

Professional Open Youth Work in Europe

The point of view of young people and students

Young people expect a safe place to meet with friends, where they are taken serious and treated with respect. They wish to be enriched and challenged through new experiences and activities for growing as a person and learning a variety of skills – for that youth workers serve as role model, facilitator and confidant. Students are willing to match those expectations – supporting (young) people is among the main motives to study for becoming a youth worker.

144 young people and youth work students in nine European Countries came together between January and March 2015 to discuss and give an inside in their wishes, needs and hopes when it comes to professional open youth work.

„The youth club is safe, and I have never felt safe at home or at school“ said an 18 year old boy in the discussion group in Norway and summarizes the need of young people to have a space where they feel welcome, not pressured or pushed into anything and where they can turn to in case of problems. The role of the youth worker becomes crucial here as he or she plays an important part in creating the open minded atmosphere, inspiring activities and the trustful relationship that young people refer to when asked what were their most important experiences with youth work.

Friends, activities and experiences – all new!

Young people appreciate the openness of this form of youth work by saying that meeting and hanging out with friends without any kind of pressure is an important offer for them. They also acknowledged that through frequenting e.g. youth centres they met a wider range of new friends, were animated to try new activities and thus able to make new experiences they wouldn't have had without.

Being offered a variety of games, sports, cultural activities and excursions are valued features of open youth work. But the young people also mentioned that being supported in realising their own ideas or being involved in setting up those activities gave them the opportunity to acquire new skills and grow as a person. A 15 year old boy in our group in Malta brought this extra value to the point by explaining what youth work changed for him: *“Higher self-esteem, getting smarter and getting more mature“*

information, help and support

„Everyone can listen to you, but youth workers can really help you“ stated a 17 year old girl in the group in Rotterdam, expressing a general expectation of young people all over Europe that youth workers listen to their questions and problems and have a broad knowledge for giving

advise and support. Not only are they seen as a source of information, but also requested to set rules and reinforce them if necessary. Youth work should help to keep them on the right path or as a 17 year old boy in the Austrian group put it "*The youth centre kept us away from shit*". This also explains that one of the most mentioned things that they miss is time – be it more or longer opening hours or resources of the youth workers to engage with them.

Students are highly motivated, but also realistic

The student groups in Finland and the UK shared that they are highly motivated to work with and for young people. The motives to study for working with young people also include a personal wish to be professional and contribute to the community. As a 40 year old female student in the UK said „*I wanted to be seen as a professional rather than just a do gooder!*” The strong dedication to young people seems to overrule some negative aspects in their expectations for their future working reality – since all groups mentioned that they expect to work for a low salary and especially in the UK facing job insecurity. They also acknowledged that for working with young people in these kind of open settings they will need flexibility, a clear distinction between private and professional life and creativity.

Being at the side of young people

The assumptions what they can change in young people´s lives and what young people will expect from them match well with the results of the discussion groups with young people themselves. Helping young people to find their own path in life as well as empowering them to take their position in society were the strongest among students. Students plan to use a wide variety of activities and methods to full fill these tasks and are aware of their special function as role model and example when it comes to trust, relationship and attitude. A 28 year old male student from Finland described it as: “Youth worker has only his (her) reputation and that´s why the confidentiality is everything”.

A Map of professional open youth work in Europe

We asked 96 young users of youth work and 48 youth work students about their experiences and expectations with and of professional open youth work. „*This qualitative research approach, using the same scheme in nine European countries helps us to identify common ground as well as seeing the existing differences in youth work approaches among the partner countries*” says Pauline Grace from our UK partner Newman University.

The Strategic Partnership “Mapping professional open youth work” will produce a common definition and description of shared values of this specific form of youth work and an online platform to share knowledge, experiences and debate through an E-Magazine and a Video Channel. “*These first hand answers from young people and students will play an important role in our discussion about a shared definition and principles of professional open youth work in Europe*” concludes Marc Boes, managing director of POYWE.

The Strategic Partnership "Mapping professional open youth work" runs from October 2014 to September 2016 and consists of the following partners:

poywe - Professional Open Youth Work in Europe – applicant organisation/coordinator

bOJA – bundesweites Netzwerk Offene Jugendarbeit/Austria

Ungdom og Fritid/Norway

n.e.t.z. - Netzwerk der Jugendtreff und -zentren Südtirol/Italy

Udruga „ZAMISLI"/Croatia

Stichting JONG Rotterdam/The Netherlands

AGENZIJA ZGHAZAGH/Malta

HUMAK University of Applied Sciences/Finland

Institute for policy research and analysis/Lithuania

Newman University/UK

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