

Extending Entitlement: Youth work and its place in youth policies in Europe

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Introduction

‘Youth work’ and ‘youth policy’ have, far too often and usually misguidedly, been thrust together in debates within the youth sector at a European level. It is an erroneous, though not completely inappropriate connection. My contention, as somebody very committed to the value as well as the values of youth work but also as somebody with high-level experience in youth policy development and implementation, is that ‘youth work’, however important, remains a tiny fragment of overall ‘youth policy’ considerations, even in the best instances rarely more than 1% of the resources allocated to formal education, let alone those allocated to other youth policy fields such as employment, training, housing, health or justice.

Yet this paper does seek to draw attention to the growing youth policy acknowledgement at a European level of ‘youth work’, culminating in the current momentum, supported by both the European Commission and the Council of Europe, around the ‘Bonn process’—the practical measures being taken to support the implementation of a *European Youth Work Agenda*—.

My own personal and professional background encapsulates the so-called ‘triangle’ of youth (work) practice, youth research and youth policy. Other than being a UK ‘JNC’ nationally qualified ‘professional’ youth worker who ran an open youth centre for 25 years, I was also a youth work educator and trainer, an



external examiner for a range of youth work education and training courses, a contributor to national youth work strategies and a writer on youth work issues. I wrote a column for a youth work magazine for over 30 years. Beyond youth work, however, I conducted research on a whole spectrum of youth questions, from the transition from school to work, to substance misuse and criminal justice. My ‘Milltown Boys’ trilogy, a longitudinal ethnography of young offenders over their lifetime, is a unique contribution to youth research. At a policy level, I have been involved, since the 1980s, in many aspects of public policy, within and beyond the youth sector, at a number of levels of governance: Welsh Government, UK government, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the United Nations. This background and experience, I hope, establishes some credentials for the commentary that follows.

Youth policy at a European level

Youth work, within early formulations of youth policy at a European level, is conspicuous only by its absence. A brief glance beyond 20 years ago at either European Union or Council of Europe youth sector documentation reveals absolutely nothing about youth work, save perhaps for an occasional reference to ‘non-formal education’ or ‘non-formal learning’. There is, for sure, some alignment between these concepts and the idea of youth work, but youth work has a different character and history, albeit played out differently in different parts of Europe – as we shall see. First, we need a brief foray into *youth policy* development at a European level.

Youth policy at the level of the European Union

The European Commission first established its youth *programmes* in 1988, followed by a White Paper entitled *A new impetus for European Youth*¹, in 2001. Significantly, on account of the responsibilities of other directorates within the Commission and the overall principle of subsidiarity, this did *not* address the ‘big’ youth policy issues of its time and instead restricted itself to commitments around youth participation, youth information, youth voluntary activities, and securing a better understanding of youth. Subsequently, however, the Commission launched a European Youth Pact², in 2005, addressing key issues such as education and employment; this was followed, in 2009, by the first explicit European Youth Strategy, entitled *Investing and Empowering*³, and focused on strengthening opportunities in education and the labour market, improving access to participation, and promoting greater solidarity between the generations. This was succeeded by a second European Youth Strategy, *Engage – Connect – Empower*, in 2018, to span a period up to 2027.

Youth policy at the level of the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe, comprising 46 member states, was established in 1949 and has had a distinct Youth Directorate/Department since 1972. A Youth Ministers’ conference in Bucharest, in 1998, launched a document entitled *The Youth Policy of the Council of Europe*⁴, though the Youth Directorate had already embarked, a year earlier, on what became a 20- year programme of international reviews of national youth policies⁵. These reviews were designed not only to provide a ‘stranger’s eye’ on national developments and provision but also to inform a framework for thinking about ‘youth policy’ across Europe. Indeed, after seven international reviews, that framework was suggesting that attention to youth policy needed to accommodate the following elements:

- Conceptualising ‘youth’ and ‘youth policy’
- Legislation and budgets
- Structures for delivery
- Policy domains (cf. education, employment, health)
- Cross-cutting issues (cf. information, inclusion)
- Foundations for development (research, communication, training)
- Monitoring and evaluation

[Source: Williamson 2002⁶]

1 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a3fb3071-785e-4e15-a2cd-51cb40a6c06b>

2 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:c11081>

3 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2009:0200:FIN:EN:PDF>

4 See <https://rm.coe.int/16807023a7>

5 See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:c11081>

6 <https://rm.coe.int/1680702418>

This framework informed subsequent reviews, though later it was amended further, as other issues influencing ‘youth policy’ in other parts of Europe (such as the role of the military and the church) surfaced. In the meantime, in 2008, the Council of Europe produced its own youth strategy, *Agenda 2020*⁷, with its own trilogy of policy aspirations: human rights, democracy and the rule of law (the overall governing principles of the Council of Europe); living together in diverse and peaceful societies; and the social inclusion of young people. This was superseded in 2020 by the Council of Europe’s *Youth Sector Strategy 2030*, with four thematic priorities⁸.

Youth work at a European level

In the first decade of the new millennium, there was still limited attention to or recognition of the idea of ‘youth work’. A small seminar held in Blankenberge, Belgium, in 2008, and supported by the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, changed all that. The seminar was concerned with the history of youth work in Europe and its relevance for today’s youth policy. It not only set in motion a series of seminars that, over the next ten years, produced seven volumes about the histories of youth work throughout Europe⁹, but it was also the foundation stone for planning a first European Youth Work Convention.

That first Convention, held under Belgium’s Presidency of the European Union, celebrated the diversity of youth work across Europe and led not only to a professional Declaration¹⁰ testifying to that diversity but to a political EU Resolution on youth work¹¹. Diversity can, however, appear as chaos from an external perspective; a 2nd European Youth Work Convention, also held in Belgium in 2015 though this time through its Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, sought to establish –if possible– the common ground¹² on which that diversity of youth work was positioned. On this occasion, its Declaration¹³ led, in 2017, to a political Council of Europe Recommendation on Youth Work¹⁴.

Those discrete strands of youth work development at a European *youth work policy* level then dovetailed with broader European *youth policy* developments; as noted, towards 2020, both European institutions were formulating new youth strategies.

7 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/agenda-2020>

8 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-strategy-2030>

9 <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-1>

10 https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261698/declaration_1st_european_youthwork_convention.pdf/877e42b1-b916-49e0-bc58-6ca6c2d61fb7

11 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42010Y1204%2801%29>

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

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

14 <https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78>

The EU youth strategy of 2018¹⁵ was concerned primarily with strengthening youth participation (Engage), youth mobility (Connect) and, significantly *youth work* (Empower). Youth work, which had been mentioned but only in generic terms in the previous 2009 EU youth strategy, now had its distinct place in the lexicon of ideas for informing the EU's policies directed at young people over the next decade. Similarly, the Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030¹⁶, launched early in 2020, had four 'thematic priorities': revitalising democracy, access to rights, living together in peaceful and inclusive societies, and *youth work*. And both institutions, within this documentation, expressed an interest in and commitment to supporting a **European Youth Work Agenda**. To that end, as Germany simultaneously held the Presidency of the European Union and the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, a 3rd European Youth Work Convention took place in December 2020, building on a recent EU Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda, and formulating a final Declaration that announced the establishment of a 'Bonn Process' for the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda.

But what, more precisely, is 'youth work'?

The English language terminology of 'youth work' does not travel well linguistically, let alone conceptually. Jugendarbeit, travail de jeunesse or trabajo juventud always risk translation as 'youth employment', a far cry from the leisure-time, voluntary engagement, practices that is broadly understood as youth work. I say broadly because, as the 1st European Youth Work Convention established, 'youth work' is a phenomenally broad church of ideas and activities, from human rights education to cultural pursuits, and from the work of self-governed youth organisations to 'street work' that connects with young people 'on their terms and their turf' (as depictions of youth work often put it). In between lie project-based youth work addressing a multiplicity of issues affecting the lives of young people, centre-based 'open' youth work, youth work that is more targeted at specific groups of young people, youth information work, residential youth work, intergenerational youth work, and much more.

It was into this jungle of youth work definitions and practices that the 2nd European Youth Work Convention ventured in its attempt to discover whether there was any 'common ground' in thinking seriously about youth work¹⁷. Perhaps to the surprise of many, there was consensus that all forms of youth work were not only glued together through the principle of voluntary participation but also shared the twin aspirations of winning and defending *spaces* for young people to exercise autonomy and 'be young', and providing *bridges* for young people to move positively and purposefully to the next

15 https://europa.eu/youth/strategy_en

16 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-strategy-2030>

17 See <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/thinking-seriously-about-youth-work?desktop=true>

stages in their lives, as they ‘become adult’. The Declaration of the 2nd Convention¹⁸ captured these aspirations while simultaneously recognising the ever-present challenges for youth work of both the multiculturalism of societies (in which different young people’s cultural preferences and practices varied) and the pace of technological change (where youth work practice would need to adapt –an issue thrown into sharp relief as ‘online youth work’ developed urgently and rapidly in response to the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, through 2020 and 2021–).

Whether or not the policy and practice being discussed falls under the umbrella of ‘youth work’ is somewhat immaterial. What we are concerned about is the education and learning context that is available between the formal education provided institutionally through schooling and the informal learning that takes place within young people’s families and communities. We might usefully refer to this context in terms of ‘non-formal education and learning’¹⁹. It is the context in which youth workers operate, sometimes in roles more akin to teachers (engaging in didactic learning) and sometimes in roles more akin to community workers (engaging in more active learning). It is a broad learning context that lends itself to creative pedagogies and reflective practice²⁰. Indeed, that is the only way effective youth work can be, simply because its practice is largely not pre-determined and framed from ‘on high’ but, quite to the contrary, it builds on the needs, demands and issues facing the young people with whom it works. That is, however, by no means the only pressure on youth work: there are also the expectations of public policy and the principles underpinning youth work philosophy and practice. And that is not the only triangle within which youth workers have to navigate and negotiate: as the final chapter in the final volume on the history of youth work in Europe points out, there are numerous ‘trilemmas’ that youth work has to confront, without becoming trapped in any particular corner of any triangle²¹.

Extending Entitlement

Youth policy at national levels, when one drills beneath the political rhetoric, has invariably been driven by ‘problem-oriented’ agendas, as governments have sought to respond to issues such as youth unemployment or youth offending. At a European level, it has been pitched in a more ‘opportunity-focused’ way, anchored within the mantra that young people are not a problem to be solved but a resource

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

19 See video contribution to World Non-Formal Education Forum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, December 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUT2KqIMAGA>

20 See https://www.academia.edu/36335079/Donald_A_Sch%C3%B6n_The_Reflective_Practitioner_How_Professionals_Think_In_Action_Basic_Books_1984_pdf

21 <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-7>

to be managed. The recently revised ‘youth policy manual’²², published in 2021 by the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, focused, for example, on the following themes:

- participation and active citizenship
- youth information
- volunteering
- social inclusion
- access to rights
- youth work
- mobility
- digitalisation

Some 20 years earlier, however, the newly established devolved government in Wales had produced its own opportunity-focused national youth strategy. The UK government, elected in 1997, had driven forward with its manifesto and wider commitments to address, *inter alia*, youth unemployment, youth crime, teenage pregnancy, substance misuse, homelessness, and truancy from school. Though pitched under the banner of ‘social inclusion’, this was clearly a problem-oriented youth policy agenda, however noble its inclusive aspirations. In contrast, the devolved government of Wales, inaugurated in May 1999 and responsible for most ‘youth’ policy issues except for criminal justice, turned its gaze in a different direction.

The expert group that advised on the production of *Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Wales*²³ focused on the opportunities and experiences that conferred on young people the likelihood of being well prepared and equipped for taking on adult responsibilities, in the labour market, in civil society and in the domestic arena. This came to be referred to as a ‘package of entitlement’. Family and school remained pivotal but, in the complex world of the 21st century, the ‘offer’ needed to be greater than that, accommodating, for example, good advice, information and guidance, away from home experiences, access to culture, sport and music, constructive leisure time activities, international exchange and mobility, and being taken seriously when there was something serious to say.

Much of this offer continued to be made available by supportive families and schools with a repertoire of extra-curricular options. Equally, some families and schools offer even less than the minimum. The conclusion of the expert group was that public services needed to improve their reach to ensure that young people who would not get them any other way should have access to this range of opportunities and experiences that constituted the ‘package of entitlement’:

22 <https://book.coe.int/en/youth-other-publications/9892-about-time-a-reference-manual-for-youth-policy-from-a-european-perspective-youth-knowledge-28.html>

23 <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/direction-and-guidance-extending-entitlement-support-for-11-to-25-year-olds-in-wales.pdf>

Extending Entitlement - For Young People Aged 11-25 in Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government wants every young person in Wales aged 11-25 to have the same rights or entitlements (things you are allowed/should have/have a right to). Rights come with responsibilities – for adults and for you as a young person. The things the Assembly thinks you should be entitled to are opportunities and choice:

1. Your Rights

- a. To learn what your rights are and understand them
- b. Make sure you are able to claim them and to understand and accept the responsibilities arising from them

2. Being Heard

It is your right to have the opportunity to be involved in making decisions, planning and reviewing an action that might affect you. Having a voice, having a choice even if you don't make the decision yourself. Your voice, your choice.

3. Feeling Good

To feel confident and feel good about yourself

4. Education & Employment

- a. To be able to learn about things that interest and affect you
- b. To enjoy the job that you do
- c. To get involved in the activities that you enjoy including leisure, music, sport and exercise, art, hobbies and cultural activities

5. Taking Part/Getting Involved

To be involved in volunteering and to be active in your community

6. Being Individual

- a. To be treated with respect and as an equal by everyone,
- b. To be recognised for what you have to contribute and of your achievements
- c. To celebrate what you achieve

7. Easy Access

Easy access in getting the best services that you should have, locally and nationally, and to have someone available to help you find them.

8. Health & Wellbeing

To lead a healthy life, both physically and emotionally

9. Access to Information & Guidance

To be able to get information, advice and support on a wide range of issues that affect your life, as and when you need it

10. Safety & Security

To live in a safe, secure home and community

This was a ‘youth-friendly’ version of the ten entitlements, revised and refined in order to reach young people’s awareness and understanding. The original (2000) list was as follows:

- Education, training and work experience
- Basic skills
- Opportunities for achievement through volunteering and active citizenship
- High quality responsive and accessible services
- Independent careers advice and guidance
- Personal advice and support
- Advice on health, housing, benefits and other issues
- Recreational and social opportunities
- Sporting, artistic, musical and outdoor experiences
- International opportunities
- The right to be consulted and to participate in decision-making

Youth work threads its way, almost invisibly, throughout so many of these themes. Indeed, research evidence later confirmed that the value of youth work lies in effecting ‘personal change’ through the relationships and experiences it provides, which is a critical pre-requisite to supporting ‘positional change’²⁴ –perhaps finding work or desisting from crime–. Youth work, it should be added, neither claims to directly tackle these wider challenges (cf. unemployment, offending behaviour) nor should it be instrumentalised to try to do so, but it is part of a process that may lead to such outcomes.

Youth work and youth policy at a European level

There is considerable political momentum now, at a European if not always national level, in support of the place of youth work in contributing both independently and in partnership to the wider aspirations of youth policy. Both contemporary European youth strategies explicitly reference youth work as a core element within them and there is also an explicit European Youth Work Agenda.

This should not lead to complacency. There is still limited formal recognition of youth work in many national contexts and there remain significant doubts about its evidenced contribution to some of the big youth policy challenges facing us, such as ‘employability’, or ‘inclusion’. This should not surprise us. The Declaration

24 <https://www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/an-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-youth-work-in-england/r/a11G00000017vtPIAQ>



of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, *Signposts for the Future*²⁵, highlighted the challenges ahead, as indeed did a preparatory paper for the Convention²⁶ that also informed the EU Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda²⁷. Indeed, the metaphor of the ‘yellow brick road’ and The Wizard of Oz tagged the 3rd Convention with the label of ‘courage’, after the ‘heart’ of the 1st Convention (celebrating diversity) and the ‘brains’ of the 2nd Convention (finding common ground). There would need to be courage, *inter alia*, to promote a local youth work offer to all young people, strengthen the quality of youth work, communicate its value to wider audiences, improve education and training for youth workers, demonstrate innovation and responsiveness to emergent challenges, and connect more firmly to wider youth policy frameworks. In short, there still needed to be a stronger strategic framework for youth work development.

However, alongside other youth policy measures, the greatest challenge would be reminiscent of Wales’ *Extending Entitlement* –how to ensure that the opportunities and experiences available through youth work reached those young people who were likely to benefit most from them–. This is the classic challenge of **reach**. Far too much positive –emancipatory and developmental– youth policy, including youth work policy, fails to reach deeply enough into the youth demographic: the most excluded and disadvantage young people remain

25 <https://www.youth.ie/articles/the-final-declaration-of-the-3rd-european-youth-work-convention-what-you-need-to-know/>

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

27 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1201\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1201(01))

unaware of what it has to offer, unable to access it, or sceptical of its possibilities. Conversely, regrettably, too much more negative –regulatory and restrictive– youth policy is applied to young people who have no need of it; the classic ‘low hanging fruit’ syndrome where ‘easy pickings’ can be secured. The result is a strange combination in which more marginalised young people are least likely to get the positive opportunities and more likely to be constrained by negative interventions. This can easily have the inadvertent and certainly unintended consequence of widening divisions and inequalities within and between different groups of young people. It is a divide that can be better bridged through effective youth work, as a starting point and stepping-stone for young people’s life course progression, as they acquire competence and confidence arising from youth work engagement.

Looking to the future – the role of youth work in the challenges facing European youth policy

Questions have been asked as to whether, after the two years of the COVID-19 and the onset or deepening of concerns about climate, security, employment, energy and other challenges, the two European youth strategies, forged prior to 2020, remain fit for purpose. A conditional conclusion is that, with development and adaptation, they are²⁸. Arguably, the principles and practice of youth work sit firmly between the current themes of European youth policy and the key issues facing young people in Europe today. This assertion, depicted through the diagram below, may be contested, but it is a position that merits serious consideration, one that would never have surfaced until relatively recently:

European youth policy	Youth work	Key issues facing young people in Europe
Participation	Relationships	
Information	Reflection	
Volunteering	Activities	Economy
Inclusion	Opportunities	Security
Rights	Experiences	Climate
Mobility	Horizons	Energy
Digitalisation	Motivation	Health
	Self-belief	Technology
	Co-production	
	Intercultural learning	

28 See <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/101043895/European+Youth+Strategies+-+reflection+paper.pdf/ba2cb002-9705-620d-3ddb-bc4939c6d3b4>

Conclusion – A six-point plan Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Europe

Both youth work and youth policy, at a European level, have come a long way in a relatively short time. Conspicuous largely by their absence only 20 years ago, the last ten to fifteen years have seen them subjected to considerable debate and significant development. However, celebrating evolution should not cloud the weaknesses that still prevail in European youth policy (not least its limited reach to those rather euphemistically referred to as those ‘with fewer opportunities’) and also in youth work, that the European Youth Work Agenda seeks to rectify.

In conclusion, therefore, I submit a six-point plan for reflection and consideration:

1. What should be a post-2020 ‘package of entitlement’ for young people in Europe?
2. Where are the gaps/challenges that obstruct young people’s access to this package?
3. Where is ‘reach’ failing, with regards to social groups, geography and types of opportunity?
4. How can ‘reach’ be improved: structural and professional pathways to ‘excluded’ groups and places?
5. Evaluate the success of public policy in supporting and stretching such ‘reach’
6. Reflect on the place of youth work – not relevant; an entry point; a stand-alone service; a partner in practice; its role as a safety-net *and* a springboard for inclusion.

As a former face-to-face practitioner with thousands of very different young people, I have ‘youth work’ written on my heart. But I am not an uncritical apologist for youth work and, indeed, I am not wholly persuaded that it can do everything that is now proclaimed for it. Youth work makes a modest contribution to many young people’s lives but a critical contribution to some. Of more concern is that many young people have no access to youth work whatsoever. Levelling the playing field, ensuring access, and strengthening its reach is the paramount next step for youth work as it seeks to find its place within the wider canvas of youth policy in Europe. ■

