Youth work quality tools in 15 European countries

Youth Partnership

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Executive summary

This analytical paper explores the current state of youth work quality tools in 15 European countries, focusing on how the quality of youth work is understood and supported. Quality youth work has long been a European priority due to its contributions to young people's well-being and social inclusion. However, there is no shared definition of what "quality" entails or how best to promote it across diverse national contexts.

The study is based on a survey conducted with European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) correspondents and members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR). Countries that did not have youth work quality tools or frameworks were not included in the analysis. To provide a more balanced picture of youth work quality, data collection was supplemented by additional research on five countries. The countries studied have developed national quality tools, though fewer have focused on tools that incorporate local contexts or the perspectives of young people.

The results of the study show that it is more common to have structural-level quality tools than to have tools created for local contexts. Nine out of 15 countries reported having quality tools with a focus on the national or systemic level, aiming to influence the whole community of practice of youth work in the country. Five countries had developed hybrid models, combining the national and organisational levels with youth work practice and providing tools to analyse work with young people. Only one country, Finland, had developed quality tools with a focus solely on local practice. The most common quality tool mentioned was a competency description of an individual youth worker or a professional standard for youth workers. Out of the 15 countries studied, 11 had a nationally approved, used or produced quality tool.

There were eight common themes in the quality tools studied. These were promoting learning; promoting well-being and safety; working with groups; establishing a professional relationship with individual young people; promoting participation of the young in society; promoting inclusion; being youth-centred and conscious of the needs of young people; and organisational skills.

The study applies quality thinking developed for management purposes to the youth work context. According to the results, most of the quality tools focus on the process of youth work instead of the subjective experiences of young people as beneficiaries of youth work. The critical observation of the analytical paper notes that despite the emphasis on youth work quality tools to respond to the needs of young people, the systematic integration of beneficiary perspectives of quality is the work of the future. Also, integrating youth work contributions to local communities and sustainability issues is rarely represented in the tools studied.

The study concludes with four key observations.

1. Lack of conceptual clarity

There is a shared understanding of the importance of quality youth work in the European youth field. However, it is not always clear what role different quality systems, standards and frameworks have in promoting quality youth work. Despite the efforts of this research group to analyse different conceptions of quality, there were relatively few explicit statements on how quality is understood in general.

2. European youth work quality frameworks are not widely used

The European expert group on youth work quality has presented a framework for analysing quality. This was explicitly referred to in Sweden, and other countries had adopted different perspectives. Further analysis of case examples could be useful in understanding to what extent existing European tools have contributed to the creation of different quality tools.

3. Beneficiary perspectives are not widely presented

Most of the quality tools described what youth workers need to be able to do and how youth organisations can work best. Actual efforts to integrate the experiences and expectations of young people are relatively uncommon.

4. Sharing different tools and practices is still needed

It was noted that most of the tools used by the countries and regions analysed in this paper were based on models they had developed themselves, and the adaptation of tools from other national contexts was relatively uncommon.

In Part 2 of this paper, detailed examples of quality tools in 15 countries are provided.

Part 1

Introduction

Supporting quality youth work has been a European priority. Quality youth work contributes to the well-being of young people and strengthens the democratic spirit. Talking about quality youth work is also connected to demands for better support and the allocation of sufficient resources for youth work.

Scholars on the concept of quality tend to agree that they disagree on what quality means and how it could be best managed (Mitra 2021; Pradeep Kumar, Raju and Satish Kumar 2016). The traditional way of looking at quality is to say that it refers to excellence, reaching the highest standards or doing your job really well. When the youth work community talks about quality youth work, it refers to doing youth work as well as possible. This, in turn, requires proper support mechanisms, such as training opportunities, ways of recognising prior learning in youth work and a set of competence descriptions.

Generally, scholars of quality management have been critical of equating quality with excellence. This is seen as too vague for management purposes, as it is usually hard to measure or even define this conception properly (Anttila and Jussila 2017). Due to this, other ways of thinking about quality are preferred when creating quality systems.

An influential quality approach is the ISO standard, developed by the International Organization for Standardization. According to it, quality is understood as the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfils requirements. These requirements are decided by organisations, and they should satisfy the needs of

customers. In this understanding, quality means meeting the specifications of design. This approach analyses objective and measurable features. Other ways of thinking about quality emphasise subjective features and preferences. In this view, quality is about meeting the demands of users. Here, quality is best seen as whatever satisfies the needs of customers. It is possible to combine these two perspectives (Martin, Elg and Gremyr 2025), although they might be seen as contradictory. In addition, one can also refer to wider societal needs as key elements of quality.

Quality does not happen by itself. Different tools and perspectives have been developed to maintain and improve quality. One can talk about quality management, quality control, quality assurance, quality systems, total quality systems and quality improvement (Mitra 2021). There are quality frameworks, quality standards and quality handbooks. The expert group on youth work quality has used the term "quality development" to refer to the process of setting indicators and explaining youth work better (European Commission 2017).

Even a short excursion into theories about quality and quality management reveals a rich array of possible ways of thinking about quality. There are plenty of concepts to choose from. If there is no shared understanding of what quality in general means, the same applies to its management. For this reason, it cannot be assumed that different stakeholders will have a shared understanding of quality. Therefore, analysing different conceptions of youth work quality can be a step forward in considering how a European framework might connect with national policies.

This analytical paper examines youth work quality in 15 European countries. The authors of this paper did not approach the question with a fixed idea of what youth work quality means. Therefore, the paper analyses what the EKCYP correspondents and PEYR members who answered the survey thought about quality and the tools to promote the quality of youth work. This data collection was supplemented with the integration of five countries into analysis. Since the data of the study do not contain any shared concepts, the term "quality tools" is used to denote different ways of promoting both quality youth work and quality of youth work. Based on this standpoint, the approach adopted in this paper does not judge quality tools based on extrinsic criteria. Instead, the aim is to understand and articulate different ways of thinking about and promoting the quality of youth work. If this endeavour is successful, the differences in how quality is conceptualised will become clearer.

The paper begins by examining how the concepts of quality youth work and the quality of youth work have been used in European youth work policy discussions. Secondly, European quality perspectives are analysed. Thirdly, the methodology of the study is described further. Fourthly, the study's results are analysed using four different perspectives. Finally, the conclusion highlights the main results of the study. Part 2 of the study describes in detail the quality tools used in the analysed countries and regions.

Quality youth work and quality of youth work

The quality of youth work has been discussed in the field of European youth work policy for at least 15 years. There has been an emphasis on both quality youth work and also on the quality of youth work, although the first concept is more common. Although interlinked, these two terms emphasise different things. For example, in Recommendation CM/Rec 2017/4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work, it is stated that "[a]dequately supporting young people today, including through the provision of quality youth work, is an important investment Europe has to make" (Council of Europe 2017). Usually, quality youth work is not explicitly mentioned, although different conditions for quality youth work are outlined. These include, for example, sustainable structures and resources, an evidence-based approach and research, collaboration and developing comprehensive youth work policy (European Commission 2024). When talking about quality youth work, the quality is probably understood in the traditional way of associating quality with the positive aspects and success of the product or service (Anttila and Jussila 2017). Thus, quality youth work refers holistically to youth work that contributes to the well-being and citizenship of young people. The quality of youth work might be more closely connected to evaluating youth work, although similar structural issues are also often emphasised. For example, a European Commission publication on youth work quality systems and frameworks emphasises that "[i]n order to develop the quality of youth work it is also important to formulate indicators" (European Commission 2017: 37).

While the concepts of quality youth work and the quality of youth work are not always clearly defined, we propose that the concepts can be distinguished as follows. Perhaps it can be said that when using the concept "quality of youth work", the emphasis is on explanation, evaluation and measurement, in addition to structural issues, and the concept "quality youth work" refers more holistically to the promotion of youth work in a way that meets the expectations of young people and European societies alike. However, both concepts are important in understanding how European youth work policy has tackled the issue of quality.

In the Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) (European Commission 2009), it is emphasised that "[p]roviding quality guidance and counselling services" is needed in all fields of action identified in the document, including youth work. Improving access to quality youth information was emphasised. There was not yet a mention of quality youth work or the quality of youth work. This was to change quite soon. For example, the current European Union (EU) Youth Strategy 2019-2027 includes a target on quality youth work. As part of promoting empowerment, the strategy invites member states and the European Commission to "[s]upport quality youth work development on local, regional, national and European level, including policy development in the field, training for youth workers, the establishment of legal frameworks and sufficient allocation of resources" (European Commission 2018).

The European youth policy discussion has tackled the issue of quality at least since the publication of the Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention. In the declaration, it was emphasised that quality and qualifications of youth work were debated in the conference. The declaration talked about the quality of (youth work) practice. It was mentioned that, alongside competence and recognition, quality is among the topics that create challenges caused by the provision of youth work by different actors, including paid and voluntary youth workers. The document emphasised the need to promote the recognition of prior learning of youth workers. These could be established by "the setting of quality standards and the identification of generic competencies" (Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention 2010: 4). It was suggested that this type of framework could be "developed at the European level and applied through national structures, delivered through flexible education and training systems, as well as self-regulated through a professional code of ethics governing the behaviour of youth workers in their contact with young people" (ibid.). Thus, already at this stage, it was acknowledged that the creation of quality standards was important for youth work, although the suggestion lacked specificity. This document did not yet emphasise that quality standards would be important for the promotion of youth work in European societies.

The 2010 Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on youth work also emphasised the need to work on the quality of youth work. The resolution invited the European Commission to "[e]nhance the quality of youth work, the capacity building and competence development of youth workers and youth leaders and the recognition of non-formal learning in youth work, by providing learning mobility experiences for youth workers and youth leaders" and invited member states and the European Commission to "[e]nable youth work to further develop its quality" (European Commission 2010). Clearly, at this stage, one of the conceptual tools to promote the recognition of youth work was to talk about the quality of youth work and point out the need to further develop it. This was further emphasised in the 2013 Council conclusions on the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people. According to it, "[q]uality youth work is a commitment to continually ensuring and enhancing optimum youth work

provision and practice for young people" (European Commission 2013). Elements of quality youth work are a quality approach informed by evidence, quality systems and supportive quality frameworks.

The 2nd European Youth Work Convention was held in 2015. The final declaration talked about both the quality of youth work practice and quality youth work. It was emphasised that quality tools are needed to promote quality youth work. Similarly to the earlier declaration, there was a call for shared quality standards: "[t]here needs to be a core framework of quality standards for youth work responsive to national contexts, including competence models for youth workers, and accreditation systems for prior experience and learning" (Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention 2015: 6). The document also provided eight recommendations. The second of them was improving the quality of youth work. The proper training and qualifications of youth workers and youth workers' competences were emphasised.

The Council of Europe recommendation from 2017 further emphasised the need for quality youth work. The first recommendation of the document highlights the importance of the concept of quality youth work by calling member states to renew their support for youth work by "ensuring that the establishment or further development of quality youth work is safeguarded and pro-actively supported within local, regional or national youth policies, as appropriate" (Council of Europe 2017). The document noted that quality youth work is one of the means to support European young people. Therefore, providing sufficient resources is needed. This is expressed as follows: "[a]dequately supporting young people today, including through the provision of quality youth work, is an important investment Europe has to make for its present and for the future." Also, the document noted that it is of vital importance for member states to ensure "access to quality youth work for all young people" (ibid.). While this document does not mention the quality of youth work, it strongly stresses the need to provide quality youth work.

The Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda emphasised youth work quality. The resolution identified five challenges in Europe, namely conceptual framework, competence, credibility, connections, and crisis and opportunities. Out of these five Cs, quality was connected to credibility. It was noted that youth work needs to be promoted in society and the role of youth work needs to be acknowledged. To achieve this, "the quality of youth work must also be improved, monitored and evaluated" (European Commission 2020). The document set up a European Youth Work Agenda, which was described as a "strategic framework for strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of youth work" (ibid.). The agenda aimed at promoting quality and innovation in youth work. This was to draw from cross-sectoral co-operation and evidence-based approaches. In this document, improving the quality of youth work was seen as one of the ways to further strengthen the position of youth work in European societies.

The Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention also utilised the concept of quality youth work. It included eight "strategic aspirations" (Williamson 2024: 49). Quality development was the second of these. It noted that quality development is a

complex endeavour, ranging from "quality assurance systems and the development of quality indicators to competences development schemes, and from long-term sustainable funding to the development of evidence-based policies and practice" (Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention 2020). The central conclusion of this topic is that "arguably the overarching need for the development of quality youth work is to develop clearer structures for cooperation and co-creation within and between all levels and stakeholder groups within the youth work community of practice" (ibid.).

In conclusion, 15 years of European youth policy discussion show that quality youth work and the quality of youth work have become undisputed policy goals. The youth field has argued that quality youth work is needed to provide support for European youth. This has been a considerable success.

Youth work quality as a process-oriented approach

An expert group on youth work quality systems in the EU member states published a book called *Quality youth work* in 2015. In it, they presented an outline of youth work quality. Their framework presents a clear and articulated approach to understanding quality in youth work. This framework is rooted in the explanation of youth work principles and values.

The expert group noted that a youth work quality system needs to be based on the core principles of youth work. These core principles should guide youth work if it is to be successful. These principles are shared by both universal (intended for all young people) and targeted (intended for a specific group of young people) youth work alike. According to the expert group (European Commission 2015: 16), youth work should:

- be perceived as being attractive, bringing added value or joy in life;
- respond to the different needs, interests and experiences of young people as perceived by themselves, and be actively inclusive by reaching out to and welcoming all groups of young people;
- be based on young people's voluntary and active participation, engagement and responsibility;
- have a holistic perspective and meet young people as capable individuals and resources, and enhance young people's rights, personal and social development, and autonomy;

- be designed, delivered and evaluated together with young people and be based on non-formal and informal learning;
- have a visible learning perspective and design its activities in accordance with clear learning objectives that are relevant to the young people participating.

The group defined quality as "how well something fulfils its function; to what degree the actual outcomes meet the aims" (European Commission 2015: 18). If youth work is successful, "it contributes to the personal and social development of young people" (ibid.). As can be seen, this definition is a variant of objective assessment definitions of quality, namely it emphasises how well youth work provision corresponds to youth work's "function", which is based on the core principles described above. Applying this perspective was a novel approach, since it sidetracked questions about youth worker competences and qualifications and concentrated on the creation of a quality system.

The expert group was certainly not blind to contextual factors, which are often emphasised when talking about youth work. The group noted that outcomes of youth work are dependent on different preconditions, which, according to their description, combine material-economic conditions, such as budget, facilities and equipment, as well as work cultures, such as organisation and work routines. In addition to these, aims and ethical guidelines also influence the outcomes. Although the expert group does not use this term, these features emphasise structural factors that influence how youth workers are able to do their work. Furthermore, the actual work processes of youth work influence the outcomes. These include "processes for setting aims; methods for mapping 'the different needs, interests and experiences of young people'; processes for structured dialogue with young people; methods for documenting and making non-formal learning visible; methods for evaluation and assessment; processes for change management" (European Commission 2015). Outcomes can be divided into quantitative outputs and qualitative effects. Similarly, the group emphasises that the choice of indicators mirrors the outcomes and the core principles and that the primary focus should be on the qualitative aspects.

Thus, the quality thinking of the group can be expressed as follows.

- The core principles need to be articulated so that the function of youth work is made explicit. These core principles describe how the personal and social growth of young people is made possible.
- The outcomes are shaped by the preconditions and work processes.
- The outcomes can be divided into quantitative and qualitative categories.
- Indicators need to define which factors regarding preconditions, work processes and outcomes are crucial to quality.
- There need to be tools to manage the knowledge gathered.
- Different tools create a quality system. A quality system can be defined as a "set of tools designed for gathering knowledge on how different ways of organising and conducting youth work corresponds with desired outcomes, combined with corresponding tools to manage this knowledge in a way that enables adequate support for the development of quality" (European Commission

2015: 22). The quality system should include elements of gathering knowledge, reflection and changing the way youth work is done.

Quality, innovation and recognition of youth work are emphasised in the current EU youth strategy (European Commission 2018), and the issue of quality has been taken up in other European documents. The above way of thinking about youth work quality has clearly influenced the key document of the Europe Goes Local project called the European Charter on Local Youth Work (Europe Goes Local 2019). Using the same professional vocabulary, the charter describes core principles and values of youth work, talks about local youth work policy, and outlines what the organisation and practice of local youth work need, as well as what youth workers need. It also emphasises the quality aspect. The following list from the charter describes what youth work quality development requires (ibid.):

- a clear and comprehensive system for documentation and follow-up of outcomes, preconditions and work processes in relation to measurable indicators and aims;
- regular and up-to-date mappings of local realities and needs;
- clear procedures for continuous analysis of and reflection on outcomes in terms of how they relate to preconditions, work processes and activities, and the need for further development;
- clear procedures for continuous updates on new national and international research, trends and methods in the field of youth and youth work;
- common efforts of all stakeholders to co-operate around quality development and the adoption of innovations;
- competence development of youth workers based on a clear competency framework in combination with an analysis of local outcomes, needs, strengths and weaknesses.

Both documents emphasise the need to be able to explain outcomes, preconditions and work processes. They also identify the core principles of youth work. They point out that outcomes are connected to preconditions and work processes. Importantly, they also emphasise that quality systems are based on local needs, thus noting the importance of local context in youth work. These two examples highlight that there are instances in the European discussion where quality is clearly defined. It is one of the empirical tasks of the paper to analyse if and how often national quality tools comply with this framework.

Data collection

A survey for EKCYP correspondents and PEYR members was launched during the autumn of 2024. In the survey, respondents were asked to provide information on quality tools. To avoid presumptions about what a proper quality system would look like, the wording of the questions was chosen to include many examples of quality tools. The following questions were asked.

1. Is there a national quality framework, system or standards for youth work in your country?

2. Is there a regional quality framework, system or standards for youth work in your country? If yes, please provide details and links to these documents if available (either in English or in the language spoken in your country).

3. Is there a local quality framework, system or standards for youth work in your country? If yes, please provide details and links to these documents if available (either in English or in the language spoken in your country).

4. Is there another document that explicitly talks about quality? If yes, please provide details and links if available (either in English or in the language spoken in your country).

5. Is there another document that is or would be useful in creating a quality framework, system or standards? If yes, please provide details and links if available (either in English or in the language spoken in your country).

6. When was this quality framework, system or set of standards developed? Is there information on how long the process lasted?

7. Who initiated/managed the process? Who were the stakeholders involved in the process?

8. How is quality defined in the quality framework, system or standards? What are the main areas of quality? Please provide details and links if available. How is quality achieved, recognised or assured?

9. What is the status of the quality framework, system or standards? Is there an official role at the national, regional or local level?

10. Is the quality framework, system or set of standards state/public recognised, supported or funded? If it is, please provide details.

11. Is there any research conducted in your country on the impact of the quality framework, system or standards? How does the quality framework, system or standards contribute to youth policy?

12. Is there any other information on how the quality framework, system or standards are used? Please provide any other relevant information, documentation and links if available.

The data collection provided information from 14 countries. Four of them reported that they did not have any quality tools available. The researchers of this study concluded that the data set collected lacked some key features and decided to seek information on five other countries to ensure that the study's material would include relevant aspects that were missing in the original collection. Based on earlier research and sufficient information collected for this analysis by two authors of this paper (Kiilakoski 2024; O'Donovan et al. 2020), the authors examined Austria, Finland, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands. Therefore, the countries analysed in this paper are not randomly chosen.

The results of the data collection are summarised in Part 2 of this study. The most useful information concerned the content of quality (Questions 8.1-8.3) and the status and funding of the quality framework, system or standards (Questions 9 and 10), while the conceptual aspects or the question about the use of different tools did not provide enough material to draw any conclusions. When available, the referred documents were analysed. If there was not an English, German, Swedish or Finnish version available, artificial intelligence tools were used to translate the documents. This enabled the researchers to better familiarise themselves with the material.

Results

Below are the results of the study. The first sub-chapter analyses the nature of quality standards or frameworks. The second sub-chapter examines the stakeholders involved in the process and groups the models based on the orientation of the main quality tools and stakeholders involved. The aim is to understand how different quality systems are developed in Europe. The third sub-chapter ventures to examine the content of different programmes. The fourth sub-chapter utilises quality theories developed outside youth work to further understand quality development in different countries.

What the quality standards or frameworks are about

Quality tools, standards, systems or frameworks were analysed in 15 countries. The diversity of the youth field has been emphasised continuously, starting from the "celebrating the diversity" ideal of the Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention (2010) and extending to recent comparative studies (Kiilakoski 2020, 2024), which show that there is a lot of variety in youth work practice architectures, namely structures that enable the youth work community to engage in youth work and for individual youth workers to develop their capabilities and enjoy sustainable working careers. Since it was already known that youth work practice architectures differ, variety in quality approaches was to be expected. This was reflected already in the wording of the questions proposed to informants.

The results are firstly analysed based on the dichotomy of whether they describe structural factors or practical/methodological factors. If the emphasis is on the level of organisations or the national level, such as formal qualifications, the quality is seen as being about structures. If the emphasis is on the actual youth work practice done in a local context with young people, the quality system is counted as being about practices. If the quality systems support both factors, the quality system is described as a hybrid model, combining both structural and practical factors.

Table 1. Structural, hybrid and practical orientations of quality tools

Country	Examples of quality standards/framework	Main target level
Austria	Quality manuals for open youth work, such as the aufZAQ Competence Framework for Youth Work, which is strongly oriented towards professional practice.	Hybrid
Belgium (Flanders)	The decree on youth and children's rights policy and the support of youth work, which ensures support for youth work activities.	Structural
Czech Republic	The title "Non-governmental organisation (NGO) recognised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in the field of children and youth work" is given to organisations that meet specific evaluation criteria.	Structural
Finland	The self- and peer-assessment model developed by the Kanuuna network.	Practical
France	Officials under the ministers of youth and sport identify educational aims being developed within each centre, and monitor and evaluate the work of centres.	Structural
Germany	Juleica, a national standardised card for voluntary youth workers; accompanied by local, regional and, in some cases, national-level training programmes.	Structural
Ireland	A National Quality Standards Framework for youth work; and "8 Steps to Inclusive Youth Work".	Hybrid
Luxembourg	National quality framework for youth work.	Structural
Malta	The internal quality assurance policy and the reflective supervision policy.	Hybrid
Netherlands	A competence profile for youth work developed at the national level; Quality Framework and Assessment for Youth Work.	Structural
Serbia	Quality assurance and standards in youth work at national and local levels, provided by the National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR).	Structural
Slovenia	Youth worker as a vocation/occupation has been recognised as part of the national vocational qualification system.	Structural
Sweden	The quality system developed by youth work network KEKS, which consists of five different tools centred on the core principles of participation and non-formal learning.	Hybrid
Ukraine	National quality mark and quality criteria for youth centres; recommendations for organising the work of youth.	Structural
United Kingdom (Scotland)	National occupational standards and the National Youth Work Outcomes Framework.	Hybrid

While it is possible that some of the characterisations above may not be entirely accurate, the analysis provides a rough overview of how youth work quality tools have been developed across the 15 countries and regions studied. Based on this broad characterisation, nine out of the 15 countries had established quality structures primarily focused on the structural level. This indicates that most countries or regions reporting quality tools tended to emphasise the national or systemic level, aiming to influence the entire youth work community of practice within their territory. Five countries had developed hybrid models, combining national and organisational levels with youth work practice, thus providing tools to analyse the direct work with young people. Only one country, Finland, had developed quality tools focused exclusively on local practice. This is likely explained by Finland's well-developed youth

work education system (Kiilakoski 2019), where youth workers are recognised and supported by society even without national occupational standards.

To further understand the development of quality systems, a more detailed look at the quality tools is needed. The most common quality tool mentioned was a competency description of an individual youth worker or a professional standard for youth workers. Eight countries had developed this. In the Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention, the quality of practice was explicitly connected to validating prior learning. The route to achieve this would be "through the setting of quality standards and the identification of generic competencies" (Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention 2010: 4). Connecting quality and qualifications has been one of the themes in the European youth policy discussion. Four countries mentioned having a component that leads to recognising and/or validating prior learning.

Besides individual youth workers and their capabilities, quality tools may grant organisations an official status. The Czech Republic and Slovenia had developed processes for recognising organisations providing youth work, while France has a process for evaluating projects.

Indicators or statistical tools were mentioned in six responses. It is perhaps surprising, especially given that subjective evaluation of quality is part of the tradition of quality theories outside youth work (Martin, Elg and Gremyr 2025), that mentions of measuring the views of young people were relatively rare, appearing in only four cases. Austria and Sweden had regular surveys for young people. Scotland mentioned having a self-assessment tool through which the views of stakeholders, including staff, management, young people and volunteers, must be considered. Additionally, Malta's self-assessment framework mentions gathering opinions of young participants. This raises the question of whether there is a case to be made about the participation of young people in youth work quality management or their role in general as the ultimate beneficiaries of youth work.

Besides the examples above, different tools included training programmes or curricula, toolkits, self-assessment tools for organisations, a national standardised card for voluntary youth workers, reflective supervision policy, a digital logbook, statistics on the number of youth club visitors and activity hours. This reflects the myriad ways in which youth work quality is promoted. More detailed examples are offered in Part 2 of this study.

Main stakeholders in producing quality tools

To analyse the policy aspects of the creation of quality tools, a simplified quadrant combining two axes will be used. The first axis is whether the quality tool has national status. The second axis will use the structural, hybrid and practical dimensions analysed in the previous sub-chapter.

In Table 2, countries are analysed based on whether the quality tools have an official status or are otherwise strongly promoted by the state. This might mean, for example, having national occupational standards which talk about the quality of youth work, being required to undertake quality assurance as a condition for receiving federal

funding, official recognition of the quality model, official status of youth organisations recognised by the state, legislation, national quality standards or monitoring of the youth organisations. In some cases, the development has been done on a local level and does not have state recognition.

This analysis does not necessarily do justice to countries and regions that have both official tools and tools developed by the youth work community. Given the dichotomous nature of the analysis, the stakeholders are described as either official or community-owned.

Table 2. Main stakeholders involved in creating quality tools

Country or region	Main stakeholder in developing the described tool
Austria	National
Belgium (Flanders)	National
Czech Republic	National
Finland	Community of practice
France	National
Germany	National/regional
Ireland	National
Luxembourg	National
Malta	National
Netherlands	National
Serbia	Community of practice
Slovenia	National
Sweden	Community of practice
Ukraine	National
United Kingdom (Scotland)	National

Out of the 15 countries studied, 12 had a nationally approved, used or produced quality tool. In some cases, there was a formal procedure for recognition. In others, national-level tools are provided by national agencies. For example, in Malta, the quality tools are provided by Aġenzija Żgħażagħ, the national youth agency. Although the sample size is relatively small and does not allow for statistical conclusions, it should be noted that based on this sample, nationally approved tools are more common than those produced by the youth work community of practice for local purposes.

In Table 3 below, the axis of national/community of practice is combined with the structural, practical or hybrid axis. It shows that regardless of the main stakeholder, there are both structural and hybrid approaches. No reliable statistical conclusions can be offered, so it is merely an observation when we state that in this group of countries, national-level structures are slightly more likely to be structural, whereas community of practice-oriented solutions are evenly distributed.

Table 3. Comparison of countries based on the orientations of quality tools and the stakeholders responsible for developing them

	National	Community of practice
Structural	Belgium (Flanders) Czech Republic France Germany Luxembourg Netherlands Slovenia Ukraine	Serbia
Practical or hybrid	Austria Ireland Malta United Kingdom (Scotland)	Finland Sweden

What constitutes youth work quality: content and thematic analysis

As is evident from Part 2 of this study, the data comprise different types of material. Some are competency descriptions, some describe the functions of organisations, some are indicators, and some are rather detailed descriptions of different skills or competences a youth worker should possess. In this, the material reflects the diversity of youth work structures in Europe. However, there are some overarching themes which can be analysed. The following themes, presented in Table 4, were mentioned on at least five occasions out of 15. In the table below, the themes are presented with examples of how they are stated in the quality tools or translations of them.

Table 4. Quality themes shared by at least five different countries

Quality theme	Examples of how this theme was expressed
Promoting learning	► Enabling young people to acquire competences ► Non-formal learning and competence development ► Developing and implementing youth learning programmes ► Promoting empowerment and education ► Helping young people see new things or look at things in a new way ► Shaping learning and development activities that enhance quality of life and sphere of influence

Quality theme	Examples of how this theme was expressed
Promoting well-being and safety	► Ensuring the safety and well-being of young people ► Providing access to support services ► Promoting a feeling of safety in the region ► Guiding young people with problems, advising and stimulating them towards more positive development ► Young people have become better at taking care of themselves, highlighting overall well-being and safety
Working with groups	► Enabling and supporting friendships ► Working with young people in groups and teams ► Supporting volunteering and informal youth groups ► Young people have become better at co-operating ► Teaching leadership skills and group pedagogy in theory and practice
Establishing a professional relationship with individual young people	► Encountering individual young people ► Establishing and maintaining co-operative and confidential relationships with young people ► Youth workers care about young people as individuals ► Reaching out, developing contacts with young people, their networks, collaborating organisations and structures in the local area ► Establishing and maintaining co-operative and confidential relationships with young people
Promoting participation of the young in society	► Empowering young people to make an impact ► Young people have become more engaged in society ► Empowering young people to drive change ► Encouraging youth participation ► Enabling participation and representing interests
Promoting inclusion	► Where necessary, plans for minors with health problems or disabilities ► Ensuring that all young people can join youth work services is one of the key values of youth work ► Addressing the need for youth work to be inclusive and accessible to all young people, regardless of their background or circumstances ► Engaging vulnerable young people ► Gender-conscious girl and boy work ► The organisation provides opportunities for children and youth with fewer opportunities ► Follow commitments set out in voluntary youth organisation's diversity, equality, integration or inclusion policy
Being youth-centred and conscious of the needs of young people	► Youth work should be young person-centred ► Prioritising young people's needs ► Assessing and understanding the issues and needs of young people ► Talking with young people about things they feel are important ► Young people are the starting point of youth work

Quality theme	Examples of how this theme was expressed
Organisational skills	► Organising and managing projects ► Guiding facilitators (animators) ► Developing a general action plan for every educational service for young people that receives state financial support ► Committing to the ongoing improvement and adaptation of services to meet the evolving needs of young people effectively ► Youth workers should be able to evaluate youth work programmes ► Structuring youth work initiatives, maintaining records and ensuring proper documentation

The above list of eight content areas shared by at least five of the documents will not surprise anyone who has even a basic knowledge of youth work. They are recurring themes, and rightly so, as they relate to core questions of youth work. In the following section, we connect the quality themes with discussions in the study of youth work and youth work policy.

Understanding youth work as a form of non-formal learning (Kiilakoski and Kivijärvi 2014) or informal learning (Batsleer 2008) is often mentioned in youth work discussions. Talking about learning refers to the pedagogical functions of youth work, and "contemporary European ideas that youth work is about learning and opportunity" (Williamson 2015: 20) also stand in contrast to viewing young people from a deficiency perspective or focusing on those who suffer from social marginalisation or social problems. Since youth work is youth-centred, the examples about learning did not mention specific topics or learning outcomes. Given the open-endedness of the youth work process, this was to be expected. Part of quality youth work, it seems, is creating conditions for learning but not dictating what needs to be learnt.

Promoting well-being and safety are often referred to as key positive contributions youth work brings to the lives of young people. For example, Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 states that youth work "contributes to young people's well-being, enhancing a sense of belonging and strengthening their capacity to make beneficial choices" (Council of Europe 2017). This is seen as one of the positive outcomes of youth work. The issue of safety is also emphasised in youth work discussions. For example, Resolution (2020/C 415/01) states that one of the essential components of youth work is "creating safe, accessible, open and autonomous spaces in society, as well as supportive and experiential learning environments for young people" (European Commission 2020). Both the promotion of well-being and safety are agreed-upon features of youth work.

Youth work can be done with and for young people both individually and in groups. For example, the European youth work portfolio notes that "[i]n practical terms, youth work is a journey undertaken with groups of young people who change and evolve" (Council of Europe 2015). Establishing a professional relationship with individual young people refers both to individual young people as the main beneficiaries of youth work but also to the need to adopt a reliable, professional form of working with the young. While a lot of youth work methodologies deal with working with groups, youth workers also need to establish relationships with young people as individuals and make sure that they are met with respect and integrity. It has often

been emphasised that youth work needs to be reflective and work in a manner that conforms to the key values of youth work. To be able to do this, reflective practice and an agreed set of principles are needed (Rannala et al. 2024). Therefore, it is to be expected that a professional way of establishing relationships is emphasised when talking about youth work quality.

It is often claimed that youth work is a value-based praxis committed to values of democracy and human rights. Social inclusion is one of the key youth work policy goals and, to a certain extent, youth work has always responded to challenges affecting different young people (Williamson 2024: 105-106). Participation and the right to be heard are among the general principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Professor Tim Corney and his colleagues state that youth work ideas have moved from a mere "service-user" approach, where the youth worker needs to listen to young people to improve services offered to them, to facilitating processes "where young people themselves take action to defend rights, tackle injustice and inspire social change" (Corney et al. 2021: 679). Given this emphasis, it is far from surprising that promoting participation of the young in society was one of the themes shared by quality tools.

Promoting inclusion means paying attention to young people with fewer opportunities or marginalised youth groups. This has been a shared goal of youth work in Europe, although it may be asked whether these ambitious goals are met in practice (Williamson 2024: 66). Be that as it may, according to a comparative study on youth workers from Australia, Estonia and Iceland, inclusion and accessibility are among the most important principles and practice frameworks of youth work (Rannala et al. 2024).

Being youth-centred and conscious of the needs of young people is also a shared principle. This basic point has been formulated in many ways in European discussions. All of them state that youth work starts with young persons and should be attentive to what the young people themselves bring to the situation. This means not starting with fixed images but being attentive to what the young are doing. The Resolution on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda expresses the point in the following way: "[y]outh work is geared to young people's individual needs and requirements and directly addresses the challenges they face in today's society" (European Commission 2020). Trudi Cooper, an Australian scholar of youth work, states that a focus on young people's lives and their concerns is one of the shared characteristics of contemporary youth work (Cooper 2018: 11).

Organisational skills differ from the other themes above, which deal with working with individual young people and groups. Organisational skills refer to being able to work in organisations. This too is a common European theme. For example, a study on competence frameworks noted that organisational skills are mentioned in many competence descriptions and could be referred to as being about operational competences (Kiilakoski 2022).

Even the short analysis reveals that all of the eight themes above are widely shared both in European youth work policy and within the theories of youth work. This means that all the themes above are not controversial at all. To further analyse how these themes are connected to other European categories, we will compare them to two different European frameworks.

Jon Ord co-ordinated a project which compared five European countries. The end result of the project was that there were five overarching themes when studying European youth work impact (Ord 2018: 222-225).

To point out the similarities of this analysis to existing European tools, one can analyse the similarities between the above eight themes and the version of the Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio available at the time of writing (Council of Europe 2015), which was developed as a self-development tool for youth workers to check their own competences and keep track of developing them. It was done with consultation with the youth sector. These two projects present different approaches – one based on research and one on the consultation with the European youth work community. When comparing these with the themes of this study, it becomes evident that there are many unifying themes across these three independent approaches. The results of the comparison are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. A comparison of three European models

Dimension	Quality themes in this study	Overarching themes from comparison of five countries (Ord 2018)	Functions in the Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio
Learning	Promoting learning	Experiential learning	Providing learning opportunities for young people
Well-being	Promoting well-being and safety	Sense of self	
Groups	Working with groups	Relating to others	
Professional relationships and practices	Establishing a professional relationship with individual young people	Creating places or spaces for young people	
Participation	Promoting participation of the young in society		Support and empower young people in making sense of the society they live in and engaging with it
Inclusion	Promoting inclusion	Social inclusion	
Needs of the young	Being youth-centred and conscious of the needs of young people		Address the needs and aspirations of young people
Organisation	Organisational skills		Develop, conduct and evaluate projects Contribute to the development of their organisation and to making policies/programmes work better for young people Actively practise evaluation to improve the quality of the youth work conducted
Intercultural relations			Support young people in actively and constructively addressing intercultural relations
Supporting learning in teams			Support collective learning in teams

Five overarching themes as described by Ord (2018) are similar to the results of this study. Also, when comparing the above themes to the eight functions described by the youth work portfolio, one finds that at least six out of these eight themes are shared. The youth work portfolio is more detailed on organisational competences, but there are many similarities between it and the eight shared themes analysed above. Only one function of the youth work portfolio is almost absent, namely supporting young people in actively and constructively addressing intercultural relations. This might be because the emphasis is on the national level. Whatever the reason, it is noteworthy that this dimension is not so much emphasised in the data of this study.

To conclude, the content of the quality tools studied bears close resemblance to many descriptions of youth work. This perhaps shows that there is a European common ground, shared by at least those countries which have developed strong enough practice architectures to create quality tools. Since one of the motivations of quality tools is to ensure youth work provision follows the same principles and values, it is not surprising that the above themes are shared. They refer to key principles of youth work. Based on the material of this study, it is not possible to analyse how much European discussion has informed national-level decision making. It is perhaps safe to assume that the more shared principles there are at the European level, the easier it is to integrate them into national processes.

Taking an external perspective: many faces of quality

In their theory of quality, Martin, Elg and Gremyr (2025) propose a framework for analysing quality. In this framework, they aim to combine relevant features of the recent quality discussion. They suggest that a quality framework should combine four perspectives. Given this holistic approach, their model is useful for mapping how youth work quality tools reflect recent themes in quality theories. However, since their background is in management and engineering, their choice of terminology differs considerably from the tradition of youth work. When presenting their work, we use their terminology, but when applying it to the youth work context, we reformulate it for our purposes. As Trudi Cooper and her colleagues remind us, "[t]he circumstances in which 'client' might accurately apply are limited but exist where youth workers offer their services directly to the public on a user-pays basis" (Cooper et al. 2024). Therefore, we have opted to use more appropriate terms. Tanya Basarab greatly helped us in developing the right terminology.

The first category of their framework is quality-as-customer-value. This perspective emphasises that a quality product or service meets customer expectations. Therefore, quality is subjectively defined by how well individual customer expectations are matched. They note that this has been an important perspective in analysing quality and that satisfying the needs of the customer is a key feature.

The second aspect is quality-as-agreed-delivery. This perspective emphasises that quality is based either on various standards from production or on end-customer requirements. These features can be objectively evaluated, given that the expectations are clearly defined from the start.

The third perspective, quality-as-ecosystems integration, emphasises that expectations are always dependent on communities. Using rather technical language, they state that quality is constructed among the actors within the system intersubjectively

and is driven by shared ideals. More practically expressed, blues guitarists value different guitars compared to classical players. Quality is tied to values, which have been institutionalised within the ecosystem. This aspect of quality emphasises collective and consensus-driven aspects.

The fourth element of quality, quality-as-society-value, notes that although a certain product might please individual people, it may be unsustainable and thus have societally negative consequences. They propose that quality should also be connected to different dimensions of sustainability.

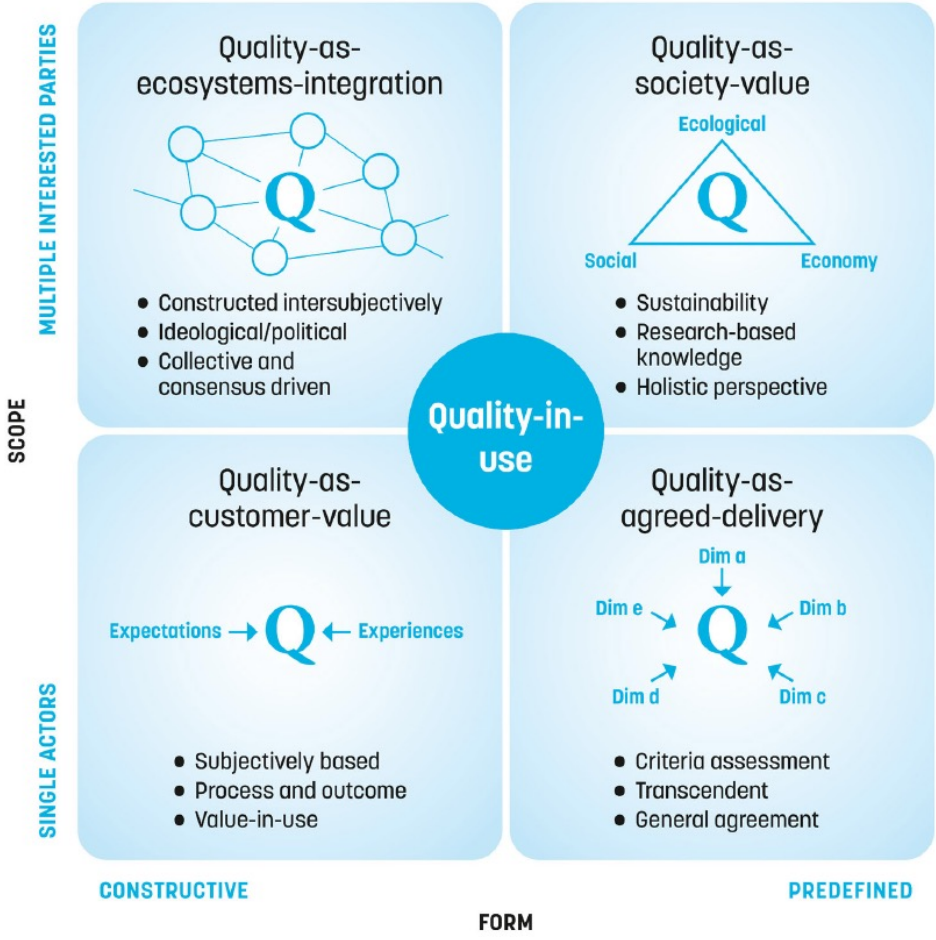

Figure 1. A framework for the conceptual meanings of quality (Martin, Elg and Gremyr 2025: 191)

How does the material of this study look if the above framework is taken as a reference point? We first reformulate the above suggestions and apply them to the youth work context. Our proposal is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. A proposal for quality aspects in youth work, based on Martin, Elg and Gremyr (2025)

Main element of quality	Key aspects of quality
Quality-as-process	The principles and functions of youth work provision are clearly outlined. The value base of youth work is communicated. The main emphasis in quality development is on clarifying the functions and principles, with tools developed to assess how well these functions, defined by the youth work community, are being fulfilled.
Quality-as-beneficiary-value	The quality of youth work is seen as subjectively based on how well young people themselves view the process. The emphasis is on value-in-use and on how young people benefit from youth work. The main focus in developing quality is on creating tools to discover what young people, as beneficiaries, gain from youth work.
Quality-as-service-system-integration	The quality of youth work is seen as contributing to the collective impact of different services offered to young people. Value-based evaluations are emphasised, with the local context as the starting point for assessing value. The main focus in evaluating quality is at the community level.
Quality-as-community-and-society-value	Sustainability is evaluated both from social and ecological perspectives, and scientific knowledge is utilised. The emphasis in evaluating quality is on long-term effects and positive contributions to society.

If the above categorisation is used as a point of reference, the first observation is that most of the approaches analysed in this paper fall under the category of quality as a process. Different models describe what youth workers or organisations should be able to do, and actions are evaluated based on this. Also, the model suggested by the European expert group has adopted this perspective, although they emphasise the need to listen to young people. This is perhaps to be expected since European discussion has emphasised the need for shared frameworks such as occupational standards, competence descriptions and tools. Calls to develop systematic ways to evaluate youth work are rarer. In many cases, quality tools focus on securing that organisations work well with young people. Accordingly, the main emphasis of evaluation is on the organisational level, not on individual young people.

This brings us to our second point. Perhaps surprisingly, quality-as-beneficiary-value is considerably rarer, and there are fewer co-ordinated efforts to analyse what young people themselves expect from youth work and what experiences they have when attending youth work services. Surveys for young people are integrated into the quality tools in Austria and Sweden. Of course, many of the descriptions emphasise the need to respond to the needs of young people. What is noteworthy, however, is that this starting point has not been transferred to systematic and continuous efforts to consider the wishes of young people themselves as part of quality tools. Given that the world of commerce has developed elaborate ways to evaluate value based on the customer perspective, it might seem even odd that youth work communities in Europe have not systematically developed beneficiary perspectives.

One might ask if the balance between quality-as-process and quality-as-beneficiary-value reflects the stated values of youth work. While the data of our study do not really equip us to be able to answer the question of why beneficiary perspectives are rarer, we humbly offer three educated guesses. Firstly, as the earlier chapters of this study show, most of the quality tools are made at the national level. The aim is to develop

the community of practice of youth work and to secure that certain principles are met. If this is the aim, this leads to working with organisations and networks instead of young people as customers. Secondly, creating an evidence-based youth work policy is often seen as a goal for the future, not as a reality at present. Extensive knowledge on how young people feel about youth work has yet to materialise in Europe. Given this, there are no shared starting points or points of reference. Ways to recognise prior learning in youth work might serve as a point of reference when thinking about how this could be achieved. Thirdly, evaluation of youth work takes many forms, such as surveys, focus groups, creative methods, conversations with young people, storytelling and social media, to name but a few (de St Croix and Doherty 2023). Given this multiplicity, it is no wonder that it has proven difficult to come up with shared ways to evaluate quality subjectively.

The models have been developed by the community of practice of youth work, and different stakeholders have had a say. Therefore, quality-as-service-system-integration is at least partly respected in the creation of these models. However, if the perspective is widened and the quality-as-ecosystem-integration perspective is taken to emphasise, for example, families, parents and custodians, other civil society stakeholders working with young people, or education and social work, it is apparent that these perspectives are less represented. Lastly, discussions about eco-social youth work or sustainability in youth work have only started to emerge (Gorman et al. 2024). Therefore, it is not surprising that sustainability issues, which are an integral part of quality-as-community-and-society-value, do not play a prominent role in the quality tools analysed in this paper.

Conclusions

This paper has analysed the quality tools in 15 European countries and regions. According to the results, most of these (12) are made at the national level and three by the community of practice of youth work. Also, nine of them are more structural than focused on the local youth work context. Five countries had tools combining a structural and practical focus. One country had a quality tool for local youth work only. There were eight shared themes. These were promoting learning; promoting well-being and safety; working with groups; establishing a professional relationship with individual young people; promoting participation of the young in society; promoting inclusion; being youth-centred and conscious of the needs of young people; and organisational skills. When looking at different categorisations, the quality tools were more about quality-as-agreed-delivery than meeting the requirements of the customers, stakeholders outside youth work or society and sustainability in general.

Based on the study, the following observations and suggestions can be made.

1. Lack of conceptual clarity

There is a shared understanding of the importance of quality youth work in the European youth field. However, it is not always clear what role different quality systems, standards and frameworks have in promoting quality youth work. Despite the efforts of this research group to analyse different conceptions of quality, there were relatively few explicit statements on how quality in general is understood. If there are no clearly defined conceptions of quality, it may be difficult to find common ground in arguing which tools are best for promoting quality.

2. European youth work quality frameworks are not widely used

A European expert group presented a framework for analysing quality in 2015. This was explicitly referred to in Sweden, while other countries had adopted different perspectives. It is often emphasised that the national context is of vital importance and should be respected in the creation of European tools. Further analysis of case studies could be useful in understanding the extent to which existing European tools have contributed to the creation of different quality tools.

3. Beneficiary perspectives are not widely presented

Most of the quality tools described what youth workers need to be able to do and how youth organisations can work best. Actual efforts to integrate the experiences and expectations of young people are relatively rare. Analysing how young people themselves feel about youth work would perhaps balance the emphasis on production, or what is often referred to in youth work as process-oriented or objective features of the quality tools, with subjective and beneficiary-oriented perspectives.

4. Sharing different tools and practices is still needed

Although not emphasised in the analysis, it was noted that most of the tools used by countries and regions analysed in this paper had developed their own models, and the adaptation of tools developed in other national contexts was relatively rare. Sharing good practices and perhaps supporting their adaptation in other countries may be a useful path to explore.

Part 2

Country examples from 15 European countries

Austria

Child and youth work, as it is referred to in Austria, is a broad and diverse field of measures and activities that are provided outside the formal education system or public welfare services. In Austria, this field is generally referred to as "extracurricular/out-of-school youth work", where the participation of children and young people is voluntary.

Out-of-school youth work in Austria is largely focused on leisure time activities to encourage and facilitate young people's informal and non-formal learning. The structures and funding of youth work are varied and diverse, ranging from institutional youth work, open and associative youth work to youth information, international youth work and initiatives.

1. Status of youth work quality

Federal youth organisations that apply for basic funding from the federal government are required to undertake continuous quality assurance. Different processes are in place to evaluate the quality of youth work programmes and projects for children and young people. There is no formal definition of quality.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

2.1. Quality manual for open youth work

The manual outlines the basic principles of quality standards. It describes the requirements in terms of structure, process and results of professional open children and youth work in Austria and makes proposals for further development and improvement.

Other methods and tools include: "Goals, achievements and effects of open youth work" (a description of five dimensions of open youth work), a toolkit titled "Tools and methods for quality development in professional open youth work" and the bOJA documentation database, which also contribute to and support quality assurance, development and improvement.

2.2. The aufZAQ Competence Framework for Youth Work

aufZAQ is a certification system for non-formal education and training courses for youth workers in Austria that seeks to guarantee high-quality vocational education and training for youth workers strongly oriented towards professional practice.

The aufZAQ Competence Framework for Youth Work:

- makes the competences of people working with children and young people visible and comparable;
- stimulates the development of essential skills – with subsequent benefits for children and young people;
- clarifies what people who work in extracurricular child and youth work do and what quality standards they set themselves;
- promotes networking, co-operation, further development and mutual recognition of education providers and providers of child and youth work services as well as related areas such as school social work and health prevention; and
- increases the quality of educational opportunities.

The framework comprises five different content areas:

- enabling, initiating and promoting learning;
- supporting identity development and coping with everyday life;
- enabling participation, representing interests;
- acting and interacting consciously and responsibly;
- organising and managing (projects).

2.3. bOJA

bOJA – the competence centre for open youth work – was established in 2009 and builds on the tradition of networking open youth work in Austria. It provides a network and support services for open youth work, as well as expertise in quality development of open youth work. It also seeks to promote and strengthen, at both national and European levels, the positive and empowering role that open youth work can play in the lives of young people.

In Austria, bOJA estimates that there are some 340 providers of open youth work with a total of over 630 site facilities. Centres of open youth work employ some 2 000 youth workers who reach and involve some 250 000 young people on an annual basis.

In recent years, bOJA has developed a range of practical tools for all open youth work practitioners. These include:

- a quality manual, which is regularly revised and upgraded;
- a toolkit for quality development in youth work that includes methods and tools for evaluation, as well as self-assessment sheets. It also employs a logbook or "line count lists" that record visit frequency, as well as daily logs of events and activities, and photos and video documentation, among others. The toolkit also includes "quality dialogue", the aim of which is to look at practitioners' work from different angles and analyse and discuss the results;
- worksheets for self-assessment that include expansion of competences, identity development, coping with everyday life, lobbying and participation;
- a checklist for including young people in policy making;
- regular surveys of young people and stakeholders in mobile (detached) and site-specific youth work settings.

Belgium (Flanders)

1. Status of youth work quality

While there is not a quality assurance system as such in Flanders, the decree on youth and children's rights policy and the support of youth work ensures support for youth work activities. The decree establishes several programmes, including the Flemish Youth and Children's Rights Policy Plan. The decree also describes competency profiles of a facilitator, head facilitator and instructor.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

The competency profile of a head facilitator includes:

- guiding facilitators;
- organising a set of activities;
- self-reflection as a head facilitator;
- evaluating facilitators;
- taking ultimate responsibility;
- practical organisation and administration;
- leading a team.

Czech Republic

There is no national legal definition of youth work in the Czech Republic. Leisure-based education is connected to formal education through school clubs. NGOs provide informal and non-formal learning.

1. Status of youth work quality

Organisations working with children and young people can apply to get recognised by the state. The title "NGO recognised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in the field of children and youth work" is given to organisations that meet the evaluation criteria. These criteria refer to structural aspects. Organisations that are awarded the title have a supra-regional scope. Their activities primarily benefit children and young people. The call is issued every three years.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

Organisations need to provide evidence that they meet the following 16 criteria (according to the call from 2023):

1. the organisation has to have existed for at least five years;
2. it has to have organisational units in at least seven regions;
3. founding documents of the organisation state that it works with children and youth;
4. the organisation has at least 700 members aged 6-26 years;
5. members (aged 6-26) pay annual membership fees;
6. the organisation complies with legal obligations;
7. the organisation has a clearly defined organisational structure;
8. the organisation publishes an annual report on financial management;
9. the organisation has a strategy;
10. the organisation has no outstanding financial obligations, including debts to the state, municipalities or regions, and no unpaid public health insurance contributions;
11. the organisation describes its activities publicly;
12. the organisation evaluates its activities;
13. the organisation provides activities for children and young people who are not members of the organisations;
14. the organisation promotes volunteering in work with children and youth;
15. the organisation provides opportunities for children and youth with fewer opportunities;
16. the organisation regularly trains its youth leaders.

Organisations holding the title need to report annually to the ministry.

Finland

According to the Youth Act of Finland, youth work means the efforts to support the growth, independence and social inclusion of young people in society. Youth policy

means co-ordinated actions to improve young people's growth and living conditions and intergenerational interaction. According to the act, local government is responsible for providing both youth work and youth policy. Besides municipalities, NGOs and parishes provide youth work.

1. Status of youth work quality

Finland does not have a formal or recognised youth work quality framework, system or standards, or a formal definition of quality.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

2.1. The self- and peer-assessment model developed by the Kanuuna network

The Kanuuna network was active from the mid-2000s to 2024. It continued the development of the self- and peer-assessment model, which was originally developed for the purposes of youth work in the capital region in Finland. This model was renewed in 2015 and again in 2023. According to the developers, the creation of the quality criteria:

- produces a shared understanding of good and desirable youth work;
- is based on "polyphony"[1] and peer learning;
- updates the existing criteria to correspond to the changing surroundings.

The newest version of the criteria is in line with the curriculum of the youth work model in Finland, which is based on a theory of relational pedagogy in youth work. According to this, youth work supports six different categories of relations:

1. relations of young people to their peers;
2. relations of young people to trustworthy adults;
3. relations of young people to services;
4. relations of young people to the local community;
5. relations of young people to decision making;
6. relations of young people to the environment and global community.

Based on this theory, the document describes 22 categories. Each category is further divided into four quality stages (thinking, doing, implementing, developing), which are used as a basis for evaluation:

1. enabling and supporting friendships;
2. hobbies and action groups;
3. dating;
4. enabling activities organised by young people themselves;

1. The Finnish word "moniäänisyys" refers to respecting different views by using the metaphor of multiple voices being listened to in the process.

5. strengthening communication skills;
6. emotional skills;
7. safety skills;
8. supporting the relations of the young to their guardians and close community;
9. encountering individual young people;
10. supporting the interaction of the young with adults;
11. young people as actors in their local community;
12. promoting a feeling of safety in the region;
13. training and education;
14. supporting employability;
15. service counselling;
16. digital service system;
17. citizenship and democracy skills;
18. empowering young people to make an impact;
19. improving growth and living conditions and advocating for young people;
20. ecologically sustainable and responsible way of life;
21. socially sustainable and responsible way of life;
22. culturally sustainable and responsible way of life.

These different criteria can be self-evaluated. The system of peer review has been created to offer external evaluation. The model has existed for over 15 years and has been actively used by municipalities.

2.2. Quality of school-based youth work

The centre of expertise for school-based youth work (Nuoska) has developed a quality model for the structural aspects of school-based youth work. There is no information on how widely the model is used. The model aligns with the quality framework for schools in Finland, although statistics show that schools rarely evaluate quality. The model emphasises the following four dimensions:

1. management;
2. financial resources;
3. developing the capabilities of the staff;
4. evaluation.

The Kanuuna network has developed a set of criteria for school-based youth work. Like the criteria described in 2.1., it is based on a theory of relations. It offers 15

categories. Each category is further divided into four quality stages (thinking, doing, implementing, developing), which are used as a basis for evaluation:

1. working with groups or classes;
2. helping the induction phase of the group;
3. targeted small group activities;
4. encounters during breaks;
5. peer activities;
6. accessibility;
7. co-operation with the guardians of young people;
8. encountering individuals;
9. working with school welfare guidance committee;
10. networks in the local area;
11. special features of regions;
12. working with transitions to further education;
13. service counselling;
14. supporting young people in becoming autonomous;
15. empowering young people to make an impact.

France

Youth work in France is generally associated with "socio-cultural animation", which forms part of the non-formal education sector. In recent years, it has undergone many changes, both professionally and legislatively.

Youth work is underpinned and supported by the central state and regional and local authorities, as well as by non-formal education federations and associations and professional bodies. Each of these stakeholders plays a different role in the governance and delivery of youth work programmes and services.

The main function of the central state is to develop and implement policies, apply regulations, establish and facilitate qualifications, and provide financial support.

1. Status of youth work quality

France does not have a formal or recognised youth work quality framework, system or standards, or a formal definition of quality.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

Projects and initiatives for children and young people at the local level in France tend to be multi-annual and formalised. Officials under the ministers of youth and

sport identify the educational aims being developed within each centre, and also monitor and evaluate the work of centres.

Projects usually comprise:

- initial diagnosis: children using the centre, environment, resources, etc.;
- summary of the organiser's educational goals;
- pedagogic goals;
- concrete ways to achieve these pedagogic goals and also to guarantee the safety of minors;
- the type of activities proposed, according to the type of facilities provided and, when physical or sports activities are involved, the conditions under which they are to take place;
- a description of the building and the spaces used;
- the activity time/rest time ratio;
- the ways in which minors can participate;
- where necessary, plans for minors with health problems or disabilities;
- how the team (the director, facilitators and the other staff at the centre for minors) will operate;
- arrangements for assessing the centre.

An educational project must also specify arrangements for assessing a community centre for minors. A project must include a three-year assessment plan on how the objectives of the project are being met. Quality standards include compliance with regulations, and how the needs of all the children, young people and families in the municipality/commune are being met.

These assessments can be carried out by non-formal education associations, in partnership with communities and social agencies, in a participatory and multi-partnership approach that involves all those concerned (local or regional authority services, facilitators and associations). Methods used in the assessments may consist of semi-direct interviews (parents, teachers and municipal staff), on-the-ground observations and the collection of statistical data.

A "quality charter" label for promoting quality in youth work practice may be introduced by state services in partnership with local or regional authorities and other associations. In community centres for minors, the quality charter is a voluntary partnership arrangement that aims to guarantee and improve the standard of activities offered at the centres.

Germany

The legal framework for youth work and youth social work since 1991 is the Youth Welfare Act. According to the act (Sozialgesetzbuch VIII §11), young people shall be provided with youth work services that support their development. Youth work should be based on the interests of young people. It should also be co-determined and shaped by them. Youth work in Germany is based on the principle of "voluntarism" and is focused on the needs and interests of young people in such fields as

extracurricular education, youth work in sports, school-related youth work, youth work at recreational and international level, counselling and information, support for voluntary youth service providers and youth-led organisations, as well as support for socially excluded young people and those with disabilities. Youth work is generally seen as a "practice-oriented field of action". Youth work consists of voluntary work and paid work. Youth workers may have degrees in vocational education or in academic education. Youth workers' academic backgrounds tend to be in sociology, (social) pedagogy or educational sciences. Youth work, as a study course, may be included in social work or social pedagogy programmes.

1. Status of youth work quality

At the national level, the Youth Welfare Act states that youth work must be based on the interests of young people and that young people should be involved in decision-making processes related to youth work. The federal states have their own regulations governing youth work, and municipalities have established their own standards for youth work quality. For example, the district of Teltow-Fläming has produced detailed quality standards that define features of structural quality, quality of the contexts in which youth work and youth social work (such as youth clubs) take place, and quality within specific fields of action.

The Federal Child and Youth Plan and the state youth plans influence the quality of child and youth work. A key funding priority of the programme is to foster quality development in all areas of child and youth services. According to the plan, child and youth work includes social, cultural, intercultural and political education, as well as the organisation of leisure activities in self-organised forms, in groups chosen by young people themselves and in specific types of open-access facilities. One function of the plan is to fund paid positions in child and youth work organisations.

Mission statements and framework concepts are in place at the federal, state and local levels. At the local authority level, youth offices, youth officers and youth support services work to ensure quality in youth work practice by providing professional and organisational support to associations and organisations active in the youth work sector.

Local child and youth services committees are part of the local youth offices and, as co-decision makers in the structuring of child and youth work, play a role in shaping its quality and ensuring that it is aligned with local needs.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

Juleica is a national standardised card for voluntary youth workers. It is financed through public funds and largely administered by youth civil society organisations. It serves as proof of qualification and indicates the social recognition of voluntary work. Juleica card holders are officially recognised as meeting the quality and qualification requirements for voluntary youth work. The card can also be used as authentication and legitimacy to practise as a youth leader for public bodies such as information and advice centres.

The prescribed contents of Juleica training include:

- tasks and functions of the youth leader and the ability to lead a group;

- goals, methods and tasks of youth work;
- legal and organisational aspects of youth work;
- psychological and educational basics of working with children and young people;
- dangerous situations for young people and issues of child and youth protection.

In Bavaria, there is a particular focus on quality assurance and some training content is regarded as "binding", including:

- teaching of leadership skills and group pedagogy in theory and practice;
- methodological skills;
- planning and implementation of activities based on practical examples;
- structures of youth work;
- value orientation of youth organisations;
- legal and insurance issues;
- prevention of sexual violence;
- gender-conscious girl and boy work; and
- cross-cutting issues such as gender mainstreaming and intercultural competences.

In Brandenburg, training is divided into basic training – which includes the aims of youth work and youth social work as defined by law; the legal basis for youth work; group education; life situations of children and young people; project management; and communications and conflict – and specific training in such areas as media relations, travel law, nature and environment protection, and health education.

In Hesse, the focus of training is on working in and with groups; supervisory duty, liability and insurance; organisation and planning; developmental process in childhood and adolescence; life situations of children and young people; the role and self-image of youth leaders.

Ireland

Historically, youth work in Ireland has generally been implemented and practised by non-statutory or non-governmental voluntary youth organisations. Under the Youth Work Act 2001, there is, however, a statutory responsibility on the part of the state to ensure the provision of youth work programmes or youth work services. Effectively, the state directly funds voluntary youth organisations that provide and operate a wide range of programmes, initiatives and services for young people.

1. Status of youth work quality

Ireland has two formal and recognised national quality frameworks:

- a National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for youth work was introduced by the relevant ministry in 2011 to assess and support standards of youth work and evaluate development and improvement. The NQSF applies to all staff-led youth work organisations, services, projects and programmes

which are funded by the relevant ministry. An interim review of the NQSF was published in 2017; and

- the National Quality Standards for Volunteer-led Youth Groups is a set of standards that apply to volunteer-led youth activity and youth work groups. Other youth groups are not required to adhere to these standards but are encouraged to do so.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

The NQSF is a developmental process, which allows youth work organisations to assess service provision and identify areas for development. It also provides an opportunity to express youth work through the development of a common language within a structured framework.

The NQSF aims to:

- provide a support and development tool for youth work organisations providing services to young people;
- establish standards in the practice and provision of youth work;
- provide an enhanced evidence base for youth work;
- ensure resources are used effectively in the youth work sector;
- provide a basis for "whole organisational assessment".

The NQSF identifies key criteria which quality youth work should meet:

- young person-centred;
- based on partnership and co-operation;
- solution-focused;
- challenging and developmental;
- realistic and clear;
- focused on benefits.

The NQSF also includes a detailed 10-step process for engagement. Support and guidance on the NQSF are provided to local youth work services by the local education and training boards' youth/liaison officer and to national youth organisations by the responsible ministry.

Evaluation of youth work is based on self-assessment and some external assessment that is used to ensure that the self-assessment process is accurate.

For the self-assessment, the youth organisation must complete a scale of attainment. External assessment is performed by youth/liaison officers for local youth work services or by the NQSF standards officer for national youth work organisations. The external evaluation includes observations on practice. This provides the opportunity for more practical examples of quality youth work and may inform the ongoing development of the NQSF. The views of stakeholders including staff, management, young people and volunteers must be considered. Following the external assessment process, the implementation team and the youth/liaison officer or the NQSF standards officer review the youth work organisation's self-assessed scale of attainment. The two

parties discuss whether this is an accurate reflection and either agree or adjust the position on the scale. This position should be used as a baseline for a continuous improvement plan, to inform the completion of the annual progress report.

If the assessment identifies an issue that needs immediate action, addressing these concerns is part of a separate process outside of the NQSF. In such instances, the management within the organisation or the managing organisation and funding body will be informed and will assume their responsibility for ensuring effective youth work provision and practice within the organisation.

There are no sanctions associated with this process. For example, public funding is not awarded or withheld if projects or programmes do not meet the established quality criteria.

The National Quality Standards for Volunteer-led Youth Groups require that each participating organisation should complete an annual plan and progress report. This is based on a model of "plan, act and review". The form should be reviewed and updated on an annual basis and used to inform the work of, and processes within, the youth group. During this process, organisations should consult or liaise with the regional youth/development officer of their parent organisation, or with a youth/liaison officer from their local education and training board. The officer also completes a section within the progress report that gives feedback to the organisation.

In 2016, the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), the representative body for voluntary youth organisations, published a toolkit for the youth sector, "8 Steps to Inclusive Youth Work – Promoting best quality inclusive practice in youth work settings". The toolkit was developed after extensive interviews with 16 youth work organisations across Ireland who described their inclusive youth work practices.

The "8 Steps to Inclusive Youth Work" aimed to help voluntary youth organisations to:

- report within the NQSF;
- write continuous improvement plans;
- develop a logic model or work plan towards realising the outcomes in the national youth strategy;
- fulfil responsibilities under equality legislation;
- follow commitments set out in the voluntary youth organisation's diversity, equality, integration or inclusion policy.

As well as:

- acting as an assessment and planning toolkit to help develop and realise best practice in equal and inclusive youth work;
- articulating youth work practice in a structured manner that meets the reporting requirements of the NQSF and national youth policy objectives; and
- spurring thinking about inclusive youth work practice.

The eight steps to inclusive youth work are:

- Step 1 – Organisational review;
- Step 2 – Policy and guidelines;

- Step 3 – Space and environment;
- Step 4 – Staff and volunteers;
- Step 5 – Activities and involvement of young people;
- Step 6 – Resources;
- Step 7 – Networking and partnerships;
- Step 8 – Monitoring and evaluation.

Each step provides for:

- examples of relevant sources of evidence. For instance, in Step 4 (Staff and volunteers), examples of evidence include: job and volunteer role descriptions, records and evaluations of staff training in equality and diversity, supervision records, shared practice seminar notes, evaluation review/feedback documents, minutes of inclusion and diversity committee meetings, newsletters and communications to volunteers with equality and inclusion-related content, etc.;
- best practice indicators relating to the organisation and the young people they work with, and how they relate to the core principles and standards of the NQSF and the outcomes of the national youth strategy. For instance, in Step 5 (Activities and involvement of young people), examples of best practice indicators are under the heading of programme planning, programme content and support procedures;
- practical examples of good practice from among the 16 voluntary youth organisations involved;
- further resources and support;
- an action plan template for continuous improvement planning; and
- a logic model.

Luxembourg

1. Status of youth work quality

There is a national quality framework for youth work in Luxembourg, defined by the revised Youth Law of 2016. The Ministry of Education, Children and Youth and the National Youth Service are responsible for initiating and implementing the national quality framework.

"Quality" is defined as encompassing various dimensions: quality of structure, quality of process, quality of results and quality of concepts. According to the revised 2016 Youth Law, the concept of quality includes the provision and management of resources and infrastructure; comprehensive training and development for youth workers; monitoring and evaluation of educational services; development and co-ordination of educational and volunteer programmes; support for continuing professional development and production of educational materials; and contribution to broader national and international youth policies and programmes. These aspects are further developed in the National Reference Framework.

Quality is achieved through systematic monitoring, adherence to professional standards and specific funding mechanisms.

The National Youth Service oversees the implementation of the framework, which is state-recognised and supported.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

2.1. National quality framework for youth work

The quality framework is integrated into the field of non-formal education and work with and for young people. The system is built on five key components:

1. the National Reference Framework on Non-Formal Education for Children and Young People, which outlines the core objectives, principles and characteristics of non-formal education in Luxembourg;

2. the development of a general action plan for every educational service for young people that receives state financial support;

3. the maintenance of an event log that documents the implementation of the general action plan;

4. the creation of a continuous training plan for staff within the sector;

5. regular visits by regional agents to ensure that the educational practices of the service align with its general action plan.

At the local level, state-funded or supported educational services must define a general action plan which includes a pedagogical part, self-evaluation measures, action fields for pedagogical quality and a plan for further staff training. This concept is reviewed by the National Youth Service and is valid for three years once adopted.

2.2. Structural quality standards

A 1998 law regulates the structural quality of youth work in open youth centres (e.g. number of employees, size of groups, infrastructure and security standards).

2.3. Roles in quality assurance

Under the revised Youth Law of 2016, quality assurance is guaranteed on a regular basis. The National Youth Service, as a state administrative body, is responsible for the central control and management of the process, and is also responsible for the continuous monitoring of the process in the youth centres, which is carried out by the regional quality agents.

The communes and municipalities also play a decisive role, as they exercise an overarching control function by co-financing the youth centres and acting as local negotiating partners and supporters in practical implementation. At the operational level, the pedagogical specialists are responsible for the practical implementation of the central tasks of quality assurance.

Malta

Youth work in Malta is largely conducted by Aġenzija Żgħażagħ, the national youth agency (established in 2010), and the voluntary youth sector. Youth work in Malta is a recognised and regulated profession under the Youth Work Profession Act (2015).

Aġenzija Żgħażagħ is responsible for the implementation of Malta's national youth policy, "Towards 2030 – Reaching out to, working with and supporting young people".

1. Status of youth work quality

Malta does not have a formal youth work quality framework or system of standards and has no formal definition of quality. However, Aġenzija Żgħażagħ does have two youth work quality frameworks that support and underpin effective youth work practice.

- An internal quality assurance policy is in place to evaluate the programmes and services offered to young people through self-assessment and peer reviews; and a self-assessment tool has also been developed to help voluntary youth organisations evaluate and improve the quality of their programmes and services. These are structured around core aspects of quality youth work, namely: prioritising young people's needs, safeguarding their well-being, promoting empowerment and education, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity, and delivering high-quality information. Organisations are invited to assess their performance against a set of indicators, which are detailed descriptions of best practices in youth work, thus highlighting areas for improvement and leading to professional growth within the organisation.
- A reflective supervision policy that aims to nurture a resilient and reflexive working community, and seeks to upskill employees to work around their limitations through a continuous self-reflecting journey of their daily challenges.
- An annual report.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

2.1. Quality assurance policy

The internal quality assurance policy focuses on four main areas to ensure the delivery of high-quality programmes and services:

1. inclusion: ensuring that all young people, regardless of background or circumstances, are integrated and actively involved in the agency's programmes and services;
2. equality: promoting equal opportunities for all young people, ensuring that no one is disadvantaged or discriminated against;
3. diversity: acknowledging and valuing the diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives of young people;
4. continuous development: committing to the ongoing improvement and adaptation of services to meet the evolving needs of young people effectively.

The self-assessment tool identifies five main areas of quality that are considered crucial for delivering effective and impactful youth work. These areas represent the core aspects that youth organisations should focus on to ensure they are providing the highest standard of service to young people.

1. Prioritising young people's needs

This area emphasises the importance of youth-centred approaches across all aspects of the organisation's work. Quality is defined by the organisation's ability to understand and respond to the specific needs and aspirations of young people. It involves active engagement with young people, ensuring their voices are heard and that their needs are central to decision-making processes.

2. Safeguarding well-being

Ensuring the safety and well-being of young people is a fundamental aspect of quality youth work. This area focuses on the policies and practices in place to protect young people from harm – physical, emotional and psychological. High-quality youth work requires robust safeguarding mechanisms that are consistently applied and regularly reviewed to respond to emerging risks and challenges.

3. Promoting empowerment and education

This dimension is about enabling young people to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to take control of their lives. This involves creating opportunities for learning and personal growth through non-formal education, encouraging critical thinking and supporting informed decision making. Empowerment is a key outcome of high-quality youth work, enabling young people to become active and engaged citizens.

4. Ensuring accessibility and inclusivity

This area addresses the importance of ensuring that youth work is open and accessible to all young people, regardless of their background or life circumstances. Quality in this area means removing barriers to participation and ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to benefit. It reflects a strong commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in all aspects of organisational practice.

5. Delivering high-quality information

Providing accurate, relevant and timely information is essential for empowering young people and supporting their decision-making processes. Quality is defined by the organisation's ability to communicate effectively and to ensure that young people receive the information they need to make informed choices about their lives and futures.

2.2. Reflective supervision policy

The reflective supervision policy has four objectives:

- provide a regular space for employees to question and reflect on practices and plans (current and future);
- look at what employees do well and explore situations that might have gone better, reflecting on how to improve and develop such situations;
- think about how to use personal and professional resources better;
- allow employees to further ensure the quality of their work practice.

The organisation, the supervisor and the supervisee are the three interdependent roles that need to cohesively work together as a tripartite arrangement to maximise the potential benefits the reflective supervision process yields.

The structural process of supervision is as follows:

- one-to-one supervision;
- group supervision;
- senior management supervision.

One-to-one supervision is a regular face-to-face, uninterrupted meeting (not exceeding an hour) between a nominated supervisor and supervisee, at a time and date that is suitable for both parties and agreed in advance.

Group supervision gives space for peer learning and provides a platform for employees to bring practical cases or cases from previous supervision to learn from each other, support one another, and share challenges and solutions.

Senior management supervision aims to equip the senior management team with its own reflective journey but also to equip the team with qualities to guide their team to achieve organisational goals efficiently and effectively.

The head of corporate services is responsible for monitoring the process throughout the year and checks if any resources are needed for smooth implementation.

At the end of the year, the head of corporate services evaluates the process as follows:

- distribution of evaluation forms to assess the process's effectiveness and the targeted outcomes;
- organisation of a yearly focus group to gather further data from staff on the supervision process;
- request to the external supervisor to present an evaluation report on the supervision process;
- compilation and presentation of a report with all findings, their analysis and recommendations to the CEO for appropriate follow-up action.

2.3. Annual report

Through its annual reports, Aġenzija Żgħażagħ provides quantitative data on the nature and number of programmes, projects and initiatives provided for young people and their level of participation according to age and gender. The annual report also includes a financial statement on overall income and expenditure.

Netherlands

There is no national or regional policy or strategy on youth work in the Netherlands. Youth work is not included in any legislation or national policy documents relating to young people.

Local authorities may include youth work as a feature of local support structures for young people in general but there is no statutory or regulatory requirement for them to do so.

National organisations such as the Netherlands Youth Institute, Social Work Netherlands, Youth Spot, BVjong and others have an informal co-operative structure to promote the development of youth work and organise national youth work events. The national association for youth workers (BVjong) aims to promote and develop youth work in the Netherlands and to support youth workers as a profession within the social work domain.

1. Status of youth work quality

There is no formal or recognised quality standard, framework or system in the Netherlands and no definition of quality.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

However, a competence profile for youth work was developed at the national level in 2008. It aimed to provide an overview of the minimal professional competences youth workers as a profession should have. It also provided input for the development of training and education, and acted as an instrument for human resource policies at organisational level, and to further professionalise and promote professional standards in youth work.

The profile identifies six generic competences for youth workers:

- contractual and communicative;
- demand-driven and solution-focused;
- focused on aims and results;
- entrepreneurial and innovative;
- analytic and responsible;
- professional and quality-driven.

The profile defines competences in three core task-related areas.

1. Client-focused tasks: youth work is mainly for vulnerable young people
   - reaching out, developing contacts with young people, their networks, collaborating organisations and structures in the local area;
   - signalling possible (individual/group) problems;
   - analysing cultural and societal context of young people, organisations and neighbourhoods;
   - designing (together with young people and others) programmes and activities with recreational, pedagogical, educative and cultural goals;
   - creating opportunities and provisions for young people to have a safe platform to interact with each other;
   - animating and stimulating young people to develop their personal and social core competences (identity and social bonding);
   - helping young people to participate in society;
   - guiding young people with problems and advising and stimulating them towards a more positive development;

- transferring, accompanying and being an advocate and support for young people with problems, interfacing with other related professional fields such as youth care, psychological/psychiatric care, addiction support, education and employment;
- evaluating the results (output and impact) of the programmes and activities, including reflective practice.

2. Organisational tasks: related to the functioning within organisations. Local or regional welfare organisations are mainly the organisational structures where youth workers practice
   - contributing to the organisation;
   - contributing to policy development.
3. Professional tasks: related to the professionalisation of the workforce
   - developing and maintaining the quality and competences of the profession.

Overall methods of youth work are described as context for the competence profile:

- responding to the living and cultural environment of the young;
- coaching individual and groups of young people;
- integrated working;
- developing participation of young people in society;
- being present; to be there where the young people are.

Four levels of professional practice are identified by levels of complexity, transfer of knowledge, responsibility and independent working:

- assistant youth worker;
- youth worker;
- senior youth worker;
- youth work co-ordinator.

The Netherlands Youth Institute has also developed a quality framework and assessment for youth work that provide:

- self-assessment of youth workers at organisational level; and
- an external audit for a youth work quality label.

The criteria for the quality framework are:

- positioning youth work in a local infrastructure/system of social support and care for young people;
- organisational vision, mission, focus and policy direction;
- governance and supervision (Board of Auditors);
- content quality (workforce development, method-based approaches, innovation).

Serbia

The 2011 Youth Law is the basis for the institutional framework for the implementation of Serbia's Youth Strategy (2023-2030) and includes an action plan for the period 2023-2025 and an allocation of some €90 million spread across relevant ministries. There are action plans for youth at local level and local youth councils.

In the youth strategy, one of the five goals refers to youth work, which is developed through measures aimed at professionalisation and quality assurance.

1. Status of youth work quality

There is no formal or recognised quality standard, framework or system in Serbia and no definition of quality.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

Quality assurance and standards in youth work at national and local level are provided by the National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR). NAPOR is a union of civil society organisations (CSOs) established in 2008, in the absence of a state-recognised and supported national association for youth work.

NAPOR brings together 90 CSOs and over 2 250 youth workers and adopts a consultative and participatory approach in partnership with the Serbian ministry responsible for youth. NAPOR pools the expertise and experience of its member organisations in providing support for advocacy, capacity building and working with marginalised youth, youth employment, education and research.

Since its establishment, NAPOR has initiated and developed the following:

- three vocational/occupational standards in the field of youth work and non-formal education;
- standards for quality youth work and non-formal education and a mechanism for their implementation;
- non-formal education curricula for the youth field;
- a mechanism for validation of previously attained competences in youth work;
- a pool of licensed organisations and trainers for delivery of multimodular training for youth workers;
- a tool for the recognition of competences of young people gained through youth work programmes; and
- a code of ethics for youth work practice.

With the support of the ministry responsible for youth, NAPOR started work on the development of quality standards for youth work in 2009 and also adopted a code of ethics in youth work practice.

NAPOR developed a set of eight standards that every youth work programme undertaken in Serbia should meet.

Accreditation consists of self-assessment of organisations and assessment by accreditors – experts in youth work who give their opinion and make recommendations to the organisation, especially in connection with the improvement of certain standards.

Based on the accreditor's report, the organisations create an action plan that defines the key fields in which they intend to improve in the next three years in order to reach a higher level of achievement of standards.

NAPOR also created occupational standards for three youth work levels – youth leader, youth worker and specialist for youth work and policy, while curricula for education of youth workers, containing training programmes, have been developed for the two vocational levels: youth leader and youth worker.

Based on quality standards in youth work, a mechanism for their implementation was created.

In 2015, the ministry funded the Youth Umbrella Organisation of Serbia and NAPOR to create a dictionary of youth policy with other associations, which includes definitions related to youth work and ensuring the quality of youth work. The process was initiated by NAPOR with the support of the ministry responsible for youth. During the process, all important partners from the public and non-governmental sectors were consulted. The dictionary was updated in 2017.

During 2023, work began on the drafting of a new Law on Youth, which would provide for licensing and professionalisation of youth workers and quality assurance for youth work practice.

Slovenia

1. Status of youth work quality

In Slovenia, the occupational standard "youth worker" has existed since 2017. The standard enables the official recognition of professional skills for a youth worker. Admission requirements are at least one year's experience of youth work, which the candidate demonstrates by means of letters of reference from organisations working in the youth work field. The qualification level is EQF level 4 in the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

Youth worker as a vocation/occupation has been recognised as part of the national vocational qualification system and with it, part of the vocational education and training system in Slovenia. Verification and assessment are carried out by committees for the verification and validation of national vocational qualifications, appointed by the national examination centre. Committee members must be licensed by the national examination centre.

According to the description, learning outcomes are as follows. Candidates will be able to:

- plan, implement and evaluate youth programmes in co-operation with young people;

- establish and maintain co-operative and confidential relations with a young person;
- work with young people in groups and teams;
- enable young people to acquire competences;
- carry out activities to disseminate the results of the work of young people;
- ensure the quality of their own work and their own personal and professional development;
- observe the principles of sustainable development and the protection of health when working with young people.

Candidates must be able to demonstrate a sufficient extent of the required knowledge, skills and competences from the following operational components:

- plan youth work programmes in co-operation with young people;
- implement youth work programmes in co-operation with young people;
- evaluate youth work programmes;
- carry out activities to disseminate the results of the work of young people;
- establish and maintain co-operative and confidential relations with a young person;
- work with young people in groups and teams;
- enable young people to acquire competences.

Sweden

1. Status of youth work quality

There is no formal system of quality assurance applying to youth work organised by municipalities or regions in Sweden.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

The KEKS network of municipalities has developed a quality system. KEKS refers to quality youth work in the book *Quality youth work. A common framework for the further development of youth work* (European Commission 2015).

"Quality" is defined as "how well something fulfils its function; to what degree the actual outcomes meet the aims" (ibid.). It also states that "[i]n a first step the quality of youth work is therefore related to the overall aims – how well it contributes to the personal and social development of young people" (ibid.). In other words, this means that "quality" is measured by the degree to which the actual outcomes meet what we want to achieve. What we want to achieve can, and most likely will, have both quantitative and qualitative elements: we want to reach a certain number of young people and we want them to, for example, develop certain skills. Hence, a certain quantity is part of the overall quality.

The quality system consists of five different tools centred on the core principles of participation and non-formal learning:

1. a digital logbook where all youth work is systematically documented through both statistics and written comments;

2. an annual survey of young people visiting the youth centres. The survey consists of two parts: one with questions about the respondent (age/gender/background, etc.) and one with questions about safety, participation, accessibility, etc. (in 2014, more than 7 300 young persons answered the survey);

3. a group survey answered by young people who take part in creating activities for themselves and/or others, answering questions about how and to what extent they have participated;

4. experience, learning, description (https://tinyurl.com/acy8eu87), a method for documenting and making visible non-formal learning;

5. statistics regarding the number of visitors, number of activity hours, costs, etc. (Youth Wiki 2024).

2.1. Examples of indicators

The following examples are taken from KEKS (2023).

Our proposal for quality indicators for street work is that the young people we work with have:

- improved their self-understanding;
- improved their self-control;
- become better at managing conflicts;
- become better at expressing themselves;
- become better at looking after themselves;
- become better at managing their everyday duties;
- become more aware of their rights;
- become better at understanding others;
- become better at co-operating;
- developed new interests;
- become more engaged in society;
- improved their self-esteem.

Indicators on cost:

- cost per individual we work with (in groups or individually);
- cost per hour of actual street work (in street-based, group or individual activities).

Quality indicators on the attitudes and approaches of street workers are that young people at risk perceive that street workers:

- are accessible when they need them;

- care about them as individuals;
- act in their best interest;
- make them see new things or look at things in a new way;
- involve them when they act;
- treat them with respect;
- talk with them about things that they feel are important;
- are clear about what can be expected from them;
- help them understand the role of other services (police, social services, etc.).

Ukraine

In Ukraine, the concept of youth work is defined in the Law of Ukraine "About the basic principles of youth policy" of 27 April 2021. Youth work is defined as activities aimed at involving children and youth in public life, carried out by children and youth, together with children and youth or in the interests of children and youth through joint decision-making tools. There are documents that establish the rules for the functioning of, for example, regional youth centres, define their role in the development of youth work and provide recommendations for their organisation and activities.

1. Status of youth work quality

The Order of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of 3 August 2017, No. 3284, "On Approval of the National Quality Mark and Quality Criteria for Youth Centres", registered with the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine on 28 August 2017 under No. 1061/30929, defines the criteria for assessing the quality of activities of youth centres at the local and regional levels.

The Order of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of 22 March 2023, No. 1564, "On Approval of the Professional Standard Youth Specialist (Youth Worker)" was approved and was included in the register of qualifications by the National Qualifications Agency.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

2.1. Professional standards of youth worker

Methodical recommendations for the implementation of the professional standard "youth specialist (youth worker)" have been developed and disseminated for use by managers, founders of institutions, structural units of local self-government bodies as well as professional development centres for youth specialists or subjects of professional development for the implementation of the professional standard. The document outlines the key features of youth workers as follows:

- facilitating youth engagement with authorities and politics;
- empowering young people to drive change;
- providing access to non-formal education;
- supporting independence and self-sufficiency;

- encouraging self-expression and initiative;
- ensuring safe and healthy leisure opportunities.

Key competences of youth workers include:

- Monitoring the current situation and needs of youth:
  - assessing and understanding the issues and needs of young people.
- Organisation of youth work:
  - providing meaningful leisure activities;
  - promoting a healthy and safe lifestyle;
  - supporting volunteering and informal youth groups;
  - facilitating national and international exchanges;
  - supporting personal growth and self-realisation;
  - encouraging youth participation;
  - creating an enabling environment for youth work;
  - engaging vulnerable young people;
  - developing and implementing youth learning programmes.
- Planning and documentation in youth work:
  - structuring youth work initiatives, maintaining records and ensuring accurate documentation.
- Collaboration with different stakeholders:
  - building networks and partnerships with governmental, non-governmental and community organisations.
- Self-development and professional growth in youth work:
  - enhancing the skills and knowledge of youth workers to improve their effectiveness and impact.

2.2. A model general short-term programme for civil servants and local government officials on youth work based on participatory approaches, developed and approved by the Order of the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service of 18 September 2023, No. 149–23.

The scope of the programme is 1 ECTS credit. The programme lasts for four days.

Expected learning outcomes:

- the essence of youth policy and its cross-cutting nature;
- regulatory acts governing youth policy in Ukraine;
- key actors in youth policy;
- Council of Europe standards on youth policy;
- basic principles and tools for the development and implementation of youth policy at state and local government levels;
- stages and methods for researching youth needs;
- main principles and forms of youth participation in the development and implementation of youth policy.

Skills in:

- applying the legal framework in the field of youth policy;
- communicating about youth policy with young people and other stakeholders;
- co-ordinating the development and implementation of youth policy with various stakeholders;
- identifying and considering the needs of different youth groups in the development and implementation;
- selecting the most appropriate forms of youth participation in policy making based on specific situations.

Competences in:

- applying different tools for youth policy development and implementation;
- collaborating with stakeholders for the formation and realisation of youth policy;
- using methods for collecting and analysing youth needs;
- implementing various forms of youth participation in policy making.

2.3. A model general short-term training programme for civil servants and local government officials "youth work", developed and approved by the Order of the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service of 19 February 2024, No. 25–24

The length of the programme is 1 ECTS credit. It takes four days on-site. When completing the programme, the participants should have:

Knowledge of:

- the essence of youth work and youth policy;
- the main principles and forms of youth participation in youth work;
- tools for interaction among youth work stakeholders;
- forms and methods of communication on youth work issues;
- professional competency requirements for youth specialists (youth workers).

Skills to:

- apply various forms of youth engagement in the formation and implementation of youth policy and youth work;
- identify and analyse youth needs, developing programme documents accordingly;
- consider the needs of different youth groups when organising and implementing youth work;
- use different tools for forming and implementing youth work;
- interact effectively with young people;
- apply methods of collecting and analysing youth needs in professional activities;
- plan and implement youth projects;
- communicate effectively to foster collaboration among youth work stakeholders.

2.4. Recommendations for organising the work of the youth, approved by the Order of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of 9 December 2021

The recommendation provides a comprehensive framework for organising youth spaces, to guide organisations in creating youth spaces that foster development in intellectual, physical and spiritual areas. The importance of ensuring accessibility, providing a safe and inclusive environment for all young people and promoting non-formal education, creative potential and social integration is emphasised in the document.

2.5. The all-Ukrainian youth centre has developed methodological recommendations for organising the functioning of youth centres and spaces, on 13 June 2024.

United Kingdom (Scotland)

1. Status of youth work quality

There are no formal or recognised quality standards, framework or system in Scotland and no definition of quality.

2. Youth work quality tools, processes and assessment

Scotland has several frameworks and measures for youth work quality.

2.1. National occupational standards

National occupational standards (NOS) are the United Kingdom-wide recognised basis for qualifications in youth work. Youth work NOS are revised every five to eight years. There is usually a 6- to 12-month consultation process which includes consulting with the sector, particularly employers. The last review was in 2019.

Youth work NOS aim to define and describe the competences required of those who work in the youth work sector. They are not designed to describe any specific youth work role and do not equate directly to qualifications. The NOS, as the agreed standards of performance and knowledge required in youth work practice across the United Kingdom, can be used by employers to inform job descriptions, consider skills needs and identify areas of improvement, and can also support an individual's professional and continuous development.

The different contexts in which youth work is practised, at national, regional and local levels, and the political context, have a bearing on how NOS are applied, as approaches to youth work differ across the four nations of the United Kingdom. However, regardless of the national context, at the core of all youth work practice is the "values for youth work", developed with the sector in 2007. The "values" describe an approach to youth work, and it is expected that all those working with young people will adhere to these values.

2.2. Community learning and development competences

Community learning and development competences (CLD) bring together the knowledge, skills and personal characteristics that make up competence in CLD practice. The framework is used by practitioners, training providers and employers to reflect on, develop and strengthen youth work practice.

CLD practitioners seek to ensure that their work supports social change and social justice and is based on the values of CLD. The approach is collaborative, anti-discriminatory and equalities-focused, working with diverse individuals, communities of place or interest and organisations to achieve change. Central to their practice is challenging discrimination and its consequences, and working with individuals and communities to shape learning and development activities that enhance quality of life and their sphere of influence.

Competent CLD practitioners also need to have self-management skills that are appropriate to the level at which they are practising. While these are not detailed in the competences, they are covered through the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the NOS. Critically, reflective CLD practitioners are aware of their values and principles and critically reflect on their practice and experience. They use self-assessment, participative processes and evidence of the impact of their work to plan and manage their activities.

2.3. The National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework

The National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework is a sector-driven framework describing the outcomes and skills developed by young people through engagement with youth work. The outcomes framework is Scotland's youth work practice model, outlining the outcomes that are worked towards (with young people) using youth work inputs (standards, values and ethics), definitive features (voluntary participation, partnership) and other transfer outcomes. The National Youth Work Outcomes Framework was initially launched in 2016, the Skills Framework was launched in 2021, and a renewed and combined framework was launched in 2023.

Under the framework, youth work is a rights-based practice. There are sets of indicators attached to each skill, using "I can" statements for young people to identify their progress. This framework is used for several purposes: planning; supporting young people to recognise their learning and achievement; impact evaluation; and expressing the distinct approaches and outcomes of youth work within partnerships.

YouthLink Scotland is currently working on a system for collecting impact data from the outcomes and skills framework that can be used across the sector to support members with impact measurement and data collection and gain national insights.

2.4. How good is our CLD?

Youth work is inspected as part of wider community learning and development and there is an inspection and self-evaluation framework with challenge questions and quality indicators. Different local authorities have different reporting systems which may have additional quality, impact or reporting measurement.

This framework follows Education Scotland's overarching framework and has been developed to reflect the criteria set out in the European Framework for Quality Management excellence model. It focuses on high-quality leadership and provision as the enablers which can secure results in terms of positive outcomes for all learners and communities and sets out the standards used to evaluate and report on quality and improvement in Scottish education.

Checklist for analysing youth work quality frameworks based on this study

The following checklist draws largely on the methodology used in the current study and can be a practical guiding tool for carrying out similar analyses in countries not covered in this study.

- Is there a national, regional or local quality framework, system or standards for youth work?
- Is there any other document that explicitly discusses quality in youth work?
- Has it been documented when the quality framework was developed, how long has the process lasted, who initiated and managed the process, and who were the main stakeholders involved?
- Is there a clear definition of quality included in the framework?
- Are the methods for promoting, recognising or assuring quality explained?
- Is the quality framework nationally developed or developed by the community of practice? Is it structural (emphasising the general quality of youth work), practical (emphasising the practice of youth work), or a combination of both?
- How does the quality framework address the following themes:
  - promoting learning;
  - promoting well-being and safety;
  - working with groups;
  - establishing a professional relationship with individual young people;

  - promoting participation of the young in society;
  - promoting inclusion;
  - being youth-centred and conscious of the needs of young people;
  - organisational skills.
- Has the European expert group quality framework or other European initiatives been referenced or adapted?
- Have tools and practices from other countries been considered or adapted in the process of creating the quality framework or in the written documents?
- Does the quality framework consider community and society values of youth work? Are sustainability issues integrated into the quality framework?
- How does the framework consider young people as beneficiaries of youth work? Are tools such as surveys for young people integrated into the quality framework?

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Sintija Lase has been engaged in the youth field for about 20 years, taking part in and organising European youth projects and establishing an NGO to provide opportunities for other young people. She has collaborated with SALTO and other national agencies. Sintija has been a guest lecturer at four universities. She has consulted 20 municipalities on youth work development and trained more than 50 municipal youth affairs specialists in Latvia. During the last six years, Sintija has transferred from practical youth work consultations into youth field research, measuring the impact of entrepreneurship education, mapping digital youth work and non-formal education, looking at international youth learning mobility and youth policy monitoring, and exploring youth work education possibilities. She is also deeply involved as an expert in youth work professionalisation in Latvia.

How is quality defined in youth work? What features does quality youth work show? European youth policy has addressed two approaches: quality youth work and the quality of youth work over the years. This study explores how the quality of youth work is conceptualised and supported in 15 European countries. It highlights the diversity of approaches to quality tools in Europe and identifies common themes within. While national-level frameworks are the most common, only a few countries have developed models that respond to local contexts or directly incorporate the perspectives of young people. Overall, quality tools tend to prioritise structural features over practice perspectives.

The study identifies eight overarching themes shared by at least five quality tools or frameworks. Despite a shared European commitment to quality youth work, the study reveals gaps in conceptual clarity and relatively little attention paid to beneficiaries' perspectives. The first part of the study offers an analytical outlook on quality, and the second part consists of descriptions of quality tools or frameworks in 15 countries. Whether you are a policy maker or youth work development expert, the variety of approaches can inspire you to reflect on the quality framework you are working with, how it can integrate better practice perspectives and, crucially, perspectives of young people as beneficiaries of youth work.

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