the **heart** of youth work (celebrating diversity), the 2nd its **brain** (finding common ground) and the third was its **courage**; as Elton John sang 'When are you going to come down, when are you going to land?'. It was *time to act* (at one point the proposed mantra for the 3rd European Youth Work Convention – see mind map in text below). The dog was no longer Toto, but TO-DO. The question was whether or not the youth work community of practice would rise to the challenge in a consistent, coherent and credible way.

- COVID-19
- Mental health problems
- Youth unemployment
- Discrimination / intersectionality
- Democratic backsliding
- Climate crisis
- Disinformation

(Source: PowerPoint presentation of *Signposts for the Future: the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention* by Judit Lantai and Howard Williamson, December 2020)

The ordering of these 'wicked witches' may invite curiosity and criticism (especially the position of the climate crisis), as may issues that are conspicuous by their absence, but they were intended to be illustrative of issues that might throw the incremental development of youth work in Europe off course. The challenges had indeed been clearly laid out in May 2019, long before the Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda and the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, at one of the preparatory meetings for the Convention:

Challenges, risks and resources for youth work as we take the European Youth Work Agenda forward:


Strengthening education and training
Maintaining common ground
Understanding the trilemmas of history
Securing political recognition
Managing expectations
Assuring quality
Levelling the European playing field: a youth work 'offer'?
Clarifying horizontal parameters: where does youth work stop?
Clarifying vertical parameters: when does youth work end?
Permeable Boundaries 'Building Rapport' Clear fuzziness!
ACCESS TO RESOURCES
ASSOCIATIONS FOR DIALOGUE AND DEVELOPMENT
A SEAT AT THE TABLE (in youth policy forums)
Handling the pushes and pulls: EU, CoE, other Self-governed / street work
TIME TO ACT
The difficult 'third album'!
Challenges, risks and resources for youth work as we take the European Youth Work Agenda forward
CONCEPTUALISATION
COMPETENCE
CREDIBILITY

(Source: Presentation by Howard Williamson to the Steering Group for the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, May 2019)

By the end of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had obviously already put the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, let alone the European Youth Work Agenda, in some jeopardy, so – with some reservations and caution – progress to date within that wider context is to be commended.

The relevance of the European Youth Strategies after the COVID-19 pandemic

There had already been a wider review commissioned by the Youth Partnership of the continuing 'post-Covid' relevance of the two European youth (not youth work) strategies, both of which had been conceived and composed in pre-pandemic times. The paper was a reflection and analysis[86] on the frameworks of both the *EU Youth Strategy* (published 2018) and the *Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030* (published 2020) in the context of both continuity and change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in relation to issues such as learning loss, mental health, and isolation.

The paper noted, usefully for this publication too, the divergences and convergences within the strategies, as well as 'empirical change in young people's lives' during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'parent institutions', it observed, have

> quite different reach, roles and responsibilities across Europe and, inevitably, their youth strategies reflect different objectives, both within and beyond the youth sector…
> … [B]oth strategies have different reporting mechanisms. While the EU relies on a well-defined monitoring system based on regular reporting obligations of member states (e.g. Future National Activity Planner, EU Youth Report, Youth Wiki), policy interests and priorities of Council of Europe member states are discussed in the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ), composed of its Advisory Council on Youth (AC) and the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) (p.14)

The paper recognised, however, a 'common core' between the two strategies – around commitments such as subscribing to a values-based European culture, developing an opportunity-focused (rather than problem-oriented) approach to youth policy, ensuring youth participation and democratic governance, and seeking to promote social inclusion. Within this common ground is *youth work*, a modest but important component of youth policy, which had hitherto been relatively invisible in European youth strategic debate but which is now mentioned "as a catalyst for all priority fields" (pp.16-17):

> Youth work is, arguably, the most important thematic area for cooperation by the two institutions, as it is the only issue where there is a stated intent of collaboration and convergence between them. In addition to their current involvement in the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda, the cross-references to processes and documents, especially in the framework of the Youth Partnership, should also be mentioned here. For example, the work of the Expert group convened

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[86] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/101043895/European+Youth+Strategies+-+reflection+paper.pdf/ba2cb002-9705-620d-3ddb-bc4939c6d3b4

> by the Youth Partnership on researching education and career paths of youth workers[87] played an important role in the EU Council Conclusions on the education and training of youth workers (2019)[88]. Similar thematic and institutional overlaps took place in 2018 and 2019 in initiatives on youth work, migration and refugees[89] (p.17)

Youth work – in the context of 'non-formal and informal learning', as the EU refers to it, or 'non-formal education and learning', as the Council of Europe tends to call it – is given a reasonable airing in the strategies, though more in the direction of employability for the European Commission and more in the direction of values for the Council of Europe. The EU is particularly concerned with the validation and recognition of skills gained through non-formal and informal learning[90], as well as with quality and innovation in youth work; the Council of Europe focuses more on extending access to non-formal education and learning provision and opportunities (p.19).

Though purporting to address the needs of young people in contemporary Europe, the paper reveals that the strategies say little about issues such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) or internet governance. Clearly, as we know, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly positioned new technologies and the digital space centre stage, "posing both opportunities and threats for young people that were hardly foreseen when the strategies were produced" (p.18). Indeed, youth work accelerated its use of online methodologies to sustain its activities when all of its traditional repertoire of in-person group activities were ruled out through lockdowns. Nor did the climate crisis receive much attention in the strategies, despite it being the focus (#10) of the European Youth Goals[91] – 'Becoming sustainable is not a choice, it is an obligation' - that were formulated as the EU Youth Strategy was being prepared.

Changed context and changed lives

Both current European youth strategies do refer to the challenges that young people are facing today. These are captured through counterposing 'empirical change in the context of young people's lives' with 'empirical change in the lives of young people, of which there is a wealth of literature about both, but summarised as follows:

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[87] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/expert-group-researching-education-career-paths-youth-workers

[88] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1209(01)&rid=7

[89] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018XG1207(02)&rid=4

[90] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:TOC

[91] https://youth-goals.eu/youthgoals

CHANGED CONTEXT OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

- Poverty, (poor) health and well-being
- Quality education, training, and employment
- Non-formal education and youth work
- Technology, artificial intelligence
- Pathways to sustainable development
- (Lack of) trust in democratic structures and decision-making processes
- The (re-)emergence of populism and nationalism
- New platforms for participation and expression

CHANGED LIVES LIVED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

- Education and learning
- Mental health
- Career prospects
- Safety and isolation
- Personal development

A conclusion tucked away in the Background Document to the Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030, that discusses the multiple impediments to young people's access to their human rights (the 'context' issues above), asserts:

> Addressing these challenges requires effective youth policies, the democratic decision-making of young people at all levels, as well as resources for quality youth work (emphasis added)

The multiple and interwoven political, economic, social and cultural changes in Europe and indeed beyond, in very recent times, have propelled the lives of many young people into what has been called a zeitgeist that has dramatically transformed 'past expectations, present realities and unpredictable futures' (Wyn *et al.* 2020). The analysis of the European youth strategies says little more about youth work *per se*, though it argues the case for a broad-based education and learning package.

More significantly, particularly for this publication, it argues for strengthening coordination between the European institutions, embedding youth policy in wider strategic visions concerned with, for example, civic renewal or the green transition, and connecting appropriately to "the broader emergent challenges to be addressed in the European context in which young people are having to face their futures" (p.31). Arguably, the European Youth Work Agenda should be attached to all of this. After all, as noted earlier, in the presentation of the Final Declaration at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, which was framed around the imagery of *The Wizard of Oz*, the 'wicked witches' were depicted as issues such as mental health, unemployment, discrimination/intersectionality, climate crisis, and disinformation and media – threatening to derail a youth work agenda unless youth work got there first. These, the analysis of the strategies indicated

> now need a sharper focus, orientation and action in the light of recent change, new inequalities and new challenges. The member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe already appear to be grasping this nettle; the European youth strategies need to ensure that they are working in tune (p.29)

The question for us is where youth work sits and fits within this new Europe.

The Youth Partnership had also commissioned, in 2021, an analysis of 'European youth work policy goals and the role of the EU-CoE [*sic*] youth partnership in the interplay between the European Union and the Council of Europe'[92]. This draws together the thinking about youth work within five key documents that, in the authors' view,

> illustrate the strategic orientation of both European Union and Council of Europe as they represent the most relevant policy framework for youth work development at a European level (p.4)

In a footnote, however, it is acknowledged that the five selected documents (the EU Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda, the Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, the Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work, the EU Youth Strategy 2019-27, and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030) "are not the only relevant documents illustrating policy development of youth work". Though the paper, in some respects, presents a rather circular, indeed often almost painfully tautological, set of arguments (after all, many of the same people were involved in drafting many of those five documents, so it should not come as a surprise that similar perspectives are conveyed, even if they are fine-tuned to the wider priorities of the institutions), it usefully seeks to explore whether there is sufficient in common for the Youth Partnership to be able to draft "a common operational plan or are there some gaps to be addressed?".

Policy goals for the purpose of the paper were clustered into eight thematic categories:

1. Quality youth work
2. Youth workers: learning and cooperating
3. Youth work: understood and recognised
4. Innovative, adaptive and sustainable youth work
5. Developing youth work
6. Youth work for youth
7. Core values
8. Youth policy

Following a documentary content analysis of these themes, the paper concludes that

> it is evident that both the European Union and Council of Europe consider youth work as a policy goal. Youth work is well contextualised, adequately explained and sufficiently elaborated so it can be considered one of the essential and central points in the youth field (p.15)

Some might dispute this conclusion on the grounds that the 'youth field' explored by the paper is itself a rather narrow conception of what this might be, within the overall context of 'youth policy'. Nevertheless, on its own terms, the paper indicates that, between the European Union and the Council of Europe, there is 'great congruence' and 'common vision', anchored within a 'remarkable' commitment to a "joint, participatory, and inclusive process of horizontal collaboration among diverse actors to create quality outputs" (p.15).

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[92] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/101043895/European+youth+work+policy+goals+analysed-July2021.pdf/9db78437-5858-b35c-1523-ec41b083d837

The central criticism and concern within the paper falls on the question of co-ordination (both vertical and horizontal, and within and beyond the so-called youth work 'community of practice'). Within that concern lies a more specific issue of knowledge production and transfer, to strengthen the evidence base for the development of quality youth work. Other concerns, less prominent though no less important, related to the insufficient elaboration of some topics pertinent to youth work (such as the role of technology, ethics, or green youth work), the working conditions of youth workers and, indeed, some theoretical tensions in the portrayal of young people – on a spectrum from active citizens to passive clients. This is not an issue for this book, save to remind readers of classic depictions of young people (the valued, the villains and the vulnerable – see Williamson and Côté 2022) and how this shapes youth policy responses, including policy thinking about the nature of youth work. The 'history project' captured this so clearly, as it repeatedly reported on 'emancipatory' youth work for valued and more privileged young people, and 'regulatory' youth work for more villainous and disadvantaged young people. One might also add, a more 'therapeutic' youth work for more vulnerable young people.

I have taken the liberty to 'interpret' the Recommendations made by this study, as far as the role of the Youth Partnership goes, as follows:

1. *Co-ordination* and monitoring – **Above and Below**: strengthening vertical relations between European, national, regional and local levels
2. Facilitating *dialogue* – **Across**: forging horizontal connections between different 'stakeholders/shareholders' in the youth work community of practice
3. Building *professionalism* – **Within**: supporting platforms for youth work associations and other bodies to promote improved professional practice (by both paid and volunteer youth workers)
4. Making relevant *connections* – **Beyond**: establishing links with other youth policy fields (for example, education, health, employment, culture) where youth work has a contribution to make [see Volume 5 of the 'history project' series[93]]
5. Supporting *innovation and development* – **Behind**: encouraging expertise to guide the education of youth workers, the implementation of youth work programmes, and to explore new trends affecting young people in Europe, and how youth work may respond.

The last point resonates very clearly with some of the key intentions that lay behind the preparation and production of this book.

Beyond research and analysis on youth work at a European level that has already been completed at the time of writing (December 2023), there is not only further inquiry in train but there have also been various organisational developments as well as new political statements regarding youth work since the start of the European Youth Work Agenda and the Bonn process three years previously. The Youth Partnership has been at the centre of much of this, but it is not the only player in the field and indeed the two partner institutions have also pursued their own independent lines of activity.

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[93] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-5

In administrative and operational terms, the Youth Partnership itself appointed a Senior Project Officer with dedicated responsibility for the European Youth Work Agenda, one of whose tasks is to convene the Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda. The Steering Group comprises around 25 people, representing many (though not all) corners of the youth work community of practice: the partner institutions of the Youth Partnership, namely the European Commission and the Council of Europe, the European Youth Forum, the statutory bodies of the Council of Europe (the European Steering Committee on Youth-CDEJ and the Advisory Council on Youth – CCJ), National Agencies of the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Solidarity Corps, SALTO Resource Centres, the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process, EURODESK and ERYICA, youth researchers, youth policy experts and the community of practice. It first met, online, early in 2022, and then in person in 2022 and 2023.

The website of the Steering Group[94] presents its role as follows:

> In 2022-2023, the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership is enhancing its role in supporting the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA), notably by:
>
> - Facilitating the dialogue within the youth work community of practice
> - Supporting better recognition of youth work
> - Supporting CoE and EU initiatives on youth work
> - Organising activities in the priority regions with a focus on Youth Work Development
> - Strengthening the Learning and Development opportunities for the members of the youth work community of practice, notably through thematic and broad knowledge development on youth work (Youth Knowledge Books (Youth Work Strategy Manual planned), European youth work policy goals analysed), educational materials (T-Kits), Coyote magazine for youth work practitioners, Visible Value library on recognition of youth work, and online courses (MOOC on Essentials of Youth Work and related MOOCs on essentials of youth policy and youth research).
>
> The aim of the Steering Group is to guide the research, policy, training, capacity building and communication work of the Youth Partnership in this area and to ensure complementarity and coordination of various initiatives by the partner institutions and their actors, the Youth Partnership is setting up a Steering Group with broad representation of the youth work community of practice in Europe.
>
> The Steering Group is to meet regularly (twice per year) to map, monitor and steer developments of various initiatives and actors and guide the Youth Partnership on implementation of its work plan activities on EYWA implementation.

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[94] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/steering-group-on-the-european-youth-work-agenda

There are now, as noted above, questions as to whether or not 'implementation' is correct terminology, in that it conveys very much a 'top-down' process, when the European Youth Work Agenda is rather, according to some commentators at least (myself included), much more of a framework or reference points for member States, and indeed regional or local authorities to turn to as they seek to improve and develop youth work policy and practice.

On the matter of implementation, however, as noted above, Germany's National Agency for Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps (JUGEND für Europa) established a Service Centre for the Bonn process. As explained to the 3rd meeting of the Steering Group for the European Youth Work Agenda, this is intended to serve the youth work community of practice, identifying need and responding to it, sharing information, and complementing the work being done by the Youth Partnership on the European Youth Work Agenda. The website of the Service Centre describes its mission – through information and communication, networking and support – as follows:

> Our mission is to help make the Bonn Process a vibrant community process. To us, it is capable of leading to a future in which youth work is recognised, visible, innovative, future-fit and well-provided. In this future, youth work is accessible to all young people in all their diversity through quality youth work activities. It is appreciated as a valuable contributor to a democratic, social, sustainable and peaceful Europe.

Notwithstanding the technical rationale for the existence of both bodies and a quite plausible division of labour, there are reminiscences of Monty Python here, as a curious outsider seeks to unravel the distinctions between supporting the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda and supporting the implementation of the Bonn process[95]. Indeed, the Service Centre is part of the Strategic National Agencies' Cooperation (SNAC[96]) project on the European Youth Work Agenda[97]. This is a co-operation platform involving 16 National Agencies and SALTO Centres, and although the headlines on its website do mention the European Youth Work Agenda, five out of its six stated objectives refer to the Bonn Process rather than the European Youth Work Agenda, arguably confusing the picture even more. The case for greater clarity of both explanation and understanding is reasonably strong.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CLRAE) was one of the pioneers of (broadly conceived) 'youth work' in Europe, with its forerunner promoting the 1st European Charter on Youth Participation (1993) through two events on youth policies - the Lausanne Declaration of 1988 and the Llangollen Declaration in 1991[98] - and subsequently contributing in 2008 to a 'refreshing' of the youth policy of the Council of Europe, emphasising the attention that needed to be paid to mobility, faith and generation[99]. In recent years it has revisited youth work through its 2021 Resolution 463 and Recommendation 450[100]. These both cross-reference in large measure the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Youth Work* calling, in Resolution 463, for sufficient human and financial investment in youth work, especially in securing spaces for youth work practice and providing training for youth workers (both professional and volunteer[101]) for the delivery of quality youth work. Recommendation 450 pointedly notes that the Congress:

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[95] In *The Life of Brian*, there is a dispute over trying to understand the differences between the People's Front of Judea, and the Judean People's Front.

[96] https://www.bonn-process.net/about/snac/

[97] Strengthening youth work in Europe by supporting the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda! (SNAC EYWA)

[98] The European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Municipal and Regional Life. The Charter was revised in 2003 and once again in 2015: https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6

[99] Even within the Council of Europe, there can be a lamentable absence of communication. Only by chance were the three themes within 'refreshing the youth agenda of the Council of Europe', written by me for CLRAE,

> has long been vocal on the importance of empowering youth and on the urgency to implement youth work as a means to achieve the goal of building more inclusive and democratic societies (Recommendation 450, para 5).

For this book, there is a paragraph in the document, within its Explanatory Memorandum, that has particular traction:

> Youth work might take the shape of international youth exchanges or global movements, but *it has its roots at the local level*. It starts when young citizens take the opportunity to engage in a participatory process. They might do it for different reasons; from having some fun on Friday evenings and [*sic*] to promoting relevant and "quality" opportunities for other young people or engaging in volunteering work, etc. Some of them might do it independently, without any support or even despite resistance, while some others would never do it if not actively invited to and/or supported along the way. Quality youth work does not happen by itself: participation needs the right soil to flourish. The role of local and regional authorities in this, is to make this opportunity as *attractive and accessible* as possible, fertilising the ground for quality youth work (Explanatory Memorandum, para 11; emphasis added).

Furthermore, building on this thinking and the earlier assertion (from the 2nd European Youth Work Convention) that a critical element of the 'common ground' of youth work is the winning and defending of *spaces* for young people's association, autonomy and self-determination, the Congress quotes at length from the opening words in the European Charter on Local Youth Work, produced by the Erasmus + project *Europe Goes Local*:

> A democratic society needs the voices and active participation of young people. In order to fulfil this role, young people need a place where they can set their own agenda. A space where they, together with their peers, can explore, articulate and develop their interests and talents, as well as their ideas for the future. A space where they get stimulation and support to further develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need in order to reach their full potential as individuals and citizens. Youth work is this space, and young people are, and must always be, its primary stakeholders (Explanatory Memorandum, para 50, quoted from p.1 of the European Charter on Local Youth Work[102]).

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conveyed to the rapporteur for the AGENDA 2020, on the evening before its launch. The rapporteur, Gavan Titley, skilfully linked the themes in both, helping to establish a coherent direction of travel within the Council of Europe in the ensuing years.

[100] https://rm.coe.int/youth-work-the-role-of-local-and-regional-authorities-current-affairs-/1680a129f7

[101] The terminology is interesting, particularly given a longstanding debate about the distinction between professionalism and professionalisation. The prevailing view is that *all* youth work should be professional, whether delivered by *paid* or volunteer youth workers. The juxtaposition of 'professional' and 'volunteer' can suggest, inadvertently, that volunteer youth workers are not professional in their practice.

[102] https://europegoeslocal.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/20210309-egl-charter.pdf

Current developments

As we move into 2024, a range of initiatives relating to European youth work and to youth work in Europe are under way. The European conference on local youth work and democracy, in February 2024, at which this book was launched, is by no means the only show in town! A **review of the Council of Europe 2017 *Recommendation on Youth Work*** has taken place, with its conclusions presented to the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) in October 2023. The review concluded that the primary achievements of the Recommendation was that it provided youth work with its first 'political document' and served as a 'unifying element' for the youth sector. Following this praise, there are a further four conclusions that counsel caution about its impact, given the lapse of time, the diversity of youth work across Europe, with different momentum and stages of development, and the absence of sufficient 'institutional memory' after six years. Nonetheless, the first of the draft decisions made by the CMJ was that

> [the] Recommendation, as the first Europe-wide policy document dealing with youth work as such, has had an important impact as a framework and guideline both in European policy and in some member states, and has contributed significantly to uniting the youth work sector and strengthening cooperation.

And the third decision was that that the CMJ

> agreed that there is a need to continue to support a better implementation of the Recommendation and the development of youth work in Europe, based on the needs of member States in this regard; and that further reflection should take place on how the Council of Europe can further consolidate its role as initiator and stimulus and contribute to strengthening the causality link between the Recommendation, European developments and developments at the level of member states.

Like the report itself, which suffered from a poor response rate from member States, the other decisions are somewhat anodyne, concentrating rather more on process and aspiration than on impact and outcome, and hardly providing inspiration for the next steps in consolidating and cultivating youth work in Europe.

Over the same period in 2023, the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership commissioned a **mapping study on European youth work eco-systems** and convened **its annual symposium**, originally headlined 'Meeting of the Youth Work Community of Practice' but eventually presented as 'Visible Value: Growing Youth Work in Europe'[103]. The Youth Partnership also established a **Pool of Experts on Youth Work Development** and commissioned a **Handbook on the development of youth work strategies**. Youth work across Europe is seemingly alive and kicking, if the scale and volume of activity is to be the measure of it! But not everybody is so sure – as noted at the beginning of this section, youth work's presence and profile 'all over the place' is not necessarily a positive testimonial to its current direction of travel.

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[103] A further conference with a similar title and purpose – Visible Value: Growing Youth Work in Eastern and Southern Europe – was convened by the Partnership, in Bucharest, Romania, in November 2023.

For God's sake, tie your ropes together

During the period when I was writing this book, the third online 'Meet-up' to reflect on the progress of the Bonn process was announced, with an invitation to register. It was an upbeat message, despite the opening paragraph:

> Youth work is currently facing many challenges across Europe: Whether it is a lack of skilled workers, mental health of young people and professionals or a lack of recognition of the youth work field - existing systemic challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic and youth work structures have been further shaken in many countries.
>
> The European Youth Work Agenda, as a strategic framework for strengthening and developing youth work, provides a framework for youth work actors to address these challenges together across Europe.
>
> Once a year, the Bonn Process Meet-up invites all youth work actors across Europe to use this strategic framework as a basis for exchanging ideas on challenges, developing joint ideas on how to meet them, or sharing and advancing their own concrete projects and practice.
>
> Are you:
>
> - **engaging** in youth work development in your town, country or in Europe?
> - **wondering** what is happening in the Bonn Process all over Europe?
> - **excited** to share your own ideas with others?
> - **looking** for inspiration?
> - **ready** to network with like-minded people?
>
> **Then the 3rd Bonn Process Meet-up is for you!**
>
> The European Service Centre for the Bonn Process at JUGEND für Europa, German National Agency for the EU youth programmes Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps cordially invites you to the 3rd digital Bonn Process Meet-up. It will take place online on **28 and 29 March 2023, from 9:30 to 13:00**.
>
> In addition, we offer an onboarding session for newcomers, before the actual Meet-up, **on 27 March 2023 from 13:00 to 14:00**. The session will explain terms, concepts and aims of the European Youth Work Agenda and its implementation, known as the Bonn Process.

Within this text there is at least, for once, some clarity that the 'European Youth Work Agenda' is a (political) framework with a strategic vision and not something for implementation *per se*, while the 'Bonn process' is a (professional) task for the operationalisation of that vision with the support of the youth work 'community of practice'. And though there needs to be further and fuller clarification of what kinds of youth work are needed in the 'new Europe', such a distinction is a step in the right direction. Moreover, the Meet-up registration message remains impressively and gushingly upbeat: 'We are looking forward to an exciting Bonn Process Meet-up with fruitful exchanges, mutual inspiration and common approaches for next steps.'

The 'Meet-up' meeting at the end of March clashed, however, with two other pivotal events about young people in Europe, one on the translation of youth policy on the ground, the other (convened by the European Council of Religious Leaders, to prepare for the European Policy Forum) to do with the social inclusion of young people in cities. Whatever the enthusiasm of those organising the three simultaneous events, and the importance, undoubtedly, of each of them, one can hear the echo of the proverbial cry to tie their ropes together[104], and to ensure some coordination and coherence across the youth (work) agenda in Europe.

Indeed, just a week later, the Council of Europe Youth Department held a review seminar on the 2017 *Recommendation on Youth Work*. Its aim was

> to collect additional data and discuss the initial findings on the contributions to the implementation of the Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work (CM/Rec (2017)4).

Representatives of the Council of Europe Youth Sector - youth workers, youth work providers, policy makers and civil servants - participated in focus groups, interviews and discussion rounds about strategies, measures, programmes, activities undertaken to contribute to the implementation of the Recommendation. The seminar also provided a space for peer learning and exchange of good practices and experiences. The main objective of the Review Seminar, according to official documentation, was to identify how different stakeholders contribute to the implementation of the Recommendation (legislative measures, programmes, developing and implementing strategies, projects, etc.). Further objectives included:

> - Getting a better understanding of the goals and objectives of the Recommendation from the perspectives of different target groups;
> - Collecting and reflecting on the expectations towards the Recommendation;
> - Sharing best practices on implementation of the Recommendation;
> - Reflecting on the role the Recommendation in the development of European youth work;
> - Exploring further the relevance of the Recommendation for the work of different actors.

The outcomes of the discussions at the Review Seminar, it was claimed, would bring an added value to the review of the Council of Europe *Recommendation on Youth Work* (CM/Rec (2017)4). It is not very clear from the final document (see above) that such a claim was realised.

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[104] This remark relates to a story about a small child who falls down a well. But none of the farmers who come to her rescue have a rope long enough to reach her, until she suggests…… see Chapter 8 in Volume 2 of the history of youth work in Europe: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-2

So, in recent years and particularly following the cementing of a European Youth Work Agenda, there has been a groundswell, arguably even a deluge, of advocacy and initiatives relating to youth work. That has been promising. What has been less heartening has been the fact that they have sprung from different sources, for different reasons, with arguably insufficient consultation, collaboration, connection or co-ordination. There have been myriad platforms for reflection, the sharing of practice, more exploration, and respect for different perspectives. This is fine. It is the necessary 'D' in the youth policy clock[105], the 'Debate' that invariably produces some level of 'dissent'. This is also fine, for a while. But debate can go on forever. It can become an excuse, a cover, for inaction, inertia, and indecision. Sooner or later (ideally, sooner) differences have to be overcome and 'Development' and a new – indeed, renewed - sense of 'direction' needs to be established. There are plenty of metaphors, as well as examples from realpolitik – attesting to this requirement (tying ropes together is but one, nailing things down is another). The youth (work) sector, at every level, can appear to be dreadfully weak at taking this step.

Indeed, as the 2nd meeting of the Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda asserted, there was an urgent need for

> **a better coordination of the EYWA implementation**, with the prerequisite of an enhanced dialogue on institutional level about mandates of different actors involved in the follow up of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention. The members also concluded that this coordination would also be helping to avoid that the youth sector gets overwhelmed with the burden of several parallel similar processes and initiatives on the European level, as is the case now. (emphasis original)[106]

The same report also noted that, despite the implementation process still being at a relatively early stage, "the youth (work) sector is overwhelmed by too many different researches [*sic*]" and that "it is also important to find a way to combine all the fragmented information" if a more reliable and complete picture of European youth work and youth work in Europe was to be secured. Concern was expressed about the likelihood of "a strong fatigue in the youth sector" as it was faced with multiple (sometimes competing) expectations from various directions. The report concluded with some repetition that there was a lack of clarity about the direction of travel.

Other commentators, in private correspondence with the author, have been more damning and critical, arguing that European youth work has been channelled and co-opted into a functionalist (and functionalised) mindset, corralled into compliance and conformity with the existing order of things, rather than questioning and challenging the status quo. Does, indeed should, youth work need to be harnessed to mainstream learning pathways (the 'non-formal' complementing the 'formal'), crying out for 'recognition' and reported and recorded through formal documentation (such as the EU's Youthpass)? Is this not the very 'institutionalisation' of youth work that the history studies tell us that youth work has always fought against?

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[105] See pages 32-34 of *About Time!*: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-policy-manual-2021

[106] Report of the 2nd meeting of the Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda, by Alessandra Coppola

Moreover, despite all the apparent progress and achievements made in youth work and youth policy through the establishment of participatory, cooperative, and civic-democratic standards, and despite all the impressive networks and diverse and colourful infrastructure that have been constructed between subjects, players and actors in the youth sector[107], that alleged substantive felony has been compounded by two striking deficiencies in the proclaimed march of progress in European youth work.

First, however much the European Commission purports to reach out to 'young people with fewer opportunities', huge question marks remain as to the extent to which this is really the case. It is difficult to find confirmatory evidence that youth work and indeed wider youth policy at a European level has reached out effectively to the most marginalised[108]. The inclusion of such groups of young people in youth work 'praxis' as 'producers of the social' and as 'participants in civil society' has to be questioned, especially at the European level and perhaps, too at other levels. *Reach* remains a critical question.

Second, with few exceptions, the guiding concepts and assumptions that have informed and driven the evolution of youth work (and indeed youth policy) at European level have rarely been subject to critical questioning and appraisal. There has been significant acquiescence to the underlying political concepts and ideas – that continuous economic growth (and a 'knowledge-based economy') would need to be anchored by greater mobility, acquisition of competencies, and the acceleration of innovation – without asking fundamental questions as to why this is the case and whether or not we are on the right track. Credentialism abounds with young people acquiring higher and higher qualifications for which they are unable to find employment commensurate with that level of achievement. Climate awareness has been rather late arriving in the physical mobility debate, fuelled in part by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis that demonstrated other forms of communication, contact and debate were possible.

Such difficult questions have been raised, over the past five years, in the annual Offenburg Talks[109], which explored, in turn, the potential role of youth work in addressing the idea of European solidarity, the resurgence of nationalism and right-wing populism, shrinking civic space, the climate emergency, and European identity and belonging. Some of the conclusions from the Offenburg Talks will be considered below.

In February 2023, during the first planning meeting for the Youth Partnership's annual symposium, as something of a new approach to what has become a key item in the European youth sector's yearly calendar, those attending the meeting were invited to suggest a focus for the event, in anticipation of a Concept Note and open call for participants[110], within the framework of the European Youth Work Agenda. This attracted a *pot pourri* of ideas. On the one hand, the case was made to move beyond 'structural' questions about youth work and to ensure attention to operational questions that might enrich the development of policy. The idea of a 'practitioners' forum' – wherein the symposium would be a learning platform for youth work – attracted considerable support. However, others immediately pointed out that the gathering of practitioner activities and projects was already underway in other corners of the youth work community of practice. On the other hand, then, there were suggestions ,that the focus should be on the 'new realities' in Europe, and their 'emerging challenges' for youth work, that would confront the 4th European Youth Work Convention in 2025. The meeting was then reminded that the European Youth Work Agenda, through the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (*Signposts for the Future*), already had eight themes, and that perhaps selecting four or five of those might be the wise course of action for the symposium.

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[107] Some of these words and thoughts are amalgamations of feedback comments and ideas from members of the Informal European Advisory and Resonance Group, as indeed are many of the observations that follow.

[108] This is a recurrent public policy issue. Even programmes specifically designed to reach out to more social excluded groups often end up reaching what might be termed 'the least marginalised of the most marginalised', thereby leaving the more marginalised even more excluded than ever. Reaching the most marginalised – who usually face multiple, complex issues in their lives and often have deep suspicion and mistrust of any form of professional intervention - invariably demands time, patience, resources and professional skills that the political establishment is rarely willing to invest in sufficiently.

[109] https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/

Notwithstanding the plea to avoid 'structural' questions, the case was then made for the symposium to be about empowering youth workers through explaining youth work: only when there was a critical mass of informed youth workers (who could articulate, with confidence, the philosophy, theory and understanding behind youth work practice) would there be any chance of youth workers securing parity of esteem alongside comparable professions such as teaching or social work. Youth workers need to establish both an association at a European level and spaces to meet and organise at a local level. That, it was argued, was the pressing need for the next Youth Partnership symposium. There was also a view that the symposium could pick up on some, not all, of the 'triangles' highlighted from the history of youth work in Europe project, though this was not pursued in any depth.

All perspectives have their merits, and all have very much a 'chicken or egg' relationship. Indeed, a further proposal was to consider the impact and outputs of a very disparate 'shopping list' – the connections between local, regional and national youth work policy; youth work's contribution to mental health and green issues; how youth work has responded throughout Europe to the challenge of migration; the certification and recognition of youth work across Europe; and the extent to which the European Youth Work Agenda had helped to build *national* communities of practice in different member States. This is an interesting list because it accommodates structural and operational questions. It also reflects a pervasive concern that youth work at a European level lacks a strategic vision of its purpose and parameters.

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[110] In the open call, published early in March 2023, it is interesting that the language of 'taking stock' (the title of *this* book, which commenced preparation in the autumn of 2022) was adopted, though that term does not appear in the Concept Note itself: see https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/195343639/Call+for+participants+Symposium+2023.pdf/2f14a167-0c24-73fd-18f2-43464bfc4ffa?t=1677595641837. The name of the Symposium was 'Visible Value: Growing Youth Work in Europe' and, despite expressions of concern that it might not be the best phrasing, it continued to use the idea of the *implementation* of the European Youth Work Agenda: "The Symposium will bring together between 100-120 participants to *take stock* of the steps forward on youth work development and in the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA), and to streamline and promote a continuous constructive dialogue with the community of practice." (emphasis added)

Not that some of the supporting material for the Youth Partnership's symposium – by mid-March 2023 designated as 'Visible Value: Growing youth work in Europe' – would suggest any level of confusion or absence of clarity. It included a handbook 'to support reflection and action' (Lavchyan *et al*. 2023), as the title page indicates, or 'to support the youth work community [of] practice at national and local levels', as the first sentence in the text conveys.

Around the same time, the EUTAG (European Training Agencies' Group) held its spring seminar. The handful of participants included important academic youth work teachers (from higher education institutions across Europe), yet few have played any part in current youth developments in Europe, despite having published prolifically on both the theory and practice of youth work, in Europe and beyond (see, for example, Ord 2007, 2016; Bright and Pugh 2019; Úcar *et al.* 2020).

I have argued recurrently over many years that the youth (work) sector throughout Europe must connect with the youth (work) research community, as indeed the latter needs to know more about the former (which it often does not), so the youth work field needs to tie its own ropes together, ensuring longer and stronger reach, within its own thinking, policy and practice *and*, critically, in the context of the wider dimensions of young people's lives and the much wider youth policy responses directed towards them.

The youth work sector in Europe does not stand still and, for good and for bad, its dynamics permeate the production of this book. While still writing, at the end of March 2023[111], the Bonn Process Meet-up was imminent. Its 'onboarding' session familiarised just under 40 mainly new people, largely from practice, with the eight thematic priorities in *Signposts for the Future* and indeed elaborated a more calibrated set of issues within each of them. The presentations emphasised the *commitment* to a European Youth Work Agenda, the importance of *connections* and *coordination*, and the need for enabling *conditions*. There was, admittedly, considerable bland repetition of themes such as the imperative to persuade others of the value of youth work in order to secure more robust and sustained financial and political recognition, and a somewhat naïve articulation of the idea of 'community of practice', but I was heartened by the engagement being reinforced through important questions in the 'chat' – around matters such as forming youth worker associations[112] and the extent to which youth work should focus on green issues and sustainability[113]. The lasting impact of the Bonn process may in fact be the forging of a strengthened 'community of practice', within which youth workers of all stripes and colours see common purpose and common ground, rather than differences and competition, and act accordingly in unity and solidarity, as the first meeting of the Offenburg Talks suggested it should, for itself as well as on behalf of young people. It did not help, however, that the onboarding session stressed the importance, even centrality, of European funding (through Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps) in bolstering the Bonn process when not all participating countries have access to it, especially when the presentations were unable to explain the place and purpose of the Council of Europe's European Youth Foundation. Further, it was stated that the European Youth Work Agenda and the Bonn Process had originated under Germany's 2020 EU Presidency. Despite subsequent caveats that the idea had started earlier, and despite the fact that it is formally enshrined in a 2020 EU Resolution, this compounded perceptions that the default position of the Bonn Process lies within the European Union. When asked about upcoming youth work events at a European level, just two were mentioned (the Youth Partnership's 'Visible Value' symposium in May 2023, and the National Agencies' conference planned for December 2023 on youth work recognition); it was surprising that no mention was made of Belgium's EU Presidency youth work conference, scheduled for February 2024, that will involve all countries of the Council of Europe, and for which this book was being prepared.

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[111] And I continued writing through to the end of December 2023!

[112] At the 4th meeting of the Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda, in September 2023, Edgar Schlummer, a stalwart of youth work in Europe – formerly Director of the Estonian Youth Work Centre and host to the 4th seminar on the history of youth work in Europe, but whose role at the meeting was depicted as 'Representative of youth work associations' – outlined plans to establish a European Alliance of Youth Worker Association. It should be noted that there is already a Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Worker Association, led by Robyn Broadbent, Professor Emerita from Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. Youth worker associations have to determine their rationale for existence, along a continuum from acting as a trade union arguing for and defending terms and conditions for employment to acting as a professional association, advancing professional standards and codes of practice. There is no clear position and invariably tensions as efforts are made to accommodate multiple roles.

At the Meet-Up itself – the third and a half-way point until the next European Youth Work Convention, if the now assumed five-year cycle is to be adhered to, though there is in fact absolutely no reason why it should be (the five year intervals between the first three were a case of an opportunistic response rather than temporal planning) – one might never have known that the Council of Europe was a partner in the process. Introductory remarks said that information about initiatives at the European level would be provided – 'by the European Commission'. It was reassuring that the event was not over-celebratory and self-referential, as is, too often, the case: one opening speech did refer to the 'fragile system of youth work'. There was also, however, quite absurdly gushing applause for the state of youth work in Europe, part of a vision reflecting participants' aspirations perhaps (it received a great deal of support in the chat), but light years away from any kind of reality (one participant contacted me shortly afterwards, asking 'why are they selling hot air?'), as became evident when those attending moved into breakout rooms. The feedback from that part of the Meet-Up was very positive: the greatest contribution the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process can make seems to be in providing a space for, literally, meeting up. As another participant concluded at the end of the first day, it is good to know that you are not alone.

The second day of the Meet-Up peaked with around just 60 participants which, if one takes away the organisers, the institutions and those who have been part of the process all along, suggests that only around 40 people were relative newcomers to the 'Bonn process'. A range of topics within the eight broad goals outlined in *Signposts for the Future* had been identified, of which seven attracted interest and led to an active exchange of views. The most popular group concerned, however, how to start the 'Bonn process'. There were only a handful of topics concerned with the shaping of youth work *practice* (to do with, for example, youth criminality and with Ukrainian refugees); the rest were about cementing the position and status of youth workers in Europe through, for example, improving quality, establishing associations, co-ordinating funding, strengthening recognition, enhancing professionalism (professionalisation?) and demonstrating impact. This led to one brave critical comment: why were so few seemingly interested in 'frontline activity'? The same working groups continued after a break and, in the evaluation, appeared to have been the highlight of the Meet-Up, reinforcing perspectives from the day before and indeed constituting the final remarks from the Service Centre and its role in providing spaces for discussion, opportunities for networking and contacts for prospective projects. The particular legacy of this Meet-Up is likely to be the online community (dina.International/project/bonn-process) it has established which, by the end of the meeting, already had more than 100 members. It will be interesting to see how much its functionality is used[114].

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[113] The focus of the 4th Offenburg Talks: https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/

By mid-April 2023, there was yet another piece added to the jigsaw that comprises the European Youth Work Agenda/Bonn Process. Drawing inspiration from the excellent Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks, which had been organised over the previous five years, JUGEND für Europa (the German National Agency for the EU youth programmes), which had supported and resourced the Offenburg Talks, decided to 'reform, adapt and change the format'[115]. It might be argued that the proposals completely subvert and alter the format, in the sense that participating numbers will more than double, thus changing the dynamics of dialogue and exchange, and that the focus will be on the eight themes of the European Youth Work Agenda. Indeed, the 'steering' of the new format will lie with the SNAC (Strategic National Agency Cooperation) for the EYWA. It was suggested that one of the major reasons for the proposed changes was

> to avoid creating parallel processes and [therefore we would like] to create a stronger link to the "SNAC European Youth Work Agenda" and use its potential to coordinate such a format and to make it more visible and thereby also to strengthen the role of NAs in the European Youth Work debate.

Such a rationale, within the wider context, is in fact not very persuasive. Rather the opposite: this development would add to 'parallel processes' (given what others are already doing) and compound the absence of any overarching strategic vision, with different actors failing to consult widely and ending up duplicating activity or inventing new approaches for the sake of it (in the context of the Offenburg Talks, which had established a distinctive ad respected format, one might invoke the cliché 'if it ain't broke, why try to fix it'); furthermore, some might contend – and certainly it is a pervasive and persistent concern, if rarely expressed very loudly - that National Agencies already have too strong a role in comparison to other members of the European youth work 'community of practice'.

Nevertheless, that the new 'Youth Work Talks' would be governed by the National Agencies participating in the 'SNAC European Youth Work Agenda' would at least provide some continuity, in that they are the same as the steering group for the Offenburg Talks: Germany,

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[114] This particular legacy of the Meet-Up was in fact rather short-lived. On 28th December 2023, I logged on. The homepage reports 103 members and 3 new posts. It notes the site was created on 15th March 2023 and was last updated two weeks later, on 29th March 2023.

[115] Email correspondence

Belgium-Flanders, Estonia, Finland and Slovenia. There are other positive interpretations of such a development, primarily relating to it serving as a 'professional catalyst' for youth work in Europe, but it could also be said that it is an erroneous trajectory. Once more, youth work is trying to push itself into the limelight and punch above its weight, arguably risking raising expectations that it cannot meet, whereas the Offenburg Talks started in a different place – on fundamental questions affecting Europe and young people in Europe (solidarity, populism, post-democracy, climate, and identity) - and only then considered how youth work might respond. In that respect, the Offenburg Talks stood at one remove from what risks being perceived increasingly from the outside as a self-indulgent celebration of youth work by those who would be unlikely to say anything else. There is much to say about the value of youth work but (and this is central to my own personal policy experience in relation to formal education, substance misuse, housing and homelessness, mental health, political participation, and criminal justice) a more strategic balance has to be struck between the proactive advocacy of its inherent merits and the reactive appreciation of its contribution to addressing wider social and political agendas that affect young people's lives. That is what the remainder of this book seeks to do.

5. Where next? Taking stock and moving forward

Part I - Challenges facing young people in contemporary Europe

> *Young people in Europe are impacted by a pervasive sense of insecurity, influenced by intersecting crises resulting from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disasters, conflicts and fears of economic instability*
>
> (European Policy Dialogue Forum 2023)

Such observations are now ubiquitous in youth research and policy documents. Young people in contemporary Europe face a perfect storm of contexts that would have been difficult, if not inconceivable, to anticipate just a few years ago. Memories invariably turn to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on young people's (mental) health and learning pathways, and, more recently to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on young people's sense of security and prospects for mobility. But many other issues have also crept up on young people's lives, such as social media and technology, shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding, and the climate emergency. There have been dramatic knock-on effects (such as the energy/cost of living crisis) and less obvious forms of impact, like the accelerating pace of living. So much of this is woven together and umbilically connected but, for the purposes of this book, there has been an attempt to unravel the different dimensions of this 'new' Europe in order to outline their effects on young people, to draw out the most significant lines of impact, and then to consider how youth work may relate to them, if at all, in terms of both proactive and responsive practice.

What follows is in no particular order or priority. As noted, and what a recent report from Estonia (that engaged in a similar exercise) referred to as 'megatrends'[116] (Haugas and Kendrali 2022), the issues considered link together in myriad ways. Even each broad heading encapsulates a range of distinctive, though often connected, issues. I did, however, consult widely, both with young people and those within the youth sector in Europe, testing my 'list' and its 'ordering' against my initial sequence; the sequence that follows is a crude attempt to respect their observations. Most of those consulted determined that without 'democracy', other issues would 'fail' or fall short in what needed to be done, though others made the same argument for 'climate'. 'Health' as a broad challenge in contemporary Europe may be prominent in many people's minds on account of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the minds of those professionals working with young people (who are deeply concerned about young people's *mental health*), yet – as we have known from research for a long time – it is often not at the forefront of *young* people's minds (even when they report poor mental health, they also report considerable happiness), which is primarily why it 'lands' at the bottom of the list, though it is still likely to be an important item within a youth work response.

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[116] The 'megatrends' highlighted in the Estonia report (Haugas and Kendrali 2022) are, in order, population ageing, digitalisation, the changing labour market, climate change, and changes in the security situation. Each is discussed in relation to both the risks and opportunities, both for young people and for the youth sector.

1. Democracy

Recurrent concern is expressed today about ‘shrinking civic space’ and democratic backsliding. The freedoms of speech, assembly and protest, amongst other hard-won rights that have perhaps come to be taken for granted in contemporary Europe are under threat. Civicus Monitor, which tracks the democratic and civic health of 197 countries across the world, recently downgraded the United Kingdom in its annual global index of civic freedoms as a result of the view that the UK government was creating a ‘hostile environment’ towards campaigners, charities and other civil society bodies. The downgrading, from ‘narrowed’ to ‘obstructed’ (the most democratic states are described as ‘open’), puts the UK alongside countries such as Poland, South Africa and Hungary (Butler 2023).

Not that the electorate seems to be particularly worried. A 2019 survey in the UK by the Hansard Society indicated that over half of voters wanted “a strong leader willing to break the rules”:

> Ruth Fox, director of the non-partisan charity which promotes parliamentary democracy, said the appetite for “radical solutions” has clearly increased among Brits.
>
> The survey found that 54% of those polled calling for a strong, rule-breaking leader; 66% said politicians should be able to say what is on their mind regardless of what anyone else thinks about their views; and 42% think many of the country’s problems could be dealt with more effectively if the government didn’t have to worry so much about votes in Parliament.
>
> “Preferring a strong leader who is willing to break the rules, or thinking that the government should be able to tackle the country’s problems without worrying about the approval of Parliament, would challenge core tenets of our democracy,” Fox said in a statement.[117]

Another study around the same time suggested that two-thirds of *young people* favoured a ‘strongman’ leader over democratic governance[118] and there is research that conveys the disillusionment of ‘millennials’ with democracy: ‘across the globe, younger generations have become steadily more dissatisfied with democracy – not only in absolute terms, but also relative to older cohorts at comparable stages of life’[119]. Similar conclusions have been drawn by a recent UK study (Stanley *et al.* 2022) and, across the globe, by the report of Open Society Foundations (2023), based on data from a survey of 30 countries across the globe. Though asserting that democratic still has a ‘strong pulse’, it does highlight concern that commitment to democracy is lower amongst the young than older cohorts of respondents:

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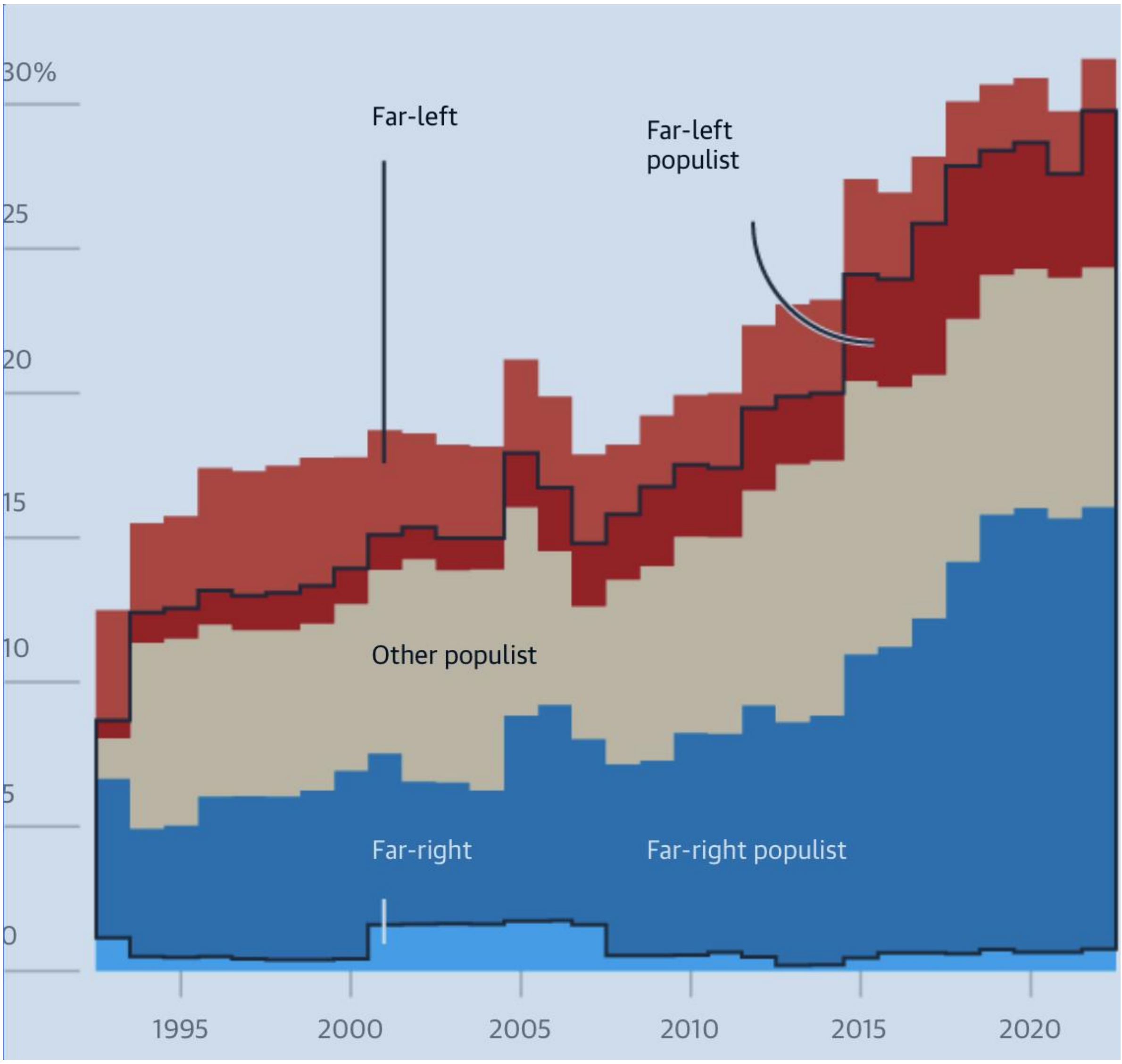
[117] https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/08/uk/hansard-strong-leader-brexit-poll-gbr-intl/index.html
Hansard Society’s survey of political engagement 2019

[118] https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/younger-voters-want-strongman-leader-new-study-claims-vp28t6mns

[119] https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/youth_and_satisfaction_with_democracy.pdf

> Age appears to be a factor in shaping attitudes towards democracy. There was less enthusiasm among 18-to-35 year olds for democracy, with 57 percent preferring it to other forms of government. For those aged 56 and above, the figure was 71 percent.
>
> The 18-35 cohort recorded higher support for army rule (42 percent) than those age 36-55 (33 percent) and those aged 56 or above (20 percent). Similarly, 35% of this youngest age category was sympathetic to the idea of a strong leader who does away with parliaments and elections. The figures were 32 percent for those aged 36-55 and 26 percent for those aged 56 and above (Open Society Foundations 2023, p.19)

Another study suggests that almost one-third (once again) of Europeans now vote for populist, far-right or far-left parties – anti-establishment parties – compared with one-fifth in the early 2000s and just over 10% in the early 1990s. Around half of anti-establishment voters support far-right parties, and this is the vote share that is increasing most rapidly.



(Source: Henley 2023)

Given such trends and that, at the same time, governments themselves shrink and regulate civic space, such findings should ring warning bells about the safety of liberal democracy in contemporary Europe (as well as in other parts of the world).

The challenge is one of what might broadly be conceived of as 'civic education' in which democracy can be learned as well as taught. There are, of course, many contemporary initiatives seeking to strengthen and indeed connect 'civic education' across Europe. One example is the work of *The Civics*, based in Croatia[120] and another, from the UK, is a new NGO called *Learn About Britain*[121], of which the author is a trustee.

There are, however, persuasive arguments that the idea of civic education needs to reach far deeper and wider than has classically prevailed. To that end, it is important to think beyond what is conventionally understood as pedagogically institutional spaces (such as kindergarten, schools, universities, VET-sites, child and youth work, volunteering schemes and others) for being taught or learning democracy. Informal spaces developed by young people themselves, in youth culture and social (sometimes protest) movements have also been identified and relevant places for civic education and learning. The 16th Child and Youth Report of the German Government[122] focuses in part on these diverse spaces for civic education. It draws on the work of Christian Lüders, of the German Youth Institute[123]. Such spaces cultivate aspects such as self-organisation of civic learning, cooperative and democratic learning formats and cultures, and the capacity to act. This suggests the need to grant such informal educational space more systematic recognition within frameworks for civic education.

Concerns about 'democratic backsliding' and 'shrinking civic space' are, of course, hardly new. Regardless of the state of national politics, the *European* project has been constructed on a set of values guided and governed by human rights, democracy and the rule of law – the central and inviolable tenets in the foundation of the Council of Europe in 1949 and subsequently guiding principles in the evolution of the European Union[124].

There have always been concerns around questions of citizenship and civic participation. T.H. Marshall's (1950) conceptualisation of citizenship as developed, over time, by the conferring or acquisition of legal, civic and social rights remains pertinent today, though in the context of, for example, the 'illiberal democracy' advocated by Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, its fragility is once again all too apparent.

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[120] See https://thecivics.eu The Civics has also pioneered the mapping of civic education in Europe: see https://mapping.thecivics.eu

[121] See https://learnaboutbritain.uk

[122] https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/service/publikationen/16-kinder-und-jugendbericht-162238

[123] Lüders was director of 'Youth and Youth Welfare' at the DJI and a member of the expert group that composed the report. His article was: Protest as Resource? Jugendprotest und soziale Bewegungen als Räume politischer Bildung, in: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APuZ) - Zeitschrift der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung / Beilage zur Wochenzeitung Das Parlament: Jugend und Protest; 71. Jahrgang, 38-39/2021.

[124] I discovered that I was reviewing this section of the book on 27th December 2023, the very day of the passing of Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission and an ardent advocate of European unity and its fundamental values: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Delors

Indeed, way back in 1977, long before the idea of a 'European citizenship' was permissible and acceptable, the European Commission had developed a commitment to a 'People's Europe' through a cultural policy seeking to boost people's awareness of a European cultural identity[125]. And as noted above, this took on a head of steam in the 1980s that led, amongst other things, to the Youth for Europe youth exchange programme. Ten years later, the Commission explored 'citizenship with a European dimension' through the lens of those who had been involved in and experienced one or more of the diversity of EU programmes, not just those within the youth field (European Commission 1998).

Much more recently there has been the 'Europe for Citizens' initiative, comprising civil society project that gave citizens an opportunity to participate concretely in the EU policy-making process. They stimulated debates to propose practical solutions to issues through cooperation at European level. Its priorities for 2019 and 2020 included:

- debating the future of Europe and challenging Euroscepticism
- promoting solidarity in times of crisis
- fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding and combatting the stigmatisation of migrants and minority groups

There is also the new EU Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV), which aims to protect and promote European Union rights and values as enshrined in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Civil society organisations active at local, regional, national and transnational level, as well as other stakeholders, can apply to receive CERV funding for initiatives aimed at citizens' engagement, equality for all and the protection and promotion of rights and EU values.

These are important initiatives that have been established to protect, defend and promote democracy in Europe. The democratic achievements and aspirations of Europe have been thrown into sharp relief in the context of the resurgence of the far right and the rapid ascendancy of populist political parties in many parts of Europe, to the point of significant influence on, if not complete control, of government policy within their countries. The pressure on the values and indeed integration of the European Union is palpable, especially since the departure of the United Kingdom from the Union, as indeed it is, too, for the Council of Europe, following the suspension and then withdrawal of the Russian Federation in February/March 2022. A number of existing member States of both European institutions are flagrantly acting in ways that are incompatible with their governing principles, to the point where, for example, the United Kingdom was suggesting – in February and March 2023, and again, later in the same year – that it might withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights, should the Court rule against its policy on immigration.

We know from robust research (cf. Giugni and Grasso 2021) that, in contemporary Europe, young people are often still very much the driving forces of political participation that aims for social and political change. However, their forms of participation are now more diverse and not always 'for the better'. Fridays for Future and other climate action is sometimes paralleled with more reactionary activity (Pilkington *et al.* 2017). Nilan (2021) also highlights how young people can be carefully nurtured to embrace the politics of the far right. And the German Child and Youth Report, cited above, makes the important point that:

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[125] https://www.cvce.eu/en/recherche/unit-content/-/unit/02bb76df-d066-4c08-a58a-d4686a3e68ff/95a065c6-38e9-45da-8bbe-66f958a8b005

> Participation, taking part, engagement and self-organisation of young people do not guarantee that political self-education necessarily leads to democratization. Anti-democratic political youth movements provide as well for some young people an attractive potential. Therefore, democratic and civic education needs to find formats and topics to attract and to reach out to young people in democracy-hostile contexts.
>
> (Source: informal interpretation by a member of the European Resonance Group)

Young people who are engaged and active within the structures of democratic Europe (for example, through the European Youth Forum or the Council of Europe's Advisory Council on Youth) clearly need to be supported, their voice strengthened, and their representation broadened. The Youth Dialogue (formerly the Structured Dialogue) needs to be commended for its achievements and, indeed, for the establishment of the EU Youth Goals[126]. However, more attention needs to be given to those groups of young people who are not part of these structures and processes – those who were once portrayed as the 'young young' rather than the 'adult young' (Laine and Gretschel 2009)! Their issues have, arguably, not been afforded sufficient attention (see Williamson 2015), producing alienation, a lack of trust and a cynicism about the rhetoric of democracy and values that surrounds them.

I asked one respected and experienced activist in the youth sector to provide some thoughts on the state of democracy and the challenge of generational renewal in contemporary Europe:

> **Youth in shrinking spaces for participation – some thoughts & empirical observations**
>
> Access to resources is fundamental for youth participation in civil society and through youth organisations/CSOs, as we know it.
> At European level, there are obvious differences not only among civil society organisations in Eastern Europe vs Western Europe / North vs South, but especially information and resources are less accessible to minorities groups: Roma youth, African descendants, young Europeans, Arab/Muslim youth, young people with disabilities. The only over-represented minority in the youth sector is the LGBTQ community.
> The neo-liberal approach to resource/funding redistribution is endangering civil society. We witness an increased attention on the topic of youth political participation at European level from EU institutions, non-traditional actors (ex. Foundations and NGOs which are not youth focused) and this leads to an inflation of ´youth experts´ out there. Youth participation is being mainstreamed in other non-traditional policies, such as climate, digitalisation, international cooperation, and bigger framework contracts are available now to consultancies who have to have to provide youth expertise. While companies get millions of euros in framework contracts to do activities which normally are done by youth work, the youth-led civil society is

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[126] https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/european-youth-goals_en

> shrinking and struggling more. We have less substantial resources, fewer professionals who are interested to grow in the youth civil society, fewer qualified youth workers. Consultancy companies reach out to youth NGOs for expertise and to help them understand youth sector and youth work. We now have consultancy companies as middle-man in the youth sector while trust and access of young people in public institutions gets weaker.
> Youth work is losing ground and resources: as a profession, it is less/not appealing to the young generation: youth workers are overwhelmed by the new tools and spaces where young people get their information / life advice / news from (mainly Tik Tok and Instagram) and they can´t keep up with the digital developments. Those who do are the exception. Youth work is struggling with a generation that is more polarised and has a small attention span.
> Youth workers are competing for the attention of young people with social media platforms / companies. Youth work still cannot articulate its position on trends that are changing young people´s lives in ways they can´t grasp: the impact of social media, what do we value and what do we monetize, climate crisis that gives youth anxiety…
>
> (Source: personal communication 7.3.23)

There are many issues to unravel from these observations, not least some profound concerns about the capacity of 'youth work' to respond to some contemporary challenges, which is the focus of this book. At this point in the book, it conveys an expression of deep disquiet about the structures of provision and styles of practice and an implicit lack of confidence that, if these conditions persist, the challenges relating to shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding can be reversed.

2. (L)earning

At the turn of the millennium, there were repeated political and policy calls for Europe to transform itself into a ‘knowledge-based economy’. Even at the time, there was some recognition that not all occupational futures were contingent on the acquisition of ‘knowledge-based’ skills; the physical and personal skills required for social care, the inter-personal skills needed in much public relations work, the physical skills still in demand in some manual occupations, and the vocational skills also still required in a range of labour market sectors all testify to the range of economies that continue to demand very different forms of labour throughout Europe. Yet, as successive Presidents of the European Youth Forum have recurrently observed, young people in Europe have become more and more equipped with academic and higher vocational qualifications that have tended to lead only to work that is *not* commensurate with their levels of attainment. Lower down the skills and qualification ladder, young people have had to face a much greater likelihood of sporadic and sometimes longer-term unemployment. This has been especially so in the countries of southern and eastern Europe and has often led to the significant challenge of ‘brain drain’ and the out-migration of the most talented (and sometimes those with few skills seeking some occupational chance elsewhere) as well as migration from the country to the city of others.

Learning was also dramatically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, affecting young people in myriad and diverse ways. The labour market itself was also seriously distorted, regardless of help provided by (some) governments, with some sectors – such as hospitality and entertainment - at risk of significant contraction or even collapse. As a result, pathways to and through the labour market have become riddled with uncertainty, a situation exacerbated and confused further by the acceleration of efforts to move towards carbon zero productivity, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis that derived from it. Even the excellent edited collection called *Youth Labor in Transition* and subtitled ‘Inequalities, Mobility and Policies in Europe’, published by Oxford University Press in 2019 (O’Reilly et al. 2019) already seems terribly historical and out of date. On this front, there is unquestionably a new Europe, one in which learning futures as well as learning recovery and the ways in which European citizens are able to ‘earn’, in and out of the labour market, perhaps through policies such as UBI (universal basic income[127]), will need robust reflection and debate.

There remain deep concerns about the challenge of young people dropping out of employment, education or training – or, indeed, never getting a real opportunity to ‘drop in’ or at least ‘catch up’; a major UK study[128] recently conveyed the scale of ‘learning loss’ and its debilitating effect on young people’s plans, confidence and hopes for a positive future. Though the terminology of ‘NEET’ is contentious, and the EU Youth Guarantee remains a commendable policy initiative to give young people designated in that way a stepping-stone and foothold towards learning, training and earning, there are huge challenges regarding labour market practices and processes, too many to consider in this book. Needless to say, they span demand-side employers’ recruitment and retention strategies and supply-side issues of competencies and qualifications, and invariably and inevitably raise questions about division and discrimination on account of, *inter alia*, gender, ethnic origin, social class, geographical location, citizenship status and perhaps age.

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[127] See https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2021/02/universal-basic-income-pros-cons

[128] https://www.suttontrust.com/cosmo-the-covid-social-mobility-and-opportunities-study/; see also https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/news-views/class-of-covid-report

Youth work, in some parts of Europe, has somewhat controversially had to engage with and support formal education, vocational training, and entry-level employment in the past (see Davies 1979); it may be called upon, or see the need to do so, once again in the future.

3. Climate

In the March 2019 Eurobarometer, the regular public opinion survey conducted on behalf of the European Commission, young people defined climate change and environmental degradation as a top priority for the European Union, ahead of inequality, employment, health and human rights[129].

The climate emergency has achieved global prominence significantly on account of social movements initiated by young people, most notably through Greta Thunberg and the school protest strikes Fridays for Future. As she has often commented, there is no Planet B. Repeated warnings about the need for action, especially from the United Nations, have met with mixed responses, as the developing world seeks financial support from the already developed world to help offset carbon emissions and move towards Net Zero, and the developed world endeavours to maintain productivity outputs while moving incrementally towards a greener economy.

Climate change is now mentioned on a daily basis, largely in the context of ‘unexpected’ changes in ‘natural’ conditions – extreme weather patterns such as heatwaves, floods, storms, often at the ‘wrong’ time of year. Europe has sought to address such circumstances through measures such as the European Union’s Green Deal[130], as Europe strives, between 2019 and 2024, ‘to be the first climate-neutral continent’:

> Climate change and environmental degradation are an existential threat to Europe and the world. To overcome these challenges, the European Green Deal will transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy.

Let us hope so! When news items bombard those listening and watching with apocalyptic accounts of climate destruction and human life becoming unsustainable beyond 2030 if drastic action is not taken *now*, it is inevitably young people – who often, in the past, have seen their futures in infinite and indestructible terms – who internalise the greatest sense of anxiety, feeling somewhat helpless, often angry, and dependent on the actions (or lack of them) of an older generation in power to determine *their* futures.

As Piispa and Kiilakoski (2021) have argued:

> Young climate activists regard the current society as unjust in multiple dimensions: individual, socio-economic, intergenerational, global, and ecological. The individual injustice was seen as limiting the basic liberties (Rawls 1999) that the young will have in the future, while the other forms of injustice were seen as violating the difference principle as described by John Rawls: the negative effects of the climate crisis affect different people and/or species unequally, and the power positions on which these inequalities are based are not open to all. The ideal of social justice is a key motive of activism for the young people studied and an important constituent of their ideal society. (Piispa and Kiilakoski 2021)

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[129] https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA7555

[130] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

The so-called new climate movement of the young has produced many issues, not least the emotional aspect of the climate change: how does it feel to face the uncertainty of the future? According to Kiilakoski & Piispa (2023) the context combines ecological and social aspects:

> Young activists shared a fear that unless our societies manage to rectify the current practices that are causing the eco-crisis, there is a possibility that human life and social order, as we know it, is in grave danger in the foreseeable future. Different scientific reports, such as The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC, 2018) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C, were often referred to as offering a knowledge basis for action. The report indicated the need to act rapidly, since "avoiding overshoot and reliance on future large-scale deployment of carbon dioxide removal can only be achieved if global CO_2 emissions start to decline well before 2030" (IPCC, 2018, p. 18). However, despite the scientific evidence, actual political efforts to renew the practices have been insufficient and the requirements of the report have not been met. In our interpretation, the eco-social disappointment towards the inability of the older generations to act quickly enough has been one of the key motivations for the new climate movement (Piispa et al., 2021).
> The public reception of the climate movement has often been concerned with environmental anxiety and other individual reactions of the young to the climate crisis. Some, although not all, of our respondents said that they felt powerless and suffered from environmental anxiety. However, the collective power of the movement itself was a remedy for individual action. Acting together was seen as a way out of negative feelings, even if some of the informants thought that we humans had destroyed the planet so much that we could not repair all the damage.
>
> (Kiilakoski and Piispa 2023)

The importance of doing something together has been pointed out in other studies as well. It is certainly a starting point for thinking about the contribution of youth work to this particular dimension of contemporary Europe and indeed the modern world (see below).

4. Technology

The Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention anticipated the increasing challenges for youth work in addressing and responding to technological change and innovation. There was less anticipation of Artificial Intelligence. The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly revealed and strengthened the capacity of youth work to *make use* of new technologies and to develop online and virtual practices. Yet this arguably only scratches the surface of the place of digitalisation and AI in the new Europe.

Like all the other challenges facing both the new Europe, and the situation of young people within it, they weave together in multiple and complex ways. Youth prospects in the digital society cannot be detached from other dimensions of their lives. As Bynner and Heinz (2021) suggest, the impact of digitalisation has to be examined in the context of rising inequalities, accelerating technological transformation, fragile European institutions, growing nationalism, and mental and economic distress arising from the COVID-19 pandemic – all factors also discussed in this book and all of which are contributing to shaping the identities of young people. Here, however, the place of technology in today's Europe will be briefly discussed, and it is perhaps useful to start with some of the tensions that prevail:

> New technologies like AI are framed as offering us various forms of empowerment and liberation: We'll be able to work more productively, spend less time doing our chores, and anything we want will be a click or tap away. But those promises never paint an accurate picture of how tech is transforming the world around us or the true cost of those supposed benefits. Automation may empower some people, but in the process, it's making things a lot harder for the hidden workers keeping everything moving
>
> (Paris Marx, 'Artificial Intelligence's dirty secret', *Business Insider* 12th February, 2023: www.businessinsider.com)

Young people may be the greatest beneficiaries of technological change, but they also risk becoming the greatest casualties, if good labour market opportunities diminish and only poor ones remain. Those working in Amazon 'fulfilment centres' have described such work as 'as close to being a robot in human form as it is possible to get'[131]. Robots have not yet taken over, by any means: the World Economic Forum has estimated that though 85 million jobs will be replaced by machines by 2025, an estimated 97 million new jobs would be created to help support this new economy.

I do not profess to have any other than a superficial level of understanding about digitalisation and artificial intelligence – and all of their ramifications. The paragraphs that follow derive from a request I made to an individual who works at the cutting edge of these issues in relation to young people. I have paraphrased some of that text, but a great deal of it is verbatim, quoted exactly as it was sent to me.

Regulation in the field of digital & AI has been accelerated in the past years. The majority of policy initiatives started before the COVID-19 pandemic and were given a higher priority in the aftermath, especially in the context of resilience and recovery funds: the European Commission has proposed that each such plan should include a minimum level of 20% of overall expenditure committed to digital priorities[132].

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[131] See also https://theconversation.com/amazon-still-seems-hell-bent-on-turning-workers-into-robots-heres-a-better-way-forward-201221

In relation to digital rights and governance of online platforms (including social media platforms) there is a rising concern about citizens' rights on the Internet, especially due to the widespread 'fake news/disinformation' phenomenon, and also on account of the increased role of online platforms, many of them acting as 'gatekeepers', and denying their role as 'publishers', with the responsibilities that this would bring. Included in this debate are social media platforms (such as Facebook/Twitter/Tik-Tok), well-known browsers (eg. Google), widely used online shopping platforms (eg. Amazon) and major application stores (Apple stores, Google play).

This has led to a wider discussion on the importance of regulation (public policies / legislation) versus self-regulation (measures taken voluntarily by online platforms to safeguard user rights). For tackling disinformation and what is sometimes now described as the 'information crisis', most measures remain dependent on self-regulation because of the difficulty of deciding who has the right to evaluate the content, and to which extent this could be considered censorship, especially if such decisions would be taken by national governments (the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation and upcoming plans[133] is currently one of the best European practices that ensures some attempt at a harmonised approach). Additional challenges have arisen, even in cases of self-regulation, as the moderation of online content is often done by algorithms and not by humans. This has, at times, also led to censorship of legitimate content. Last but not least, existing mechanisms that can be used by Internet users to report misuse of online platforms (disinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech) are rather weak, slow and, most of the time, fully under the control of technology companies.

Notwithstanding such concerns, the European Union has adopted important pieces of legislation that support digital rights and have the potential to create precedents at global level. GDPR is the most known one, while the newly adopted Digital Services Act (DSA)[134] and upcoming AI Act will bring more safeguards for citizens and even the playfield for smaller technology companies.

These competing positions reflect a long-standing tension around digital sovereignty and economic competitiveness - between the interests of governments in ensuring their economic advantage in the digital field and the need to protects citizens' rights. The European Union, the USA and China have each publicly declared their interest in becoming the leading player in the field digital technologies by adopting a series of measures to support connectivity (access to high-speed Internet), the digital transformation of private companies and public services, production of key technologies (see the EU Chips Act[135]), fast processing technologies (particularly quantum computing – see below), and new technologies such AI or blockchain. Balancing rights with economic pressures and priorities is often a challenge for both national governments and international organisations. The perspective that innovation and economic growth could be hindered if too strict regulation is adopted contributes to hesitation in choosing between government/public regulation and self-regulation. At the same time, international structures such as the EU, the Council of Europe and the UN system have increasingly taken a role in raising awareness of the risks created by new technologies and in advocating for stronger policies to protect citizens' interests.

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[132] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/funding-digital
[133] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation
[134] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package
[135] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-chips-act_en

Artificial intelligence and algorithms are, currently, one of the hottest topics at global level. In the past five years various processes have started for what is called the 'governance of AI' within four international organisations – the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations. The EU is about to adopt the Artificial Intelligence Act[136], making it the first legally binding instrument of its kind. At the same time, the Council of Europe is working to develop an AI Convention[137] which, if approved, could have a wider impact.

In all policies and proposals for AI governance, there are a number of issues that are being addressed. The risks generated by AI and algorithms are central. They relate to their deployment by private companies (eg. algorithms for staff recruitment; algorithms used on social media to filter content), by educational institutions (eg. to evaluate grades; to evaluate teachers' performance) and by public institutions (eg. to assess the right to get social benefits; in courts of law or by police – to predict the likelihood of a citizens to commit a crime; what kind of punishment to receive; to provide social scores based on citizens' behaviour). This has led to concerns about both transparency, fairness and quality. People are generally unaware that such tools are being used and do not know how to protect their rights; they certainly usually do not know how such tools work (the majority of algorithms are considered proprietary and so only the company behind them is aware of how theyare deployed). Furthermore, many algorithms used in such services have been proven to be biased for a number of reasons, often because they are based on historically biased data or due to insufficient training of algorithms, thus raising concerns about the equal treatment of citizens.

It is this context that has opened a wider social debate around the ethics of AI and the risks of using such technologies in areas that could harm citizens and jeopardise their fundamental rights. The EU AI Act and CoE AI Convention specifically aim reduce these harms and provide citizens with legal mechanisms of redress for many, if not for all, situations when an algorithm or AI technology could be used. Current discussions are linked to a range of roles and responsibilities - of governments in using such technologies but also in governing them (keeping private stakeholders accountable), of private companies in making sufficient efforts before deploying them, of the wider technical community (programmers) and how equipped they are from an ethical perspective, and of wider society in recognizing their use and understanding their impact.

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[136] https://artificialintelligenceact.eu

[137] https://www.coe.int/en/web/artificial-intelligence/work-in-progress

Recent research[138] has highlighted that at the peak of the lockdown measures, about 1.6 billion learners have been impacted globally (91.3% of the world's enrolled learners), revealing that even the most Internet-connected part of the world was still grossly affected when everything was turned fully online. Adding to challenges related to access to devices or digital content, an important factor was the lack of digital skills – at that time, at EU level, 43% of citizens lacked basic digital skills and just 15% of young people had done an online course on any subject. This indicated the pressing need not only for digital citizenship but also for digital understanding and competence. The importance of investing in digital competences has been widely recognized in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with all regions prioritizing such investment for young people and educators, and many of them opening these opportunities to wider groups as well, such as senior citizens, civil servants or adult employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly triggered a boost of digital practices; there was no other choice, and we should all be grateful that technological advances rose to the challenge. In many cases, however, it was a crisis response rather than a sustainable digital practice. Now that the dust has settled, there is a need to invest in meaningful digital education, where there is a comprehensive and calibrated approach to equip various social and professional groups with the competence and confidence to navigate the digital transition.

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[138] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/053120+Study+on+SID+Web.pdf/0057379c-2180-dd3e-7537-71c468f3cf9d

5. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)

Over 20 years ago, the Spanish social anthropologist Carles Feixa started to reflect on the changing nature of 'generational renewal' through the metaphor of time. Versions of his arguments have been revised and published many times since (see Feixa 2005, 2006, 2021; Feixa *et al.* 2015). First, he talked about 'organic' youth in the time of the hourglass: time was cyclical, people lived in local space, and culture and values were subject to social reproduction. Within that 'post-figurative' culture, one generation followed another, with little change between them. Feixa then went on to talk about 'mechanical' youth in the time of the analogue watch: time was linear, people lived in national space (with newspapers and later radio and television) and in that 'co-figurative' culture, young people were subject to social insertion, as the older generation – with mixed success, as Karl Mannheim famously argued in his seminal essay on the 'problem' of generations (Mannheim 1952) – sought to impose tradition on the next. There was both continuity and change[139]. In the time of the digital watch, however, we live in a 'pre-figurative' culture where 'virtual' youth seek to anticipate the future (rather than follow the past). Arguably, today, at a time when young people have lived entirely in the digital age, their connections with the older generation may appear to have been completely severed. People occupy global space, with 24/7 connectivity across the world, and post-modern existence is characterised by nomadism, as individuals move from one thing to another, and pick and mix according to preference, position, location and circumstance.

One can connect such theoretical perspectives to some of the most prominent, and dominant, social theories within the global north, advanced by two European sociologists – Anthony Giddens (1990), in his writing about the need to construct 'choice biographies' if life is not going to run away like an uncontrollable juggernaut, and Ulrich Beck (1992), in his treatise on individualisation and 'risk society' as people, and arguably especially young people, are less and less protected from the risks that they are likely to face. The capacity to exercise control over our lives, and find meaningful reference points across the generations, recedes further by the day.

The pace of everybody's life is accelerating incrementally, with expectations for instantaneous attention and reaction around the clock. We are familiar with the challenges of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), with people forcing themselves to wake up in the middle of the night to check their phones, just in case there are new notifications that need to be attended to *immediately* (which is probably an absurd proposition in and of itself but, nonetheless, is hard to resist). Rosa (2015, 2021) suggests that this social acceleration of everyday living conditions is producing increasing disconnection from daily experience and an increasing sense of self-alienation. As life in-person and online speeds up, young people in particular have an ever-growing number of contacts via social media, but these are invariably short-term and superficial. This obstructs and impedes the development and maintenance of what Rosa calls 'resonance relationships' within our social environments – horizontal resonances (relationships between people and in policy and politics), diagonal resonances (relationships to objects and activities) and vertical resonances (relationships to nature, art, history or religion). It is suggested that to address such concerns, a 'pedagogy of resonance' needs to be developed, slowing people down, promoting their attentiveness in the moment, because 'setting up a relationship with the world means to become part of the world'[140]. One quotation from the Estonian 'megatrends' analysis captured the same concerns in a rather different way:

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[139] According to Mannheim (1952), the scale of change was dependant on the strength and cohesiveness of each 'generational unit', itself a product of the influence of the factors that had formed that group in its youth, such as the experience of war or destitution.

> With the rapid exchange of information and all that [cf. the risks of digitalisation] – young people often hop from one thing to another…. Their lack of focus is a problem… or they want to get some quick snapshots… I cannot put my finger on it exactly, but I can see that it affects their nervous system. …. How to teach young people to regulate their nervous system, e.g. with breathing exercises. How to make it part of their daily routine…. It is easy to become overwhelmed when things are so interesting that you simply *lose control of yourself*…. You become so focused that your nervous system is thrown off balance. How, then, can we restore their *tranquility*?
>
> (Haugas and Kendrali 2022, p.16, emphasis added)

Could youth work – through non-formal education and learning - be one pedagogical space or place, or relational practice, that might translate such thinking into reality?

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[140] Mit der Welt in Beziehung zu treten heißt, sich Welt anzuverwandeln

6. Security

> *What do we do when the future we had expected disappears?* (Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, Thought for the Day BBC Radio 4, 24th February 2023)

My son, now 19, from a young age had always dreamed of travelling to Japan via the Trans-Siberian Railway and had planned it for his gap year before going to university. With the war in Ukraine, that is no longer possible. It is, of course, a small disappointment when compared with the harrowing troubles and traumas that have affected and afflicted those in Ukraine and, indeed, on its western borders, since 24th February 2022[141]. The point is, however, that conflict in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the complexion of 'Europe'. Ukraine itself has been brought more closely into a united European identity (notably through its candidate status, alongside Moldova, for membership of the European Union), but Russia and Belarus have become excluded. They have withdrawn from the Council of Europe, as well as from wider global diplomatic and military conventions; one year after the start of its invasion of Ukraine, the United Nations passed an overwhelmingly supported resolution condemning the Russian Federation for its actions[142].

Peace in Europe after 1945 was first disturbed by the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, though for many in southern, western and northern Europe these events still seemed quite distant, perhaps because it was not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 'reunification' of Europe. After stability was secured in the Balkans and the establishment of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), there seemed to be the prospect of lasting peace throughout the wider Europe and, if not full membership of the European Union for many of those countries, at least an 'ever closer union' through membership of the Council of Europe. All this was rocked, in February 2022, when the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, was suspended from – and then subsequently withdrew from – the Council of Europe. Three days later, on 18th March 2022, the Council of Europe suspended its relations with Belarus on account of the war in Ukraine.

The aspiration of the Council of Europe *Youth Sector Strategy 2030* (launched in January 2020), through its thematic priority to live together in peaceful and inclusive societies, was therefore severely undermined on this dimension. The full implications for Europe of the Ukraine war are not yet known, though there are clearly immediate repercussions across a number of fronts – accommodating and supporting those fleeing across the border into Poland, Slovakia, Moldova and Romania; re-adjusting national budgets in the light of support – in cash and kind – provided to Ukraine; mobilising defence systems in case of more widespread Russian aggression (especially in relation to the Baltic States); admitting Finland (and probably Sweden, soon) to NATO; and, arguably of greatest significance for the majority of 'ordinary' people across Europe, the dramatic hike in the costs of energy and its knock-on consequences for everyday living. Young people, whether still living at home or new to independent living, will clearly already have been affected in at least some ways by these experiences. No longer can they travel, relatively freely and safely, to other parts of the wider Europe.

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[141] And, indeed, what may have happened to young people and their families throughout history; see, for example, Daniel Finkelstein's account of the lives of his parents and grandparents during the first half of the 20th century (Finkelstein 2023)

[142] 143 votes in favour of the resolution, 5 against, 35 abstentions: https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12458.doc.htm

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall over thirty years ago, thousands of kilometres of new walls security barriers, fences and barbed wire have sprung up in and around Europe. The EU/Schengen area is now surrounded or criss-crossed by 19 border or separation fences totally 2,048 km in length, nearly seven times more than some ten years ago (there were 315 km in 2014). There may be various reasons for this but it is argued that the cause is primarily political, deriving from European member States' concern about 'irregular migration', despite the European Commission President arguing that encircling the EU with walls and fences is an affront to European values, and the European Parliament asserting that external border protection must respect European and international law (Tisdall 2023).

Whatever the reasons, and the political, ethical and practical counterarguments, there are clearly questions to be asked about how young people will absorb the rhetoric attached to such developments and how they will build or demolish such 'walls' in their own minds.

7. Energy

Rarely a day goes by without media commentary on the ‘energy crisis’ and its relation to the ‘cost of living crisis’. The war in Ukraine put immediate and extraordinary pressure on energy prices, which has affected consumers in multiple direct and indirect ways – heating, transport and food in particular. The costs of housing, especially in major cities, have been under pressure for some time; there is now talk of those at the poorest end of income distribution, and indeed even those towards the middle, having to make choices between heating and eating, sometimes even between ‘renting and tenting’.

Filippos Proedrou, the author of a highly commended recent book on energy issues in Europe (see Proedrou 2022), summarised the issues especially for this paper:

Key issues affecting Europe in relation to energy

The war in Ukraine has hit hard the European economy and society, with disproportionate impact on the least affluent, and this in most cases involves the European youth. The war morphed itself into a full-blown out energy crisis, with oil, gas and electricity prices skyrocketing for final consumers. This has been precipitated by higher energy costs on the back of a surge in global energy demand post-COVID, a notable lack of storage in Europe and hardening relations with Russia, which withheld gas quantities from the spot markets in the second half of 2021. Once the war broke out in February 2022, however, and gas trade with Russia was reduced exponentially, the cost of living both directly (through energy bills), as well as indirectly (through higher interest rates and increased prices across the board) rendered sustenance harder for everyone.

Currently, Europe faces a double-edged conundrum. On the one hand, it needs to keep up energy flows, so that its energy security and fossil-based economy is not compromised. This entails the consumption of more Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) which reduces availability of gas in the global markets and hence pushes developing states to the use of even more coal. The quest to source gas from alternative sources, including other authoritarian regimes like Algeria and Azerbaijan, as well as LNG from the US, which however involves higher emissions as it includes shale gas, moreover, sits at odds with the EU’s climate policy, as well as its goal for more resilient energy supply and dwindling support for authoritarian states. The gap that the withdrawal of Russian supplies created in the European market have also pushed the EU to move on with the questionable decision to taxonomize investments in gas as green, in contrast to its declared ambition to phase out gas sooner rather than later.

On the other hand, a return to business as usual is considered impossible. This means that while diversified imports of gas are needed to fill the gap in the short term, the EU has launched its ambitious REPowerEU plan to pioneer a clean energy economy in record times. This involves public investments and regulatory and fiscal stimuli for energy efficiency and savings, and increased renewable energy generation, including solar, wind and bio-fuels. The EU also appears determined to kickstart a green hydrogen market with public investments and international partnerships. Very importantly, it also aims gradually to spearhead an urban renewable revolution, with the intention to cover rooftops of newbuilds and vacant spaces with renewable energy facilities. Such decentralized modes of energy production bear high hopes for increased energy availability and access. This is important in two ways. First, it will mean that the need for further gas imports will be gradually curtailed. Second, it will empower people as clean energy generators and prosumers, shield them from energy crisis costs in the future and provide the basis for a functional European economy. The caveat in this scenario is Europe's dependence on the critical materials and global value chains needed for the generation of clean energy at European soil.

(Source: adapted from an email 8.3.23)

This concise appraisal of Europe's energy challenges reveals starkly the interconnection and interdependency of so many issues discussed in this paper – *inter alia*, security, health, economy, climate, and democracy – and the tensions around and within the political choices that have to be made. Notwithstanding such questions, the day-to-day reality is that the hike in energy costs have re-shaped individual budgets and the disposable income they have available for other things. For young people, this will affect core transition decisions around leaving home and living independently, thinking about starting a family, perhaps re-considering their occupational aspirations, as well as more immediate issues such as use of (and the costs of) leisure time and the possibilities of travel.

8. Identity

Writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* in 2023, Nicola Bacon, the Founding Director of Social Life, noted that she had expressed concern about social change in 2019, not knowing what was around the corner, and that

> Since then, we have had a pandemic, the start of war in Ukraine, global economic pressures and soaring costs of living. Now, as we collectively experience extraordinary anxieties about strikes and political instability, high inflation and cost-of-living pressures, problems paying for heat, housing and food, this comment seems strangely prescient
>
> (N. Bacon 2023, p.32)

Her research inquiry was largely London-focused, yet it has a striking resonance for many other parts of Europe as she discusses inequalities of various kinds, including those related to 'belonging':

> Young people… described how their sense of belonging to their local areas was linked to having friends locally, knowing their way round the neighbourhood and having strong connections to local institutions. The pandemic restricted many young people to smaller geographies, with churches, community centres, cafes, shops and local clubs closing or restricting access. Young people found themselves with limited spaces where they could socialise or build their networks of support
>
> (N. Bacon 2023, p.34)

Bacon goes on to say that 'belonging' is fluid, specific to everyday experience and life choices, though also driven by more external pressures and influenced by services provided and how our surroundings reflect who we are. She discusses the role of what she calls the 'social infrastructure', the mix of the build design that needs to be welcoming and inclusive, and relationship-based practices in community building and service provision. Youth work *per se* is not mentioned but is implicit in her advocacy for 'light touch' neighbourly relationships and the establishment of local identities that can promote a sense of belonging: 'promoting belonging in difficult times helps give people a sense of control when so many aspects of life seem precarious'.

Though by no means exclusively, the Offenburg Talks in 2022 arguably explored questions of identity and belonging most closely in relation to the prospective policy and practice of youth work. Some forms of youth work have, it must be said, *always* been concerned with identity and belonging, even if the debate has not always been couched in those term, going all the way back to the Scouting movement and the work of other youth work organisations (such as the Woodcraft Folk[143] and the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift[144]) that conferred on young people new identities to make anything at least theoretically possible for them. The challenge was always about converting new-found competences and confidence back into the 'real world' and in the context of 'real' status and identities. One might argue that something similar now prevails in the relation between online and offline identities. That might have particular implications for online youth work.

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[143] See Davis, M. (2000), *Fashioning a New World: A history of the Woodcraft Folk*, London: Cooperative College

[144] See Pollen, A. (2021), *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*, London: Donlon Books

Indeed, contributors to the Offenburg Talks #5 were forceful in their analysis of young people's identities and sense of belonging in the new Europe. The Covid-19 pandemic hit the young hard, destroying anticipated transition pathways[145], fomenting anxieties and damaging mental health.

Belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home' and about feeling 'safe' (Ignatief 2001, Yuval-Davies 2006). There is a huge literature in both psychology and sociology on belonging but, to bring this closer to our concerns, it is useful to note the observation that the concept of 'citizenship' is integrally connected to the sense of belonging to a 'community' (Hall and Williamson 1999), which raises the idea of the *politics* of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011): put bluntly, who is 'in' and who is 'out'. That space to belong, a key feature of all youth work practice according to the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, has become further restricted in terms of civic and political participation.

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[145] See Krzaklewska, E., Williamson, H., Stapleton, A. and Tillmann, F. (2023), *Transitions on Hold: how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people's transitions to autonomy*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe

9. Mobility

The Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention also noted the challenges that further mobility and migration was likely to bring to youth work practice, if it had not already done so. This was pitched, at the time, as the challenge of 'multiculturalism' throughout Europe and the sometimes extreme political responses – on many sides of the spectrum – that accompanied it.

Since then, new issues have arisen in Europe. The climate crisis in other parts of the world has dramatically, and often devastatingly, changed the picture of (im)migration, with barriers on Europe's borders as desperate people are exploited to attempt numerous points and forms of entry. This has been documented and characterised by Daniel Briggs (2021) as 'border stories and the business of misery'. And as Maria Pisani (2016) has lucidly portrayed, the majority of migrants are invariably *young*. Migration has, in turn, fuelled increasingly reactionary responses from populist politicians and governments. It is a central issue in the wheel of misfortune facing young people in Europe today.

The challenges caused by migration for the development of European societies are manifold. Firstly, European (especially European Union) member States face a considerable influx of migrants from Africa and Asia. In both cases, this includes forced and non-forced migrants who, in many countries, are not always welcomed. Growing xenophobia, racism and nationalism is the widespread consequence. Secondly, internal EU (and indeed wider European) migration and mobility is promoted by the institutions of the European Union[146], but integration in host societies requires much more than simply participation in the labour market or volunteering programmes. Furthermore, brain drain from some Central and Eastern European countries and countries in South-East Europe as well as in southern EU member States presents a significant challenge for those societies. Thirdly, the war in Ukraine and the largest European refugee movement since World War II has led to new perceptions of vulnerability and risks. On the one hand Ukrainian refugees were supported swiftly in many EU countries, though this also led to discrimination between different groups of refugees, while, on the other hand, the war also shed a new light on the vulnerability of the unity of the European Union.

On the issue of migration, beyond the myths that are fuelled through self-interested politics eager to foment division (see de Haas 2023), European countries find themselves in a limbo between its need for migrant labour and the risk of aggravating tensions and conflicts over immigration. The participation of migrants in the labour market is often seen as one of the main instruments to foster integration in host societies yet this participation is also often legally restricted for asylum seekers and for all migrants from non-EU countries. Furthermore, the lack of recognition and validation of education acquired in countries of origin can be a source of frustration, even hostility, for well-qualified migrants who have no choice but to take more menial jobs well below their levels of skills and qualifications. Conversely, the skills and competencies that migrants are lacking become obstacles to easy participation in the labour market. Beside labour market participation, education and training, and housing are the main challenges for migrants on their way to integration in the host society. An overview of existing integration policies and practices in various areas was recently collected by the Horizon Europe project SPRING – Sustainable Practices of Integration[147]. The project highlights the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation between stakeholders in different areas of policies and integration practices. It emphasises the fact that integration policies are implemented of various levels, thereby complicating the integration of newly arrived migrants.

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[146] I have already talked about the emergence of EU exchange programmes, such as what has become Erasmus + (the amalgamation of programmes for different groups such as students, other young people, and schools) and the European Solidarity Corps. Prior to ESC was the European Voluntary Service programme. More recently, during the 2022 European Year of Youth, the 'ALMA' programme was announced, offering opportunities to work in another European country, particularly for young people depicted as 'NEET' – Not in Employment, Education or Training: https://youthforeurope.eu/work-abroad-with-the-alma-programme/ Note the use, once again, of 'youth for europe', the first name for exchange programmes for young people, established in 1988.

One challenge regarding migration and integration lies in the imbalance of brain drain and brain gain. This is of considerable importance for inner-EU migration[148] but even more pertinent for the mobility-induced changes in other European countries. While the concept of mutual recognition of education in the EU is successful for tertiary education, it still needs improvement for other high skills training, especially vocational training. Research points routinely to the fact that emigration is strongly correlated with socio-economic standards and to the level of education; despite perceptions to the contrary, higher economic, cultural, social and human capital is more likely to lead to a higher readiness to leave the country of origin. The European Union mobility programs like Erasmus + promote individual mobility with the aim to induce an *exchange* of talent between member States and not migration streams to certain countries, yet it is not clear that this is always the case.

Research also shows that integration and re-integration is still challenging, besides the recognition of educational success. The problem of recognition and validation of foreign education and training is, especially for young migrants, an obstacle to participation in the labour market at an appropriate level of employment. This leads often to a de-qualification of migrants in the host country and to the fact that many migrants work in sectors and jobs far below their educational standards. On the other hand, many migrants from Asia as well as from Africa arrive with very low educational attainment and with low skills. Lack of knowledge of language is *per se* a major obstacle to participation in education and training schemes and subsequently in the labour market.

One of the pillars of building Europe and a European identity has been through mobility programmes, the most notable of which has been the Erasmus programme for university students and a sequence of youth programmes for young people more generally, latterly merged with other ‘learning mobility’ programmes under the banner of Erasmus +. In-person exchanges have been a central feature of all of these initiatives. Yet it is now suggested that, in a post-COVID-19 and climate-threatened ‘new’ Europe, notwithstanding the increasing pressures on young people’s disposable resources, there may have been an ’immobility turn’

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[147] https://integrationpractices.eu/

[148] The former chair of the EU’s Committee of the Regions, Antonio Costa, later Prime Minister of Portugal, convened a meeting to discuss brain drain / brain gain, and constructed the concept of ‘brain circulation’ – young people could and often should leave, but policies should be strengthened that focused on encouraging them to return.

(see Cairns and Clemente 2023). Young people may be less enthusiastic about taking advantage of physical mobility opportunities, though virtual exchanges may – to some extent, and for some young people, at least – be an attractive substitute for them.

10. Health

Inevitably, a major focus for everyone in Europe remains the COVID-19 pandemic. It most corrosive effects may have subsided, but its impact persists in myriad ways.

In post-COVID-19 Europe, two-thirds of young Europeans are at risk of depression, up from 15% before the COVID-19 crisis. The impact of anxiety, loneliness, academic stress and chronic insecurity has been conveyed in crushing terms: “a rollercoaster”, an “ordeal”, “overwhelming”, “terrifying” and “burnout” are just some of the expressions used to describe how life now feels for many young adults (Eurofound 2021). The head of social policy at Eurofound, Massimiliano Macherini, was quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper, pointing to the knock-on effects of these circumstances:

> This is a very bleak mix of mental health, economic and social impacts. In previous recessions, those who suffered most, in terms of the labour market, bore the scars in later employability. They never caught up.

This point is made emphatically at the close of considering the ‘new Europe’ and its impact on young people – with a variety of possible implications for youth work – because it highlights two key ‘golden threads’ that run through all the preceding text: the *interconnections* of the issues at stake, and the *inequalities* that have worsened, and continue to worsen, in today’s Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic is, of course, the universal and unifying experience that all young people in Europe have been through, though it was inevitably experienced in very different ways. Nevertheless, as *The Guardian* article also noted, alongside testimonies from young people suggesting they had been marginalised and overlooked during the COVID-19 crisis, perhaps on account that they were at least direct risk of contracting the virus:

> Although the least likely group to become ill from coronavirus, Generation Z has been hit disproportionately by the biggest educational disruption in modern history, a surge in unemployment and the psychological effects of lockdown isolation. Young workers are also the least likely group to have received financial support for lost jobs.
> The depth of despondency and anger the responses reflect is likely to ring political alarm bells, just as European governments are taming the health crisis with vaccination programmes and cautiously reopening battered economies
>
> (Butler and Bannock 2021)

It has been widely documented that the closure of educational institutions and the economic (employment) consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have already had a substantial impact on young people’s lives. Those young people had already been affected by the earlier financial crisis and the subsequent austerity measures imposed by European Member States. It has been estimated that this left one in four young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. As Colley *et al.* (2007) had argued even before the banking crisis, the many factor in social exclusion (employment opportunities, earnings, educational drop-out, health issues and more) combine together in myriad ways and tend to produce a vicious cycle over time. This has included disproportionate adverse effects on mental health and well-being (Moxon *et al.* 2021). It is not yet clear how long-lasting such effects will be but there is a strong likelihood that they will produce similar ‘scarring effects’ to those affecting young people who have experienced lengths of time outside of education, training and employment. Many of those in the ‘Covid generation’ have had their transitions to autonomy put on hold (Krzaklewska *et al.* 2023).

Part II - A resolution on the future of youth work in this 'new Europe'?

What are the implications of the ten issues discussed above – sometimes referred to as 'crises' – for youth work in this arguably 'new' and certainly changed Europe? Can European youth work, and youth work in Europe, respond? Should it respond? How might it respond? What does it need, in order to respond? How might youth work 'facilitate agency' in young people or support their 'navigational capacities'[149] to deal with these challenges in the best way possible?

Since the EU *Resolution on Youth Work* (in 2010), there have been both progressive and regressive steps in what was once referred to as the 'social condition of young people' (Willis 1985). And it is perhaps instructive to contextualise that situation even more deeply by probing even further back to that time when Willis was first recounting the 'fractured' transitions to adulthood and I myself was writing about 'Struggling Beyond Youth', suggesting that youth work was remaining too preoccupied with the 'acute anxieties of adolescence' at the expense of paying attention to the 'emerging chronic crisis of young adulthood' (Williamson 1985a).

Over the past 40 years, the inexorable rise of neo-liberalism and related globalisation has eroded and diminished social protection and the 'welfare state' in both the capitalist countries of western Europe and the former state socialist countries of eastern Europe. Esping-Andersen's (1990) seminal typology of European welfare regimes, even when one adds the latter countries, has been harder and harder to sustain, as has Walther's (2006) derivative account of regimes of youth transitions in different parts of Europe, and Wallace and Bendit's (2009) classification of 'different tendencies in youth policies in the European Union'. Youth transitions to 'adulthood' and autonomy – from education to employment, dependent to independent living, family of origin to family of destination, and sometimes from street cultures to more organised criminal activities - have, all the academic research tells us, become increasingly complex, prolonged and reversible (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Macdonald and Shildrick 2007; Williamson and Côté 2022).

Nonetheless, despite this unravelling of the social, cultural, political and ethical bonds that, since 1945 for some European countries and 1989-92 for others, have formed some degree of democratic consensus –reflected and promoted by both the Council of Europe and the European Union – and despite assertions that Europe is now a context of 'post-democracy' (Crouch 2004), there have also been glimpses of hope about democratic renewal. These have taken many forms, such as the establishment of direct democracy and participatory budgeting, experiments with a universal basic income, the Occupy and Indignados movement and, most recently the climate campaigns fronted by Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future. And, significantly, since the 1960s, young people's voice has been strengthened in the corridors of power, though many would say not enough and some would say that it has been rather too successfully co-opted and, as a result, constrained – accommodating compliant youth within the mainstream frames of debate and excluding alternative voices and perspectives (see, for example, Pušnik and Banjac 2022).

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[149] These were two of the suggested definitions of youth work in the preparatory paper for the 2nd European Youth Work Convention (see https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/FINDING+COMMON+GROUND_Summary+paper_FINAL.pdf/02fc907a-147f-47b3-ba06-041e7e8dfd8a)

At a European level, both the European Union and the Council of Europe do accommodate the voice of young people, through the European Youth Forum and the Advisory Council for Youth respectively. Both would argue that, as representative bodies of youth organisations and national youth councils in Europe, they are at the vanguard of self-organised and self-directed *youth work* – advocating for young people's needs and youth rights across Europe. They constitute the democratic voice of youth in Europe. Elsewhere in the youth work 'community of practice', however, are other forms of *youth work*: the NGOs that promote and deliver, for example, human rights education and intercultural learning; the trainers' networks that enable others to deliver various styles of youth work practice; the open youth centres and youth clubs that are managed and run by adult volunteers and paid practitioners (with very diverse levels of training); outreach and detached (street-based) work; faith-based youth work; activities promoted within the youth wings of political parties; international exchanges and other learning mobility experiences; residential opportunities; and project-based or more established youth work connected to other domains of (youth) policy, such as health, formal education, housing or criminal justice. There is probably much more, sometimes hidden well below the gaze of institutional and professional actors in the youth field.

Despite the groundswell of youth work activity over the past quarter of a century, we still do not know what is really going on. Many recent mapping exercises are as likely to confuse the picture further rather than clarify it. As the 1st European Youth Work Convention in 2010 concluded, youth work in Europe is characterised by a 'world of difference', despite the similarities ('spaces and bridges') identified through the 2nd European Youth Work Convention. Whether it can make a world of difference to the lives of young people in the 'new Europe' is quite another matter, though the framework produced at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention does provide a basis for some hope.

The European frame of 'youth work' takes a particular form. It is not the youth work of the fascist Hitler Jügend nor of the communist Pioneers and Komsomol, nor is it the youth work undertaken in exclusive sports clubs or within some faith-based organisations. It is a youth work based on democracy and other social values (though it may not always be formally democratic in its practice). It is a youth work committed to intercultural learning, tolerance and understanding, and it is a youth work anchored within a commitment to human rights. On that basis, it must never renege on countering anti-democratic ideologies.

Youth work is also a place and space for a critical pedagogy, one that promotes a participatory culture that encourages the expression of views and the asking of (sometimes difficult) questions. Youth work should not be party political (unless it is the youth work of political parties) but it is unapologetically political, following a definition of politics as 'the regulation and contestation of unequal power relationships' (Bhavnani 1991).

Youth work in Europe has matured since it first achieved some traction on the European stage. Yet at national and local levels, the story is much more patchy; youth work has often been vulnerable during the shrinkage of public services and funding restraint – capacity and momentum has often diminished. Despite the European Youth Work Agenda still being only just over three years old, it is sometimes suggested that there is some fatigue in the advocacy for youth work; its core ideas and claims have, arguably, become a numbing mantra that has been repeated too many times and ends up doing little more than preaching to the converted while, elsewhere, falling on deaf ears. We have to think deeper and harder about what we want to say on 'external' societal matters such as inclusion and participation and on 'internal' professional matters such as quality, training and value[150]. **It is now time to step forward more confidently and purposefully with a statement of intent about the concept of youth work in contemporary Europe.**

To that end, three meetings were held – in December 2022, in March 2023, and in October 2023 - of an informal 'European Advisory and Resonance Group', an *ad hoc* gathering of individuals with extensive experience and expertise in policy, research and practice concerning youth work specifically and youth policy more generally. Without wishing to replace or subvert the thinking of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention and the European Youth Work Agenda, there was a quest for fresh thinking or, alternatively, the reinforcement of established thinking. Just some of the ideas advanced are captured in the Table below:

Table 1: Some thoughts from the 1st Informal European Advisory and Resonance Group

"Don't overclaim or underclaim"

For youth work practice	**For youth work policy**	**For youth work research**
Ensuring a *participatory culture* that amplifies the voices of young people	Strengthening *cross-sectoral co-operation*	The crisis for youth work is the *absence of data – need evidence* for advocacy and for learning
Supporting more *vulnerable groups*	Greater visibility around its support for *transitions to autonomy and citizenship*	Identifying more *common ground*
Adding value to *learning democracy*	Improving the quality of youth work through *access to training*	*Recording and reporting* what youth workers have actually done
Enabling support for young people to determine how to respond to 'crises'; to find a path through these circumstances	*Positioning* the youth work sector within wider youth policy	"We can't prove everything, but nor should we prove nothing"!

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[150] The flier for a recorded discussion and Q&A, scheduled for January 2024, between myself and Dr John Rose, the leading authority on municipal youth work in Wales, includes the point that 'They don't always see eye to eye on youth work matters, but they both agree wholeheartedly that youth work matters'. That creative tension between the two of them has contributed significantly to guiding the evolution of youth work in Wales over the past 40 years. We both have a lifetime of experience across the triangle of research, policy and practice.

	Campaigning committees for youth work (youth worker, politician, youth work provider, and young person)	Mixed methods – from *storytelling to surveys*
	Signposting *at the crossroads and on the roundabouts* of youth policy	

Following the exchange of views within the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group there was a feeling that ‘the ship is sailing’. That was important; on the wall facing the door of the old cottage in the Welsh mountains where I have taken young people for almost 50 years there is a poster that states bluntly: ‘a ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what ships were built for’. Youth work, like a ship beyond the harbour, is always on a journey, navigating both the calm and turbulence in young people’s lives, sometimes making clear progress and sometimes tossed around by the elements, but ideally seeking to steer a course that is relevant and meaningful to the young people on board, towards a destination of their choosing.

The informal European Advisory and Resonance Group was insistent on two overarching thoughts. One was *the huge potential of youth work*. The other was that *youth work is not the panacea to resolve the problems of young people* as they faced one crisis after another or, as often, multiple crises simultaneously. The question was not, therefore, whether youth work possesses some kind of magical healing and problem-solving capacity, but whether youth work does – or can – have the skills and competences to support young people’s agency and ‘navigational capacities’ in these changed times. Three possibilities exist: youth work simply reasserts its old position, youth work adapts its old position (through, perhaps killing off some ‘sacred cows’ but not relinquishing its ‘cherished values’[151]), or youth work finds a new position[152]. It is important to acknowledge that, however much youth work proclaims to hold to a consistency of values that underpins its practice, it has *always* responded to different crises and challenges affecting young people and the society at large: anxieties about the emergence of some kind of ‘residuum’ or ‘underclass’ (the social inclusion agenda); the physical (lack of) fitness of army recruits (the health promotion agenda); the need to produce more active citizens (the personal development and character-building agenda); a concern about the rise in juvenile delinquency (the youth crime prevention agenda); the threats arising from ‘cultural’ invasion, notably from the USA (the ‘values’ agenda); and more.

There may be some merit, therefore, in pausing to consider what kinds of influences have held sway at different levels of development in youth work policy and practice:

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[151] This juxtaposition of ‘cherished values’ and ‘sacred cows’ was an approach I took at the turn of the millennium to challenge youth workers to consider the role of youth work in the 21st century. See also Siurala (2016).

[152] There is a fourth option – that youth work gives up and goes home – but that is not to be contemplated.

Table 2: **Key drivers of youth work development at different levels**[153]

	European	**National**	**Local**
Participation			
Information			
Association			
Rights			
Mobility/exchanges			
Social inclusion			
Promotion of volunteering / civic action			
Promotion of 'healthy lifestyles'			
Re-engagement of young people depicted as 'NEET'			
Crime prevention/diversion			
Pre-vocational training/alternative education			

Just as one element of the common ground of youth work is to provide a 'bridge' for young people's transitions, so youth work itself required intermediaries that 'bridge' the different levels of youth work development. Regional and national authorities are critical brokers in the transmission of local realities to the transnational level and, equally, in the interpretation and application of European frameworks towards the local context. Quality, inclusion and competence are fine words, even keywords, amongst others, but they need pegs on which to hang. Youth work is often depicted as a kind of improvised practice, suggesting recurrent spontaneity and a rather ad hoc response; this is inaccurate - like jazz improvisation it needs foundational knowledge and skills that underpin the judgment to determine the 'scale and volume' of response and intervention. Or, put another way, when it is posited that jazz has 'no rules', the counterpoint is that it has its 'patterns and parameters' – "only then comes the improvisation"[154]. It could be argued that quality youth work is much the same. Indeed, the campaigning group In Defence of Youth Work published 'stories from practice'[155] in which significant emphasis is put on youth work being about *improvisational skills* underpinning a process that cannot be scripted in advance. In a new Europe of division, inequalities, uncertainties and anxieties, such calibrated professional practice is critical if youth work is to both realise and demonstrate its potential.

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[153] The informal European Advisory and Resonance Group was asked to consider this grid. There was not one response. My own youth work policy experience is that any and all of these issues have been pivotal, at different times, to youth work development (through both promises of further or additional funding if they are addressed by youth work or – critically – threats to future funding if youth work did *not* address such issues). As I write, youth work in England (and perhaps Wales) is celebrating the allocation of significant additional resources, announced as part of a package of measures to tackle youth nuisance and anti-social behaviour.

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After writing this paragraph, I came across a brilliant paper, published in 2014, on precisely this point by Dr Pete Harris of Newman University in Birmingham, England. It is worth covering in some detail and it should be essential reading for all involved in youth work. Harris himself, now a university teacher of youth work and criminology, is both a youth worker and a musician. The article focuses on youth worker training (its title is *The Youth Worker as jazz improviser: foregrounding education 'in the moment' within the professional development of youth workers*):

> By drawing on jazz musicology that details the extensive preparation involved in acquiring the ability to improvise within jazz, [the paper] asks whether more can be done in the classroom setting to embed an *improvisatory disposition* within youth work students on professional development programmes (emphasis added)

Harris sets the scene for the need to incorporate this in such training with many powerful, cogent and salient points:

> This paper argues that readiness, willingness and ability to improvise are central to the role of the youth worker.
>
> The physical and social context of youth work practice (in youth clubs, on the street, in public space and in young people's 'free' time) means that opportunities for learning are necessarily negotiated, often occur during real time and need to be drawn from the immediate environment, 'in the moment'.

Harris confronts the idea that improvisation in youth work is something just 'cobbled together', any more than it is with improvisation in jazz music, and he dives deeply into the parallels between the two. Jazz differs from classical music in that

> There is no clear prescription…. It is exploratory and tentative… this uncertainty creates a freshness and edge… pre-rehearsed ideas are avoided if at all possible…. Regulation and control are viewed as restricting interplay. Retrospective sense-making is preferred over attempts to plan for anticipated outcomes.

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[154] Taken from *The Gold*, a BBC docu-drama about the Brinks-Mat robbery, the biggest gold heist in global history, where £26 million worth of gold bars were stolen from Heathrow Airport, of which 'only' £13 million pounds' worth has ever been recovered.

[155] https://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/thisisyouthwork.pdf

The last point is especially important, given wider preoccupations and expectations that youth work needs to 'deliver' on prescribed outcomes. As Harris concludes,

> youth work [professional development programmes] may need to proactively highlight improvisation as a hallmark of professional expertise.

Source of quotations: Harris (2014)

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Youth work is always in a process of discovery, reflection, re-appraisal and renewal. Sometimes, as in the case of the digital world, its terrain is uncharted; sometimes, as in the case of environmental issues, the landscape is faintly familiar in one way or the other. Youth organisations in the 1920s were, after all, quite preoccupied with 'connecting' with nature and the land, though such concerns receded as other issues assumed precedence.

Climate issues and the environment inevitably commanded considerable attention within the informal European Resonance Group. One padlet highlighted some of the different perspectives that might prevail within youth work, as well as the difficulties of looking into the future:

> Sustainability is not tackled in much depth in existing [youth work] documents. When preparing a resolution on youth work for years to come, how can we prepared to ensure that such a resolution is meaningful in the future as well. This task is complicated by the fact that connections between sustainability and youth work/youth policy are in the process of development at the moment. Also, two perspectives on sustainability may be offered. Environment as an issue of sustainability can be seen as an individual issue. Individuals have to take responsibility. On the other hand, it may be seen as an important element of the youth work value base, in the same way as democracy and equity. We should be talking about a democratic, sustainable framework.
> (adapted by the author)

The Offenburg Talks #4 (2021) did, however, grapple with the topic of Environment, Climate Change and Sustainability, around the thorny question of 'how green is youth work?', exploring a range of issues from many angles[156].

The conclusions to those Offenburg Talks were multifaceted but at their core was a view that youth work had to strengthen its position on sustainability, stand by young people committed to climate action, and to work at the local level to 'build up a strong base and provide the foundation and catalyst for national and international actions'. Youth work specifically, and youth policy more generally, needs to move from what was described as 'hesitant ambivalence' to a more determined stand and stance on 'green' issues. Of significance was the view that youth work support for young people's perspectives and aspirations demands a reflective balance of both 'dutiful' and 'disruptive' action by youth workers. Furthermore, it was argued that the youth climate movement and youth work needed to forge and form alliances both within and beyond their boundaries, making connections with other professional and progressive groups. The climate movement should be working with other social movements and on wider geopolitical issues and youth work must play a role in facilitating dialogue and bringing diverse stakeholders together.

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[156] See https://jugendfuereuropa.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/download/file/4319?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DOffenburgTalks_Reader_final151221.pdf&response-cache-control=private&X-Amz-Content-Sha256=UNSIGNED-PAYLOAD&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIAUCI3T77LQ4XU6EES%2F20230405%2Feu-central-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20230405T082134Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=600&X-Amz-Signature=cf5a453f04f53c0788312432fbf1ed311621aea516ca28c36897ea7adb6f0f8a

Very similar arguments might well be advanced concerning the role of youth work in relation to many other contemporary issues affecting young people's lives, including all of those outlined above. This suggests that youth work in Europe – with appropriate recognition and support, including the context of European youth work – has reached a point of development and maturity that it may potentially occupy a pivotal place in connecting (signposting?) young people to both influencing and accessing the opportunities and experiences that can positively shape their lives. Indeed, as the summary paper for the Offenburg Talks #4 concluded:

> Even if it seems that in terms of urgency climate change is of the highest priority, and therefore arguably more paramount than the others, the interrelationship with other topics cannot be neglected. Youth work must promote awareness of global and interconnected social issues and support a plurality of voices through inclusive structures, capacity building and cross-sectoral approaches.

The following pages consider Play, Participation and Partnership as the core components of youth work, together with the pressures to evidence its value (Proof), and the need for education and training if the full potential of youth work is to be realised (Proficiency).

A. Play – (re)considering and (re)conceptualising 'la vie associative'

In July 2023, the BBC Politics programme suggested that loneliness was perhaps 'the new pandemic'. It debated the findings of a new report (see Ellard *et al.* 2023) suggesting that one in four university students in the UK are experiencing profound loneliness, as 'the walls close in around them'. Social media may forge connections but is no compensation for in-person contact; young people get plugged in, but remain left out. Combating loneliness requires urgent attention to the provision of space for social gathering and the rebuilding of social bonds and social trust, something that has eroded and been corroded in recent years, especially during the pandemic. The renewed attention to 'play' is therefore something of a pincer movement that derives from both bottom-up psychological imperatives (as suggested above) and renewed top-down pedagogical exhortation (as suggested below):

> *We value creative and playful approaches to lifelong learning*[157] *that are theoretically informed, risk sensible and draw on people's potential.*
>
> (A Charter for Social Pedagogy in the UK & Ireland www.sppa-uk.org)

As the youth sociologist Phil Cohen (1997) once wrote, leisure is the 'weak link in the chain of socialisation' – a space for creativity, experimentation, and enjoyment away from the disciplines of family, school and work. Paul Corrigan (1976) wrote about the value of 'doing nothing' and 'passing the time', while Filip Coussée (2008) has written about youth work being a 'third milieu' of youth development, beyond the family and school. All speak, in different ways, to the importance of 'space', 'free' time, and the opportunity to have fun.

There are many forms of 'play', though it is often just dismissed as 'fun' and almost frivolous activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Play certainly does involve fun but it can also be deadly serious. It sometimes stretches people's capabilities, presents challenge, requires strategy and tactics, is very likely to involve teamwork and communication, and tests the imagination. In other words, it helps to engender and develop the very so-called 'soft' skills (better described as 'life' or 'key' skills) that are increasingly needed for functioning effectively in the modern world. Yet as Merico (2023) has sharply observed, these arguments have been with us for more than a century; the sociologist Jane Addams[158], in her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (Addams 1909), noted how governing institutions were largely oblivious to the lives of young people in their leisure time and, as a result, often "turned a blind eye to the decisive role that play had traditionally covered in young people's development processes" (Merico 2023, p.16).

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[157] One region of Romania, Ploiesti, seeking to become its national 'youth capital' in 2024, has adopted the acronym of PLAY for its campaign: Partnership, Lifelong Learning, Advocacy and Youth.

[158] Addams had been a co-founder of Hull House, where activists and campaigners undertook research on childhood and youth, and contributed significant reforms in relation to, for example, child labour, juvenile delinquency and truancy from school. She was the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

Her Wikipedia entry is extensive, covering her thinking about the Settlement House following a visit to the world's first – Toynbee Hall in London – and the subsequent establishing of Hull House, guided by her ethical principles (to teach by example, co-operation and to practice democracy), and her focus on the role of children. The entry discusses her Teaching, Relationships, religious motives, her politics and her legacy. Her sociology led her to work with both George Herbert Mead and John Dewey on social reform issues.

Play (and role play / identity experimentation), through association, was always embedded in early forms of youth work and almost certainly needs to be revitalised in post-Covid times to strengthen young people's confidence in social space and to develop social competencies. Inter-personal capabilities for a generation of young people have been shattered by the lockdown, social distancing and mask-wearing conditions imposed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic[159].

When the European youth work magazine *Coyote* dedicated an issue exclusively to the celebration of youth work in the context of the 1st European Youth Work Convention (in 2010), one contribution was given over to the question of 'play' in youth work:

> By participating in youth and community work, *even in a game*, children and young people gather information about a great number of things and become aware of socially relevant subjects such as relationships and sexuality, democracy, social issues, diversity, sustainability or solidarity…
> Playing is a way to discover, to experience, to learn and to get acquainted with new things, to develop tactics and strategies. But above all it is fun, amusement; it sticks in the mind and is experience based. Playing in youth work is considered as a non-formal and informal education process, where *fun with purpose is one of the main elements*. In recent years…. the role and importance of playing has – at least at higher political levels – faded into the background. And yet it remains a special vehicle for effortlessly learning to find one's place in the world and in our complex societies (emphasis added)[160]

The article concludes with an expression of concern that youth work is becoming too harnessed to formal economic, educational and social dimensions, and an exhortation to remember the value of playfulness in youth work: 'Let's be serious – let's play and have fun!' In another paper, the same authors (Schild *et al.* 2010) ask what is wrong in recognising that youth work and youth organisations provide a unique setting for playing and having fun, 'and that this work is a serious mission with a clear purpose':

> Isn't it about supporting children and young people to be active citizens? Maybe we need to start changing our attitude and opinion about playing and having fun and realise the added value it is bringing for the development of individuals and society.
>
> (Schild *et al.* 2010, p.76)

Beyond youth work, perhaps the best commercial manifestation of this philosophy is LEGO itself (**Le**g **Go**dt, in Danish, meaning 'play well'), where everybody seems to know that some serious learning derives from having a lot of fun. In post-Covid times of recovery from isolation and pronounced social anxiety, being *together* and having fun *together* is arguably more important than ever.

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[159] A post-pandemic pledge in England, made by the UK government in February 2022, is the National Youth Guarantee: that by 2025 every young person (all 11-18 year olds, and up to 25 years old for those with special educational needs and disabilities) will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities: see https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-outlines-ambitious-plans-to-level-up-activities-for-young-people

[160] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261503/Right.pdf/aab5a3ae-3004-407c-abdb-2df5cfca0d48

Youth work is, as no end of documents remind us, 'quintessentially a social practice', providing spaces for young people to come together to experience '*la vie associative*'. Association lies at the very heart of youth work – young people invariably turn up to clubs, events, projects and activities to meet their friends or because their friends are going, not to be 'non-formally educated' or to be the recipients and hopefully beneficiaries of 'non-formal learning'! Yet through their creative self-development or the measured interventions of youth workers, such non-formal education and learning invariably occurs, as new ideas take shape and new experiences broaden thinking, perspectives and horizons.

There are now, of course, very diverse 'spaces' available for association, both online and offline. For a time, in some parts of Europe, 'open' youth work became somewhat discredited and out of favour, with more targeted and outcome-driven youth work practice favoured by policy makers. Indeed, this led to a resurgence of advocacy for youth clubs (and a more visible presence of ECYC - the European Confederation of Youth Clubs[161]) as well as the formation of POYWE (Professional Open Youth Work in Europe) to strengthen transnational attention to open youth work. There now seems to be a renewed case for creating associative space for young people – both in person and online. The value of online spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person spaces were not permitted, cannot be understated. Like their open in-person equivalents, not only do they provide opportunities for association, autonomy and activities, but for some young people they offer havens and sanctuaries from the wider pressures and anxieties of everyday life: simultaneously, such spaces constitute both safety-nets and springboards for young people – to catch them when they fall but to propel them back, with greater competence and confidence, to face life's risks and opportunities with greater resilience and 'grit'. There is growing evidence that youth work makes such a contribution to young people's lives.

This is one reason for the work undertaken by the Erasmus + project, and now a SNAC, *Europe Goes Local*. Its European Charter on Local Youth Work[162] is, it claims, an important reference point when reflecting on and developing local youth work:

> The charter is a contribution to the recognition of youth work. It transforms a number of political documents into concrete guidelines regarding what is needed in order to establish and maintain quality in local youth work and therefore contribute to the further development of local youth work. It states which principles should guide it and how different aspects of it should be designed in order to meet these principles. The charter is a common European platform for the necessary dialogue on youth work. It functions as a check-list around which stakeholders can gather and discuss what measures might be needed for the further development of youth work.

Two of Europe's most distinguished youth sociologists recently published a book on young people's prospects in the 'digital society' (Bynner and Heinz 2021). They conclude that young people's 'agency' is central to acquiring the skills and resources needed to shape their future in the digital society. The late John Bynner[163] was arguing for the importance of 'life management' more than a quarter of a century ago (see Helve and Bynner 1996), so that young people were less at risk of being tossed around by 'uncontrollable' forces in a changing world. Though youth work *per se* was not mentioned in either text[164], the implications of those analyses are that young people need the space for play and self-discovery, to strengthen their 'grit' and 'resilience' in dealing with adversities and rising to the contemporary challenges they will face. Bynner and Heinz argue that one of the most striking features of digitalisation and the internet is the transformation of particularly young people into a 'new kind of citizenship' – probably less national, possibly less European, most likely more global. Just as Hall and Williamson (1999) contended that the concept of 'citizenship' could not be divorced from a sense of belonging to some kind of community, Bynner and Heinz (2021, p.152) write,

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[161] My keynote speech at the 20th anniversary meeting of ECYC in 1996, in Christiansborg Castle in Copenhagen, Denmark, was headlined 'The Case for Open Youth Work'.
[162] https://europegoeslocal.eu/charter/

> … an effective policy that intends to promote young people's potential must start by taking into account the different living conditions and welfare mixes in European countries. Youth policy must be coherent and embrace skill building, participation, citizenship rights, intra-generational discrepancies in well-being, and inter-generational relations. Such development first of all implies specifying the components of citizenship that come in different versions and levels: regional, national, EU (passport) and global (digital). Developing citizenship identity may also rest on a sense of belonging to a community or social network and by participating in a common cause, like environmental protection, using the internet to facilitate collaboration.

Their paramount sense of unease in reflecting on the unfolding of the digital society is that some young people will be left behind unless there is 'unrelenting engagement' in the elimination of all forms of discrimination and exclusion. Clearly, youth work generally, and particularly through play has, literally, a part to play. Digital youth work, as it is now known, was something of a saviour during the COVID-19 pandemic; in today's 'post-Covid' environment it is now 'settling' and finding its place within a repertoire of youth work methodologies, building on the lessons learned – good and bad – during the pandemic. YMCA Europe, in partnership with others, have recently concluded an Erasmus + project on digital youth work; the resources produced include a MOOC[165] in which the benefits, challenges and limitations are considered in the round. One incontrovertible benefit has been the capacity of digital youth work to attract and include more marginalised young people – those who are marginalised on account of, for example, geography, vulnerability, sexuality or identity.

One specific 'inclusion' challenge for youth work relates to that of 'multiculturalism', foreshadowed almost a decade ago in the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work

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[163] John died in August 2023. John knew I was writing this book and he had always been a great supporter of my work; he was a referee for my professorship. He had played a hugely significant role in youth studies and youth policy, primarily in the United Kingdom but also on the global stage and occasionally at a European level: see https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/in-memory-of-john-bynner-1938-2023/

[164] Williamson (1997) does, however, provide a chapter in another of Bynner's publications – see Bynner, J., Chisholm, L. and Furlong, A. (1997), *Youth, Citizenship and Social Change in a European Context*, Aldershot: Ashgate

[165] https://alwayson-for-youth-s-school.teachable.com/p/digital-inclusion-and-safety-in-youth-work?_ga=2.119816776.1146495186.1677405351-1381261858.1675971195

Convention. There have, of course, been many beacons of hope in youth work's response to migration to, and the mobility of those from different ethnic backgrounds within Europe. Yet there is no explicit canon of knowledge addressing this question. The same is true of social work, as a recent publication acknowledges:

> We are at the beginning of a long path in which we can learn how to better develop helping processes, how social work organisations can increase accessibility and sensitivities, how to teach and learn content through anti-discriminatory and human rights approaches, how policies can avoid reproducing oppressive dynamics, how to protect and advocate for vulnerable people without paternalistic and assimilationist expectations and how to take a stand coherent with social work principles
>
> (Gómez-Ciriano *et al* 2023, p.4)

One could, perhaps should, substitute 'youth work' for 'social work': the same issues prevail.

We don't have to look much further for both theoretical and empirical ideas than the excellent Youth Knowledge book (#24) on youth work with young refugees (Pisani *et al.* 2018). In its introduction, it highlights the key role that can and should be played by youth work:

> Youth work is definitely a support for individual empowerment, a safe space for young refugees to be young and also to be supported in the process of integration in host societies. It helps young refugees in developing their confidence, resilience and trust and in building positive relationships, also with their peers. Youth work can offer a space for young refugees to express themselves and participate in society. As it is a space for them to voice their ideas, concerns and aspirations, it can also be a space to uncover and value the resources that young refugees bring to society. Youth work is also an important stakeholder in the necessary cross-sectoral co-operation between different services involved in young refugees' integration (legal, education, housing, employment, etc.). Youth work is complementary to other services.
>
> Youth workers need specific support to tackle complex situations when working with young refugees, thematically looking at intercultural learning, mental health and trauma, involving young women refugees and addressing other intersectionalities, access to social rights and participation in local life. Youth work practitioners also need space to exchange practices and thematic capacity building on the above-mentioned themes.

All of this powerfully echoes what is becoming something of a broken record, incessantly repeating itself: youth work is about direct, supportive engagement with young people through the provision of spaces and experience (see Participation below); youth work is a bridging activity, for both young people and between agencies (see Partnerships below); and youth worker education and training is needed to develop generic competencies and specific skills for working with different groups (see Education and Training below).

Youth work can therefore achieve many things just by bringing young people together and having fun. Currently the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People, in the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic and Romania, have partnered with UNICEF to develop a 'Stand By Me' project for young Ukrainian refugees. They can join in the activities being undertaken by Czech, Slovak and Romanian young people without having to formally enlist in the Award programme; it is a social inclusion/integration project. Inevitably, it will produce intercultural learning. Youth work in this instance is working both on the host society and with refugees. It may not formally be offering human rights education (though it could be) and it may also assist with language learning, through shared activities, and in these processes building tolerance, respect and understanding.

Bringing any groups of young people together to learn from and understand each other while doing things that they consider to be fun is important for many reasons. University-level group work, post-Covid, seems now to be a particular challenge, because young people have become accustomed to working on their own. Clearly, making spaces for young people from different (in particular, class, faith and ethnic) backgrounds can support tolerance and learning. But research regarding the social dimensions of the climate emergency, and the resultant anxieties and concerns in young people, suggests the need for 'journeying together', a concept that has been pedalled within youth work for some time, albeit within more generic thinking about growing youth work and youth workers in local communities (see Rogers and Smith 2010). 'Association', as already noted, has always been a central idea within youth work and, though not to be confused with youth 'associations' (in the plural), the two are in fact organically connected – youth associations were formed precisely to bring young people together. Indeed, Pierre Tap, one of the co-authors of an early study of 'youth work' in Europe, invariably invoked the French alternative terminology 'la vie associative' (see Vanandruel *et al.* 1996).

Youth work has invariably sought to cultivate a sense of belonging and its related ideas of attachment and indeed 'citizenship'. As Hall and Williamson (1999) have argued, there are formal or legal realities, normative realities and lived experiences – which can be very different. Identities are shaped in many different ways and, all too often in contemporary Europe, young people have a sense of detachment, sometimes alienation and perhaps even neglect; indeed, as we argue the need and case for promoting youth autonomy, we should remember that some have suggested this could be tantamount to abandonment: 'freedom, to the adolescent, can look suspiciously like neglect' (Pitt-Aikens and Thomas Ellis 1990).

Youth work, in its multiplicity of forms, has always both operated reactively to make all kinds of young people welcome and proactively to reach out to young people, whoever they may be. This is even more critical in these days of intersectionality, 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) and the post-modern fluidity of identities. Young people need both receptivity and reference points; youth work provides it in ways that families, schools and workplaces do not, indeed cannot. In that respect, youth work constitutes a 'home' in which young people can work on their identities at the same time as having fun.

B. Participation

In its submission to the open call for input for the 4th Council of Europe Summit of Heads of State and Government meeting during Iceland's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Advisory Council on Youth of the Youth Department within the Council of Europe asserted the following:

> In the current setup of the Council of Europe, a youth perspective is only included when the bodies of the Organisation specifically invite it. **Youthless policy is useless policy**. To successfully tackle the challenges of Europe, there cannot be discussions taking place without including the citizens concerned by the decisions taken (emphasis original).

The Advisory Council (AC) argues that the Summit presents an 'extraordinary opportunity' to enhance the use of the co-management system that has prevailed within the Youth Department for many years. It is widely praised yet has been emulated in very few other transnational or national contexts, or even within other sections of the Council of Europe. Clearly, the AC is seeking strong (young) citizen participation at a high level, but it needs to be emphasised that the practice of participation, if it is to be strategically and culturally embedded in everyday life, needs to start early and at the grassroots. My son, when he was not yet five years old, joined his school council: his first contribution was to a decision as to whether a mural in the playground should depict knights and castles or pirates and ships! It was his first lesson in deliberative democracy. 'Meaningful participation', as is so often exhorted, can start young. The Reykjavík Declaration that emerged from the high-level meeting in May 2023 – *United Around Our Values*[166] – made a robust statement of intent in support of the greater participation of European youth.

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The philosophy of youth work is embedded in a commitment to 'youth participation', 'young people taking part', listening to young people's 'voice' and views, and some kind of 'co-management' of what goes on, though such terminology has not always been explicit. Nor is it an unconditional position within youth work, for it is mediated by other pressures, not least those of public policy and other values and principles that guide and govern the practice of youth work (see Corney and Williamson 2020). A recent OSCE document on youth engagement quoted the author of this book:

> The whole participatory agenda with young people needs to be strongly connected to the wider framework infrastructure umbrella of youth policy. It's not a separate issue. And youth policy accommodates a whole range of things, one of the most central of which must be young people's voice and capacity to contribute without the certainty that their aspirations will be fulfilled
>
> (OSCE 2023, p.12)

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[166] https://edoc.coe.int/en/the-council-of-europe-in-brief/11619-united-around-our-values-reykjavik-declaration.html

Critically, the 2nd European Youth Work Convention identified ‘space’ as one element of the common ground across all facets of youth work. Youth work not only *is* a space for youth participation and dialogue; it also fights for space for young people and sometimes ventures into spaces that young people have carved out for themselves. That last point is important: in times of shrinking civic space, youth work must stand alongside young people in winning, occupying and defending spaces for their association, activities, autonomy, (advice) and advocacy – an old package of ideas that informed a review of youth work in England more than 40 years ago and was aptly titled *Experience and Participation* (DES 1982). Or, as one member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group put it,

> An essential component of youth work is creating safe, accessible, open and autonomous spaces in society, as well as supportive and experiential learning environments for young people….
> Through engaging young people in co-creating activities that meet their needs and interests, youth work enables young people to learn about and experience universal values such as human rights, gender equality, democracy, peace, pluralism, diversity, inclusion, solidarity, tolerance and justice, and at the same promoting democratic awareness and active European citizenship.
> This will, taken together, empower young people to gain autonomy and become active citizens, contributing to the common good.

Youth work environments (particularly youth clubs and youth organisations) – as open, associative space for young people – have recurrently been proclaimed, in the histories of youth work throughout Europe, as ‘laboratories for democracy’, as young people learn to argue their corner and their convictions in the context of the position and perspectives of others. The idea is sometimes disputed, on the grounds that youth work needs to support the ’minority of one’ and perhaps confront the ‘tyranny of the majority’. With that in mind, as Yael Ohana (2020) has argued so cogently, (European) youth work is inherently political in that it should always be ‘engaging young people meaningfully as citizens, impacting not only their civic and political acumen but also their political agency’. She expresses concern that European youth work (which is her focus, though much of her analysis might well be applied equally to youth work at other levels) is subject to ‘creeping de-politicisation’ through a kind of self-censorship in order not to jeopardise important funding streams and clear expectations (threats?) amongst public authorities and funding bodies that youth work should avoid ‘political’ activity.

Yet youth work has an important part to play in ‘political education’, through enabling young people to learn about, understand and develop skills for taking part in a healthy democracy. In fact, as noted above, the process should start even earlier, through schools councils, for example:

The author's son, at the age of 4

Of course, as Giugni and Grasso (2021) show very clearly, the 'socialising spheres' for young people's political participation and political activism are very varied but youth work has its part to play. Within youth work it is a two-way street, with young people using it as a space for exploration and experimentation, and youth work encouraging young people's voice, engagement and co-production. As one padlet contribution to the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group put it:

The political/democratic nature of youth work

> Youth work starts from pleasure and leisure but extends beyond those. In our group work it was stressed that structural issues are something that need to addressed.
>
> The political nature of youth work could be better addressed. Youth workers themselves are not always clear if they are political agents. When working in the local communities and societies in general, youth workers are engaging in political issues. This should be examined more explicitly.
>
> Although the concept of political is probably scareful (*sic*), but you can start building from the level of local democracy. Youth work has a responsibility to make the voices of young people heard. *Encouraging young people to take initiative in structural issues* needs to be addressed.
>
> (adapted by the author)

This is precisely the territory of *Democracy Reloading/Govern with Youth*. It is also the expressed interest and commitment in the recent *Charter on Youth and Democracy*[167], jointly produced by the European Committee of the Regions and the European Youth Forum. Within its 49 recommendations are the following specific references to youth work *per se* and spaces for youth work to take place:

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[167] https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Documents/4856_EU%20Charter%20on%20Youth%20and%20Democracy_N.pdf

> 3. Strengthen youth work in order to build young people's competence for democratic culture and provide a forum for them to actively engage in society from a young age
>
> 5. Improve the availability of inclusive youth spaces, put up information hubs run together with youth, and create and coordinate online platforms with the aim to inform on youth-related matters and to wider participation
>
> 6. Recognise the value of and validate the competences and skills gained through youth work, volunteering, non-formal education, informal learning also in youth organisations
>
> 11. Support the building and safeguarding of intersectional democratic spaces for youth and by youth to ensure the voices of young people are formally, continuously, and permanently represented in the policy-making cycle, making sure that such spaces exist in both urban and rural areas.
>
> 27. Ensure affordable high-speed Internet connectivity for all, including in the less developed, remote, or rural areas, and particularly for formal and informal educational institutions, including for youth centres, if necessary by agreements with local Internet service providers.

As a slight aside, the focus on greater equality of access to youth work for young people in more remote and rural areas is an important issue and one that could also be strengthened. It is also important to note that Recommendation 33 of the Charter, in a section concerned with new technologies and digitalisation, calls for the protection of civil society and youth organisations 'from being labelled political on social media, especially when they are critical of the government in power'.

The paradox here is, of course, the need to *strengthen* democratic political participation. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has expressed profound concern about the further erosion of trust in political systems and institutions, following the higher living costs on account of the Ukraine war just as Europe emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, 'reinforcing the downward trend of the past few years'. In its preparatory documentation for the May 2023 Reykjavik Summit of Heads of State and Government, PACE seeks a 'fresh political impetus'[168] and new responses in the face of the present extraordinary challenges, putting people at the centre. This should include 'mainstreaming a youth perspective in all its activities'[169]. The PACE Report informing its Recommendation elaborates on this point:

> The youth are the key target group in this effort to reconnect with people. The Summit should ask that a "youth perspective" be mainstreamed throughout the work of the Council of Europe and that their input be taken into account. This would contribute to enhancing knowledge of the values underpinning the Council of Europe among the

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[168] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Recommendation 2245 (2023) https://pace.coe.int/pdf/c630f49740df86f5347ea4395494752f4a377d5e75162d4c8401e58619bae269/recommendation%202245.pdf para 7

[169] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Recommendation 2245 (2023) https://pace.coe.int/pdf/c630f49740df86f5347ea4395494752f4a377d5e75162d4c8401e58619bae269/recommendation%202245.pdf para 21.1

> young generation and help the Organisation develop a more inclusive, dynamic and forward-looking agenda.[170]

And, though at risk of repetition, but necessarily in the interests of reinforcement, the Council of Europe's Advisory Council on Youth, representing youth organisations throughout Europe, subsequently submitted its own perspective for consideration at the Summit, advocating for ensuring the full engagement of young people in youth policy: **youthless policy is useless policy**.

At the polar opposite of the structured, bureaucratic and formalised landscape of youth participation, there is renewed interest in more spontaneous and informal forms of youth association, activity and action. We know relatively little about these phenomena, the roles and relationships within them, and the structures and processes that guide them. Yet the recent 16th Child and Youth Report of the German Government argues forcefully not only for exploring such 'civic spaces' but supporting the informal learning within them, acknowledging them as 'political' movements that allow for the self-mobilisation of young people, and critical open digital platforms and means of communication for young people involved in such activity. Youth work could and should be reaching out and supporting the democratic potential of such movements and building connections between them.

None of these arguments are particularly new, in and of themselves. What is perhaps new is the context in which the arguments are being made, and the advocacy for youth work as a key mechanism for addressing the challenges entailed. As Führer *et al.* (2019) suggested in a discussion paper on social cohesion in Europe, the context is worrying:

> *A spectre is haunting Europe* – a spectre of eroding solidarity in society and between the European countries, of growing nationalism, xenophobia and social divisions, of environmental ignorance and of enhanced individualism and egoism. [D]emocracy, human rights and rule of law are being increasingly disrespected by governments and many citizens in a growing number of European countries.

Using the imagery of 'spaces' and 'bridges' that emerged at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention as the common ground for youth work in Europe, they suggest that

> Youth work has a central role to play in realising the vision of a cohesive Europe, as it provides a space for young people, for dialogue and for practiced European values on the one hand, and as it builds bridges to a new European narrative on the other hand.

In line with an issue that threads throughout this book, the case is made for a paradigm shift where local knowledge, experience and practice is taken to the European level, rather than the other way around. In other words, there needs to be a far more robust 'bottom-up' perspective. Europe *needs to go local* and support regional governments and municipalities to take responsibility for Europe and young people. Municipalities need spaces and platforms for the exchange of European opportunities and perspectives, to experience European identity, practice cooperation and enrich the local level with a European dimension. Youth work has a key role to play in fostering an open, social, inclusive and democratic Europe.

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[170] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Doc.15681 (2023) https://pace.coe.int/pdf/71ef001440dd052705eefb15f15ed05523450aa7587b4f160bc28d275eb772aa/doc.%2015681.pdf

One might have thought that climate issues would figure prominently on the youth work agenda, indeed centrally within a 'participatory culture', when those issues appear recurrently at the top of young people's anxieties and priorities. Yet research from Finland points to a very mixed picture:

> Most, almost two thirds (64%), of the responding government representatives on youth affairs thought that "Some youth work organisations have taken it on their agenda" and 36% said "Many organisations have it on their agenda". By the time of data gathering of this study (summer 2021), climate change seems to be emerging on youth work agendas, but still, it is not yet a mainstream youth work topic. In fact, nobody said that "Most youth work organisations are working on climate change". Further data is needed to know whether this is because NGOs and municipal youth services have not yet related their work to climate change or because they feel that it is not their task to deal with climate issues.
>
> (Source: member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group).

From this data, according to Lasse Siurala[171], 'climate' does not yet appear to have become a universally adopted or determinedly accepted priority in youth work. And as climate is no longer a new social issue and as we have witnessed school strikes for climate for some years, one fundamental question arises: is youth work (and indeed youth policy) agile enough to respond to emerging youth themes such as climate change and climate strikes?

The Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks #4 - Environment, Climate Change and Sustainable Development – How 'Green' is Youth Work? – offered a rather more engaged view of the relationship between youth work and climate issues (see above). There was a sense that youth work had an obligation both to promote 'sustainability' within its own structures, activities and practice, and to stand alongside young people involved in climate activism.

Recent studies have pointed to the importance of doing something together, a natural segue into the potential contribution of youth work. This calls for attention and development within youth work, something that has already been partially addressed in Finland through, for example, a module on a youth work training course on sustainable youth work where the outcomes are that the student and stakeholders:

> - knows the basic values of eco-social learning (responsibility, moderation and human connectedness)
> - knows the strategies and guidelines of their own organization, and is able to act based on them
> - knows some forms of civil activism
> - is familiar with NGOs and other stakeholders working on the field
> - reflects her own counsellor identity and thinking in relation to sustainable education
>
> (Source: Kanneljärvi Vocational Institute (2022) *Kestävä nuorisotyö 15 osp* [Sustainable youth work]. Accepted by the board of Kanneljärvi on 18.1.2022)

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[171] https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163802/OKM_2022_4.pdf?sequence=1

There may well be limitations to the capacity of youth work to attend to the ecological aspects of the climate context, but research suggests that young climate activists are seeking combined attention to the environmental situation and the social situation (the anxieties and uncertainties) of young people. There is clearly a role for youth work here.

In the 2010 EU *Resolution on Youth Work*, the striking advances in technology in the ensuing years were hardly foreseen. Indeed, in the early years of the millennium, youth work was largely preoccupied with acquiring laptops and computer games for administrative and social purposes. Five years later, however, the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention acknowledged that the impending challenge for youth work was to engage with technological developments, and five years later, Finland (once again!) led the way with its advocacy of 'online' youth work[172]. Its digital expertise, located in Verke, made the following argument:

> Technological development and digitalisation impact society and the lives of young people in many ways. Indeed, one of the focus areas of youth work is to support the growth and development of young people in an increasingly digital world. Youth work also plays an important role in closing the digital divide and promoting digital agency.
>
> Digital youth work is based on the idea that new technology must be utilised in youth work to make services and activities intended for young people better, more accessible and more meaningful. Digital youth work can be used to create opportunities and spaces for young people to develop their critical, ethical and creative thinking related to technological development and the digital future[173].

This proved sadly prophetic when, ten years later, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and as other forms of (in-person) youth work were subject to closure or draconian restrictions. Verke had argued:

> Digital youth work is focused on digitalising the youth work sector and the practices within. Digital youth work is not a separate discipline or method within youth work, but rather something intertwined with all areas of youth work. Digital youth work can, for example, be implemented in the context of cultural youth work, youth participation, youth information and counselling, open youth work or outreach work – in other words, any and all forms of youth work. At its best, digital youth work links seamlessly with other youth work performed by the organisation and the related goals.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, digital youth work was being strongly promoted, though not without careful attention to some of the potential risks and issues relating to its implementation (there was a major conference convened by the Youth Partnership in Estonia in 2018, followed by a YouTube video explaining digital youth work[174], and the EU convened an expert group on the terrain (see European Commission 2018)).

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[172] See https://issuu.com/nuorisoasiainkeskus/docs/the_wonderful_world_of_youth_work

[173] https://www.verke.org/en/verke/digital-youth-work/

[174] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3e5qogW1yw

My expert contact on digitalisation had the following observations and proposals to make:

> Digital youth work has also gained momentum; if previously it was seen as something innovative, the pandemic showed the need for such services and tools at all times. Nevertheless, research on digital competence and capacity in youth work[175] has highlighted that while there are numerous practices in the field, they are mostly experimental and project-based. There is no harmonized understanding of what digital competences of youth workers should be, while organisations have virtually no strategic approach to digital transformation (related to their internal processes or services). All this calls for stronger efforts to develop such practices at European level (including a curriculum for digital youth work and tailored self-assessment tools).

Over-reliance, or unavoidable dependency, on social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, either for educational or outreach purposes, raised awareness of the additional investment that is needed in the youth and education sectors to develop tailored platforms rooted in ethical principles (safety, privacy, accessibility and usability) that can cater for the needs of the beneficiaries (children, young people, and all users of social and educational services)[176].

For young people in particular, who are already the most adept at digital engagement (having grown up developing the technical skills to use technologies – both applications and software, and devices and hardware), there is still a strong imperative to address digital competences rooted in critical digital literacy principles and responsible digital citizenship, focusing on understanding the impact of new technologies, rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders, and new attitudes needed in such contexts. Technology is neither a 'necessary evil' nor an 'inevitable future' - it's a part of our realities and needs to be used meaningfully and critically, for the benefit of all citizens, without the risk of creating harms especially for the categories already vulnerable (or at risk).

With more and more Internet connectivity and easier access to digital devices, it is expected that more citizens will have the opportunity to participate in shaping decision-making or public opinions. Nevertheless, if expressing opinions has been enabled by social networks, including mobilising for new forms of participation (eg. through protests and online awareness-raising campaigns, such as Black Lives Matter), *structural participation* in more traditional formats (formulating public policies/legislation) has not seen the same intensity or scale of development, significantly through a lack of public digital platforms that can facilitate such a dialogue, both within countries and at transnational (including European) levels. Social media networks may present a great opportunity to communicate but they are not neutral; they are led by commercial interest, and content is filtered by hidden algorithms. There also need to be digital platforms that are more suitable and safer to use to enable real dialogue between citizens and decision-makers.

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[175] https://participationpool.eu/resource/digital-competences-and-digital-capacities/

[176] In April 2023, YMCA Europe launched its digital toolkit for youth workers (European Digital Youth Work Toolkit: A Comprehensive Guide for Youth Workers and Educators): https://www.ymcaeurope.com/launching-the-future-of-digital-youthwork-in-brussels/. And in July 2023 it established a Digital Youth Work Community of Learning: https://www.ymcaeurope.com/launch-of-the-digital-youth-work-community-of-learning/

Opportunities to participate in shaping digital governance (on the one hand, digital policies and regulations; on the other hand, the development of technologies) also need to be developed. Current practices suggest that such participation is limited among everyday citizens, human rights organisations, in general non-experts or those who are not part of the technical community. The majority of consultative bodies constituted within all major international organisations to guide the development of ethical guidelines or public policies on digital and AI issues have been expert groups (including representatives of academia, technology companies, employers' associations or governments). Civil Society organisations have limited possibilities in influencing such initiatives and everyday citizens seem to be quite far from such fora. In other words, young people and youth organisations are generally conspicuous by their absence.

Youth work clearly has a part to play in a host of different ways, anchored perhaps in the ideas of association, activities, autonomy, advice and advocacy. All can be developed and delivered by digital means, as the new aforementioned YMCA Europe MOOC on 'digital inclusion and safety in youth work'[177] suggests and accompanying handbook for youth workers and educators on 'shaping digital inclusion, safety, and well-being in a post-pandemic world'[178] suggests.

In post-Covid Europe, there is now a more tempered focus on the place of digital youth work within the overall repertoire of youth work policy and practice but, like all technology and innovation, it needs strengthened political and financial support if it is to keep up its contribution to young people's lives and their participation in society. As we have noted, the pace of life and living is relentless and little escapes that momentum, including approaches to supporting youth participation (see Crowley and Moxon 2017). It has been referred to, in relation to the policy context, as the 'tyranny of policy momentum' (Hyman 2005), but such 'tyranny' could, arguably, be applied to many facets of contemporary life.

One emerging issue that seems to attract some media attention almost every day is the incessant pace of living and its impact on attention spans and mental health. Youth work in fact may well have a role in 'slowing things down' and supporting young people in living for the moment rather than constantly trying to anticipate the future and experienced incessant worry about 'missing out' (the FOMO issue). Counsellors, mentors and coaches in the youth sector can all be predicted to comment on young people's diminishing attention spans as they seek to latch on to the next social media or other notification. Invariably, they will talk about 'balance' – as in the YMCA Europe MOOC on digital youth work[179] – but it is by no means clear what kind of balance is desirable and how it might be struck. Nonetheless, youth work has classically tussled with balancing leaving young people to their own devices (pun intended) and seeking to engage them more actively in conversation and activities.

One cannot write anything in 2022/23 without reference to the war in Ukraine. The Russian invasion has changed so much. Just a few years before, questions were sometimes asked about the purpose of the military in a modern, united, peaceful Europe. Less than a year into the conflict in Ukraine, at the start of November 2022, the `Youth Council under the President of Ukraine launched a youth policy document in which the first 'Block' of issues related to 'Security', including, right at the start, 'better conditions and possible training about, for example, first responders and skilled use of weapons'[180]. Such a start to a national youth policy document would have been unimaginable just one year before. Yet beyond internal priorities (albeit guided by the view of an international expert group), youth work in other forms also has a role to play. The Council of Europe's Youth Department's *Youth for Democracy in Ukraine* project has sought to help youth workers adapt to the specific challenges of an ongoing war through, *inter alia*, mentorship and capacity-building. As the Council of Europe's Advisory Council on Youth stated in its submission to the Iceland Summit meeting,

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[177] https://alwayson-for-youth-s-school.teachable.com/p/digital-inclusion-and-safety-in-youth-work?_ga=2.

[178] https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iVZI6FtwQxHUye4qva7Q2du-HnUWwn3Q/view

[179] The MOOC is promoted on a new platform www.youthwork-digital: see https://ymca.ro/2023/youthwork-digital/

> The work of the Council of Europe is more relevant than ever, supporting and protecting defenders of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, even though the war continues.

The submission goes on to argue that Europe does not do enough to amplify the peacebuilding efforts and capacity of youth organisations and networks, through training contacts and project funding. Peacebuilding, it contends, can be done through human rights education and conflict transformation programmes. The Council of Europe in particular (but implicitly also the European Commission)

> needs to continue to engage with young people of conflict-stricken regions through a cross-border approach and encourage intercultural learning and peacebuilding efforts by engaging young people in dialogue. It is not possible to make peace without truly engaging with others across the conflict divide.

Inevitably, in times of war, there is an immediate reaction to mitigate risks and find new ways to operate within this altered reality; there is almost certainly a re-evaluation and questioning of both the old and the new realities and how things are done[181]. This is experiential learning at its sharpest. Young people witness other people "living the values of solidarity, empathy and taking care of one another". They learn about the 'values of humanity':

> In retrospect, [….] those experiences set me on the path of peacebuilding, and youth work. In the aftermath of the conflict [in Yugoslavia] I wanted to "give back"[182]. I felt the need to support others affected by ugliness and the brutality of war. None of us engaging with young refugees in the 1990s and supporting them to make sense of how to move forward in their new environments would have called what we were doing – youth work. Nevertheless, in its essence that is what it was…..
> [E]xactly because of war, it is essential that (young) people are not deprived of support systems. Providing support to others during war is by no means easy. Youth workers are also affected and are having to learn to adapt to the changing reality. The essence

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[180] *The Implementation of Ukraine's Youth Policy in the War and Post-War Reconstruction Conditions*

[181] This paragraph draws heavily on Ajsa Hadzibegovic's blog 'Youth work in times of war', written in December 2022

[182] In Ukraine's youth policy document (see footnote 144), there is a proposal for "the formation of an 'international youth brigade for Ukraine', comprising Ukrainian youth with direct and indirect experience of the war and young people from throughout the member states of the Council of Europe (not only the EU)".

> of learning consists of reflection and of action based on gained insights… As a youth worker you carry a certain power in relationships with young people which make your own attitudes and behaviors [*sic*] stand out even more in such incomparable times. [Youth workers can show] how to deal with uncertainties and how to navigate a new reality.

The concept of 'navigation' may be particularly acutely needed in such circumstances, but it is a more universal dimension of effective youth work practice; as *Finding Common Ground* had suggested in 2015, one way of thinking about youth work is that it supports young people in developing 'navigational capacities' (Swartz and Cooper 2021), a capability of even greater significance in troubled and complex times. New forms of youth work invariably emerge in response to new contexts, though they also often rest on old principles and methods:

> So, youth work in time of war? Yes, it exists and it's essential as ever. It emerges and evolves into different forms and modalities. It needs recognition and support. It pushes boundaries, reaches out and innovates in impossible conditions. And it makes a difference for young people who are figuring out who they are, what's happening around them, what they want to do – and finding their value-based community or path to imagining their future and finding their purpose.

The same 'participative practice' is of course true of all good quality youth work but it has a particular resonance in this context because it reflects the fifth key challenge for youth work as outlined in the EU *Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda: Crisis and Opportunity*. At the end of the first year of the war in Ukraine, in December 2022, the Council of Europe hosted a study visit for those continuing to provide youth work in Ukraine, who outlined some their specific needs in a time of war:

- Support for competence-development of youth workers to deal with new challenges
- Provision of youth work for young refugees from Ukraine
- Supporting internally displaced people
- Absorbing the impact of the war on the youth sector
- Dealing with stress, trauma and risks of burn-out
- Adopting a rights-based narrative to youth work in a context where human rights are massively ignored or violated

(Source: Think Youth #111 March 2023)

Perhaps these are less specific than first thought, though they bring classic tensions and challenges for youth work acutely to the surface. Youth work has already revealed a capacity to adapt and respond to the COVID-19 crisis; now it needs to be supported in displaying its credentials in a Europe where security issues are prominent once again.

Youth work remains essentially a sector of volunteering – by youth workers, and amongst young people themselves. There are, of course, reasonable pressures and demands to ensure professionalism amongst *youth workers*, though not necessarily 'professionalisation' (see below). In *youth work*, however, voluntary activities and civic action have always been a central feature, though that has manifested itself very differently in different parts of Europe (see Williamson and Hoskins 2006). Following the launch of the EU White Paper in 2001, within which 'voluntary activities' was one of four central pillars, there was further reinforcement of the idea of supporting youth volunteering in Europe. Just a few months later, there was a Council Resolution on the added value of voluntary activity for young people in the context of the development of Community action on youth[183]. 2001 had, after all been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Volunteers. Moreover, debate following the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000)[184] had drawn attention to the added value of informal and non-formal learning resulting from voluntary activity. The Council Resolution was clear that voluntary activities undertaken by young people supported the transmission of universal values with regard to human rights, democracy, anti-racism and solidarity, and sustainable development; promoted social participation, voluntary engagement and active citizenship and strengthened civil society at all levels; and contributed to the social inclusion of young people, and the development of young people's creativity, enterprise and social innovation.

In the intervening two decades, there has been incremental progress in the evolution of youth volunteering at both national and European levels, though concerns have often still persisted in relation to the legal (and social security) status of volunteers and the historical and cultural legacies around the idea of 'volunteering'. Nonetheless, the success of the European Voluntary Service programme and its transition to the European Solidarity Corps[185], announced by EU President Juncker, in his 2016 State of the Union address, as part of a package of support to improve opportunities for young people, is indicative of one particular pathway that youth work needs to take. As Juncker remarked:

> The European Solidarity Corps will create opportunities for young people willing to make a meaningful contribution to society and help show solidarity – something the world and our European Union needs more of. For me, this has always been the very essence of what the European Union is about. It is not the Treaties or industrial or economic interests that bind us together, but our values. And those who work as volunteers are living European values each and every day.[186]

In the light of the war in Ukraine, there may well be a renewed imperative for Europe to strengthen its volunteering capabilities and capacity, perhaps through some form of 'international youth brigade' to support and assist the reconstruction and recovery of Ukraine after the war, as one of its recent documents suggests. This could build on existing national and European volunteering initiatives – not least the European Solidarity Corps, the successor to the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme – but future voluntary activities throughout Europe still demand more careful alignment with youth work policy and practice, as well as more reinforcement of the legal and administrative frameworks within which it typically takes place. Indeed, the primary objective of the Resolution cited above was 'to encourage exchanges between young volunteers and youth workers'[187]. It is perhaps important to note that the first step into more structured and professionalised youth work is taken by young people motivated to undertake youth work as a volunteer through their own experience of youth work as a young person themselves.

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[183] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2002:050:0003:0005:EN:PDF
[184] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac11047

[185] https://europeanvoluntaryservice.org/whatis-evs/
[186] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_4165
[187] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/NL/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:c11058

It is often said that youth workers are ‘gardeners, not mechanics’ – they cultivate the ground rather than fix the problems. This conception of youth work lies at the heart of the Council of Europe’s ‘distinction’ in its *Youth Sector Strategy 2030* and the former Secretary-General’s idea of ‘deep security’: winning the hearts and minds of young people throughout Europe in support of core European values. It is also a mainstay of local youth work practice – relationship building and an approach to participation anchored in mutual respect, tolerance, learning and understanding. Building a ‘participatory culture’ lies at the heart of youth work, though it may take different forms depending on the issues at stake, the types of young people involved, the methods adopted and the context in which it takes place.

Youth work in Europe and European youth work should also *take heart* that, at the end of November 2023, within the aspirations for ‘inclusive societies’ of the current trio of Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (Spain, Belgium and Hungary), the Council adopted Council Conclusions on promoting youth mainstreaming[188] in policy decision-making processes in the European Union[189]. Paragraph 7 is striking, drawing data from the most recent (2021) European Parliament Youth Survey:

> Most of the young people surveyed believed that they did not have much, or any, say over the important decisions, laws and policies affecting them. Young people are increasingly turning to non-institutional ways of expressing themselves politically. Such a development can be seen as essentially positive, but it is concerning if it is based on the perception that the European institutions do not provide young people with any possibility of being involved in decision-making processes or of addressing their needs and difficulties. Thus, a comprehensive approach to the challenges affecting young people requires their involvement and participation in public institutions and in policy-making processes, through both non-institutional and institutional forms of participation.

It is very reasonable to suggest that youth work in all its diversity has a key role to play in facilitating the agency of young people in this respect, both with regard to winning spaces and encouraging ‘voice’, and through ensuring bridges are built between young people and the institutions and practices that affect their lives.

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[188] Youth mainstreaming in this context is understood as ‘an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, that the challenges and concerns inherent to young people are not addressed in isolation but are integrated cross-cuttingly into broader policy frameworks’

[189] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15321-2023-INIT/en/pdf

C. Partnership

One of the eight pathways for youth work suggested in the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, *Signposts for the Future*, is headlined ‘Beyond the youth work community of practice’, starting with the quotation that ‘young people are not restricted to one domain and their voice needs to be heard across!’, and then the telling observation,

> In the reality of unpredictable societal changes, well-connected and supported youth work is the driving force for youth and community resilience. It is important to **communicate the value of youth work**, [and] facilitate and stimulate structural and strategic cooperation with other sectors relevant to young people’s lives (emphasis original)

The section talks about the need for youth work to ‘engage effectively’ with other sectors, both public and private, and outlines two proposed measures:

- define **with whom** cross-sectoral cooperation is to be established in line with the priorities of specific segments of the youth work community of practice at any given level and **on which shared objectives**; bringing together different actors from different sectors and from different levels together to build **synergies**;
- supporting the creation and the functioning of **multidisciplinary structures, networks and bodies on youth** at local and national levels

> (Source: *Signposts for the Future*, Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, p.21; emphasis original)

This is easier said than done. Youth work has often cherished its autonomy and independence, standing apart one way or another from the difficult youth policy areas such as unemployment or crime. Yet, at the same time, youth work has invariably been drawn towards those issues and its history is littered with such connections, whether because they are central to the lives of young people involved or because they are the priorities to which funding demands attention. There are difficult balances to strike and decisions to be made. Youth work that seeks to remain autonomous, proclaiming its ‘independence’, can easily be dismissed as irrelevant; youth work that engages too closely can easily become subordinated to the agendas of others. The critical issue is whether or not, and if so how, *partnerships* should be established, based on clarity of role allocation, respect for the different values and principles that guide and govern different forms of practice, and a sense of mutual professional benefit as well as ‘added value’ for the young people intended to be the recipients of services, experiences, opportunities and interventions. Volume 5 of the History of Youth Work in Europe[190] series suggests that, almost paradoxically, the autonomy of youth work may in fact be enhanced through some level of ‘dependency’ on those working in other fields of youth policy. Its sub-title is *Histories of Co-operation, Conflict, and Innovation in Youth Work*.

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[190] https://book.coe.int/en/youth-other-publications/6971-the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-5-autonomy-through-dependency-histories-of-co-operation-conflict-and-innovation-in-youth-work.html

Long ago, I argued that 'inter-agency co-operation', as it was called at the time, rested on a 'precarious equilibrium' of organisational/institutional, professional and personal relationships (see Williamson and Weatherspoon 1985), yet I also reported on the capacity for youth work in community settings to draw together the perspectives and practice of groups as disparate as faith groups, adult education, policing, housing, health, schooling, and local NGOs. It was not a model that was typical of youth work at the time, though subsequently it is now not only more commonplace that youth work does help to establish such partnerships but that such transversal practice may even be legally required, as in the case of youth offending services in England and Wales, which is in fact a direct legacy of that experience from the 1980s (see Williamson 2017).

Yet youth work has often remained reluctant to forge partnerships with other youth policy arenas, usually on the grounds that the philosophies between them are incompatible. This is disingenuous, given that histories of youth work are invariably attached to wider policy expectations – from child saving (social services), to improving health (for military recruitment), to combating delinquency (by substituting for absent fathers in wartime), to cultural rescue (providing an alternative to American rock'n'roll), and so forth. Youth work has always had implicit, if not explicit, connections to wider policy agendas.

Such connections, however, became very explicit, widely recognised and often widely respected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth work demonstrated its capacity for reach and for adaptability, for example going for 'walk and talk' socially distanced strolls with vulnerable and isolated young people. And of course, technological innovation throughout the pandemic enabled digital youth work to advance leaps and bounds, providing contact, support and social connection, subject, of course, to young people's own access to devices, connectivity and, where desirable or indeed rather imperative, privacy. Huge lessons were learned on a daily basis about how youth work might engage with young people, especially those more socially excluded, during the lockdowns and more general periods of isolation. In Wales, as just one example, some youth workers were designated 'essential workers'[191] (a contentious issue, when they were not, in many countries). They worked in partnership with psychologists and schools on issues around well-being and mental health, and with housing agencies and staff on issues to do with homelessness. I highlight those two 'youth policy' arenas simply because significant extra public resources were allocated to youth work on account of a growing reputation for engaging effectively around mental health and homelessness issues facing young people. Youth work in Wales attracted significantly increased political and professional recognition for that work and arguably strengthened its wider credibility. This is absolutely in accord with the arguments in Volume 5 of the *History of Youth Work in Europe*, where the debate focuses on whether or not youth work is perhaps an 'interstitial practice', often invoking a 'border pedagogy' that lends itself to forging stronger connections with other agencies working in the youth field in order, in turn, to strengthen their connections to young people, with whom, purportedly, youth work has a special relationship.

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[191] As a nationally qualified and police-checked youth worker, I volunteered my services in March 2020 and was appointed by the chief executive of my municipality as a 'COVID-19 community resilience youth support volunteer'. I received a 'thank you' letter on 30th November 2022 to inform me that my services would no longer be required after 31st December, though it was noted that our support had been invaluable over the previous two years.

> The participants at the 2022 annual symposium of the Youth Partnership went even further. Though not reflecting specifically on the role of youth work and more focused on the concept of youth policy and the broadening of youth participation, they were insistent that stronger connections should be forged with any areas of policy that affected young people's lives:
>
> Participants called for revisiting the definition of youth policy, in ways that consider that other policy fields, not traditionally associated with young people, do have implications for their lives. Young people want a say in climate policies, in local urban planning, in refugee and asylum policies, in the regulation of AI and digital governance and in policies on agriculture and energy…. Overall, making other sectors aware that they do youth policy emerged as a powerful message.
>
> (Source: Pantea (2022), pp.23-24)

I am not sure that 'making' is the right word, or even possible, but certainly drawing attention to the impact of other sectors (a kind of 'youth proofing' test) and, where possible, building relationships – even partnerships – that enable and ensure young people's needs and interests are suitably represented within their policies and planning is clearly a step in the right direction. I recall, as a youth work practitioner myself, building such links with policy environments as diverse as the city architects' department (on urban design that was hostile to skateboarders), a national broadcaster (to provide young people's perspectives on issues to be discussed), a private music business (to provide young people with experience of recording and commerce), policing (to find a path between graffiti as crime and graffiti as art) and social services (to develop volunteering opportunities for young people at a lunch club for the elderly).

All of this points to the value in youth work developing partnerships, both within and beyond what has conventionally been understood as the 'youth sector'. In general terms, it would reinforce the capacity for *advocacy* by youth work, it would be likely to enhance the wider *acknowledgement* of youth work's contribution to the lives of young people (thereby supporting its call and case for recognition), and it might well deepen the need for the more formal *accreditation* (certification) of youth work, as youth workers ventured into specialisms relating to particular arenas of young people's lives.

We can take the cost of living crisis facing many people, but often young people in particular, as a case study of the *adaptability* of youth work as the wider social context changes. When youth work started to consider and address the question of young people's 'financial literacy', some 20 years ago, there was some bemusement that this was legitimate territory for youth work practice. As I write, the English National Youth Agency (NYA) has just launched an 'Exploring the Cost of Living Crisis' resource pack for youth workers, with an Introduction as follows:

> Living through what is reported the biggest UK cost of living crisis since the 1980s, coming hot on the heels of the Covid pandemic and Brexit, it is not surprising that many people may be feeling anxious, frustrated and overwhelmed. Rising prices everywhere from the supermarket to the petrol pump puts pressure on everyone, but for those already experiencing financial hardship, the additional burden can be

> devastating. All of this has a direct impact on young people who may not understand what's happening, but feel the emotional and physical impact of inflation, raised interest rates and a shrinking disposable income at home, with no political power to do anything about it.
> The benefits [of the resource pack] are that young people learn about the rising cost of living and how it affects them, but also gain essential money skills to prepare them for the world of finance. All of which helps build the emotional resilience to cope now, whilst reducing the potentially negative impact of economic hardship on mental health and wellbeing[192]

At a more practical level, a recent Welsh Government Youth Work Bulletin (April 2023) highlights how 'new and innovative ways to support young people' are being established. In the context of the cost of living crisis, youth work projects are cooking food together, running a 'slow cooker' scheme, providing a community food store, and establishing clothing banks. Some of these things would have been unheard of, certainly not as part of the repertoire of youth work practice, just a few years ago.

Youth work in the new Europe has some experience and a considerable potential to build partnerships with supermarkets, to access and distribute surplus food, or with financial institutions, in order the support a more youth-friendly approach to their financial services and to develop appropriate methodologies to help young people develop financial literacy skills, which are arguably more needed than ever in the context of widespread youth unemployment, escalating energy costs and a pervasive cost of living crisis.

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[192] https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/assets.nya2.joltrouter.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/17125537/cost-of-living-final-web.pdf

D. Proof

One of my favourite statements, when addressing public policy questions related to targets, draws from an observation I once heard made by my friend Lord Victor Adebowale who started his illustrious career working in the fields of housing and homelessness, and then substance misuse, before more recently becoming Chair of the NHS[193] Confederation:

There is always a risk of hitting the target but missing the point

In tough economic times and multiple pressures on public finances, economic support for youth work is often cut back and any progress in recognition and development reversed. As one municipal politician, a vocal advocate for youth work, once said to me: "in the 'people' part of our budgets, once we have allocated the required resources for child protection, social care of the elderly, and provision for vulnerable adults, there is nothing left for youth work, parks or libraries". There is, of course, a counter-argument; as Pascal Smet, the former Flemish Belgian education minister once observed in 2012: "it is not young people who have caused the financial crisis, so we should not be expecting young people to tighten their belts". That, however, is an act of faith, not an act of science – and, increasingly, those making decisions around the funding of youth work are seeking 'evidence' of value, of impact, of outcomes, of the 'social return on investment'. Countering that youth work is 'all about process' as I once did (Williamson 1993), or to argue – as the radically resistant British 'In Defence of Youth Work' campaign has done (when its founder Tony Taylor was interviewed by Marilyn Taylor in 2013[194]) - that outcomes are an illusionary goal for youth work and that youth work is about 'conversations, without guarantees', is now even more likely to fall on stony ground. The question is, of course, whether having any 'targets' is the right approach; if so, which ones, and if not, how else might investment in youth work be judged?

Ten years before the 2010 EU *Resolution on Youth Work*, I was asked by a youth magazine journalist from another EU country to provide some thoughts on the state of 'youth policy' in the United Kingdom and its priorities. I suggested that the two 'big' youth issues at the time were youth unemployment (particularly young people not in employment, education or training – 'NEET') and youth nuisance, though I added other 'youth concerns' such as access to higher education, heavier end crime, mental health issues and growing levels of suicide, and more general health issues around obesity and around heavy alcohol use. Of significance for this section of this book, however, I went on (and remember that this is a quarter of a century ago, at the turn of the millennium):

> So big challenges for youth policy.
>
> And *where does youth work fit in*? I have always said that 'youth work' cannot hide away from connecting with these challenges – they are not just political concerns, but often the concerns of young people too. But youth work needs also to be careful that it does not get dragged into serving, or even servicing, these political agendas. In youth

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[193] National Health Service

[194] https://indefenceofyouthwork.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/threatening-yw-and-illusion-final.pdf

> work circles, it is well established that youth workers should not fall into becoming soft cops, surrogate vocational trainers, or drugs counsellors.
>
> Nevertheless, there are always risks that they do become so: funding, especially funding from government, wants youth work to demonstrate how it makes a contribution to re-engagement with learning, to youth crime prevention, or to health promotion.
>
> Some would say this has always been an expectation…. Others would say that these anticipated, or expected, outcomes should never be more than a by-product of effective youth work, and not ever a specific goal: if youth work builds personal development, self-confidence and broadens individuals' horizons and aspirations, then there is some likelihood that participating young people may turn a corner out of crime, establish more healthy life-styles or renew their interest in formal learning.
>
> These 'outcomes', though, should, according to many involved with youth work, *never* become the basis for measuring the value of youth work. But, the counter-argument runs, if these are not the tests of effective youth work, what are – and how should those be 'measured'?
>
> I have always argued that the test should be the quality of the opportunities and experiences provided by and through youth work – bad inputs are likely to produce bad outputs and outcomes, but good inputs should produce good outcomes, even if we never quite know when, why or what. That is the essential problem for something we call 'youth work', because politicians and funders are too preoccupied with measuring the outcomes.
>
> Even if we could, and I am not convinced that we can, even if there is a growing consultancy business searching for this holy grail and getting a lot of public resources to do so, how can we ever be really sure that the 'good outcomes' (or bad ones) can be attributed directly to youth work interventions and experiences. Young people are going through a lot of other things, indeed more and more other things, at the same time: what is their effect on their development, life orientation, civic engagement, personal responsibility and so on?
>
> (Source: private note by Howard Williamson October 2000, emphasis added)

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, and there has certainly been a robust quest for that holy grail – the search for plausible and persuasive evidence of the value of youth work.

The 'value' of youth work remains, however, stubbornly difficult to prove, especially when standard approaches to the production of 'evidence' simply don't stack up. Alternative approaches, conversely, often don't pass muster when subject to scrutiny by 'hard-nosed' officials who, it is often alleged, simply don't understand youth work. In my review of Ord's (2018) interesting study of youth work in five European countries, invoking Cooper's (2018) transformative evaluation 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) methodology, I wrote[195]:

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[195] https://indefenceofyouthwork.com/2019/01/09/howard-williamson-reflects-on-the-impact-of-youth-work-in-europe/

> We need to proclaim loudly that it does draw important conclusions, anchored within a credible methodology. Dare I say it, but it may prove to be a valuable, complementary evidence base to the emergent neuro-scientific evidence about youth development, which also points to the value of youth work! Conversely, though, there is a risk of it being dismissed as the self-indulgent ramblings of those already inside the youth work bubble, who have found a methodology to suit their case and cause.

Such 'story-telling' approaches to considering the benefits of youth work reinforce the repeated assertions that youth work experiences make a significant contribution to the prevention of pathologies as well as to the promotion of prospects for young people. Both in fact rest together on a broad continuum of intervention and opportunity, with youth work sometimes described as a 'Tier 0' prevention service before more focused professional contact and clinical professional practice is considered necessary, and with youth work simultaneously claimed to be the site of 'soft skills' development that are critical for young people's agency and 'navigational capacities' in an increasingly complex world.

In recent years, there has been a spate of efforts to 'measure' both the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of youth work, using multiple and mixed methodologies.

Beyond identifying relevant and plausible indicators of the skills and competencies that may derive from youth work interventions and experiences, there have also been efforts to monetise the benefits of youth work. A study for the National Youth Council for Ireland (2012) suggested that youth work saved the government 1.2 billion Euros in public services that otherwise would/might have been needed. Youthlink Scotland (2016), in a study of social return on investment, have argued that for every £1 spent on youth work, £7 in other public expenditure costs are saved. Even longer ago, hard-nosed accountants Coopers and Lybrand (1994) were commissioned by the Prince's Trust to explore the economic benefits of youth work and concluded that youth work only had to slow down the rate of offending by a handful of young people it worked with to justify its existence, given the huge costs that even modest rates of offending incurred to the public purse.

As I argued long ago (Williamson 2011), though without trying to put a monetary value on it, youth work acts not only as a springboard or trampoline in propelling young people forward but can also serve as a haven or safety-net for young people facing difficult times. Those trying to monetise these issues therefore have both to try to count the cost of the benefits of youth work (the positive contributions it can make) and to consider the savings that may accrue if some of the negative effects of youthful behaviour and circumstance do *not* materialise. One may not wish to think about it in this way, but we may have to try. A report by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society[196] produced a social investment perspective on the provision of open leisure-time activities for young people and concluded that it is possible to make such 'hard-nosed' calculations about the benefits of public investment, particularly concerning more marginalised and alienated young people. The study

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[196] Nilsson Lundmark, E. and Nilsson, I. (2022) *Utanförskap och unga: En socioekonomisk analys av värdet av främjande öppen fritidsverksamhet för unga* [*Alienation/Marginalization and young people: A socio-economic analysis of the value of promoting open leisure activities for young people*], Stockholm: Myndigheten för ungdoms och civilsamhällesfrågor (MUCF) **[**Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society]

- introduced an approach to this that can be comprehensible and useful for municipal decision-makers regarding prevention and promotion work in the leisure sector.
- in the form of advanced calculation examples, concretely showed the economic effects of exclusion in the short and long term as well as the value of social investments around the target group.
- described that it is possible to make such calculations and how they are made
- provided examples of such calculations both in the short and long term, for society at large and for various actors.
- pointed to the potential profitability for society at large and effects for various social actors (municipality, state, region) regarding this kind of 'promotion' and 'prevention' work.
- suggested what obstacles there are to achieving this.

(Source: member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group)

A survey conducted by the youth work network KEKS, in Sweden and Slovenia, concluded – without monetising the issues – that youth work support made a significant difference in levels of confidence, engagement and participation by young people, including filling in the questionnaire! Some of the issues evaluated by young people included:

Taking responsibility
Concentrating/focusing
Critical thinking
Coming up with ideas
Planning and organizing
Cooperating
Handling conflicts
Support others

Feel more confident
Understand myself better
Dare things I didn't dare before
Feel better mentally
Be more positive
Have less preconceptions about other people
Care more about what happens in the society
Do better in school
Live a healthier life

(Source: member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group)

In the UK, there have been concerted, though rather different efforts to demonstrate the 'value' of youth work. The momentum took off following a rather chaotic attempt to produce a government (for England) paper on the 'Outcomes'[197] that accrued from youth work – it was chaotic because the original brief from ministers related to outcomes from youth work but, during the production of the paper, this mutated into outcomes from youth services and then to outcomes from work with young people. Predictably and inevitably, this led to a rather confused and contested document (see McNeil *et al.* 2012). It had, however, been based on wide consultation and its lead author, Bethia McNeil, not only commanded considerable respect in the youth sector but went on to head the Centre for Youth Impact and later the YMCA George Williams National College[198]. The final paragraph of the Executive Summary of the report reads as follows:

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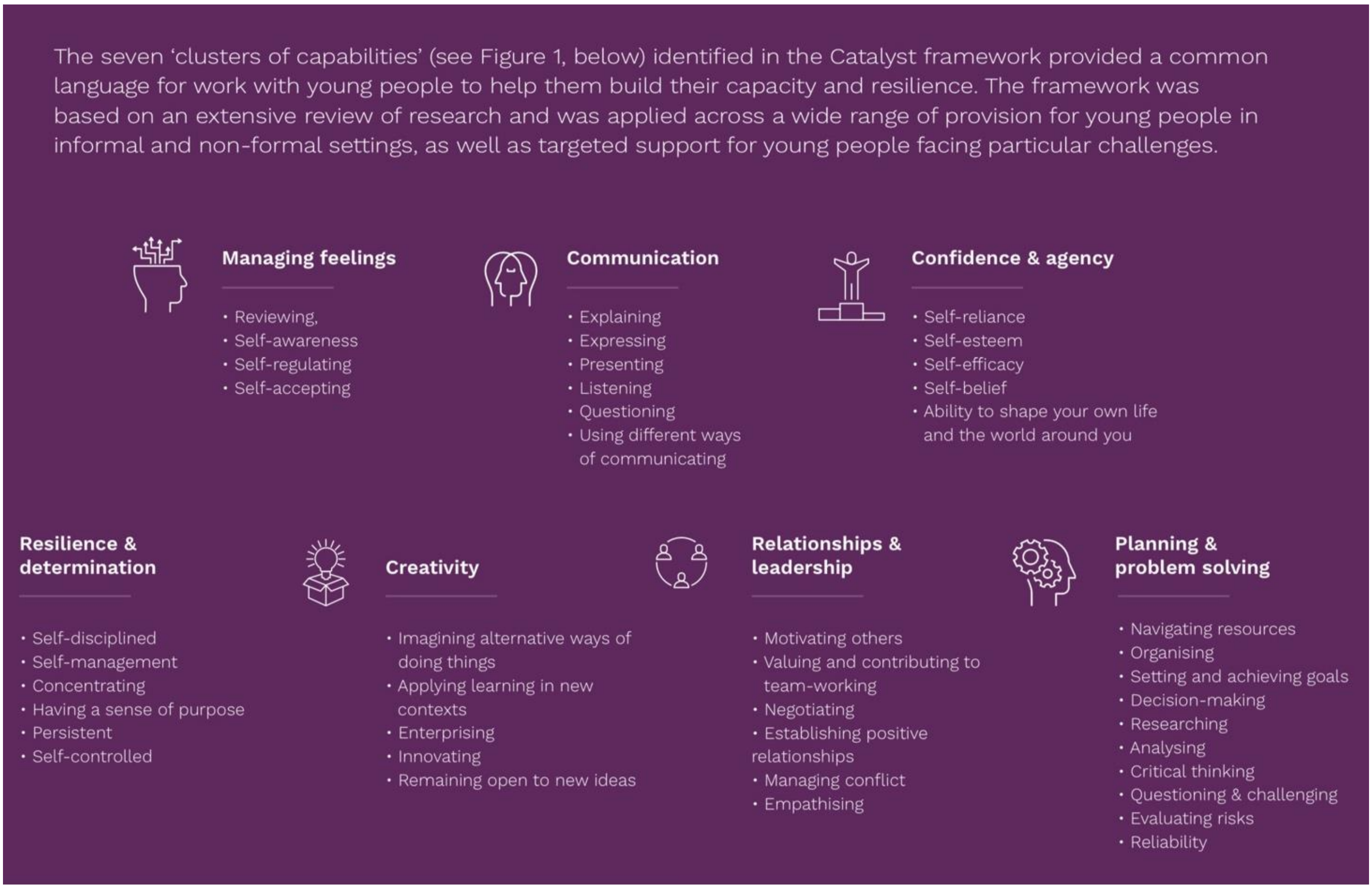
[197] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7a53b340f0b66eab99b65b/Framework_of_Outcomes_for_Young_People.pdf

> This Framework will help to address the key challenges in measuring impact on the lives of young people – strengthening and creating greater awareness of the evidence base and leading to greater coherence in language. It will support progress towards a future in which providers are confident and able to evidence their impact, and commissioners are confident to supplement their focus on reducing negative outcomes with an equal or stronger focus on commissioning for positive and sustained personal and social development, which evidence shows is fundamental to young people’s current and future wellbeing and success.

The Centre for Youth Impact has, since then, pursued these issues further, including producing an updated Framework of Outcomes for Young People in 2019 (McNeil *et al.* 2019). This persisted with the original seven ‘clusters of capabilities’ to which ‘work with young people’ contributed that, the research suggested, needed to be evaluated:



The seven ‘clusters of capabilities’ (see Figure 1, below) identified in the Catalyst framework provided a common language for work with young people to help them build their capacity and resilience. The framework was based on an extensive review of research and was applied across a wide range of provision for young people in informal and non-formal settings, as well as targeted support for young people facing particular challenges.

Managing feelings

- Reviewing,
- Self-awareness
- Self-regulating
- Self-accepting

Communication

- Explaining
- Expressing
- Presenting
- Listening
- Questioning
- Using different ways of communicating

Confidence & agency

- Self-reliance
- Self-esteem
- Self-efficacy
- Self-belief
- Ability to shape your own life and the world around you

Resilience & determination

- Self-disciplined
- Self-management
- Concentrating
- Having a sense of purpose
- Persistent
- Self-controlled

Creativity

- Imagining alternative ways of doing things
- Applying learning in new contexts
- Enterprising
- Innovating
- Remaining open to new ideas

Relationships & leadership

- Motivating others
- Valuing and contributing to team-working
- Negotiating
- Establishing positive relationships
- Managing conflict
- Empathising

Planning & problem solving

- Navigating resources
- Organising
- Setting and achieving goals
- Decision-making
- Researching
- Analysing
- Critical thinking
- Questioning & challenging
- Evaluating risks
- Reliability

(Source: McNeil *et al.* 2019, *A Framework of Outcomes for Young People*, p.5)

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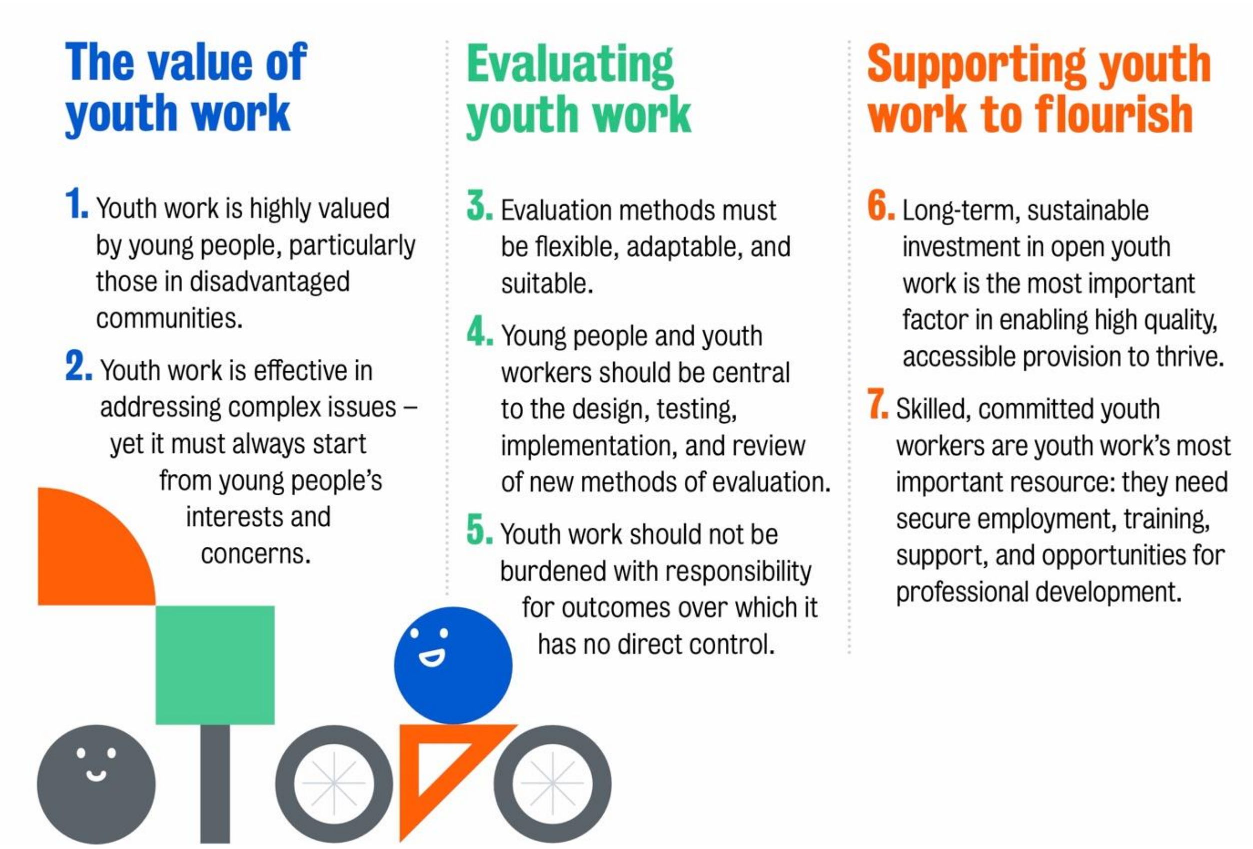
[198] George Williams established the YMCA. The college had earlier been called the YMCA national college. It had pioneered distance learning in the professional training of youth workers, in part through a partnership with the Rank Foundation, which provided very generous bursaries for some students on the distance learning course, for a period of *five years*: a first year induction course, three years for degree-level qualification in youth and community work, and a final year to put that learning into practice. I was a supervisor for that course for many years and also, for a while, the Regional Tutor for the north-west and then the south-west of England.

It is perhaps important to note that the framework generally avoids the use of the term ‘youth work’. It is ‘for everyone working with and for young people’ and it focuses specifically on outcomes for young people ‘rather than the provision in which they engage/participate’. However, crucially, it does emphasise that the framework is informed by key principles that are ‘common to youth work and non-formal education’, including:

- taking a holistic, young person-centred approach: ‘meeting young people where they are at’
- building on young people’s positive assets rather than ‘solving problems’
- engaging young people as active partners in their learning and development

This is all consistent with a ‘European’ philosophy and approach to youth work.

Elsewhere, Tania de St Croix, the author of a seminal text on grassroots youth work (de St Croix 2016), has also worked on developing a meaningful approach to evaluating youth work. Alongside her research associate Louise Doherty, she led a three-year Economic and Social Research Council study entitled ‘Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work’, producing in 2022 a film of young people’s views (classically, somewhere to go, something to do, someone to talk to) and two research reports, both called ‘Valuing Youth Work’ – one providing key messages for decision-makers[199], the other providing resources for practitioners[200]. The seven ‘evidence-based messages for decision-makers are as follows:



The value of youth work

1. Youth work is highly valued by young people, particularly those in disadvantaged communities.
2. Youth work is effective in addressing complex issues – yet it must always start from young people’s interests and concerns.

Evaluating youth work

3. Evaluation methods must be flexible, adaptable, and suitable.
4. Young people and youth workers should be central to the design, testing, implementation, and review of new methods of evaluation.
5. Youth work should not be burdened with responsibility for outcomes over which it has no direct control.

Supporting youth work to flourish

6. Long-term, sustainable investment in open youth work is the most important factor in enabling high quality, accessible provision to thrive.
7. Skilled, committed youth workers are youth work’s most important resource: they need secure employment, training, support, and opportunities for professional development.

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[199] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ecs/assets/rethinking-impact/valuing-youth-work-seven-evidence-based-messages-for-decision-makers.pdf

[200] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ecs/assets/rethinking-impact/valuing-youth-work-research-informed-practical-resources-for-youth-workers.pdf

As one might expect, this perspective has received widespread support from the youth sector (in England, and further afield) yet, equally unsurprisingly perhaps, it has so far secured limited traction beyond it, though the study claims to have won some level of political support for its approach, stimulated political attention to youth work and contributed to a government decision to provide financial bursaries for the training of 400 youth work students.

A less grounded and more monetised evaluation of the *economic* benefits of youth work was commissioned, around the same time, by UK Youth from the consultancy firm Frontier Economics[201]. Its report, published in 2022, considered both 'direct' economic benefits (expenditure and value-in-kind within the sector) and 'indirect' economic (social) benefits - particularly relating to crime, health, and education and employment. The conclusions are telling:

> Our work shows that youth work is likely to deliver high value for money for the UK taxpayer, through the positive effects it has on young people in terms of mental health, wellbeing, education, employment and other areas. Youth work supports young people with the issues that matter most to them, rather than on one single issue. This leads to benefits across multiple outcomes and helps other sectors become more effective, e.g. by improving the appropriateness of referrals to specialist services.

A central conclusion to the evaluation is that government should strengthen its funding of youth work to allow the sector to expand and to reach a greater proportion of young people. The report acknowledges the complexities of untangling the diverse effects of youth work and indeed untangling the effects of youth work from wider effects on young people's lives. It does, however, provide a useful way of thinking through the effects of youth work as part of a process for determining its value:

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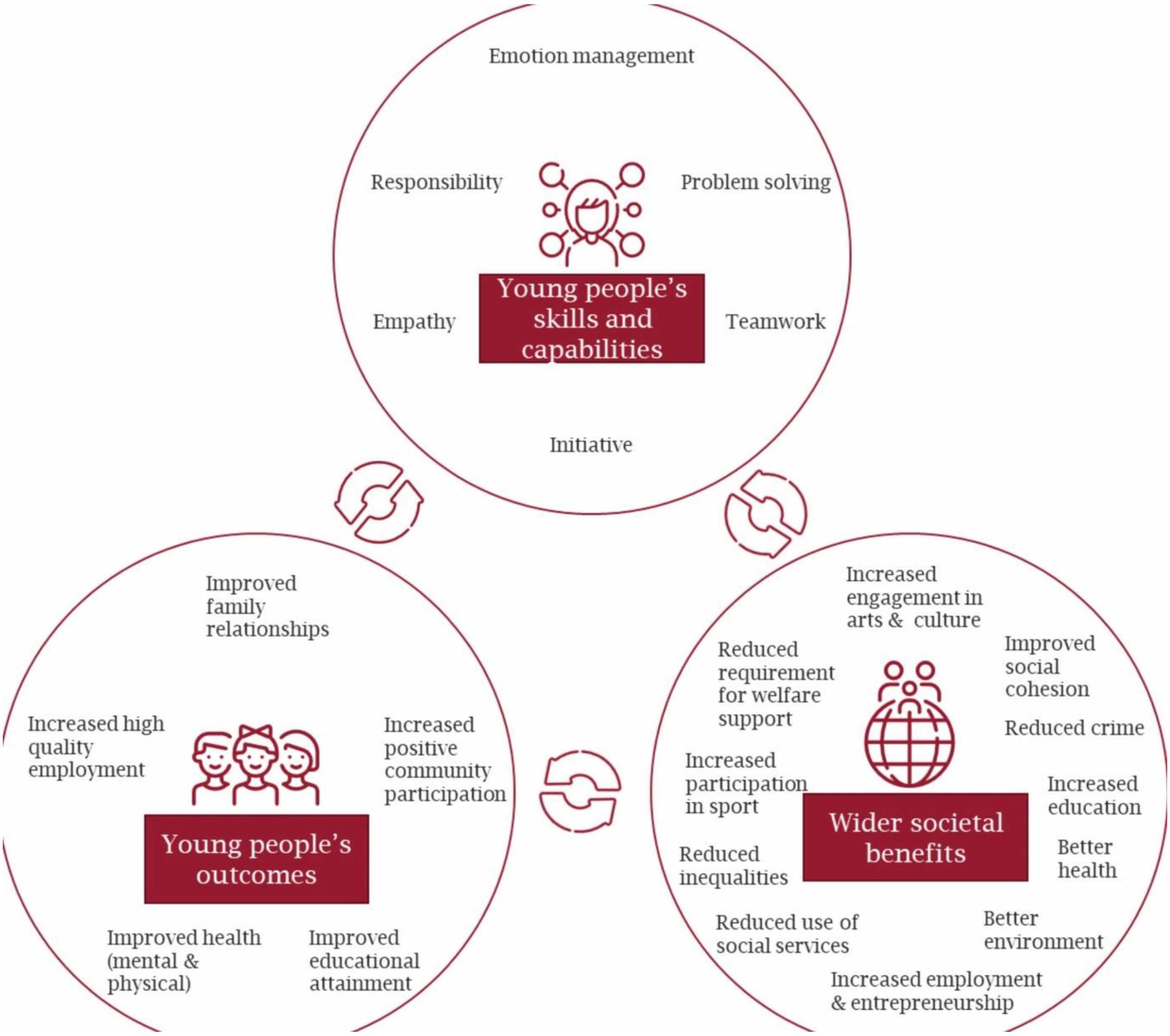
[201] https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Economic-Value-of-Youth-Work-Final-260822-STC-clean75-1.pdf


Emotion management
Responsibility
Problem solving
Empathy
Young people's skills and capabilities
Teamwork
Initiative
Improved family relationships
Increased high quality employment
Increased positive community participation
Young people's outcomes
Improved health (mental & physical)
Improved educational attainment
Increased engagement in arts & culture
Reduced requirement for welfare support
Improved social cohesion
Reduced crime
Increased participation in sport
Increased education
Wider societal benefits
Reduced inequalities
Better health
Reduced use of social services
Better environment
Increased employment & entrepreneurship

The estimates furnished by Frontier Economics are located within a broad range of possibilities and plausibility; the report suggests they are cautious in their celebration of youth work's value, despite the very positive conclusions that are drawn. They are, nonetheless, 'guestimates' that, like any other, are subject to question.

Even more assertively, the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People, a framework for the personal and social development of young people through non-formal education and learning that operates throughout the world, has been commissioning 'social value' research to gauge the social impact of the Award in different parts of the world. Pilot research in Australia[202] highlights a $4.27: $1 social return on investment, while in Canada[203] the ratio is put at $3.50: $1. In New Zealand[204], the return was recently put at $6.95: $1, with an estimated $42 million in 'future social value' for participant and society. The framework applied in all cases covered five areas:

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[202] https://dukeofed.com.au/resources/research/2018-social-value-research/
[203] https://www.dukeofed.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Award-by-the-numbers-2021.pdf
[204] https://dofehillary.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022-The-Award-Social-Value-Analysis-Report-NZ.pdf

- Improved employability and earning potential
- Improved physical health and fitness
- Improved mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Increased engagement with charitable and community causes
- Increased social cohesion

We can see by now that a huge spectrum of factors, themes, indicators and issues are invoked in an equally broad spectrum of methodologies suggested as most appropriate and apposite for passing judgement on the 'value' of youth work.

One of the few pieces of work that endeavours to draw research knowledge from an international stage is the rapid review conducted for the Irish government on the benefits and outcomes of 'universal' or 'open access' youth work (Brady *et al.* 2022). This seeks to answer a central question: *What is the international empirical research evidence in relation to the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work for young people aged 10–24 years?* The purpose of the review was to inform future grant funding for open youth work and to consider the extent to which open youth work practice was congruent with the five objectives of Ireland's current youth strategy. The conclusions were overwhelmingly positive:

- There is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the benefits and utility of universal or open access youth work.
- The outcome areas identified in this review can be seen to have significant congruence with the five national outcomes set out in the guiding policy for children and young people in Ireland
- The implication of this review is that government support for universal youth work has the potential to contribute to the achievement of national policy goals for children and young people.

Though not all studies covered all the ground, the overall ground covered in the review addressed five themes: personal development and growth; relationships, connection and support; civic values and behaviour; health and well-being; and education, career and hard skills.

It would be easy to trawl for further studies and there have, of course, over the years, been occasional attempts to 'measure' the value of youth work. The Council of Europe T-kit on Educational Evaluation of Youth Work (2007)[205], the study on Working with Young People: the value of youth work in the European Union (2014)[206], and the Youth Partnership's study of the Socio-Economic Scope of Youth Work in Europe (2007)[207], spring to mind. One can even go much further back, to Warren Feek and Douglas Smith's (1984) *Value Judgements*, or even my own *Taking a Close-Up* (Williamson 1985).

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[205] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261233/T-Kit_10.pdf/8d85c6ac-05e5-4715-8f43-0f9c3018772a?t=1377272318000

[206] https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf

[207] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261653/study_Final.pdf/642c51c1-34d7-4f03-b593-317bf1812009

These are, however, pioneering but now rather dated attempts to gauge value in youth work. There is now a groundswell of more recent efforts, all with their own weaknesses and all with particular strengths. There is, therefore, momentum; now a more concerted effort is required, to draw together the strengths of different frameworks and methodologies and to mitigate both their academic and political weaknesses. As one member of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group insisted,

> Youth work providers must gather both quantitative and qualitative information regarding the outcomes of their work, both for reflecting on and analysing their own work and for being able to show to others what is being achieved. In my experience this is key to strengthening the quality and recognition of youth work. Research is important but can never replace continuous follow up and reflection.

Only by doing that will youth work reap the benefits of the unequivocally positive appraisals it has received from disparate judgments about its value to date.

E. Proficiency

There are recurrent cries to ensure 'quality' youth work, a foundational element of *Signposts for the Future*. This certainly requires education and training, though the content and format of such provision and experience remains a matter of contention and debate. Work continues on trying to shape a model (or models) for the professional formation of youth workers, though even the term 'professional' raises concerns in some quarters of the youth work community of practice. What is not in doubt is the unanimous desire to 'do the job well', to be professional in one's practice, whether or not the youth work role being carried out is professionalised. What is also not in doubt is that if the aspirations and expectations now being placed on youth work are to be fulfilled, those doing such work need to have access to education and training provision that will equip them appropriately for the task. Versions of the occupational status of 'youth worker' (and the corresponding 'national occupational standards' to which youth workers should adhere) are increasingly in place in many parts of Europe, the latest being in Ukraine, to the evident delight of the Member of the Ukrainian Parliament, the RADA, who steered it through. As Oleksandr Sanchenko posted on Facebook on 3rd April 2023,

> Historical time for youth politics 😆
> From now on "Youth Worker" is an official profession! This is a huge step forward that has been made possible, including thanks to the introduction of the definition of "Youth Worker" in my Bill No. 3718 "On the Fundamentals of Youth Policy" ☝
> I am sincerely excited about this move and I am sure that it will be the key to the quality development of the youth sphere 💛💛

The extensive academic literature on 'professions' (see, for example, Johnson 1972) suggests clearly that, to merit the label, occupational groups require such things as a distinctive body of knowledge and a code of ethics. Youth work may still be working on these issues but clearly, whatever the final outcome, there need to be processes of, and for, professional formation, notably through education and training.

There is no need to dwell too long on this question of education and training. There are, however, some fundamental truths that will demand attention if youth work throughout Europe is to move to another level. The first is the stark reality that, though youth worker education and training may be relatively sophisticated in some European countries, it is very thin, under-resourced and under-developed, or even non-existent in many others. Even 'advanced' courses in those places are relatively short. Secondly, it is clear that youth worker education and training needs to be carefully calibrated, depending on the roles and responsibilities to be undertaken. As was suggested at a seminar on the subject during Finland's chairmanship of the Council of Europe in 2019, there could be a more vocational pathway for those with local, operational duties, a degree level programme for those wishing to occupy more strategic roles *within* the youth work sector, and perhaps a postgraduate pathway for those undertaking more transversal and inter-agency management and leadership on behalf of the youth work sector.

Thirdly, regardless of the 'level' of practice, youth workers need to be equipped with a repertoire of competences – knowledge, attitudes, skills, values and critical understanding.

There is, surprisingly, still debate about the extent to which *fieldwork practice* (and supervision) should be an essential component of education and training courses. In the UK, for example, if higher education students in youth and community work fail their supervised placement practice, they fail the course, irrespective of their more academic performance. In other countries, seemingly, one can 'qualify' to be a youth worker with very little practice experience, though some background in practice may be required as an eligibility criterion to be accepted on a youth worker training course.

Knowledge (on matters such as the sociology of youth or the psychology of adolescence) and skills (to make connections with and build relationships with young people, through dialogue and activities) clearly need to be anchored by certain attitudes and values, as well as robust critical understanding (for development particularly through supervision). During a meeting of the informal European Advisory and Resonance Group, the point was made that youth workers were always operating at 'crossroads' or 'roundabouts' – seeking to respond to young people's perspectives and realities, trying to secure sufficient resourcing and recognition, and working on complementarity and collaboration with other within and sometimes beyond the youth sector. This is not dissimilar to the variety of triangular pressures and demands that face youth workers on a daily basis and which are captured in the final chapter of Volume 7[208] of the History of Youth Work in Europe series. Coussée and Williamson (2011) once suggested that youth work was, arguably, 'the most difficult job in the world' on the grounds that it had few of the clear parameters of other professional practice to guide its priorities and activities. Instead, youth workers had, constantly, to navigate – through informed decisions based on their reflective practice – between competing pressures and expectations:

- intervention and response
- individual and societal expectations
- leisure and education (and care?)
- the life led versus the life developed
- comfort zones and stretch zones
- principles with pragmatism

Such tensions are not strikingly different from Coussée and Williamson's notion that youth workers have to be a kind of double-headed hydra, forever balancing the top-down pressures for measurement and demonstrable outcomes against the grounded imperatives for building trust and relationships with young people, where time and patience are of the essence, which are routinely denied by funding structures and political demands. The two are unlikely to ever be evenly balanced and, if the former demands are weighed down by the latter imperatives, youth work is doomed – it becomes 'dehydrated' (Coussée and Williamson 2012).

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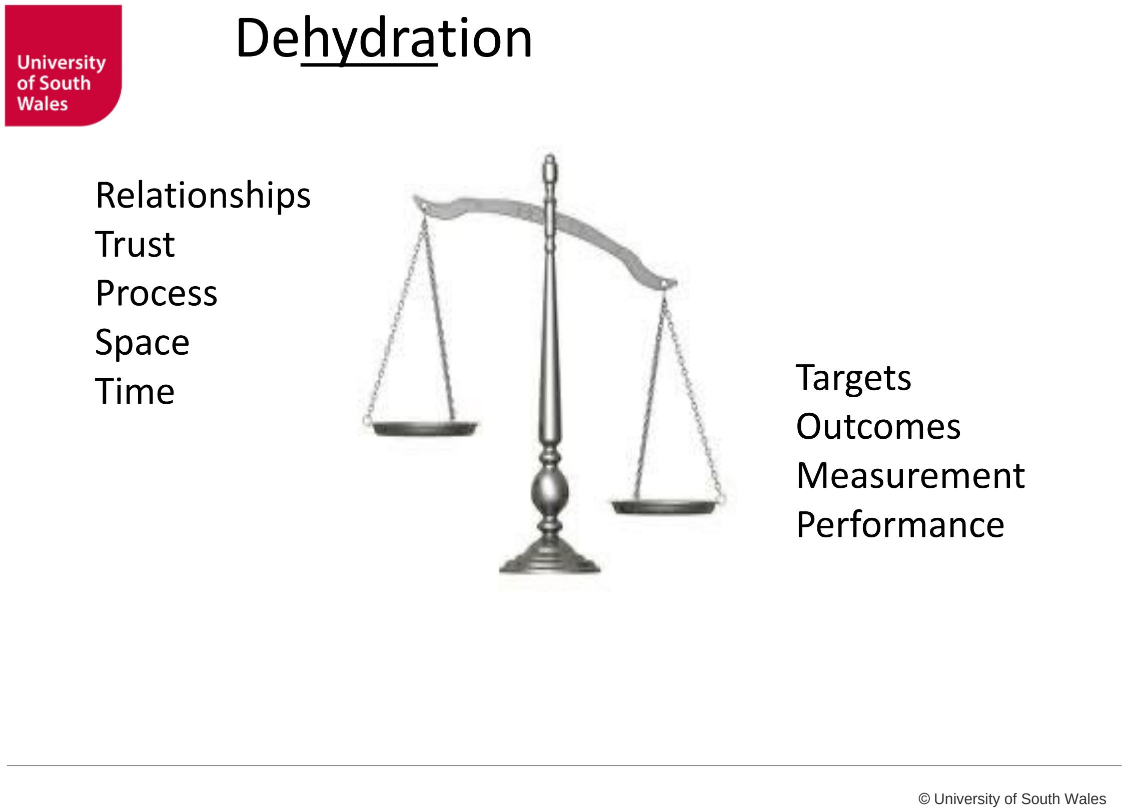
[208] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-7



University of South Wales

Dehydration

Relationships
Trust
Process
Space
Time

Targets
Outcomes
Measurement
Performance

© University of South Wales

Keeping youth work practice in balance is, of course, not just a matter for initial education and training but also for continuous professional development. As with other 'people professions' regular non-managerial supervision is an important component for reflection and action, or reflection-in-action ('praxis', as it is often called). We have little knowledge of the extent to which youth workers throughout Europe sustain their experience and development through supervision – something that entails variations on the two elements of the word, super and vision: over-seeing, watching over, and higher sight. This enables youth workers to continually reinforce their competence and confidence – their resilience and capability – to operate in contexts where boundaries and parameters are fluid and constantly demand professional judgment and discretion. This chimes loudly, too, with the idea discussed in some detail above of youth workers building increasingly sophisticated skills to improvise, in the moment, on the basis of prior learning and experience (see Harris 2014).

The Youth Partnership has published a text on youth worker education in Europe (Taru *et al.* 2020), covering issues such as educational and career paths, the concept of 'practice architecture', ethics, competences, quality assurance, and associations but it is something of a *pot pourri*, though a useful starting point to learning about what is going on. Its singular fault is that it is both very partial and selective, sometimes too academically distant and sometimes too operationally distant from the subject in focus. It is not always clear that the contributors, however authoritative they may be in their particular research fields, have much of a solid grasp of the terrain of youth work and youth worker education and training *per se*; as a result, they snatch at bodies of knowledge that may seem to bear some relation to the topic. A more authoritative text on university level youth worker education was produced through an Erasmus + project (see Seal 2019), with 24 chapters in three sections covering the historical and policy context, key thinking and thinkers, and a sequence of thought-provoking case studies. And another Erasmus + project, coordinated from North Macedonia[209] has provided some illumination on how youth workers are actually 'created' – through a convergence of demand from the field, political recognition that more quality and qualification is needed, and the creation of institutional space and a desire to accommodate the professional training of youth workers. Too often, one of more of these elements is missing.

The most recent development, again through the Youth Partnership, is an initiative to consider the options for a mechanism that would enable pan-European recognition of youth workers, through both self and external assessment of relevant competencies, and an appropriate governance structure. A discussion paper[210] prepared for the Partnership's 2023 symposium suggested that the core benefits for the youth work 'community of practice' of such a European recognition mechanism should be:

- Enhanced professional self-awareness and self-recognition
- Confirmation of professional credibility
- Better visibility within the professional field

It was argued further that a range of individual benefits should also accrue from such a mechanism.

Youth work does not have a ready and comfortable place within the education and training environment[211]. There are, however, straws in the wind, in institutions, in the field, and at a political level, not least through the European Youth Work Agenda. Youth work as a profession or an occupation is increasingly recognised. Youth worker associations are forming, and forging links with each other, calling for professional recognition and occupational standards. There are risks, of course, of institutionalisation but few dispute the need for more robust education and training programmes and opportunities throughout Europe, if 'quality' youth work is to be developed and delivered. That would optimise the potential of youth work. Without greater attention to the professional formation of youth workers, that potential remains unfulfilled.

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[209] https://creatingyouthworkers.com/developing-youth-work-training-in-estonia-ireland-north-macedonia-and-wales/

[210] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/0/Putting+the+puzzle+pieces+together+Draft+discussion+paper+for+symposium_20230522+amended.pdf/ded39c21-a788-3bfa-7996-7dc5b6fa55f6?t=1685462483632

[211] Indeed, as I write, I have learned that two of the four initial youth worker training courses (degree level) in universities in Wales have suspended recruitment for the academic year 2023-2024. A rather more pessimistic take on the current state of youth work, especially given the excellent Welsh Government endorsed youth work strategy that is currently being implemented. One of its key delivery recommendations is 'Build on its commitment to develop and promote the youth work profession with a career structure offering progression'.

Conclusion

Before looking forward, I want to look back once again. I have been fortunate to have been given access, by Dr Hywel Ceri Jones (often described as a 'founding father of Erasmus'), to his speeches when he was a senior official in the European Commission. Though Hywel had a tangential relationship to 'youth work' *per se*, some of his observations were wise before our time and are apposite and pertinent to our current consideration of the place of youth work in the 'new' Europe, and the connections between local, regional, national and European levels of policy and practice. For example, in a speech made in Spain in 1995 about the launch of the Employment-Youthstart programme in order to mainstream European Social Fund support for young people, he remarked:

> The search for innovation means reaching organisations and people working on the ground, most especially at the **local** level… It is the local actors who have the experience, the ideas, and are best placed to find the right mix of solutions. However, very often these are also people who are deeply rooted in their own local environment and they can be cut off from policy-makers and sometimes even from other local services, which are also engaged in supporting youth initiatives. We believe that it is the people at the grass roots level who are the main sources of new ideas that can also be practical and workable…
>
> Innovation and large scale breakthroughs with better practices will only happen if they are mainstreamed **in the Member States** – this means constantly linking the grass-roots initiatives with the top-down incentives stemming from national policy. This should be a rich two-way process.[212] (emphasis original)

One month later, in another address about employment, he considered youth unemployment and the need to establish,

> a basis on which we can ensure that we provide proper support for **every young person** for his or her entry into working life, support which ensures that they are never written off, as so many of them are at present, as 'unemployable'.
>
> New needs and new jobs can play a pivotal role in the fight against unemployment which is of particular relevance to young people. This is because these new types of job often require a lack of preconceptions and an openness of mind that are the very stuff of being young. The young are not fixed in their attitudes. They embrace change. We can use those qualities.[213] (emphasis original)

I took the liberty of sending an early draft of this book to Hywel, which he said he read with interest and admiration but his email reply also emphasised that there was a highly significant omission:

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[212] Address by Mr Hywel Ceri Jones (Deputy Director General DG V) to European Conference on youth employment, Seville, Spain, 19 October 1995.

[213] Opening address by Mr Hywel Ceri Jones (Deputy Director General DG V, European Commission) to conference on New Needs, New Activities, New Jobs: The challenges and the outlook, El Escorial, Madrid, 9-10 November 1995.

> One key point to me is our breakthrough to secure the article in the Maastricht treaty with its formulation on education, training and youth. This is crucial as without it there can be no EU funded programmes.[214]

The email was accompanied by a detailed exposition of developments relating to vocational education, going back to 1963. The first exchange of young (agricultural) workers was provided for a year later. There followed, for a decade, just small detailed, sectoral initiatives (for example, on machine tool operators). After CEDEFOP[215] was established in 1975, a more pro-active vocational training policy was introduced by the European Commission. The 1970s also heralded the beginning of European Community co-operation in education, with some small initiatives that could be viewed as the precursor of the Erasmus programme, though vocational training concerns re-asserted themselves in the 1980s because of unprecedented levels of youth unemployment and technological change. The Commission was still hesitant in taking the lead, except on the comparability of vocational training qualifications. In 1985, however, the European Court of Justice ruled in the Gravier case and provided a broad definition of 'vocational training', allowing for an interpretation that included the developing notion of the 'free movement of students' – which provided the legal basis for proposing the establishment of a number of initiatives[216], including Erasmus. We should not forget that the first 'youth' programme followed just one year later. Hywel Ceri Jones had made a speech at the beginning of that decade about the proposal by the Commission to establish a 'social guarantee' of vocational preparation and training. He talks about the need for a broad understanding of 'skill development', not just specific occupational skills but also "the more general skills essential in adult life". He talks about reaching all young people. He mentions the need for effective working together, between, employers, trade unions, the education and training services, local as well as central governments, and 'not least, young people themselves'. He emphasises that 'involvement will have to be voluntary'. All of these points could, 40 years later, be copied from vocational education and applied to youth work. That particular speech concluded as follows:

> The Chinese often quote the proverb that 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step'. The length and difficulty of the journey is no reason for not attempting that first step at all[217]

It was another 30 years before the first EU *Resolution on youth work*; policy development can be long in the making, but all require first steps. 'Youth' is a national policy area, so EU harmonisation is not possible, though the EU can play a supporting role, and as regards youth policy, ‘any harmonisation of Member States’ legislation is expressly excluded’. The European Council may, however, adopt recommendations based on Commission proposals. We know that there are explicit provisions for youth exchanges and vocational training Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), and that young people are often a significant focus on European policy development in education, training and health.[218]

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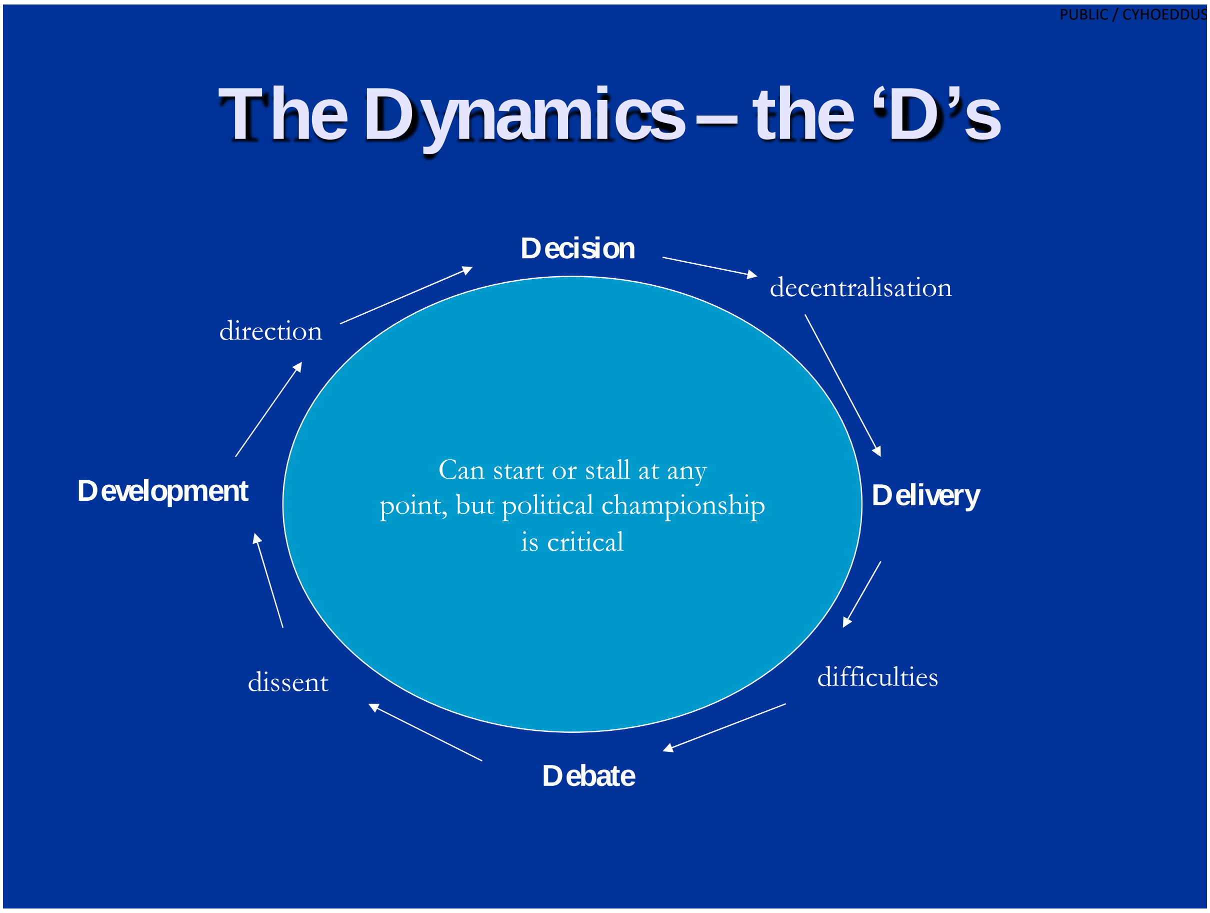
[214] Private email 3rd April 2023

[215] The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – initially located in Berlin, later in Thessaloniki.

[216] Others included COMETT (University-Industry co-operation) and PETRA (Initial Training of Young People). ERASMUS was about University co-operation and student mobility. All were based on Article 128 of the Treaty of Rome 1957 that provided for the European Council, acting on a proposal from the European Commission, to lay down the general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy. 'It must be assumed that the intention of the founders of the Treaty was to leave a possibility for the development of a policy, which they were not ready to define more clearly at that stage' (Hywel Ceri Jones, private correspondence to the author). The wider legal interpretation of 1985 and subsequently initiatives that were sustained despite legal challenge was incorporated into a consolidated Article 128 in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, became Article 151 in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and Article 166 in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007).

[217] Speaking notes for the attention of Mr Jones 21/12/1982 - subject 'Social Guarantee': Liverpool speech.

I provide this brief history of youth-related developments at a European level simply to demonstrate the differential pace of development at different times, akin to the ‘stop-start’ rhythms depicted by Williamson’s youth policy clock (Williamson 2002, Williamson *et al.* 2021), which drew from the Council of Europe’s international reviews of national youth policy, where political championship is critical to keeping the cycle going, though professional debate and advocacy is also important:



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The Dynamics – the ‘D’s

Decision

decentralisation

Delivery

difficulties

Debate

dissent

Development

direction

Can start or stall at any point, but political championship is critical

(Source: The dynamics of youth policy development; lecture slide)

Despite the protracted, sometimes contradictory and often complex, evolution of youth work in Europe, at a European level, the conclusion to this book is relatively straightforward and simple. There is plenty of evidence that youth work – non-formal education and learning, usually in community settings – makes a meaningful and relevant contribution to young people’s lives and their transitions to adulthood and autonomy. In its many forms, it provides both spaces and bridges. Like all forms of professional practice, however, it needs a policy framework. Without political championship, the direction and development of youth work, like anything else, inevitably stalls[219]. The youth work community of practice, perhaps guided by the European Youth Work Agenda and supported through the Bonn process, may well consolidate its common ground, but it will always need to secure and sustain political advocacy and sufficient funding. As one member of the European Advisory and Resonance group wrote to me:

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[218] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_3.6.5.pdf

> **Youth work policy as a governmental guarantee for successful youth work**
> To create and maintain a strong youth work, governments on all levels must elaborate and implement a sustainable and well elaborated youth work policy. This means well balanced support (financial, services, coaching…), only successful if decided and implemented in close collaboration with youth work-actors. A governmental youth work policy must be active in all policy structures: legislative, executive, administration, comprehensive budget, active formal and informal participatory practices, scientific reflections.

If youth work is to play to its strengths in the 'new Europe', such a statement could not be more apposite. The proof that such political support for strengthened youth work policies throughout Europe, that will in turn guarantee the quality of youth work practice, lies in an expressed commitment, fourteen years on from the first, to a new EU Resolution on Youth Work.

The informal European Advisory and Resonance Group produced a proposed statement to capture the specific identity of European Youth Work:

Youth work must be considered as a specific and unique approach in a broader spectrum of pedagogical/educational systems (education, welfare, prevention, justice, training, employability etc.), often supported or created by governments. It is made by, through and for young people – they are as far as possible the co-owners of their youth work, project, or association. Youth work targets autonomy and creates spaces to enjoy being young together by creating useful playfulness and playful usefulness. Youth work practice proves itself as a concrete and sustainable milieu for active democracy and civic engagement. Thereby youth work realises naturally a lot of positive societal effects on physical and mental wellbeing, uploading democracy and coping with severe menaces related to global challenges. Youth workers, both volunteers and professionals, assure the realisation of these spaces. Youth work needs a well elaborated youth work policy by governments on all levels, from local and regional over national to international.

(Developed from Redig 2023)

To that end, the call is for a common, strong and specific identity of *youth work policy* within governments at all levels. To create and maintain a strong youth work, local, regional, national and European levels of governance must elaborate and implement a sustainable and well elaborated youth work policy. This means well balanced support (through budgets, service provision, human resource capacity and other infrastructure) that is only likely to be achieved if decided and implemented in close collaboration with youth work actors. A governmental youth work policy should be clear and distinct at all levels of 'youth policy' making, perhaps emulating versions of the framework proposed by the Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy (see Williamson 2002): legislative, executive, administration, comprehensive budget, enabling foundations, active formal and informal participatory practices, and scientific reflections through research, monitoring and evaluation.

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[219] https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261623/Youth+policy+manual+2021+WEB.pdf/32a8859d-ee44-cbb8-016b-0aa3928a4c99

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Postscript: ***Let them breathe***

As I was working on this '*context paper'* (in support of the 'concept paper' of the same name, now tabled for consideration by the EU Youth Working Party), a short article was published in a British newspaper *The Observer*. It focused on the mental health crisis in young people and its probable connections to what was described as the 'choking smog' of bold glamour: Tik Tok filters, violent porn, #thinspo and misogynist influencer Andrew Tate. The article draws attention to the simultaneous decline in public services for young people (leisure centres, youth clubs and swimming pools, for example) and the increasing risks perceived both by young people and also their parents that exist in public space. No wonder over half of young people, according to a recent report (Onside 2022), spend most of their free time in their bedrooms. The article goes on to describe how bleak the world may feel for so many young people. Had it always been that way? The author thinks not, suggesting that for her it had been bearable through 'crumbs of independence and agency; [and] a sense of possibility'. As this book has noted repeatedly, contemporary Europe presents a range of challenges that prospectively adversely affect young people's lives. The article in *The Observer* concludes:

> But [life] becomes less unmanageably frightening when you're allowed to engage with it on your own terms, separate from your parents, in creative spaces and sports clubs, but also on train platforms and at bus stops, in playgrounds or on the streets. If we really care about [young people's] mental health, let's give them affordable, accessible, welcoming places to go; and if we can't do that, because it's 2023 and everything's broken, let's at the very least give them space and autonomy and tolerate them being [young people]. Let them, well, breathe (Beddington 2023)

This article was published on the very day that the UK Government launched a new policy initiative to tackle 'anti-social behaviour'. This talked about reclaiming public space from 'feral', drug-taking and aggressive young people and instigating more severe, certain and swift punishment to ensure young people 'clean up the mess that they have made'. Within such rhetoric, however, was also talk about re-establishing positive opportunities for young people and the need for more accessible youth work (the British Prime Minister announced £11 million GBP of additional funding to secure one million hours of additional youth work), reminding me of an old adage I once promulgated repetitively: 'it is better to build fences at the top of the cliff than to provide ambulances and police vans at the bottom'. And, incontrovertibly, it is also much, much cheaper.

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Appendix 1: Current strategic thinking about youth work at a European level

Under the triple banner of the **EU Youth Strategy 2018** – Engage, Connect, Empower – the ‘Empower’ strand displays a strong commitment to youth work:

Empower (from the EU Youth Strategy 2018)

Empowerment of young people means encouraging them to take charge of their own lives. This requires the necessary resources, tools and an environment that is willing to pay proper attention to the voice of young people. Today, young people across Europe are facing diverse challenges, such as difficulties in accessing their social rights, social exclusion and discrimination, as well as threats arising from fake news and propaganda.

In order to address these challenges and therefore allow for the true empowerment of youth, it is necessary to work collaboratively on policies that tackle the specific situation of young people and consequently improve the lives of young people in the EU.

In this context, youth work in all its forms can serve as a catalyst for empowerment:

Youth work brings unique benefits to young people in their transition to adulthood[11], providing a safe environment for them to gain self-confidence, and learn in a non-formal way. Youth work is known for equipping youth with key personal, professional and entrepreneurial competences and skills such as teamwork, leadership, intercultural competences, project management, problem solving and critical thinking. In some cases, youth work is the bridge into education, training or work, thus preventing exclusion.

To reap these benefits, there is a greater need for recognition of non-formal and informal learning through youth work, especially beneficial to those with little formal qualifications, as a way to improve employability. Recognition can be improved by a more systematic use of quality tools.

INVITE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, WITHIN THEIR RESPECTIVE FIELDS OF COMPETENCE, TO:

- – Develop and implement a European Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work. In order to unleash the full potential, it is necessary to integrate the expertise of youth representations, youth organisations, youth workers and researchers. Further synergies with the work carried out by the Council of Europe in this area should be encouraged;
- – Support quality youth work development on local, regional, national and European level, including policy development in the field, training for youth workers, the establishment of legal frameworks and sufficient allocation of resources; – Support youth work activities on all levels, including grassroots, and recognise youth organisations as providers of competences development and social inclusion through youth work and non-formal education activities, while respecting national, regional and local activities in this field;

- - Create and further develop, when and where possible, easily accessible youth contact points that deliver a wide range of services and/or provide information, including financial guidance, guidance and support on career, health and relationships and educational, cultural and employment opportunities.

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Under the four thematic priorities of the **Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030** – Revitalising Pluralist Democracy, Access to Rights, Living Together in Peaceful and Inclusive Societies, and Youth Work – ‘youth work’ is not only a thematic priority in its own right, but threads through all the others, placing a special emphasis on:

- strengthening, recognising and advancing youth work policies and practices by embedding youth work within youth policy frameworks, notably through a European youth work agenda and its implementation, in close co-operation with the European Union;
- improving the quality of youth work delivered by both volunteer and paid youth workers;
- extending the access and attractiveness of youth work and non-formal education/learning for the benefit of wider populations of young people.

Youth work

This priority covers the Council of Europe youth sector’s action to strengthen youth work development, the quality and recognition of youth work (in the member States and at European level) and European co-operation on furthering youth work development through partnerships, such as the one with the European Commission. This priority further includes the pro- motion of specific non-formal education/learning approaches in the service of Council of Europe values, especially human rights education, education for democratic citizenship, digital citizenship education and intercultural education.

The Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030 sets out its ‘expected *outcomes*’ in relation to each of its four thematic priorities and the overall impact this work is designed to achieve. However, beyond immediate outcomes positioned closely to the outputs of the work of the Council of Europe youth sector, longer-term outcomes and impact are clearly dependent on and also vulnerable to social, political and economic circumstances beyond its control.

Impact: Young people’s autonomy and democratic citizenship are being strengthened through youth work and non-formal education/learning and social inclusion is fostered.

Appendix 2: The Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work (2017)

The Appendix to the Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work [CM/Rec(2017)4] sets out the definition and scope of youth work:

Youth work is a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making.

Despite different traditions and definitions, there is a common understanding that the primary function of youth work is to motivate and support young people to find and pursue constructive pathways in life, thus contributing to their personal and social development and to society at large.

Youth work achieves this by empowering and engaging young people in the active creation, preparation, delivery and evaluation of initiatives and activities that reflect their needs, interests, ideas and experiences. Through this process of non-formal and informal learning, young people gain the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes they need in order to move forward with confidence.

In order to facilitate these outcomes, youth work should create an enabling environment that is actively inclusive and socially engaging, creative and safe, fun and serious, playful and planned. It should be characterised by accessibility, openness and flexibility and at the same time promote dialogue between young people and the rest of society. It should focus on young people and create spaces for association and bridges to support transition to adulthood and autonomy.

It is acknowledged that youth work, often in partnership and co-operation with other sectors, produces a wide range of positive outcomes for individuals, their communities and for society in general. For example:

- – it leads to critical reflection, innovation and changes at local, regional, national and European levels;
- – it contributes to young people's well-being, enhancing a sense of belonging and strengthening their capacity to make beneficial choices;

– it supports positive and purposeful transitions in personal, civic, economic and cultural life, enabling the development of competences that facilitate life-long learning, active citizenship and labour market participation;

– it promotes the development of various skills such as creativity, critical thinking, conflict management, digital and information literacy and leadership;

– it enhances diversity and contributes to equality, sustainable development, intercultural understanding, social cohesion, civic participation, democratic citizenship and the upholding of the values of human rights;

– it strengthens young people's resilience and thereby their capacity to resist negative influences and behaviour.

These positive outcomes, in the face of the current challenges in Europe and the disproportionately negative effects on young people, underline the vital importance of member States ensuring access to quality youth work for all young people. The risks of not doing so could be significant.

Young people are a key resource in building a social and just Europe. Societies are at high risk of undermining stability and social cohesion if they allow the current difficult circumstances to create a "lost generation" of disillusioned and disengaged young people. Adequately supporting young people today, including through the provision of quality youth work, is an important investment Europe has to make for its present and for the future. Not doing so represents a loss of opportunity to strengthen contemporary civil society, a threat to social cohesion and weakens the potential for dealing effectively with some of the major challenges of our time such as migration, unemployment, social exclusion and violent extremism.

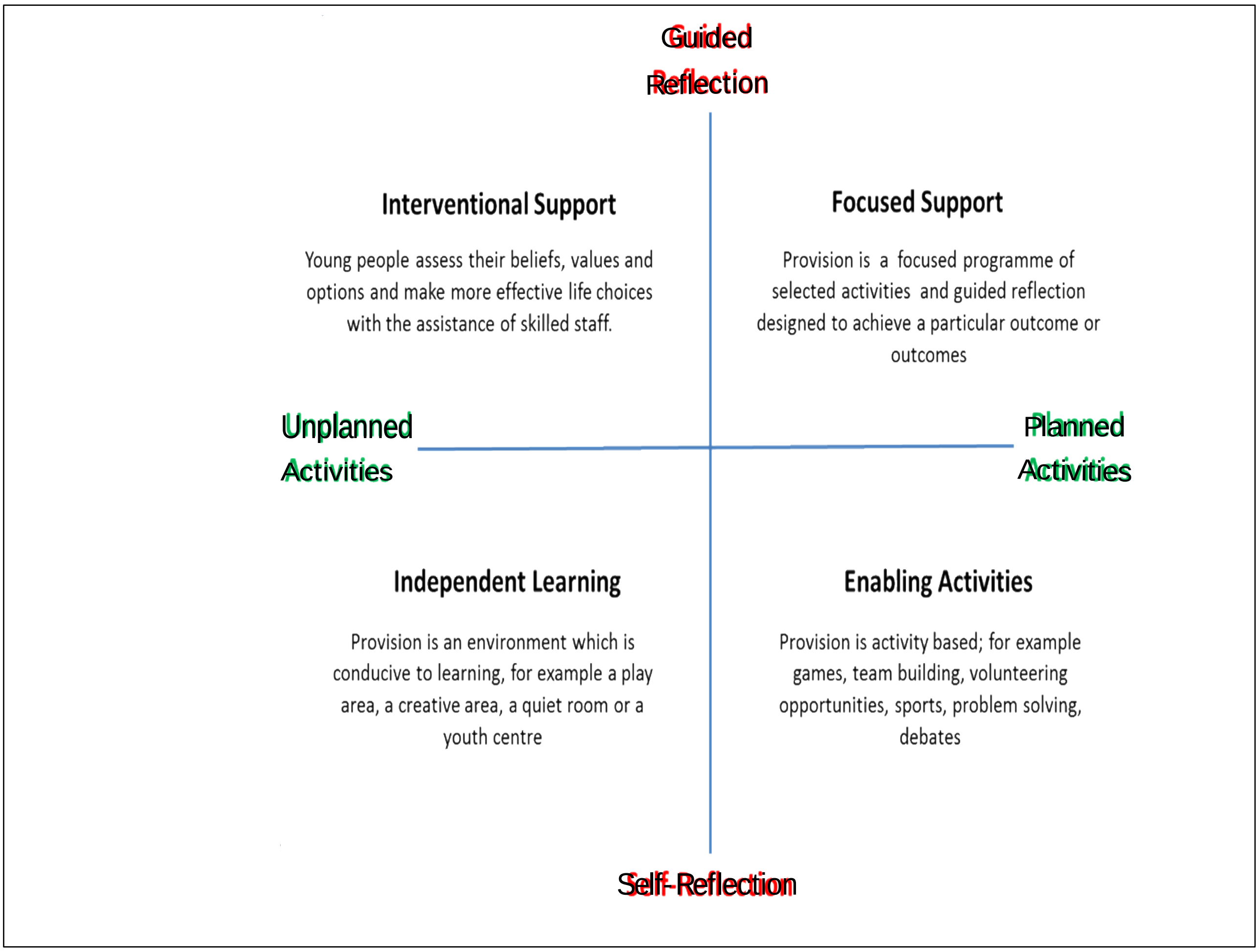
Appendix 3: One illustration of the diverse practice enshrined in youth work

Figure 1: Total Number of VYW Organisations based on the Type of Provision

Type of Provision	Total Number of Organisations	Percentage (%)
Advocacy	9	1.0
Care/Adoption/Young Carers	24	2.6
Crime Prevention/Victimisation	7	0.7
Digital	6	0.6
Disabilities/Additional Needs/Illness	145	15.5
Disadvantage/Vulnerable/Disengaged Young People	20	2.1
Diversity/Inequality/Discrimination	44	4.7
Domestic Abuse/ACE's	19	2.0
Employability / Educational Support / Volunteering	77	8.2
Environmental/ Sustainable Development	2	0.2
Faith Groups	69	7.4
Forums/Councils/Decision Making	7	0.7
Generalist	22	2.3
Homelessness/Housing Support	30	3.2
International Exchanges / International Work	4	0.4
Mental Health/Wellbeing	85	9.1
Recreational	195	20.8
Refugees/Asylum Seekers	4	0.4
Substance Misuse/Addiction	10	1.1
Uniformed Groups	20	2.1
Welsh Language and Culture	10	1.1
Youth Club/Outreach/Detached	129	13.8
TOTAL	**938**	100.0

(Source: E. Bacon's 2023 mapping study of 'voluntary youth work services' in Wales)
NB. Note that there is no reference to paramount European youth work activity – such as human rights, intercultural tolerance and understanding – though all youth work in Wales purports to be informed by the principles of being educative, participative, empowering, expressive and inclusive.

Appendix 4: The Oginsky model – one model for thinking about youth work


Guided Reflection
Unplanned Activities
Planned Activities
Self-Reflection

Interventional Support

Young people assess their beliefs, values and options and make more effective life choices with the assistance of skilled staff.

Focused Support

Provision is a focused programme of selected activities and guided reflection designed to achieve a particular outcome or outcomes

Independent Learning

Provision is an environment which is conducive to learning, for example a play area, a creative area, a quiet room or a youth centre

Enabling Activities

Provision is activity based; for example games, team building, volunteering opportunities, sports, problem solving, debates