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Chapter 1: Importance of the role of youth work in the promotion of significant and societally relevant learning



The importance of the role of youth work in the promotion of significant and societally relevant learning is nowadays out of doubt.

It can be said that youth work contributes to empowering the individual, building bridges to the community and tackling societal challenges. They draw a picture of challenges – as for example financial and economic crises, unemployment, the increase of migration – within European society that youth work can contribute to tackling. In this way, youth work contributes to upholding democratic values and human rights, social cohesion, social diversity, freedom of expression and values, as well as dealing with the consequences of emerging social polarisation and social exclusion. With regard to young people themselves, the need for youth work is emphasised by its role in promoting inclusion, active citizenship and well-being of young people.

The strategy through which youth work contributes to tackling and promoting societal challenges is its ability to empower young people and support their personal development.

One of the main responsibilities of youth work as far as young people are concerned is to confront the various life challenges and emerging threats they encounter. This is done on the individual level by contributing to the knowledge, skills and values of young people.

Youth work is about creating spaces where young people can meet, where divides can be bridged and where social integration of young people is supported.

Values and principles

The fundamental values and principles of youth work are: voluntary participation, youth-centeredness, mutual respect between youth workers and young people, accessibility and openness, flexibility, and the promotion of a rights-based approach, diversity, and inclusion.

Through this kind of learning, youth work is seen as being able to bring about a positive change to society by reacting to emerging societal change in preventatively addressing potential problems. A specific example is the reaction of the youth work sector to an increasing polarisation of society by addressing issues like xenophobia, racism and fake news.

It can be seen that in dealing with these challenges the main focus is on young people's learning and acquisition of life skills to secure and enhance values such as:

- a) the strengthening of active citizenship,
- b) social and human rights,
- c) civic responsibility
- d) the recognition and respect of democratic values, promoting cultural diversity, and guaranteeing freedom of expression and belief.

Youth work is considered one main actor in supporting young people with this important task and their personal development and, by fostering young people, youth work contributes to the well-being and prosperity of society.

Skills

Youth work pays attention to different areas of life, focuses on all young people and, very importantly, takes a positive view on young people, emphasising their talents, skills, abilities and capabilities, while respecting individual differences.

The development of skills is addressed from various points of view. Skills are about learning certain skills that enable active citizenship, like constructive self-expression, participation, human rights, social rights issues, and the practice of solidarity. Others are regarded as general life skills, like self-esteem, confidence and taking ownership, problem solving behaviour, interpersonal concern, as well as communication and cognitive abilities. Skills like confidence, resilience and trust empower young people to take matters in their own hands.

Cooperation


Following some innovative approaches, a second major topic in discussions on the future of youth work concerns cooperation within the youth sector and cross-sectoral cooperation in society. It is very important the dialogue between youth work, youth policy and youth research in the youth sector, and this is stressed both in political documents, as for example documents of the Council of the European Union, as well as in professional documents. This matter seems still precarious and unstable but a number of documents highlight its potential.

Recognition

There is a debate on the recognition of youth work and what should be recognised, and this discussion focuses on the contribution of youth work to society. This involves posing the question of how youth work and non-formal education can come to be recognised as professional fields in general and how youth work can be legitimised as a profession capable of producing learning outcomes and the promotion of significant and societally relevant learning, challenges and solutions.

It is for this reason that many of the European institutions have decided to bring youth work and its formal, social and political recognition higher on the political agenda, welcomed by all relevant stakeholders in the field.

But it still seems evident that discussions on youth work's contribution to society will need to continue in the future to raise and broaden awareness, mainly in decision-makers as politics, institutions, experts, and authorities on local, regional, national and European level.

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Chapter 2: The importance of stronger networks of cooperation between institutions of formal and non-formal learning in the youth sector

In general, it is understood that formal learning takes place in schools, training institutions and at colleges and universities. Also, it has clearly defined curricula and rules for certification. Non-formal learning, on the other hand, takes place mostly outside formal educational systems and is voluntary.

We suggest an agenda for youth policy which defines learning in a broad meaning, being aware of the current developments in youth work curricula, policy and practice in international youth work and intercultural competence and to enhance co-operation between formal and non-formal education sectors.

Formal education and learning moulds the physical, intellectual, emotional and social characteristics of a person in a balanced manner. Moreover, formal education trains children and youth to develop critical thinking and reasoning power, shaping them into good citizens, and improving their social standing and independence.

The current trends in youth workers' education promotes cross-sector cooperation between non-formal and formal education and learning, therefore the importance of stronger networks of cooperation between institutions of formal and non-formal learning in the youth sector. We can see a growing need for qualified youth workers on one hand, as well as the constant need of colleges, universities and other institutions to update their education programmes in line with the needs of our societies which imply possibilities of mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation between such institutions promoting youth work across Europe.

It is a great challenge to create a platform of intercultural cooperation between high education and youth work institutions aiming at creating joint future projects and preparing young people for the changing world of work, promoting entrepreneurial learning through a process of empowerment. The European Commission is already addressing this issue through their Strategic partnership actions.



**Chapter 3: Relevance of intercultural competences
in the labour market**



Intercultural competences are a valuable asset, and more in an increasingly globalised world, where the probability of interacting with people from different cultures and countries is growing, especially in the professional field.

Intercultural competences are like a set of necessary tools required to tackle some of the challenges posed by diversity in our contemporary societies. They are necessary to respond to the challenges of today's societies, recognising diversity and focusing on common and shared elements that transcend differences and promote positive interaction and dialogue between people.

Intercultural competences ensure the ability to function effectively in a culturally diverse environment. Increasingly, in large organisations and small start-ups, we work and co-operate with people from various countries, different cultures, traditions and ways of thinking and doing.

The labour market finds that employers recognise a business value in employing staff who can work effectively with individuals and organisations from cultural backgrounds different from their own. Otherwise, organisations whose employees lack these intercultural skills are more exposed to problems and risk.

Intercultural skills are important and relevant to the labour market for several reasons. They not only give employees a better understanding of their workplace and co-workers, but they also help them adapt to new work environments and prevent culture shock, while enhancing their cultural awareness, knowledge, and practical skills.

Intercultural understanding goes way beyond reflecting on our own values and those of other cultures: patterns of behaviour, language, developing true respect and openness for others.

At an organizational level, an inclusive team that exhibits intercultural competence creates a happy and healthy working environment, which generates a culture of belonging. This means that employees will be more engaged and motivated, offering new ideas and innovations to help the company succeed.

As the mind opens to a growing reflective awareness of our own culture, so we can develop a more fluid and international mindset. Embedded in this are the cognitive skills of self awareness and cultural knowledge, as well as the affective skills of open mindedness and curiosity. This is very much in keeping with the broader skill set needed to face a fast-changing and volatile world.

Intercultural skills are a big asset for organisations and teams. Especially nowadays, the labour market is changing rapidly because of automatization, technological developments or for example a global pandemic, and the work environments are more diverse, so it is important to adapt quickly, to be open to other perspectives, to be willing to learn new things and to be able to communicate in an appropriate manner with different kind of persons and cultures.



Chapter 4: Why and how to promote international youth work



Besides what is mentioned above about the relevance of promoting youth work, when considering involvement in international youth work, and the reasons for doing so, it is important to consider the impact of such engagement on young people, youth workers and organisations. Such impact is evidenced in a number of ways, including competence development, professional development, greater intercultural awareness and active participation of young people.

Engagement in international and intercultural exchanges strengthen the development of personal skills, intercultural competence and sensitivity as well as openness to other cultures. Taking part in international youth work provides young people with the opportunity to acquire new skills and competences that can play an important role in their personal development, even providing them with the opportunity to step outside their comfort zone and broaden their horizons, as well as making a significant contribution to personal and social development, testing values and beliefs, creating acceptance and understanding of others and accelerating skills development across a range of competences.

Moreover, through this kind of experiences, young people develop friendships and connections, establishing a sense of belonging and purpose as well as displaying increased confidence and a greater awareness of our intercultural and diverse world.

Young people gain skills and competences that contribute to opening minds and hearts, motivating them to become active and contributing members of local and international communities. Intercultural experiences create an understanding of difference and facilitates the development of empathy. Having this experience in a supportive learning environment can create space for young people to think, observe and reflect differently and more positively about home, family and friends.

Research has shown the value of learning mobility and its impact on communities, including the multiplier effect and how after an international opportunity, youth participants are likely to return home, and become involved in community-based activities and conversations with newly gained competences, values and knowledge. This constitutes a benefit to society, which can include greater openness and understanding of cultural diversity.

The European Commission promotes a range of projects for youth which can also provide young people with the space and opportunity to have their voices heard and to explore issues that affect them, apart of providing young people with opportunities for exciting new learnings combined with a fun and dynamic learning environment, the chance to build connections and friendship, increased confidence and a greater awareness of an intercultural and diverse world.

After a young person participates in a mobility activity, they are more inclined towards remaining connected, staying involved and supporting other community-based initiatives. They also share new perspectives and understandings of themselves and others with their peers and family members

Engagement in international youth work through European programmes, for example, can therefore have multiple and multi-faceted benefits for young people, youth workers, youth organisations and the wider community. Recognising and mapping the impact of such engagement for various stakeholders provides a strong foundation when considering whether, and why, to engage in international youth work.

There is a range of organisations of the youth sector promoting initiatives and helping member states to develop their policies on youth work, advising them on possible strategies and legislation that will result in quality youth work, as well as quality education and training for youth workers. And many European institutions and organisations offer great training and exchange opportunities organising regular international activities such as study sessions, seminars or training courses, as well as youth exchange programs and different international projects and experiences.

To mention few of them:

- **SALTO.**
<https://www.salto-youth.net/about/>
- **COUNCIL OF EUROPE.**
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-work>
- **UNESCO. Youth Global Community.**
<https://www.unesco.org/en/youth/global-youth-community>
- **The International Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE).**
<https://www.icye.org>
- **YEU International.**
<https://yeu-international.org>
- **IYF.**
<https://iyfglobal.org>