

Research on volunteer-based youth work: Final report



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Contents

Summary	4
1. Background	6
Methodology	7
2. The concept and value of volunteer-based youth work	8
Challenges relating to the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work	10
Recommendations relating to the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work	10
3. Promotion and recognition of volunteer-based youth work	12
Challenges for promoting and recognising volunteer-based youth work	14
Recommendations for improving the promotion and recognition of volunteer-based youth work	14
4. Support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth work	15
Challenges relating to support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth work	16
Recommendations relating to support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth work	16
5. Education and training of volunteer-based youth workers	17
Challenges related to education and training of volunteer-based youth workers	19
Recommendations related to education and training of volunteer-based youth workers	19
6. Career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers	20
Challenges relating to career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers	21
Recommendations relating to career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers	21
7. Conclusion	22
8. Bibliography	24
Annex 1: Online survey	26
General Questions	26
Understanding The Concept Of Volunteer Based Youth Work	26
Annex 2: The concept of volunteer-based youth work	27

Summary

The European Youth Forum, as the platform for more than 100 youth organisations that predominantly rely on volunteer-based youth work, has conducted the research amongst nearly half of its member organisations. The objective was to improve understanding of this unique concept and motivate further evidence-based policy work on the topic, by involving all relevant stakeholders. **The pioneering nature of this exercise should inspire and boost further research and advocacy to better understand and recognise the value of volunteer-based youth work in the context of the Bonn process.**

The methodological approach to this research was qualitative, and based on a desk review of the secondary sources, five online focus group discussions and an online survey conducted in the autumn of 2021. The sample was made up of the International Youth Organisations (INGYOs), National Youth Councils (NYCs), national and local youth organisations and volunteer-based youth workers from 15 European countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, the Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland). The research participants were encouraged to reflect on the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work and to elaborate on how it has been implemented in practice, in terms of support systems, education, training and career prospects for volunteers in youth work. They were invited to identify the main challenges and opportunities in these areas, and to suggest policy recommendations for different audiences (governments, agencies, youth organisations, etc.).

The research findings reveal that the understanding of the concept of volunteer-based youth work is lacking amongst various members of the youth work community of practice¹, and that its relationship with the concept of volunteering is unclear. The *conceptual framework* clearly represents one of the challenges that (volunteer-based) youth work in Europe currently faces, in line with the European Youth Work Agenda. This requires a further development of common, basic understanding and shared principles, in order to increase the relevance, inclusiveness and responsiveness of (volunteer-based) youth work.

The value of volunteering in youth work is beyond doubt, and is linked to both individual and social aspects. Apart from the individual benefits (such as learning new skills, building experience, gaining access to resource and potential employment), the volunteer-based youth work implies serving and *'offering back to peers and the community'*, while *'creating a better world and providing greater good to the society'*. Furthermore, volunteering in youth work contributes to *active citizenship, individual and social change*, and boosts *youth representation* by voicing young people's needs, facilitating their participation and helping them take responsibility for their lives.

1 Communities of practice have been defined as a process of social learning when 'people who have a common interest in a subject or area collaborate over an extended period of time, sharing ideas and strategies, determining solutions and building innovation'. The youth work community of practice includes youth workers and youth leaders, youth work managers, project carriers, accredited and independent youth work organisations, trainers, researchers, educators of youth workers, local communities and municipalities, National Agencies for Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps, youth representations, young people and policy-makers at all levels of governance. See: <https://www.eywc2020.eu/en/convention/final-declaration/>.

Voluntary youth work is understood as an important non-formal and informal socialisation environment, one which creates safe, accessible, open and autonomous spaces in society as well as supportive and experiential learning environments for young people.

Despite a lack of recognition, volunteer-based youth workers (along with paid ones) are perceived as an integral part of the youth work community of practice, which can play an essential role in strengthening the provision of quality youth work. They can also help boost its credibility by showcasing its impact. The youth work community of practice can play a key role in creating a common narrative, not only for the recognition and validation of learning in youth work but also for that of youth work in general, including volunteer-based youth work, in the context of the Bonn process.

Research, and Europe-wide mapping of the volunteer-based youth work concept and practice, is needed to gain greater insights and **better understanding of challenges related to the recognition and quality implementation of volunteer-based youth work**. In practice, volunteers are often left to navigate 'on their own', as their transitional pathways from voluntary to (potentially) paid engagement in youth work are frequently unclear and poorly signposted. Education and career development opportunities are rarely structured, and are not always accessible to volunteers in youth work, particularly in those countries with less-developed practice architectures.

Provision of sufficient resources for the continuous development of youth work (both paid and volunteer-based) is therefore essential, as is enhancement of understanding of the concepts, methods and tools used in education and training, guidance and support in youth work. There is also a need to develop competence-based frameworks for formal and non-formal youth work education and training, in line with the European Youth Work Agenda. There should be special attention placed on knowledge transfer, peer-to-peer learning and dissemination of good practice from the international / European level to organisations working at the national and local level. European institutions, decision makers and the National Youth Councils are key actors for future advocacy for greater recognition and support of the volunteers in youth work in Europe.

Despite the inevitable hardships and challenges that volunteer-based youth workers are facing in Europe, the research participants recognised the unshakable willingness and commitment – and the need of volunteers in youth work to belong to the youth work community of practice – that represents an important part of their professional identity and development. It is therefore critical to support their efforts, provide the appropriate conditions and assure quality opportunities for education, training, career development and voluntary youth work practice, in line with the current policy developments and in the context of the Bonn process.

1. Background

The vision of the European Youth Forum is to be the voice of youth in Europe, where young people are equal citizens and are encouraged and supported in achieving their fullest potential as global citizens. Youth work contributes considerably to this vision. As the platform of more than 100 youth organisations predominantly relying on volunteer-based youth work, the European Youth Forum conducted the research amongst its members in order to improve understanding of this unique concept and to stimulate further evidence-based policy work on the topic through involving all relevant stakeholders.

This research aims to explore the concept, current status and recognition of volunteer-based youth work and to look into the opportunities and challenges relating to education, training and career development of volunteers in youth work. The report summarises findings from desk research combined with the empirical data gathered in the autumn of 2021. Evidence collected from practice on how volunteer-based youth work is supported and implemented at different levels provide the basis for the policy recommendations suggested by the European Youth Forum members for different audiences, including governments, agencies, youth organisations, etc.

The background of this research is linked to the achievements of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (EYWC) and its final Declaration.² This recognises the need for greater inclusiveness of the youth work community of practice in Europe – as a major active and responsible stakeholder in the Bonn process.³ It also highlights the need to *pay particular attention to voluntary youth workers' practices* when tackling professional standards, both to gain a better understanding of their contribution to the field and to conduct further research into their youth work engagement. The Declaration stresses the importance of incorporating *all kinds of youth work* and *all kinds of youth workers* (in the youth work community of practice). This encompasses the *paid or voluntary*, those in a lifetime career or a short-term or part-time commitment and those educated through formal curricula or through non-formal training. Better structures for cooperation, within and between all levels and stakeholder groups in the youth work community of practice, are also required to *facilitate trajectories of voluntary youth workers*. In particular, sustainable investment and cooperation between local authorities/municipalities and local youth work organisations (with paid and voluntary youth workers) are essential, as is the provision of basic conditions and protection for voluntary and paid youth workers through funding, including insurance, minimum salaries and safety networks for burnout (EYWC 2020).

As a follow-up to the 3rd EYWC, a joint strategic framework for strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of, youth work is reflected in the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA).⁴ This adopts a targeted approach to enhancing knowledge-based youth work in Europe and connecting political decisions with their practical implementation. It calls for promotion of quality and recognition of youth work and a better understanding of the concepts, methods, tools, education and training opportunities for youth workers.⁵ The EYWA also aims, *inter alia*, to strengthen and extend the common principles of youth work within the youth work

2 See: https://www.jtba.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/EN_3rd-EYWC_final-Declaration.pdf

3 See: <https://www.eywc2020.eu/en/agenda/bonn-process/>

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

5 Both the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030 called for the development of a European Youth Work Agenda that would foster mutual cooperation and create synergies between the EU and Council of Europe to further develop youth work practices and policies.

community of practice by promoting regular cooperation, exchange and common practices, while *taking account of the differences between the various levels and areas of youth work*. A range of entry points in youth work policy and practice, as well as the needs, motivations and value system of youth workers, *need to be taken into account when developing* quality youth work in a more holistic and structured manner (EU Council Resolution 2020/C 415/01).

The Study on Youth Work in the EU (European Commission DG EAC 2021a) emphasises the need to improve the *recognition of youth work and develop competence-oriented curricula and flexible training for both paid youth workers and volunteers in youth work*, in order to increase the professional recognition of the value of their work and practice. The study recommends establishing youth work as a more 'professional' occupation, through setting occupational standards, providing better salaries (supported by better funding for paid workers), imposing stricter entry requirements and creating coherent pathways to youth work qualifications. However, one of the key obstacles highlighted is a lack of structural funding, which hinders the attraction of careers in the sector and development opportunities for youth workers, whether paid or volunteers.

Methodology

The overall research methodology on volunteer-based youth work was qualitative. It was based on a desk review of the secondary data sources, five online focus group discussions conducted 22 September – 14 October 2021 and an online survey among the member organisations of the European Youth Forum during October 2021. The participants in five online focus group discussions (25 in total) were representatives and youth workers from the National Youth Councils (NYCs), local youth non-governmental organisations from across Europe (Azerbaijan, Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Latvia, the Russian Federation, etc.) and representatives of various International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs). Together with 16 respondents to the online survey of 10 countries (Armenia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland), the research participants were encouraged to reflect on the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work. They were also asked to elaborate on how this has been implemented in practice for support systems, education, training and career prospects for volunteers in youth work. The participants were invited to identify the main challenges and opportunities in these areas and to suggest policy recommendations for different audiences (governments, agencies, youth organisations, etc.).

Various types of youth work practice architectures⁶ were represented in the sample, including countries from *strong practice architectures* (Finland, Germany); *strong practice architectures, with room for development* (Austria, Belgium [Flanders], the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation); *practice architectures where some parts have been developed* (Armenia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovenia); and *practice architectures in need of development* (Azerbaijan, Croatia, Greece).

6 The author (Dr Tomi Kiilakoski) created the four groups based on the information provided by member state representatives in European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKYP), and verified by the Council of Europe Council of Ministers representatives (CDEJ). The listing in each group is in alphabetical order. Full scoring of the data received and analysed is explained in the analytical paper on the topic.

2. The concept and value of volunteer-based youth work

Youth work “belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders, based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation”⁷. It is *carried out by a wide youth work community of practice and is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers*.

Volunteering⁸ takes many forms, which can benefit individual volunteers, the service beneficiaries and society as a whole. It refers to an activity, or a set of activities, which take place through non-profit or community organisations, with no financial reward for the work by the volunteer. The volunteer may be a professional in the field, offering the expertise and aiming at supporting the individuals and impacting the communities’ development, or one involved with youth work with no link to their profession, driven by personal motivation and a willingness to help.

Despite the need to better understand the dynamics of different types of volunteering in youth work, it is clear that the primary function of youth work is to motivate and support young people to find and pursue constructive pathways in life. This will contribute to their personal and social development and to society at large (Council of Europe 2017). Volunteer-based youth work can enhance the employment prospects of individual volunteers, and support their integration into rewarding work, through the acquisition of work-related skills and experience, access to social networks and signalling the possession of desirable work-related competencies to employers (ILO 2020).

As a *social and a value-driven practice*, youth work has inherent moral elements, serving the higher purposes of inclusion and social cohesion and producing actions that have positive moral, social and political consequences (Council of Europe, 2015). It facilitates young people’s active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making (Council of Europe 2017). This also includes non-formal and informal learning and *engagement of young people on voluntary basis in youth organisations, associations, young people’s initiatives or other open forms, in an organised or self-organised manner*. Non-formal education and learning, within the educative, participative, empowering, expressive and inclusive values of youth work, provides young people with a sense of agency.⁹

As a *relational practice*, both volunteer-based and paid youth work is based on a community and cooperation, and seeks authentic communication with young people, contributing to sustaining viable communities (Council of Europe 2015). Practices involve an active commitment

7 This sentence uses the common EU definition of youth work included in the 2009 Council resolution on the EU Youth strategy 2010–2018 and in the 2012 Joint report of the European Council and the European Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the field of youth (2010–2018).

8 See https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_DORIMh2XFevw&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-4&p_p_col_count=1&_101_INSTANCE_DORIMh2XFevw_delta=200&_101_INSTANCE_DORIMh2XFevw_keywords=&_101_INSTANCE_DORIMh2XFevw_advancedSearch=false&_101_INSTANCE_DORIMh2XFevw_andOperator=true&p_r_p_564233524_resetCur=false&_101_INSTANCE_DORIMh2XFevw_cur=2.

9 Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda (2020/C 415/01), available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1201\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1201(01)&from=EN)

from their members, who participate in social communities and who construct identities in relation to these communities (Kiilakoski T. 2018a). Learning to become a youth worker, from the perspective of the theory of communities of practice, is about sharing a practice and developing a personal identity. This comes either through formal education, through experiential learning gained from participating as a *voluntary youth leader in the organisations* and/or by actually doing the job and learning the methods and tools used by the local youth work community and the values that are important to the community (Kiilakoski T. 2018b). Although the ethical standards (principles and values), tools and methods applied by paid and *volunteer youth workers* are usually similar in practice, there are differences in their communication with young people, intensity of workload and access to resources.

When asked to reflect on their *understanding of the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work*, as well as on their *motivation to join the sector*, the majority of survey respondents and participants of the focus group discussions agreed that volunteer-based youth work represents an important significant stage in the youth worker's trajectory towards (potential) employment. This helps the individual gain / deepen the experience and contribute to the wider societal change, as illustrated in the following statements: *'The value of voluntary-based youth work is that it provides the opportunity to volunteers to grow in their role as youth workers'; 'Young people have an opportunity where they learn new skills and competences with the mentor support, as well as doing something good for the organisation, youth and society in general'.*

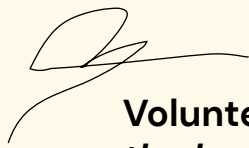
The research participants agree that volunteer-based youth work is *'extremely important – and complementary to paid youth work – since, even if there are a lot of paid youth workers, they cannot do everything by themselves'*. It implies *hard work, dedication, perseverance and commitment*, which is often based on identifying with the mission and values of the youth organisation. Volunteering in youth work is perceived as a *fulfilling, eye-opening, encouraging and offering fun two-way relationship* (e.g. with youth, peers, youth workers, other professionals etc.), thus providing experience that cannot be valued in any monetary sense: *'Volunteering is selfless, based on generosity and solidarity, and contributes to the professional and personal development of young people for the cause of shaping active civil society without expecting anything in return. It provides a greater understanding of society and democracy from an early age, and empowers volunteers to transmit this knowledge to others'*. Young people can easily identify themselves with a *'volunteer development path'* that is closer to their reality and can serve to motivate their further engagement and participation in democratic processes.

Volunteer-based youth work provides an *entry point into youth work*, and opportunity to gain valuable contacts, networking, peer support and friendship to help boost one's career. For the majority of research participants, volunteer-based youth work – although it has *'no monetary value'* – represents *'a first step into developing a professional youth worker, and thus needs to be supervised'*. The concept is closely linked to *learning, empowerment and skills development* among the volunteers and youth. Volunteer based youth work is described as an *educational, flexible, hand-on learning experience, based on non-formal and informal learning, which provides greater room for experimenting and making mistakes in a safe environment.*

The majority of the research participants agree that the volunteer-based youth work gives a lot to both the community and the youth workers themselves. It is based on intrinsic motivation; *'the individual's inclination and a longing for change', rather than on 'external motivating factors'*. Therefore, it can respond more effectively to the needs of young people on the ground due to its greater flexibility (compared to project-based youth work).

Furthermore, volunteering in youth work contributes to *active citizenship, individual and social change*. It boosts *youth representation* by allowing young people's needs to be heard, facilitating their participation and helping youth to take responsibility for their lives. In countries with prac-

tice architectures where some parts have been developed (e.g. Latvia), volunteer-based youth work plays an important role in developing the democratic capacity of young people, while preparing them to engage in problem-solving at local and international levels.



Volunteer-based youth work is more ‘driven by the heart’ and associated with ‘sharing the passion’, ‘being accepted and developing a sense of integrity and belonging to the community’.

It represents the base of youth work, which brings together people from differing backgrounds but sharing similar interests, fostering *inclusion and compassion* among both youth and adults (youth workers and other professionals) and the volunteers themselves. As such, it enhances *intergenerational solidarity and cooperation*, particularly among those volunteers from vulnerable groups. However, volunteering in youth work can be linked with intergenerational tension and competitiveness over access to resources (equal payment) and opportunities (to get a job).

Challenges relating to the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work

- There is a lack of information and knowledge of both the concept of volunteer-based youth work, and of its importance and social value among the volunteers themselves and among the stakeholders within the youth work community of practice.
- Due to the shrinking number of spaces for youth NGOs and a lack of sustainability, the position of volunteers in youth work is uncertain, particularly in countries with less-developed practice architectures.
- The impact of COVID-19 has brought additional challenges and financial hardships to implementing volunteer-based youth work, but at the same time has provided opportunities for intergenerational solidarity, something that needs to be strengthened.

Recommendations relating to the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work

- The youth work community of practice, is invited to provide a clear definition of volunteer-based youth work that is consistent throughout Europe. This will enhance the visibility and understanding of the impact and value of voluntary-based youth work among stakeholders within the Bonn process.

- European institutions, and their Partnership programme in the field of youth, should work towards mainstreaming volunteer-based youth work among stakeholders. This should see the launch of a motivation campaign and the design of information tools, along with training on the concept and value of volunteer-based youth work for various stakeholders / members of the youth work community of practice.
- European and national policymakers (in cooperation with other members of the youth work community of practice) need to support and enhance sustainability of volunteer-based youth work. This requires a greater understanding of the motivation of young people to join or quit volunteering in the area of youth work (e.g. a lack of entry positions, income, age etc.).

3. Promotion and recognition of volunteer-based youth work

According to the focus group discussion participants and survey respondents, volunteer-based youth work is often promoted via advertising, peer-to-peer exchange, experiential learning and non-formal education, or via digital tools and social media. Volunteering is also promoted by certain municipalities and recognised within certain companies.

The recognition of volunteer-based youth workers is clearly linked with identity issues and the transition of beginners entering the world of youth work at the local, national and European levels. However, the respondents believe that there is insufficient formal or legal recognition of voluntary-based youth work, which should include the acknowledgement of previous volunteering experience when selecting interns/paid workers, certifying those participating in trainings and voluntary activities (undertaken by youth organisations) or active engagement in advocacy at the national level, etc.

The data also show that volunteering in youth work is not recognised equally in all European countries / organisations covered by the research. *'When policymakers discuss youth work and youth workers, the target they have in mind is youth workers hired by municipalities and co-operatives, not volunteer youth workers engaged by educational non-profit or volunteer-led organisations.'*

Furthermore, the lack of well-defined legal framework that considers volunteering on one side and youth work on the other makes it impossible to define, and advocate for, better voluntary youth work conditions. The rights of volunteer-based youth workers are neither clearly defined nor equivalent to those of paid youth workers. *'While paid youth workers have employee status, which comes with rights to salary/qualification/continuous professional development, this is not the case for volunteer youth workers. The same rules and treatment cannot be applied to both types of youth workers'*.

The time, energy and contribution of volunteers in youth work, which is *'demanding, challenging and unpaid'*, is not always respected nor taken seriously.

In countries with *strong practice architectures* (Finland), most of the youth work is based on trained and paid professionals. Even so, the role of volunteers is important, albeit severely underfunded when compared to, for example, sports or health and welfare organisations. *'Youth*

work is strongly embedded in legislation at the country level, and a guiding paper (VANUPO)¹⁰ is prepared every four years to match global trends and issues. At an organisational level, the implementation of volunteering act ensures the basis for recognition and development of quality standards and support mechanisms (mentoring) for volunteers in youth work.'

By way of contrast, in countries such as *Italy*, a lack of recognition of volunteer-based youth work is linked to the overall poor recognition of youth work and youth workers (both paid and volunteers) and of informal and non-formal learning.

In *Spain*, on the other hand, there have been recent encouraging developments in this area. The public recognition of youth work by the law has been achieved through the first National law on the volunteer recognition of youth work, created in 2021/

The discussions among focus group participants from countries with *strong practice architectures with room for development* (e.g. *Austria, the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation*); and from countries with *practice architectures in need of development* (e.g. *Azerbaijan*), also report that youth are '*fully engaged and interested in volunteering (not only in youth work, but in general), particularly in event organisation, university events and international exchanges*'. Although there might not be a standalone law on youth volunteering in youth work in place here, there are some paragraphs mentioning youth work in the different relevant acts (e.g. in *Austria*). There are also voluntary-based youth work organisations in *Russia* engaging in, for example, youth exchanges, peer-to-peer education, solidarity and community projects. In the *Czech Republic*, the promotion of recognition and quality of youth work is managed through voluntary networks (across Europe and beyond) and through youth organisations promoting intercultural education. Although the number of opportunities is growing, according to the participants there is still a need for further development in this field.

In those cases where *some parts of practice architectures have been developed* (*Armenia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovenia*), most youth work is volunteer based. However, the focus group discussions revealed that volunteering is poorly recognised in *Latvia*, due to the post-Soviet tradition of 'hobby education', regardless of the relatively well-established legal framework for youth policy and youth work (in *Latvia*, the youth law was adopted in 2008, and youth workers were recognised in 2009). A testimony from the Latvian project-based volunteer youth organisation, gathering unpaid workers mainly engaged in the Erasmus+ projects, youth exchanges and peer education, shows that focusing solely on marginalised youth (aged 13–25 years) and promoting volunteering in the country – where only paid municipality youth workers are recognised – is not an easy task.

In *Slovenia*, on the other hand, there is a law on volunteering as well as a portal¹¹ that many organisations promote. There was also an added bonus on social transfers for volunteers. Fundamental preconditions have been established for recognising and promoting volunteering at the country level, but more needs to be done on quality assurance (providing mentor support and assuring that volunteers in youth work are not exploited).

In *Bulgaria*, volunteer-based youth work is recognised mainly through non-formal trainings and youth exchanges organised by NGOs and other associations. Very often youth workers in *Bulgaria* are forced to work without payment due to lack of funding but driven by their will to make things better. There is no real law on volunteering and things are not regulated and thus not recognised at all officially. The National Youth Council of Bulgaria has been struggling for years

10 See <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/162007>.

11 See <http://www.prostovoljstvo.org/?lang=en>.

to advocate for the implementation of the law on volunteering, but so far things have not been great at all.

In countries with practice architectures in need of development (Azerbaijan, Croatia, Greece), volunteer-based youth work is virtually unrecognised, as even paid youth work is rare or is not formally and socially recognised. Youth organisations and NYCs face obstacles created by decision makers not understanding the value of volunteering in youth work and providing it with a degree of formal recognition. The social challenges come from the perception that activities done on a voluntary basis and are not paid are not 'professional'. The testimonies from the field show that it is difficult to be a volunteer in a country where many young people have to work while studying to support themselves and their families. A common perception about of volunteers is that they are somehow 'privileged' and 'lucky' to be able to do this, because they 'do not worry about the money'. The focus group participant from Greece explained that 'this is why it is so difficult to motivate young people to volunteer, because they would rather earn money than work for free'.

Challenges for promoting and recognising volunteer-based youth work

- There is a lack of systematic promotion of volunteer-based youth work among members of the youth work community of practice and employers in the labour market.
- There is a lack of formal – legal, social and political – recognition of volunteer-based youth workers in countries with less-developed practice architectures, together with the insufficient financial support overall to volunteers in youth work in all countries covered by the research, irrespective of their practice architecture status.
- There is a lack of recognition of the soft skills gained through volunteer-based youth work and of quality assessment frameworks / tools aligned to youth work quality standards.

Recommendations for improving the promotion and recognition of volunteer-based youth work

- European and national policymakers should create further opportunities and innovative/digital tools to promote volunteer-based youth work among members of the youth work community of practice and employers in the labour market.
- European and national policymakers should reinforce the legal, political and financial recognition of volunteer-based youth work and support those youth associations and organisations that implement it. Youth work organisations needs to advocate for volunteering in youth work to be more widely recognised both in Europe and nationally, regionally and locally.
- European and national policymakers should develop quality assurance systems for volunteer-based youth work and provide space for sharing best practice in implementing them across those countries with different practice architecture status.

4. Support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth work

The empirical data point out that those diverse support mechanisms are in place to assist the work of (not exclusively volunteer) youth workers in the countries with various practice architectures, including mentoring, supervision, counselling; quality assurance systems and ethical codes of conduct. All of these mechanisms mainly depend on NGOs and are neither obligatory nor formally regulated by the state. A survey respondent from Germany emphasised that *'It is important that these mechanisms are applied in order to assure the quality of the non-formal education for young people. It is critical to ensure that voluntary youth workers have the capacity and experience necessary to implement complex activities, such as Erasmus+ youth exchanges, in order to meet quality standards.'*

One focus group discussion member from Latvia also explained that *'All of those mechanisms are a part of our training programme for volunteers, because we work with a vulnerable target group and thus need to be extra careful. The main challenge for us is finding the organisational capacity to supervise and mentor a sizeable volunteering group and give them all the attention and care they need.'* Unsurprisingly, mentoring is identified as essential by the majority of the research participants, since it offers the basis of any volunteering in youth work. *'Having a mentor who will help you be taken seriously in the real world and help you with networking in your field is very important'* (focus group discussion participant from Italy). Ethical codes of conduct are also recognised as vital, as they help volunteers share common values and common approaches to youth work practice.

Voices from those organisations working with volunteer youth workers – and from the volunteers themselves – confirm that the best way of supporting engagement and providing meaningful guidance / orientation is to combine different support mechanisms. Other support activities suggested by the participants include internal reflection within the peer group following each activity as well as risk management, namely tackling the risks that youth workers face in practice. However, high turnover of volunteers across organisations often interrupts the exchange of knowledge and experience between the different generations of volunteers. Scout movement, in contrast, provides structured peer and professional support across generations via support units that deliver technical, administrative and financial assistance to volunteers engaged in community actions or educational activities and youth work.

In those countries with strong practice architectures that have room for development (the Czech Republic), and those where some parts have been developed (Latvia) or are in need of development (Azerbaijan), the European networks and international umbrella organisations play a key role in providing well-structured support to volunteers on mentoring or finding international volunteering opportunities. In other countries (Austria, the Russian Federation), the National Youth Councils – members of the European Youth Forum – are seen as key actors to advocate for improving support and supervision mechanisms for volunteer–youth workers. However, respondents think that these representative structures need to be better informed on the state of play in this area.

Challenges relating to support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth work

- There is insufficient quality support, supervision, information and counselling services available to volunteer-based youth workers, particularly in those countries with less-developed practice architectures. Even when these are in place, the mechanisms are often not adjusted to the needs of volunteers in youth work, who are sometimes not aware of their existence.
- There is a lack of structured and sustainable support for youth organisations to their volunteer-based youth workers, particularly those working at the national and local levels.

Recommendations relating to support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth work

- European and national policy makers should support youth work organisations in developing a thorough mapping of the existing support mechanisms for volunteer-based youth workers and in transferring best practice across Europe. This will improve their quality and ensure their dissemination within the youth work community of practice. Beginners require proper and tailored information and support services to gain orientation and to have a sense of direction in the youth work field.
- European and national policymakers – in cooperation with other members of the youth work community of practice, including National Youth Councils – need to ensure better-structured and sustainable support to youth organisations. This will strengthen their capacity to provide quality support services to their volunteer-based youth workers.

5. Education and training of volunteer-based youth workers

In countries *with strong practice architectures (Estonia)*, the access to education and training for voluntary youth workers is far better than in those where *some parts of practice architectures have been developed (Latvia)*. In the latter case, volunteers usually have no access to the existing youth work education schemes provided by the state or municipality, due to high selection standards (including age, experience, timeframe and language).

Since youth work is not fully recognised, only a limited number of experienced people (30+ years old) have access to the available courses and certificates at a national level.

Volunteers in youth work are often not even informed about these courses in countries with less-developed practice architectures.

In contrast, in countries *with strong practice architecture with room for development (the Czech Republic)*, or in those *in need for development (Azerbaijan)*, despite there typically being no educational programmes that are fully recognised by the state, public support is strongly present for youth umbrella organisations and networks specialised in volunteering. This provides structured and organised capacity-building activities in areas not necessarily linked to youth work. The National Youth Councils and other umbrella organisations (*in Austria, Bulgaria, the Russian Federation*), also provide significant educational opportunities for volunteer youth workers (team leader training; youth work, advocacy, etc.) that are complementary to the state programmes. In other countries (*Greece*), NGOs typically navigate by themselves, organising seminars and regular meetings with supervisors based on needs assessment for volunteers in youth work.

The INGYOs participating in the research noted that each youth organisation has their own system and structures to support training for trainers, and to ensure quality and mentoring for volunteer-based youth workers (and beyond). Some organisations have internal systems for quality control and training / certification procedures that are not recognised externally, as illustrated by the following examples:

- Eduk8 is the ESN's international training project, which aims to empower and professionalise the network and provide self-development opportunities for ESN members through enhancing soft skills and competences based on the methods of non-formal education. These skills and competences can be difficult to identify, and therefore Eduk8 facilitates activities where underlying soft skills can be articulated and where participants can share knowhow and learn from one another in a structured, conscious and fun way¹².



- European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL), as an international non-profit organisation that brings together 28 volunteer-based educational organisations, including all those belonging to the AFS¹³ Intercultural Programmes network in Europe and the North Mediterranean. EFIL's main activities focus on supporting and developing its member organisations through advocacy work, sharing knowhow, organising training, coordinating projects and programmes. Within EFIL members, there are two types of volunteer youth workers; those who train mobility programme participants to prepare them for the mobility and support them throughout, and those who train other volunteers, particularly those who then train the mobility participants. EFIL fosters the development of European youth work and the provision of quality learning mobility across Europe, mainly through its EFIL Volunteer Summer Summit: an annual five-day event hosted by one of the member organisations in July/August. This brings together some 250 AFS volunteers from all over Europe to share their experiences and improve practices in volunteer work, through a series of learning tracks and workshops.



- The World Scout Youth Programme is the educational approach used to help young people realise their full physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual potential – as individuals, as responsible citizens and as members of their local, national and international communities. The Youth Programme is the means through which Scouting – as a non-formal educational movement – contributes to empowering autonomous individuals and the holistic development of active global citizens for the community. The World Organization of the Scout Movement Global Support consultancy system – the WOSM Quality Standard – can be a useful route for NGOs to enhance their training quality at any stage (review, implementation, design, etc.).



¹² Note: Eduk8 organises a four-day training twice a year. The events usually divide to either two or three thematic tracks (such as Project Management, Motivation or Intercultural Learning), with approximately 20 participants and two facilitators per track. Workshop tracks are designed and customised according to the applicants' needs and expectations, and are delivered by Eduk8 facilitators who in turn are supported and monitored by external mentors, developing them as trainers. After successfully delivering this four-day training, facilitators can join the Eduk8 pool of trainers, which aims to educate and develop the capacities of fellow members in the ESN network.

¹³ AFS is a network of exchange organisations that exists in over 60 countries worldwide. With the help of a large network of volunteers, they organise short- and long-term intercultural and voluntary service stays abroad for over 12,000 young people each year. Most exchanges involve a deep cultural immersion in the local community for the young participants.

Challenges related to education and training of volunteer-based youth workers

- Educating and training of volunteer-based youth workers are provided mainly through European-funded projects and trainings for trainers organised by the international organisations. However, the focus group discussion participants from the volunteer-based youth organisations identified barriers to access to the EU funded educational opportunities. These were due to a lack of capacity among the volunteer-based youth workers, particularly those from vulnerable groups, to meet complex application requirements.
- The existing educational programmes, tools and methods are not integrated and lack a formal / sustainable Europe-wide system of certification for volunteer-based youth workers established and recognised at national level. This could potentially facilitate the transition of former and current volunteers to paid youth work in their communities.

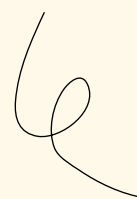
Recommendations related to education and training of volunteer-based youth workers

- European institutions, and their Partnership programme in the field of youth, should invest in capacity building and better accessibility of EU-funded education opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers, increase outreach (by being inclusive to vulnerable groups) and develop educational tools and methods (e.g. gamification).
- European and national institutions (in cooperation with other members of the community of practice), should support the establishment of a Europe-wide system of certification of volunteer-based youth workers. They should also support advocacy for its recognition at the national level, which also recognises the existing certification systems for INGYOs.

6. Career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers

The majority of the survey respondents and focus group discussion participants think that there are insufficient opportunities for career development for volunteers in youth work.

Creating more opportunities for them to use their experience in their professional careers, as well as the provision of compensation for their efforts, is seen as essential.



'It is not okay to expect young people, who are oppressed in our societies and suffer financial hardships, to volunteer without any financial support and without real prospects of using their voluntary-based youth work experiences. Their efforts should be acknowledged, either through extra points when applying for university, or by allowing their voluntary experience to be seen as being as valuable as professional internships.'

However, compared to those offered at national and local levels, many more opportunities are available at the European level and within international networks / organisations. For example, AFS International – the global umbrella of AFS Intercultural Programmes organisations – has a system of certification at different levels, as well as a Volunteer Learning Journey, to illustrate various developmental paths for volunteers within the organisation.¹⁴

Furthermore, the validation process in ESN (through the validation of competences project '#myESNcareer') aims to provide a structured learning process for their volunteers. This is to be able to track the competences they acquire and/or develop in ESN, in order to be able to validate them in the organisation, thus making their volunteers more employable and competitive in the labour market. Validation of Volunteer Work in ESN implies Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification. This represents the process of making the learning of individuals visible while ascribing value to all forms of education (formal, non-formal and informal) that an individual has acquired, allowing them to make use of them in professional and educational contexts.

In countries with strong practice architectures, with room for development (Austria, the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation), and those where some parts have been developed (Bulgaria), structured career development support is absent, and opportunities for getting a job follow a

¹⁴ More information can be found at <https://afs.org/volunteer-staff-training/>.

period of volunteering in youth work are limited. The transition from voluntary status in youth work to getting paid in these contexts is not clear (and often uncertain), although voluntary engagement is perceived as valuable in terms of enhancing one's employability through gaining valuable experience and skills, building networks and social capital. *'Fighting for limited job opportunities is common, and being noted / recognised / paid is not easy, regardless of big ideas and open hearts and minds.'* Engagement in youth work is frequently associated with low incomes, so even when gained, it does not guarantee independence and the opportunity to develop the full professional potential of the volunteer youth worker.

Challenges relating to career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers

There are not enough career opportunities offered to volunteers, while the existing ones are typically not clearly articulated or presented to volunteer-based youth workers.

Career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers are limited to organisational frameworks and are often not ensured outside of these.

Recommendations relating to career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers

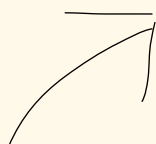
European and national institutions, youth work organisations need to enhance the number of, and accessibility to, career development opportunities for volunteer-based youth workers, particularly in those countries with weaker practice architectures.

European and national institutions, along with their partners in the business sector, should be accountable for improving job and learning opportunities, as well as quality internships for volunteers in youth work across Europe. This should ensure structured and sustainable career development opportunities and pathways for volunteer-based youth workers.

7. Conclusion

The research conducted by the European Youth Forum among nearly half of its member organisations, including International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs), National Youth Councils (NYCs), national and local youth organisations and volunteer-based youth workers, provides a snapshot – rather than a comprehensive and extensive overview of approaches and insights – of the volunteer-based youth work concept and its implementation in Europe. The pioneering nature of this exercise should inspire and boost further research and advocacy for better understanding and recognition of volunteer-based youth work in the context of the Bonn process.

The main findings reveal that understanding of the concept of volunteer-based youth work is insufficient among various members of the youth work community of practice, and that its relationship with the concept of volunteering is unclear. Unsurprisingly, *the conceptual framework*, as one of the challenges that youth work in Europe currently faces (elaborated in the European Youth Work Agenda), is clearly even more relevant in this context. This requires the further development of a common basic understanding and shared principles, in order to increase the relevance, inclusiveness and responsiveness of (volunteer-based) youth work.



The value of volunteering in youth work is beyond doubt, and is linked to the intrinsic motivation and strong identification of volunteers with the mission, values and principles of the organisation or movement.

Motivations to become a voluntary youth worker described by the participants in this research are both *individual* (based on positive experiences as a participant in youth work activities) and *social* (for example, wanting to help young people and contribute to society).¹⁵ This reflects the overall nature of youth work as a value-based, social and relational practice. These two motivations, personal and societal, are complementary; apart from individual benefits (such as learning new skills, gaining experience, accessing resources and potential employment), the volunteer-based youth work implies serving and '*offering back to peers and the community*', while '*creating a better world and providing greater good to the society*'. Volunteering in youth work contributes to *active citizenship, individual and social change*, and boosts *youth representation* by voicing young people's needs. This encourages their participation and helps them to take responsibility for their lives.

Voluntary youth work is understood as an important non-formal and informal socialisation environment, one that creates safe, accessible, open and autonomous spaces in society, as well as

¹⁵ Kiilakoski, T, Finnish Youth Research Network European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy Early career perspectives on the educational pathways of youth workers, working paper, 'Motivation to become a youth worker', p. 10–11. Available at: https://pip-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/07_SCRIB.pdf/3d3973ef-2dc1-e277-82ec-615bf942bbcd.

supportive and experiential learning environments for young people. The methodology of youth work and the experiences as a participant in youth work can help motivate young volunteers and to enter the field of youth work and develop a sense of belonging to the community.

Volunteer-based youth workers (together with paid ones) are perceived as an integral part of the youth work community of practice, which can play an essential role in strengthening the provision of quality youth work and help to boost its credibility by showcasing its impact. Youth work community of practice can also play a key role in creating a common narrative, not only for the recognition and validation of learning in youth work but also for recognising and validating youth work in general – including volunteer-based work – in the context of the Bonn process.

However, research and Europe-wide mapping of the volunteer-based youth work concept and practice should be undertaken to gain deeper insights and understanding of the challenges for its recognition and quality implementation. It is worth exploring the role of volunteering in youth work in boosting individual employability and in creating a sense of agency, which helps volunteers to navigate their careers if managed and supported meaningfully. In practice, volunteers are often left to navigate 'on their own', as their transitional pathways from voluntary to (potentially) paid engagement in youth work are frequently unclear and not signposted.

Education and career development opportunities are rarely structured, and are not always accessible to the volunteers in youth work, particularly not in those countries with less-developed practice architectures. A gap between the education and training opportunities offered at the international / European levels, and the realities that young volunteers face in their countries, creates additional challenges and limits their access. It is therefore essential to enhance education and training opportunities, and to develop certification systems and strengthen supporting mechanisms for volunteer-based youth workers throughout Europe. There needs to be special attention paid to knowledge transfer, peer-to-peer learning and the dissemination of good practice from the international / European level to those organisations working at the national and local levels.

Quality education, training and practical support for youth workers (both volunteer and paid) across the EU are a precondition for promoting the recognition and validation of youth workers' competences in the Member States. It is vital to provide sufficient resources for the continuous development of youth work (both paid and volunteer-based), enhance understanding of the concepts, methods and tools used for education and training in youth work. It is also important to further develop competence-based frameworks for formal and non-formal youth work education and training and also to provide the various actors involved in youth work with education, training, guidance and support of sufficient quality, in line with EYWA.

Despite the inevitable hardships and challenges that volunteer-based youth workers face in Europe, the research participants recognised the unshakable willingness, commitment and desire of volunteers in youth work *to belong to the youth work community of practice*, which represents an important part of their professional identity and development. It is therefore essential to support their efforts, provide the conditions and assure quality opportunities for their education, training, career development and voluntary youth work practice, in line with the current policy developments and in the context of the Bonn process.

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Annex 1: Online survey

General Questions

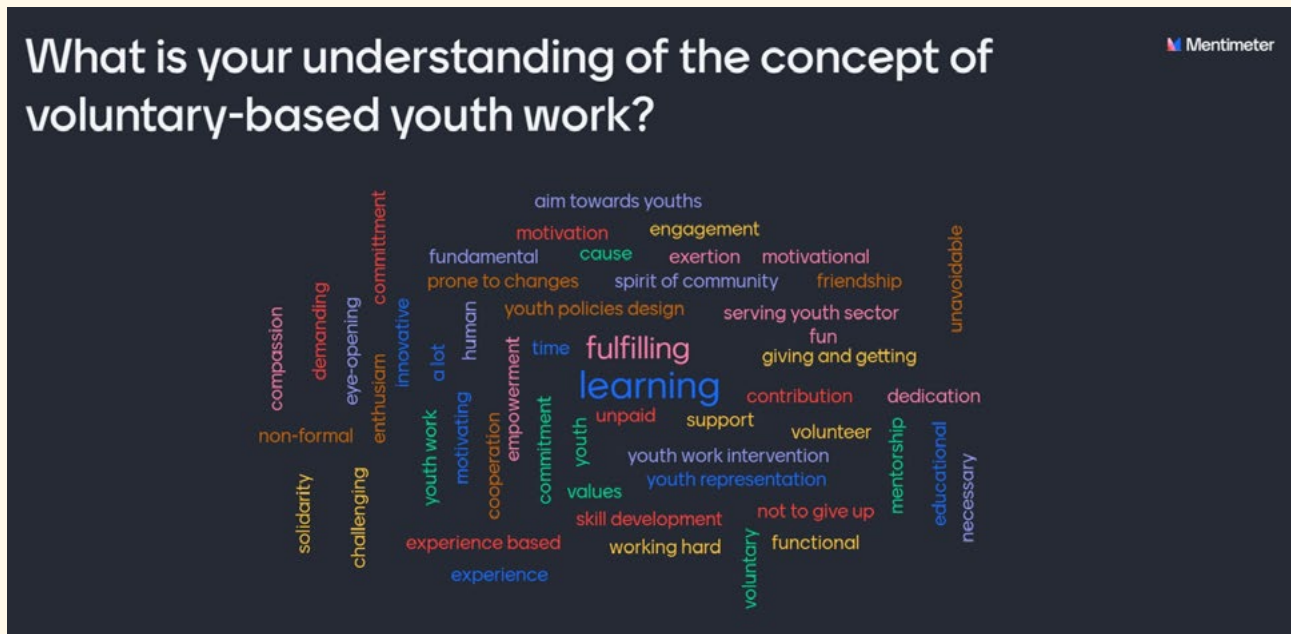
1. Organisation
2. Country
3. Your role in the organization

Understanding The Concept Of Volunteer Based Youth Work

1. How would you define volunteer-based youth work in 3 words?
2. What is the value of voluntary-based youth work, in your opinion?
3. How is volunteer based youth work promoted and recognised in your context (organisation, country, Europe) and what are the main challenges to its recognition?
4. What support mechanisms are in place to assure quality performance of voluntary-based youth workers in your context (organisation, country, Europe)?
5. Please elaborate on the importance of these support mechanisms and identify challenges related to their implementation. What is missing or needs to be further developed?
6. Are there sufficient education and training opportunities provided for voluntary-based youth workers in your context (organisation, country, Europe)?
7. Is there any example of good practice in providing education and training opportunities for voluntary-based youth workers in your context? If so, please describe it briefly.
8. Are there sufficient career development opportunities provided for voluntary-based youth workers in your context (organisation, country, Europe)? If so, please explain briefly.
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share about volunteer-based youth work?
10. What would you recommend to the decision makers in order to improve the conditions for voluntary-based youth workers in your organisation, country and in Europe?

Thank you for your time and contribution!

Annex 2: The concept of volunteer-based youth work



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