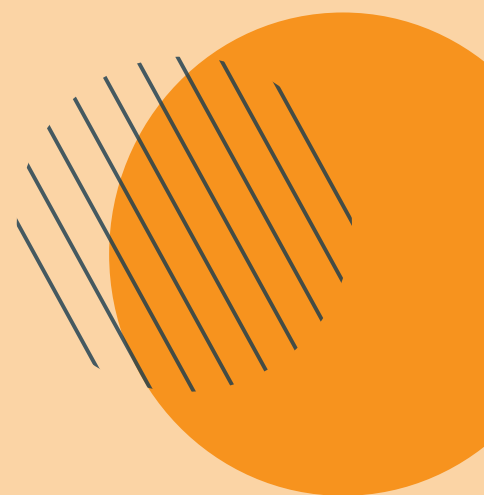


Mapping of best practices for the recognition of youth work

Dragan Atanasov

Research report from the Erasmus+ K2 project: 'European youth workers unite to empower youth and youth field – Youth worker is a lifestyle'.



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1. Introduction



This Mapping of best practices for the recognition of youth work was produced as the first result of the Strategic Partnership project “European youth workers unite to empower youth and youth field - Youth worker is a lifestyle”.

The mapping study conducted within the project was aimed at mapping the state of youth work recognition in the 9 countries involved in the project, as well as wider in Europe. It focused on the four dimensions of recognition as defined by the Youth Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe: self-recognition, social, formal and political recognition. As a subtopic, the study also explored the status and working conditions of youth workers in the project countries. Additionally, the study also aimed to collect good practices of youth work recognition from the 9 project countries, which could serve as good examples and inspiration for further work on recognition in the other European countries.

The primary use of the study is to provide the newly established Alliance of Youth Workers Associations (AYWA) information about youth work recognition relevant for its advocacy and other activities on a national and European levels. However, we believe that the document is also a valuable contribution to the youth work sector in general, as it provides an insight into less explored aspects of recognition, such as employment rights and benefits of youth workers. We hope that the study will point out to some of the key areas in which further intervention is needed, while also providing examples of how real progress can be achieved.

Countries participating in the project: North Macedonia (lead partner), Estonia, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia. Researchers who helped to collect and analyse the data:

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2. Methodological approach

To produce this mapping of good practices related to recognition of youth work, a four-step methodology was used. The methodology combined desk and field research and was implemented on a national level. The research was conducted by a team of nine researchers, appointed by the project partners. Overall coordination was done by the lead researcher and author of the study.

In the first step, the researchers conducted desk research of existing documents relevant for youth work. The list of analysed materials included laws, strategies, other policy documents, existing studies and reports, documents such as youth work portfolios and occupational standards, as well as other documents deemed as relevant by the national researchers. In that way, the desk research focused primarily on the formal and political dimensions of recognition. In total 18 European countries were covered by the desk research. Besides their own country, each researcher covered at least one more country. The findings were collected in a matrix and were provided to the lead researcher.

The second and third step of the process consisted of the field review and covered the 9 countries involved in the project. In the second step, each researcher conducted 3 individual interviews with key informants possessing relevant knowledge about the state of youth work in their country. The interviews covered questions organised in four groups, corresponding to the four dimensions of recognition. In the third step, the researchers conducted national-level focus groups with youth workers. The focus groups focused on the status and employment rights of youth workers in the country. All data gathered through the field review were contained in matrixes that were shared with the lead researcher

In the fourth step of the research, the national researchers wrote and submitted national case studies related to youth work recognition, based on recommendations coming from the interviews and focus groups. The case studies are included as an annex to this report, in the form in which they were received.



3. State of recognition of youth work in selected countries in Europe

3.1. Self-recognition

Within this study, self-recognition was explored from the perspective defined by the Youth Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe. As stated by the Youth Partnership:

“Recognition starts with us! It is about recognising who we are, what we do, and knowing the value our work has. It is also about recognising who else is part of the community of practice and recognising what it is they do. Self recognition includes being able to gather evidence of what it is we do. Self-recognition means being able to see the developments that are needed to improve the quality of youth work.”

The level of self-recognition of youth work was assessed in all 9 countries involved in the project, through conducting individual interviews with youth workers and other stakeholders from each country. This section first provides a summary of the general state of self-recognition, and then it goes into the specific circumstances of each country.

State of self-recognition of youth work

The study identified differences in how individuals identify themselves as youth workers:

In some countries (Estonia, Malta and the Netherlands), self-identification mostly comes from having obtained formal education and/or having a job position as a youth worker, or as a professional in a different sector but implementing youth work activities.

In other countries (Czech Republic, Greece, Italy and Portugal), self-identification comes more from working directly with young people, regardless of the educational and professional background, type of youth work and the sector in which the individual works. In these countries there is a broader and more diverse understanding of who a youth worker is.

There is also a third group of countries (North Macedonia and Serbia), where both aspects are combined and self-recognition comes both from working with young people, and from recent achievements in formal recognition of youth work, such as occupational standards.

However, in all studied countries, self-recognition is at least partly influenced by the shared values and principles of youth work, and by youth workers' dedication to supporting young people, which seems to be a very important aspect of their professional identity.

The study also showed a great variety in who is considered a youth worker by the sector:

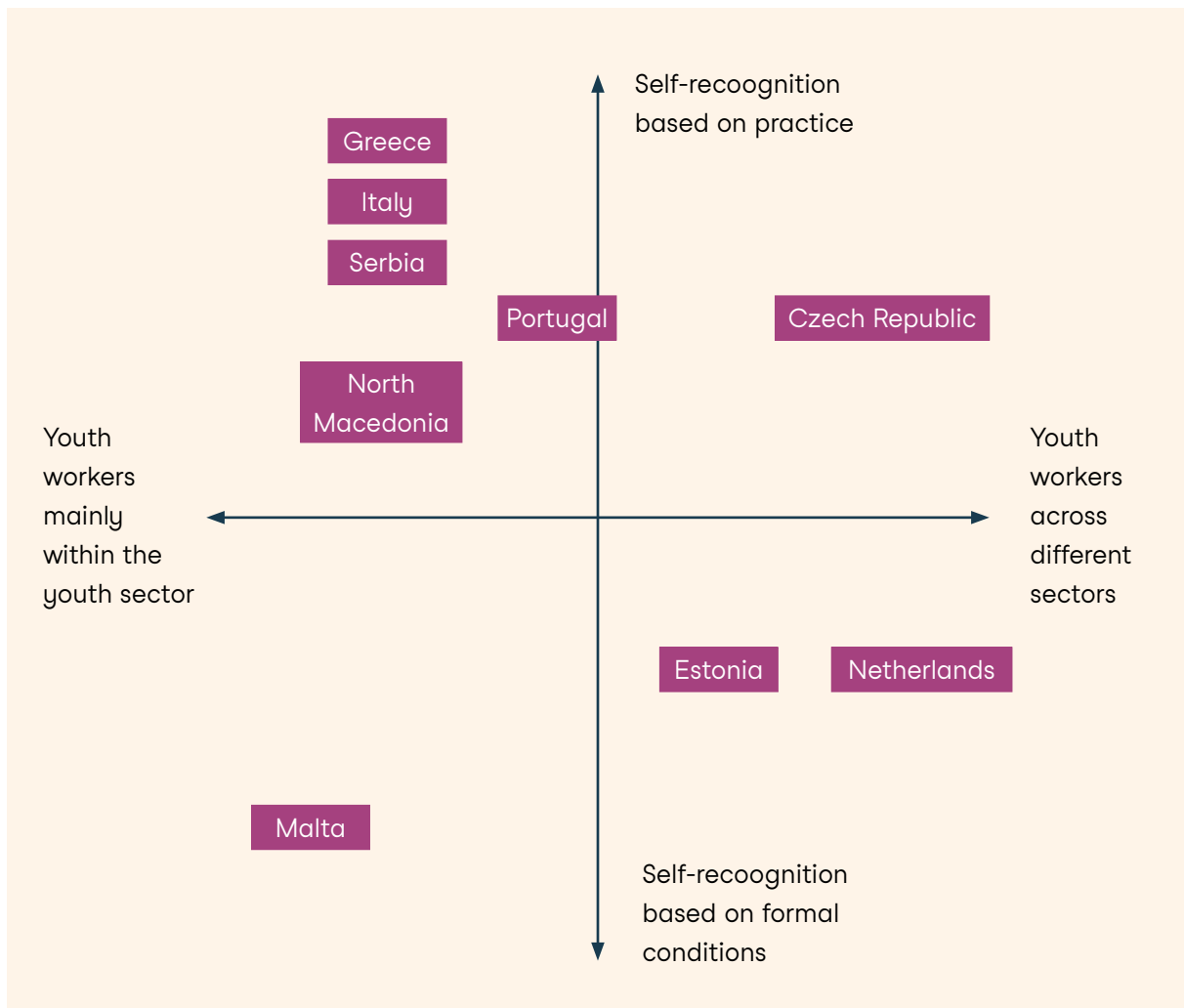
In countries where youth work is formally recognised as a separate profession, such as Malta, the approach is very narrow, and it includes only those that have obtained formal education and that are employed as youth workers.

The situation is different in countries where youth work is recognised, but it is integrated in a wider system for providing support to young people, such as Estonia and the Netherlands. In those countries, in addition to youth workers working in the "usual" youth work settings like youth organisations and youth centres, professionals working in other sectors (education, social work) also consider themselves, and are considered by others as youth workers.

A third group of countries are those that do not have formal recognition of youth work as a profession (Czech Republic, Greece, North Macedonia, Portugal, Serbia). In those contexts, youth worker is a broad category as well, but in most cases, it includes employees and volunteers from the civil sector.

Combining these two perspectives, the countries can be placed in a diagram that shows how countries are positioned according to two criteria:

- If self-recognition is based on formal conditions (such as having obtained adequate formal education and/or training, having received a warrant or another type of licence acquired from a youth worker, or being formally employed as a youth worker), or on practice and experience in working with young people.
- If self-recognition is predominantly within an established and distinct youth work sector, or across different fields (such as education and social work).



Based on this, the 9 countries included in the study can be placed in the diagram as shown above. Malta is the only case where youth workers are part of a narrowly and clearly defined youth work sector, and where youth workers' self-identification is conditioned by well-established formal factors. In that sense, youth work most clearly takes the form of a separate profession in Malta. In Estonia and the Netherlands formal factors are crucial as well, but they are a bit looser. In addition, in those two countries youth workers are dispersed across different sectors, in many cases having overlapping roles.

In the majority of countries self-recognition is strongly based on practice and experience of working with young people, rather than by being employed as youth workers or meeting certain formal requirements. In most of those countries, self-identification is mainly contained within a youth work sector, which is almost always part of civil society. An exception is the Czech Republic, where youth workers often are part of the social work system, as well as in Portugal, where some municipalities have started employing youth workers in the public sector. From this group of countries, North Macedonia is moving closer to self-recognition based on formal conditions, thanks to the certified vocational training programs for youth workers.

From the study it is also evident that in countries where youth work is not yet established as a profession, there is a movement towards its greater formalisation and regulation. In some cases, such as in North Macedonia, Portugal and Serbia, some progress is already made, and the adopted policies and processes already have an impact on self-recognition. Despite challenges in reaching a common understanding of what youth worker means, youth workers from these countries generally ask for a more structured and formalised approach. The trend is sometimes the opposite in countries where youth work is recognised as a profession. This is most clearly visible in Malta, where the perception is that the system is too rigid and that it should be open for youth workers that do not necessarily meet the formal requirements.

Another difference that can be observed is related to the focus of youth workers' priorities related to recognition. In countries where youth work is not recognised as a profession, most needs are concerned with reaching a common understanding of youth work and achieving greater political and formal recognition. In countries where youth work is formally recognised, the needs are related to gaining greater recognition from other stakeholders of the value and importance of youth work, as well as to establishing youth work to the same level as the other affiliated professions, like education and social work.

Youth workers generally agree that self-recognition is an important step towards achieving overall recognition of youth work. They also acknowledge that the lack of understanding and recognition of youth work from the society, policy makers and institutions is a challenge to self-recognition. Other significant challenges are related to the lower status, reputation and working conditions for youth workers when compared to other similar professions. Hence, youth workers agree that a greater social, formal, and political recognition will support self-recognition. To achieve that, youth workers propose more promotion and awareness-raising, capacity building and knowledge sharing within the sector, more research and data collection about the impact of youth work, and more unified acting mainly through professional associations of youth workers. Depending on the national circumstances, the youth workers also ask for specific tools that can support self-recognition, such as self-assessment tools for professional competences, validation processes for recognising competencies gained through experience, accreditation processes for youth workers etc.

On the level of self-recognition, the impact of European developments and policies is not very important, since many of the youth workers do not follow closely what is happening on the European level.

Specificities of the state of self-recognition per country

CZECH REPUBLIC

In the Czech Republic, the understanding of who is a youth worker seems to be broad and diverse. It includes those conducting leisure and non-formal education activities in NGOs, either as employees or as volunteers, but it also includes social workers working with young people in “low-threshold” social services, workers in open clubs, in interest education, and even in sport clubs. According to interviewees, the self-identification is not very strong because the positions are very diversified and there is no common definition of a youth worker. Hence, the identification is much stronger with the organisation where the individual works, than with youth work as such.

ESTONIA

In Estonia, youth worker is a collective term for all professionals and volunteers working in the field, either in the public or the civil society sector. As there is no legal definition of a youth worker, the roles are very diverse, and the self-identification is based on shared values and principles of youth work. The self-recognition is strongly supported by the fact that youth work is recognised as a profession and is a regulated policy area, so youth workers feel as part of a professional community. Still, some of those doing youth work (in hobby schools) struggle with the identity and tend to associate themselves more with education, which could be linked with the lower reputation and worse conditions for youth workers compared to those of other affiliated professions. In Estonia the self-recognition is positively impacted by the work of the professional association of youth workers, and the recognition programs for youth workers that are organised by organisations and institutions, such as the “Youth Work Week” and the “Youth Workers of the Year” award.

GREECE

In Greece, the identification as a youth worker comes from engagement in activities that support and empower young people. Since youth work is not recognised as a profession, only some individuals identify as youth workers based on their job title. Others that identify themselves as youth workers rely on their dedication to working with young people. This includes a broad range of professionals with different roles (educators, social workers, psychologists etc.) and working in various settings, such as NGOs, youth centres and educational institutions. In the view of the interviewees, the lack of formal recognition of youth work poses a challenge for self-recognition, and what is needed is establishing a professional framework, standardised qualifications, adequate support and enough funding for the youth work sector.

ITALY

In Italy, where there is no national regulation, self-recognition has become increasingly active in recent years, sparking various debates. The national organization NINFEA was born from the initiative of youth workers aiming to establish a structure and define the necessary competencies for quality work. Beyond NINFEA, there are also numerous other national movements led by various organizations, often utilizing K153 projects to activate local groups. There are several initiatives that, in collaboration with local institutions, seek to better understand how the role of the youth worker is defined based on their professional experiences and how these experiences can then be framed within a broader context of social recognition.

MALTA

In Malta, the self-identification as a youth worker is closely tied to obtaining a formal degree in youth work and a warrant to be allowed to work as a youth worker. However, those working with young people in NGOs also self-identify as a youth worker even if they do not have a degree, which according to the interviewees, creates some confusion. The existence of formal education programs and the warrant system strongly support self-recognition, but it is challenged by those that do not hold degree but have gained competences through their working experience. Self-recognition of youth work and its promotion and development as a profession is also positively impacted by the work of the professional association of youth workers.

NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, the self-identification as a youth worker is mostly connected to the job and to the youth work assignment. Having obtained studies connected to working with young people also play a role. Additional trainings, the work of the professional association and positive feedback from other stakeholders all play a role in the self-recognition. The interviewees assess the level of self-recognition as quite high, even though they feel that the positive impact and value of youth work should be even more visible and recognised.

NORTH MACEDONIA

In North Macedonia, the self-identification as a youth worker comes from working with young people, even if the individual does not possess the competences needed from a youth worker, or if the one does not actually implement youth work programs, but works in related areas, such as youth participation. The existing policy documents and occupational standard are of less importance for the self-recognition. On the other hand, some individuals acting as youth workers are not aware of their professional identity. According to the interviewees, the low level of self-recognition is connected to the lack of formal and political recognition of youth work. While there has been notable progress in the recognition processes over the last years, the developments are too recent to be well known and accepted within the sector.

In Portugal, the self-identification as a youth worker comes from the place of work (youth organisation, youth departments of municipalities) and from working with young people. The occupational standard exists only since recently, and most youth workers have gained their knowledge through working experience exchange with peers. In interviewees' opinion, the low level of self-recognition is influenced by the lack of social awareness and recognition from the government. But at the same time, youth workers need to understand the importance of their role themselves, so that it can be recognised by the others and recognised as a profession. The work of the national association of youth workers plays an important role in this process.

In Serbia, individuals self-identify as youth workers if they have received formal certification through training and education, but also if they are implementing youth work programmes with young people, while having acquired competences informally and through work experience. While the occupational standard for a youth worker plays an important role, self-recognition is challenged by the lack of formal education opportunities and the low level of political recognition of youth work. The work and achievements of the national association of youth workers has made a large impact on self-recognition of youth workers, but there is a need for the processes started by the association to be recognised by the state and integrated in the system, such as the validation of previous experience and the accreditation process for youth workers.

Good practices related to self-recognition

Many good practices leading to greater self-recognition are closely tied to the work of national associations of youth workers. In almost all countries, the participants in interviews and focus groups mentioned the positive impact of their national associations, which contribute through activities such as promotional campaigns for youth work and providing spaces for national meetings and exchanges between youth workers. For example, in **Serbia**, NAPOR has implemented a promotional campaign for recognition of youth work by presenting short videos of youth workers talking about their personal stories and experiences in the field of youth work.

What seems to work particularly well for self-recognition is the organization of public events where youth workers' work and role can be publicly acknowledged. A good example comes from **Estonia**, where the Estonian Association of Youth Workers organises different events to motivate youth workers. The National Education and Youth Board also organises an annual event for the youth field, where "Youth Worker of the Year" is one of the award categories.

Finally, the policies and processes aimed at recognition of youth work as a profession are also reported to have a positive impact on self-recognition. There are a few good examples that were pointed out. In **North Macedonia**, the Union for Youth Work worked with the Agency for Youth and Sport to create the first national Youth Work Portfolio, which lists the competences of three different profiles of youth workers. In **Serbia**, NAPOR has established an accreditation process of ensuring quality standards and leads the process of establishing an occupational standard, qualification framework and licensing for youth workers.

Quotes from youth workers about self-recognition and its link to other forms of recognition

“The job seems less prestigious to youth workers, poorly paid, and they may leave for another profession over time.”

“Personally, before working with Erasmus+ Youth programs (former known as Youth in Action programs) I had no idea of this specialty and I believe it is created as a term because of these programs. Hence, I would consider a youth worker a person working in E+ Youth programs, as a project manager/trainer/facilitator/administration officer/team leader/etc.”

“Certainly, self-recognition was and will be highly affected by the development of policy and official recognition on the national level. But it is a two-way street – so Youth Workers that kept working as YW, and even developed their personal expertise, are affecting development of political/formal recognition.”

3.2. Social recognition

Within this study, social recognition was explored from the perspective defined by the Youth Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe. As stated by the Youth Partnership:

“Social recognition is when others gain a better understanding of what we are doing. It is about the social players acknowledging and valuing the positive impact of youth work and non-formal learning/education on young people and therefore on their communities as a whole. In practice it means that both the community (the public) and the other sectors (NGOs, private, municipal, media, institutions, education...) not only know what youth work is, but have a positive attitude towards it. In essence it is about gaining visibility for young people, youth work and the organisations providing this work.”

The level of social recognition of youth work was assessed in all 9 countries involved in the project, through conducting individual interviews with youth workers and other stakeholders from each

country. This section first provides a summary of the general state of social recognition, and then it goes into the specific circumstances of each country.

State of social recognition of youth work

The situation regarding social recognition of youth work is very similar across the studied countries. The analysis of conducted interviews showed a general agreement that the overall level of understanding and awareness of youth work in the wider society is very low. To a great degree, this is true also in countries where youth work is recognised and well established as a profession.

Youth work in different countries is either completely unknown to the wider public, or there is some level of misunderstanding about what it means. In countries where youth work does not exist as a profession, the understanding about it is very wide and it includes a range of different activities, many of which are not necessarily part of youth work programs. In many cases, youth work is seen as only providing entertaining and free time activities to children and young people, without any educational value. The latter is also true in countries with a high level of formal recognition of youth work, where youth work is often perceived as low-skill social work. In general, youth work is not taken seriously, and many people believe that it is a side volunteering activity, rather than a real profession.

The reasons for this are also similar across different countries and are generally related to the low level of communication and promotion of youth work to the wider public. Another issue is that youth work is a relatively new profession, and it is much less known than the other professions that support young people. The perception of youth work is often conditioned by personal experiences people have. As a result, the number of people who know more about youth work is limited, and many of them have different understanding, based on their own experience. In North Macedonia and Serbia, there is also a linguistic issue, since the term used for youth work is more related to employability of young people, which creates additional confusion.

Social recognition is seen as very important not only for increasing the morale and motivation of youth workers, but also for applying pressure on policy makers to put youth work higher on the agenda and provide more funds and supportive policies. At the same time, social recognition is perceived as conditioned by formal and political recognition, which is confirmed by countries where the situation has improved once institutions introduced concrete measures in the field of youth work. The study shows that to increase the level of social recognition, more strategic communication towards the wider society is needed, supported by evidence-based and data driven arguments that demonstrate the impact of youth work. In addition, youth workers need to start acting in a more coordinated and unified way, primarily through professional associations and trade unions.

European developments in the field of youth work have very little impact on the social dimension of the recognition of youth work. The most direct impact is observed among young people who participate in European funded projects, such as through the Erasmus+ Programme, and thus increase their awareness about youth work. Some potential is seen in the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda on a national level, but more funds are needed for real impact to be achieved.

Specificities of the state of social recognition per country

CZECH REPUBLIC

The public understands youth work in a broad way that includes leisure activities, informal education, camps, sport and other activities. Youth work activities are seen mainly as part of the work of civil society organisations and as conducted by volunteers. In the opinion of interviewees, the perception of youth work from the public is generally positive, while also very diverse, based on one's own personal experience and perspectives coming from personal experience with participation in activities or membership in organisations. Some initiatives have already been done to bring the concept of youth work closer to the public.

ESTONIA

The perception of youth work varies and there is still some level of uncertainty over what it means. Youth work is often seen as a low-skill profession mainly related to providing entertainment for children, rather than having an educational and developmental value. In interviewees' opinion, some of the reasons for this are that youth work is still quite new as a profession, it has not been adequately communicated with the wider public, and it lacks the use of data and arguments based on studies and theories. The low level of social recognition has a negative impact on youth workers' motivation and self-perception, but it also negatively affects the attention that youth work gets by policy makers, and consequently the amount of funds it receives.

GREECE

The understanding and perception of youth work among different stakeholders is varied, with many individuals not recognising youth work at all. Youth work is also often seen as recreational and unstructured. According to the interviewees, the main reason for this is that youth work is still a new concept, and there is even no proper translation of the term "youth worker" in Greek language. Social recognition of youth work is seen as important since it can influence policy makers and provide a push for greater political and formal recognition. Awareness raising activities, as well as fostering more cross-sectoral collaboration can impact the level of social recognition of youth work.

ITALY

There's a diverse understanding and perception of youth work among stakeholders, with many not recognizing it at all. It is often viewed as recreational and lacking structure. The social recognition of youth workers is complex due to the varied nature of their roles. When youth workers engage in numerous activities, external perception becomes unclear, leading to misunderstandings about their role. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted innovation in youth work, with the adoption of new educational tools creating new phenomena. However, youth workers have a communicative responsibility to share best practices, experiences, and foster collaboration. Enhancing the quality of youth work delivery is crucial for gaining social recognition, which can influence policy makers and lead to greater political and formal acknowledgment. The National Association of youth workers and the National Association of youth work providers are working for fostering a better social recognition.

MALTA

The social recognition of youth work derives from the law and the way youth work is defined as a profession. Still, there is lack of awareness about the profession and it is often confused with social work. Some people link youth work with entertainment, and they think that it is a volunteering activity rather than a real profession. In interviewees' opinion, this happens because the number of youth workers is relatively small, and they are not united in promoting youth work. Thus, more awareness raising activities are needed, alongside with improving the working conditions so that more people would like to become youth workers. What has already worked is publicly recognising youth workers for their work and integrating them in multidisciplinary teams of professionals to support young people. The warrant system has also helped to put youth work next to the other professions.

NETHERLANDS

There is generally a good understanding of youth work, even though recognition is seen as greater on a formal level, rather than among the wider public. In the society there is still a lack of understanding of what youth work is, and it is often thought of as a voluntary activity rather than a real profession. However, the social recognition has generally improved in recent years thanks to the greater political recognition and the demonstrated impact of youth work for addressing social issues. In interviewees' view, more social recognition is needed so that there is more pressure on policy makers.

The public has generally low understanding of youth work and the role of youth workers. The main reason for this is that youth work is still very new, not well established and not promoted enough in the society. More aware of youth work are those that have had personal experience and connection to youth work, but they are not many. In interviewees' opinion, the low social recognition of youth work slows down the other levels of recognition – self-recognition, formal and political. If more organisations and social groups recognise youth work, then there would be stronger influence on the institutions as well. In addition, low social awareness means that there is less demand for youth work programs, less activities offered by organisations and less funding for youth work.

There is still a lot of vagueness in the society about what a youth worker does and how it differs from other professions. The reason for this, in interviewees' perspective, is that youth work is not yet recognised as a profession and there is little political attention to it. This also shows, according to them, that young people in general are low on political agenda in Portugal. What is needed is the establishment of formal education for youth work, as well as more dissemination activities in the society.

The level of social recognition of youth work is considered as low, and most people outside of the youth sector do not understand youth work and the role of youth workers. Those that are more aware are the ones that have had a personal experience, either through participating in youth work activities, or by being in contact with youth workers. There is also confusion with employability and the labour market, because the term for youth work in Serbian language is more associated with youth employment, or “young people working”. In interviewees' opinion, increasing social recognition is conditioned by a greater political, formal and self-recognition, since for the wider society it is important to see that youth work is formally recognised and has proven its impact on young people.

Good practices related to social recognition

The good examples leading to greater social recognition can be grouped in three areas: working with different sectors, engaging different social groups, and activities for public promotion.

Working with different sectors is particularly well developed in **Malta**, and according to the interviewees, it makes an impact on the wider recognition of the value of youth work. An example is the approach of integrating youth workers as part of multidisciplinary teams of professionals that support young people. Youth workers in Malta can support young people when interacting with institutions, such as when applying for a passport or when involved in a legal process in a court.

In Malta, the introduction of the warrant system for youth workers also played a role in accepting youth work among the other related professions.

There are more examples of strengthening social recognition of youth work by involving different social groups. In the **Netherlands**, youth workers often engage young people with other community members to build good relationships with all residents in the neighbourhood. An example for this is an activity called “Young Castricum Cooking”, where young people cook for the lonely elderly citizens for the community, thus establishing relations between the two social groups. Meanwhile, the project “72 hours” of the Czech Council for Children and Youth provides an opportunity to anyone in the community to spend 3 days as a volunteer in an NGO. In this way, the public gets a better understanding of what youth work entails. NAPOR in **Serbia** has made a step further, by establishing the “Parents Council” as an advisory body in its own structure.

Finally, the promotional activities can take different forms. In **Estonia**, the Youth Workers Association, the Education and Youth Board and the National Agency for Erasmus+ all manage blogs that introduce and promote youth work. In the **Czech Republic**, the Czech Streetwork Association introduced a week of low-threshold clubs and established an award for innovation in street work. In **Serbia**, NAPOR does not only do promotional campaigns, but it also implements trainings for journalists and representatives of the media about youth work.

In addition, some interviewees have pointed out that the engagement of the youth work sector during the Covid-19 period provided greater social recognition of youth work. In **Italy**, youth workers had to be innovative in adapting new educational tools and platforms to respond to the new challenges, primarily in the digital sphere. This was recognised by the other sectors, which also benefited from the new developments in the youth work field.

Quotes from youth workers about political recognition and its link to other forms of recognition:

“Low recognition from public and political spheres affects youth workers, undermines their self-value and lowers their motivation. On the other hand – lack of professional (qualified youth workers that are well-equipped to argue about their work) keeps the public and political recognition low.”

“When youth work is widely recognized and valued by society, it can generate public support and demand for formal recognition.”

“Social recognition validates the work of youth workers and strengthens their professional identity.”

“Most of the time the role of the youth worker might change according to what the social recognition thinks youth work is – or else one has to explain what it is.”

“Low social recognition leads to low demand for youth work practices and opportunities in the country.”

“Lower level of social recognition is causing smaller demand by citizens (especially on local level), which leads to invisibility for decision makers – who should support it by implementation of youth work in institutions or by raising level of funds for youth work programmes.”

3.3. Formal recognition

Within this study, political recognition was explored from the perspective defined by the Youth Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe. As stated by the Youth Partnership:

“Formal recognition has two areas of focus. It refers to the ‘validation’ of learning outcomes and the ‘certification’ of learning processes in youth work through recognised and accepted certification. It also refers to the training and education of youth workers, either within the context of youth work itself or through the formal education system. This includes the recognition of competencies acquired when entering formal education; official accreditation of non-formal education/learning programmes by formal accreditation bodies; licensing of youth workers and youth work trainers; officially recognised occupation of “youth worker” by the state, etc.”

Formal recognition of youth work was first analysed through desk research conducted in 18 European countries. Then through individual interviews, the study assessed the perception of youth workers and other stakeholders from the 9 countries involved in the project about the level of political recognition in their own countries.

State of formal recognition of youth work

According to the desk research, the level of formal recognition of youth work as a profession varies greatly between the different countries. Based on the data gathered by the national researchers, the countries can be divided in the following groups:

Countries where youth worker is recognised as a distinct profession (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and Slovakia). There are some differences due to the different legal systems, but in principle these countries define the youth worker in the national qualification framework. The educational pathway for becoming a youth worker in this group generally relies on formal education, with undergraduate and postgraduate programs available either specifically in youth work, or in a close discipline. In Ireland and Malta, in

addition to the requirement for adequate formal education, there is also a vetting/warrant process that allows youth workers to start working with young people, while other countries have a simpler procedure requesting additional documents, such as a certificate for non-conviction. In some, but not all, there are also other pathways for becoming a youth worker, through vocational training programs and partial professional qualifications/occupational standards, which respond to different positions and levels of responsibility.

Countries where youth worker is recognised as an occupation (Czech Republic, Georgia, North Macedonia, Portugal, Serbia). In these countries there is an occupational standard for a youth worker, though sometimes the standard is not explicitly for a “youth worker” but for a similar professional profile. The pathway for becoming a youth worker based on the occupational standard is usually tied with vocational or adult education programs, delivered by certified providers. This normally responds to the 4th level of qualification, which allows youth workers to be employed in civil society but sometimes prevents them from taking jobs in the public sector. However, in some of the countries, such a training program does not exist yet. Validation of previously gained competences is possible in Portugal.

Countries where youth work is not recognised as a profession or an occupation (Croatia, Greece, Denmark, Italy, Poland and Spain). In these countries the profile of the youth worker is wider and more diverse, including mostly those working with young people in civil society, as well as professionals from other sectors that implement some activities that can be considered as youth work. An individual can become a youth worker by acquiring competences through training programs and informal learning, or by simply starting to work with young people. There are no prior qualifications, accreditations, licences, or other entrance criteria for youth workers. Usually, organisations and institutions have their own professional standards and requirements from the youth workers they employ.

The division above is very rough and it groups countries that in some respects have very different realities. This is particularly true for professionals that we call “youth workers”, but who are effectively employed by other affiliated sectors, such as education. In some countries, the role is so strongly immersed in the education or social welfare system, that even the term “youth worker” is not used, though in the European context, the role involves the duties generally understood as being part of youth work. Sometimes, there is an internal struggle related to this, with some of those professionals identifying with other professions (such as teachers), rather than youth workers.

Different countries have chosen different models of formally recognising youth work. While some have opted just for the formal education pathway, others rely on vocational training, while some provide different options for different profiles and levels of youth work. In some of the studied countries, there are models that are currently in the process of establishing. For example, Italy,

North Macedonia and Serbia are all working on establishing formal education for youth workers, but establishing the studies will not automatically provide a formal recognition for the graduated youth worker, since other steps have to take place as well.

The perceptions from interviewed youth workers and other stakeholders are generally in line with the desk research findings. However, even in countries where youth work is formally recognised as a profession, interviewees express concerns that youth work is not fully recognised, or not recognised to the same level as other similar professions. Youth workers often feel not appreciated enough and not treated equally to teachers and social workers. Salaries and other employment conditions are also seen as different and, in all cases, worse for youth workers.

In countries where youth work is not formally recognised, there are requests for establishing educational and training opportunities, adopting occupational and professional standards, and validation systems for recognition of competences gained from non-formal and informal learning. Meanwhile, in some countries where formal education exists, there are requests for diversification of the educational and training pathways for becoming a youth worker.

Formal recognition of youth work is considered as important and interlinked with other dimensions of recognition. At the same time, it is seen as one that is difficult to fully achieve due to the complexity of national legislations, bureaucratic obstacles, and resistance from older and more established professions. Ensuring political will and support from policy makers is often seen as a key to developing formal recognition. European policy documents and developments are mentioned as good advocacy tools, but other than that, their potential impact regarding formal recognition is seen as quite limited. The reason for this lies in their non-binding character, but also in the diversity of legal systems across Europe, which often makes European level documents irrelevant on a national level.

Specificities of the state of formal recognition per country

CZECH REPUBLIC

All interviewees agree that youth work is not formally recognised, and the main reason for that is seen in the lack of uniformed understanding of what youth work is. The organisations work in different ways and agreeing on a common definition that would include all would be a great challenge. The interviewees acknowledge that not having youth work recognised means that its status is worse when compared to other similar professions, however there is no overall agreement on whether it is better or not to have formal recognition of youth work, given the diversity of the work and the fact that most youth workers are actually volunteers.

ESTONIA

Interviewees confirm that youth work is formally recognised, but they all agree that it is not adequately recognised, especially when compared to other professions, such as those in formal education. What would be needed is to raise conditions for youth workers to the same level as teachers and other affiliated professionals. Another major issue is the lack of recognition of competences gained from non-formal and informal learning, since much learning in youth work happens outside of formal education.

GREECE

Interviewees agree that youth work is not at all recognised in the system. The reason for this is seen in the lack of political recognition, which is connected to the lack of awareness and understanding about the nature, scope and impact of youth work. The lack of formal recognition in perceiving youth work as not important by the wider society, but it also has practical implications to those practicing youth work, in the form of lack of employment rights, guaranteed salaries and insurance.

MALTA

Interviewees confirm that youth work is formally recognised, however, they point out that it is not recognised on the same level as similar professions in the social and education field. A major problem in Malta seems to be the existence of only one pathway for becoming a youth worker, which requests formal education degree in youth work. Since opportunities in the field are scarce, not many people decide to follow this path, and that causes lack of youth workers and empty vacancies.

NETHERLANDS

According to interviewees youth work is recognised, but not on the same level as other professions. Youth work is undervalued, and youth workers feel unappreciated by other related professions, such as social workers. The main reason for this lies in the conflicting interests and influences within the social work sector, where youth workers fit. Greater formal recognition can be achieved by cooperating with policy makers and other stakeholders, as well as by working together in a strong professional association.

NORTH MACEDONIA

The interviewees recognise the progress made recently, but also point out that youth work is still not fully recognised. The recognition of youth work as an occupation is assessed positively, but a more systematic approach is requested for fully integrating the youth worker in the system. A validation process for previously gained competences is also needed, since many youth workers are involved in youth work for many years, but they are not formally recognised. A positive development is seen in the establishing of public youth centres, which create job opportunities for youth workers.

The interviewees point out that while youth work is recognised as an occupation, there are many employees working in organisations that have not taken the training associated with it. Hence, a major positive development is the development of the validation process, which recognises demonstrated competencies. Interviewees underline the importance of adequate preparation, so that youth work is implemented in a professional, rather than amateur way.

The interviewees agree that youth work is not fully recognised, even though an occupational standard has been adopted recently. While this is considered as an important step, youth work is still not defined in the National qualification framework, which makes it almost invisible formally. In addition, currently there are no ways to obtain recognised formal education or vocational training. Formal recognition is deemed as very important, but it is halted by the lack of understanding about youth work and the lack of political will.

Good practices related to formal recognition

The study found that the greatest contribution to formal recognition of youth work can be made by policy documents and established training and educational pathways for youth workers.

The policies that foster formal recognition of youth work are diverse and range from legal documents that define and regulate youth work in general, to those that regulate specific questions. A good example of the former is the Youth Work Act in **Estonia**, as well as the law on youth work in **Malta**. An example of the latter is a recent policy in the **Czech Republic**, which regulates that youth workers that participate in summer camps for youth are entitled to receive a week of paid leave from their employers.

Policies appear to be more impactful if they are created through a process that also involves youth workers. In most cases, the representation of youth workers is ensured by the national association of youth workers and youth work providers. A good example comes from North Macedonia, where the Union for Youth Work implemented an Erasmus+ project that included a wide consultative process leading to preparation of the first national Youth Work Portfolio and national Quality Standards for Youth Work. The Union also led the processes that resulted in adoption of the first Occupational Standard for a youth worker and the Quality Standards for youth centres. Similarly, NAPOR in Serbia is actively involved in lobbying and advocating for youth work policies. One of the results of those efforts is that the new Law on Youth will include a separate part on youth work.

Training and educational opportunities for youth workers appear to be very important for formal recognition of youth work. This is confirmed in the countries where such opportunities are well established and recognised by the state, such as in Estonia and Malta. National

associations are working to achieve that level in the other countries as well, such as in Italy, North Macedonia and Serbia. In the meantime, other tools are being developed that can compensate for the lack of established mechanisms. A good practice comes from Serbia, where NAPOR has developed a Passport of competences for monitoring the competences obtained through non-formal education.

Quotes from youth workers about formal recognition and its link to other forms of recognition:

“Youth work is like a baby in terms of recognition, other professions are like adults.”

“Formal recognition can shape political discourse and policymaking, as it provides a basis for advocating for dedicated resources, support, and integration of youth work into government structures.”

“Lack of formal recognition makes an influence on the way that youth workers don’t have opportunity to be permanently employed and have financial stability. They get paid through projects and their role is not only as youth workers. Usually they have multiple roles (coordinator, financial manager, administrator etc.)”

3.4. Political recognition

Within this study, political recognition was explored from the perspective defined by the Youth Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe. As stated by the Youth Partnership:

“Political recognition is when young people and/or youth work are included in policies about young people and/or are the focus of policies. This can be at local, regional, national and international levels. It is about youth work getting onto the political agenda, entering legislation and becoming a part of political strategies - and supporting the involvement of young people and youth work in those strategies. It is the political level acknowledging and recognising youth work and the value of youth work.”

Political recognition of youth work was first analysed through desk research conducted in 18 European countries. Then through individual interviews, the study assessed the perception of youth workers and other stakeholders from the 9 countries involved in the project about the level of political recognition in their own countries.

State of political recognition of youth work

According to the desk research, the level of political recognition of youth work differs a lot between different countries, both in the sense of how recognised youth work is, and in the way in which the political recognition is done.

One of the questions of the desk research was whether and how youth work is recognised through laws. Based on the data gathered by the national researchers, the countries can be divided in the following groups:

In six of the studied countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Slovakia), youth work is recognised and regulated through laws that are either targeting youth work exclusively, or together with other related topics (such as non-formal education). The laws have different names and cover different aspects of youth work provision, while in some cases certain elements are also regulated in other related legal documents.

Two of the countries (North Macedonia and Serbia) do not have specific laws on youth work, but youth work is defined in the existing Laws that regulate youth related issues.

Five of the countries (Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal) do not have youth work recognised in legislative documents, but the national researchers recognised that some aspects of youth work provision are covered by other laws. In most cases, those laws do not explicitly mention youth work and they regulate other fields: such as the Social Support Act in the Netherlands and the Law on Voluntary Activities in Greece. In some cases, as elaborated by the researchers, the laws cover activities that can be considered as youth work even though they are not named as such, and that are implemented by other sectors, like education, social care etc.

Four of the countries (Croatia, Denmark, Georgia and Spain) do not have youth work recognised in legal documents, and the national researchers did not identify any other laws that tackle aspects of youth work provision. It is however possible that such documents exist, but they were not recognised within this study.

The research also analysed whether the country has a strategy for youth work, if youth work is covered by another strategic document, or not at all. The studied countries can be divided again in four groups:

Three of the countries (Finland, Ireland and Malta) have specific strategies or similar policy documents in the field of youth work.

Five of the countries (Austria, Estonia, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovakia) have youth strategies or similar policy documents in the field of youth, which also include a specific section or a strategic goal on youth work.

Three of the countries (Italy, Portugal and Spain) have youth strategies, but they do not mention youth work.

Seven of the countries (Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Greece, the Netherlands and Poland) do not have a youth strategy at all. In some cases, the reason for this is that the old youth strategy has ended and a new one was never adopted. In other cases, youth issues are covered by other strategic documents in different areas, such as education and welfare. In the case of the Netherlands, there is no strategic document on a national level because the responsibility for youth work provision is on the local municipalities.

The research also mapped other legislative and policy documents that are of relevance for youth work. Below is a summary of the most significant findings:

In some countries, policy documents concerning youth work are being adopted on a regional and/or local level, even if there is no similar legislation on a national level. This is the case in Italy, where some regional governments have adopted regional laws that recognise youth work, and in Serbia, where the provincial government of Vojvodina is preparing an action plan where youth work is to be recognised as a separate goal. In the case of the Netherlands, provision of youth work is the responsibility of the local municipalities, which are obliged to prepare 4-year youth policy plans.

In some countries with a higher level of political recognition of youth work, such as Ireland and Malta, there is additional legislation that tackles protection of minors and regulates the conditions under which youth workers can do their job. The same countries also have a vetting process for professional youth workers. There is no similar legislation in the other countries.

In most studied countries, there is a movement towards greater political recognition, particularly in countries that currently lack legislative and policy documents in the field of youth work.

The desk research also looked for influences of European policy documents in the field of youth work on the national ones. In most countries where national legislation and policy documents on a national level exist, it can be concluded that European policies are taken into consideration. In that regard, most references were made to the European Youth Work Agenda and the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027. In countries where youth work activities are integrated in other sectors (education, social work), such as Denmark and the Netherlands, it is not possible to compare European with national policy because the reality of youth work provision is very different. Similarly, this question could not be analysed in countries that do not have national legislation concerning youth work. In some of those countries, such as Italy and Poland, the national researchers observed that stakeholders refer to the European policy documents instead of national ones, thus filling in a gap in the national legislation.

The interviewed youth workers and other stakeholders have differing opinions regarding the level of political recognition of youth work depending on the country where they come from. In general, their opinions align with the level of political recognition of youth work as identified through the desk research. However, it is notable that even in countries where youth work has already earned some level of political recognition, youth workers often say that the political recognition is not satisfactory and/or youth workers are not represented well, pointing to areas that are not properly regulated and supported by legislation.

In general, youth workers agree that political recognition of youth work is important and that it can positively impact the other types of recognition of youth work, and that if it is on a lower level then that creates challenges to the youth work practices and opportunities. Furthermore, the lack of political recognition is related to limited funding and resources for youth work. Youth workers list various challenges to political recognition of youth work, including its dependence on the political will of decision-makers, the changing priorities of policy makers, the lack of awareness and understanding among policy makers, the lack of political will and commitment, the lack of data-supported arguments and the lack of common understanding in the youth work sector. In youth workers' opinion, political recognition can be strengthened if decision makers increase their awareness about youth work, if there is more attention to it in the media, and if youth workers act in a more organised, united and strategic way, primarily through national associations of youth workers.

European developments in the field of youth work generally are seen as having some influence on the political recognition on national level. In the opinions of youth workers, the documents of the European Commission and the Council of Europe show the direction for youth work development, help in making youth work trendier as a topic, and can be used as an advocacy tool. Nevertheless, their influence seems to be stronger in pre-accession countries, such as North Macedonia and Serbia, which are striving to synchronise their national legislation with European laws. The impact seems to be much lower in EU member states, where the policy documents are seen as not binding. In the view of youth workers, the impact could be much stronger if there was

more pressure from European to the national level and if the European Commission applied more concrete measures, such as financial instruments, to monitor the actions of member states and to call for action. As it is now, the impact remains rather formal and even if European policies are reflected in national documents, they do not have much impact on the practice of youth work.

Specificities of the state of political recognition per country

CZECH REPUBLIC

The interviewees agree that youth work does not have enough political recognition, since most relevant aspects of youth work are not included in any policy or legislative documents. The lack of definition of youth work, provision of funding and regulation of requirements from organisations and youth workers, are mentioned as some of the gaps that should be regulated. Youth workers think that only some of them have a say in front of policy makers, and that there is a lack of awareness about the importance of youth work not only among the institutions, but within the sector itself.

ESTONIA

Everyone that was interviewed agrees that youth work is adequately recognised in policies and legislation. Main gaps in regulation pointed out by youth workers are in the sphere of employment rights - social benefits and guarantees, minimum qualification requirements and minimum salaries for qualified youth workers. Some of the youth workers think that they are not represented well and that they need to be more visible and better organised in the professional association and/or a trade union. In Estonia, the strong legal and political framework is seen as one of the pillars that contributes for raising youth work to a higher level.

GREECE

Youth workers agree that youth work is not at all recognised in policies and legal documents. Various gaps in legislation are identified, such as the lack of formally endorsed definition of youth work, the non-existence of formal requirements from youth workers, and the lack of clear career pathways frameworks, which will help those working in the field to identify themselves as youth workers, “professionals with a future”. The representation of youth workers in front of decision makers is seen as fragmented and limited due to the absence of a unified professional body, even though the interviewees recognise the limited role of the National Youth Council and the Hellenic Youth Workers Association.

ITALY

Political recognition of youth work is absent, despite some regions integrating youth policies. However, not all regions adopt this approach, with some focused on sports, leisure, or cultural initiatives. Many areas remain unsupported, leaving youth work unrecognised compared to roles like educators. To address this, political advocacy is crucial at all levels, from grassroots to national. By highlighting successful regions with specific laws supporting youth workers, we can garner attention and achieve the desired recognition from governing bodies.

MALTA

Youth workers are divided on the question whether youth work is adequately recognised in policies and legislation. Specific aspects of youth work are mentioned as not being regulated sufficiently, such as the different roles that youth workers take in their work and the involvement of youth workers in detached and outdoors youth work practice. Interviewees also point to the fact that they are often not recognised as part of the psycho-social team in education and the civil sector. Youth workers confirm that they are represented on a political level, but they are lagging behind other professions in the day-to-day work, such as when compared to social workers. For example, when supporting a young person that is taken to court, youth workers often need to give information about the profession and explain that they have been working with the young person.

NETHERLANDS

Youth workers think that even if some progress for political recognition of youth work was done, there is still work to be done. All interviewed youth workers agree that they are not well represented in policy development and that decision makers are not well aware of their role and importance.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Youth work is considered as only partially recognised. Youth workers underline that the process of recognition and establishing of youth work is still at the very beginning and that there are many areas that are not covered by policy documents. Youth workers are consulted by some public bodies, but they are not represented enough due to insufficient interest from decision makers. In the opinion of youth workers, if the institutional awareness for youth work recognition was on a higher level, then social recognition would be increased too. Political recognition in policy documents can be used for lobbying and improving recognition by other stakeholders.

PORTUGAL

Youth workers acknowledge the policy documents that recognise youth work, but they also think that there is still a long way to go in its political recognition. Youth workers think that political recognition can be strengthened if policy makers recognise that youth work can change young people's mentalities. Support from media is also considered as important in this process.

Youth workers acknowledge the progress, but agree that youth work is not yet politically recognised to the adequate level. For them, important aspects of youth work are missing in policy documents and legislation, such as defining youth work as a profession, recognising some types of youth work (like outreach youth work) and creating employability prospects for youth workers. Youth workers consider themselves well represented through NAPOR – the Serbian national association of youth workers, but youth work needs to get higher on the political agenda and become more visible. In their view, the EU pre-accession process of Serbia can support the process of political recognition of youth work, as the country strives for harmonisation with European policies.

Good practices related to political recognition

The practices supporting political recognition of youth work are diverse, which shows that there are different approaches for ensuring that youth workers are acknowledged by political actors and in decision-making processes.

A few good examples are related to the establishing of public institutions and bodies responsible for youth work issues. In **Portugal**, a State Secretariat for Youth was created. In **Malta**, a big contribution is made by the Youth Work Profession Board, which is a body appointed by governmental entities as a regulatory body for the warrant system and for other important matters for the profession.

North Macedonia boasts an institutionalised form of cooperation between policy makers and youth work organisations on a local level. According to the national Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy, youth centres in the country should be established in cooperation between local municipalities and the forms of youth organisation. A by-law related to the Law stipulates that the local government establishes the youth centre and then signs an agreement with a youth work organisation that will manage it on their behalf, with financial support from the municipal budget.

Participation in development of policy documents has been mentioned many times as important for political recognition of youth work. Good examples come from various countries, particularly in those where the national association of youth workers has taken an active role in that process. Closely tied to this are the lobbying and advocacy activities for youth work on national levels. In Serbia, NAPOR has launched a project aimed at creating a methodology for measuring the impact of youth work on young people and the community, as a first step in their advocacy process to show the importance and value of youth work.

The National Association of Youth Workers in **Estonia** has taken the advocacy work to a different level, by creating a political platform for youth work aimed at working with political parties prior to the national elections in 2023.

Quotes from youth workers about political recognition and its link to other forms of recognition:

"If there is not enough political recognition then all other levels of recognition will suffer."

"Political and formal recognition are interrelated and cannot be treated independently".

"All these dimensions and forms of recognition interrelate and affect each other"

"All is connected, for example, a stronger community causes political recognition, political causes formal and social recognition, but if there is weak community and level of youth work, then formal recognition can boost development and claim some level of coverage and recognition."

"Without political will there's no possibility for formal recognition that leads to social and self-recognition."

"Political recognition affects sustainability of youth work programmes and employment opportunities for youth workers, which in turn affects all of these dimensions of recognition."



4. Status and working conditions of youth workers in selected countries in Europe

The status of youth workers in the project partner countries was explored by conducting focus groups with youth workers on a national level. In total, six focus groups were organised.

The focus groups showed that there is a **great diversity in the status of youth workers** on the European level, and even between different profiles of youth workers within the same country. The status and working conditions of youth workers largely depend on the type of employer and on the legal basis on which they are contracted. On a broader scale, the status of youth workers is impacted by the overall level of recognition of youth work in the country and by the policy documents that define the status of employees in general, and/or of youth workers more specifically, if such documents exist.

Youth workers that are employed as full-time professionals, either in the public or the civil sector, are perceived as having the best working conditions. The employers who offer full-time positions to youth workers are diverse and predominantly include local municipalities, youth centres, public institutions from the education and social work sectors and civil society organisations. The working conditions are generally the same for all employed youth workers on the national level, regardless of who the employer is, since they are all subjected to the same labour laws. In all cases, employed youth workers are entitled to salary and full social benefits.

In countries where youth work is not fully recognised, there is a general preference for job positions in the public sector. The reason for this seems to be the fact that jobs for youth workers in the civil sector are considered as less secure, as organisations mostly work with project-based funding that does not guarantee a long-term financial stability. At the same time, the main employers of youth workers in those countries are organisations, which makes the overall job market in the field of youth work unstable and unfriendly for youth workers. Many of the youth workers in such contexts are engaged with limited contracts, as volunteers, or on multiple positions within the organisations, which are not necessarily related to youth work (project coordinator, trainer etc.). If they are not formally employed, their working conditions depend on the individual contract and on the status that they have. For example, freelancers are supposed to pay insurance and other costs by themselves, while volunteers have rights to very limited benefits.

The challenge is different **in countries where youth work is formally recognised**. There, while youth workers are more often employed, they still notice differences in conditions between youth workers and other related professions, such as teachers and social workers. This plays a role in their level of

motivation and the quality of work they provide. In these countries, youth workers often must take additional roles, so as a consequence they experience burnout and start looking for jobs elsewhere. In general, the view expressed in the focus groups is that youth workers are not paid according to the difficulty of the profession, and they do not have the same opportunities for professional development and career growth possibilities as those in other professions.

It should be acknowledged that there are **many youth workers who stay in the sector despite the challenging conditions, thanks to their passion for working with young people** and the possibility to make a positive impact on their lives. This happens often, even in countries where youth work is not recognised, and youth workers face more difficult conditions. Still, in the long run it results in a very high turnover, as many youth workers eventually decide to change careers and move to related fields. Due to the overall state, many people see youth work as a short-term affair and a stepping stone before pursuing other paths. Even in countries where youth work is formally recognised, it is most often not perceived as a viable long-term professional orientation.

Many specific challenges were listed that contribute to this. Some of them are:

- ① Lack of formal recognition of youth work as a distinct and valued profession.
- ② Limited career progression pathways for youth workers.
- ③ Inconsistent employment conditions, including irregular contracts, part-time work, and/or reliance on project-based funding.
- ④ Low level of professional status, reputation and position in the society.
- ⑤ Limited social benefits, especially in unregulated cases.
- ⑥ Funding constraints, which can create uncertainty and challenges in regards to long-term employment and stability.
- ⑦ Lack of representation in decision-making processes
- ⑧ Lack of advocacy efforts for youth workers' rights and interests.
- ⑨ Lower salaries than other related professions.
- ⑩ Lack of professional development opportunities such as trainings, coaching, mentoring etc.
- ⑪ Low level of self-recognition of youth work as a profession.
- ⑫ Donor politics and funding constraints that jeopardise youth workers' jobs.

Overall, it can be concluded that the situation regarding the status of youth workers is better in countries with greater levels of formal recognition, since youth workers there are covered by collective labour agreements and protected by labour laws. Looking up at that, youth workers from other countries also aspire for achieving greater recognition of youth work and strengthening the youth work sector. According to the focus groups, a major role in that effort can be played by national professional associations of youth workers, which in most cases act as the main or only bodies representing the rights of youth workers. In countries where such associations exist, they are often mentioned as positive examples that have played a crucial role in improving the conditions of youth workers.

Good practices related to the status and employment rights of youth workers

The focus groups on the status of youth workers resulted in some good practices shared by participants.

Country	Good practice
Portugal	an important impact has been made by some municipalities that start investing more in local youth policies and in reinforcing their teams with trained youth workers
Estonia	an important step was made by the replacement of project-based financing with more stable funding from local government budgets
Serbia	the youth centre OPENS, which employs youth workers and signifies a step towards recognising youth work as a distinct profession



5. Annex 1: Case studies

5.1. Czech Republic: Case study of good practice – Low Threshold Clubs Week

We have chosen the described case of good practice with regard to its longer tradition, during which it has demonstrated a growing impact on various target groups, its nationwide reach in the Czech Republic, and last but not least - in our opinion - also the potential for international cooperation and use.

The initiator of the described example of good practice is the Czech Streetwork Association. It is an umbrella organization of low-threshold social services. It brings together and protects programmes that operate using the contact work method. It is dedicated to the development of streetwork, education, networking and advocacy. It was founded in 1997 and currently unite 118 organizations.

Low Threshold Clubs Week is a campaign that introduces the service of low threshold clubs for children and youth to different target groups in the Czech Republic. The 16th season of this campaign took place in 2022.

The focus of the campaign is on a series of events organized by the individual participating low-threshold clubs in their respective cities, towns, and communities during a collectively selected week (the last week of September). The concentration of these events in one week, their mutual coordination and the employment of a large number of clubs makes it possible to highlight the work and importance of low-threshold clubs in the region and nationwide.

During The Low Threshold Clubs Week, the public has the opportunity to visit more than 100 low threshold clubs, usually from all regions of the Czech Republic. In addition to getting an insight into the activities and functioning of the clubs, parents of teenagers in particular can get expert advice on problems related to their children's adolescence as part of free counselling. Each club also prepares its own programme.

A joint promotional campaign is also being run for the purpose described above. This has the advantage of mutual support from every organization involved on social media and in the media. In addition to the social media activities, the media are also approached and communication with the professional and general public is carried out through them.

On the website of the Czech Association of Streetwork (<https://www.streetwork.cz/stranka/2397/tyden-nizkoprahovych-klubu>) and on other communication channels, a calendar of events of individual low-threshold clubs participating in the campaign is presented.

The target groups of the campaign are parents, potential clients, schools, neighbours, corporate donors, local government representatives and the media.

Since 2021, Low Threshold Club Week has also chosen to focus thematically on one or more current issues related to youth. In 2021, the issues were child and youth mental health and return of the children to school (both in the wake of the Covid epidemic and multiple lockdowns), while in 2022 the issues were the impact of poverty on childhood and adolescence and the manifestations of the refugee crisis in low-threshold clubs (in the context of the war in Ukraine).

The Czech Streetwork Association monitors the number of this campaign's outputs. Since 2019, 64 separate media outputs have been published based on the campaign (ie 15-20 per year). A large part of this was in-depth reportages, presenting in detail the work of the street worker and including a tour of the premises of the clubs or even the locations in which the service operates. Other expected impacts are an increase in awareness of low-threshold clubs and their role in the context of youth work, and a gradual increase in the interest of clients in these services.

In our opinion, the described practice has potential for international use. Inspiration would be possible at the national level of other states, which could use this format to promote a type of youth work (ideally if it were an umbrella organization in the country concerned). Secondly, if there is the will and willingness to do so in a larger number of participating countries, there is also the possibility of using an international format, with events taking place simultaneously across countries.

5.2. Estonia: The qualification system and occupational standard of youth workers

Youth work has become gradually more professional in Estonia. In Estonia, estimated that there are about 7000 youth workers, working at different positions.

At state level there are two documents which indicates the importance of youth workers:

- 1) The Youth Work Act does not define the youth worker profession as such, but it does set the requirements for youth and project camp manager, defines the youth work and main environments for its practices and some other key elements for youth workers field of activities and responsibilities.
- 2) The national youth strategy, Youth Sector Development Plan 2021-2035, dedicates one of its strategic goals to quality youth work, aiming at ensuring that it is available across Estonia. To do so, there are several ambitions defined for facilitating the development of competences and the training of new youth workers, and for supporting the youth workers as profession:
 - ensuring regional opportunities to receive bachelor and master's level higher education in the field of youth work.
 - initiating the transfer to compulsory professional qualification in the youth field professional qualification in youth sector.
 - ensuring the systematic and consistent acknowledgement of youth workers.
 - ensuring adequate salary equal with the salary level of specialists on similar positions (such as in the field of education).

There are three main factors which has contributed to the development of the profession of youth workers in Estonia:

- 1) Youth work can be studied in three academic institutions in Estonia:
 - Tallinn University – higher applied sciences degree in youth work and a master's degree in youth work organization.
 - Tartu University Narva college – bachelor's degree in youth work.
 - Tartu University Viljandi cultural academy – higher applied sciences degree in community education and hobby activities.

In 2022, the 30th anniversary of youth work education was celebrated.

- 2) Over the years, trainings for youth workers have been one of the priorities in Estonia receiving attention in strategic development as well as through financial investments.
- 3) There is one qualification system for different professions in Estonia, a comprehensive framework, that links life-long learning system and the labour market. And there is separate occupational standard for youth workers in Estonia.

Estonian example for strengthening youth work recognition is the occupational standard of youth workers.

Description

The occupational standard of youth workers is the key document to define the role, the minimum requirements and competences of youth workers, skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to work successfully, it includes the code of ethics. The standard is built up on levels 4, 6 and 7, which have a bit different competence, for example level 4 has focus on organizing youth work, interacting with the public and cooperation, providing a safe environment, professional personal development, and youth worker recurring competence; while levels 6 and 7 have additional competences like management, youth field development etc.

Obtaining professional qualification has not obligatory so far. There are no age restrictions when applying for a professional occupational standard certificate in youth work.

In order to apply for a professional occupational standard certificate, youth workers have to go through a self-assessment process by filling in a portfolio based on the occupational standard. After that, an interview is conducted with an expert panel, which is the basis for the decision if the qualification would be awarded or not (in justified cases). Besides a professional qualification of youth workers, there is also a partial qualification certificate for youth personnel, which is mandatory for working in a youth camp. Such competences are assessed through a written exam.

The first occupational standard for youth workers confirmed in 2006 and the first professional qualification obtained in youth work in 2010. Started from 2012 there is new occupational standard equivalent to to the European Qualification Framework, which has 8 levels, the first of which is the lowest and the eighth is the highest.

From January 2022 the structure responsible for awarding the youth worker professional certificates is Estonian Association of Youth Workers.

Professional qualification certificate is valid for 5 years. You can apply for the certificate twice a year.

Main outcomes

1. All the youth work curriculums in academic institutions have to be in accordance with the occupational standard for youth workers. Thus, youth workers are taught the competencies needed in the labour market in higher education institutions.
2. The content and quantity of studies targeted at occupational activities meet requirements of the labour market.
3. The occupational standard is a valuable tool for employers and youth workers themselves for understanding their competences, implementing these competences in their work and in their further personal development.
4. The competence of individuals is appreciated and recognised, regardless of where and how the studies took place. Therefore, it is possible to prove your competences with, for example, previous work experience.
5. The occupational standard is a mark that youth work is a profession in Estonia, and it allows to compare it with other similar professions.
6. In the end of 2020, there were more than 300 valid youth worker certificates and more than 2 600 partial professional certificates awarded for camp counsellors or camp directors.
7. There are more and more local municipalities that are requiring youth work formal education and/or professional certificate as pre-requisite for funding certain youth work activities and/or when recruiting youth sector staff on local level, for example for the posts of youth field responsible in local municipality, director of local youth centre etc.
8. There are more and more local municipalities where the occupational standard certificate has also been used as reference for salary system in youth sector on local level. The salaries are higher for those youth workers, who has occupational standard certificate (the higher level of the certificate, the higher salary). The aim is to promote occupational standard certificates as a quality mark for the work.

As occupational qualifications are internationally comparable, Estonian occupational standard of youth workers is transferable in other European contexts.

5.3. Italy: An example of best practice for strengthening youth work recognition and improving the status of youth workers in Italy

Go Deep is a game that is played by any group that is interested in the future of a community. It is like a journey, where groups of people travel through the cards along imaginary metro lines to deepen their leadership and facilitation skills and create actions and community transformations for everyone.

Go Deep is a game where participants learn about themselves, about their communities and get new skills about the facilitation of human relations and communities, communication, and different perspectives and resources that, after the game can be applied in their daily life.

The Partnership was composed by Altekio (Spain) Biovilla (Portugal), Comunitazione (Italy), Diversity Matters (Scotland) Elos Foundation (The Netherlands) Processwork Hub (Greece) Xena (Italy).

Go Deep combines the Elos Philosophy, Processwork and Non Formal Education, to create an asset-based community development process, which is played like a game and focuses on change on three levels: individual, group and community

Process Work or Process Oriented Psychology is an approach to facilitating individuals, groups and organizations. Dr. Arnold Mindell, originally a physicist and Jungian psychologist, and always researcher at heart, developed methods of carefully following the twists and turns of nature – revealing the creative patterns that lie within apparently chaotic and disturbing events and symptoms.

All of us tend to identify with only a small part of who we are. Over the boundary of our awareness, new information arises, first as a disturbance – in dreams, body experiences, symptoms and conflicts. Similarly in organizations, relationships and daily work get disturbed by conflicts and surprising events. A natural tendency is to try to eliminate the disturbance. Process Work methods involve accurately exploring both our plans, and those elements of our experience that rub up against our plans, disturb or surprise us. The interaction of all parts and dimensions of experience, yield new ideas and directions forward – and a feeling of being involved with your life and others.

Deep democracy is the core value and principle of process oriented psychology. Processwork is deeply democratic toward all levels of experience: it values the freedom to explore and express consensus reality, dreamland and the essence levels. It understands all levels as equally important.

Every time you ignore sentient, that is, generally unrecognized dreamlike perceptions, something inside you goes into a mild form of shock because you have overlooked the spirit of life, your greatest potential power. Arnold Mindell, *Dreaming While Awake*.

Only when all aspects of an experience are unfolded with awareness does the wisdom embedded in the experience reveal itself most fully. Process work is based on the idea that processes contain their own inherent wisdom. Even the most intractable relationship problems or body experiences contain a great deal of meaning and wisdom, hidden within what otherwise might seem like intolerable events. In order to unfold the details of any particular experience, it is important to notice our everyday approach to experiences as well as the dreamlike or unknown background aspects of those events of which we are not quite aware. Amy Mindell (2008). *Bringing deep democracy to life. Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 6(3)

Elos Philosophy comprises seven disciplines: Gaze, Affection, Dream, Care, Miracle, Celebration, and Re-evolution.

The gaze consists of exercising and cultivating an appreciative outlook on the community and its environment in order to create a scenario of abundant resources and possibilities, enhancing each person's presence and potential for contribution.

Affection is what stimulates people to create affectionate relationships, fostering the emergence of mutual care and trust – elements that feed and strengthen collective work. The exercise of listening is an essential skill for this discipline.

To dream means to provide the appropriate space and relationship for the expression of the best and deepest aspirations in us all. It means building an image of the best we would like to achieve, transcending our habitual practice of only identifying problems. Typically, the deeper, more genuine and more precious the dream, the more support it finds from the entire community.

Care consists of carefully planning strategies and projects that will widely meet the expectations of a set of common dreams. The group operates in response to the question of how to walk together while taking care of oneself, of others and of a shared dream all at the same time.

Miracle is what we call collective action motivated by the group's best qualities and skills, equipped with the abundance of existing resources within the community, confident in the affectional bonds that unite them, and motivated by their best common dreams. It is an extraordinary gift that you give to yourself and to others.

A celebration is a reunion after a course of action in order to share the joy of joint accomplishment, recognize and celebrate each person's contribution to the collective achievement. It is when the

concrete physical achievement and the lived experience make even more sense because they are nurturing the celebration of life.

To create a re-evolution is to think about the future and plan actions to materialize new challenges, always together and with new momentum created by the joy of seeing dreams come true.

(Text taken from the official website)

Multimedia references: <https://godeeproject.org/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kanRw3JIHro>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LnYZSeeks8>

5.4. The Netherlands: Register of child and youth work in the Netherlands

On May 17, 2022, the Register of Child Workers and Youth Workers opened . Professional association BVJong is the driving force behind this new register. Bianca Boender of BVJong explains why the register is needed and how it helps child and youth workers to demonstrate and improve their professional skills.

Why was this register necessary?

Because it wasn't there yet! Child and youth work is such a specific profession. You do have the Register of Social Workers , but that does not properly cover the load of youth work. As a professional association, we were therefore asked by youth workers why there was no register. Another immediate reason was that we drew up the competence profile in 2018: a kind of overview of the qualities that a good youth worker should have. When that profile was available, we wanted a register that could safeguard those competencies.

How does the new register do justice to the specific profession of youth workers?

The starting point of the register is the professional competence profile. This is in line with the quality label of Social Work Netherlands. For the competence profile we have described the qualities in a so-called competence matrix. What is so specific about youth work is that contact with young people is always voluntary. There is no obligation, as is often the case in youth care. Youth workers supervise leisure activities and are therefore a pivot in the complete network of the young person: parents, friends, school and sometimes also the police and social services. This means that child and youth workers work across domains. And that cross-domain work means that there are many different factors that determine how well a youth worker does his or her job.

How do these different competences appear in the Register of Child Workers and Youth Workers?

We have divided the competencies into three categories: streetwise, booksmart and system-sensitive. Perhaps as a youth worker you know very well what is going on in the street and you easily make contact with the young people, but you find it difficult to find your way in contact with the municipality. Then you are more streetwise than system sensitive. That's okay, we want to do justice to those different skills. That is why you do a test before registering in the registry. This test (the competence matrix) shows in which skills you excel and how this compares with the other competences. With that hatch you can do two things. Either you set the goal to improve your 'lesser' points or you choose to become even better in the competence in which you already score well. In any case, this test will give you more insight into your work qualities.

We ask the young people we work with to continue to develop. Then you can't make it professional to stand still. – Bianca Boender (BVJong)

Do diplomas play no role?

Yes, but we didn't want that diploma to weigh the most heavily. We do not want to say: MBO is good, HBO is better and WO is best, because that is not the case in practice. Education is an indication, but does not say whether you can do what really matters: assisting young people in their development into emotionally stable adults. Many youth workers have received social training, but not everyone. Some come from the military or the police or have a legal background. We do not want to exclude those professionals from the register.

What steps do you go through with the registry?

The goal is that you really look at your personal development. That is why you first fill in the competence matrix and set up a 360° feedback. A 360° feedback is a questionnaire that you have completed by the people you work with: colleagues, clients and principals. The questions in that list examine the way you work. The image that others have of you is of course not complete, but it is precisely this sum of different visions that can be very insightful. The competency matrix and that 360° feedback help you determine your direction. You draw up a development plan for this register. This is how you set your personal goals. Then you look for the right training and reflection activities and enter them in your file. You have five years to reach 120 registration points. These points are subdivided into accredited professional development, reflection and other professional development.

To what extent can this register tie in with the training and development programs that youth workers often go through at their employers anyway?

What I like about this register is that you register in a personal capacity. You make a development plan that is tailored to your own needs. These can very well be the personal goals that you share with your manager, for example during a performance review. I think personal development should be an integral part of your mindset as a youth worker. We ask the young people we work with to develop. Then you can't make it professional to stand still. But most child and youth workers I know are very driven and passionate people. They already do that on their own.

What is your personal motivation for making such an effort for this register?

For years I did youth work in Rotterdam, especially with Antillean and Cape Verdean girls. It's really a great job. We can do so much preventively. A study by the University of Amsterdam has also proven that our work has an effect. We influence. Then we must set an example and ensure that good professionals are available for those young people. A professional register also contributes to making everyone aware of this.

Read more: <https://www.registerplein.nl/registers/kinderwerkers-jongerenwerkers/>

5.5. Portugal: Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) Youth Worker

In Portugal, until 2022 there was easy and accessible answer to proceed with the certification of competences and respective validation process of Youth Technicians, which formally exists since 2015.

APPJuventude - Portuguese Association of Youth Professionals, took a leading role in this issue and proceeded, together with other entities such as the Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth - IPDJ and the Soure Schools, a protocol that allows this to be possible since 2022.

This protocol follows the principles and objectives identified by APPJuventude in favour of the professional recognition of the youth worker and in the framework of the commitment with the Bonna Process which is being implemented by the association.

This protocol establishes as priorities the analysis and evaluation of the qualification levels, the training needs and the guidance on the training paths of the APPJuventude associates. Focusing its action on the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) professional level 4 of Youth worker.

What is RVCC?

The Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) is the process by which the adult demonstrates competences acquired and developed throughout life by formal, non-formal and informal means, which are liable to validation and certification for the purpose of obtaining a qualification (Portaria n.º 61/2022, de 31 January - consolidated version).

For whom?

The recognition, validation and certification of competences is addressed to adults aged 18 years old or more, without the appropriate qualification for insertion or progression in the labour market and, as a priority, without having concluded basic or secondary education, being particularly indicated for adults with incomplete qualification paths. Adults up to the age of 23 must have at least three years of professional experience.

What is the certification?

The conclusion of a process of recognition, validation and certification of competences allows the obtainment of a school certificate of basic level (4th, 6th or 9th year) or of secondary level (12th year), of a professional certification or both, in these cases designated as double certification and grants the level 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 of the National Qualifications Framework – law n.º 782/2009, 23rd July.

Where?

The recognition, validation and certification of competences is developed in the Qualifica Centres, centres specialised in adult qualification.

Results achieved so far:

The process has run quite successfully, exceeding initial expectations. APPJuventude has already initiated contacts with other school groups in the country in order to enlarge this network and thus be able to guarantee more easily the accessibility of youth workers from all over the country to this important revalidation.

Youth worker Reference - Level 4

The process was based on the referential of the National Catalogue of Qualifications, in the QNQ/QEQ Level 4 - EDUCATION AND TRAINING AREA: 761 - Services of Support to Children and Youngsters

Description of qualification:

To intervene in the conception, organization, development and evaluation of projects, programs and activities with and for young people, through methodologies of non-formal education, facilitating and promoting citizenship, participation, autonomy, inclusion and personal, social and cultural development.

What does it do?

1. Diagnose and analyse areas of intervention with and for young people.
2. Collaborate in the definition and management of technical, logistical, training and financial resources necessary for the implementation of youth activities, namely in terms of human resources, equipment, space and services.
3. Intervening in the planning, organisation, dynamisation and evaluation of youth work activities.
4. Collaborate in the preparation and implementation of intervention and development projects, of national and/or international scope, addressed to young people.
5. Intervening in the development of information and communication campaigns, at national and/or international level, on youth issues.
6. Promote the international dimension of the youth field, especially within Europe, Ibero-America and the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP).

Which competencies do you have?

KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS
<p>Notions of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Diagnosis and evaluation of social situations. 2. Non-formal education in Portugal and in the world. 3. Policies and legislation in the area of youth. 4. Human rights, social integration and empowerment of young people. <p>Knowledge of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arts, corporal, dramatic, musical and plastic expression. 2. Physical education, sports and sports equipment. 3. Safety, health and first-aid. 4. Methods and techniques for training and information. 5. Information and communication technologies. 6. Associative management. 7. Preparation and development of projects. 8. International cooperation projects and programmes in the youth area. 9. Education for development. 10. Management of pedagogical teams. <p>In-depth knowledge of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Animation techniques, including pedagogical games and group dynamics. 2. Communication techniques, oral and written. 3. Intervention and community development. 4. Events organization. 5. Planning and development of free time activities. 6. International organisation and cooperation in the youth field. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Apply methods and techniques for diagnosis of situation and analysis of the real needs of young people, especially in the field of non-formal education. 8. Identify and address potential risk situations, in cooperation with other actors in the youth/youth field. 9. Apply participative and youth involvement methods and techniques. 10. Apply research techniques using quantitative and qualitative methodologies. 11. To apply basic techniques of human resources management. 12. Use information and communication technologies tools in a user's perspective. 13. Apply project methodology. 14. Apply pedagogical methodologies and techniques, in particular non-formal ones, in the intervention with young people. 15. To elaborate applications to programmes and initiatives for young people. 16. Apply adequate animation techniques to each context, group and individuals. 17. Organise information and communication campaigns on youth issues. 18. Apply communication techniques in the public dissemination of results on youth issues. 19. Apply safety and health rules and basic first aid techniques. 20. To create, manage and energise youth associations. 21. To use sport for the development of non-formal education activities.

	ATTITUDES
<p>22. To apply strategies for fighting isolation and for the social integration of young people.</p> <p>23. To apply the mandatory mechanisms for the formal functioning of an association.</p> <p>24. Apply techniques of organization of spaces, materials and equipment.</p> <p>25. To promote and mediate events.</p> <p>26. Support the construction of public policies, national and international, for the Youth area</p> <p>27. Apply techniques of promotion and development of international cooperation projects in the youth area</p> <p>28. Apply techniques to develop and support initiatives for peace, human rights and intercultural dialogue.</p> <p>29. To organise youth exchanges.</p> <p>30. To express themselves orally and in writing in order to facilitate communication with national and foreign interlocutors.</p> <p>31. To follow up youth pathways and tutoring.</p> <p>32. Promote the knowledge and inform young people about the importance of subjects which are transversal to their interest or which have an impact on their age group.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Demonstrate capacity for evaluation and quality improvement, with a view to continuous improvement. 2. Work as a team. 3. Demonstrate empathy, emotional intelligence and social skills. 4. Support the development of confidence, knowledge and critical thinking in young people. 5. Promote youth participation through action, collective learning and peer education. 6. Tailor its intervention to the target individuals and groups. 7. To promote skills in interpersonal relationships, gender equality, inclusion and human rights. 8. Promote the conscious and safe use of new information and communication technologies. 9. Support young people, facilitating their affirmation in a world of permanent change, both nationally and internationally. 10. To foster an approach of conflict management towards peaceful solutions. 11. To promote intercultural and multicultural interaction and dialogue among young people. 12. To develop leadership processes. 13. To stimulate development education.