# EUROPEAN ACADMY ON YOUTH WORK

# PRE-CONFERENCE REPORT

by Boško Stankovski

## 1.  WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN ACADEMY ON YOUTH WORK (EAYW)?

The EAYW is a strategic cooperation of National Agencies of the Erasmus+ programme, youth sector, and the European Solidarity Corps[1], and SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centres. The EAYW aims to:

- support innovation in youth work and youth work policy;
- promote the development of quality youth work;
- contribute to creating a common ground on youth work and youth work policy.

It offers a regular platform for reflection, exchange and knowledge gathering on innovation and current European topics, trends and developments in and with relevance to the youth field.

In order to support the further development of youth work and youth policy, the EAYW wants to address the questions of why, when and how innovation in youth work happens, and which conditions are needed, so that innovative approaches and practices can successfully respond to current developments and the challenges faced by young people across Europe.

Biennial events for 120-150 participants are part of the activities organised by the EAYW. The first edition of the EAYW took place in Slovenia from 21 – 24 May 2019. The second edition was originally planned to be held in Slovenia in November 2021 and, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, postponed to 31 May – 3 June 2022. As part of the second EAYW, an interactive online programme of activities titled Learning in Times of Disruption and Change was implemented in the period from November 2021 to April 2022. This included five webinars exploring different aspects relevant for the innovation process. The topics included:

- "Innovation in times of disruption" (4 November 2021);
- "Recognising larger trends, seeing interconnections with youth work" (16 December 2021);
- "Rethinking innovation – what kind of innovator are you?" (27 January 2022);
- "Cultures of innovation" (10 March 2022);
- "Ecosystems for innovation" (21 April 2022).


## 2.  DEFINING "INNOVATION" IN YOUTH WORK

According to the study Innovation in Youth Work published by the EAYW, innovation in youth work is understood as "demonstrated methodologies, practices, tools, ways of approaching target groups, or organisational models that have novel elements" (Atanasov, Belletti and Demicheli 2021: 20). All these "novel elements" can be completely new to the youth field, they can be upgrades of the already existing practices, or they can be considered innovative in

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[1] This includes the National Agencies of Austria, Belgium (FL), Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden.

regards to the particular context in which they are implemented. The underlying reasoning of these innovative practices is to enable youth work to support young people to make changes, thus positively affect their lives and contribute to a wider social change (*Ibid*).

The innovation ecosystem is not static, but in a constant movement caused by the actions of different stakeholders, conducted jointly or independently of one another (*Ibid:* 22). In this context, the research differentiates between triggers and conditions which put the system in motion. While the former are defined as "forces that push or motivate the process of innovation", the latter are regarded as "factors that provide the underlying support and create a climate favourable to innovation" (*Ibid:* 8). Starting from this premise, the paper divides the triggers and conditions into three groups according to the level on which they act: individual, organisational and contextual. A successful process of innovation is most likely to happen when the actors are driven by the triggers and supported by favourable conditions.

Innovation is neither static not a linear process. Moreover, it often exists as a loop because one innovation leads to another. Therefore, as the triggers and conditions lead to innovation, we can also conclude from the EAYW 2022 contributions that new, innovative projects produce new ideas (triggers) and improve the conditions, thus creating new and sustaining the existing innovation cycles.

## 3. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE EAYW 2022

The innovative practices that will be presented at the 2nd EAYW 2022 were selected on the basis of a public call in 2021.[2]

Starting from the premise that described above that one innovation leads to another, it can be observed that the practices that were selected for presentation at the EAYW 2022, in general, showcase innovation in youth work which can be regarded from a *policy*, *capacity-building* and *youth empowerment* aspect.

In this direction, the innovations analysed from the youth policy aspect include creating national or European frameworks for supporting youth work as well as targeted advocacy campaigns implemented by leading national and international youth organisations, especially youth umbrella organisations. One element common to all these practices is that they adopt evidence-based approach both within their structural framework and as a tool for influencing policymakers. However, in an absence of national funding, many of these efforts have been supported by the international donor community, especially the programmes of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

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[2] In response to the call, 202 proposals for contributions were received. Of those, 32 were selected for presentation at the EAYW 2022.

From a capacity-building aspect, the selected practices are predominately cantered on strengthening the existing structures of youth organisations, paying particular attention to building new skills and competences of youth workers. This includes increasing the youth organisations' outreach, the quality of services they offer to young people and/or enhancing the multiplier effect of their activities.

From the aspect of youth empowerment, the practices aim to create meaningful societal change and address the systemic inequalities in a situation of institutional ineffectiveness or failure. Most of these projects and activities have been designed using a co-creation approach and include a strong participatory element.

Having said this, the analysis of these aspects is only provisional because the large majority of all these contributions incorporate an interdisciplinary, multifaceted and cross-sectional approach. It is also noteworthy to mention that there is particular emphasis on digitalisation. This has already been a trend in youth work in the last decade, only to be rapidly exacerbated by the changed circumstances brought by the Covid-19 outbreak. Certainly, when the Pandemic is in question, it has to be noted that with a few exceptions, all the practices had to adapt in order to meet the targeted goals.

### 3.1. YOUTH POLICY ASPECT

When it comes to innovative practices that influence youth policies on an international level, **"The European Youth Work Agenda – a New Framework for Strengthening and Further Developing Youth Work in Europe"** (EYWA) is a milestone in the history of youth work in Europe. EYWA was established in 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, when the fragility of the field had become even more evident, and it is the outcome of collaboration at different institutional levels, including national, the European Union and the Council of Europe efforts. The Agenda has the potential to make future policy developments more coordinated and open up the chance of a strategic and effective approach to youth work at international level. On a more analytical level, **"Quality Youth Work and How to Measure it: Insight into the Revised Dashboard on EU Youth Indicators"** is a part of the "Proposal for an updated dashboard of EU Youth indicators" (DG EAC, April 2021) created by the European Commission's Expert Group on EU Youth Indicators. It aims to encourage data exploration and comparative data analysis in the field of youth, and to enable users to view indicators and other statistical data, gaining insights in the situation on youth in Europe and their programme engagement and activities.

The practices in this section offer opportunities for strong comparative insights. This is particularly important for the community of practice as many innovative projects build upon one another. Additionally, from a cross-sectoral component, comparative analysis can be a powerful advocacy tool to exhibit pressure to policy makers in order to adopt the necessary changes. This is especially the case if these types of analytical platforms are produced by

respected international organisations. In that direction, the European Commission - Council of Europe Youth Partnership has created the **"Visible Value",** a resource library on the recognition of youth work in Europe.

The initiative is, at the same time, the end point of a project and the baseline of a community of practice. Visible Value offers, in the first place, an overview of the issue in the form of an animated timeline, and then proceeds by providing the community of practice with effective working tools like, for instance, "inspiring recognition practices", an analysis of "national situations" and a well-stocked section with "recognition resources."

Also at a European level, through utilising an evidence-based approach in both project design and advocacy campaign, the practice "**Creating a European Learning Hub for Democratic Competences**" was able to develop a policy proposal on how to enhance democratic competences in the EU among all age groups, including youth. The policy proposal, grounded in a round of interviews with experts from multiple disciplines, is now the backbone of a successful advocacy campaign. In a similar direction, the report "**A New Approach to Integrated Youth Policy: Reflecting on History, Admitting Failures and Focusing on Collaborative Governance"** explores the dynamics related to the cross-sectoral youth policy approach in supporting young people's active citizenship and their transition to adulthood. The contribution puts forward a model based on the changing relationship between science and policy, the perceived nature of social problems, and the effect of increased uncertainty.

On a national level, the practice "**Development and Implementation of a New Youth Policy for Malta**" has been created by the national Youth Agency, which is working towards the implementation of a holistic set of youth policies for the country. The action, that has a strong focus on youth work, aims at supporting young people, both, as individual and as citizens. On the other hand, the scarcity of support to youth work in Moldova has been tackled by the practice **"Supporting Youth Work Development at the Local Level through the Youth Centres."** This scheme has not only produced a much needed administrative tool that provides guidance and methodological support to youth workers, but it has also developed into a best practice able to affect the way youth work policies in the country will be developed in the future.

The tendency to merge the analytical approach and targeted advocacy campaigns aiming to engage the local and national authorities is visible in the practice **"City for Youth Certificate"**. It is the result of an open and fruitful collaboration between policy makers, academia and youth organisations in Croatia. The project output is a tool that allows local governments to assess the quality and quantity of their youth policies, therefore helping them to qualify their strategic goals. The same tool will help civil society organisations and youth councils to form a clear picture of the state of the art in order to make their advocacy more effective. The certification, i.e. the rewards offered by the system, will further motivate local communities to improve the situation, for the benefit of all local stakeholders.

### 3.2. CAPACITY-BUILDING ASPECT

The second set of contributions are analysed from the aspect of how they strengthen the capacities of youth organisations and the youth sector in general, including the development of new skills and competences for their staff members. The evident pattern here is that their design relies on a strong research component and they aim to provide institutional support/recognition for youth work. In that direction, **"The Impact of Youth Work**" is based on a study implemented by the De Ambrassade and the University College Leuven-Limburg focusing on the impact of youth work in Flanders, Belgium. The project not only clarifies what 'impact' in youth work means, but also provides the youth workers with a set of recommendations on how to increase both the impact and visibility of the activities they implement, thus supporting the process of creating a learning community.

Another practice that incorporates theoretical reflection is the contribution "**Participation Resource Pool**", which is aimed predominately at practitioners. It enables youth workers, youth leaders and trainers/educators to have access to the most up-to-date online tools for fostering young people's critical thinking as an important pre-condition for increasing the level of meaningful youth participation. As such, it focuses on four topics and the way they intersect: youth participation; media, information and critical thinking; digital transformation; and youth outreach. In the same direction, user friendliness, research and needs analysis, newest digital technologies and feedback are the foundations of "**StreetSmart: Game-changing Tools for Youth Workers**." The project addresses the issue of the professionalisation of youth work by developing technological tools that are both attractive and effective. It suffices to think of StreetSmart Wheels, a transportable blackboard on wheels combined with 300 educational panels to bring non-formal education to the street – to mention but one of the highly innovative tools produced by this project.

In addition to this, quality information is the subject on another important contribution in this section: As the way youth information is organised and implemented varies considerably across countries, "The **European Competence Framework for Youth Information Workers**", developed by Eurodesk and ERYICA, has provided the first comprehensive competence framework for youth workers from information services at European level. The project goes beyond institutional and legal differences and has become an important reference point, while, at the same time, supporting advocacy actions for a full recognition of the sector.

Finally, the last set of practices covered in this section show a trend of adopting new approaches and perspectives on trainings for youth workers, either facilitating knowledge transfer from different sectors to the youth sector or blending tools of formal and non-formal education. For example, the contribution **"It Takes a Whole System to Develop a Youth Worker"** is based upon the YOCOMO Systemic training courses for youth workers. The practice explores the value of approaching competence development in a systemic way. In that direction, it points out the

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importance of acquiring 'systemic skills' for youth workers. The YOCOMO Systemic Training is part of the European Training Strategy.

Additionally, the **"MOOC: Innovation Tools for Youth workers and Organisations active in the Youth Field**" intends to offer on a permanent basis a set of resources on innovation, tailor-made for the youth work sector. Taking stock of the scarcity of ready-made, free and specific resources, the project provides ideation tools, innovation management systems and examples of future-oriented organisational cultures. Last but not least, building on collaboration between experts in higher education and the youth sector, "**FOCUS *learning***" addresses the quality of learning processes in youth work. The project output, a website populated by a rich choice of material and formats, pinpoints the need for a systematic collaboration between formal and non-formal education and training.

### 3.3. EMPOWERMENT ASPECT

When it comes to the set of contributions in this section, the empowerment of young people goes hand in hand with building a healthy, just and democratic society. One noticeable pattern exhibited here is the greater agency of young people which is facilitated by innovative efforts made by youth organisations and youth workers to address the shortcoming of national institutions, be it in relation to human rights protection, health and wellbeing, social welfare and/or social inclusion.

In this context, the **"Academy of Activism"** is the example of a practice that aims to empower young people by providing them with knowledge and tools necessary to create and implement their own social projects. Through several different phases, the project accompanies the individual from the creation of intra-group cohesion, to the training on human rights and activism and, finally, to the creation of its own activism project. As well, the starting point of **"Youth Pool"** and **"Youth Watchdogging Network 'Žinau, ką renku'**" is the need to offer young people the tools to become influential members of their community. The first, "Youth Pool", is a virtual space where young people develop, share and practice their own ideas for change. The participants have the chance of exploring the challenges of their own communities, meeting virtually other young people from all over the world, while discussing and advocating for their rights. The appealing and engaging exercise is both effective in supporting sense of purpose and autonomy as well as crucial for the democratic culture of the society at large. The second, "Youth Watchdogging Network 'Žinau, ką renku'" seeks to answer question on how to set up and cultivate a grass-root movement. The initiative gathers young people from all around Lithuania to organise political debates before the elections and has successfully managed to engage and give a voice to young people in the electoral processes.

Four initiatives address specific societal issues, namely the impact of different aspects of collective memory on the society, the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community and those of the

asylum seekers. Designed like a treasure hunt, **"Memory Walks"** encourage the exploration of forgotten memory spots in Instanbul and the reflection on how their stories influence every-day life. The practice is an example of how to make a non-formal rights-based youth work method attractive. Another practice, **"Beyond youth work: a holistic and participatory based approach to addressing young people's unmet needs"** describes a pilot project dealing with the issue of homelessness and housing exclusion of a specific vulnerable group: LGBTIQ+ youth. The action builds on community development approaches and mobilizes groups of community members in supporting LGBTIQ+ youth at risk.

On the other hand, **"iSave"** provides a space for inclusive self-advocacy for young displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers. Thanks to a co-creation approach, the project takes care of the needs of both the young refugees and the youth workers that support them. Finally, the "**STAR project"**, through exploring racial micro-aggressions, or invisible racism, raises young people's awareness about the level in which racism is embedded into our societies, the harmful consequences it has on minorities and the need for proactive measures to eliminate it.

While the concept of inclusion is an important feature in most of the contributions, it is particularly evident in "The New Life of an Old City Bus" and "Pay it forward be a Social Entrepreneur." The first one, **"The New Life of an Old City Bus"** – is an answer to the lack of programmes and spaces for young people in Ljubljana, but also to the dichotomy centre-periphery. The mobile youth centre hosted in the bus can address the needs of young people where traditional premises are not available and, while doing it, can also connect central and periphery neighbourhoods, therefore providing all the city corners with a sense of belonging. The second proposal **"Pay it forward be a Social Entrepreneur (PIFBASE)"** involves underrepresented groups of young people in entrepreneurship and personal development through a 3-stage-entrepreneurial-process, in which a youngster fulfils the dream of a peer. This way, Awesome People is able to involve subjects who otherwise would not have been engaged.

When talking about empowerment, digital skills and digital tools are increasingly taking the centre stage. This is an element that brings about important opportunities, dangers and limitations and that has acquired a new importance due to the COVID19 crisis.

The contribution **"Skills at Stake – Progress"** tries to answer to two important questions, i.e. how to foster non-formal education in a formal setting and how to promote effective digital health campaigns aimed at young people. The project has successfully trained a set of high school students on how to design health and wellbeing campaigns for their peers, combining in-presence activities and digital tools. It is noteworthy that Skill at Stake – Progress was able to provide young people with support and information during the lockdown and the hardest moments of the COVID-19 pandemic. **"Maker Education: Learning by Doing"** targets that section of youth that has limited access to digital technologies. The aim of the action is to allow young people from all social backgrounds to access technology and STEM careers. The practice is of paramount importance, because, while promoting inclusion, it gives young people tools, skills, and opportunities for professional success from an early age. The rationale of **"Digital**

**Learning Factory Dortmund - Rethinking (Digital) Education"** is a result of a reflection on the human-technology interaction and the individual and societal changes brought by the rapid pace of technological progress. The Digital Learning Factory is sited in a large decommissioned coal mine where innovative forms of education, training and career orientation based on digitalisation and digitality are tested and practiced.

When analysing the increasing trend of digitalisation, one has to be aware that it brings its own shortcomings. In that direction, the contribution **"Inclusion and Diversity in Digital Youth Work"** builds on the evidence that traditional disadvantages, be it economic, cultural, physical and/or psychological, persist in the sphere of digital youth work as well. However, technological innovation allows for new solutions to address these issues. Through its website, the project offers a wide range of carefully selected materials in a plurality of formats, all aiming at increasing digital inclusion for youth, addressing diversity in online activities, enhancing digital youth competences, creating adequate support frameworks, and encouraging inclusive policies.

Finally, "**Mythnet Sardinia: a case of "unaware" digital youth work**", builds on a volunteering project aimed at collecting rural legends, and at editing and preserving them in a digital, interactive, and multimedia-rich format. The contribution picks up the overarching question of where is the threshold to defining youth work as being "digital", and what are the core digital youth work ideas and principles.

When applied to artistic production, new and innovative tools can have unexpected outputs. Namely, the contribution **"Behind Bars: Hip-hop as Youth Empowerment Tool"** sees hip hop as both an art form and a tool that has the capacity to empower youth work. The project was able to engage young people of different social and cultural backgrounds, showcasing that, when it comes to innovative initiatives, collaboration can be established and funding can be obtained from different types of donors. Also, **"Hybrid Projects in Practice: Examples, Potential and Perspectives"** focusses on how latest technological possibilities can be used to foster collaboration between young artists in physically separate locations in real-time. The project was initiated in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic and it enabled continued international dialogue and artistic exchange in a situation of imposed lockdowns/restrictions.

### 4. OBSERVATIONS and FURTHER QUESTIONS

Considering the contributions presented at the EAYW 2022, the following observations can be made:

- youth policy changes are predominately initiated by large European networks of youth NGOs and supported by international organisations;

- youth research leads to creating evidence-based initiatives on youth policy change and, at the same time, it can be used as a powerful advocacy tool for influencing national and international institutions;

- national and, especially, international collaboration is an important element fostering innovative projects, as the youth sector, especially youth NGOs, exchange ideas, lessons learnt and provide mutual support during all phases of the implementation process;

- many practices have been developed by using youth research in order to assess specific youth needs and devise targeted actions that will optimise the expected outcome;

- comparative analysis of best practices can also inspire innovation because innovative practices often build on one another, provided that the specific local context is taken into consideration;

- the Covid-19 pandemic put strong emphasis on digitalisation in youth work and prompted the youth sector to develop new and innovative tools in order to be able to continue its activities during the period of national restrictions and lockdowns;

- there are a proliferating number of initiatives that are focussing on providing youth workers with new skills and competences in order to increase the inclusivity and effectiveness of the activities they implement;

- there is an emerging trend of knowledge transfer from other sectors, especially business, to the youth sector as well as blending different tools/approaches of formal and non-formal education;

- there is an increased emphasis on peer-to-peer education;

- using new forms of creative expressions can lead to reaching wider, more diverse audience, and keep it engaged;

- the innovative practices on youth empowerment are initiated as the first and necessary step towards addressing systemic discrimination and creating a meaningful societal change;

- the contributions show stronger agency of young people who, supported by youth workers and youth organisations, are addressing the failure and/or underperformance of the national institutions regarding human rights protection, health and wellbeing, social welfare and/or social inclusion.

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These preliminary observations open three important questions and sets of sub-questions for further discussion at the EAYW 2022. They are as follows:

- **Which are the fundamental factors for starting and upscaling an innovative process?**
More specifically, what means are needed to mainstream and scale innovative solutions? What factors are needed to sustain innovative responses?

- **What skills and competences do we need to create and support innovation?**
More specifically, what are, in this context, relevant knowledge/ skills/ attitudes? What needs to shift in one's mind-set? How do crises (like Covid-19) affect our capacity to innovate?

- **What is a culture of innovation and how to create it and sustain it?**
More specifically, what is the influence of the wider cultural and geographical environments on innovation in youth work? How do we recognise a culture of innovation in the behaviour of teams/organisations? What recommendations can we give for creating policies that encourage innovation?

Starting from the analysis of the selected contributions and going forward with extensive discussions during the European Academy on Youth Work event, the EYWA 2022 will try to provide some answers to these questions.

This is also in line with the strategic decision of the EAYW to move from an "academy of contributions" to an "academy of processes": looking not only at what these innovative practices represent and are able to contribute to the youth work field, but also at what was needed and relevant to make them happen. The conclusions will be available in the final report that will be produced after the event.


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