

Youth worker's competencies

On the competencies needed to perform quality youth work

KEKS

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Introduction

The role of youth workers and which competencies are required to perform it well have been a recurring discussion within the sector for many years. The responses put forth have been quite varied, with 'roles' ranging from 'stable adult role models' to leisure time leaders with vocational training or academically trained social pedagogues. Determining which institution(s) should provide the education is important, but regardless, the starting point must be to decide which competencies are required. Hence, this document. It intends to serve as guidelines for both KEKS's own work with competence development and for managers in recruitment, as well as an input for various providers of education and training. Some of the competencies listed here can, of course, be acquired through means other than formal education and training, but if the sector is to develop and raise its status, these competencies need formal validation before being used as a basis for employment.

KEKS is not the only one to address these issues. For example, both the European Commission and the Council of Europe have developed so-called competence models for youth workers¹. However, we claim that something clearer is needed, which lists the various competencies required in a more concrete and comprehensive manner. In this way, this list can also serve as a template for (self-) assessment of competencies and thus also provide input for KEKS's various competence development efforts.

The starting point for determining the various competencies required is, of course, the policy documents that define youth work and what it is expected to achieve. Such documents are largely lacking at the national level. The competencies established here are therefore based on the descriptions and definitions of youth work found in the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Youth Work*².

The adoption of the Recommendation, as well as the launch of the European Charter on Local Youth Work, is also a clear sign that the sector wants to progress, that it has become clearer and more well-thought-out, and that, as a result, the competence requirements for youth workers have been raised (or at least, should be raised). This may make a document like this seem unnecessarily serious and weighty. So, let us also remember that youth work must be fun to participate in if it is to reach out and be attractive. The difference is that, today, this should not happen through temporary entertainment provided by adults but through young people being co-creators in a process that responds to their ideas, experiences, interests, and needs, and that this

¹ www.europeantrainingstrategy.eu/ and www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio/home

² Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4. The Recommendation is the so far most prominent European policy document on youth work. To support its realization, providing concrete principles and guidelines, Europe Goes Local has launched the European Charter on Local Youth work (www.europegoeslocal.eu). The competencies and work processes described in this document are all based on and in line with both these documents.

way stimulates and supports learning. Youth work is about participation and learning and must "bring added value and/or joy in life"³.

³ European Charter on Local Youth Work, Core principles

What is competence?

There are various definitions of competence⁴. Here, competence is defined as: "The individual's ability to use their accumulated knowledge and skills to achieve set aims", where the ability is shaped by the individual's capacity for critical reflection, their motivation and the values and attitudes they possess.

Taken together, this means that competence consists of five components:

- Values
- Attitudes⁵
- Critical understanding⁶
- Skills
- Knowledge

These components naturally influence and are mutually dependent on each other. For example, acquiring new knowledge may lead to realizing the need to develop new skills. However, when working with people, values are most central as they shape one's attitudes and, consequently, how one perceives and utilizes one's knowledge and skills. This also explains the structure of this document, where the values, attitudes and skills needed, and the work processes in which they should be applied comes before and lays the ground for the list of knowledge that is also needed.

The level and extent of the combined competence determines the approach one takes and what one does in different situations. A competent youth worker can critically reflect on and adapt their general knowledge and skills to various specific situations without stepping outside their role. Since youth work is often about 'catching the moment', this also means that the "willingness and ability to improvise are central to the role of the youth worker"⁷.

This, in turn, requires clear and well-grounded aims for what is expected to be achieved. It is impossible to "use one's accumulated knowledge and skills to achieve set aims" if these are absent or too abstract and unclear. Hence the importance of the Council of Europe Recommendation!

⁴ You can, for example, find a long list here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Competence_\(human_resources\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Competence_(human_resources))

⁵ Attitudes are the concrete approaches and characteristics that show, make manifest, in practice which values you are the bearer of.

⁶ Critical understanding is the outcome of critical reflection.

⁷ The Youth Worker as jazz improviser: foregrounding education 'in the moment' within the professional development of youth workers, Pete Harris, 2014 (<https://indefenceofyouthwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/improvisation-article-harris.pdf>)

Framework competencies

To build youth worker competence, it is necessary to first ensure that three basic prerequisites in the form of framework competencies are in place. Without these, all other competencies will be separate fragments, missing necessary connections to each other and a common context, and thus risk being misused or not used at all.

1. Aims, core principles and context

First and foremost, it is crucial to understand what the various competencies are to be used for, in what context they are to be used, and in relation to which target group. This means understanding the overarching aims of youth work, the values, and principles it is based on, and how the mission relates to these. It also means understanding how youth work borders on other activities, such as schools and social services. This in turn forms the basis for understanding the basic work process of youth work⁸⁹.

Without this understanding, it is impossible to link general knowledge, such as psychology and sociology, to the concrete situations one must handle as a youth worker, and to reflect on what skills are required to apply them in practice. It also makes it difficult to understand why certain values and attitudes are necessary for successful youth work.

2. Constructive critical thinking

The second necessary framework competence is the ability for constructive critical thinking. This is a prerequisite for being able to analyze and reflect on how one's own values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge manifest in one's actions and how this corresponds to various tasks. It is only when one is able to critically examine one's own motives and emotional reactions that one can develop and adapt to the needs of young people and design activities accordingly¹⁰.

Critical thinking is also necessary for being able to acquire education, to reflect on what is conveyed, and to understand that general knowledge about, for example, youth psychology is just that, general, that individual variations are significant, and that this knowledge should only serve as a frame of reference for one's daily encounters with different, unique, young people. It is also this awareness of one's own competencies (or lack thereof) that will shape the youth worker's further learning and development process.

⁸ More about the youth worker's work process below.

⁹ Equally important is to understand the various challenges that youth work and youth workers have to reflect upon when trying to fulfill their mission. Please see chapter 14 in the 7th volume of *The History of Youth Work, Reflective dialogue: conclusions from the history project – 12 trilemmas for youth work*, by Howard Williamson and Filip Coussée. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-volume-7>

¹⁰ As stated in the European Charter on Local Youth Work: The youth worker must "continuously and critically reflect on how one's own actions, as well as local aims, methods, and ways of organizing activities correspond to the basic principles."

Last but not least. Youth work is based on the principles of democracy, solidarity, and the equal value of all human beings. The young people who take part in various activities live in a society that often does not live up to these values. Therefore, youth workers must be able to critically engage with the surrounding society and help young people to understand how they are affected by things like inequality and segregation and that their sometimes-vulnerable situation is not their own fault. Youth workers must also ensure that destructive norms regarding, for example, gender do not influence activities but are actively problematized through both conversations and how activities are designed. This requires the ability to critically analyze one's own activities and design them in a way that corresponds with the values and principles one claims to represent. Youth work should not unconditionally reflect the surrounding society and is, from this perspective, always political.

3. Professional conduct

The third necessary framework competence is to understand what it means and what requirements it places to take on a professional role and to act professionally. As a professionally acting youth worker (employed or volunteer), one must realize that one is part of an organizational context and that the mission therefore is to contribute to the overall achievement of aims, not just to carry out one's own more or less clearly formulated tasks. This requires acting with self-distance and being able to have a holistic perspective. It also requires being able to draw the line between private experiences and feelings and personal reflections on our lives as individuals and citizens and understanding why it is important to be and be perceived as professional. For young people to feel safe in the encounter, they must know what they can expect, what is included and not included in the mission of youth workers. For this to function, individual youth workers cannot go beyond their role.

Prerequisites for Learning

Individuals who seek education or training to become youth workers may do so for a variety of reasons. The images and experiences that different applicants have of the field can be as diverse and unclear as the field itself still is. Consequently, the expectations regarding both the education and a potential future career vary greatly and can range from a desire for advanced pedagogical work to viewing education as a necessary evil to obtain a 'soft' job where one can hang out with young people and play pool. This is another reason why the three framework competencies are central and should be conveyed in such a way that it is clear that they are necessary prerequisites for a future career as a youth worker. A prerequisite for benefiting from an education to become youth worker is being driven by the right motivation¹¹.

Furthermore, none of the competencies required can be gained solely through classic 'lectures' but require also that students are given space and support to reflect on and problematize what is conveyed. At the same time, the 'academic' elements of the education, such as knowledge of European youth policy, must not be trivialized, partly because this knowledge is central, partly because the ability to absorb such material is a necessary prerequisite for continued, continuous, competence development. Building youth worker competence also requires that competencies be tested, and critically reflected on, in practice under the supervision of experienced mentors trained for the role. This process of reflection, through blending theory (thinking) with practice (experience) is known as praxis; it is equally important for both students and active youth workers if stagnation is to be avoided.

A prerequisite for effective learning is also for students to become aware of their different learning styles and to receive support to develop their learning. This also contributes to an increased understanding of the various learning styles of young people and how to handle them. A central part of developing one's own competence is also to create a personal development plan where students, as well as active youth workers, are supported to reflect on what they need to develop and how this should be achieved.

¹¹ "Youth workers need to be driven by the will to support young people in their personal and social development", European Charter on Local Youth Work.

Values, attitudes, and basic skills

The table below shows the values, attitudes, and skills essential for performing well as a youth worker, necessary also for being able to apply the skills and knowledge presented thereafter in a way that aligns with the aims and core principles of youth work.

Many of the values below may be perceived as obvious and something that everyone should fully endorse. However, if we take a look around, we know that this is not the case and that they must be cultivated to be kept alive. Those who, after reading this document, think that the focus should have been more on formal knowledge and concrete skills perhaps need to consider what it is that enables us to connect to others and influence them in a positive direction.

Some of these values are also very close to each other and are partly overlapping or interconnected. However, we have chosen to include them all, partly because this contributes to reflecting on them from different perspectives, and partly because they can be interpreted differently depending on background and experiences.

After this table, there will be a section on the youth worker's work process. Only after that will there be a corresponding table regarding knowledge and skills.

Value	Attitude	Basic skill
I believe in:	I am:	I:
Openness	Open	<p>I meet new people and ideas without prejudice or fear, signalling that I am willing to change if there is reason to do so.</p> <p>I don't present myself as 'the final version of myself' and I show that I want to learn from others.</p> <p>I openly present reasons for my thoughts and actions and am professionally transparent regarding my role and mission.</p>
Curiosity	Curious	<p>I show positive interest in people and the world around me.</p> <p>I actively try to broaden my horizons and explore areas that are new to me.</p> <p>I actively listen to others and try to understand.</p>
Tolerance	Tolerant	I do not judge anyone on beforehand and try to understand even what I cannot accept.
Independence	Independent	<p>I stand up for myself and my values while supporting others to stand up for theirs.</p> <p>I dare to make independent decisions and support others to do the same.</p>

Integrity	Self-respect	I am honest to myself, respect others' integrity and maintain my own. I am loyal to the basic values and principles of youth work and do not carry out tasks that conflict with these.
Respect	Respectful	I argue based on facts and resolve conflicts without offending or devaluing anyone.
Courage	Courageous	I dare to expose myself to discomfort to achieve/stand up for what I believe is right. I dare to risk failure and dare to let others do the same.
Self confidence	Self-confident	I can handle doubt, uncertainty, and unforeseen situations and do not try to escape from these.
Engagement	Engaged	I clearly show that I am engaged in people and the world around me. I actively support others to engage in what they find important. I am positive and seek to contribute to optimism and joy.
Empathy	Empathetic	I empathize with others' situations and try to understand why they think, feel, and act as they do.
Trust	Trusting	I dare to believe in and trust others and encourage and support others to be independent and take responsibility. I focus on individuals' positive sides and strengths and address them accordingly.
Development	Development-oriented	I stimulate and support all types of development, both my own and others'. I keep myself updated on news in the sector. I dare to challenge and be challenged and to try new things.
Responsibility	Responsible	I take my share of the work and contribute actively where needed. I take responsibility for my own actions and eventual mistakes.
Initiative	Resourceful	I come up with new ideas and suggestions and support others to do the same. I stay actively aware of what is going on around me and try to be proactive instead of reactive.
Patience	Patient	I allow others to take the time they need to make decisions.

Honesty	Honest	I do not try to hide, withhold, or distort the truth and can admit that I do not know.
Solidarity	Unselfish Solidary	I stimulate and support selfless actions and measures.
Justice	Just	I work actively for everyone to have access to the same resources and opportunities. I actively contribute to gender equality and equity and challenge all forms of discrimination.
Inclusion	Inclusive	I create conditions for everyone to participate on equal terms and actively invite those who are excluded, breaking structural barriers. I make groups with different backgrounds socialize and function together.
Organisation	Organized	I structure and keep track of my own tasks. I contribute to a well-functioning organization.
Functionality	Solutions-oriented	I make the best of the situation and do not let obstacles or setbacks paralyse me.

The Youth Worker's Work Process

The work process, divided into five interconnected steps, within which the basic skills are to be used, is general and should be applied regardless of which young people one works with or the context in which one operates. The following description is only an overview, and an in-depth exploration of the different steps constitutes a central part of all modes of education/training of youth workers.

1. The first step is to build positive, non-judgmental, and equal relationships with young people. This, however, never happens in a vacuum. The young people one meets all have different images and expectations of what a youth worker is and does. Hence, it is not about a general, pseudo-private, getting-to-know-each-other, but about visibly demonstrating the role of the youth worker and how this is put into practice. Youth workers therefore introduces themselves and becomes clear to young people by trying to make their experiences, ideas, interests, and needs visible together with them, individually and in groups. Talking about what they want to experience, change, do that they perceive as meaningful and motivating, and within which frameworks this can be realized.

In the European Charter on Local Youth Work, it is stated that the activities should "be based on and respond to young people's self-perceived needs, interests, ideas, and experiences." This means that these conversations cannot only be about possible traditional leisure time activities, such as pool, but must have a much broader scope and address, for example, their experiences of marginalization, their need for feeling safe in school, their interest in developing new skills, and their ideas about what they would like to experience.

It also means that these conversations cannot only consist of questions to young people. Many young people are unaware of all the opportunities available to them or do not believe that they are accessible to them. Therefore, youth workers must be able to broaden young people's horizons and show them exciting new possibilities for carrying out various types of activities, both in everyday life and in the form of various projects.

For this to work, youth work must also always address young people in a way that focuses on and makes them see and believe in their strong sides and capabilities, making them feel that these can be used both when creating activities and for handling eventual problems. This is what is usually called a strength-based approach, and it is a crucial starting point if young people should dare to engage.

When having the above discussions, it is crucial not only to talk about activities, but also to make clear *why* young people want, or don't want, to engage in a certain activity, their motives and driving forces. This both helps young people to better understand themselves and the youth worker on how to take the following steps and eventually design an activity. Young people can want to engage in an

activity for totally different reasons, and not knowing this can have serious consequences when the activity is to be planned and implemented.

The above could be summarized as the youth worker conducting a dynamic and inspiring needs analysis with the aim of stimulating activities that young people want to engage in and perhaps also to take responsibility for. In addition to being able to do this with individuals and groups, youth workers must also do this through corresponding surveys in the community where they work. This is required to meaningfully reach the whole target group and not just those who already are in contact with youth work, at the same time functioning as means for information and marketing.

For many young people, the process ends here. However, this does not make the following steps less important, as they constitute a central part in shaping the participatory culture that should characterize youth work and the activities conducted. More about this below. The remaining steps are more briefly described, but all of them need to contain considerations related to values, and thus the ability of youth workers to ask open, thought-awakening, questions and to stimulate critical reflection.

2. In the second step, identified experiences, ideas, interests, and needs are to be translated into concrete activities, preferably together with young people. When the concrete idea for an activity is formulated, this step involves supporting young people to organize around it. It is important to note that this is about "supporting young people to organize themselves", not about organizing young people. How tasks and responsibilities should be distributed requires discussions around several of the values listed above, such as responsibility, respect, and solidarity. The aim is that young people should 'own' the activity and be able to carry it out as independently as possible, with youth workers providing support only when needed.
3. In the third step, young people are supported in planning and preparing what they have decided to carry out. Young people should be supported to perform as much of the work as possible themselves. If this requires skills and abilities that young people lack, the youth worker should, as far as possible, avoid taking over and instead support them in developing these competencies through courses or other educational efforts.
4. The fourth step involves the actual implementation of activities. Here, too, young people should perform and take responsibility for everything that needs to be done, with the support of youth workers if needed.
5. The final step is to evaluate the activities together with young people, both regarding the activity itself, the process they have had together and what they have hopefully learned. A well-conducted evaluation asks, again, for critical reflection, and provides valuable knowledge on what could be improved. It can

also serve as inspiration and a springboard for new, even better, activities by harnessing the energy it generates.

The above process responds to the Charter's statement that the activities should be "created, organized, planned, prepared, implemented, and evaluated together with or by young people." However, for many young people, the process will start with step one but then stop or be far from as 'linear' as this description suggests. They may come up with ideas for activities that would interest them but may not be able or willing to engage further in the process due to personal preferences or circumstances. The process itself is nevertheless central to well-functioning youth work.

The first step is important in relation to all young people, but by running the whole process with some of the young people one meets, a culture is created where young people are seen as and see themselves as competent individuals and resources. Youth work that is based on a participatory process and which is permeated by the values outlined above is in itself educational through the continuous acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that takes place in such an environment¹². Activities driven by young people are usually also more attractive to other young people than those driven by adults.

At the same time, young people usually come to youth centres and similar places mainly to meet their friends, to 'hang out', and perhaps participate in some activity. They carry self-images and expectations shaped by their upbringing, by the surrounding society, by school, media, and, for example, TikTok. These self-images and expectations often manifest in behaviours that are more or less in conflict with the values (e.g. tolerance, trust, solidarity) that are central characteristics of youth work. The role of the youth worker is then, with care and respect, to problematize these behaviours. Not through 'lectures' and 'trainings' (the latter may come in a second step) but by designing activities in such a way that these behaviours are naturally questioned and become topics for an open discussion about which values should characterize all human interaction. It's when the winner no longer gets to stay on the pool table and when male youth workers stand in the kitchen talking about feelings that these necessary conversations become real and meaningful. Youth work should not reflect society; it should contribute to a better one. The overarching skill is to be able to create an environment that promotes acquisition of the values that youth work stands for, both generally and targeted towards specific values and behaviours.

¹² This, youth worker supported, learning process is often described as non-formal education and learning. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUT2KqIMAGA>

Other skills and knowledge

To be able to carry out the above process well, youth workers need a wide range of other skills and knowledge.

Skills	Knowledge
I can:	I am familiar with:
Collaborate/Cooperate.	Roles, aims, and mandates of other organizations. Relevant collaboration forums. Organizational knowledge.
Handle conflicts constructively.	Mediation techniques. Debriefing.
Facilitate meetings in various settings and with various participants.	Meeting techniques, focus group methodology.
Hold individual meetings.	Coaching, feedback-techniques.
Meet and understand young people based on their circumstances and life situations.	Youth psychology, sociology, and culture – being young in today's society and in different social contexts. The image of young people and how it affects them.
Design everyday activities in a way that promotes specific values and behaviors.	Different models for arranging e.g. tournaments, quizzes, and board games.
Stimulate and support young people in organizing around an aim or an activity.	E.g. coaching, group psychology, methods for inclusion, and meetings.
Support young people in identifying what they want/need to learn and how.	Didactics, pedagogy, different learning styles and non-formal learning methods.
Support young people in making visible and document learning achieved through youth work.	Youthpass and ELD (Experience, Learning, Description).
Identify personal problems and, if needed, refer young people to other actors.	Signs of mental health issues. Roles and mandates of other actors (e.g. social and health services).
Promote healthy habits and well-being.	Health risks and health promotion.
Handle acute health problems.	Cardiopulmonary resuscitation.
Detect and counteract tendencies towards political and religious radicalisation.	Signs of radicalisation. Radical organisations and their methods for recruiting.
Explain and problematize how society is formally organized at different levels (global, European, national, regional, municipal).	UN, EU, CoE, national parliament and government, regions, and municipalities - their mandates and decision-making processes.

Explain and problematize our various roles and mandates as citizens, employees, union members, private individuals, and minors.	Relevant laws and regulations, duties, and responsibilities.
Explain and problematize relevant policy documents at the global, European, national, and local levels.	Major documents adopted by the UN, the EU and the CoE, as well as the Charter, national youth policy and local political documents.
Act in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.	E.g. duty to report, confidentiality, principle of public access, and GDPR.
Act with ethical awareness and discuss and problematize ethical dilemmas.	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Youth worker ethics. ¹³
Search for and structure information.	Information management, critical reading, and validation of sources.
Represent the organization and do advocacy in relation to young people, other actors, the public, and politics verbally and in writing.	Organization, aims, and methods. Various presentation techniques. Rhetoric.
Engage local actors in community work.	Local actors, their aims, interests, and organization.
Handle social media for information dissemination and networking.	Applicable laws and regulations. Media literacy and digital literacy.
Handle budget and finances.	Budgeting, accounting, and reporting.
Manage projects.	Project management; applying, coordinating, reporting.
Analyze and design the organization from an intersectional perspective.	Intersectionality, racism, homophobia, sexism, multiculturalism, separatism.
Evaluate activities.	Methods for reflection and analysis. Methods for documentation, follow up and research.

¹³ Ethics is basically about consciously and self-critically reflect on how different ways of acting corresponds to basic values. Many of the values that youth workers need to reflect on are the ones listed in this document.

Summary and conclusions

The list of competencies may seem long, but if we want to run quality youth work, motivate better salaries, and raise the sector's status, it needs to be. Some of the competencies in the second list may be less important in some contexts, but all youth workers need to be aware of them and their possible relevance. Basically, it is long because the role of the youth worker is both demanding and complex. Youth workers work with voluntary groups of young people of different ages, backgrounds, experiences, and needs and should get them to function together in a way that leads to both participation and learning. Compared to having a set curriculum and fixed classes, or to work within a statutory framework with individuals, the role of the youth worker is in many ways more demanding and should be valued accordingly.

To make these competencies visible and realized should therefore be the basis for an enhanced recognition of the sector and a more relevant setting of salaries. Hopefully, it can also lead to more youth workers themselves realizing what is required and what responsibilities they have, and therefore take themselves and their mission more seriously than what sometimes seems to be the case.

These competencies may of course also need to be supplemented with various more concrete skills such as knowing how to use design programs on the computer. However, these concrete skills should never take precedence over or replace the competencies listed in this document. Indeed, in some situations, it may be useful to hire youth workers with 'special competencies', but if the competencies listed in this document are lacking, there is a significant risk that they will not be able to work in line with the aims and core principles of youth work¹⁴.

Youth work is part of the learning, not the entertainment, sector¹⁵, and those who work in it must have the corresponding competencies.

¹⁴ The various 'special competencies' needed also tend to vary over time, and it is therefore often better to bring in 'experts' for a limited period and let them work together with experienced youth workers.

¹⁵ The learning sector is not the same thing as the formal education sector. Youth work stimulates, liberates, and supports young people's learning based on their own, self-perceived, ideas, interests, experiences, and needs. Our 'curricula' is the process that leads to this and decides what educational measures that need to be taken.

Literature tips

If you want to know more about youth work, its various aspects and how it has evolved, the following books might be of interest.

The history of youth work, vol 1 – 7,

Council of Europe, 2009 978-92-871-6608-1,

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/the-history-of-youth-work-in-europe-volume-1>

Thinking seriously about youth work,

Hanjo Schild, Nuala Connolly, Francine Labadie, Jan Vanhee, Howard Williamson (eds.),

Council of Europe Publishing, ISBN 978-92-871-8416-0,

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/thinking-seriously-about-youth-work>

Youth worker education and training in Europe. Policies, structures, practices.

Marti Taru, Ewa Krzaklewska, Tanya Basarab (eds)

ISBN 978-92-871-8868-7 © Council of Europe and European Commission, 2020.

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-worker-education-in-europe>

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