



Newsline

occasional papers on issues for youth workers

The idea of 'youth policy'
- a European tour

June 2004 Dr Howard Williamson CBE
Wales Youth Agency
Leslie Court, Lôn y Llyn, Caerphilly CF83 1BQ
Tel: 029 20 855700 Fax: 029 20 855701
This document is also available on our website at www.wya.org.uk

The Idea of Youth Policy – a European Tour

Introduction

Legend has it that the Norwegian Ragnar Sem, the first director of the Council of Europe's European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, once commented that 'Norway may only be a small country in Europe, but in youth policy it is a world power'. More recently, with the Welsh Assembly Government's Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Jane Davidson, the UK's political representative on youth issues within the European Union (EU), one might stake a similar claim for Wales. Some may balk at such a claim, given the continual gripes at the alleged disorganisation of youth services (broadly conceived) and the constant claims of under-funding. Certainly compared to Norway, in the funding of voluntary youth organisations, Wales *is* mean-minded, allocating pro rata around one-sixth of that given in Norway. On the other hand, it is immensely generous compared to Latvia, the poorest of the new EU members, giving (pro rata again) some 200 times more. On the other hand, it should be noted that, again pro rata, Wales has a *de facto* 'state budget' which is ten times greater than that of Slovenia, the richest of all the former communist states which have recently become members of the EU (though poorer than Malta and Cyprus). All is relative, and the wider Europe in which we now live is certainly not a level playing field for young people, where dramatic inequalities in experience and opportunity continue to prevail.

Yet Wales has, in the past, made a significant contribution to thinking about youth policy in that wider Europe, and continues to do so in the present. A further chance to extend that influence will arise during the UK's Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2005, when Wales will host the youth dimension of those responsibilities.

Until European Youth Year in 1985, little attention was given to what Paul Willis referred to around the same time as the 'social condition' of young people (Willis *et al.* 1988). Without going too far into the academic debates concerning the changing state of 'youth transitions', it was becoming apparent that the patterns of transition which had existed since the 1950s, in most parts of Europe, though for different reasons, were altering. No longer was there a sense of certainty about linear pathways from education into work, from dependent to independent living, and from families of origin to families of destination. Put simply, transitions were becoming more complex and more prolonged, and could no longer be guaranteed: in each of the transition domains alluded to above, they were also reversible. Certainly there were potentially greater opportunities for young people, but there was also corresponding risk, and the 1980s witnessed the first glimpses of future policy challenges around youth unemployment, crime and drug misuse, and social exclusion. The collapse of communism in the east at the end of the 1980s and the free market liberalism which dominated political thinking in the west compounded these problems and challenges for young people. Not that everything was focused on the difficulties faced by young people. There was also increasing attention to strengthening the positive aspects of young people's lives, exploring questions of participation and the possibilities of the emergent 'information society'. The UN Convention on Children's Rights, formulated in the late 1980s, set out such an agenda for children *and* young people (up to the age of 18). In Wales in 1991, during the second European Conference on Local and Regional Youth Policies (the first had been in Lausanne in 1987), the 'Llangollen Declaration' was signed, advocating the greater participation of young people across Europe at the local and regional level.

These were the embryonic precursors to more robust considerations of the idea of 'youth policy', how such policy might be converted into effective practice, and the extent to which policy should be informed by youth research. Indeed, it was during the late 1980s and early 1990s that the inadequacy of the magic triangle of research, policy and practice was firmly exposed: youth research ran on one track, practitioners got on with the job, and politicians basked in the glory of rhetorical documents. In the 1990s, more stringent effort was made to bind these elements together. The European Union produced a 1995 White Paper on teaching and learning, part of which sought to address (and combat) the social exclusion of young people through the establishment of 'second chance' schools and the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme (European Commission 1995). The Council of Europe held its second youth research symposium in Budapest in 1996 (the first had been in Strasbourg a decade earlier), considering the practical application and implication of the 'information society' for young people (see Williamson 1997a).

The Council of Europe also produced a report on 'youth work' - or *la vie associative* - in Europe, identifying various planks of good practice to which young people should have access and opportunity (Council of Europe 1996). And, during the middle of this decade, the European Commission supported the 'Youth for Europe' programme (which subsequently evolved into the current 'YOUTH' programme, soon to be converted into a new programme for 2007-13). This encouraged and financed international exchanges and youth initiatives which were believed to promote, *inter alia*, personal development, enterprise (De Wachter and Kristensen 1995) and intercultural tolerance and understanding. Indeed, DG XXII of the European Commission conducted a research project in 1997 which explored the effect of different elements of this programme on what at that time was only allowed to be called 'citizenship with a European dimension'. This later became known, rather impersonally, as the DG XXII citizenship study (European Commission 1998).

All these developments were stepping stones which foreshadowed a European 'youth policy' agenda kicking off with a vengeance towards the end of the 1990s. Both the European Union (with its, then, 15 countries) and the Council of Europe (with a 48 country membership) embarked upon processes addressing the concept of 'youth policy' and seeking to secure its place on both national and international political agendas.

The European Union White Paper

Towards the end of 1999, the European Commissioner for Education and Culture, Viviane Reding, announced her intention to support a European Union White Paper on youth. There followed a process of widespread consultations with youth researchers, youth organisations and member states (and the thirteen pre-accession/candidate countries, ten of which are now full members of the EU, were also involved) before the White Paper was launched in Belgium in November 2001 (European Commission 2002).

After a great deal of protracted debate, especially on matters beyond the 'competence' of the White Paper (such as education and employment), the White Paper delineated what it considered to be the 'youth field' and identified four key priorities: participation, information, voluntary service and a greater understanding of youth. It is on these issues that, to date, the European Commission has engaged in what, rather elliptically, is called the 'open method of co-ordination'. Questionnaires have been sent to each of the member states on each of these topics, a synthesis report has subsequently been produced in Brussels, and 'common objectives' for the European Union on these planks of 'youth policy' have been established. At the time of writing, the European Commission is considering the next steps for the White Paper process.

The Council of Europe

Over a similar period, the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe has been involved in a different process of 'youth policy' development. In 1996, its European Steering Group on Co-operation in the Youth Field (the CDEJ - comprising senior civil servants from each of its member countries) agreed to embark on a series of international youth policy reviews of national youth policy. Its purpose was threefold: to support national youth policy development, to provide other countries with learning from reviews of individual countries, and to build a portfolio of good practice and a guiding framework for youth policy development within the Council of Europe.

Each international review (of which there have been ten so far, and one is in progress) has followed a unique pattern, though they all have common features. The country concerned produces a national report which serves as the foundation for the international inquiry. The international review team is composed of government officials, young people, youth researchers and an official of the Council of Europe. It visits the country concerned, meeting politicians, Ministry officials, youth organisations and those involved in practice at the regional and local level. It subsequently produces an international report which is presented both to the country concerned and to a meeting of the CDEJ. To date, there have been reviews of Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Romania, Estonia, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Malta and Norway, and a review of Cyprus will be concluded by the end of 2004. Slovakia, Hungary and Azerbaijan are to

follow. A 'synthesis report' of the first seven reviews - considering the issues arising from material within both the national and international reports - was published in 2002 (Williamson 2002).

Building on this work, the Council of Europe has also developed a practice of 'advisory missions' to support governments in thinking through specific aspects of its youth policy development. Missions to date have included Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia and the Czech Republic, and others in the pipeline include Macedonia and Kosovo. The Youth Directorate has also worked on the idea of youth policy 'indicators' - a crude, though useful, way of determining whether or not youth policy is moving in the right direction, through strengthening opportunity for young people and reducing risk. Furthermore, the CDEJ has worked on 'standards' for youth policy development, agreeing a framework of principles and practices which should underpin political initiatives in the youth field.

Partnership between the EU and the Council of Europe

Both strands of youth policy activity have been supported by more grounded practice - through the YOUTH programme of the European Commission, the international training courses run by the Council of Europe, and the training provided by teams of European level trainers both for international participants and in individual countries. Indeed, it was on the training front that a protocol and partnership was first established between the Commission and the Council (in 1998), which led to the implementation of the ATTE (Advanced Training for Trainers in Europe) course between 2001 and 2003.

The Commission and the Council have also established an agreement on Euro-Med co-operation in the youth field and, more recently, concluded a protocol on youth research, within which youth research seminars convened within the Council of Europe have addressed the priorities identified in the EU White Paper.

Extending Entitlement

All of this may seem to be a long way from Wales - with its own distinctive 'youth policy' framework in *Extending Entitlement* - and many working in the youth field in Wales may have little, if any, knowledge of such developments. Yet Wales has had considerable influence on the thinking which has informed the idea of youth policy in Europe, just as the European framework has permeated into Wales. At the 2004 Wales CYWU conference, Jane Davidson suggested that the EU White Paper was 'launched' in Wales. This is not strictly true, though it is true to say that Wales was the first place the White Paper was presented and discussed, following its formal launch in Ghent. The Welsh Assembly Government Minister has certainly been passionate and instrumental in promoting the philosophy of Extending Entitlement throughout Europe - a philosophy which has won the hearts and minds of youth policy makers in far-flung places such as Moldova. It came as some surprise to me when an official from Chisinau (the capital of Moldova) was able to quote chapter and verse from the original policy document (National Assembly for Wales 2000).

Yet in many respects, it should not have been a surprise. My own involvement in the production of *Extending Entitlement* drew heavily on the ideas I had formulated through my European work on youth questions since the 1980s. Preoccupations with 'problematic' teenage youth (around unemployment, drugs or crime) needed to be supplanted with a better understanding of what I have often rather casually referred to as 'sorted' young adults - and a better understanding of what made them so. Young adults who are 'employable' and good 'citizens' (following the big political mantras of employability and citizenship) do not just happen: their character, competence and confidence is shaped by the experiences and opportunities to which they have been exposed. Historically (ie for much of the twentieth century), the key experiences were provided through the family and the school (in both communist and capitalist societies). In the contemporary global and 'post-modernist' world, however, the menu of opportunity needed expansion and diversification - including the repertoire of non-formal educational (youth work) experiences which contribute to the development of 'soft' skills and a capacity for 'life management' (Helve and Bynner 1996). Many young people *are* able to access this menu and repertoire in a variety of ways. Some,

however, cannot, or do not. And it is to these young people that public policy needs to make greater effort to extend a similar entitlement. For if we do not, we should not be surprised if those young people become the 'problematic' youth on whom so much political and public anxiety is focused. In short, the position in Wales and the emergent framework in Europe is to make the case for an 'opportunity-focused', rather than a 'problem-oriented' youth policy. Despite trends to the contrary - for it is 'problem' youth who will always capture political attention in the short term - there is a groundswell of understanding that the best means of preventing the emergence of problems both caused and experienced by young people is the promotion of better opportunities - in family life, schooling, leisure and employment, and through participation, information and engagement in civil society. The soundbite of 'extending entitlement', if not the concrete thinking behind it, derives firmly from Wales, but now has a key place in the engines of youth policy development across Europe.

The challenge of implementation

Whatever the political challenges around forging and formulating 'youth policy', the acid test lies in its delivery. The optimism, within Wales, following the achievement of unanimous political support for Extending Entitlement when it was debated by the Welsh Assembly Government (the one and only time this has been achieved), has subsequently been dampened by confusion and argument over appropriate structures for delivery. The significant extra resources made available for training (capacity building and workforce development), youth information, and the voluntary [NGO] youth sector have produced considerable in-fighting within the youth field: there has been contention over who does what, and how it is to be done. This is not the place to enter into the detail of those debates. Here it is important to acknowledge, if not accept, that this is par for the course. Throughout Europe, it is one thing to have a youth policy resolution or a co-management agreement, quite another to achieve consensus on how it is to be put into effect.

One of the new members of the EU, Lithuania, was quick off the starting blocks in cementing a progressive framework for its youth policy development. It agreed a 'youth policy concept' in 1997, based on a principle of co-management between the government and a coalition of youth organisations (Lijot). The idea - the concept - was, and is, very commendable, but the reality was that, outside of the main cities, young people had, and still have, access to very little. This is the story throughout most of Europe and, when I was discussing youth policy development in Vilnius some years ago (and doodling around the 'C' in concept), I stumbled upon what have come to be known as the five 'C's of youth policy:

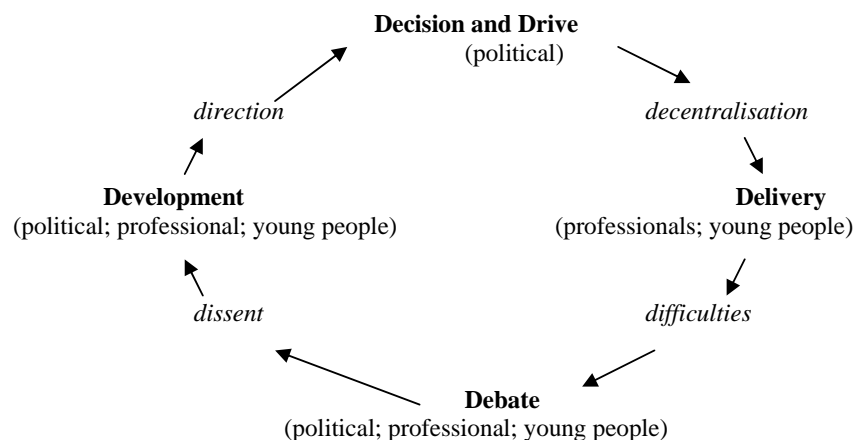
- Coverage
- Capacity
- Competence
- Co-ordination
- Cost

It became apparent to me that the very best of youth policy intentions are immediately obstructed by one or more of these dimensions. One may aspire to extend a package of experiences and opportunities but the burning question is how far that is extended, geographically and in relation to specific social groups of young people (coverage). Much depends, of course, on what the Council of Europe now refers to as 'structures for delivery': are systems in place to ensure delivery at regional and local levels, either through governmental or non-governmental (voluntary sector) structures (capacity). Even if such structures are in place (and in countries such as Romania, they patently are not, so its 198 resolutions on youth policy remain trapped on a civil servant's desk), there is the question of the skills and qualifications of those working with young people (competence). In eastern Europe (and quite unlike western Europe), there are - almost literally - armies of willing hands to do work with young people, but very few have been trained to work on particular issues or with particular social groups. Furthermore, given the increasing recognition of the need for 'joined-up practice', there needs to be suitable provision for cross-sectoral debate, planning and implementation, both vertically and horizontally (co-operation). The autonomous regions of Spain are significant obstacles to the delivery of a level playing field of youth policy throughout the country. Similarly, in Norway, often an exemplar of positive youth policy and practice, the (sometimes stubborn) autonomy of its 434 (usually very small) municipalities makes

the implementation of central government plans and aspirations especially difficult. Moreover, the left hand is often quite unaware of what the right hand is doing, however much each hand has enviable political support and correspondingly generous resources to make *their bit* of youth policy effective. Finally, of course, few countries have the objective wealth and political commitment to young people (from which resources flow in their direction) of Norway; and without sufficient resources, the grand objectives of any youth policy are unlikely to be realised (cost). Yet in Finland, a significant proportion of the (state controlled) national lottery is dedicated to supporting young people; even some of the lottery's promotional budget is directed towards the funding of a national youth information service. Resources can be found if the political will exists.

The political dynamic

In a couple of the Baltic states, youth policy development ground to a halt for a time as a result of the absence of any political champion. Elsewhere in Europe, the whole administration changes each time there is a shift in political control. Whatever the current challenges in Wales, we should revel in the fact of some level of stability within the public administration and a very transparent commitment to young people at Ministerial level. However, through drawing lessons across the wider Europe, there is a political dynamic on which any form of youth policy accelerates or stalls. Certainly there needs to be political championship, in order for the necessary framework and resource base to be secured. Certainly there need to structures for delivery. But there then needs to be space and scope for debate, to iron out teething troubles, to respond to new circumstances, to strengthen focus in some areas and perhaps to 'loosen up' in others (across the UK, the youth work accreditation debate might be an apposite example here). And there also needs to be a moment when the 'field' suppresses any differences and projects a united front - for only through that unity is the baton likely to be picked up by a necessary political champion. Without all these elements in motion, youth policy initiatives become vulnerable, with their flanks exposed. Politicians weary of in-fighting in the field and turn their attention to other things, practitioners feel unsupported, dialogue is closed down. A siege mentality sets in and a cycle of negativity (watching backs) sets in. On the other hand, when these elements are effectively in motion, a virtuous circle of development is assured - one which produces effective practice, reflective dialogue and political will. Without the five 'C's, of course, little will happen, but those are infrastructure needs and challenges. It is, however, four (or eight) 'D's that will determine if policy ever gets to the young people at whom it is directed and for whom it has been developed - in a credible and meaningful form, and delivered by the right people:



Conclusion

The idea of 'youth policy' is at very different stages in different parts of Europe. Not that it never exists for, as I have argued elsewhere, all countries have a youth policy - by default, design or neglect (see Williamson 1997). Young people's lives are affected, albeit differently, as much by

the absence of opportunity and provision as by its presence. But, increasingly, policy for young people must have purpose and cohesion if it is to be *constructively* effective.

We may live within the orbit of the European Union and under the even more amorphous (but more values-driven) umbrella of the Council of Europe, but it is a different world of experience and opportunity for young people in Cymru (Wales) from that of young people in (still divided) Cyprus. Yet there is a great deal to be learned both ways. In an indirect fashion, Wales has built some planks of its youth policy from the lessons of a wider Europe; more directly, the thinking of 'Extending Entitlement' has informed youth policy development elsewhere.

Wales is a small country in Europe, but by no means the smallest. It may not be quite a world power in youth policy but it has already exerted a considerable influence at the European level. Quite recently, youth workers from Wales exchanged views with those from the Baltic States, during a meeting in Lithuania. Wales may have little to share with large countries such as Poland, Hungary or Romania, but there is much in common with a host of new partners of similar size and geo-political characteristics: Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Catalonia, Cyprus and so forth. Their cultural, political and professional traditions may be very different, but all have an interest and commitment to supporting their young people and extending their entitlements. Their reasons for doing so may be diverse - for 'nation-building', economic development, social cohesion - but young people in Europe have much in common as well as many differences. But then so do young people in Aberfan and Abersychan. Shiny documents carry little meaning for them (however much they are waved around on the political and professional conference circuit); grounded practice and concrete opportunity does. It is to this end that the idea of 'extending entitlement' ultimately speaks.

Bibliography

Council of Europe (1996), *Young People and Associations in Europe*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe

De Wachter, B. and Kristensen, S. (1995), *Promoting the Initiative and Creativity of Young People: the experience of the PETRA programme*, Luxembourg: European Commission

European Commission (1995), *Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society*, Luxembourg: European Commission

European Commission (1998), *Education and active citizenship in the European Union*, Luxembourg: European Commission

European Commission (2002), *A new impetus for European youth: White Paper*, Luxembourg: European Commission

Helve, H. and Bynner, J. (eds) (1996), *Youth and Life Management: Research Perspectives*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press

National Assembly for Wales (2000), *Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Wales*, Cardiff: National Assembly for Wales

Williamson, H. (1997a), *Youth in the Information Society*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe

Williamson, H. (1997b), *Youth and Policy: contexts and consequences*, Aldershot: Ashgate

Williamson, H. (2002), *Supporting young people in Europe: principles, policies and practice*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe

Willis, P., Bekenn, A., Ellis, T. and Whitt, D. (1988), *The Youth Review: Social Condition of Young People in Wolverhampton*, Aldershot: Avebury

12.6.04