

# **A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF IRISH YOUTH WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR OCCUPATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH WORK AS A PROFESSION**

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# ABSTRACT

This study builds on a range of earlier research analysing aspects of youth work as an occupation (Harland et al., 2005; McCready and Warm, 1991; McCready and Morgan, 2014; Monaghan, 2013; Youhcert, 2000), and others that have explored the perspectives of youth workers using qualitative approaches (Cluskey, 2025; Hammond, 2018; Hammond and McArdle, 2023; Noonan, 2020). However, this research is distinctive in that it is the first study to combine the systematic *mixed-methods* collection of empirical data on youth workers' perceptions and experiences with the analytical and interpretative lens(es) of the sociology of the professions, including Evetts's (2003-2013) framework of occupational and organisational discourses of professionalism. It is also situated in the European and international scholarly, professional and policy literature on youth work (e.g. Cooper 2013, 2018; Council of Europe, 2017; Tilsen, 2018).

The study set out to examine (a) the perceptions of paid Irish youth workers of the nature and characteristics of youth work as an occupation and (b) the implications of these perceptions for the development of youth work as a profession. Based on a combination of 'purposive' and 'convenience' sampling, the study gathered data from 141 survey respondents and 18 focus group participants. Given the sampling strategy (a matter of practicality and indeed necessity) the findings do *not* provide the basis for generalisations about the broader youth worker population but they certainly raise questions that should be addressed in future research and suggest a number of recommendations for policy makers and other stakeholders.

Youth workers in the study sample are predominantly female and almost entirely white, working mostly in UBU projects or IYJS youth diversion projects. There are gender differences across a wide range of findings, including salaries, with women earning considerably less than men. Roughly evenly divided in terms of those with and without professional qualifications in youth work, they are in broad agreement about many things (the rewards of working directly with young people; the sense that they have a high degree of autonomy in exercising professional judgements (although less so among women than men); the view that the administrative aspects of their work is a burden; the perception that they are highly trusted by young people and their families and their own employers but much less so by policy makers; the belief that their work has a low public image and they make much less of a contribution to national policy than they should). They are also generally agreed - specifically reflected in the focus group discussions - that pay, conditions and career structures are unsatisfactory compared with 'cognate' professions (a view that the salaries reported in the survey sample seem to support) and that there are widespread frustrating inconsistencies relating both to employment conditions and administrative and reporting arrangements between different funders. There is therefore a 'hybrid' (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008) combination of professional discourses: considerable occupational autonomy in some respects but in others a lack of recognition and respect and a sense of professional identity being undermined and 'voice' ignored.

In the focus groups, those with and without a background in professional education and training in youth work appear to see things differently and use different language and concepts, especially regarding the fundamental question of whether youth work is a form of education. I suggest this may be because of a lack of shared professional socialisation processes (Pusztai and Csók, 2020). I argue that this situation - *if it applies more generally, something that is very important to find out* - is detrimental to the achievement of positive outcomes for young people and that it requires attention from all stakeholders, most importantly and immediately the Department of Education and Youth in its preparation of a workforce development strategy for youth work.

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# LIST OF ACRONYMS

BOBF	Better Outcomes Brighter Futures
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CAYWA	Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Work Associations
CDVEC	City of Dublin Vocational and Education Committee
CDYSB	City of Dublin Youth Services Board
CE	Community Employment (Scheme)
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPE	Continuing Professional Education
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
DOJ	Department of Justice
EANI	Education Authority of Northern Ireland
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
GAA	Gaelic Athletics Association
GYDP	Garda Youth Diversion Programme
HSE	Health Service Executive
IYJS	Irish Youth Justice Service
IYW	Institute of Youth Work
IYWA	Irish Youth Workers Association
JLO	Juvenile Liaison Officer
NQSF	National Quality Standards Framework
NSETS	North South Education and Training Standards Committee
NYA	National Youth Agency
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
NYWAC	National Youth Work Advisory Committee

NYWDP	National Youth Work Development Plan
NYWNA	National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Childre and Youth Affairs
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SCP	Schools Completion Project
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SPY	Special Projects for Youth
UBU	Your Place Your Space
VFMPR	Value for Money Programme Review
YWCI	Youth Workers Collective Ireland

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Statement of Research Questions

In Ireland, youth work is defined in the Education and Training Boards (ETB) Act (2013) as a ‘planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is (a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.’

Paid youth workers in Ireland are commonly employees of voluntary organisations that receive state funding via Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to provide UBU projects (community-based projects offering ‘out-of-school supports’ to young people) or from the Department of Justice (DoJ) to run Garda Youth Diversion Programmes (GYDP).

While there has been a significant body of research into various aspects of youth work in Ireland (see below and Chapters 2 and 3), there is as yet very little that focuses specifically on youth workers themselves. This mixed methods study therefore sets out to address the following two research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of paid youth workers of the nature and characteristics of youth work as an occupation in Ireland?
2. What are the implications for the development of youth work as a profession in Ireland?

The research consisted of an online survey with 141 respondents, followed by two focus groups involving a total of 18 participants. The implications from the fieldwork are considered in the light of a conceptual framework drawing on Julia Evetts’s work on occupational and organisational discourses of professionalism (2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013).

## 1.2 Statement of Purpose and Intent

This study examines youth workers' perceptions of issues relating to becoming a youth worker, being a youth worker and practising youth work in Ireland. Having been a youth worker for 16 years, I wanted to explore and analyse the experiences of those who occupy youth work positions in Ireland, specifically in terms of the nature and characteristics of their occupation.

The youth work sector in Ireland has experienced much change in the last 10 years, and a post-austerity policy focus which began with an attempt to determine the value for money offered by youth work services resulted in a significant alteration of the funding mechanisms and policy priorities for youth work services. Throughout these changes, and in the years since they were introduced, youth workers' voices were not heard in any collective and systematic way. My first purpose has therefore been to address this deficit, by providing an opportunity for youth workers to describe their experiences and offer their opinions of youth work as an occupation.

Secondly, and of equal importance, this study sets out to examine the implications of youth workers' perceptions for the development of youth work as a profession in Ireland. I start from the assumption that the patterns of experiences, views and opinions of the members of any occupation can throw light on the nature of that occupation as a *profession*.

Here I make use of the conceptual framework of discourses of professionalism within knowledge-based work, as explored extensively by Julia Evetts (2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013). A 'discourse' in this context can be described as a cluster of images, ideas and – crucially – practices related to some area of social life, so different discourses refer to different ways of *thinking* and *acting* in a particular social context (Devlin, 2013).

Acknowledging that occupations and professions change with time, Evetts has identified two discourses of *professionalism* – the occupational and the organisational. The differences between the discourses relate primarily to issues of occupational change, authority, autonomy and trust, as summarised in Table 1.1. All of these aspects can be seen to relate in one way or another to the exercise of power and the capacity to make decisions and take legitimate independent action within a professional sphere.

**Table 1.1. Organisational and occupational discourses of professionalism (Evetts, 2013)**

<b>Organisational</b>	<b>Occupational</b>
Change controlled by managers	Change constructed within occupational groups
Authority held within management hierarchy	Authority is collegiate
Standardising procedures and practices	Occupational control
Trust and Autonomy not assumed	Trust and Autonomy by ‘clients’ and employers

This study is therefore concerned with considering how youth workers’ perceptions of their occupation can throw light on these matters of change, authority, autonomy and trust within youth work and therefore on the question of whether one discourse of professionalism dominates or whether and how the two discourses interact.

The third purpose of this study, building on the findings regarding the two key research questions (which are themselves related to the two purposes outlined above) is to make recommendations for action that might be taken at the levels of policy and practice by the range of stakeholders in youth work, with a view to supporting the development of youth work as a profession and ultimately the enhancement of the resultant benefits for young people.

As already stated, research focusing directly on youth workers in Ireland is limited. A small number of occupational studies (Harland et al., 2005; McCready and Warm, 1991; McCready and Morgan, 2014; Monaghan, 2013; Youthcert, 2000), have provided important insights into matters such as role delineation, career pathways and workforce composition in youth work, north and south.

Devlin and Gunning’s report (2009) on *The Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work* is among the even smaller number of published research contributions concerned specifically with youth workers’ (and in this case also young people’s) views on the nature and characteristics of their occupation and profession. The fourth and final purpose of this study is therefore to make a significant and original contribution to the body of scholarly work on both the above aspects of youth work in Ireland, and on the relationship between them.

### **1.3 My Background**

I was first introduced to volunteer-led youth work unintentionally; not quite the ‘accidental youth worker’ as described by Tracy Hayes (2012), but as a young person and participant. My story is not unique. A few of my friends were dropping by to the local youth club on a Tuesday night. It was wet, and cold. And apparently the tea and biscuits were free. So, I gave it a go.

Soon enough, Tuesday at the youth club became a sacred part of my weekly routine.

Throughout my time as a teenager, I experienced everything the youth club had to offer, and soon found myself suggesting different things to do there. The adults were always encouraging and open to suggestions. When it came time to decide what to do after school, I was lucky enough to get a place in Carlow College studying Applied Social Studies in Social Care. It was described to me at the time as the Arts Degree for people who did not know who they wanted to work with, but knew they wanted to work in the field of social sciences.

Fieldwork placement was a core part of this programme, and in my final placement I went to Naas Youth Project to join the youth work team for 12 weeks. On reflection, this experience was influential in deciding my professional journey. My direct experience of participating as a young person, observing, interacting with and learning from youth workers, helped to shape my own professional development.

A few months later, after graduating from Carlow College in 2008 I successfully interviewed to become the first Community Youth Worker in a pilot youth project in Clane, Kildare. This project was funded by a local community development company which had identified the need for a service in Clane. I always felt like I had two roles in Clane – a youth worker in the project, and a youth work advocate with decision makers to try and secure permanent funding. I was introduced to the political nature of youth work very early in my career.

I have been involved in youth work ever since. I’ve worked in and managed youth projects in Youth Work Ireland (Kildare), Foróige, the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and most recently in Maynooth University as a youth work educator. I have experience of working in projects funded by the Special Projects for Youth (SPY) and UBU Your Place Your Space schemes, and in the Garda Youth Diversion Projects funded by the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS).

Over the years, like many others I have witnessed significant changes in the youth work sector in Ireland. Persevering through a series of austerity budgets was not easy. We shook many buckets to raise programme funds for activities with young people. The profession lost many excellent youth workers due to budget cuts, contract shortages and an unclear future.

Parallel (and related) to the severity of the impact of austerity was the ‘pass the parcel’ approach by the Irish state when it comes to youth work, moving responsibility from the Department of Education and Science (DES) to the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and most recently to the Department of Education and Youth (DEY). I was a founding member of the Youth Workers’ Collective that organised to campaign for the term ‘Youth’ to remain within the Department’s name in 2020.

The changes were not limited to Departments. I remember vividly the dread amongst colleagues upon hearing about the Department of Children and Youth Affairs conducting a *Value for Money Programme Review* (VFMPR) exercise in youth work (DCYA, 2014b). This was happening to a sector that was unorganised and not in a position to influence or collectively participate in such a significant initiative.

Subsequent policy developments would continue to assess, monitor and impact upon the context and practice of youth work in Ireland, but without youth workers having an opportunity or platform to make a collective contribution or response. Since joining the Department of Applied Social Studies in Maynooth University, I have been involved in a small number of research projects that incorporated collaborative approaches to amplify the voices of people who are often unheard and undervalued (Daly and Farrelly, 2023; Centre for Youth Research and Development, 2023; Gorman et al., 2021). I believe youth workers in Ireland themselves fall into this category. As already stated, a key purpose of this study is to help to remedy this situation.

## 1.4 Significance of this Study

Youth work shares some important features with what have been termed the ‘social professions’, a category that includes teaching, social work and social care among others (Banks, 2004). These in turn can be compared and contrasted with the longest and most securely established professions such as medicine and law. Apart from obvious questions of disciplinary foundations and content, the main differences between this range of occupations (or groups of occupations) lie in the distance travelled in the process of *professionalisation*, a topic discussed further in Chapter 3.

In summary, the differences concern such matters as whether specific qualifications are required to practice within an occupation (perhaps including different thresholds for different levels of practice); whether or not an occupation has ‘protected title’ in law; who has authority to determine the duration, content and assessment methods of education and training programmes; where such programmes are located (e.g. within universities or not, in the ‘field’ or not); whether career structure and progression, remuneration and other job conditions are standardised and if so the process through which this takes place.

Cutting across all of the above is the question of the role of the state and of other actors in the formal recognition and regulation of the profession. The other actors include employers, education and training institutions, ‘clients’/ ‘consumers’/ ‘users’ of (or ‘participants’ in) services and practices, and – most relevant here – practitioners themselves and their representative bodies (Devlin, 2012).

The situation regarding such matters can, and typically does (Wilensky 1964), change over time within individual occupations. The term ‘professionalisation’ (or, if relevant, ‘de-professionalisation’) is used to describe precisely such changes. But within an occupation at any one time, all of these matters can also be seen to raise questions of change, authority, autonomy and trust, as mentioned in section 1.2. The key question is: which actor(s) are seen as having legitimacy in controlling such matters? Julia Evetts’s framework of organisational and occupational *discourses of professionalism*, already outlined, provides a way to provide tentative answers to this question.

Despite a number of occupational studies, referred to above, and a very limited volume of work introducing the relevance of professionalism and professionalisation to Irish youth work (e.g. Devlin, 2012), there has as yet been no study in this country that combines the

systematic collection of empirical data on youth workers' perceptions and experiences with the analytical and interpretative lens(es) of the sociology of the professions. The primary significance of this study is that it is the first to do so.

## 1.5 Thesis Overview

This chapter has introduced the study by outlining the research questions (Section 1.1) and the statement of purpose and intent (Section 1.2). I have included a section about myself to provide insight as to my situatedness in approaching the research (Section 1.3) before discussing the significance of this study in Section 1.4.

Chapter 2 further contextualises the study with a brief history of youth work in Ireland (Section 2.2), before describing the current occupational landscape for paid youth workers in this country. It continues by outlining the policy provision for youth work in Ireland and the profile of youth worker education and training.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive review of literature associated with the two key concepts in this research: youth work and professions. Section 3.2 presents an overview of key youth work literature both in Ireland and internationally. Section 3.3 reviews important scholarly and policy contributions regarding professions. This includes a detailed consideration of the work of Julia Evetts regarding discourses of professionalism. The final section summarises the findings of the small number of previous occupational studies of youth work in Ireland, north and south.

Chapter 4 presents the research design and methodology of this mixed-methods study. It discusses my positionality as a researcher, before outlining the philosophical underpinnings and the rationale for applying a mixed-methods approach. The chapter also addresses the ethical considerations arising in the study.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study in two main sections. Firstly, the findings from the survey are presented under five headings, corresponding to the structure of the survey questionnaire. These are: contract and conditions, education and training, rewards and challenges, role and task, and youth work as a profession. The focus group findings are then presented under four headings that reflect the main analytic themes: becoming a youth worker, being a youth worker, the educational nature of youth work and the development of youth work as a profession.

Chapter 6 is the discussion chapter, in which I revisit the findings from this study in the light of the background and policy context presented in Chapter 2 and the literature reviewed in Chapter 3. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the two main sections of this chapter correspond with the two key research questions of this research.

The seventh and final chapter in this thesis is the Conclusions chapter, in which I provide a brief summation of the main findings and their significance as well as noting the limitations of this research. The chapter suggests some areas for future research before presenting several recommendations based on the findings, analysis and discussion in the preceding chapters.

# CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the scene for this study, beginning with an overview of the history of youth work in Ireland in section 2.2. The years 2008-2025 were a time of rapid growth regarding youth work policy in Ireland. Section 2.3 considers the main recent and current policies such as the *National Quality Standards Framework* (2010), *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* (2014), *Value for Money: A Programme Review* (2014) and *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (2023-2028).

The occupational structure of youth work in Ireland as discussed in section 2.4 illustrates the context within which paid youth work occurs. Despite a very uneven pattern of development, youth work continues to professionalise from its beginnings as a volunteer-led vocation to a substantial sector of paid employment in receipt of significant exchequer funding.

Section 2.5 discusses the context of education and training for professional youth workers in Ireland. Youth work is not a regulated profession in Ireland, therefore the workforce is made up of those who are ‘other’ qualified as well as those who are specifically youth work qualified. In fact, a ‘diversity of routes of entry’ has been seen as a positive feature of youth work employment for many decades (Department of Education, 1980).

## **2.2 Irish Youth Work Organisations, Structures and Policies: A Brief History**

### **2.2.1 Pre-1980**

When considering the historical beginnings of engaging with young people, the political and religious influences cannot be disregarded (Devlin, 2010). While youth work in Ireland may be seen, by virtue of the country's colonisation, as sharing some aspects of the 'British youth work tradition', it developed a specific character as a result of the struggle for independence and the imperatives of an emerging new state, which was both Catholic and nationalist.

Voluntary organisations such as the YMCA, Boy Scouts and Na Fianna Éireann led early initiatives to respond to a societal 'concern about the morals of young people' (Coyne and Donohue, 2013: 77). After independence, the new Irish State was highly influenced by Catholic social teaching, especially in relation to the concept of 'subsidiarity' which prioritised voluntary community responses to local issues. However, as a series of regular 'moral panics' continued to prevail on either side of the Irish Sea (Cohen, 2002 cited in Devlin, 2010), the state, prompted by religious institutions and to a lesser extent political movements, began to take a more active role in the welfare and 'out of school' education of young people.

An example of this was the establishment in 1942 of Comhairle le leas Óige as a sub-committee of the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee (Hurley, 1992). The 'Comhairle' later became known as the City of Dublin Youth Services Board before more recently removing the word 'Board' from its name. The 1940s and the decades after also saw the establishment of several organisations focused on the provision of social education and recreation services for young people such as Macra na Tuaithe (1952), the youth branch of the farmers' body Macra na Feirme and the organisation that eventually developed into Foróige; and the National Federation of Youth Clubs (1961) which was to become the National Youth Federation and some years later Youth Work Ireland.

The establishment of the National Youth Council of Ireland (1967) with the support of the Department of Education showed a willingness to provide for vehicles to influence policy as well as the 'co-ordination of key voluntary youth organisations in Ireland' (Noonan, 2020: 8). This in itself was a significant catalyst for policy development leading among other things to *A Policy for Youth and Sport* ('Bruton Report') (Government of Ireland, 1977) which was

followed by the ‘O’Sullivan Report’ *on the development of youth work services in Ireland* (Department of Education, 1980). The latter included 100 recommendations focused on young people’s needs through youth work. Notably, it gave credence to the idea of employing staff in youth organisations, although as already noted it emphasised the desirability of diverse educational backgrounds among workers.

### **2.2.2 1981 - 2009**

While the religious and political influence in youth work in Ireland is important, the state’s involvement has evolved over time to become a primary driver of the nature and direction of the ‘sector’ through a series of policy initiatives and associated funding mechanisms. The ‘Costello Report’ (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984) preceded the first attempt to develop a comprehensive national youth policy, *‘In Partnership with Youth’* (Government of Ireland, 1985). In keeping with both the recommendations of the ‘Costello Report’ and with the spirit of its own title, the policy emphasised the empowerment of young people and encouraged youth workers to engage in processes that enabled young people to become active critical participants in society (Treacy, 2009: 183).

As Jenkinson (2011: 2) suggests however, this period can be ‘characterised by numerous policy reports on youth work being commissioned, published and not being implemented.’ The introduction of the first Youth Work Act in 1997, although ‘unfinished’ (Devlin, 2010: 94), enabled two important elements of infrastructure to be put in place: the recognition of NYCI as the ‘representative body’ for voluntary youth organisations (although not formally named in the act), and the establishment of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC) to ‘advise the Minister in relation to the provision of youth work programmes and services’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 6). NYWAC was discontinued in 2013 but in its years of operation it had a significant impact on youth work policy development, not least through shaping the amended Youth Work Act (2001) whose definition of youth work applies to this day.

The definition in the 2001 legislation captures three key features of youth work in Ireland: the essentially educational nature of youth work, the voluntary participation of young people and the primary role of voluntary organisations as the direct providers of youth work services. The Youth Work Act (2001) also assigned responsibility for *ensuring* and *supporting* such provision to the statutory local Vocational Educational Committees. While this element of the legislation was not officially implemented (or ‘commenced’), it paved the way for the

eventual formal assignment of such responsibility to regional Education and Training Boards (ETB) in the Education and Training Boards Act (2013).

The 2001 Act was followed by the *National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-07* (NYWDP) (Department of Education and Science, 2003), which set out four overarching goals, though as has often been the case in the Irish context, not all were followed through into implementation. Goal 4 focused on ‘enhancing professionalism and ensuring quality standards’ in youth work and led directly to the establishment of the North South Education Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS) in 2005. NSETS is an all-island body that assesses and endorses professional education and training programmes in youth work at higher education level (see 2.5 below).

### **2.2.3 2010 to date**

Also arising from the *National Youth Work Development Plan*, although less promptly and less directly, was the *National Quality Standards Framework* (NQSF) in 2010, a comprehensive framework of organisational self-assessment across ten quality standards, aimed at ‘staff-led’ projects. The NQSF was suspended after six years and the government has committed to the implementation of an ‘updated sector-wide framework’ within the timeframe of its current youth work strategy (Government of Ireland, 2024: 54).

In addition to actions such as those outlined above, the NYWDP also identified a range of challenges facing the sector, including recruitment and retention of youth workers and volunteers; attracting and sustaining the interest of young people; maintaining relevance and having the capacity to respond to young people’s needs in a rapidly changing environment. These are all issues that remain pertinent today, and if anything have become more pressing.

Despite the optimism generated by the publication of the NYWDP, youth work in Ireland remained vulnerable to shifts in government policy and administration. In 2008 responsibility for youth work transferred overnight from the Department of Education to the Office for the Minister for Children (OMC). This development was ‘entirely unanticipated within the sector (Devlin, 2008: 53) and it has never received an official explanation. Later ‘youth affairs’ was added to create the title of OMCYA and in 2011, in the reconfiguration of departments and ministerial portfolios after a general election, the Office was upgraded to a full Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Whatever the administrative location or title, ‘youth affairs’ was subject to what NYCI termed ‘savage cuts’ in the years of austerity between 2008 and 2014 (NYCI, 2016: 5).

The administrative shifts had not ended, however. In 2020 the DCYA was expanded considerably (some would have said unsustainably) to become the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). It took an intense campaign by the NYCI and allies to ensure youth was retained in the Department’s name. The 2024 change of government saw responsibility for youth work move yet again, returning to a re-constituted and renamed Department of Education and Youth, some sixteen years after it had been transferred to the Office for the Minister of Children.

The *National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services* (Government of Ireland, 2024), presents a list of key milestones since the Youth Work Act (2001) (Figure 2.1). It serves as a helpful summary of the developments outlined above.

**Figure 2.1. Key milestones in the development of youth work services (DCEDIY, 2024)**

2001	Youth Work Act, 2001
2003	National Youth Work Development Plan 2003–2007 published
2006	Launch of the North South Education and Training Standards for Youth Work (NSETS)
2008	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) established
2011	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) established
2011	National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work published
2013	Education and Training Boards Act 2013
2014	Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes published
2014	Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 published
2015	National Youth Strategy 2015–2020 published
2019	UBU Your Place Your Space scheme launched
2020	DCYA expanded to become the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
2022	YSGS reform process initiated

The next section provides an overview of the key policy developments shaping occupational youth work between 2008 and 2025.

## **2.3 Key Youth Work Policy Developments in Ireland 2008-2025**

The previous section provided a brief history and overview of the organisational, policy and administrative context of Irish youth work. This section focuses on the substantive content of important policy initiatives and statements in the years 2008-2025.

### **2.3.1 Garda Youth Diversion Projects Operational Requirements (2008)**

In terms of youth justice work in Ireland, the *Youth Diversion Projects Operational Requirements* do not mention the term ‘youth work’ once in the document, instead naming the role of Youth Diversion Projects as ‘community based, multi-agency, youth crime prevention initiatives which primarily seek to divert young people involved or at risk of becoming involved in criminal/anti-social behaviour away from the criminal justice system’ (Department of Justice, 2022: 4).

In an attempt to ‘work to reduce offending by diverting young people from offending behaviour’ (DoJ, 2008 cited in Redmond, 2009: 135), the Irish state invested significantly in the Garda Youth Diversion Programme. Whilst acknowledged as not the ‘only intervention that intends to positively impact troubled or troublesome behaviour among young people’ (ibid.: 136), the GYDP has received significant investment by successive Irish governments. The staff complement is ‘mainly but not exclusively trained in youth work’ (ibid.: 137).

Young people are referred to the GYDP programme either through a direct referral process from the Garda Juvenile Liaison Officer, or other agencies working with young people such as social workers and teachers or through self-referral.

The lack of explicit acknowledgment in the GYDP operational requirements of the role of youth work and youth workers in the process being engaged in, despite the fact that most of those engaged in it are trained youth workers, is significant evidence of a lack of recognition and respect for youth work as a profession. This is a subject that will be revisited throughout this thesis.

### **2.3.2 National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (2010)**

As indicated in the previous section, the Office of the Minister Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) launched the *National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work* (NQSF) in 2010. The NQSF took the 2001 Youth Work Act’s definition of youth work as its starting point. Much of the framework’s content was developed in consultation with the youth work sector. The framework was underpinned by a set of core values and principles:

1. Young person-centred: Recognising the rights of young people and holding as central their active and voluntary participation.
2. Committed to ensuring and promoting the safety and well-being of young people.
3. Educational and developmental.
4. Committed to ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults.
5. Dedicated to the provision of quality youth work and committed to continuous improvement (OMCYA, 2010: 3).

The NQSF for staff-led organisations consists of a series of self-assessed standards to ‘ensure that youth work organisations provide quality services to young people’ (OMCYA, 2010: 1).

These standards were detailed in two sections:

1. Youth Work Practice and Provision; Planning, Practice, Progression, Monitoring and Assessment, Policies and Procedures.
2. Organisational Management and Development; Governance and Operational Management, Strategy, Volunteers, Human Resource Management, Collaboration and Integration.

The rationale for implementation focussed on the intention to support and enhance the standards of practice and provision whilst also providing an evidence base for youth work in Ireland. Importantly, it emphasised the administrative responsibility of organisations in the youth work sector regarding the effective use of resources and the need to establish a basis for ‘whole organisational assessment.’

In a review of the NQSF commissioned by the DCYA which was published in 2017, it was suggested that 70% of participants in the review had found it to have ‘significant value’ although issues arose in terms of the administrative burden associated with the initiative. Another finding from the study highlighted the willingness from organisations to have the standards recognised externally.

In the years between 2016 and 2024, the implementation of the NQSF appeared to have stopped within the sector while Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures became the main policy focus of the Department (see below). However, as already explained, when *Opportunities for Youth* was published in 2024, it committed to implementing an ‘updated sector-wide National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work’ with the lead partners being the DCEDIY, ETBs and funded youth organisations. The reason given was that it had been a ‘strong theme

emerging from the public consultation process’ (Department of Education and Youth, 2024: 54).

### **2.3.3 Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014)**

As noted earlier in this chapter, the general election of 2011 heralded the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). In 2014, the Department published *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014a). The framework is popularly known as ‘BOBF’. It set out five key outcomes for children and young people:

1. Active and healthy.
2. Achieving in learning and development.
3. Safe and protected from harm.
4. Economic security and opportunity.
5. Connected, respected and contributing to their world.

Among other things, BOBF recognises the contribution of youth work to young people’s informal and non-formal learning (ibid.: 67), youth work’s role in crime diversion (ibid.: 80) and commits to supporting quality youth work (ibid.: 105).

### **2.3.4 Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014)**

The policy framework was followed by the *Value for Money Policy and Policy Review of Youth Programmes* (VFMPR), triggered in part by the Department’s desire to rationalise what it saw as a multiplicity of funding schemes and bring efficiencies to youth work in pursuit of effective youth work interventions and quality outcomes for young people.

The VFMPR report (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014b), heralded a significant period of reform in Irish youth work. It made a number of far-reaching recommendations including the amalgamation of existing funding schemes into one targeted funding stream, using demographic data to prioritise geographic areas and categories of young people to target for engagement, adoption of the Hardiker model (Hardiker et al., 1991) of assessing levels of need among children and young people, construction of a logic model and associated theory of change for the targeted programme, the adoption of seven ‘proximal outcomes’ as the basis for measuring youth service provider performance and refocusing the work of ETB Youth Officers towards governance and oversight.

The VFMPR has had and continues to have a significant impact on the funding and direction of professional youth work. Sinead McMahon (2021) argues that the VFMPR process problematised youth work in three substantial ways: it suggests that youth work presents a problem of risk, a problem of underperformance and a problem of proof.

Including the word ‘risk’ 73 times (McMahon, 2021), the VFMPR report could not find sufficient evidence that €128m of public investment was providing value for money to the taxpayer, leading to the conclusion that youth work was underperforming. While it could be suggested that the framework for determining underperformance was absent, what resulted was ‘increased monitoring by local state bodies; clear criteria to aid the targeting of ‘at risk’ young people; and outcomes measurement for the production of youth work data that would be quantified, calculable and database friendly’ (McMahon, 2021).

The final problem identified in the VFMPR was the challenge of proving the impact youth work can have on young people’s lives. This ‘imperfect evidence base’ of qualitative, anecdotal, and differing outcomes led to the inclusion of seven proximal outcomes for application in future funding schemes (McMahon, 2021).

The VFMPR recommendations, which were largely adopted by the Department, led to the launch of the UBU funding scheme in 2020, along with a comprehensive set of operating rules and associated logic model and performance framework. The mission of the UBU funding scheme for youth work is to ‘provide out-of-school supports to marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable young people in their communities to enable them to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their full potential’ (DCYA, 2019:12).

### **2.3.5 Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023)**

The 2014 policy framework was superseded by *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023-2028)*. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) launched this policy framework in 2023 to ‘provide a platform to realise the rights of children and young people in Ireland, so that all partners can work effectively together to ensure children and young people can thrive’ (DCEDIY, 2023a: 4). In doing so, the framework set out a series of priority actions under the five national outcomes for children and young people, first identified in BOBF (2014).

The revised policy framework recognises that ‘participation in high-quality non-formal youth programmes and projects supports young people across the five National Outcomes’ noting that it is ‘especially important in relation to young people experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation or who are otherwise vulnerable’ (DCEDIY, 2023a: 36).

It goes on to say that the youth service grant scheme was being ‘reformed with the aim of developing a funding and governance system which is responsive to the current and emerging needs of young people and supported by a sustainable and transparent funding infrastructure’. The youth sector engaged in an intensive campaign to ensure that the long promised new strategy for the youth sector explicitly references youth work as a primary focus of the strategy.

### **2.3.6 Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services (2024 – 2028)**

In 2024, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth launched *Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services*, intended to ‘strengthen the capacity of the youth work sector to support the delivery of these outcomes and to address new and emerging challenges for young people’ (Department of Education and Youth, 2024: 7). The outcomes referred to by the Minister in his introduction are the five national outcomes for children and young people that had been presented in ‘BOBF’ and retained in ‘Young Ireland’.

Opportunities for Youth has identified three strategic objectives that will ‘shape the future direction for youth work opportunities and services’:

1. The role of youth work services in enhancing the lives of young people is strengthened, move visible and better aligned with other services.
2. An equality and rights-based approach is embedded across all youth work services and supporting structures.
3. Youth work services are high quality, accountable, sustainable and shaped by relevant data and evidence.

Included in this strategy is a series of 18 priority actions to be pursued by a variety of government agencies and services. Of note, this strategy commits to establishing a National Youth Sector Reference Group, reviewing the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme and mapping the availability and distribution of youth work services.

Of key interest for this research, the strategy recognises that there are ‘widespread challenges in the recruitment, retention and training/ professional development of staff and volunteers’ (ibid.: 45) and commits to undertaking a workforce development strategy and to consider the training needs of the sector (ibid.: 52).

## 2.4 An Occupational Overview

As previously noted, Irish youth work has a strong voluntary basis, both in terms of adult volunteers and governance structures. Professional youth workers are employed by voluntary organisations as the sector continues to professionalise.

State funds are the primary source of funding for the employment of youth workers, supplemented by European and philanthropic funding. Professional youth work is mainly funded through two government schemes: the ‘Your Place, Your Space’ (UBU) scheme (Department of Education and Youth) and the Garda Youth Diversion Programme (Department of Justice).

The mission statement of the UBU Scheme (DCYA, 2019:13) is ‘to provide out-of-school supports to young people in their local communities to enable them to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their full potential by improving their personal and social development outcomes’. ‘Young people aged between 10 and 24 years old who are experiencing marginalisation or are disadvantaged or vulnerable are the primary target group for youth services funded by UBU’ (DCYA, 2019: 19).

The Operating Rules of the UBU scheme outline a number of values associated with the scheme, including freedom to participate in non-formal educational activities, along with a rights-based and person-centered approach. ‘The work is developmental and empowering’ while maintaining a sense of fun, therapeutic, early intervention and prevention (DCYA, 2019: 13). The Operating Rules suggests there is clarity of purpose for practitioners who should be ‘critical and reflective in ensuring that their work is informed by evidence’ (ibid.: 14).

The Garda Youth Diversion Programme (GYDP) also employs youth workers, often in a ‘Youth Justice Worker’ role. This programme is funded by the Department of Justice and located in the Irish Youth Justice Service Community Programmes Unit. It provides ‘community based, multi-agency youth crime prevention initiatives’ in 105 projects around Ireland (Garda Síochána, 2023). Young people who are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social and/or criminal behaviour are targeted for inclusion in GYDPs in communities around the country.

National organisations such as Foróige and Youth Work Ireland are the biggest service providers of professional youth work, with smaller, regional organisations such as Crosscare

and Extern providing significant youth work services. Alongside national and regional bodies are independent youth work organisations in Ireland, services who are not members of regional or national services but are in receipt of either UBU or GYDP funding to employ youth workers / youth justice workers. Many of these tend to be city based, e.g. St. Andrews Family Resource Centre, Sphere 17 and many other projects in Dublin.

The Department of Education and Youth does not collate information regarding the youth work workforce. In response to a parliamentary question put to the Minister requesting the number of youth workers employed in Ireland under the UBU Scheme, the response stated that the Department ‘does not collate the information requested.’ Funding is allocated on an organisational basis ‘to meet the identified local needs of the youth population in an area’ (DCEDIY, 2023b).

Furthermore, the response stated that the ‘recruitment and employment of staff including youth workers is a matter for the youth organisations and services themselves’ (DCEDIY, 2023b).

Not only is this policy position a significant barrier to gaining information and understanding concerning the youth worker population in Ireland (at least within the UBU scheme), it also offers some insight into the value placed on youth work by government policy which is willing to fund the service, but not concern itself with the people that provide it. The implications of this policy approach are reflected in the findings of the current study and discussed at length later in the thesis.

In contrast, the same parliamentary question was put to the Department of Justice regarding the number of Garda Youth Diversion Project workers employed by county, resulting in the information contained in Table 2.1 below (Department of Justice, 2023).

**Table 2.1 Department of Justice funded youth diversion programme workers**

<b>County</b>	<b>DOJ Funded YDP Workers at Sep 2023</b>
Carlow	3.00
Cavan	6.00
Clare	5.00
Cork	38.30
Donegal	10.60
Dublin	191.66
Galway	13.00
Kerry	14.00
Kildare	12.40
Kilkenny	2.00
Laois	8.00
Limerick	26.80
Longford	8.00
Louth	15.50
Mayo	4.00
Meath	16.70
Monaghan	4.00
Offaly	9.00
Roscommon	2.00
Tipperary	14.50
Waterford	15.00
Westmeath	7.00
Wexford	9.50
Wicklow	8.00
Sligo/Leitrim	3.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>446.96</b>

In 2023, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth hosted a number of youth workers and organisations to discuss the current landscape of professional youth work in Ireland. As rapporteur to the group, Senator Lynne Ruane introduced the report as a ‘glimpse into the culture and crucialness of youth work in Ireland, as a safe haven for our young people, and a space for empowerment and positive change’ (JOCCEDIY, 2023: 5).

The importance of this report with reference to the current study is significant: opportunities for youth workers and organisations to provide first-hand testimony to policy makers in formal government spaces are rare. Alongside a list of 30+ recommendations arising from the meetings, the Committee also facilitated important discussions focused on defining youth work and more importantly identifying the issues facing the sector.

It is worth noting that there is no professional association of youth workers in Ireland. Despite significant interest and momentum behind the formation of an Irish Youth Workers' Association (IYWA) in 2018, it never gained traction and folded shortly after the launch. Following a campaign to retain 'youth' in the DCEDIY title following the 2020 general election, the Youth Workers Collective Ireland (YWCI) was formed although this group too, is no longer active. The role for such a group and its potential to the development of the youth work profession in Ireland will be revisited later in this thesis.

## 2.5 Youth Worker Education and Training in Ireland

The National Youth Work Development Plan explicitly recognised youth work as a profession dedicated to the ‘education of young people in non-formal settings’ and added that ‘education is by definition a planned, purposeful and conscious process’ (DES 2003:13) and that ‘not everyone can or should be a youth worker’ (DES 2003:14).

The NYWDP also set out four broad goals for the sector, including the development of quality standards to enhance professionalism in youth work practice, along with a recognition of the need to address education and training routes for youth workers and a commitment to the establishment of an all-island validation body for youth work training. While elements of the NYWDP were not funded/implemented, as already indicated the North-South Education Training Standards Committee (NSETS) was established in 2005 and the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for staff-led organisations was developed and implemented in 2010.

NSETS is ‘responsible for the professional endorsement of undergraduate and post graduate youth work education programmes in higher education institutions on the island of Ireland’ (NSETS, 2021: 1). It assesses and endorses awards that are deemed to comply with a detailed set of criteria relating to ‘all aspects of programme content and delivery’ (ibid.). These include programme design; student recruitment, including means of assessing suitability; issues of student retention and progression; recognition of prior learning; methods of teaching, learning and assessment; balance between academic learning and supervised fieldwork practice learning; library facilities and other student supports, including pastoral; physical and spatial considerations including accessibility; staff resources, including proportion of professionally qualified staff; staff student ratio; institutional commitment and support for programmes; quality assurance procedures (NSETS, 2021). The NSETS criteria also contain a set of ‘principles into practice’ reflecting both the policy contexts north and south and the relevant professional and scholarly literature on youth work. These include an emphasis on the centrality of ethics in the youth work profession, supported by a separately published resource to guide institutions in addressing the ethical dimension within youth work education and training (Darcy, 2016). In terms of level and duration, the minimum requirement for endorsed programmes is honours undergraduate degree (National Framework of Qualifications Level 8) or one-year postgraduate diploma (Level 9). The MU postgraduate

programme is at Masters level. Programmes may be full-time or part-time in-service equivalent.

Because NSETS is a partner with other education and training standards (ETS) committees or their equivalents in England, Scotland and Wales within the 'Joint ETS' forum, a mutual recognition protocol is in place whereby programmes endorsed/approved/validated by one ETS (different terms are used across the jurisdictions) are recognised as professional awards in all the others.

There are currently six NSETS endorsed higher education institutions in Ireland:

- Maynooth University (MU)
- Ulster University (UU)
- University College Cork (UCC)
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)
- Technological University Dublin (TUD)
- Atlantic Technological University (ATU)

Despite the fact that the UK 'occupational standards' for youth work are embedded in the NSETS criteria for endorsement, they are not formally applicable or required in Ireland. While NSETS is concerned with standards of *education and training*, and the NQSF was established to address standards of *service provision* in staff-led services, the concept of *occupational* standards has not so far been explicitly addressed or implemented in Irish youth work policy.

There are also several Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) introductory programmes at NFQ Level 5 that, whilst not NSETS endorsed, provide students with an education pathway to progress towards a Level 8 professional programme.

As already stated, youth workers in Ireland are not required to have completed a professional qualification in youth work to be employed as one. For as long as youth workers have been discussed and researched in Ireland, the pathways by which people enter the profession have been diverse. The O'Sullivan Committee (Department of Education, 1980) noted with approval that some youth workers enter with a third-level qualification, often in arts or social science, while others qualify through years of experience in voluntary youth work or similar areas (at the time of the O'Sullivan Committee's deliberations the undergraduate professional programme in what is now Ulster University had been established but there was no

professional programme in in any university south of the border). Pathways to becoming a youth worker in Ireland are still not formally limited to university qualifications (in any discipline), though existing research (considered in Chapter 3) does suggest that most youth workers do now have a 3rd level award.

Similarly, there is no formal framework for continuing professional development (CPD) for professional youth workers in Ireland. Youth workers can, at their own expense, sign up for a variety of training initiatives. The National Youth Council of Ireland offers the most comprehensive suite of training programmes for youth workers – their website suggesting they ‘provide a range of practical training and certified courses delivered by experts to support your professional development and work with young people’.

The training available ranges from one day/short term workshops on issues like climate justice, power, global youth work, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s), Youth Arts and Child Protection to more sustained Level 7/8 certificates. These include: Youth Mental Health Promotion; Global Youth Work and Development Education; and Youth Arts. The latter are run in partnership with NUI Galway and Maynooth University respectively (NYCI, 2024).

In the absence of programme-specific entry requirements for staff and of a sector-wide CPD framework, courses and programmes such as these play a pivotal role in the ongoing learning and development of professional youth workers.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Chapter 2 contextualises this study in policy and sectoral terms, beginning with a brief history of youth work in Ireland. Predominantly the concern of the voluntary sector in the initial stages, the Irish state began to take a more active, though still limited, role in the overall policy direction of youth work in the 1970's and 80's, culminating in a more directly interventionist role in the period since the 2001 Youth Work Act. The employment of paid youth workers has increased significantly since the 1980s, with the majority of workers employed by voluntary organisations in targeted youth work projects.

This chapter has reviewed the key policy developments relating to youth work in Ireland between 2010 – 2025, notably the *National Quality Standards Framework* (2010), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (2014), *Value for Money Programme Review* (2014), *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (2023-2028) and *Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services*. It has also provided an occupational overview of youth work in Ireland, considering the current youth work landscape, highlighting the relevant policy and legislation, along with the funding and employment settings within which youth workers operate. It has emphasised the ongoing policy position that 'recruitment and employment of staff including youth workers is a matter for the youth organisations and services' themselves (DCEDIY, 2023b), meaning that there are no uniform requirements regarding professional qualifications for entry into youth work employment and no consistent framework for CPD or other aspects of professional practice, including ethics.

# CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 is presented in five sections, including the introduction and conclusion. The substantive sections deal with the nature and characteristics of youth work (3.2), previous empirical research focussed on Irish youth work (3.3) and professions, professionalisation and professionalism (3.4).

Whilst Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive background to this study, including a thorough review of the context of Irish youth work, Chapter 3 reviews and analyses key literature associated with the two primary areas of focus in this study: youth work and professions.

According to Jesson and Lacey (2006: 141), a literature review is ‘a narrative account of information that is already currently available, accessible and published, which may be written from a number of differing paradigms or perspectives, depending on the standpoint of the writer’.

In organising the literature review, I was guided by Aveyard’s (2010:5) description of the literature review as the ‘comprehensive study and interpretation of literature’ to address a specific research question by selecting, summarising and analysing literature relevant to that question. As a youth work educator, I have access to a significant amount of literature associated with the research questions which was a useful starting point for the review. In selecting literature for inclusion in this review I started with an online keyword search in the MU library.

The keywords included, though were not limited to: ‘youth work’, ‘occupational youth work’, ‘research with youth workers’, ‘youth workers’, ‘becoming a youth worker’, ‘being a youth worker’, ‘youth worker education and training’, ‘perceptions of youth workers’, ‘perspectives of youth workers’, ‘professions’, ‘professionalism’, ‘professionalisation’, ‘semi-professions’, ‘occupations’, and included ‘the study of...’ or ‘research with...’

The process of summarising and reviewing the literature arising from that process, based in turn on the two key questions guiding this research, informed my decisions concerning the structure and content of the remainder of this chapter.

## 3.2 Nature and Characteristics of Youth Work

### 3.2.1 Defining youth work

The general public, politicians and novice youth workers may not find it easy to understand how youth work relates to other forms of work with young people in the education, welfare and recreation sectors. As Howard Sercombe succinctly suggests, ‘defining youth work isn’t easy’ (2010: 15). Nor (perhaps unsurprisingly?) is delineating its relationship to other forms of work with young people (Cooper, 2018).

Whether youth work is about informal education (St. Croix, 2017), support and amplification (Nicholls, 2012), a practice in its own right (Davies, 2021), dialogue and conversation (Batsleer, 2010), educational and developmental processes (Devlin and Gunning, 2009) or just an ‘odd phrase’ (Cunningham, 2012: 13), defining youth work is not a straightforward endeavour. This is not helped by a traditional perception that the absence/dearth of a ‘theoretical background disempowers youth work practice’ (Coussée and Williamson, 2011: 225). Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that:

Youth work has a history as a social movement as well as a social profession. It almost always exists in a community context and is an important part of civil society, or what in some European countries is called ‘associative life’, through which people come together to work collaboratively to achieve shared objectives (Tierney, Devlin and Reynolds, 2019: 8).

Kate Sapin (2009: 3) proposes that youth work can be considered as a relationship between values and practice in order to ‘enable young people to learn from each other and address their needs and interests’. She goes on to suggest that youth work can be considered under three headings: practice, principles and values.

A consideration of one’s positionality is imperative when trying to understand youth work.

Positioning has to do with the way you situate yourself in relationship to young people. It also has to do with how you’re situated in relation to the discourses that influence your identity, each youth’s identity, and your relationship with them (Tilsen, 2018: 23).

A youth worker who has managed a project for 20+ years will have a very different perspective on youth work compared to a policy writer or funder who has never been in a youth work service. A young person who has spent two nights a week in a service for five years will communicate what youth work is very differently to that of a parent or a teacher.

The occupation of youth work can find itself on shifting sands, often being expected to react to changing government policy priorities such as youth justice, educational disadvantage, unemployment, drug misuse or mental health, which can directly or indirectly alter/impact the purpose and outcomes of the practice. Youth work can provide ‘inclusive, democratic spaces within which young people are nurtured and respected, and where they can learn about, question and take action on their world’ (McCrea and Moran, 2024: 2) whilst servicing a ‘higher purpose of inclusion and social cohesion’ (Petkovic and Bárta, 2024: 117).

On the other hand, youth work is sometimes accused of bring in collusion with ‘stigmatising state policy’ or charged with ‘inducing social conformity [and] promoting the status quo’ (McCrea and Moran, 2024: 2; citing Swirak, 2016 and Kiely, 2009). Arguments for such a charge are possibly rooted in the ways in which youth work is funded by the Irish state with explicit aims of reducing youth crime or youth unemployment or an increase in school attendance. As previously highlighted in Chapter 2, the implementation of the UBU scheme has made even further explicit the state’s intention for youth work services (DCYA, 2019).

For Bernard Davies (2010), youth work is a complex mix of features that include voluntary participation, ‘starting where young people are at’ (ibid.: 2), trusting relationships, tipping the balance of power in young people’s favour, diversity and equity, promoting equality, working with and through young people’s friend groups, attending to process and reflective practice.

Alongside some theoretical perspectives on youth work, the geographical landscape can also weigh heavily on an understanding or interpretation of youth work. Differences extend ‘not just internationally and cross-culturally, but even administratively within individual countries or jurisdictions, where it can be defined differently for different policy or legislative purposes’ (Tierney, Devlin and Reynolds, 2019: 7).

This variety of understanding is highlighted further by Trudi Cooper (2018) who identifies the breadth of definitions associated with youth work internationally depending on the language, context, locations and purpose. Cooper acknowledges that whilst one international definition might not be possible, a conceptual one rich with ‘essential features of practice’ could be considered as an alternative (ibid.: 2018: 4). These essential features include the many places and spaces within which youth work occurs, with youth workers to be ‘found almost everywhere young people can be found’. Cooper also describes a series of models of youth work practice to highlight the diverse political, sociological and educational nature/dimensions of youth work.

Often, youth workers find themselves describing who they are and what they do by ruling out other occupations/professionals in young people's lives i.e. youth workers are not teachers or social workers (Spence and Devanney, 2008). According to Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith (2010), it is only when the following five 'elements' are present that youth work occurs, and when one or more of these elements are absent, so is youth work:

- Voluntary participation
- Education and welfare
- Young people
- Association, relationship and community
- Being friendly, accessible and responsive while acting with integrity

A more detailed consideration of the nature and characteristics of youth work in Ireland follows in 3.2.2, highlighting the core principles of the occupation by using the 2001 definition as a starting point.

### **3.2.2 Nature and characteristics of youth work: an Irish perspective**

#### *3.2.2.1 Purpose / definition*

The Education and Training Board (ETB) Act (2013), reaffirming the formulation first presented in the Youth Work Act (2001) defines youth work as '...a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is—

- complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and
- provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations' (Government of Ireland, 2013).

Responding to Spence's (2007:6-7) criticism of this 2001 definition as being 'determinedly structured' and as relying on concepts that are themselves all 'contestable', Devlin (2010: 94) argues that the definition 'neither prescribes nor proscribes too much'. In fact, he suggests, 'the contestability of certain concepts allows some useful "room for manoeuvre" in practice'. The legislative definition is broadly in keeping with the 'core features of youth work as it has evolved historically' in Ireland (ibid.), recognising youth work as an educational endeavour and young people's voluntary participation as literally a defining feature.

As previously highlighted in Chapter 2, the characteristics or features of youth work that are emphasised in practice have often been influenced by policy developments in Ireland. The ‘Costello Report’ (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984) was instrumental in positioning youth work as educational by encouraging youth workers to enable young people to become ‘critical participants in society’ (Treacy, 2009: 183).

### *3.2.2.2 Youth work as an educational endeavour*

In 1993, Louise Hurley and David Treacy published a sociological framework for youth work which was based on work in the sociology of education by Burrell and Morgan (1979), their starting point being that youth work is an educational practice and like all education practices is not value free. They set out to ‘examine how learning takes place in youth work and to explore the implications of sociological theory for youth work practice’ (ibid.: iii).

Based on the two broad sociological approaches of functionalism and conflict theory, they proposed four models of youth work as follows: Personal and Social Development and Character Building aligned with the functionalist perspective, and Critical Social Education and Radical Social Change aligned with conflict perspective.

This categorisation is not to be misunderstood as a linear process of engagement with young people i.e. that youth workers are encouraging young people to progress from personal and social development, through character building towards radical social change. Rather, it offers a sociological framework to articulate an understanding of the issues impacting young people, structures for young people’s participation, the role of the youth worker, the nature of the youth work programmes and process, any intended outcomes for young people and wider society. Characterising youth work and the processes undertaken by youth workers within such a framework contextualises practice and highlights the differing intentions for youth work outcomes, offering a way to understand some of the tensions between practice approaches.

If there is a question mark in identifying youth work as an educational process, or moreover of youth workers identifying themselves as educators, it could be rooted in a discomfort related to the idea of a lack of expertise in specific subject areas associated with the formal education curriculum. The lives and consequent needs of young people can be complex and diverse, and youth workers might not welcome the notion of having to ‘educate’ young people on everything that is relevant to them and their lives e.g. young people may identify

needs across a wide spectrum of issues such as relationships, school, careers, emotional support and much more.

Education and the occupation of youth work are inextricably linked (Department of Education and Science, 2003; ETB Act, 2013; NSETS, 2006; NYCI, 2023). Youth workers are educators. If youth workers can become experts in one thing; it could be in the informal education process. The issue or topic under discussion might change, but the process remains the same (Doyle, 2001) and is ‘on par with any educational process’ (NYCI, 2023: 11).

Non-formal education resides in between formal and informal education and can be defined as youth work. As such, it requires intervention by the youth worker and is action orientated (Hammond, 2018: 34).

Despite clarity about youth work’s educational purpose in Irish legislation and academic literature (Devlin, 2010), this educational focus has been challenged by recent policy developments, most significantly the implementation of UBU Your Place Your Space policy. There are two goals associated with UBU, one based on the provision of services and a second which is focussed on governance. Whilst the first aim mentions education, it is possible to surmise that this is not the priority, given the targeted, welfare focused nature of the intervention.

In fact, there is something paradoxical about the notion of youth work receiving government funding to raise young people’s consciousness (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984) about the institutional inequalities and injustices that state policy can often facilitate. There would be very few youth workers paying their mortgage if the Department of Education and Youth or the Department of Justice decided to no longer fund the work.

In his doctoral thesis titled “*An investigation into the purpose, processes and theory underpinning youth work practice*”, Mark Hammond identified a ‘consensus about [youth work’s] educative role with young people’ (2018: 239). This included ‘learning opportunities which youth work affords to young people’ (ibid.: 239). Evolving from his analysis were four key processes: relationship building, conversation and dialogue, participation and democracy and learning through experience, ‘placing conversation as the central cog driving all the youth work processes’ (Hammond and Harvey, 2021: 3).

The educational nature and focus of youth work is not just one of its features. According to the Irish legislation, it is the primary feature, the aspect that is mentioned right at the outset of the definition: it is a ‘planned programme of education.’ The inclusion of the word ‘planned’

emphasises the need for youth workers to demonstrate an intent behind all interactions with young people, whether individually or in a group. Whilst the nature of such interactions can be varied i.e. a cup of tea or a game of pool, it is imperative for youth workers in Ireland to approach such interactions with an overall sense of educational purpose.

It is possible that overly focusing on, or emphasising the planned dimension of youth work lends credence to a common critique of professionalisation in youth work. According to this view, ‘professionalised’ or ‘bureaucratic’ youth work takes an appointment-style approach to the relationship between youth worker and young person and can be contrasted very unfavourably with less prescriptive ‘voluntary, relational, associational’ approaches to the work (Cooper, 2013: 119). But that is to insist on an unnecessarily narrow interpretation of what ‘planning’ involves. A more useful way to think about it might be to utilise the metaphor of ‘youth work as jazz’ proposed by Davies (2010: 6) according to which good youth work, like great jazz, is ‘well prepared and highly disciplined, yet improvised’:

[W]hile responding sensitively to the signals and prompts of others, it continues to express the workers’ own intentions, insights, ideas, feelings – and flair (Davies, 2010: 6).

Devlin and Gunning (2009: 9) make a similar point noting that, no matter how spontaneous or informal an engagement is, ‘it needs to be planned, facilitated and managed so that young people can gain the maximum advantage from their involvement in youth work.’

This builds on the description of the ‘educative process’ as outlined in the NYWDP, which emphasises that the priority of youth work is the education (not only learning) by focussing on process or the ‘ongoing educational cycle of experience, observation, reflection and action’ and the ‘active and critical participation of young people’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13).

### *3.2.2.3 Voluntary participation*

This is at once both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity in youth work (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14).

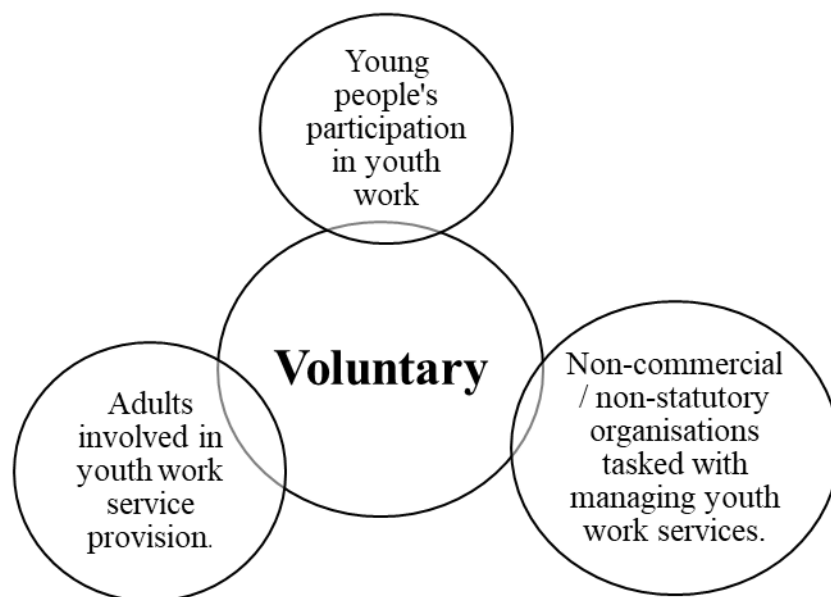
As explicitly stated in the original 2001 Youth Work Act and again in the ETB Act (2013), young people choose to engage in youth work, a point reiterated by Devlin (2017) and Coyne and Donohoe (2013) who identify voluntary participation as the first of three ‘essential features’ along with a youth-centred approach and partnerships (ibid.:103).

Often, it is this characteristic over all else that is used to spearhead definitions of youth work in Ireland and internationally. The ways in which young people choose to participate in youth work is arguably more nuanced than is appreciated within a funding landscape of ‘targeted’ young people, ‘target groups’ and ‘referrals’ (DCYA, 2019; DoJ, 2022).

When a young person is referred to attend a DoJ-funded youth service via a process with the Garda Juvenile Liaison Officer, the extent to which they may or may not exercise choice in participating merits further research. Equally, should they choose to discontinue their participation, what are the implied consequences of such a decision? This will vary depending on the organisation, the youth worker and the young person of course, but it can be a downside of the principle of voluntary participation, nonetheless. Despite the centrality of the voluntary principle, there is little empirical research on its complexity in practice.

Nonetheless, it is this exercise of choice that impacts on many other important characteristics of youth work, both as an occupation and as it is experienced by young people. Whether it relates to the youth work relationship, or the operation of programmes and activities, the extent to which young people’s choice to attend and participate is acknowledged and reinforced arguably sets youth work aside from all other professional services available to young people such as social work and formal education.

**Figure 3.1 The dimensions of the ‘voluntary principle’ in Irish youth work (adapted from Department of Education, 2003)**



Young people's choice to participate is not the only meaning of the term 'voluntary' when it comes to youth work in Ireland as is outlined in the NYWDP. Two other critical components relate to the significant number of adults who have traditionally volunteered in a youth work setting in Ireland (see 2.2) and also the context within which youth work services operate (voluntary sector).

The importance of the administrative oversight of youth work services resting with voluntary organisations '(i.e. non-commercial and non-statutory)' (ibid.: 14) is also recognised in the Irish definition of youth work. Figure 3.1 captures the various overlapping meanings and applications of the 'voluntary principle' in Irish youth work.

#### *3.2.2.4 Relationships*

Cited as a basis, not a purpose, the importance of building relationships as a process in youth work practice is highlighted by Hammond (2018) when he suggests that a youth work relationship facilitates 'the building of skills and trust while at the same time supporting young people to learn' (Hammond, 2018).

A foundational pre-requisite for learning and development in a youth work space, the existence of a relationship between a youth worker and a young person is essential. The importance of relationships are located within the values of the UBU operating rules as follows: 'emphasises relationship building, listening, trust, acceptance, patience, and respect' (DCYA, 2019: 14). The mutuality of such a relationship is supported within Opportunities for Youth (Department of Education and Youth, 2024: 9), suggesting that youth workers support young people to reach their full potential by 'building mutually trustful and respectful relationships with and between young people'.

Youth workers in Ireland can participate in 'multiple different types and levels of relationships' (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 43). Whilst balancing the need for developing a relationship with young people themselves, youth workers are also cognisant of the need to facilitate positive relationships amongst young people, and group work activities are often focussed loosely on building a cohesive environment.

As highlighted further in 3.2.3.4 and 3.3.3.4, where youth work happens can often have a significant influence on the nature of the youth work relationship, process and outcomes.

### *3.2.2.5 Where youth work happens*

According to the 2001 definition, youth work should be ‘complementary’ to a young person’s formal education experience. And whilst not all young people engaged in youth work will attend full time education, it is reasonable to infer that the majority of youth work services will occur outside of school hours.

The UBU operating rules go as far as to make explicitly clear the instances when youth workers can work in schools, stipulating that whilst youth workers can use the buildings during breaks or after school to work with young people, no young people can be taken out of class to work with young people (DCYA, 2019: 80).

This rule does not apply universally on the island of Ireland, as youth workers in Northern Ireland can often be employed as youth workers in schools. Whilst not without its challenges as described by Bradford and Byrne (2009), it is important to note this difference between jurisdictions.

Centre-based youth work practice remains by far the most common form of provision within the sector in Ireland, and a search of the websites of organisations including Foróige and Youth Work Ireland (both of which have affiliate services throughout most of the country) shows there to be an impressive number of youth work centres now in existence.

There remains a substantial proportion of communities that are not served by youth work organisations however. The UBU operating rules also place an onus on the youth work service to consider making provision for outreach services ‘where the costs involved of travel for young people or staff to youth service locations are very high/difficult’ (DCYA, 2019: 80). The extent to which this occurs however remains unresearched and unknown.

## **3.2.3 Nature and characteristics of youth work: international perspectives**

Having reviewed the literature associated with the key features of Irish youth work, the next section explores international perspectives on the key features of youth work including a consideration of purpose, voluntary participation and its educational focus.

### *3.2.3.1 Purpose / definition*

The National Youth Agency (NYA) in England describes the purpose of youth work as enabling ‘young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential’ (2023: 7).

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition's (2013: 3) starting point is that youth work is a 'practice that places young people and their interests first', that it is a 'relational' and empowering practice where youth workers work with young people in their 'social context' to facilitate their independence, connectedness and the realisation of their rights. It further recognises the limitations of trying to define a complex, dynamic practice and that no youth work definition is stagnant and needs to evolve.

This complexity is acknowledged in the Dutch context by Hans van Ewijk (2009), referring to it as an 'undefined field of activities' noting the lack of any statutory or legal basis for youth work in his context. He continues by identifying 'recreation, informal education and support' as the core focus of youth work (van Ewijk, 2009: 72).

In the European context, Taru, Krzaklewska and Basarab, (2020: 200) recognise that 'youth work is a field of practice characterized by a high degree of variation across countries as well as within countries'. The European Commission (2007) attributes the range of youth work definitions to the 'traditional absence of youth policy in some countries, and on the other hand, the tradition of self-determination and process-related development of the youth work sector in other countries' (European Commission, 2007 cited in NYCI, 2012: 34).

The Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers (COE, 2017: 3) builds on the theme of variation by acknowledging that youth work at a continental level is often 'celebrated for its diversity, flexibility and responsiveness' in not only addressing the needs of young people but equally responding to social and political challenges.

The Recommendation continues by providing a definition and scope of youth work, highlighting a 'common understanding that the primary function of youth work is to motivate and support young people to find and pursue constructive pathways in life, thus contributing to their personal and social development and to society at large' (ibid.).

In 2018, Trudi Cooper published a detailed examination of the breadth of youth work definitions internationally. Cooper situates youth work as a 'pluralistic practice', where diverse models of youth work have developed across countries contexts, with different theoretical underpinnings and language to express commitments and describe practice. Whilst this diversity suggests that one international definition might not be possible, Cooper (2018: 15) proposes that a conceptual one, rich with 'essential features of practice' that highlight shared characteristics of contemporary youth work values and practices across contexts, could be useful as an alternative. The features are:

1. A focus on young people's lives and their concerns;
2. Attending to the social connection and the context of young people's lives;
3. Positive regard and processes for working through supportive and friendly relationships;
4. A holistic approach to young people that includes commitment to:
  - i. informal education;
  - ii. an ethic of care and concern for the flourishing of young people;
  - iii. facilitation of youth participation, rights and social justice;
5. Acting with integrity.

These features include many already discussed above, including that to which we turn next, youth work as an educational practice.

### *3.2.3.2 Youth work as an educational endeavour*

As previously discussed, youth work is a distinct educational practice, one that has no curriculum, no exams, no uniforms, and no teachers. Youth workers 'educate and support young people, and amplify their voice' and without these intentions, it cannot be youth work (Nicholls, 2012:11).

Informal education tends to be defined by its relationship to formal education (Jeffs and Smith, 1990:1).

Youth workers can find themselves communicating or convincing others of the value of youth work. Often, the 'general public, politicians and novice youth workers do not find it easy to understand how youth work relates to other forms of work with youth in the education, welfare and recreation sectors' (Cooper, 2018: 3). To see a value in informal education, one must consider whether learning is limited only to a classroom or lecture hall. If not, then it is amongst the remaining settings in life that informal education occurs.

Batsleer (2008), Young (2006) and Corney et. al (2023) all support the idea that youth work must have an educational focus, while Jeffs and Smith (2010) contend that you cannot have youth work without a focus on a young person's education and welfare.

For Batsleer, the focus is on informal education via conversation and relationships, going some way to explaining the 'dynamics of their relationships with young people' (Spence, 2008: 7.)

In his consideration of the nature of informal education, Mahoney (2001) identifies a series of five indicators or thematic areas that youth workers could consider when thinking about the intentionality behind any educational endeavour. They are educating by using the environment, relationships, being 'ok' and beyond, learning from each other and being aware of opportunities.

Whilst this should not be seen as just a checklist before an engagement, it contextualises an approach by youth workers to be aware of their physical and social surroundings whilst working with young people, developing and sustaining professional relationships, acknowledging the value in being 'ok' with young people, reflecting on approaches and techniques adopted by colleagues and utilising every opportunity to engage in an educational process.

Young (2006) asserts that youth workers must possess the skills and values to develop trusting relationships with young people. If we are to accept that youth work with a focus on education requires a structured but not rigid process on behalf of youth workers, it can be that youth workers are encouraged to be facilitators as opposed to educators:

Young people are experts of their own world. Our responsibility is not to know it, but to try to understand a little of it – just as much as they want to offer (Young, 2006: 91).

Experiential learning, and the ability for youth workers to stray from the constraints of a formal curriculum is a key component of contemporary youth work practice, although this should not provide an opportunity for no planned activity whatsoever. If youth work is to occur over a game of snooker for example, then the youth worker will not simply play the game in isolation. Instead, a youth worker will use the game as a component to employ what Kolb (2015) would suggest as the doing in their theory of experiential learning; having planned conversations with young people, discussing an issue of importance with young people, provided opportunities for young people to learn about teamwork, coping with loss and so on (Ord, 2007).

There are several key characteristics which define non-formal learning, including that it takes place outside of a formal learning system in a diverse range of environments and situations. Non-formal learning is also based on volunteerism, it is purposive and involves all people over their lifespan (Rannalla and Polda, 2019: 8).

### *3.2.3.3 Voluntary participation*

The voluntary principle delineates youth work from almost all other services provided for this age group (Jeffs, 2001: 156).

As in Ireland, the voluntary nature of young people's participation in youth work services is acknowledged internationally. It has a distinct impact on their experience of feeling safe, supported and encouraged from the first time they enter a youth work space, potentially leading to an increase of confidence, wellbeing, resilience and a reduction in risky behaviour (Cooper, 2018).

The importance of maintaining the principle of voluntary participation in youth work is two-fold: the balance of power is held with young people through a series of negotiations with youth workers during the development of any relationship and also impacts significantly in terms of the 'content of what is on offer' (Davies, 2015: 102). Davies had previously described voluntary participation as 'perhaps the defining feature of youth work' (ibid.: 12).

In his 2005 publication, Davies put forth four points that follow from voluntary participation:

1. Young people retain power
2. Youth workers have 'no choice' but to negotiate
3. It keeps the content relevant to young people
4. Relationship between adult and young person has greater parity.

In the UK, this principle of voluntary participation has been tested, with policy facilitating the mandatory attendance of young people in youth work services (Davies, 2010). The expected impact on the nature of young people's active participation, but also the challenges in developing trusting relationships have been documented (Davies, 2015).

On the other hand, Coburn and Gormally (2019) have argued that the presence of youth workers in schools (a space young people do not choose to attend voluntarily) have been shown to be perceived by young people as a positive support and intervention, suggesting that youth workers can successfully apply the principles of informal and non-formal education, at least in some ways and to some extent, in formal educational contexts.

### *3.2.3.4 Relationships*

'A profession is defined not by a set of practices, but by a relationship' (Sercombe, 2010: 11). The most defining characteristic of any youth work process is the relationship between a young person / group of young people and the youth worker they engage with. Without the

development of a relationship built on acceptance, honest, trust, respect and reciprocity, it is impossible to see how other youth work principles can be applied (Young, 2006).

A relationship can be understood as a connection between ‘two people in which some exchange takes place’ (Goetschius and Tash, 1967: 137 in Jeffs and Smith, 2010). In a youth work relationship, this exchange is not a financial transaction, but an emotional one, where young people are intended to be heard, valued and respected. The ‘conversational moment’ is imperative, the opportunity that is presented by young people to youth workers to open and build a conversation (Tilsen, 2018). This relationship is often unique in young people’s lives, and in sharp contrast with how young people often interact with adults (Sapin, 2013).

The informal nature of youth work practice can make it challenging to set, apply and reinforce the boundaries of a professional relationship, and Sercombe offers the examples of situations where young people may misinterpret a relationship to be that of a friendship, or a second parent (2010). Youth workers should carefully correct such a misinterpretation because it is ‘not accurate and is misleading’ (Sercombe, 2010: 115).

Very few spaces exist in society where young people have autonomy to participate on their own terms. In countries like the UK and Ireland, young people choosing to become a participant in a youth work service and relationship, both physically and emotionally is a demonstration of young people’s agency (Batsleer, 2010).

Youth workers are known for their ability to hold a space or facilitate a group, or sometimes by engaging in what on the surface might look like a game of pool or cup of tea (Tierney, Devlin and Reynolds, 2019). However, the ability to ‘listen to things beyond words’ goes some way towards explaining the formulaic or strategic approach youth workers take towards dialogue with young people (Tilsen, 2018: 71).

It is a privileged position youth workers have in developing authentic relationships with young people, as opposed to that of teachers, social workers or other social professions. Without an ‘agenda’, youth workers are provided with an opportunity to be guided by young people, as opposed to teachers/social workers developing a relationship with young people for a specific purpose, and prescribed outcome (Ord, 2007). However, I would argue that professional youth workers do have an agenda in the sense that they have a conscious purpose for engaging in the relationship, and it is incumbent on youth workers to be upfront about that from the beginning. Funding programmes like UBU and the GYDP most certainly have an agenda, as does the state which funds them.

### 3.2.3.5 *Where youth work happens*

Traditionally, youth work was conducted in a local community or sports hall or less often, a dedicated youth space. However, in more recent years, youth workers have found themselves physically as well as pedagogically meeting young people ‘where they are at’. When considering youth work in various settings, Sapin (2013) encourages youth workers to be mindful of the values and purpose of the work:

Whilst the values, principles, and processes of the work with young people should remain consistent, the levels of access to resources and responsibilities for them can vary considerably (Sapin, 2013: 26).

Detached / outreach / street-based youth work has become increasingly popular in Ireland, some 50 or 60 years after some such an evolution in the UK (Whelan, 2010). Being the ‘visitor’ (Sapin, 2013: 29), the power is certainly tipped in favour of young people which supports how Davies (2010) has defined youth work previously. Rather than waiting on young people to attend the local youth service, centre-based youth work is no longer the only medium for the practice to occur. The impact of COVID-19 should not be understated in this section; the closure of youth spaces offered an opportunity for youth workers in Ireland to consider embracing detached youth work.

Whelan (2010) presents a model of detached youth work practice that reinforces the intentionality of any interaction and ensures the practice does not become a walkabout. In proposing the model, he warns that it is relatively ‘purist’ and might not be possible to always replicate in practice:

- Assess: Develop a community profile which includes a risk assessment of areas.
- Plan: Like all youth work interventions, planning engagement is crucial but requires added flexibility.
- Act: This is where professional autonomy and competence comes alive, with youth workers required to make quick and consistent judgements based on the relationships they have as to the extent of any planned engagement can occur.
- Evaluate: Take time to consider the work practices involved in any detached youth work session in an open and transparent manner.

When considering the many definitions of youth work as outlined in this section – it is not difficult to see how principles such as building and sustaining relationships and ensuring

voluntary participation can be maintained, and arguably strengthened in a detached youth work setting (Tiffany, 2007 cited in Whelan, 2010).

### **3.3 Previous Research on Professional Youth Work in Ireland**

#### **3.3.1 Irish Youth Work Practice: An Occupational Profile (2000)**

While youth workers' experiences and stories are under-researched and under-represented, there have been some attempts to better understand the landscape of professional youth work in Ireland. In 2000, Youthcert published what it describes as an occupational map, attempting to describe and possibly define the youth work sector, asking questions about what youth workers do, their functions, roles, challenges, needs, training and more.

The study was focussed primarily on asking youth workers eight questions relating to the practice of youth work, the roles they undertake, the challenges they face and the needs they are seeking to meet. The survey also questioned participants about their employment capacity, the training they engage with and the settings in which they work.

The research culminated in 10 key findings:

1. Youth work has become an increasingly complex and diverse practice.
2. Broad agreement on range of job titles and occupational roles.
3. Volunteers still make up bulk of workforce – changing profile of volunteers and attendant training needs.
4. Volunteers and CE workers mainstay in frontline positions.
5. Changing profile of CE workers: implications for sector in general and training in particular.
6. Most groups and organisations seek to respond to a range of young people's needs and issues.
7. Core skills required in youth work identified.
8. Demand for accreditation.
9. Demand for basic agreement on entry qualifications and progression options.
10. Growing awareness of the implications of lack of research and theory development.

Questionnaires were sent to 126 youth work organisations with 53% responding. A limitation to this study was the way the surveys were distributed: they were sent directly to 126 youth work organisations. This would suggest that responses were submitted by organisations as opposed to individual youth workers within and across organisations and projects.

Notwithstanding the merits of the 'larger organisations' being represented in the study, the

responses were those on behalf of organisations as opposed to individual youth workers, and the findings should be considered as such.

Section two of the published study further analyses the data from the survey, which the authors conclude is a ‘major first step in developing a comprehensive profile of the current state of youth work in Ireland’ (Youthcert, 2000: 24). The data captured an occupation that was becoming more ‘complex and diverse’ not only in the young people youth workers were engaging with, but also identifying a broad spectrum of ‘challenging’ issues facing young people and the need for youth workers to receive ‘basic training in relation to the diversity of the developmental needs of young people’ (Youthcert, 2000; 7). At a time when youth work was developing an identity of its own (Jenkinson, 2000) this research indicates a profession attempting to establish an identity within the social professions.

### **3.3.2 Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work (2009)**

In 2009, authors Maurice Devlin and Anna Gunning published the results of a research project commissioned by ‘an interagency group comprising several of Ireland’s largest and longest established youth work organisations’ (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 8). Like the current study, the researchers used a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods (questionnaires; semi-structured interviews, focus groups). They gathered data at five site locations across Ireland.

While research conducted with professional youth workers in Ireland (Noonan, 2020) and other countries like Australia (Cooper and Sutcliffe, 2024) is limited, hearing young people’s voices in the importance and impact of participating in a youth work relationship is also rare. Devlin and Gunning’s study engaged young people as research participants.

The research had six objectives:

1. To develop a definition of youth work
2. To consider how youth work and youth services relate to other youth-related disciplines
3. To identify the outcomes of youth work and recognise its boundaries
4. To identify the knowledge, skills and experiences gained by young people
5. To identify what is particular about youth work’s method and approach and the relationship between this and its outcomes

6. To assess the social benefits of young people's and adults' engagement in the youth work process.

Youth workers who participated in this study noted the importance of relationships, not just with young people but with families, community members and other stakeholders.

Furthermore, 'it is an explicit part of youth work's concern as described by these workers to facilitate the active engagement and participation of young people, to promote their empowerment and the development of a sense of working together as partners' (ibid.: 43).

Participants highlighted the professional nature of their job, with one participant reflected on being professional in the way they 'approach young people' and that this 'is our career, our profession that we have taken on' (ibid.: 25). The word positive came up throughout the study, with youth workers naming positive feelings, experiences, behaviour, skills and influences as important elements of youth work.

Young people offered a different perspective on participating in youth work, the most common response focusing on the social element of participation, while the 'voluntary nature of their participation was regarded as very important' (ibid.: 48). The correlation between youth work practice and education was clear in this research, with young people naming the importance of how they learn in a youth work context, and how that differs from their experience in formal education.

Young people highlighted the professional nature of youth work as they had experienced it, with one participant (Ben) specifically referring to the youth work space as being 'totally professional, yet more casual here' (ibid.: 32).

In terms of purpose, the authors noted 'virtual unanimity' from respondents in determining youth work to be primarily 'educational and developmental' (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 15). Whilst it may be been communicated in a variety of terminology, there was a key focus on youth work being concerned with young people's personal and social development.

The study also captured a tension between the universal and targeted nature of professional youth work in Ireland at the time, with one respondent describing youth work becoming a 'response to the disadvantaged' (ibid.: 17). In a climate of social policy austerity where funding for youth work services and many other aligned professions was at risk of severance, it was one of the first signposts of the state utilising youth work to target young people for specific purposes for example youth unemployment programmes.

Other findings in terms of core purpose included youth work being a needs-based practice and one in which ‘most youth work’ takes place in groups, as well as the centrality of relationships in the youth work process and – very importantly – the need for time to develop these.

### **3.3.3 Mapping the Work Force in the Youth Work Sector in the Republic of Ireland (2013)**

The third study considered in this review was conducted by Louise Monaghan on behalf of the NYCI and YouthNet in 2013. A total of 19 youth work organisations participated in the survey, representing some 940 paid staff, 23,740 volunteers and 304 CE workers. The purpose of this study was slightly different from the previous research mentioned, in so far as the intention here was to ‘map the workforce in the statutory and voluntary youth sectors in receipt of funding from the key funding Departments with a view to developing a draft workforce development plan for the sectors North and South’ (Monaghan, 2013: 8).

Accessing data proved to be a ‘quite challenging’ for the researcher, who posited reasons for this including a lack of centralised record keeping systems and the ongoing budget cuts impacting on service delivery (ibid.: 6). The findings focused primarily on the types of employment youth workers were in (67.5% full-time positions), training, resources and the importance of changing policy landscape within which youth work was occurring. This study was also sent directly to youth work organisations.

The author confirms approximately two-thirds of ‘paid staff in the sector are educated to at least third level degree standard’ (Monaghan, 2013: 80). In similar fashion to the Youthcert research, the publication resulted in a list of recommendations arising from the research conclusions. These focused primarily on the need for a coordinated approach to training and CPD in the workforce, but added the challenge of communication amongst youth workers, services and other stakeholders such as education bodies.

Two recommendations explicitly relate to professional youth workers. Recommendation 6 calls for clarity on ‘what is meant by the term professional youth worker’ and who it is that can describe themselves as such. In the context of interagency work and partnership, the authors continue by highlighting a need for a ‘safe’ space to explore ‘the status of youth work as a degree profession within the Republic of Ireland (ibid.: 85).

Recommendation 8 highlights a need for workforce development and CPD within the youth work sector in Ireland, noting that many other professions have progressed in these areas. Professional supervision is named specifically in this regard given the nature of youth work practice as reported in the study.

### **3.3.4 Worth their Weight in Gold (2003, 2014)**

The University of Ulster has published periodic studies about the careers and employment of professional youth workers in Northern Ireland. The 2003 study collected data from 264 respondents through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. All participants were graduates of professional community work and youth work programmes in the UK and Ireland.

The study presents key quantitative findings which illustrates information about the occupational landscape that graduates were working in e.g. two thirds of those within the community work profession were on permanent contracts, 32% on fixed term contracts and 3% on temporary contracts. The findings, although limited to the participant profile being graduates of professional programmes only, did present a profile of the occupation on issues such as pay, working hours, satisfaction, career aspirations and gender.

The qualitative element of this study included an open-ended question in the questionnaire: *'What are your views on the current state of Community Youth Work in Northern Ireland and what do you think the future holds for the profession?'* (Harland et al., 2005: 8).

While surveys are limited in their capacity to add depth and nuance, this open-ended question did elicit some priorities for respondents. Firstly, 'the most frequently mentioned concern' was the status of youth work in comparison to other aligned colleagues, with terms like 'poor cousin' and 'Cinderella service' often used (ibid.: 8).

The latest research published (McCready and Morgan, 2014) built on the earlier report. Some 274 professionally qualified youth workers participated in the 2014 study, with the researchers naming a similar frustration to Louise Monaghan (2013) in terms of accessing youth workers as research participants, despite them having 'something to say on a range of issues relating to the field of youth work' (McCready and Morgan, 2014: 91). Like their counterparts above, the study wrapped up with recommendations that focused on the need for dedicated human resources for the sector, promotion of training and CPD, along with multi-annual and cross-departmental funding allocations.

When considering these studies cumulatively, it is evident that the occupation of youth work, especially but not only in the Republic of Ireland remains significantly under-researched. A large part of the problem is that the Department of Education and Youth does not collate workforce data about youth work, and so there remains a significant gap in knowledge and data when it comes to youth work in Ireland.

## 3.4 Professions and Related Concepts

### 3.4.1 Professions

Profession, in the simplest form, may be regarded as a calling, an ‘occupation where taking advantage of the customer is against the rules’ (Burke and Christensen, 1994: 29). For Evetts (2003a: 397) professions ‘are essentially the knowledge-based category of occupations which usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience’.

While the history of professions is rooted in the occupations of law, medicine and religions, which are known as the ‘learned professions’ (Hudson 1978), the study of professions has expanded and ‘evolved over the years’ (Evans, 2008: 35) to include many other occupations such as psychology and education. More recently, social work, social care, community work and youth work have become known, collectively, as the ‘social professions’ (Banks 2004).

Various approaches have been taken to identifying the key dimensions and characteristics of the term profession, often highlighting service, specialised education and training, ethics, processes for accessing the workforce and control of the work. Burke and Christensen, (1994: 29), outline five requirements of a profession which primarily focus on the subject matter being specific enough and specialist enough to go beyond general understanding and require a period of academic study to master the topic. The three remaining requirements relate to the ability to enter the workforce, the provision of a code of ethics and a ‘professional society to monitor the actions of its members and to enforce the code of ethics’ (ibid.: 29).

Millerson (1964) identified the following as important defining features of professions:

- Skill based on theoretical knowledge.
- The provision of formal training.
- Tests of the competence of members.
- Organisation (of the “professionals”).
- Adherence to a professional code of conduct.
- Altruistic service.

The distinctiveness of professionals’ work has been characterised in terms of three main sets of attributes:

- A) non-routine tasks requiring expertise based on both abstract knowledge and practical apprenticeship.

- B) occupational monopoly over this practice jurisdiction and individual autonomy within it; and
- C) legal and ethical responsibility for this practice that is typically reflected in values of service (Adler, Kwon and Hecksher, 2008: 365).

Adler, Kwon and Hecksher offer insight into the organisation of professions that may be useful for youth work. They identify the emergence of collaborative community as an organising principle of professions with a focus on coordination of activity through a shared commitment to a set of ultimate goals. Collaborative community privileges characteristics of trust and conscious collaboration via values such as ‘contribution, concern, honesty, collegiality and value-rationality’ (ibid.: 366).

Recognising that rigid classifications of professions, and especially ones based on the long-established and ‘high status’ professions such as medicine and law, may seem a long way from the experience of many occupations, some scholars have introduced related concepts. One of these is the concept of ‘semi-profession’, which gained considerable currency after being used in a collection edited by Amitai Etzioni (1969). Concerned with (and featuring in its sub-title) ‘teachers, nurses and social workers’, the collection presents the concept of semi-profession as applying to occupations with considerably less autonomy than professionals and as also having the following characteristics:

- A) semi-professions are an integral part of the bureaucratic organisational structure;
- B) a semi-professional is communicating knowledge rather than applying it;
- C) the training required for the semi-professional is short and specific;
- D) the degree of commitment of the semi-professional is limited;
- E) more typically, the semi-professional is female (Horowitz, 1985: 297).

It is an important insight in the body of literature on professions that I have reviewed, sometimes implicitly and sometimes stated explicitly, that professions are constantly undergoing processes of change. The same has to be true of ‘semi-professions’. For the moment it is enough to note that the occupations of ‘teachers, nurses and social workers’ have undergone very significant change since Etzioni’s collection was published and in many ways if not most countries, including Ireland, are regarded as relatively well established professions. Nonetheless the concept of semi-profession continues to have some usefulness and relevance and will be revisited in the discussion and interpretation of my findings (Chapter 6).

### 3.4.2 Professionalisation

In line with the point just made about professions and semi-professions experiencing constant change, an important area of study and one relevant to this research is the process whereby occupations make the transition from not being recognised as professions to being so recognised. This can be referred to as the process of professionalisation. Professionalisation ‘refers to a process of change over time, to the way in which significant aspects of an occupation develop and evolve, and it usually implies a concern with status, recognition and relationships with (and comparisons with) other occupations’ (Devlin, 2012: 177).

Professionalisation ‘remains a critical, yet contested issue within the field’ (Ranahan, 2017: 137) although it is far from a new question or issue for youth work (Bessant, 2014). In the youth work sector in Ireland, there has been a systemic resistance towards professionalisation, which is possibly rooted in the historical relationship between volunteer and paid youth worker (Devlin, 2010). Banks (2004) describes an ‘ambivalence towards professionalisation’ within the social professions in general.

Because they have worked with and on behalf of some of society’s most disadvantaged members, the social professions have had an uneasy relationship with the notion of professionalisation and many practitioners have certainly wanted to avoid the elitist trappings of the “established” professions (Banks, 2004: 36).

As previously noted, the disparate pathways towards youth work can fuel a lack of collective support for, or even resistance towards, professionalisation. Such discomfort can come from the perception that professionalisation will single out a cohort of workers as underqualified and identify youth volunteers as completely unqualified. An alternative view, advocated by Cooper in an article already cited (2013), is that the purported dichotomy between ‘professionalised youth work’ on the one hand and ‘voluntary, relational and associated youth work’ on the other, does not in fact reflect the reality and that if anything professionalised youth work has the potential ‘to provide resistance to post-welfare policy, and to sustain an alternative to bureaucratic youth work’ (2013:120) and thereby to promote and defend the interests of young people. The relevance of this approach for this study will be revisited in Chapter 6.

Other writers, including Emslie (2012) in Australia and Raselekoane (2019) in South Africa have similarly called for the professionalisation of youth work in their respective nations, seeing it very much as supportive and progressive.

In a seminal contribution to the academic literature on professionalisation, based on an empirical investigation of the development of a range of occupations over time in the United States, Wilensky (1964) detailed a series of typical ‘steps’ or ‘stages’ in the professionalisation process:

- The occupation becomes a fulltime endeavour
- Training schools are established within or with links to universities
- Those looking for training to be set up
- Create a professional association
- Legal protection is required
- A code of ethics is required

If these steps are considered in the context of Irish youth work, it is possible to assert that the occupation has been undergoing a process of professionalisation, but one that is incomplete. Youth work is quite commonly a full-time endeavour, education and training programmes have been in existence for four decades and a professional endorsement framework through NSETS has been established more than twenty years. Youth workers frequently engage in training, the extent of which is a question raised in this study alongside the extent to which youth workers believe an association, legal protection and a code of ethics should be prioritised. Wilensky emphasises the complexities associated with these processes, and suggests that issues regarding internal conflict, determining competency, exclusive jurisdiction and ‘organisational threats to autonomy and the service ideal’ can prevail (ibid.: 148).

Despite being historically apathetic towards organising, certainly in Ireland, the youth work sector remains particularly vulnerable to the power held by funders, decision makers and government ideology. When Devlin and Gunning (2009) researched the purpose and outcomes of youth work, and the NYCI published an *‘Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work’* (2012), both in advance of the VFMPR in 2014, there was a sense throughout the sector of needing to prove youth work’s worth to society. If youth work is a social profession as determined by Banks, one would have to question if colleagues in social work must go to similar extents to highlight their collective value. It could be argued that a resistance towards professionalisation is an exercise in cutting off the sector’s nose to spite its face. Whilst many will agree with George Bernard Shaw that ‘every profession is a conspiracy against the laity’ (Sercombe, 2004: 2), I would contend the youth work sector is already experiencing many of

the negative or concerning elements of professionalisation, without benefiting in any way from the positives.

While some would argue that the further professionalisation of youth work could restrict entry to the sector, make professionals less accountable by mystifying processes, disempower young people with jargon and technical language and move to protecting each other by closing ranks when complaints are made (Sercombe, 2004) the alternative view, which I would share and which relevant Irish research would support (e.g. Devlin and Gunning 2009) is that young people themselves see youth workers as being the professionals in their lives most likely to respect them, to have time for them and to defend their interests.

Whatever one's view, youth work in Ireland has already experienced significant professionalisation at least in some respects, leading to a greater sense of identity within the sector (Jenkinson, 2013). As Davies contended, it is no longer satisfactory to simply suggest good intentions are enough, or that youth workers do not need to articulate the extent to which the outcomes of planned work are being achieved (Davies in Ord, 2012). The introduction of the UBU scheme in Ireland has directly impacted the way in which youth workers are accountable, both in terms of their goals and planning and in terms of the introduction of quarterly meetings with a Youth Officer, responsible ultimately for the funding provided.

As previously discussed, during the post-2008 austerity era, the youth work sector in Ireland experienced severe funding cuts which led to significant alterations in the operation of youth work in practice, and more importantly significant job losses. The absence of a youth work association or membership body to act on behalf of the sector was felt. The state has availed of this absence on many occasions, introducing significant reform without any substantial consultation or modification based on feedback from the youth workers tasked with implementation. Whilst sporadic engagement individual employers with trade unions may have resulted in localised improvements for some workers, comprehensive workforce planning and development from the responsible government department has remained absent (I acknowledge that there are recent but incomplete steps in that direction, described above). The people most at a disadvantage in these circumstances, I would argue, are the young people with whom youth workers engage and whose interests they are committed to serve.

### 3.4.3 Discourses of professionalism

Evetts's examination of discourses of professionalism provide a widely used and very relevant conceptual framework for this study. She notes that:

For a long time, the sociological analysis of professional work has differentiated professionalism as a special means of organising work and controlling workers and in contrast to the hierarchical and managerial controls of industrial and commercial organisations. But professional work is changing and being changed as increasingly professionals (such as doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers) now work in employing *organizations*... [and find] *occupational* control of their work and discretionary decision-making increasingly difficult to maintain and sustain (Evetts, 2013: 778 emphases added).

The distinction between the 'organisational' and 'occupational' is at the core of Evetts's conceptualisation of discourses of professionalism. Evetts (2006: 2) suggests that 'the conditions of trust, discretion and competence which historically have been deemed necessary for professional practice are continually being challenged, changed or regulated'. The effect of this is to undermine the 'ideal type of professionalism' described by Friedson (1994) in which there is:

- An officially recognised body of knowledge and skills, drawing on integrated concepts and theories, with professionals allowed discretion regarding how to apply these
- an occupationally controlled division of labour
- an occupationally controlled labour market requiring training and credentials for entry and career mobility
- an occupationally controlled training programme associated with 'higher learning', providing an opportunity for the development of new knowledge
- an ideology serving some transcendent value.

In recognising the departure from the ideal type that Friedman proposed, acknowledging that (as already stated) 'professions change over time' and attempting to 'make sense of the changes' (Fraser, 2023: 3), Evetts developed the idea of alternative discourses (certainly *contrasting* and at least potentially *competing*) of professionalism, namely the occupational and organisational. In summary, organisational professionalism is a 'discourse of control used increasingly by managers in work organisations' while occupational professionalism is 'constructed within professional occupational groups and incorporates collegial authority'

(Evetts, 2013: 787). Evetts’s analysis – certainly in the early stages of developing and applying her framework – was that in the case of many, if not most, occupational groups the dominant discourse of professionalism is now in fact being constructed and applied by the managers, supervisors and employers of workers rather than by the practitioners themselves (Evetts, 2006: 523). As outlined in Chapter 1, a discourse in this context can be described as a cluster of images, ideas and – very importantly – practices related to some area of social life, so different discourses refer to different ways of *thinking* and *acting* in a particular social context (Devlin, 2013). In the present study, the differences have to do with what being a ‘professional’ youth worker means, and who gets to say what it means.

In Evetts’s framework, organisational professionalism is concerned with standardising procedures and practices, the installation of a hierarchy of ‘authority and decision making’, with accountability, regulation and target-setting ultimately determined by bodies or parties other than the professionals themselves (Evetts, 2013: 788). In the case of occupational professionalism, the discourse is constructed within professional groups. Workers have a level of autonomy and ‘occupational control’, and trust is provided by both clients and employers (ibid.: 788). The table below, reproduced from Chapter 1, illustrates the key features of occupational and organisational discourses:

**Table 1.1. Organisational and occupational discourses of professionalism (Evetts, 2013)**

<b>Organisational</b>	<b>Occupational</b>
Change controlled by managers	Change constructed within occupational groups
Authority held within management hierarchy	Authority is collegiate
Standardising procedures and practices	Occupational control
Trust and Autonomy not assumed	Trust and Autonomy by ‘clients’ and employers

In summary, the differences between the discourses relate primarily to issues of occupational change, authority, autonomy and trust. All of these aspects can be seen to relate in one way or another to the exercise of power and the capacity to make decisions and take legitimate independent action within a professional sphere.

While there are certainly fundamental differences between the two discourses, reflecting different assumptions about the nature of professions, professionals and professionalism, they are both – like Friedman’s conceptualisation described above, ideal types. It is not Evetts’s view or argument that one or other of them prevails absolutely to the exclusion of the other in any professional practice situation. They can co-exist and interact with greater or lesser degrees of tension and with one or other dominating in specific contexts or circumstances. They might best be seen as representing a spectrum or continuum rather than a set of mutually exclusive opposites. Situations may be found (and may be common) in which there is a ‘hybrid’ mix of both the occupational and the organisational discourse at play (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). Both the distinctiveness of the discourses as ideal types and the possibility of their coexistence and interaction in practice will be kept in mind in the analysis and interpretation of this study’s findings.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter set out to provide a comprehensive review of the literature relating to the two key concepts included in the research questions guiding the current study. These are ‘youth work’ and ‘profession’.

In the case of the former I have included a consideration of the scholarly, professional and policy-based literature on youth work both in Ireland and internationally. In the case of the latter I have attempted to give an overview of the sociological literature dealing with a range of necessarily overlapping areas: the question of what professions are, and how they are similar to or different from other occupations; the process of professionalisation, what it involves and how it is perceived within youth work specifically and in the social professions more broadly; and the concept of professionalism and Evetts’s framework of alternative professional discourses.

The youth work literature (for example Batsleer and Davies, 2010; Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Tierney et al., 2019) specifically influenced those parts of the survey instrument relating to the respondents’ roles and tasks, the rewards and challenges that they experience, the programme areas in which they practice and the range of people they engage with in their work. The section on ‘areas of development for the youth work profession’, including CPD, code of ethics, regulation and registration reflect some aspects of youth work sources (e.g. Corney, 2017; Darcy, 2016; Sercombe, 2010) but also the literature on professionalisation (Wilensky, 1968; Devlin, 2012). The approach to the focus group discussions was influenced by the above youth work sources as well as those with a particular emphasis on narrative and conversation in youth work (Hammond, 2018; Tilsen, 2018). The section of the questionnaire dealing with respondents’ perceptions of youth work as a profession (degree of autonomy and discretion, perceived influence over the policy context, belief in youth work as a coherent professional practice, sense of being trusted by employers and others) drew very much on Evetts’s conception of discourses of professionalism as just mentioned, and this also fed into the focus group discussions.

These two broad sets of sources, in addition to shaping my approach to the design and implementation of the fieldwork for the study, will be revisited in the context of analysing and interpreting the findings in Chapter 6. At that point additional elements of the literature have particular usefulness and relevance in making sense of patterns in the data and how they

relate to the practice and policy context (Cooper, 2013, 2018; Devlin, 2013; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008).

In the next chapter I turn to a description of the research methodology.

# CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Introduction

Very little systematic research has been conducted into professional youth work in Ireland, compared with most other professions. This was the opening statement I made to my research supervisors when I was beginning the process of developing research questions. Ultimately it was the rationale behind me doing the DSocSc in the first place – I was curious to know more about the occupation of youth work. I was personally and professionally motivated to conduct research with youth workers in Ireland.

As a youth worker this lack of research had frustrated me throughout my career, and I believed strongly that it had acted as a restrictive factor in the progression of youth work as a profession. What initially began as a quantitative study that would conduct an occupational profile of youth workers in Ireland evolved based on my interest in delving deeper beyond descriptive statistics.

I wanted to find out about the experiences of people who are employed as youth workers in Ireland. I wanted to research their perceptions about the profession, to find out what they did and did not do as part of their job, how they became youth workers, and to highlight their perspectives about the future of youth work in Ireland as a profession.

Over time, my initial sense of the ‘research problem(s)’ evolved as I learned more about, and reflected further on, research paradigms, ontological and epistemological considerations and research methods and methodologies.

After careful consideration, it was decided that the study would attempt to answer two questions:

1. What are the perceptions of paid youth workers of the nature and characteristics of youth work as an occupation in Ireland?
2. What are the implications for the development of youth work as a profession in Ireland?

## 4.2 Social Research

Social theory ‘informs our thinking which, in turn, assists us in making research decisions and sense of the world around us’ (May, 1997: 28). Describing social research as a ‘purposive and rigorous investigation that aims to generate new knowledge’ Sarantakos (2005: 4) contends that social scientists aim to enter ‘contexts of personal and/or public interest’.

Primarily concerned with human behaviour, social research and social sciences as opposed to the natural sciences (such as physics, chemistry and biology) are ultimately defined by how we as social researchers conduct our inquiry (Henn et al., 2006).

Throughout its history, social research has served a variety of goals. In general, this has entailed the generation of knowledge, but more specifically the identification of regularities in social processes, which was expected to help us understand the presence, type, extent and causes of problems and the way one could control them (Sarantakos, 2005: 11).

Social research is about ‘exploring, describing, understanding, explaining, predicting, changing or evaluating some aspect of the social world’ (Blaikie, 1993: 4) and is often carried out to ‘inform decisions about which policies or initiatives might be most usefully implemented to solve everyday issues and problems’ (Henn et al., 2006: 8). Despite being diverse, it is ‘expected to adhere to certain standards and principles’ (Sarantakos, 2005: 73).

Bryman (2004) suggested there are a variety of factors that influence social research:

- Ontology
- Epistemology
- Values
- Theory
- Practical Considerations (Bryman, 2004: 21).

Throughout various sub-sections of this chapter, these factors are discussed in terms of how they have informed and shaped this study. Ontology, epistemology and theory are addressed in section 4.3. Practical considerations are dealt with in section 4.4. Firstly, I highlight the issues of values and positionality, and why I believe it is imperative for me as a researcher to be conscious of their influences on the study. As May (1999:51) says, ‘values do not simply affect some aspects of research, but all aspects’. This also raises the question of potential areas of bias on the part of the researcher and how they have been dealt with in this study.

### **4.2.1 Values and positionality**

Throughout this study, I have been conscious about the values I hold as a youth worker, a youth work educator, and a researcher. Youth work is rooted in a commitment to social justice which ‘manifests in models of emancipatory practice informed by a critical analysis of power and inequality and a commitment to social change, equality and the promotion of human rights’ (McMahon, Bradley and Tierney, 2024: 56).

Social research is never ‘value neutral’, and it is important to acknowledge and manage the impact of values on the research process. According to May (1999: 46), there are five stages in which values enter the research process:

1. Interests leading to research
2. Aims, objectives and design of the research project
3. Data collection process
4. Interpretation of the data
5. The use made of the research findings

In approaching this study, I wanted to hear from people about their experiences as youth workers in Ireland. This, in part, was due to my own understanding of youth work in Ireland being an under-researched and often misunderstood occupation. Youth workers are no strangers to reporting on outcomes, impact and evidencing their work, but rarely are youth workers asked to engage in-depth exploration of their role, their experiences, and their reflections on the profession of youth work.

Ultimately what has motivated me is a professional commitment to justice and equality and their centrality to youth work in Ireland. I was conscious throughout this study that youth workers are ‘more likely to be consumers, participants, gatekeepers or commissioners of research than to be conducting research themselves’ (McMahon, Bradley and Tierney, 2024: 59) and driven by the possibility that this research can directly involve youth workers in the debate around the nature of professional youth work in Ireland.

My own personal and professional background, as outlined in Chapter 1, makes it clear how my experience places me as an insider researcher (Gair, 2012). It is impossible for me to attempt to lead a research project without considering how my experiences will influence and ultimately shape it, reinforcing the suggestion that ‘knowledge, especially in the social and human sciences, is never neutral’ (Delanty and Strydom, 2003: 366).

In this study, I was researching with youth workers while being (among other things) a youth worker myself. In acknowledging this fact, I have embraced it as an ‘opportunity’ (Finlay, 2002: 212). My positionality provided me with an understanding of ‘common wounds’ (Gair, 2012: 134) that are shared by youth workers in Ireland, and this increased the empathy in my research. Equally, it provided me with enhanced ‘access to the field’ (Berger, 2015: 220). Considering these and other aspects of my own positionality required me to be consciously reflexive throughout the research process.

In social science research, the term reflexivity is closely tied to ethics (Israel, 2015; Bos, 2020; Carpenter, 2018), and the ethical dimensions is addressed specifically later in this chapter. Being a reflexive practitioner relates directly to the management of risk and accountability. Equally, being reflexive requires researchers to be conscious of ‘the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate’ (Bryman, 2004: 500).

Reflexivity is different from reflection. Whereas the latter involves looking back on past experiences to capture learning, the former constitutes a process of meta- learning – not only reflection in but on action (May and Perry, 2017: 165).

The role of a researcher is a powerful one, requiring the trust of participants that the researcher (and in many cases, including this one, also an academic institution) will treat the information they provide respectfully, carefully and correctly. But participants must have trust not just in relation to what will become of their answers but also with regard to the rationale for asking them in the first instance (Bos, 2020). This is why, according to Batsleer, youth workers as researchers need to make ‘explicit the power of the researchers’ own position (their situatedness) and [take] responsibility for the decisions which they make in constructing representations of the world’ (Batsleer, 2010: 187).

Being reflexive has involved among other things being alert to the potential for bias in my own approach to the research topic, findings and analysis. Maton (2003: 58), citing Bourdieu (1990, 2000), highlights three ‘principal sources of bias in knowledge claims’. These are ‘the social origins and coordinates of the researcher; the researcher’s position in the intellectual field; and the “intellectualist bias”, the results of viewing the world as a spectacle’.

These sources of bias are relevant to my own position. My experiences overlap with, but are not the same as, the experiences of research participants in this study. I am a youth worker and youth work educator. I am political as a person and I am directly involved in politics.

Other potential sources of bias include being a male, being a white male, and having formerly been a young person in a youth work service. Identifying and remaining conscious of these potential sources of bias throughout the various stages of this study was important. The practicalities associated with being a reflexive practitioner and researcher required consistent attention to the need to mitigate bias. For example, if I was immediately drawn to areas of the survey or focus group findings that were of particular interest to me based on my career in youth work, I could potentially prioritise their meaning over others.

The use of reflexive tools such as journaling pre- and post-fieldwork and regular review and reflection with my supervisors helped me to remain aware of such potential bias and take corrective action if necessary. The adoption of an inductive as well as deductive approach to the analysis of the data collected, specifically the qualitative focus group discussions as described later in this chapter, also helped to ensure that the perspectives of research participants could be heard and communicated in their own terms rather than being confined within a framework predetermined by me.

## 4.3 Research Design

### 4.3.1 A pragmatist worldview

How I have approached this study says much about my ‘relationship to certain values, concepts and beliefs about the nature of knowledge’ (McGarry, 2024: 14). As a youth worker and social researcher, my ontological beliefs about the ‘nature of social reality’ and my epistemological perspective on the ‘relationship between knowledge and the researcher’ are important (ibid.).

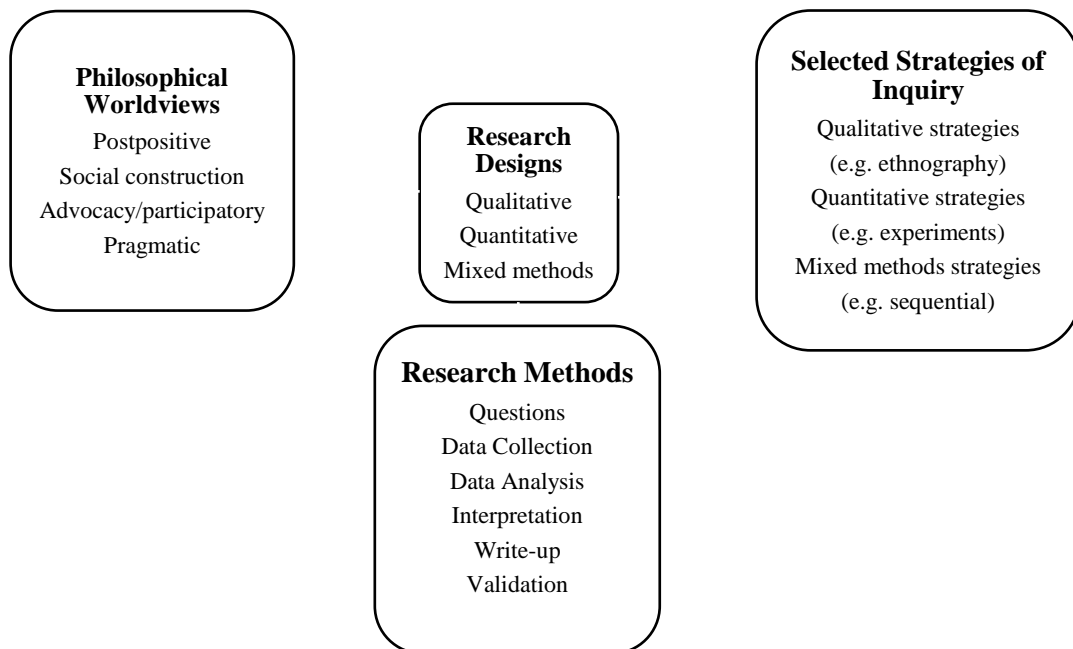
When referring to research paradigms, epistemologies and ontologies, John Creswell (2009) uses the terminology of worldviews. A worldview is: ‘a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds’ (2006: 6). He identifies four worldviews, as follows:

- Postpositivism: ‘hold[s] a deterministic philosophy in which causes probably determine effects or outcomes.’
- Constructivism: ‘hold[s] assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work.’
- Advocacy and Participatory: ‘holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda.’
- Pragmatism: ‘arises out of actions, situations and consequences rather than antecedent conditions... focussing attention on the research problem in social science research and then using pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem’ (Creswell, 2009: 7-10).

Whilst I do not have a predominantly positivist worldview, I could see the value of deploying quantitative measures (most commonly associated with a positivist approach) as part of a mixed-methods study. This is not to suggest that I believe in an objective reality that can be observed (Koch and Kralik, 2006), and certainly not that I believe all social reality can be accessed in such a way. I do however believe that it is possible to gain access to *certain aspects* of social life, even if in a limited way, through quantitative methods such as social surveys. But because I also believe that the data thus gathered is likely to make most sense when considered alongside data of a different type, gathered differently, the worldview that best describes my own is that of pragmatism.

As outlined in Figure 4.1, Creswell describes pragmatism as a philosophical worldview that facilitates a researcher to draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions, providing researchers with a ‘freedom of choice’ with regard to the methods, techniques and procedures of research (2006: 11). Employing a mixed methods approach allowed me as a researcher to ‘use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work to provide the best understanding of a research problem’ (ibid.). This seemed particularly appropriate in my case because my research questions touch on matters not just of respondents’ perceptions and reported experiences and behaviour, but on matters relating to the broader social, policy and political context, and respondents’ awareness of it.

**Figure 4.1 Inter-relationship of Worldviews, Strategies, Methods and Designs (Creswell, 2009)**



As is visible from the framework offered by Creswell (2006), there is an inter-relationship between the worldview of the researcher, the selected strategies of inquiry and the research methods chosen. According to Feilzer (2010: 8): Pragmatists’ view of the measurable world relates more closely to an ‘existential reality’ (Dewey, 1925: 40), a reference to an experiential world with different elements or layers, some objective, some subjective, and some a mixture of the two.

As will be explained further in later sections of this chapter, the data gathered for this study had both ‘measurable’ and ‘experiential’ dimensions, both objective and subjective aspects. For example, information was sought relating to salary, length of time employed as a youth

worker or the qualifications held by respondents. In one sense these might be seen as straightforwardly measurable, quantifiable variables, and it is conventional in social research to take such findings at ‘face value’ as representing an accurate picture of the pattern of experience or behaviour within the relevant sample.

However, because the data collected of necessity always reflects what respondents are willing or inclined to say about themselves in response to survey questions, even in the case of a confidential and anonymised context, strict ‘objectivity’ is not possible. A pragmatic approach acknowledges both the *possibilities* and the *limitations* or pitfalls of the methods selected.

This study also gathered data that was explicitly subjective, because it deals with the perceptions and opinions of respondents, for example about the introduction of the UBU scheme or the extent to which participants believed they had professional autonomy in their work. The study was also designed in such a way that the quantitative findings of the survey questionnaire could be explored in greater depth through qualitative discussion in two focus groups.

In both the qualitative and quantitative strands of the research, therefore, the key sources of data were the research participants themselves, drawing on their own lives and work and expressing their own perceptions and views. In this way the study upholds a principle emphasised by Kaushik and Walsh (2019: 4): ‘An important philosophical underpinning of pragmatist epistemology is that knowledge is always based on experience’.

### **4.3.2 A mixed methods study**

The researcher bases the inquiry on the assumption that collecting diverse types of data best provides an understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2009: 19).

As already stated above, this is a mixed methods inquiry, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. It became clear from the outset that conducting a survey and presenting a descriptive analysis of the data would not be sufficient in terms of the pragmatist world view and I therefore took a decision to incorporate a qualitative strand in the form of focus group discussions with youth workers.

This was consistent with Creswell’s view that there is ‘more insight to be gained from the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research than either form by themselves’ (Creswell, 2009: 203). Lieber and Weisner (2015: 3) similarly suggest that ‘the complementary nature of qualitative and quantitative research methods, employed

simultaneously, is of great value in bringing a wider range of evidence to strengthen and expand our understanding of a phenomenon'. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) elaborate on the advantages of mixed methods research from the perspective of a pragmatist worldview, highlighting a number of aspects directly relevant to this study:

[C]ombining quantitative and qualitative research helps to develop a conceptual framework, to validate quantitative findings by referring to information extracted from the qualitative phase of the study, and to construct indices from qualitative data that can be used to analyse quantitative data. Further, because quantitative research is typically motivated by the researcher's concerns, whereas qualitative research is often driven by a desire to capture the participant's voice, pragmatic researchers are able to merge these two emphases within a single investigation (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005: 384).

In keeping with the above points, there was an element of 'two-form face validity' in the present study: focus group participants could add validity to the survey results, as well as the survey results influencing the focus groups (Bryman, 2004). Using the findings from the survey to influence the discussion in the first focus group provided an opportunity for participants to agree or challenge them, before providing a rationale for their position.

Creswell (2009: 211) highlights several ways of approaching mixed methods strategies. To determine the most appropriate for a particular study, he suggests four important aspects for consideration:

- **Timing:** As the researcher, I had to determine whether the qualitative and quantitative data gathering process would happen sequentially, or concurrently, and if the former, which one would come first. I decided that the survey data would be collected first, before facilitating two focus groups to add depth to the survey findings. However, the design of the survey was informed partly by an informal 'qualitative' discussion with a group of research participants.
- **Weighting:** As is clear from Chapter 5 of the thesis (research findings), the two sets of data collected were given roughly equal importance in addressing the study's research questions.
- **Mixing:** Firstly, as just mentioned, a group met to discuss and make suggestions for the content and structure of the survey questionnaire. Once the survey was piloted, it went live. A first round of analysis took place in advance of the focus groups in order to provide shape to the discussions. Once the focus groups were complete, the data was analysed in the round and points of convergence and divergence are highlighted in Chapter 5.

- Theorising: Creswell acknowledges that all researchers bring ‘theories, frameworks and hunches’ to their studies. The extent to which these dominate the research design is the fourth aspect to consider in terms of a mixed methods research strategy (2009: 208). The role of theory is addressed further in the following section.

### 4.3.3 Exploratory, descriptive and explanatory aspects

As stated at the outset of this chapter, this study originated from a concern that there was relatively little systematic research into professional youth work in Ireland. In such circumstances, an exploratory research approach is appropriate. Exploratory research is essential as a building block for other types of investigation. This is why, for Swedberg, ‘all good science is the result of exploratory research’ (2020: 17).

Swedberg distinguishes between two types of topic for exploration:

1. A topic that has not been researched before is given a first tentative analysis.
2. An already existing topic is explored in order to produce new ideas and hypotheses, but without being able to properly verify these (Swedberg, 2020: 18).

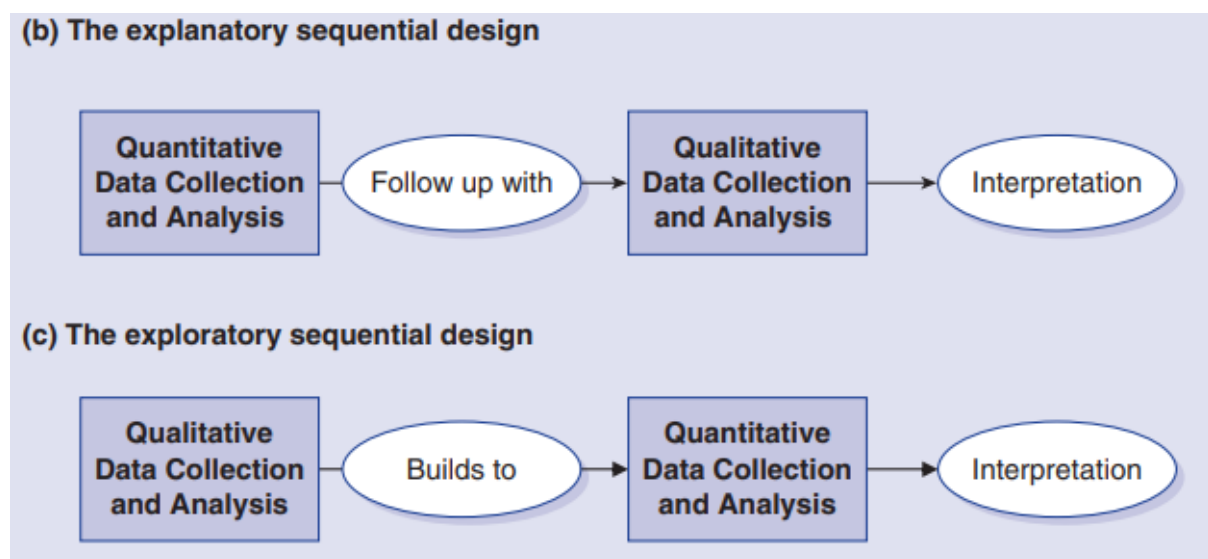
The present study falls into the second category because while there is relatively little youth work research in Ireland there have certainly been previous relevant studies that have informed the overall approach to the research and the specific design of the research instruments. In addition, because of nature of the sampling strategy and the methods of data collection and analysis, formal ‘verification of hypotheses’ is not an appropriate aim in the context of this research.

Despite its primarily exploratory orientation there is also a significant *descriptive* aspect to this study. In both the survey and focus groups my intention is to describe as accurately as possible the perceptions and experiences of a sample of Irish youth workers with regard to a range of aspects of their occupation and profession. The use of statistics in the case of the survey is descriptive as opposed to inferential (De Vaus, 2002) in the sense that no attempt is made to generalise from the sample to the broader youth worker population.

Finally, there is also an *explanatory* dimension, albeit a modest one, to the current study. In fact, the sequencing of the two main elements of data collection, the qualitative and quantitative, correspond to what Creswell (2011: 69) calls the ‘explanatory sequential design’ (see Figure 4.2), although he has in mind studies with more stringent sampling methods in the quantitative phase.

Nonetheless, beyond *exploring* the topic of professional youth work in Ireland from the perspective of practitioners and *describing* as accurately as possible the patterns of their responses to the quantitative and qualitative research instruments, the analysis and interpretation presented in this thesis, and the conclusions drawn, are concerned with making a very tentative effort to *explain* the patterns of response in terms of the sociological literature on professions and on youth work. It is therefore concerned, in a necessarily limited way, with the development of theory, or at least raising questions and making suggestions for the direction(s) that might be taken by studies aiming at more formal theoretical development.

**Figure 4.2 Explanatory and exploratory sequential design (Cresswell, 2011)**



#### 4.3.4 Designing the survey

Survey research is considered ‘well suited to providing certain types of factual, descriptive information – the hard evidence’ (De Vaus, 2002: 5). Surveys can be used for collecting information ‘from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, attitudes or behaviour’ (Fink, 2011: 2). In this study, it was considered advisable to include a survey element in order to maximise the number of youth workers from whom it would be possible to collect comparable data in a systematic way. Flick (2011: 87) refers to this as ‘standardising the research situation’. Such standardisation enhances the replicability of research procedures and therefore the reliability of the study (Bryman 2012: 28). For the same reason, and as is the norm in survey research, the questionnaire consisted primarily of closed or ‘forced-choice’ questions, where participants selected a response, from options

provided, to a question with a categorical answer, e.g. how many evenings per week do you work, how long in total have you been employed as a youth worker?

However, while such practical information such as this was considered important to collect in this survey, its importance lay mainly in contextualising and helping to make sense of the *perceptions* of respondents of the nature and characteristics of their occupation. ‘Perception’ is used here in its common contemporary meaning of ‘thought, belief or opinion’ (dictionary.cambridge.org) rather with specific reference to sensory processes. The most significant findings are those relating to what research participants think about youth work as an occupation (for example what is rewarding and challenging; whether they have the discretion to make professional judgements; whether and how much they feel trusted by others). However, the more ‘factual’ questions are very helpful when it comes to interpreting the responses. For example, in assessing responses to the question about what respondents perceive as rewarding and challenging in their work, it is very useful to also have information about what aspects of their work they actually say they spend most time on.

Both the ‘factual’ questions and the perception-based ones included a number that provided a series of ordinal response choices, including the examples just given about evening work or duration of employment but also questions asking survey participants to indicate the frequency by which they engage in youth arts or the extent to which they agree or disagree with a list of statements about the nature of youth work as an occupation. These questions were in Likert format.

There were also a small number of questions that were open, in other words for which categories of response were not provided. According to Fink (2011: 14), open questions are ‘useful when the intricacies of an issue are still unknown’, for example where the parameters of a possible range of responses are not available. De Vaus (2002: Chapter 7) describes in detail the advantages and disadvantages of different types of question.

Among other things, open questions are appropriate in cases where it is considered advisable not to provide research participants with a ‘hierarchy’ of options, some of which might be considered to have higher status or be more ‘socially desirable’ than others, therefore introducing potential bias. Examples in the current study are where participants were asked ‘What is your gross annual salary?’ and ‘Please describe your current annual leave entitlements’ rather than being asked to choose from a scale ranging from lower to higher or vice versa.

Fink (2011: 14) advises that ‘when you create a survey instrument, you should make sure that experts and a sample of potential respondents review all of your questions’. The survey for the current study was designed taking into account previous occupational studies with youth workers in Ireland (Youthcert, 2000; Monaghan, 2013) as well as in consultation with my supervisors and as already mentioned an informal discussion with a small group of research participants in the early stages of the study. A pilot survey was then undertaken with 12 participants and feedback received on the usability of the survey, the types of questions included and suggestions for further additions. Among the topics that were included as a result of pilot feedback were global youth work and international exchanges.

The survey was constructed in five parts, and a full copy is available in Appendix C;

1. Contract and Conditions
2. Education and Training Pathways
3. Rewards and Challenges
4. Role and Task
5. Youth Work as a Profession

All questions were optional, meaning the risk of creating ‘false opinions’ was minimised (De Vaus, 2002: 99). As already mentioned, Likert rating scales were included throughout the survey. An example of one of these questions is below:

28. In terms of programme areas - how often is your work with young people specifically focussed on the following [list of programme areas follows, with a separate response sought for each item]:

Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

The closed questions asking participants about ‘youth work as a profession’ were in two parts. Respondents were presented with a list of statements and in each case asked to indicate (a) the extent to which it is *currently* the case and (b) the extent to which they think it *should* be the case. For example:

29. 'I have a lot of leeway in making professional judgements about how I work with young people.'

Currently the case:

Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not At All

Should be the case:

Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not At All

As will be seen in the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis, these questions have thrown considerable light on the extent to which there is a gap between the way things are and the way things should be in youth work as a profession, from the perspective of the research participants in this study. The responses raise, in a particularly explicit way, issues that merit further consideration both in future research and in the policy context.

#### 4.3.5 Designing the focus groups

Focus group research can be best described as loosely constructed discussion with a group of people brought together for the purpose of the study, guided by the researcher and addressed as a group (Sarantakos, 2005: 194).

I chose to conduct two focus groups as the qualitative element of this study because the focus group approach lends itself particularly well to research in youth work settings (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Tierney et al., 2019). As professional youth workers, the extensive group work experience of the participants meant that they were likely to be both competent and comfortable engaging in a semi- structured conversation about the main issues arising from the survey.

Focus groups allowed for participants to learn from each other and ultimately 'flesh out views and information on topics surveyed' (Punch, 2005: 172). As such, the focus groups added depth to the survey findings, allowing me to explore the reasons survey participants may have answered as they did (Bryman 2004). They helped to uncover the 'why' of research participants' perceptions and experiences, as opposed to the 'what' in the survey. The

structure of the focus groups was similar to that of the surveys in terms of thematic areas: Education and Training Pathways, Role and Task, Rewards and Challenges, and Youth Work as a Profession. The groups began with me reminding participants of the ground rules and confidentiality of participation, before inviting the participants to introduce themselves.

Both conversations evolved in a semi-structured way; whilst I as the researcher had a series of questions pre-prepared, I wanted participants to guide the conversation based on areas of concern and interest to them. I developed a Moderators Guide (Appendix D) which included a lead question under each of the five headings and a series of prompts that could be used if needed. This 'tentative plan' allowed for considerable detail to be thought-out in advance but it also left open the possibility of responding to spontaneously arising ideas and suggestions within the group (Maxwell, 2013: 89). Such an approach is very much in line with youth work practice.

One of the focus groups was conducted in person and the other conducted online so as to make arrangements as accessible and convenient as possible for the youth workers and also help to ensure a wide geographical representation within the participant group.

## **4.4 Conducting the Study**

### **4.4.1 Sampling and recruitment**

Youth workers can be classified as a ‘difficult-to-reach, specialised population’ as characterised by Neuman (2003: 213). Chapter 2 has set out the reasons why this is the case. In these circumstances, the selection of a random sample that might be deemed representative of the overall population of professional youth workers is not possible. There is no ‘sampling frame’ from which to select (De Vaus, 2002: 70).

A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was therefore adopted for this study (Taherdoost, 2016: 22-23). Both of these are types of non-random or non-probability sampling (ibid.: 20). The principle of purposive sampling is to get as close as possible to including ‘all possible cases that fit particular criteria, using various methods’ (Neuman, 2003: 211). Along similar lines, Flick (2011: 75) defines purposive sampling as attempting to reach as many ‘experts’ as practicable and possible that fit specific participation criteria. For me the key criterion was that participants were employed as youth workers in Ireland. My sampling approach was purposive not so much in targeting specific individuals or ‘cases’ (Taherdoost, 2016: 23) as in targeting groups or platforms within which people meeting the above key criterion were likely to be found.

### **4.4.2 Ethical considerations in this study**

In any research project, it is of paramount importance to consider the ethical dimensions of the study, including the impact on those who participate or potentially on other individuals or entities, the nature of the data to be collected and how it is dealt with. Ethical concerns and considerations should be ‘involved in every aspect of design’ (Maxwell, 2013: 7) whether it is regarding the research problem, the purpose and questions, data collection, analysis and interpretation and writing/dissemination (Creswell, 2009: 87).

From a consequentialist perspective, determining whether an action, or in this case a research question is morally right is ‘determined by evaluating the balance of its good and bad consequences’ (Israel, 2015:10). Non-consequentialist approaches should be considered however, according to which the main concern is not the consequences *per se* but that human beings (and in this case specifically researchers and those they work with) ‘treat ourselves and others in ways consistent with human dignity and worth’ (ibid.: 11).

Ethics refers to the study of what ought to (or ought not to) be done. The term also describes a collective body of guidance regarding questions of good or right action. Ethical decision making is the process of identifying, evaluating and choosing among options regarding a problem that has an ethical dimension. What kinds of problems have ethical dimensions? Those that involve and may impact humans (Anderson and Corneli, 2018: 2).

Bryman (2012) offers four ethical areas for consideration with regard to social research. The following should all be avoided:

1. Harm to participants
2. Lack of informed consent
3. Invasion of privacy
4. Deception

Whether physical or emotional, any research that poses the risk of causing harm to participants is fundamentally unacceptable (Bryman, 2012: 135). It is for this reason that confidentiality and anonymity are key considerations for the researcher. Such considerations arose even at the point of deciding on the adoption of an approach to sampling for the study, as described above. The sampling methods chosen and the data collection method for the survey strand of the research guaranteed both anonymity and confidentiality to participants. Similarly, in the case of the focus groups, even though participants volunteered their names and contact details to the researcher for the purpose of making contact and setting up the groups, all reporting of findings has been anonymised and confidentiality of contributions has been assured.

These issues arose again when it came to deciding on the questions asked in the survey. I considered whether to ask participants to name the organisation they worked for along with other demographic information such as the county they lived in and worked in, their age and their gender.

Asking participants to name the organisation they worked for would have generated very interesting data from a research point of view, enabling a comparative analysis of salaries, contract types, hours of work, distributions of roles and tasks, satisfaction levels and so on across different youth work organisations. However, for this very reason it would have been a 'sensitive topic' (Boeije, 2010: 48) from the point of view of the organisations themselves and in addition it would have raised the possibility of the combined responses from any one research participant becoming an 'identifier' to the researcher, thus breaching the principle of anonymity (Ragin and Amoroso, 2022).

This study required two separate applications to the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Committee – the first seeking approval to conduct the survey and the second for the focus groups. These applications are presented as Appendices F and G of this thesis. All questions in the survey were optional, giving participants the opportunity to skip ones that they did not want to answer. This was to make the process of completing the questionnaire as straightforward and stress-free as possible from the participants' point of view and to ensure 'that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests' (Anderson and Corneli, 2018: 24).

Similarly, regarding people's participation in the focus groups, emphasis was placed at the beginning and throughout on the fact that involvement was a choice, and participants were free to speak or not speak on any given topic. Aside from a continuing prioritisation of ethical principles, I as a researcher wanted to create a space in which participants could have an enjoyable experience, consistent with a youth work approach. To help to facilitate this as well as meet other research objectives, ground rules were presented and agreed at the beginning of each focus group, adapted from King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019) and relating to respect, the moderator's role, discussion format, recording and turn-taking and mobile phones.

Further issues with ethical implications, arising from my positionality as an insider researcher and including the potential for bias in conducting the research and analysing the data, have been dealt with earlier in this chapter in Section 4.2.1

Previous surveys conducted with youth workers in Ireland had relied on youth work organisations distributing information amongst their employees and facilitating access to researchers. An important consideration for me in this study was to share the invitation with youth workers to participate independently of their employer. I wanted participants to represent their own experiences, as opposed to possibly feeling like they were answering on behalf of the organisation they worked in and I wanted them to be assured that their participation was anonymous and confidential. I made contact with youth workers in a variety of ways:

1. Direct Correspondence: I researched contact details on youth work organisation websites in order to develop a mailing list of 250+ youth workers and managers, to whom I emailed the survey and information sheet directly. This was done on two

occasions.

2. Maynooth University Department of Applied Social Studies Fieldwork Placement mailing list: I was provided with the contact information for supervisors of students on the undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Community Work and Youth Work. Similar to point 1, I contacted those on the mailing list on two occasions.
3. Social Media: There is a Facebook private group called ‘Youth Workers in Ireland - Discussion Page’ which has been active for many years. I posted on this page on three occasions inviting those who are employed as youth workers in Ireland to participate. I also shared this post on my personal Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn page a number of times as I had connections with a number of youth workers in different fora.
4. Organisations: I spoke with staff in the Youth Affairs section of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who agreed to circulate the survey via the ETB Youth Officers in each ETB area.

Because I combined a number of existing contacts and online sources of which I was aware in an attempt to reach as many employed youth workers as possible, but was not in a position to determine what proportion the number of people contacted might constitute of the total number of youth workers in Ireland, or what exact number of them might have received the information and invitation via more than one channel, this approach can also be termed convenience sampling. The methods I used for contacting prospective research participants were ‘readily and easily available’ (Taherdoost, 2016: 22).

One exception to the procedure outlined above was when I spoke to a senior management representative of a large youth organisation about the possibility of sharing the survey among its youth workers, but it was mutually decided not to pursue this approach. With the survey sample recruited in the manner just described, the second task was to recruit participants for the two focus groups. At the end of the online survey, participants were invited to complete a form to register their interest in participating in a focus group and if interested (and only in that case) to provide their contact details. Some 26 participants did so, although when followed up, eight were unavailable. The remaining 18 constituted the focus group sample for the study.

## 4.5 Analysis

### 4.5.1 Survey analysis

The survey was conducted via an online platform called Online Surveys. When the survey was closed, the data was exported into Microsoft Excel format and for the purposes of analysis was uploaded on to SPSS. The data from this survey remains on the Maynooth University password encrypted server.

Given the relative lack of relevant previous occupational research in the field of youth work, especially research gathering information directly from youth workers as opposed to their employing organisations, straightforward univariate analysis within SPSS of the frequencies with which participants selected from the categories of response is an important contribution of this study. This is what De Vaus calls a summary of ‘patterns of cases in the sample’ (De Vaus, 2002: 207).

While stressing again that the sample not a random one, and cannot therefore claim to be representative, this analysis does provide useful indicative information, and raise important questions, about the nature and composition of the youth work workforce in Ireland. This is clear even from a glance at the data summarised in Chapter 5, Table 5.1, concerning the gender, age, ethnicity, professional qualification status, duration of employment (and so on) of the study sample.

The remainder of the chapter provides further univariate analysis of the responses to all the survey questions. Various methods are used for presenting the data, including tables, bar charts and pie charts. Throughout the process of examining the data, I also attempted to remain alert to possible relationships *between* variables, and therefore conducted extensive bivariate analysis.

In reporting the findings in Chapter 5, attention is drawn to differences of response between subgroups within the sample where these seem worthy of comment, or alternatively it is noted where relevant that responses were broadly comparable across subgroups. Once again, a range of graphics are used. For example, in relation to the frequency with which they engaged in a range of tasks, female participants scored higher for direct work with young people and the planning and evaluation of such work, while male participants scored higher for routine administration and for taking part in CPD activities, and Figure 5.12 summarises the pattern in a bar chart.

The response categories for the question about engaging in different tasks were in Likert format as follows: never, annually, every few months, monthly, weekly, daily. For this and the other questions in the survey questionnaire that adopted a Likert-style categorisation of responses, each category was assigned a numerical value and the arithmetic mean of responses was calculated, giving a summary ‘measure of central tendency’ within the data (De Vaus, 2002: 225). This process (automated within SPSS) was followed for the total sample and for subgroups based on variables such as gender, age and so on, enabling comparisons such as the one just provided.

For practical purposes it was necessary to identify a ‘cut-off point’ for deciding whether to draw attention to differences of mean response between subgroups within the sample. The vast majority of Likert-style questions in the survey had five categories of response, meaning that the mean response could in principle lie anywhere on a five-point scale from 1 to 5. After consultation with my supervisors it was decided that a difference of 0.5 or more between subgroups would merit specific comment in the presentation and discussion of findings.

However, it is very important to stress that no claim is being made that differences within the survey sample are *statistically significant* in the way in which that term is formally used in social research, nor that such differences are therefore likely to be found within the youth worker population in Ireland. The use of statistics in the analysis of the survey findings in this study is entirely *descriptive* (i.e. concerned with presenting as accurately and concisely as possible the pattern of responses within the sample itself) rather than *inferential* (i.e. intended to make inferences or reach generalised conclusions about the broader population) (De Vaus, 2002: Chapter 13).

#### **4.5.2 Focus group analysis**

Both focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed in full and the transcriptions were then subjected to analysis. The in-person focus group was recorded on two devices (a phone and a laptop). The online focus group was conducted on MS Teams which provides a recording facility. The audio files have been transferred and stored on the Maynooth University password encrypted server. I transcribed the focus groups manually while playing (and re-playing) back the audio files. There is a considerable advantage to the researcher in carefully listening back and transcribing the contents of their own qualitative fieldwork. In terms of familiarity, attention and reflection, the process can be regarded as the first ‘crucial step of data analysis’ (Kowal and O’Connell, 2014).

The analysis continued using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (Neuman, 2003). As stated earlier (section 4.3.5), the initial schedule for the semi-structured focus group discussions was designed broadly in accordance with the structure of the survey questionnaire. This provided a set of themes which were used (deductively) in the first stage of the qualitative analysis, following what Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) call a ‘theoretical thematic’ approach and using ‘pre-determined codes’ (Bingham and Katkowsky, 2022).

Each participant in the focus groups was assigned a pseudonym and every contribution they made was consolidated in one document. This meant I could isolate what each participant said about all of the major themes explored in this study. I also recorded in the same location the demographic and other relevant characteristics of each participant (gender, age, job title, professional qualification, funder and length of time employed as a youth worker), enabling me to examine closely whether any patterns might be tentatively identified in terms of relationships between such variables and participants’ experiences and opinions concerning the main themes. Figure 4.3 provides a condensed example for illustrative purposes of the resulting ‘matrix’ of data for one of the research participants.

**Figure 4.3 Focus group analysis: deductive phase**

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Current Job Title</b>	<b>No of years' in paid employment as a youth worker</b>	<b>NSETS Endorsed Qualification?</b>
Emma	Female	30-34	Youth Worker	6	Yes
<b>Heading</b>	<b>Emma</b>				
Education and Training / Pathways into Youth Work	You're passion driven. It's your life experience that drives you in it.				
Contract and Conditions	<p>People starting off trying to get mortgages and stuff – and you're going in and you're saying I'm only on a year contract but it will roll over because I don't think the arse will fall out of the country anytime soon. So...</p> <p>If that's not a need of your young people – there's loads who wouldn't want to bet here at 11pm at night. The Department are dictating what we do.</p> <p>Exactly, you need to be in work early in the morning too.</p>				
Role and Task	But we're doing it, do you know what I mean? We are doing informal education. If you're doing sexual health programmes, or drug and alcohol awareness programmes. You're not furthering something – you're teaching them something they didn't know.				
Youth Work as a Profession	We were talking about the little things that happen, that you don't report on. They are the real golden nuggets. Whether that's getting someone to sign up to go to college – that for a particular person is massive.				
Priorities for Professional Youth Work	There's way more female youth workers.				

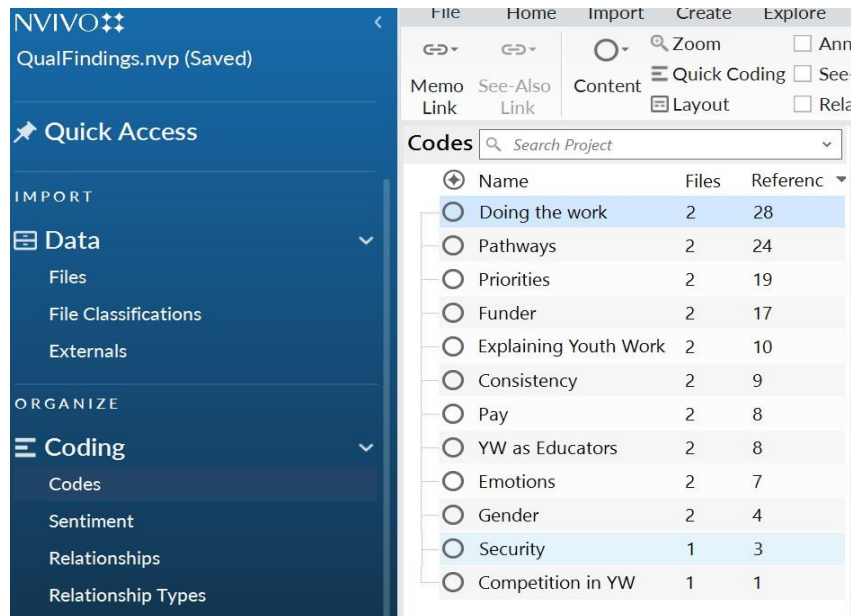
This was the first round of the analysis of the data from the focus groups. A second round was conducted using the NVIVO qualitative software package.

This second round was *not* pre-determined by the thematic categories addressed in the survey questionnaire and allowed for a more detailed exploration of the transcripts via the conversations between participants rather than the participants' individual inputs.

Analysing the focus group transcripts from this perspective, I assigned codes to passages of text, still conscious of the categories that were used in the survey design but also attempting

to take into account experiences described or views expressed by participants that did not necessarily fall into any of those categories, in other words taking an inductive approach to the analysis of the data.

**Figure 4.4 NVIVO analysis**



As shown in Figure 4.4 (and illustrated further in Appendix K), this process made it clear that while many of the research participants' concerns aligned with the headings in the survey and the 'lead questions' in the focus group schedule, they also used other terms and spoke about other topics. For example, their contributions relating to 'doing the work' of youth work were not limited to the range of 'roles and tasks' referred to in the questionnaire, and specifically they had a lot to say about youth work as an educational process and therefore about youth workers as educators. There were strong and contrasting opinions about this matter and in particular about the terminology that should be used by youth workers. This is therefore reflected in the structure and thematic headings used to present the qualitative data in Chapter 5.

## **4.6 Limitations, validity and credibility**

It is important to state (or reiterate) some limitations of the present study and also address the issues of validity and credibility.

### **4.6.1 Sample**

As stated above, this study makes use of a combined purposive/convenience sampling strategy. 141 people participated in the survey, and 18 people participated in the focus groups. While the exact number of youth workers currently employed in Ireland is not known, the research conducted by Indecon for the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI, 2012) estimated that the figure was just under 1400, and despite the financial crisis that began in 2008 and the years of austerity that followed, the number today is unlikely to be lower than that.

This means that the number of respondents in this study is equivalent to approximately 10% of the youth work workforce (paid employees), and it may be more. De Vaus (2002: 81) describes a sample of 10% as a 'sizeable proportion' of a given population. However, it is important to stress again that the present study is not based on a random sample drawn from a sampling frame, whereby each individual or 'case' has an equal chance (i.e. *probability*) of being selected.

With random or probability sampling, the sample chosen can be claimed to be broadly representative of the population in question. That is not the case in this study. For that reason, it is not possible to generalise from the findings in this study to the perceptions, circumstances and experiences of youth workers in Ireland more broadly.

In this thesis, no claims regarding findings are made that cannot be directly attributed to the study's own sample of participants. However on occasion, questions are raised and suggestions made as to what the implications would be (for policy, and for youth work as a profession) if the patterns found in the data did apply to Irish youth workers in general.

### **4.6.2 Response rates**

As indicated earlier, it was decided to make all questions in the survey optional. This was in line with an ethical commitment to ensure participants were able to opt out in particular instances if they did not feel comfortable answering the question. As a result, there was quite a high non-response rate and many questions generated responses from 100-110 participants

out of the total of 141. Nonetheless, it was considered preferable to tolerate a somewhat lower response rate than compel research participants to provide a response to all questions.

### **4.6.3 Validity**

According to Sarantakos (2005), validity ‘tells the researcher whether an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure, and whether this measurement is accurate and precise’ (2005: 83).

Internal validity refers to the ‘extent to which the research design impacts on the research outcomes’ (Sarantakos, 2005: 85) and is ‘best achieved in the laboratory and in experimental research’ (Flick, 2011: 203). In the strictest sense, therefore, this type of validity is not relevant to (or not achievable in) the present research. However, based on discussions with a small group of participants after the pilot stage of the survey and based also on participants’ contributions in the focus group discussions, including their responses to the survey findings, it does seem possible to say that the research instruments had ‘face validity’ and ‘content validity’ (Neuman, 2003: 183) in so far as they seemed to participants to be designed to assess the things they were intended to assess (e.g. satisfaction with aspects of their role; involvement in different types of programme area) and they were also designed to encompass the ‘full content’ of the relevant concepts and ideas.

For example, in the case of discourses of professionalism, the questions and statements in the section of the survey dealing with ‘youth work as a profession’ can be seen to cover the main aspects of discourses of professionalism outlined by Julia Evetts (2003a/b, 2013) and presented in summary and tabular form in Chapter 3.

External validity refers to the ‘extent to which research findings can be generalised, and is mostly relevant to explanatory studies’ (Sarantakos, 2005: 85). As already discussed, this study does not make such claims but it is hoped that it will help to pave the way for and build a commitment to larger scale research at national level that will carry external validity in this sense.

### **4.6.4 Credibility**

Because of the purposive approach outlined above, this survey utilised an ‘expert sampling technique’, inviting participants to engage based on their relevant working lives and experience and therefore their direct ‘expertise on the phenomenon being studied’ (Bhattacharjee, 2019: 67). This increases the credibility of the findings when compared with

an approach using a mixed sample of experts and non-experts (ibid.). Credibility is also one of the criteria for the trustworthiness of qualitative research set out by Bryman (2004: 273-275). As Bryman recommends, this study has relied on the ‘canons of good practice’ in social research when designing the focus groups and has taken particular account of the literature on focus group research in youth work contexts (see section 4.3.5 above). Furthermore, in raising and discussing the survey findings with focus group participants who had themselves responded to the survey, the researcher was ‘submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied... [which is] often referred to as respondent validation’ (Bryman, 2004: 275).

## **4.7 Conclusion**

Chapter 4 has attempted to provide a comprehensive description of the methodology for this study. Section 4.2 presented an overview of social research and Section 4.3 described the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings that influenced me as a researcher. Through the lens of a pragmatist worldview, I have developed a research approach and design that allowed me to have an appropriate degree of ‘freedom of choice’ with regard to methods, techniques and procedures for research (Creswell, 2009). This section also described my approach to designing the research instruments for data collection.

It was important to highlight in this section the ethical considerations, reflexive tools along with my values and positionality as a researcher. Sections 4.3.2-4.3.3 detailed the rationale for conducting a mixed-methods study, a sequential approach by conducting a survey followed up with two focus groups.

Section 4.4 dealt with other important aspects of concluding the study, including sampling, recruitment and ethical considerations, and Section 4.5 described the approach to analysing the quantitative and qualitative data and this was followed in Section 4.6 by a discussion of the limitations of the study.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter 5 presents the findings of this study, dealing in turn with the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research. Aspects of convergence and divergence between the findings from the two strands will be addressed in the course of the discussion that follows in Chapter 6. The presentation and analysis of the survey findings follows the structure of the questionnaire. There were 141 responses to the survey. In the presentation of findings in this chapter, alongside percentage breakdowns (%), 'n.' is used to indicate absolute numbers where appropriate. The questionnaire had five major sections:

1. Contract and conditions
2. Education and training pathways
3. Rewards and challenges
4. Role and task
5. Youth work as a profession

The second, qualitative element of this study comprised two focus groups. One focus group took place in person and one online. 18 people participated in the focus groups.

The themes from the focus groups are as follows:

1. Becoming a youth worker
2. Being a youth worker
3. Educational nature of youth work
4. The development of the youth work profession

## 5.2 Survey Findings

As previously mentioned, 141 responses were received to the online survey. Of the 141 responses received, 38% (n. 53) were from people aged 40-49, while a combined total of 55% (n. 77) of respondents were aged 40 or over. 71% (n. 100) of respondents identified as female, with 27% (n. 38) identifying as male. 51% (n. 73) of participants were in roles funded through the UBU scheme, while 18% (n. 26) of participants were in roles funded through the Irish Youth Justice Service.

The survey asked participants to identify their ethnicity using the wording from the most recent Irish census of 2022. 91% (n. 129) of participants chose 'White – Irish', 7% (n. 10) chose 'Any other White background' with one participant choosing 'White – Irish Traveller.' The 'White – Irish' proportion of the survey sample is notably higher than the 77% of people identifying as White Irish in the broader population according to Census 2022. The fact that the increasing diversity of Irish society is not reflected within the sample for this study is a point discussed further in Chapter 6.

Table 5.1 summarises the breakdown of the sample.

The remainder of this section deals with the five major categories of survey questions. As explained in Chapter 4 (section 4.5.1), in the case of Likert-style questions with responses falling on a five or six-point scale, only differences of at least 0.5 in the mean scores of sub-groups within the sample are explicitly drawn to the attention of the reader.

**Table 5.1 Sample profile**

		<b>% of Sample</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	72
	Male	27
	Prefer Not to Say	1
<b>Age</b>	17-24	6
	25-29	12
	30-34	13
	35-39	15
	40-49	38
	50-59	14
	60 – 69	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White – Irish	91
	Any Other White background	7
	White – Irish Traveller	1
	Prefer not to say	1
<b>Funder</b>	UBU Scheme	52
	IYJS – Garda Youth Diversion	18
	HSE	2
	Tusla	9
	Other	19
<b>Professional Qualification</b>	Yes	45
	No	48
	Unsure	8
<b>How Long Employed in Youth Work Total</b>	Less than 1 Year	9
	1-3 Years	14
	4-7 Years	18
	8-10 Years	6
	11-15 Years	24
	16-20 Years	14
	21-29 Years	14
	30+ Years	1

### 5.2.1 Contract and conditions

Respondents were asked a series of closed questions relating to their occupation. Firstly, they were asked to identify where most of their youth work takes place. Figure 5.1 shows that 51% of participants (n. 72) responded that most of their work takes place in a town. A combined 39% of participants conduct most of their youth work in a city centre or suburb of a city.

These findings indicate that respondents are being employed as youth workers in areas where higher populations of young people are concentrated. Less than 10% of respondents responded that most of their work takes place in a village or countryside.

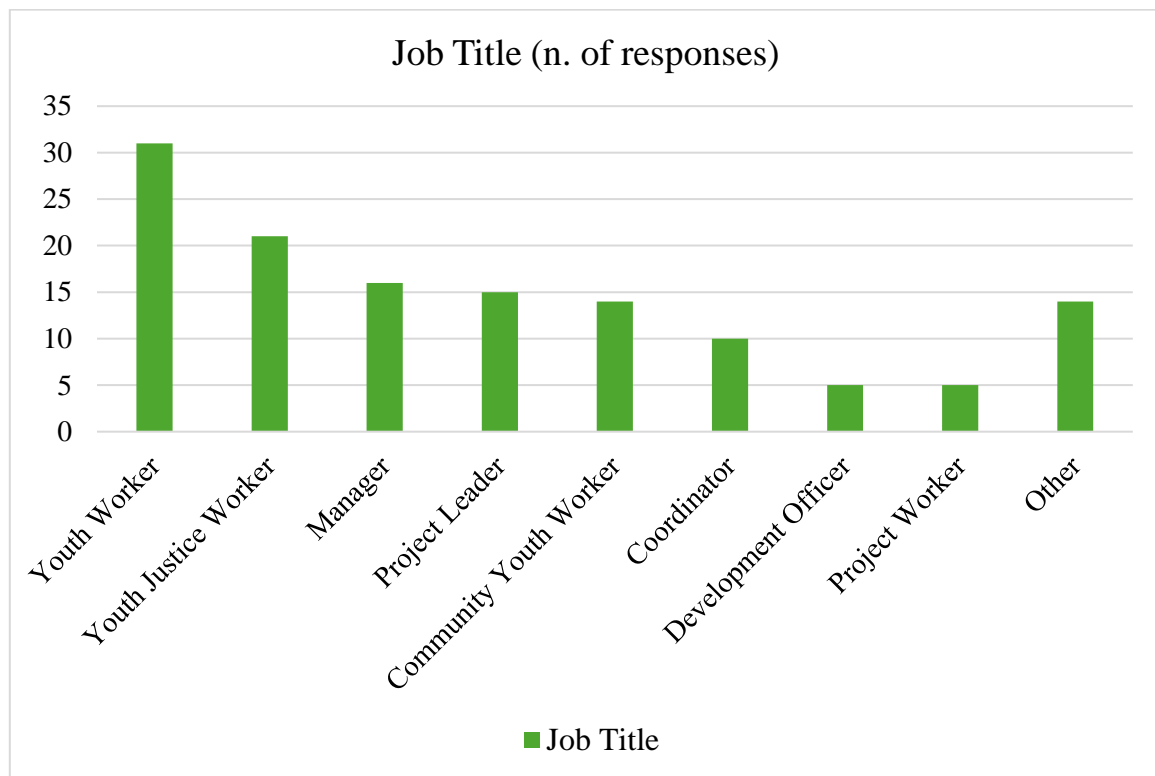
**Figure 5.1 Where work takes place**



#### 5.2.1.1 Job title

Based on responses to an open-ended question about their current job title, 85 were coded as those concerned with working directly with young people in a youth work setting. Figure 5.2 displays some of the roles occupied by survey participants including: Youth Worker (n. 31), Youth Justice Worker (n. 21) and Community Youth Worker (n. 14).

**Figure 5.2 Job title**



56 respondents were coded as occupying a role with a significant management component. Examples of these included ‘Manager’ (n. 16), ‘Project Leader (n. 15) and Coordinator (n. 10). A list of the other titles provided by participants is included in Appendix H. For the purposes of comparisons between respondents in youth work roles and those in management roles, I have coded the other titles according to a desktop analysis of duties associated with these roles.

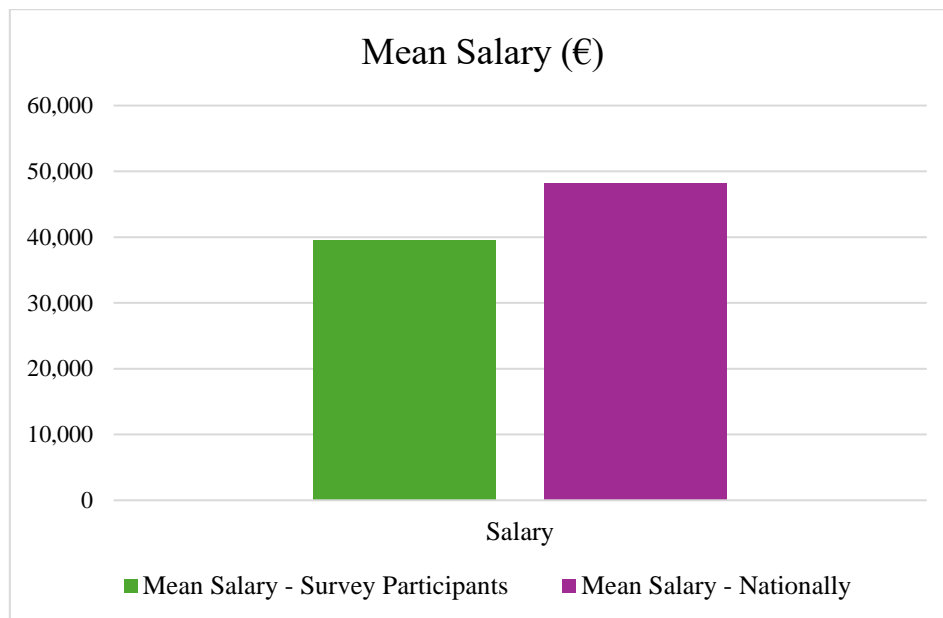
*Example 1:* For respondents who identified their role as a ‘Youth Integration Worker’, I compared a series of job descriptions available online and determined that for the purposes of the current study this is most appropriately coded as a ‘Youth Worker’, substantially concerned with direct work with young people.

*Example 2:* For respondents who identified their role as ‘Team Lead – Youth Family Support Work’, I compared a series of job descriptions available online and determined that for the purposes of the current study this is most appropriately coded as a management role and assigned the respondent to the ‘Manager’ category. A full list of other titles, with an indication of whether they were coded in the youth worker or manager category is provided in the Appendix H.

### 5.2.1.2 Salary

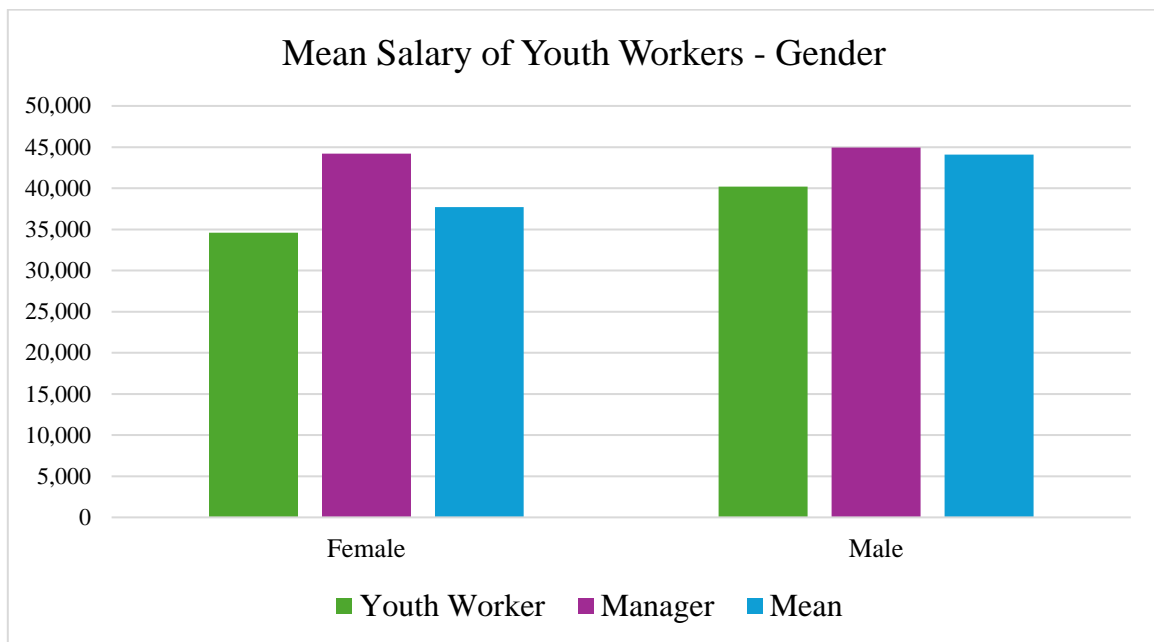
Participants were invited to answer an open-ended question about their salary, to the nearest thousand euro before tax. As illustrated in Figure 5.3, the mean salary of respondents was €39,520. The national mean earnings for all workers provided by the Central Statistics Office (2024) for Quarter 4 of 2023 was €48,258 based on average weekly income of €928.04. More specifically, earnings of youth workers in this study can be compared to the national mean earnings for workers in other sectors that overlap with or have at least some features in common with youth work. Examples are: Education (€56,210), Human health and social work (€47,918) and Arts, entertainment, recreation and other services (€33,755) (CSO, 2024).

**Figure 5.3 Mean salary – survey sample and national comparison**



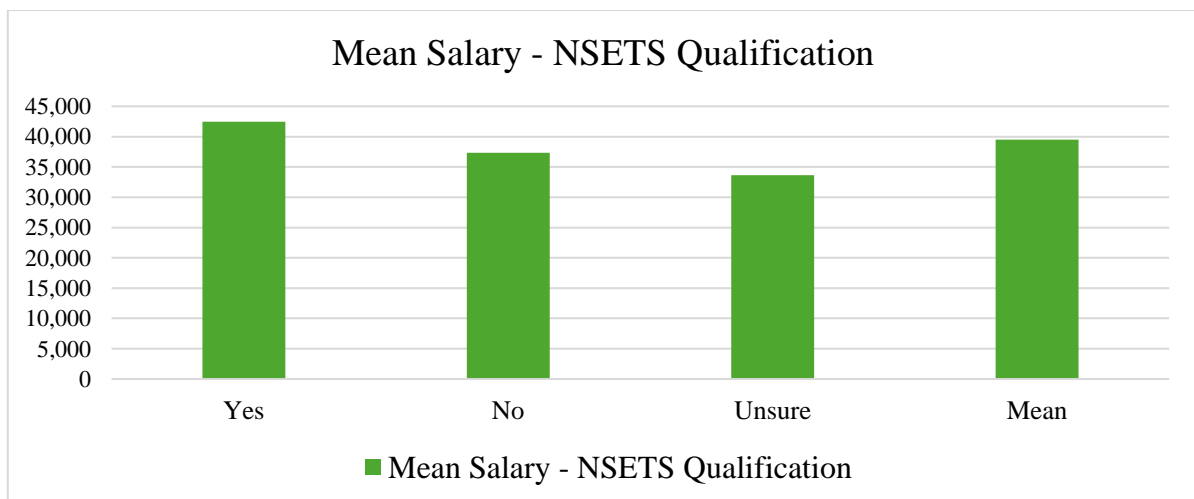
The mean salary of female respondents (€37,719) was some €7,000 less than male respondents (€44,100). As shown in Figure 5.4, the difference is particularly notable in the case of those in youth worker roles, but male managers also earn slightly more than their female counterparts.

**Figure 5.4 Mean salary by gender and role**



The mean response for participants working in roles funded by the DCEDIY UBU Scheme (€37,424) was €6,565 less than their colleagues funded through the Department of Justice (€44,080) or the HSE (€44,667). As illustrated in Figure 5.5, survey participants who had an NSETS-endorsed professional qualification in youth work were, according to the mean responses, earning €5,100 more than those without a professional qualification.

**Figure 5.5 Mean salary by NSETS qualification**



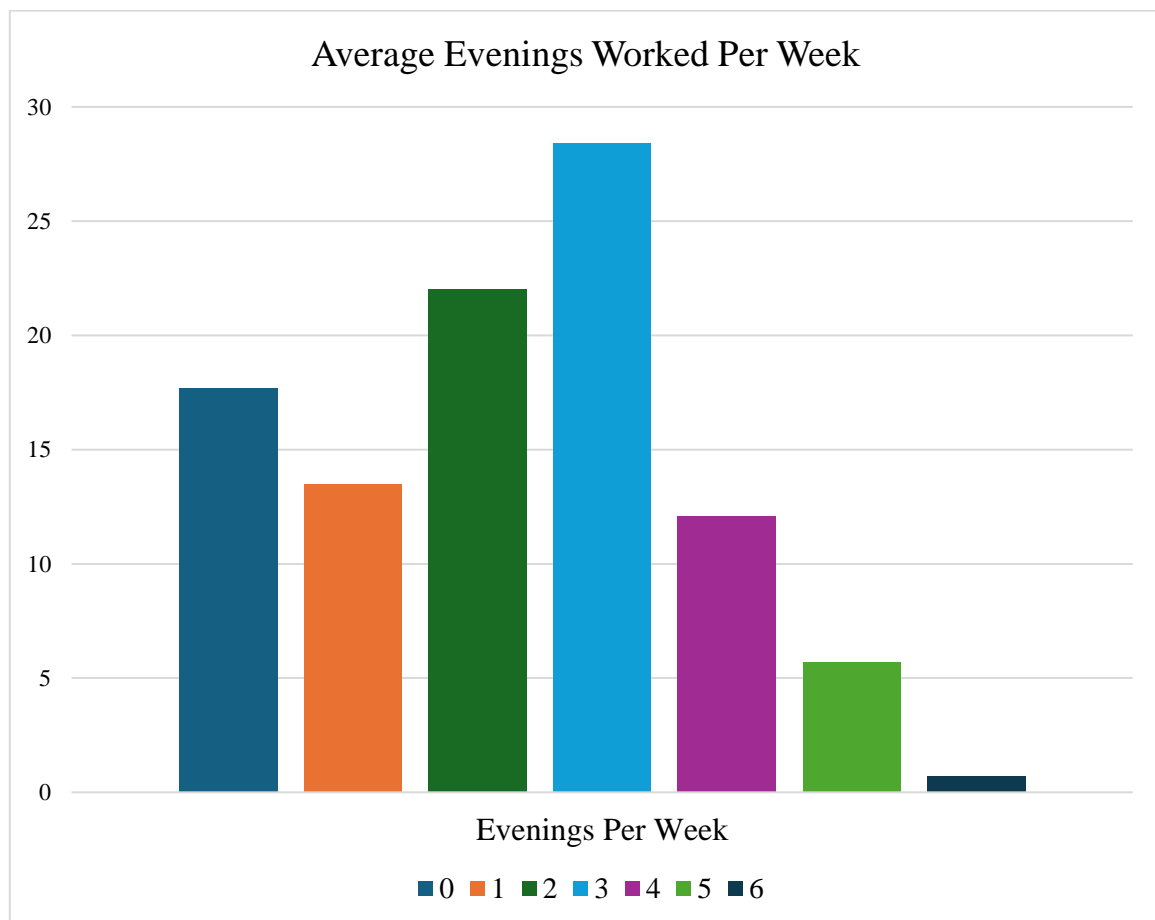
### 5.2.1.3 Conditions

50% of respondents (n. 71) were in permanent, full-time occupation as youth workers. Those with fixed-term contracts either part-time or full-time accounted for 17% of respondents,

while a further 18% (n. 26) were on rolling contracts (funding dependent). 71% (n. 100) of respondents work between 30 and 40 hours per week.

Youth work is often considered to be practised during out of school hours on evenings and weekends. Figure 5.6 shows that 51% of respondents (n. 71) worked two or three evenings per week, with a combined 18.5% of respondents working between four and six evenings per week. Less than one in five participants (18%, n. 25) did not work any evenings.

**Figure 5.6 Average evenings worked per week**



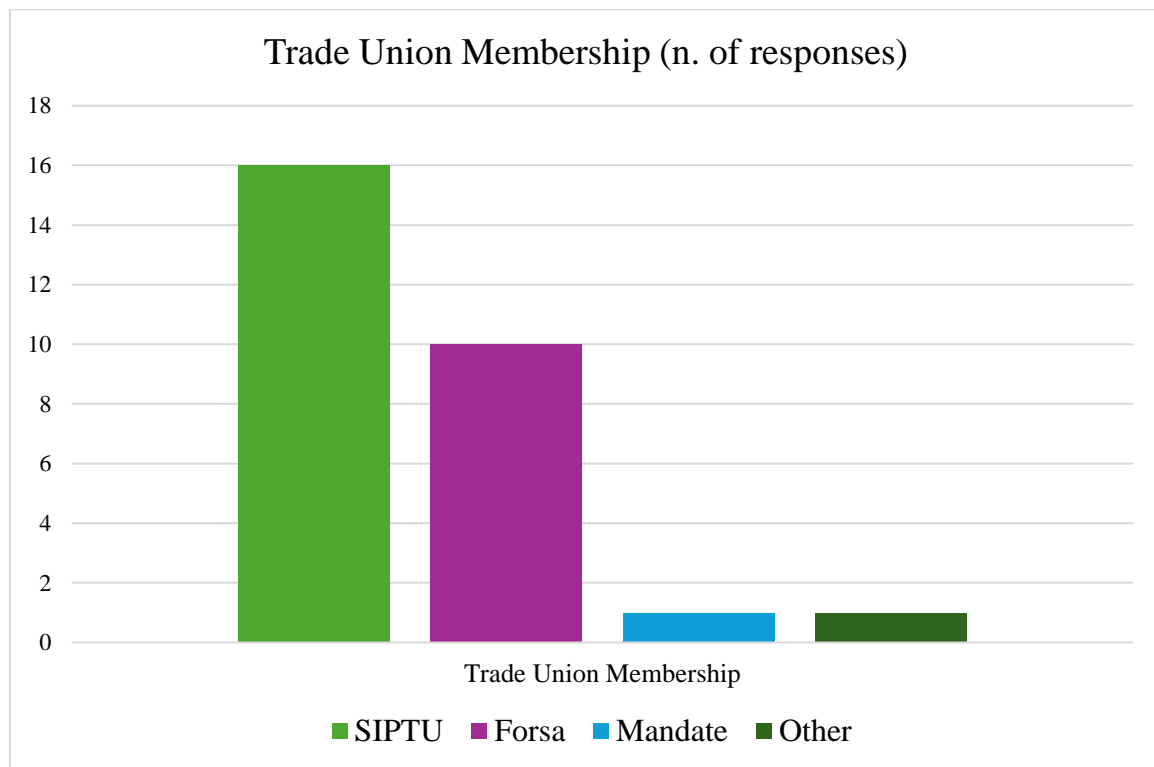
Paid overtime was not a feature of respondents' employment, with 89% (n. 125) indicating this was not part of their employment contract. Maternity leave with full pay was available to 45% (n. 45) of female survey respondents, unavailable to 31% (n. 31) with 20% (n. 20) of respondents unsure. Virtually all respondents (97%) had a time off in lieu (TOIL) system in place. Almost three quarters (72%) did not have health and dental insurance, and more than one in ten (12%) were unsure about their entitlement in this regard.

Participants were asked if they were members of a trade union, to which 80% (n. 113) said they were not. Of the 20% (n. 28) who were, 10 worked in Dublin. This equates to 24% of Dublin-based respondents identifying that they were in a trade union.

A comparison can be drawn with a study conducted by Geary and Belizon (2021) which showed that one in four of the Irish workforce were members of a trade union. Broken down by sector, membership figures for education (60%), human health and social work activities (41%) were significantly higher than for respondents in this survey.

For those who indicated membership, the following trade unions were identified (Figure 5.7):

**Figure 5.7 Trade union membership**



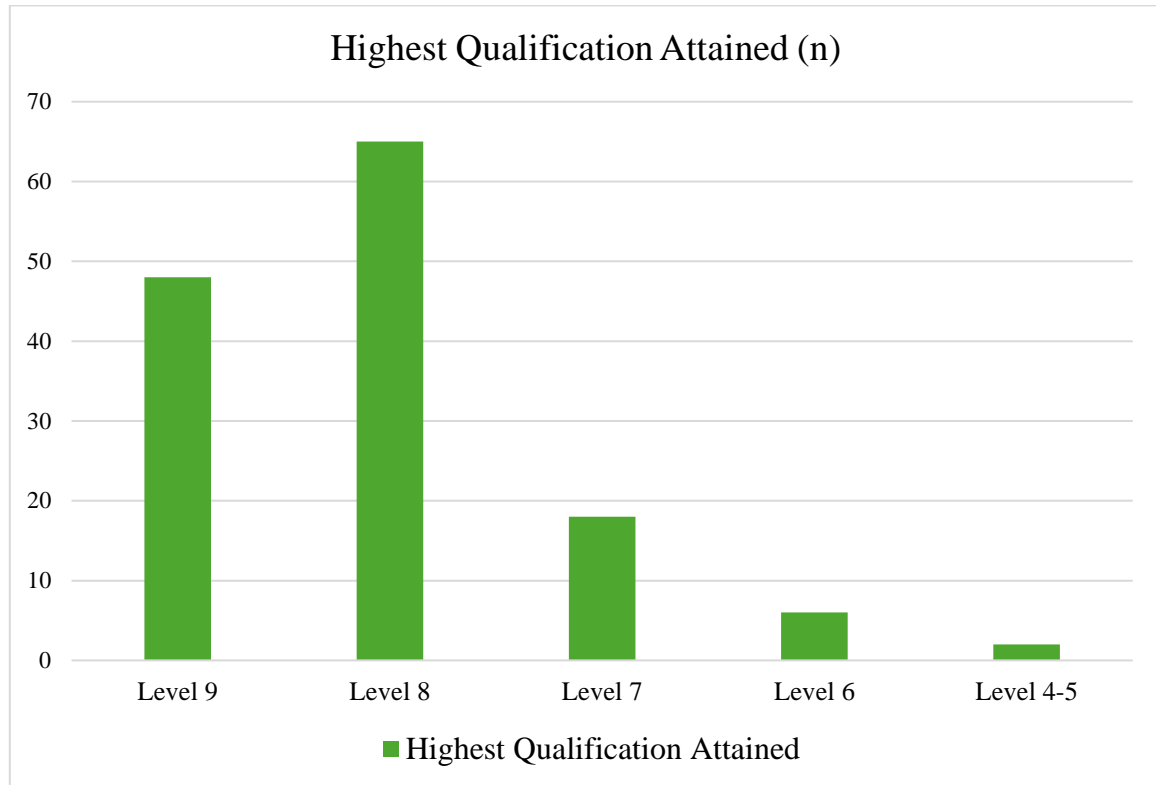
## 5.2.2 Education and training pathways

### 5.2.2.1 Education

This study shows that participants have taken a variety of routes to becoming youth workers. Survey respondents were invited to answer a series of questions about their pathway into the occupation of youth work. Participants were asked to indicate their highest level of qualification attained, in accordance with the National Framework of Qualifications (Figure 5.8). As shown in Figure 5.9, the majority of participants had a NFQ Level 8 or Level 9

qualification (equating to 46% at Level 8 and 35% at Level 9). A list of qualifications identified by participants is available in Appendix I.

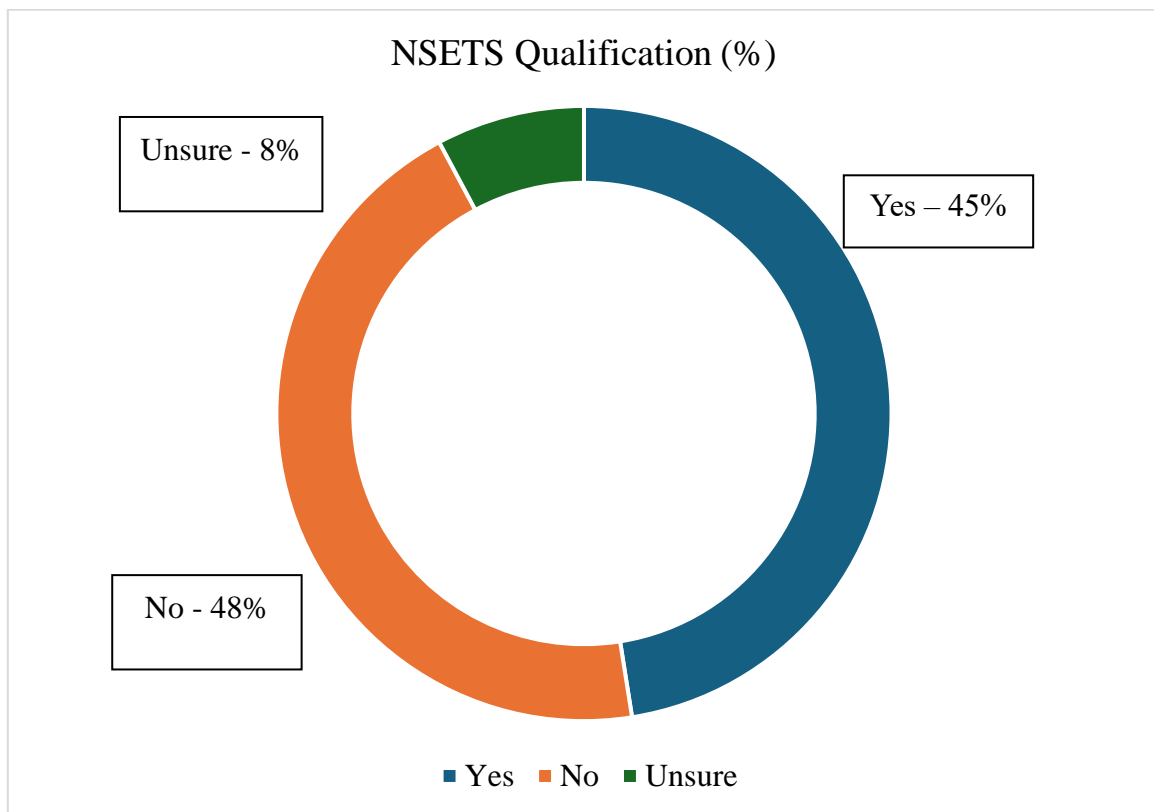
**Figure 5.8 Highest qualification attained**



#### 5.2.2.2 NSETS qualification

Participants were asked whether they possessed a qualification that was professionally endorsed by the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS). As illustrated in Figure 5.9, 45% (n. 63) indicated they did possess an NSETS-endorsed qualification, and slightly more (48%, n. 67) stated they did not, with the remainder (8%) being unsure. Of those who possessed an NSETS-endorsed qualification, just under 50% (n. 33) had completed their training pre-service, with 49% (n. 30) of participants completing the programme in-service.

**Figure 5.9 NSETS qualification?**



The survey findings illustrate the diversity of ways in which people can become youth workers in Ireland. The majority of youth workers who have completed this survey have attained a minimum of Level 8 NFQ qualification, yet a large proportion of respondents do not possess a NSETS endorsed qualification.

#### *5.2.2.3 Prior youth work experience*

More than two in every five respondents (44%, n. 61) had participated in youth work as young people prior to becoming youth workers themselves.

Well over half of participants (57%, n. 81) indicated that they had volunteered in youth work prior to becoming a youth worker, and the majority of these (n. 59) were female. The proportion with prior volunteering experience was even higher, at 67% (n. 42) among respondents who possessed a professional qualification.

70% (n. 99) of participants answered yes when asked if they were in a different full-time occupation prior to becoming a youth worker. Of those that said yes, the previous full-time occupations included the following:

- Social Care, Social Work, Childcare, Nursing, Homeless Services (n. 28)

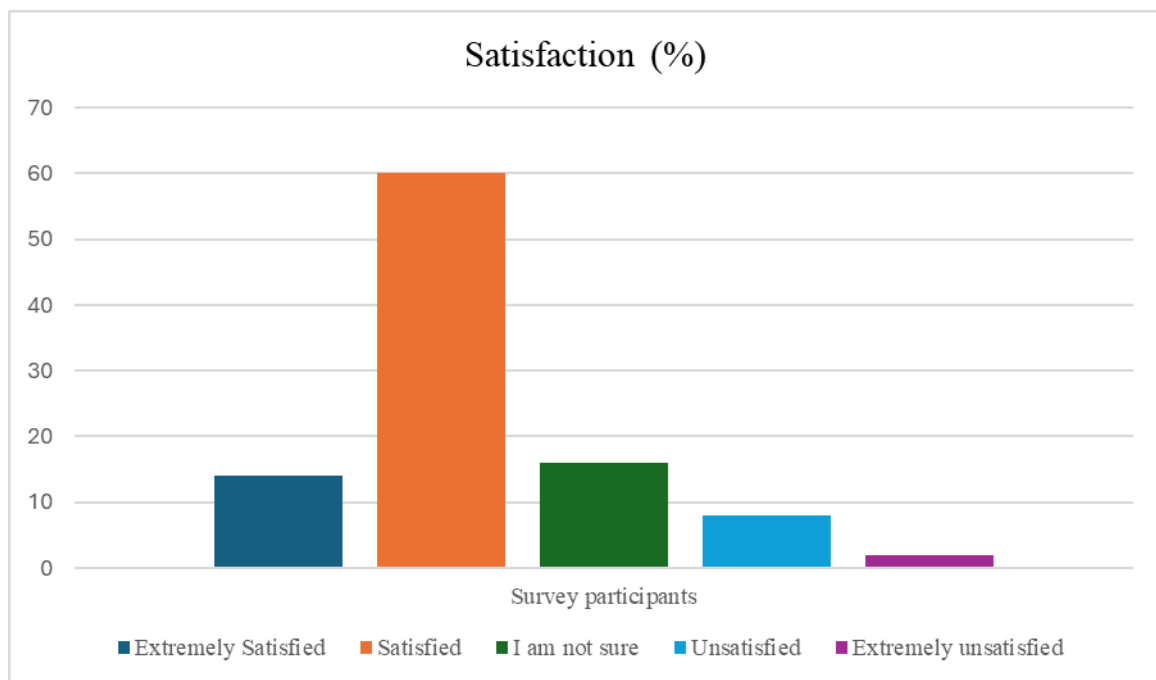
- Retail (n. 20)
- Formal Education – Teacher, SNA (n. 13)
- Hospitality (n. 4)

### 5.2.3 Rewards and challenges

#### 5.2.3.1 Satisfaction

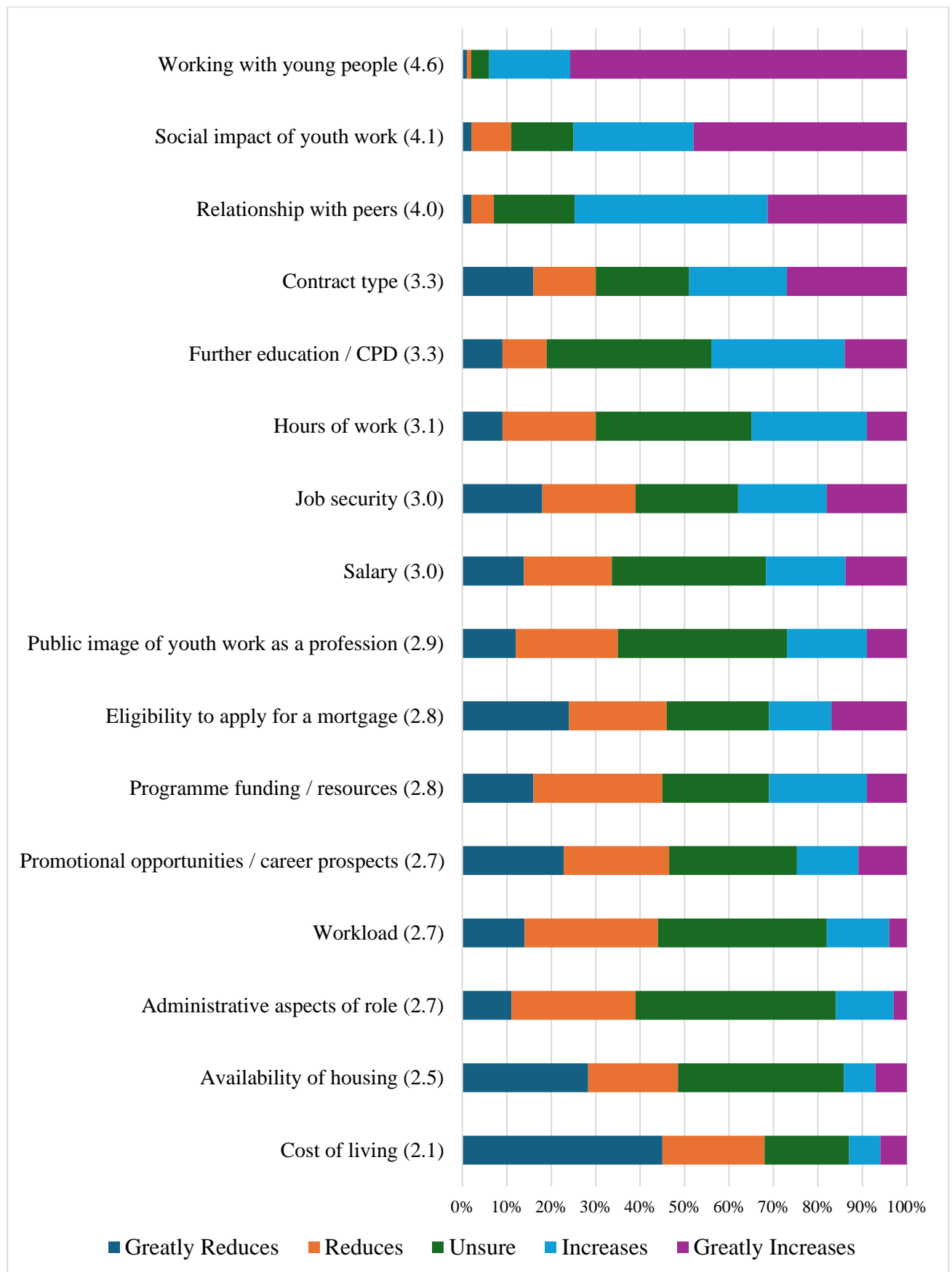
As illustrated in Figure 5.10, in terms of overall job satisfaction, the vast majority of respondents (74%) were satisfied or extremely satisfied in their current roles. 16% (n. 22) of respondents were not sure about their satisfaction level, while less than one in ten (10%, n. 14) were either unsatisfied or extremely unsatisfied.

**Figure 5.10 Overall job satisfaction**



Respondents were asked to assign a score to a series of factors that might influence their satisfaction, using a scale of 1 – 5 whereby 1 means ‘Greatly reduces my job satisfaction’ and 5 means ‘Greatly increases my job satisfaction’. As highlighted in Figure 5.11, working with young people, the social impact of youth work and participants’ relationships with their peers were factors that greatly increased satisfaction levels, with the cost of living, promotional opportunities / career prospects and availability of housing ranking high in terms of factors reducing satisfaction. Figure 5.11 displays the percentage breakdown for each item and response category, with the mean score for each factor shown in brackets.

**Figure 5.11 Factors that influence satisfaction levels**



Scoring of the factors influencing respondents' level of satisfaction varied according to gender. Male respondents scored more highly on areas such as salary, impact, job security and promotional opportunities, while female respondents scored more highly on areas relating to work with young people and the public image of youth work as a profession.

There was only a marginal difference between those who have, don't have or don't know if they have a professional qualification with regard to factors that influence their level of satisfaction.

When compared by age, there were some notable differences in mean scores. For the factor 'hours of work', the overall mean score was 3.1 (almost exactly mid-scale) but there was a clear tendency for older participants to assign it a lower score (i.e. regard it as more associated with dissatisfaction than satisfaction). The mean score for both the 25-29 and 30-34 age groups was 3.4, but for those aged 40-49 it was 2.9 and for the 50-59 age group (n. 20) it was 2.8, 0.6 of a point below the 25-34-year-olds.

In considering the factor 'relationships with peers', the mean response was 4.0. Participants aged 30-34 scored substantially higher (4.4) than both the 35-39 (3.9) and 40-49 (3.8) age groups. However, the age-related pattern was not straightforward because the score for both the 50-59 and 60+ age groups was 4.0. Overall, peer relationships were found to be highly satisfactory among respondents.

Some differences were found when the length of time participants had been employed as youth workers was considered. For example, those employed for 1-3 years scored 4.6 under the 'social impact of youth work'. This score tended to reduce the longer respondents were employed and was a full point lower (3.6) among those employed for 21-29 years.

In contrast, 'eligibility to apply for a mortgage' received the lowest score (1.9) among respondents employed as a youth worker for 1-3 years (1.9) as compared with those employed for 4-7 years (2.8), 8-10 years (3.0), 11-15 years (2.9), 16-20 years (3.0) and 21-29 years (3.4).

## **5.2.4 Role and task**

### *5.2.4.1 Tasks and duties*

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they undertake a series of tasks and duties, on a scale of 1-6 as follows: 1=Never; 2=Annually; 3=Every few months; 4=Monthly; 5=Weekly; 6=Daily.

The highest-ranking items focussed on the more direct aspects of youth work practice, with ‘planning for work with young people’ (5.2), ‘work with young people in groups’ (5.1), ‘individual work with young people’ (5.0) and ‘evaluating work with young people’ (5.0) being the areas of work with the highest scores. Of the 15 items on the list, these four were the only ones scoring 5.0 or higher.

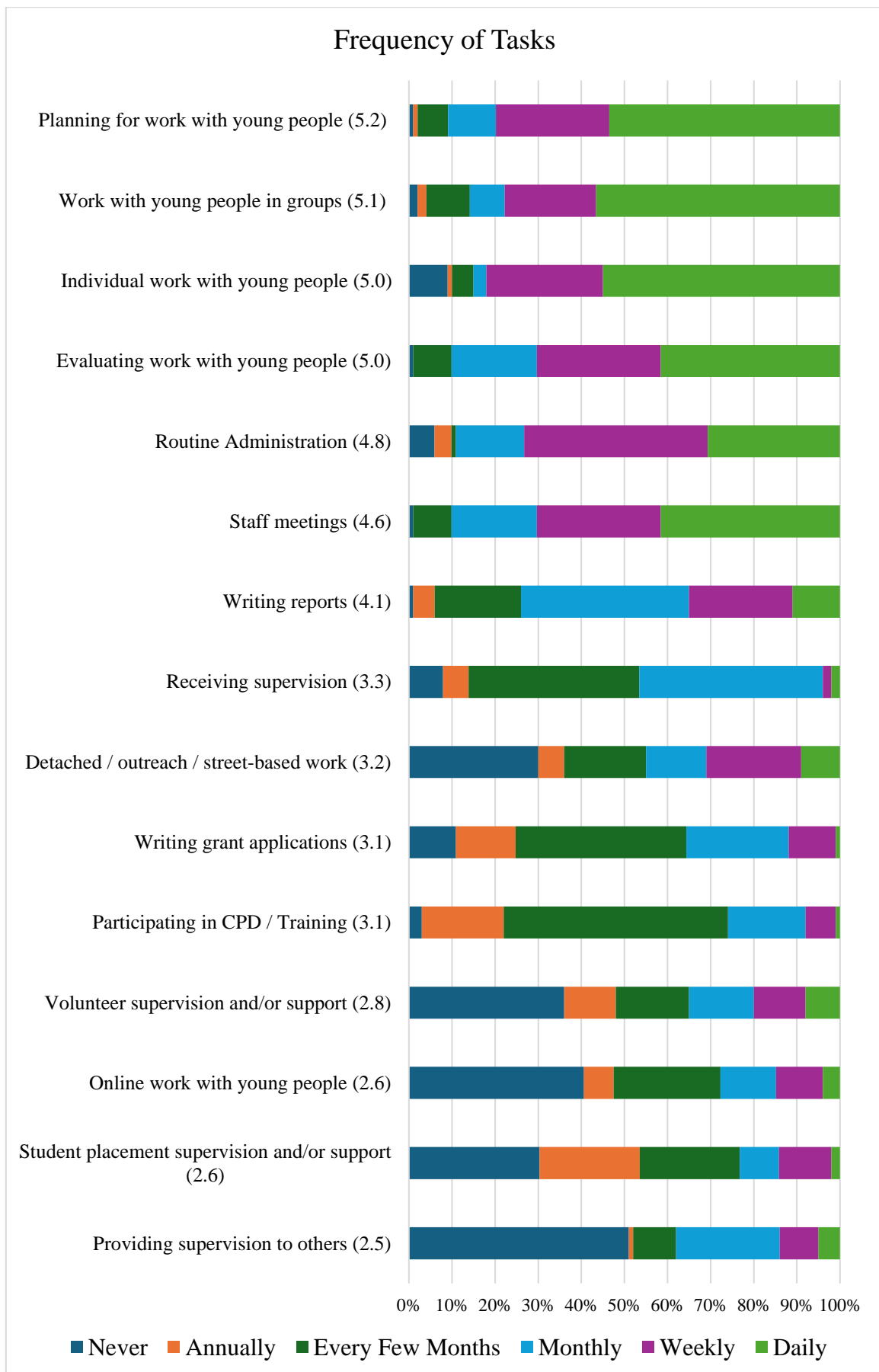
Figure 5.12 summarises the percentage breakdown of responses for each item with the mean score displayed in brackets. The scores for what might be called ‘centre-based’ face-to-face work with young people as referred to above (5.1 with groups and 5.0 with individuals) were much higher than the score for detached/outreach/street-based work (3.2), which in turn was higher than the score for online work with young people (2.6).

Aside from direct work and planning for/evaluating work with young people, the most frequent activities for respondents were routine administration (4.8), staff meetings (4.5) and writing reports (4.1).

Overall the survey findings in this area reflect the ongoing policy and funding emphasis on the importance of direct contact with young people as well as the long-standing discourse within youth work as a both a social movement and a social profession according to which the building and sustaining of relationships with young people are at the heart of the work. The findings are also in line with the increasing emphasis both within the policy context and in anecdotal accounts from youth workers themselves on the administrative aspects (and demands) of the job of youth workers and the role of youth organisations.

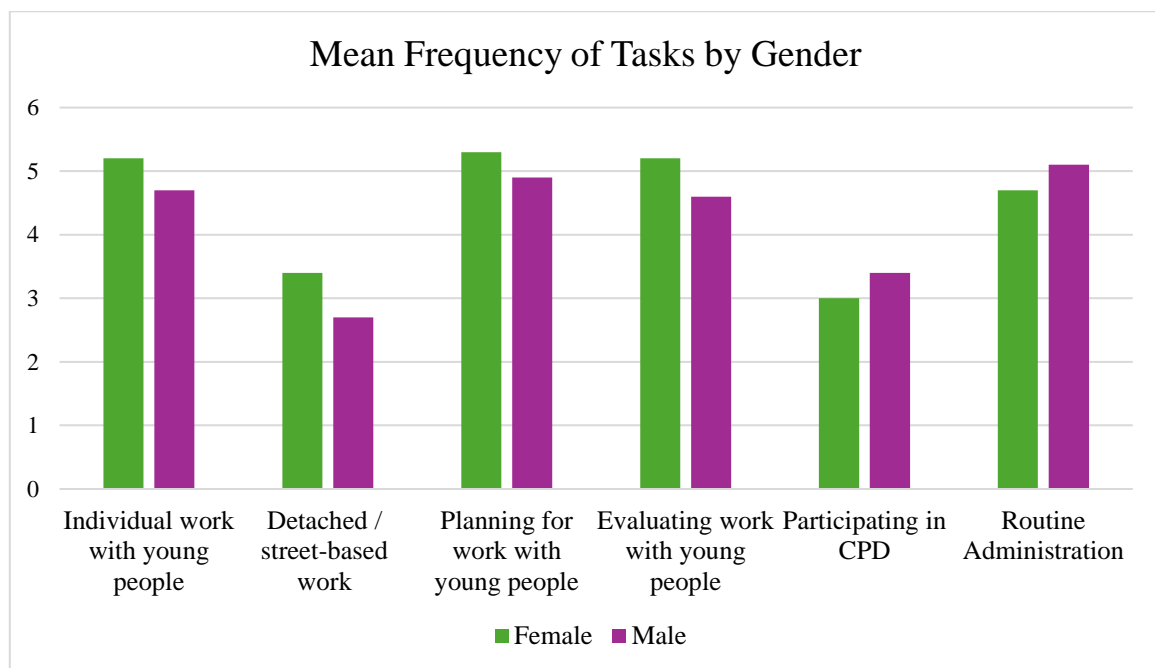
The relatively low scores for both volunteer support (2.8) and student support and supervision (2.6) are notable given that policy continues to emphasise the complementarity of the contributions of volunteer and paid/professional workers and the role of the latter in supporting the former; while the contribution of qualified and trained practitioners to the supervision and support of those undergoing training is generally regarded as a key aspect of the professional ‘socialisation’ and ‘identity formation’ process within established professions (Cruess & Cruess, 2018). Both of these matters will be returned to as part of the discussion in the next chapter.

**Figure 5.12 Frequency of tasks**



There was a gender pattern to the responses regarding frequency of tasks (Figure 5.13). Female participants scored more highly regarding direct work with young people, planning and evaluating the work while male participants scored higher with regard to participation in CPD, providing supervision and routine administration. Specifically with regard to working with young people on an individual basis, female participants (4.2) scored more highly than males (3.7).

**Figure 5.13 Frequency of tasks by gender**



Not surprisingly, there was a difference in the frequency of tasks between respondents in roles categorised as youth worker and those categorised as management positions. Youth workers were doing more direct work with young people alongside planning and evaluating of such work, whereas managers were busier in terms of providing supervision, report writing and applying for grants.

With regard to funding stream, UBU youth workers were working directly with young people more frequently than their colleagues in IYJS-funded projects. In contrast, survey participants working in IYJS-funded projects were spending more time applying for grants (3.6 vs 3.0).

With regard to tasks and duties that involve supporting others (providing staff supervision, volunteer and student support), there were only marginal differences between the mean scores of those in a managerial role and those in a youth work role, a finding that may seem surprising. In contrast, there was a broad pattern whereby, with some exceptions, those with

more years of experience in employment as a youth worker were more likely to engage more frequently in tasks relating to supervising and supporting others, as summarised in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2 Supervision of others by duration of youth work employment (Mean)**

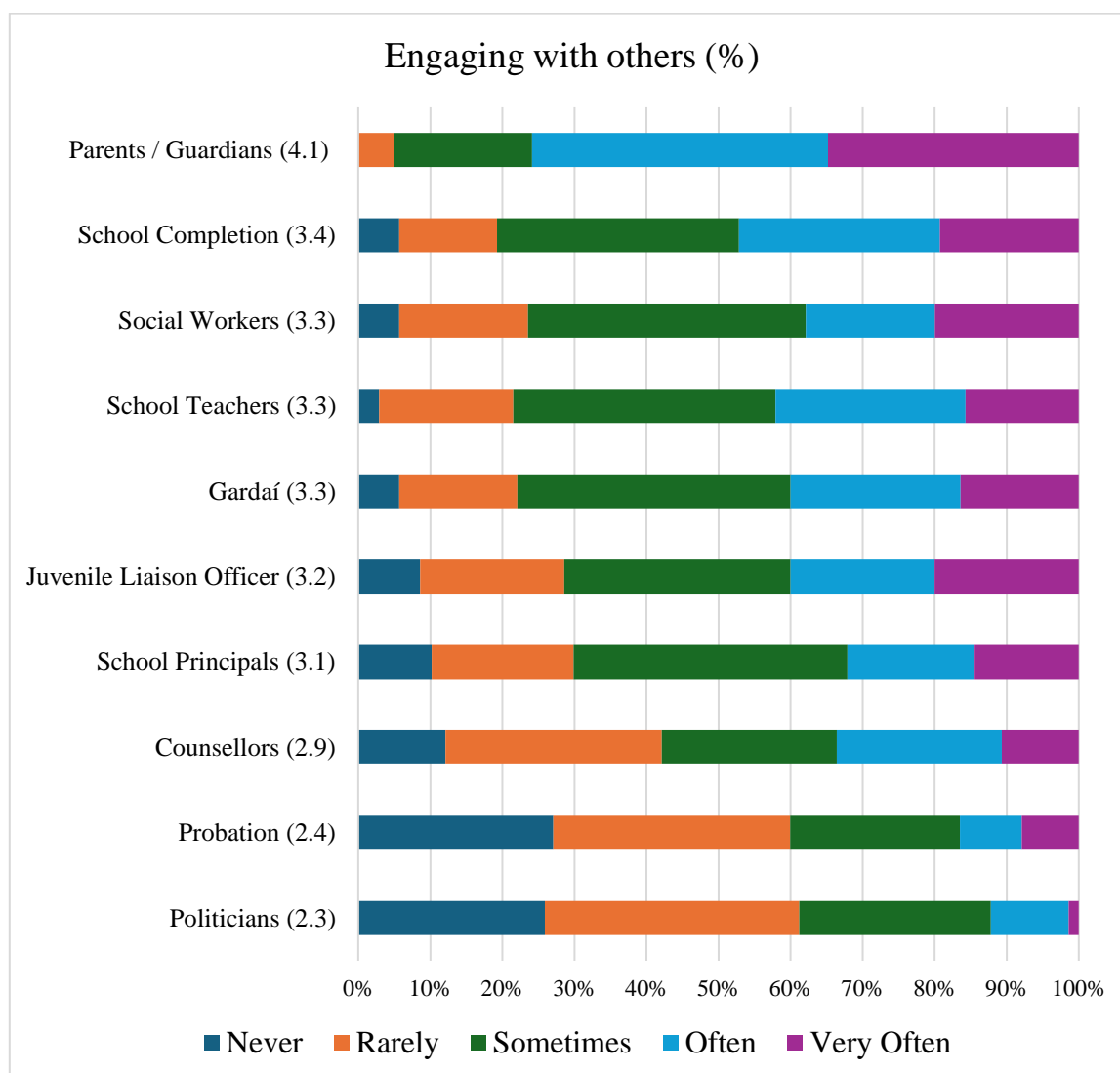
<b>Duration of youth work employment</b>	<b>Providing supervision to other staff members (Mean)</b>	<b>Student placement supervision and/or support (Mean)</b>	<b>Volunteer supervision and/or support (Mean)</b>
Less than 1 year	1.8	2.3	2.4
1-3 years	1.3	2.4	2.5
4-7 years	2.1	2.8	2.9
8-10 years	2.4	2.5	3.0
11-15 years	3.0	2.4	2.8
16-20 years	2.8	2.8	2.6
21-29 years	3.7	2.7	3.5
30+ years	4.0	5.0	1.0
<b>Total Mean</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>2.8</b>

#### 5.2.4.2 Engaging with others

Participants were asked how frequently they engage with a range of other individuals, professionals and services. Responses demonstrated the integrated nature of professional youth work in Ireland, with participants often engaging with a range of other people, services and bodies who work with or on behalf of young people. Figure 5.14 displays the percentage breakdown of responses for each category with the mean score displayed in brackets. Overall, participants were engaging most often with parents/guardians, schoolteachers, gardaí and JLO, school completion services and counsellors.

Youth workers in this survey engaged less frequently with politicians, which is in line with the finding (see below, 5.2.5) that they do not think they have a high level of involvement in policy relating to their practice.

**Figure 5.14 Engaging with others**



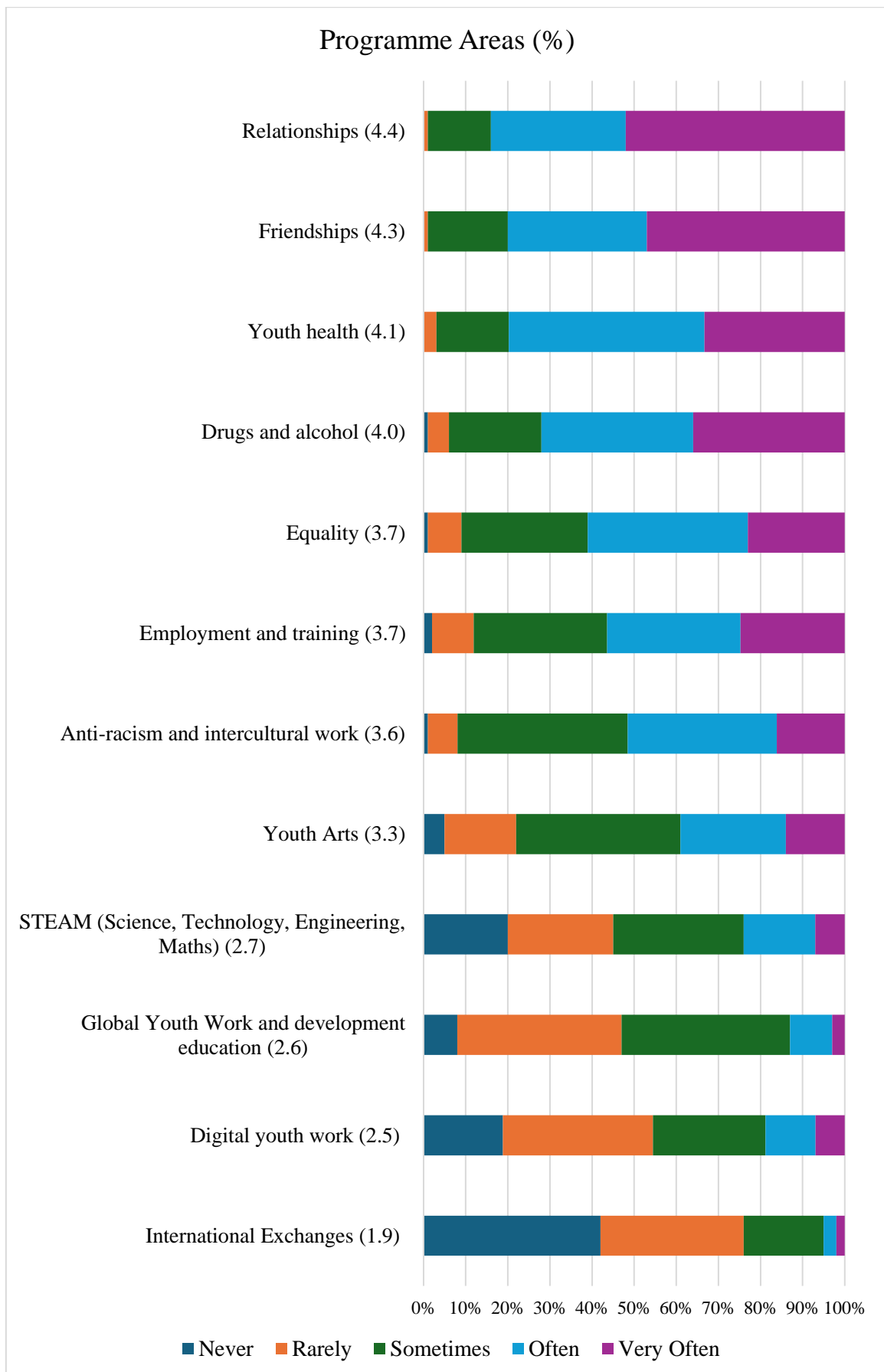
#### 5.2.4.3 Programme areas

Figure 5.15 illustrates the frequency with which respondents said they were involved in a range of programme areas in youth work. As above, the graphic displays the percentage breakdown of responses for each programme area with the mean score in brackets.

Relationships, friendships, drugs and alcohol and health were the most common programme areas, all scoring 4.0 or higher out of a possible 5.0, meaning they were engaged in ‘often’ or ‘very often’. Work on equality, employment and training, anti-racism and intercultural youth work, and youth arts all scored between 3.0 and 4.0, suggesting that these are quite regular areas of practice for respondents. Both ‘STEAM’ and digital youth work, along with global youth work and development education, were engaged in less frequently, while international exchange was the only area scoring below 2.0, suggesting that this is an area in which

respondents 'rarely' engage. Male respondents (3.6) scored higher than female participants (3.1) with regard to frequency of participation in youth arts. Apart from this, differences between other sub-groups within the sample, and between respondents with different funding sources, were minimal.

**Figure 5.15 Programme areas**



#### 5.2.4.4 Continuing professional development (CPD) and training

Participants were asked if their employer has offered training relevant to their current role as a youth worker. More than nine in every ten participants (91%, n. 128) responded yes.

Participants were also invited to list the training offered by their employer that is most relevant to their current role. A full list of the training opportunities provided is included in Appendix J. The training that focused on youth work skills for practice included:

- Child Protection
- Mental Health
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Relationships
- Motivational Interviewing
- Consent

Many participants also cited examples of formal training programmes they had participated in, including:

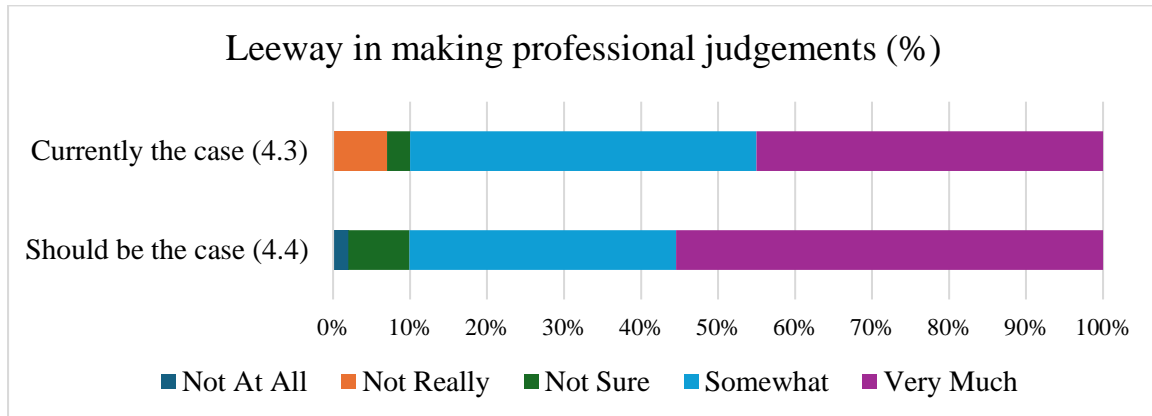
- Masters in Human Rights and Criminal Justice
- MSocSc in Community Work and Youth Work
- NUI Certificate in Community Education and Equality Studies

#### 5.2.5 Youth work as a profession

Survey participants were presented with a series of statements, shown below in italics, regarding the nature of professional youth work in Ireland. They were then invited to answer a two-part Likert-style question, indicating (a) the extent to which the situation described in the statement is *currently* the case; and (b) the extent to which they think it *should* be the case, resulting in a mean score between 1 and 5 for each part. The findings are summarised in the Figures below. In the accompanying text, if differences are referred to between sub-groups within the sample it means that there was a difference in the mean score of at least 0.5.

*'I have a lot of leeway in making professional judgements about how I work with young people.'*

**Figure 5.16 Leeway in making professional judgements.**



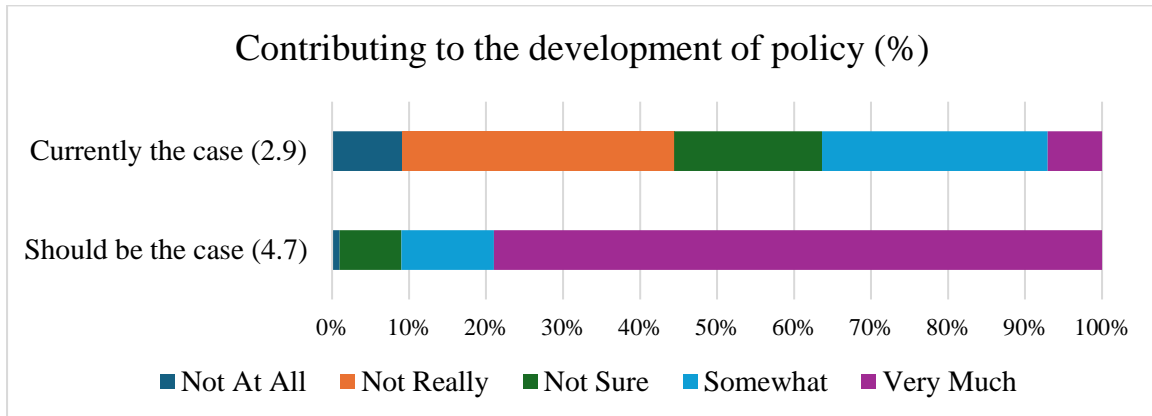
Regarding the statement ‘I have a lot of leeway in making professional judgements about how I work with young people’ (Figure 5.16), the mean scores for what is currently the case and what should be the case are very closely similar (4.3 and 4.4 respectively), suggesting that the situation is broadly satisfactory for respondents in terms of what can be described as their professional autonomy.

However, the distribution of response categories differs between the two parts, meaning that the view of respondents regarding how things *should* be seems more ‘definite’ (there are no ‘not really’ responses to the second part). Respondents in youth work roles scored marginally lower than those in management positions regarding both the current situation and how it should be. Respondents in IYJS funded projects scored higher than other respondents on both counts. Female respondents scored lower than their male counterparts in relation to what they perceive is currently the case, however scored higher in terms of what should be the case, meaning that the gap between the actual and the ideal is greater for them.

There was little difference on the basis of how long respondents have been youth workers, with one exception: when considering what should be the case, those working for less than 1 year scored higher (4.7) than those working for 16-20 years (4.2).

*‘Professional youth workers make a significant contribution to the development of the national policies that shape their practice.’*

**Figure 5.17 Contributing to the development of policy**



Participants were asked about the contribution of youth workers to the development of national policy. As is evident from Figure 5.17, there was a substantial difference between the score for what respondents believed was currently the case (2.9) versus what should be the case (4.7). This gap of almost two points in the mean score suggests that, overall, participants want to contribute much more to the development of national policies that shape their practice than they currently do or can.

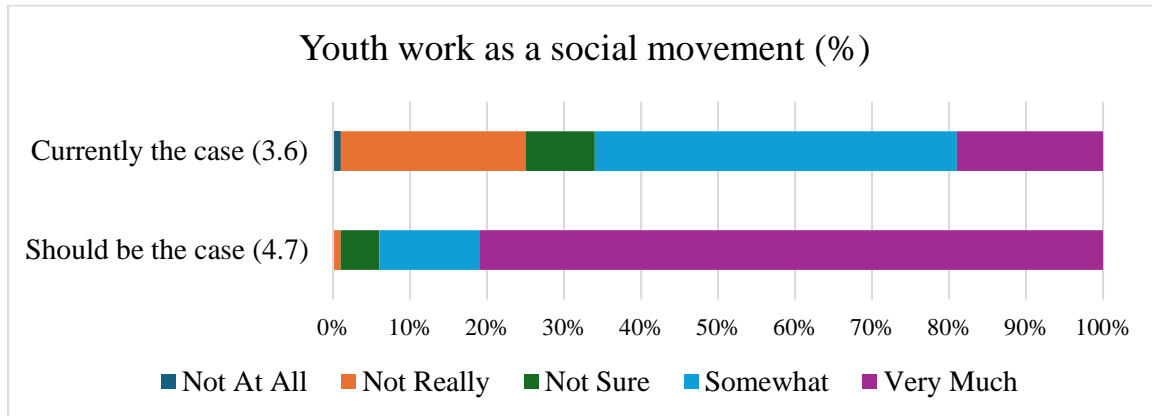
Female respondents scored more highly (3.0) than their male counterparts (2.4) in terms of their current contribution to national policies. There was no difference between those with or without a professional qualification, while youth workers scored slightly higher on current contribution than those in management positions.

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, trade union members scored lower (4.3) than non-members (4.8) regarding the contribution that youth workers *should* make to national policy.

Participants who had been youth workers for less than 1 year scored lower (4.2) than many other age groups in terms of what should be the case, with those working for 1-3 years, 8-10 years and 11-15 years all scoring 4.8. Having said this, it is important to stress that the scores on this item for all age groups and for all other sub-groups were very high.

*‘Youth work is a social movement inspired by values and a vision of how society could be better for all young people.’*

**Figure 5.18 Youth work as a social movement**

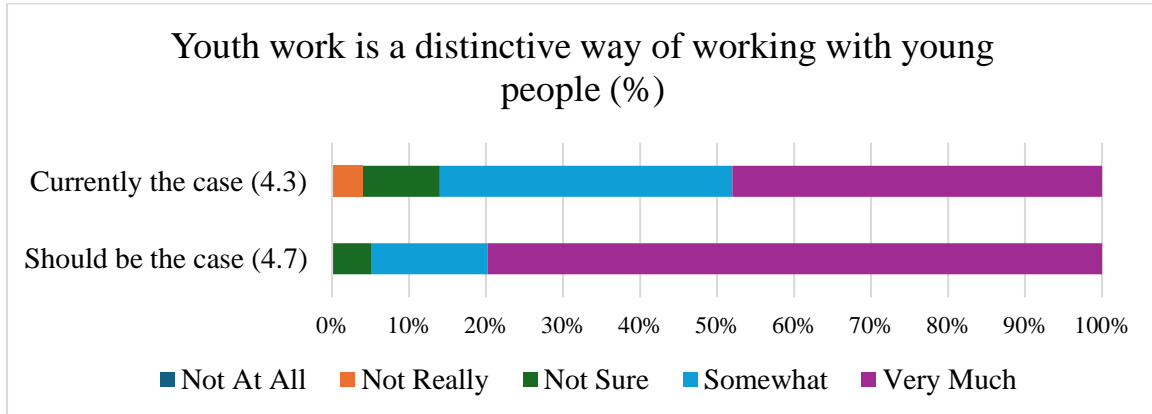


As discussed in Chapter 2, there is considerable literature on the history and identity of youth work as a social movement as well as an emerging social profession. Respondents to the survey demonstrated substantial agreement (3.6) that youth work is a social movement but they were even more strongly of the view that it *should* be a social movement (4.7).

This difference of more than a full point in mean scores clearly suggests that, from the point of view of participants in this survey, youth work’s identity as ‘a social movement with its own values and vision’ is not being as fully acknowledged or expressed as it should be. Respondents without a professional qualification scored slightly higher in terms of the current situation, although both groups scored similarly regarding what should be the case. Those aged 17-24 scored 3.3 regarding the current situation whilst participants aged 25-29 scored half a point higher at 3.8.

*'Youth work is a distinctive way of working with young people, drawing on a distinctive combination of theories, principles and methods.'*

**Figure 5.19 Youth work is a distinctive way of working with young people**

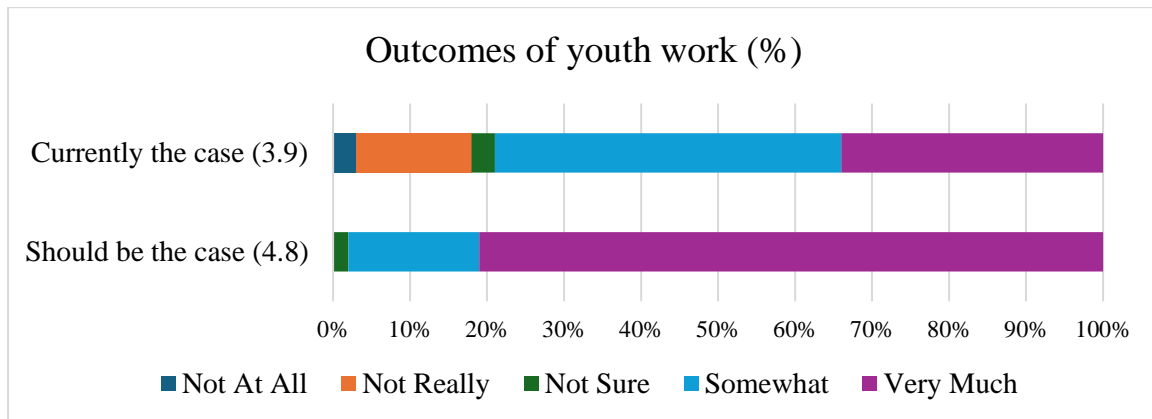


There was broad correspondence in participants' mean scores regarding the extent to which youth work is (4.3), and should be (4.7), a distinctive way of working with people with its own theory, principles and methods (Figure 5.19). Responses were also broadly similar between female and male participants, youth workers and managers.

There was no discernible pattern based on age with the exception of the fact that those in the 60-69 age group scored considerably lower than others on youth work's current situation as a 'distinctive way or working' (2.3) and also scored slightly lower than average (4.3) regarding what should be the case (although it should be remembered that there was a very small number of participants in this group).

*'The outcomes of youth work are set by youth workers in partnership with young people.'*

**Figure 5.20 Outcomes of youth work**



The final statement concerned the extent to which the outcomes of youth work are – and should be – ‘set by youth workers in partnership with young people’. The mean score for the current situation is quite high (3.9) but the score for how things should be (4.8) is the highest for any item in this series of statements about youth work as a profession. The view of respondents appears to be that while partnership is a feature of much current youth work practice, there are still significant gaps. As Figure 5.20 illustrates, almost one in five respondents believe that partnership with young people is ‘not really’ or ‘not at all’ the basis for setting outcomes at present. In contrast, more than four in five are ‘very much’ of the view that it should be. This view was shared across all sub-groups within the sample.

Overall, it is clear from the above findings that the landscape of professional youth work is not being experienced in the ways that respondents believe it should be. In the case of all five statements the current situation falls short of how respondents would like it to be, although in some cases by a very narrow margin. In general terms, respondents are satisfied with the degree to which they can exercise professional autonomy, and confident that what they are engaged in is a distinctive and coherent professional practice. They see some room for improvement in the recognition and expression of youth work’s identity as a values-based social movement and – perhaps related to this – in upholding and acting on the principle of partnership with young people when it comes to setting ‘outcomes’ for youth work. Above all, they appear to be of the view that youth workers are much less involved than they should be in contributing to national policies that have a bearing on their practice.

Notably, there are very few differences in responses between sub-groups within the sample based on variables such as job title and role, qualification or type of organisation/funding source. There is however some slight evidence of differences based on factors such as age and length of time employed in youth work.

#### *5.2.5.1 Trust in youth workers*

Youth workers are often encouraged to build trusting relationships with young people; however, this survey took the opportunity to ask participants about their perceptions of the extent to which *other people* trust youth workers.

Survey participants were invited to indicate the extent to which a range of groups place their trust in youth workers, using a scale from 1 ('Not at all') to 5 ('Very much'). The groups were as follows:

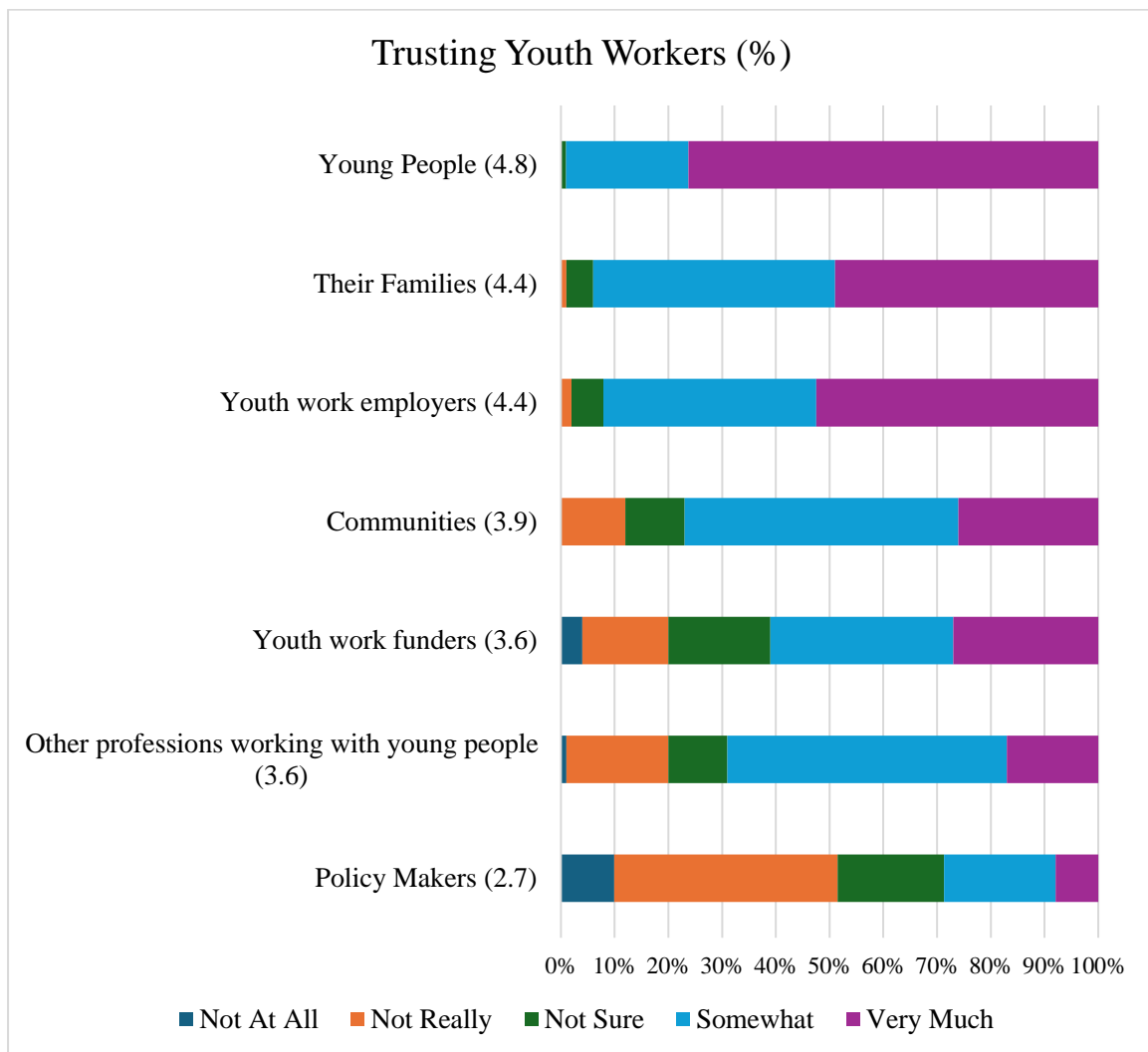
- young people
- their families
- communities
- other professions working with young people
- youth work employers
- youth work funders
- policy makers.

Respondents were generally of the view that those who engage most directly with youth workers have greater trust in them than those who do not. According to this sample, young people and their families and youth work employers score highly on trust in youth workers, while policy makers score the lowest from the perspective of respondents

There were some slight differences in scores based on funding source and type of project.

IYJS workers scored higher than their UBU colleagues in terms of perceived trust from communities, while UBU-funded respondents assigned slightly higher scores to youth work funders and policy makers. Figure 5.21 displays the percentage breakdown of responses for each group/category with the mean score displayed in brackets.

**Figure 5.21 Trust in youth workers**



#### 5.2.5.2 Developing the youth work profession in Ireland

Respondents presented with a series of options for the development of the youth work profession in Ireland and asked to indicate the level of importance they would attach to each, using a five-point scale. Table 5.3 summarises the results. The highest scores (4.7) were for research into youth work (which 79% of respondents considered ‘very important’) and a code of ethical practice while the lowest (3.6) was for a licence to practise youth work (which only 34% considered ‘very important’).

**Table 5.3 Areas for development of the youth work profession**

	Priority Area	Mean Score
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Research into the impact of youth work</li><li>• Code of Ethical Practice for youth workers</li></ul>	4.7 4.7
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collaboration amongst youth work organisations</li><li>• Collaboration with other organisations working with young people</li></ul>	4.6 4.6
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A formal Continuing Professional Development Framework</li><li>• A professional association for youth workers</li></ul>	4.5 4.5
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A more flexible approach to employment terms and conditions for women in the sector</li><li>• A regulatory body for youth work</li></ul>	4.2 4.2
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A formal register of professionally qualified youth workers</li></ul>	4.0
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A license to practice youth work</li></ul>	3.6

There were no notable differences in patterns of response across the major sub-groups within the sample, except that – as in the case of earlier questions – a few age-related findings may be worthy of mention. The youngest age group (17-24) had the lowest score (3.5) regarding the importance of a formal register of youth workers, but the highest (4.0) for a licence to practice.

They also had the joint lowest score (3.8) for the importance of a regulatory body for youth work, interestingly sharing this score with the *oldest* age group (60-69). The size of the survey sample and especially of sub-groups within it, along with the non-random sampling strategy adopted, mean that no generalisations whatever can be drawn from such patterns in the data, but they may help to point the way to questions that could be addressed in further research.

### 5.3 Focus Group Findings

As stated at the outset of this chapter, a total of 18 people participated in the two focus groups for the study. Demographic information and key job-related data concerning each focus group participant is provided below in Tables 5.4 and 5.5.

**Table 5.4 In-person focus group participant information**

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Current Job Title	No of years' in paid employment as a youth worker	NSETS Endorsed Qualification?
Jean	Female	60+	Team Leader	15	No
Emma	Female	30-34	Youth Worker	6	Yes
Daniel	Male	50-59	Youth Justice Worker	12	No
Liam	Male	Unknown	Team Leader	7	No
Noah	Male	Unknown	Community Drugs and Alcohol Youth Worker	10	No
Adam	Male	25-29	Community Drugs and Alcohol Youth Worker	2.5	Yes
Laura	Female	40-49	Team Leader	6	No
James	Male	Unknown	Programme Support Worker	25	Unknown

**Table 5.5 Online focus group participant information**

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Current Job Title	No of years in paid employment as a youth worker	NSETS Endorsed Qualification
Jane	Female	40-49	Manager	20	Yes
Rose	Female	25-29	Youth Worker	6	Yes
Amy	Female	Unknown	Development Officer	10	Yes
Niamh	Female	35-39	Family Resource Centre Manager	16	Yes
Robert	Male	Unknown	Youth Service Manager	12	Yes
Carmel	Female	Unknown	Youth Worker	10	Yes
April	Female	40-49	Youth Worker	15	No
Sean	Male	25-29	Project Worker	2	No
Ryan	Male	Unknown	Project Manager	10	No
Eric	Male	40-49	Senior Development Worker	15	Yes

As discussed in Chapter 4 (section 4.5.2) the analysis of the focus group discussions resulted in the identification of four major themes: becoming a youth worker, being a youth worker, the educational nature of youth work, and the development of the youth work profession. These will be used as headings for the presentation of findings below.

### **5.3.1 Becoming a youth worker**

As stated in 5.2.2, this study shows that participants have taken a variety of routes to becoming youth workers. In the absence of any prescribed entry to the occupation and owing to the fact that Irish youth work's recent history includes both a process of (at least partial) professionalisation and an ongoing emphasis on the role and contribution of volunteerism, some participants stressed the value of a diverse youth work workforce.

As discussed in Chapter 2, despite the fact that the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS) was established in 2005 to provide professional endorsement (a form of accreditation) of higher education programmes of youth work education and

training in Ireland, it is possible to apply for and gain employment in youth work in this country without possessing a professional qualification.

There is no formal or legal obligation on youth work (or other ‘youth service’) employers to hire people with minimum or specific qualifications. This is in contrast to the situation in the ‘cognate professions’ of teaching and social work. It now also differs from the situation in social care, which in 2023 became the most recent of the social professions to be regulated by CORU. From 1<sup>st</sup> December 2025 it became illegal to use the title or practise the job of ‘social care worker’ without being on the social care register, for which a professional qualification in social care (minimum Level 7 on the NFQ) is a requirement. Unlike the aforementioned occupations, the Irish youth work workforce is comprised of a mix of professionally qualified and ‘other-qualified’ individuals.

As described earlier in this chapter, while 93.6% of survey respondents have a minimum Level 7 NFQ qualification, almost half of them (48%, n. 67) do not possess an NSETS-endorsed professional qualification in youth work. In fact, these ‘other-qualified’ youth workers marginally outnumber the professionally qualified practitioners within the sample (45%, n. 63).

The focus groups provided an opportunity to invite participants to take part in discussion about pathways into youth work. Interestingly, the conversations within the focus groups did not focus primarily on professional programmes, accreditation or protected titles, but more commonly highlighted the calling-to-care and vocational elements of youth work as an occupation. As previously highlighted in Chapter 3, there is a strong vocational influence on youth work in Ireland, which according to some focus group participants was of equal if not greater importance than a professional qualification:

*“You’re passion driven. It’s your life experience that drives you in it.” (Emma)*

This same participant, who has a professional qualification in youth work, focused on the importance of valuing a youth worker’s *“life experiences”* and highlighted that she began studying youth work before knowing what it was about: *“And this career was wild to me. In that it was like, oh that’s what youth work is? That [my previous experience] is where my passion for youth work came from. I’m just being honest.”*

Interestingly, the word passion was mentioned on six different occasions between the two focus groups. Jean suggested *“you have to have a passion or a drive,”* while Ryan, referring

to a colleague's pathway to youth work, identified youth work as a profession that combined two passions in one: their interest was prompted by *"a youth worker who studied film and theatre and brought his two passions together and knew that it was a great way to interact with young people"*.

An excerpt from the discussion between Emma and Jean highlights a perception by some participants that the competencies required to be a youth worker do not relate specifically to a qualification, or specific experience, but an ability to build relationships with young people:

Jean: *You have to acknowledge in terms of pathways – there's no one who will see through you quicker than a young person.*

Emma: *You have to have that motivation for change, and want to empower young people. I don't think that's something that can be taught. You have to have it, to bridge them gaps. Is it really just down to who we are?*

Life experience was commonly perceived in a positive light within the focus groups. Amy suggested that people *"without a qualification bring a lot to the work."*

*"It's not that there's no training required, but I think that's yeah, the way you can come at this is different. Like as in obviously if you're working with young people, you know you have to have an understanding of keeping them safe and protected from harm like which we all do. You know, things like that. But yeah, like I know some like, yeah, like loads of people that haven't got a social care or a youth work degree who are great youth workers, but they've done, they've done certain amounts of training to keep children young people safe."* (April)

Some of the above contributions raise the question of whether there may sometimes be a perceived dichotomy within the discourse of youth workers, and also in policy, between the practice of those who are professionally trained and qualified in youth work and the practice of those who are not but who have relevant experience and an abundance of such personal qualities as passion and commitment or what might be called a 'vocation' to work with young people.

Whether this dichotomous approach is justified is a point returned to below and in the next chapter. In any case, there is no doubt that for some focus group participants a relevant personal history or experience was seen as an asset to a youth worker: *"The field that I was working in was addiction because I had a lot of addiction in my family, so it comes back to*

*the relationship – how do you vision yourself as becoming part of something, and how do you share? It's based on what you've seen in your life. That's why I gravitated towards youth work” (Noah).*

Another participant related her concerns for the youth work profession to her motivation for taking part in the study:

*“I've been involved in youth work probably since the age of nine so like a young person being in youth club, working my way up through junior leadership, all that kind of stuff. Heading to Maynooth, getting a job, going back, doing the masters. And I think why I came here this morning is because I'm actually concerned about the professionalisation of youth work. I'm concerned with where it's all going. I don't know if I can see youth work existing into the future. I think that's where I'm at, at the moment.” (Jane)*

Well over half of survey participants (57%) had volunteered in youth work prior to taking up paid employment in the sector, and not surprisingly therefore the importance and relevance of volunteerism as a pathway into professional youth work was highlighted by some focus group participants.

*“If we become more standardised, do we lose grassroots youth work? People coming from the volunteer side with passion, volunteering then going back to studying. Is that gone? I would argue that it's been lost in some organisations anyway because they're filling roles only with people who are qualified.” (Jean)*

However, there was no consensus within the focus groups on the role of volunteerism, or on the question of whether other-qualified graduates should be able to take up paid youth work positions. In contrast, some participants who were themselves professionally qualified spoke with concern about the impact a recruitment and retention crisis was having on the core principles and practice of youth work as a profession, because the pathways or ‘routes of entry’ into youth work are not sufficiently rigorous and clearly defined.

For example, Niamh argued that youth work principles and values should not be compromised in an effort to fill vacancies: *“There's no cookie cutter youth worker. But there is a set of standards and there is a set of principles and values that the work is about that we must not disregard in this struggle to employ”.*

In summary, while focus group participants for the most part believed there is a need for youth workers to participate in high quality education and training, there were mixed views with regard to the requirement for specific youth work qualifications. For some participants, the vocational element of youth work is important, including its core commitment to social change and empowerment.

Of course, these things are not mutually exclusive and an important element of the NSETS criteria for endorsement is the emphasis on the ethical precepts and value base of youth work and the key role of professional education and training in enabling students to build on their life experiences and make optimal use of their personal qualities and commitment *as well as* imparting relevant academic knowledge and practical skills. The extent to which this need for an *integrated* approach to the education and training of youth workers – and their ‘pathways’ into the profession – is acknowledged by policy makers and by practitioners themselves will be revisited in the next chapter.

### 5.3.2 Being a youth worker

#### 5.3.2.1 Scope and range

Participants in the online focus group were asked to consider ‘what youth workers do’, and without allowing too much time for deliberation the answers were captured in a ‘word cloud’ graphic (Figure 5.22).

**Figure 5.22** What youth workers do?



A quick glance might lead an observer to conclude that there is little coherence to the responses. In fact, one participant initially quipped that ‘*we can’t even agree on what we do*’

(Robert). However, on further reflection the same participant commented that even though ‘very few of us had similar answers’, the reason might be that the groups of young people and communities the participants worked with were in different circumstances and at different stages of development, whether for the young people themselves or in the ‘community development cycle’. While a specific task(s) or aspect(s) of the work would therefore be uppermost in their minds at this particular time, it is likely that all or most of the aspects identified would be a concern for all of them at some point.

Certainly, a very wide range of roles and tasks were mentioned (including one person’s response of ‘everything’). While they were obviously expressed and assembled in no particular order, they do appear to include the major types of role and task that were included in the survey questionnaire, reflecting the literature on youth work practice: needs assessment, planning and delivery of work with groups and with individual young people (including ‘listening’ and ‘emotional support’) and also including work that goes beyond the pre-existing interests of the young people (such as ‘challenge’ and ‘raising awareness’). The administrative, organisational and ‘sectoral’ dimensions of the work are represented (‘funding applications’, ‘network meetings’ and, interestingly, ‘lobbying government’). Also, the responses include not only those features of the work that are planned and relatively predictable but also those that are not: the word ‘unexpected’ appears twice within this relatively small number of responses.

Significantly perhaps, there is no explicit mention of informal and/or non-formal education, a point that is taken up in a later section.

#### *5.3.2.2 Consistency and inconsistency*

In the course of the focus group discussions, through the process of comparing their own experiences of and perspectives on being a youth worker, participants had frequent occasion to point out the differences and even inconsistencies between their circumstances. They also made the point that such inconsistencies could be found more generally across the youth work sector. A very obvious way in which this applied was in relation to pay and conditions, and differences in ‘conditions’ sometimes related to the hours that workers were expected to engage in. Liam commented: *“It’s the inconsistency of it. Some organisations [pay more for less] – I would be on much more money than I’m on now, and probably doing less work.”*

Such differences seemed to occur irrespective of the nature of the respondents’ roles. They can be traced to nature of the policy and funding context of youth work in Ireland as

described in Chapter 2. Organisations receive grant-aid, either at national level from the (now) Department of Education and Youth or locally from the Education and Training Boards, and while they are then expected to deliver particular programmes and services to which they have committed, they have considerable discretion when it comes to the detail of expenditure, including with regard to salaries. As Jean put it, the funder: “..gives a pot of money to [an] organisation and says ‘see what you can get for that’. And that’s a major [source of] inconsistency.”

To complicate matters, this situation may differ somewhat when the source of funding is not DEY/ETB but an alternative department or agency that supports another form of ‘work with young people’, and different requirements or expectations may apply even within the same organisation.

In short, this means there is no nationwide pay scale for youth workers in Ireland. Some organisations pay more than others depending on their circumstances and on the mix of funding sources they have secured. Often, organisations are not in a position to offer more than 12-month rolling contracts due to the nature of funding agreements. For some research participants, there is also a geographical dimension to the differences and indeed inequalities in the pay and conditions of youth workers in different parts of the country.

In these circumstances, it was not surprising that youth workers might be inclined to move into other areas of work. Noah gave one example: “People are already making decisions about where they will have [more] consistency in their job. People I know, like health promotion [opportunities] came out, so people shifted from youth work.”

As well as the ‘push’ out of youth work because of unfavourable conditions, participants often spoke about the ‘pull’ factors that arose from other sectors “looking for youth workers in certain roles now” because of the skills and qualities they perceived youth worker as having. Social care in particular was often highlighted in this context, because the focus group discussions took place before the introduction of social care registration and regulation as described above. The following excerpt from the in-person focus group includes reference to some of these prominent factors.

Laura:            *Our jobs are subject to funding. There’s no guaranteed pension. And that’s massive. Youth work is not something you go in, it’s not an area you go in to if you want security when you retire.*

Emma: *People starting off trying to get mortgages and stuff – and you're going in and you're saying I'm only on a year contract, but it will roll over because I don't think the arse will fall out of the country anytime soon. So...*

Laura: *The government have to provide something for young people, so chances are we will have a job in 10 years' time.*

Noah: *It's not just about the idea of youth work itself, but the timescale, like we're talking about burnout. It's the time – people are becoming more about working 9-5, and the pension, having security at the end of their tenure, when they come to retirement age. People are already now choosing pathways saying – I'll go into a certain role to see that it will benefit me more opportunity with kids, to have a family. You know you're looking at the next phase of parenthood, and your partners who will have the kids. And how, on a youth work salary scale, how do you support or manage your household? Because for me, I'm not the breadwinner.*

As well as inconsistencies relating to pay and conditions, participants drew attention to different expectations regarding monitoring and reporting which were particularly evident and inconvenient when an organisation had more than one major source of funding (a common situation as already stated). One participant who worked in a service with funding from both the ETB and the IYJS suggested that as well as creating unnecessary additional administrative burdens and taking up time that could otherwise be devoted to direct work with young people, this situation could create tensions between workers:

*“I think youth work[ers are] being battled up against each other. We deal with many different funders, so we're dealing with the ETB and we're dealing with IYJS and our relationship with both is completely different and how we report and what the expectation is of those is completely different to both funders. And that really, really frustrates me because we're doing the same type of work like - we're a community-based youth service.” (Jane)*

Given the disparities and inconsistencies referred to, and in light of the fact that working collaboratively is regarded as a youth work specialism, participants considered the question of why there had not been a successful attempt to develop a collective voice for youth workers nationally. Niamh spoke briefly about her experience of seeing initiatives get off the

ground for limited periods, such as the “Irish Youth Workers Association” but to no long-term avail.

One very important consideration was the attitude of policy makers and funders towards youth workers as professionals, as compared with other professionals. It was suggested that, despite a reference to a professional association of youth workers in the National Youth Work Development Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2003), the state has never proactively supported or even encouraged the development of such a body, perhaps because it would enable youth workers to ‘make demands’ with greater force and authority. One respondent took the view that it is for similar reasons that the state is not inclined to get involved in the regulation or registration of the youth work profession, and thereby remove many of the inconsistencies highlighted above. According to Daniel: “...if we [the state] standardised you into a structured format, we’d have to employ you [differently]. That means pensions. That means rights, terms and conditions across the board. And they weren’t willing to do it.”

The same respondent also suggested that differences in workers’ pay and conditions were very likely to be related to, and to cause, inconsistencies in young people’s experiences of youth work relationships, programmes and processes, sometimes even within the same organisation. Based on experience of working in a GYDP, Daniel spoke about the negative experience of attempting to raise such matters with employers:

*“We’ve tried that. We are funded through the Department of Justice....[M]aybe 8-10 years ago, a few dozen of us got together [because we] felt quite isolated. And everybody was complaining because no matter where you worked, there was different conditions. No structure of pay. No incremental scales. Nothing. So somebody took it on to talk with the Department. Had meetings with the top civil servants in the Department of Justice. The official reason [we were given was] we won’t do it is because there’s no professional recognition of what you’re doing, so we can’t link that to the DoE, so we can’t pay you. But the real reason is, if we [the Department] did put an accreditation in and made it universal as an Irish model, we would have to employ you as state employees. We would not be able to pay an NGO to pay you the work that we expect you to do.”*

During the in-person focus group, a conversation took place about the influence of the ETB and ETB Youth Officers and their expectations of what youth workers do in practice. The

conversation partly related to the conditions of employment of youth workers and specifically the question of working hours, but at another level it revealed what may be fundamental differences of understanding and approach regarding the nature of youth work as a profession.

Laura: *What the ETBs want is inconsistent. When it started, UBU's needed to be open until 11pm at night – where does that leave a youth worker in terms of family life, work life balance? And what are you doing, telling young people and their families that it's ok to be out at 11pm at night?*

Noah: *And Saturdays.*

Emma: *I would argue though that is when youth work should be happening. Youth work is youth work. We are after school.*

Laura: *But 11pm at night is still crazy.*

Emma: *11 is, but we stay open until 10.*

Laura: *We stay open until 9.*

Daniel: *And this is where youth work is competitive.*

Emma: *You're right – there is an inconsistency. We are youth workers; we are after school.*

Noah: *I think if you go back to the idea that youth workers aren't protecting ourselves or managing our own welfare. The hours. A lot of that is coming out of hours, which we do think contributes to the burnout. It's maximising hours.*

Jean: *When you talk about it – I suppose – it's something I've always struggled with. ETB's telling us we should be open until 11pm at night. I've 13 groups a week. You add that up in terms of contact time – 2.5 hours for every group. I'm well over my contact time. I manage two projects. I have 13 groups in one, two in another. That will increase after the summer when we increase our time. So now I have to balance – do I shut the project?*

This exchange raises important issues about what it can (and should) mean in practice for youth work to offer non-formal and informal learning opportunities to young people that 'start where they are at' and are available and accessible to them in ways that align as much

as possible with their own interests and life-worlds. The conversation explicitly draws attention to the possible tensions that can arise between youth work principles (e.g. of universality, accessibility) and the practical constraints and demands facing a workforce that is severely stretched in terms of numbers and resources.

But it may also illustrate the fact that, perhaps because of the ‘variety of routes’ and ‘diversity of pathways’ into youth work as a profession in Ireland, workers sometimes lack a shared vocabulary to address common challenges, and also perceive the nature of those challenges in very different ways. This issue came into sharp relief when participants focused more explicitly on the question of youth work as education.

### **5.3.3 Educational nature of youth work**

As explained in the earlier sub-section on ‘Being a youth worker’, when participants in the online focus group were asked to respond to the question of ‘what youth workers do?’, none of them answered in terms of informal and/or non-formal education, or explicitly mentioned education at all. However, the topic of youth work as education was raised by the researcher in both focus groups because it is so central to youth work policy as well as to scholarly, professional and practice discourses of youth work.

A segment of the in-person focus group discussion is worth quoting at length because it captures much of the range of perspectives on this issue.

Jean: *As a youth worker, I tend to steer away from the word education. And I got a huge fear when the ETBs came on board for our funding. Because sometimes when you talk about education, particularly to young people, they go ‘I hear that every day in school’. So, when you talk about education, we generally talk [or people generally think] about academic education.*

Laura: *It’s ingrained in us that it’s non-formal education. So, we don’t think about it.*

Jean: *So, take that word away from it altogether. It’s about social and personal change.*

Noah: *And growth.*

Liam: *And a person’s learning.*

Laura: *Development as opposed to education is what I would use.*

- Emma: *But we're doing it, do you know what I mean? We are doing informal education. If you're doing sexual health programmes, or drug and alcohol awareness programmes, you're not furthering something – you're teaching them something they didn't know.*
- Adam: *The word education – we link with teachers. In your head it's not ingrained in you that you're an educator.*
- Noah: *It's one of the things, when we talk about systemic oppression. The education system is failing young people. We should be talking about the education formats – it's the informal way of educating young people is the benchmark.*
- Laura: *A lot of young people who engage with us have an issue with the formal education system. They can't cope with it for whatever reason. That's probably how they end up with us. So, we tend to steer away from that word as well I think.*

Close consideration of this exchange makes it clear that there is no fundamental disagreement between the participants about what it is that youth workers are doing or what they want to achieve. The key concern – and a matter of some sensitivity for some of them – is how youth work is described and how that description sounds to others, especially to young people. Jean was comfortable with the idea of youth work as personal and social change but as regards education insisted 'take away that word'. Elsewhere in the discussion she said 'I'm not stepping away from that title or that name [educator] but I just wouldn't brandish it around where young people are', and in another contribution she commented:

*"If you think about it from a young person's perspective – if we brandished around education' on a regular basis, they'll go 'Sir, Miss can I go to the toilet.' This all plays out. You have to realise the type of young people you're working with – if you mention the word 'education' it opens up a whole different world for them. A lot of them negatively experience it. And a lot of them would have been forgotten in that education system."* (Jean)

Even Laura, working in a project where the idea of youth work as non-formal education was 'ingrained', said that she and her colleagues would 'tend to steer away from that word [education] as well'. Another participant went further and indicated that he would actively try to ensure that people would not see him as an educator:

*“I think part of the reason why we're not saying education is because everyone knows that the educational system is incredibly flawed. When I was in the [anonymised] project, I made sure that I let the young people and my colleagues and anyone who was talking to me know that I'm not an educator. I'm a facilitator. It's about attitudes and values and beliefs.”* (Sean)

Sean himself did not hold a professional qualification and had been working in youth work for less than one year. Interestingly, while he did not wish to describe himself as an educator, he recounted an experience of working with a group of young people whose members concluded at the end that they had been ‘tricked into learning!’

The relevance of the position of youth work in public administration locally and nationally was among the topics addressed. When the question of youth work as education first arose Robert replied:

*“I'm glad you brought that point up because I actually question if we could be in a worse department than the one we're in because it seems to be just a collection of rag bag issues.”* (Robert)

Robert was referring to the fact that at the time of the focus group discussion, responsibility for youth work at national level lay with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), a situation that has changed since the last general election with the establishment of the Department of Education and Youth (DEY), a development that Robert would no doubt very much welcome. But apart from the issue of departmental location the question of how youth work is defined in Irish legislation is also relevant. I raised this in the focus groups:

Aidan: *But if we look at the definition of youth work in Ireland, there is education... A planned programme of education.*

Jean: *Informal.*

Aidan: *No. It doesn't mention that. A planned programme of education.*

Laura: *We are always told by the ETB's – informal, informal, informal. Education is a word we are actually encouraged to steer away from. So that's interesting.*

This passage is notable because it suggests different levels of understanding and knowledge among participants concerning the detail of the legislative definition and also perhaps

inconsistent messaging from at least some of the relevant statutory authorities concerning the educational nature of youth work.

The firmest expressions of the view that youth work is an educational process and practice and should be described as such tended to come from respondents who themselves had undertaken a professional programme of education and training in youth work and held an NSETS-endorsed qualification. One participant mentioned NSETS in the context of the discussion:

*“They (NSETS) have set a standard for education for youth workers. Youth work is a process of education. I can nearly recite off - it's more than 10 years since I did my masters. And I can nearly recite off this statement of what youth work is that I learned when I was in [anonymised] for my final presentation. Youth work being a process of informal education, is not my opinion. That's not something I think, that's something that's in our theory.”* (Niamh)

Niamh went on to say that it is not surprising that people describe youth work in different ways if they haven't themselves experienced the relevant education and training themselves:

*“I just wonder if youth workers don't know that or don't learn that or don't acquire that information somewhere along the journey – then how would they identify as informal educators?”* (Niamh)

Another participant with a professional youth work qualification took the view that youth work as education – and specifically critical education – was something that should be celebrated rather than underplayed or somehow concealed from young people:

*“What I love about youth work is you come in and you are giving young people the space for critical learning, like critical thinking and being able to actually think for themselves and not just handing them a maths book or an English book or whatever. That's one thing that I really value about youth work.”* (Rose)

Despite the contrasting views on the appropriate ways to describe youth work, there appeared to be more of a consensus among participants when it came to understanding its process: the importance of informality, the emphasis on conversation, the absence of examinations and 'results' and the concern with less tangible outcomes, including ones that take considerable time to become evident, if they do. All of these features were touched on in the following exchange:

- Emma: *We were talking about the little things that happen, that you don't report on. They are the real golden nuggets. Whether that's getting someone to sign up to go to college – for that person is massive. [People in my family including myself] were massively supported by youth workers in [getting to college] and it was massive in terms of tackling systemic oppression or social change. That mightn't be all the time – but it's the little things that are happening. [...]*
- Liam: *It's planting seeds really isn't it?*
- Laura: *We have a group at the minute who are constantly falling out with their boyfriends, so we did something on values with them [supporting them to understand that...you can have a personal value and disagree with someone, and that's ok as long as it's respectable. That right there – that's social change.*
- Noah: *It's bringing the issues to them. Consent was a big [issue for us]. How do you talk about that – it's where the young people are at in a space, are they ready to have these conversations? Are they ready to engage in spaces and talk about consent, engage in conversations about sex and sex education? [...]*
- Jean: *It's sowing that seed. There's no exam [at] the end [of youth work]. So, you can't gauge it – [there may be] change you may not see. However, in five or six years' time, something might come back.*

It is striking that in the above passage of conversation there is a very strong sense of a group of peers exchanging accounts of a form of practice that rests on broadly shared understandings and objectives. It contrasts very sharply with the differences of opinion regarding the terminology that should be used to describe youth work, even among themselves.

These findings point to both opportunities and challenges facing youth work at this stage of its development as a profession, something taken up again in the next chapter. A more collective and collaborative response to these opportunities and challenges will be necessary if broader Irish society is to have a clearer understanding of what youth work is. The situation as it stands – the lack of such a clearer understanding - was captured in comments such as the following from two participants:

*“Even if you say to people ‘I am an educator’, their first thought would be teacher. But no – I am a youth worker.” (Liam)*

*“We need to look at the labels in terms of how we articulate ourselves. When you’re going into spaces – youth workers wear many hats...Some automatically hear that you’re a social worker – and no, I’m not. We need to be more proactive in stating who we are – we are youth workers.”* (Noah)

### **5.3.4 The development of the youth work profession**

With regard to progressing professional youth work in Ireland, participants were presented with the same question as posed in the survey. There was a variety of opinions raised during both focus groups. For some, what was necessary was to see more research conducted with youth workers, with young people, on outcomes. For others, the notion of collaboration between youth work organisations in a climate of competition was very challenging and needed to be addressed.

#### *5.3.4.1 Gender*

A feature of the in-person discussion surrounding the future priorities for youth work was the gendered dimension of youth work and the wider social professions.

Laura: *I personally never noticed any differentiation between males and females in the sector.*

Daniel: *I have – in favour of females.*

I was struck by the tone of this conversation, one which appeared in contrast with the findings of the survey which highlighted that male participants were paid more than their female counterparts, and what influences job satisfaction for male participants was different from females. Daniel, a male youth worker who has been in the sector for 12 years, went on to suggest that *“if you’re a female, you’re better off.”* That a male worker would hold such a view so firmly even though there is no evidence to support it bears out the need for research to be conducted and widely publicised, the subject of the next subsection.

The participant did not expand on the point but others in the focus group picked up on the fact that youth work like other social professions can have a preponderance of female workers and thus can be ultimately under-valued and under-resourced by governments and communities.

*“In our minds, our economic system is set up so that the man is the breadwinner. So, it doesn't matter if the female is – and I know you could get shot for saying this, but we haven't moved on as progressively as we think.” (Laura)*

In contrast to females 'being better off', Laura elaborated on her point about the possible structural inequalities presented as barriers for women progressing in youth work, naming specifically the hours and their implications on a societal expectation to be at home minding their own children.

During the online focus group participants spoke explicitly about youth work practice, and the gendered dimension of this. A female youth worker with a professional qualification spoke about her experience of working in projects where “*toxic masculinity*” was a big issue. Elaborating further on this, she spoke about her experience as a student researcher who learned about the importance of developing a gender conscious practice:

*“Youth workers being conscious of like feminism or the role of women. One thing that I noticed across the board was the different levels of understanding, values, beliefs, what they were taught and what they were conditioned to think meant that the youth work that we were doing was all over the place... negative kind of connotations for women.” (Rose)*

#### 5.3.4.2 Research

Research into the impact of youth work was one of the highest scoring priorities for participants in the survey, and this was also widely supported in the focus groups. One participant stressed the increasing importance of research in terms of providing evidence to attract funding, especially when work was innovative, or the young people being engaged with were not already gaining the attention of policy-makers and funders.

*“The longer I'm working in the sector the more I see that nothing happens without the research, you know, without the figures to back everything up, particularly at the minute, I suppose I'm working with a really hidden group of young people. It's really hard to get the statistics on them and so kind of I'm really interested in how research can help everybody.” (April)*

Another participant, based in a UBU setting, gave the example of how research had led to increased recognition of the value of youth justice work and the need for its inclusion in national strategy:

*“I think the research piece – the whole setup with Irish Youth Justice with the University of Limerick and having that Greentown report and having certain people involved has maybe made that more lucrative for the sector. How they were able to get the money to fund it, the Irish Youth Justice Strategy. It was very well funded, and we don’t have that. I don’t know when the last time there was a strategy like.”* (Jane)

Building on this point, Jean suggested that it would be valuable to conduct research into the influence that different levels of resources can have on the work that happens with young people and the experiences and opportunities that are made available to them, *“how their [well funded projects’] finances are impacting the work they’re doing compared to those who don’t have [as much].”*

Participants spoke about the importance of including young people themselves in all aspects of research and of young people who have been through the youth work process being ‘platformed’ to speak about their experiences. They regarded it as important that research programmes and priorities would reflect the reality of youth workers’ practice and the challenges they face, particularly since research findings are often very influential in shaping perceptions of professions.

Ryan: *When it comes to the professional landscape that there seems to be a gap between the real and the ideal in ways.*

Niamh: *Often, I think the conversations around professionalisation often happens amongst people who are not doing the work and the people doing the work on the ground are not often part of these conversations.*

#### *5.3.4.3 Collaboration and competition*

Participants spoke about the challenges they faced when considering which other professionals and services to work with, and how. In what was often a competitive funding environment, some participants suggested that policy has created a climate of rivalry and tension amongst services working with young people, rather than encouraging collaboration.

Amy contended that there was a hierarchy within Irish youth services, suggesting that UBU services were at the bottom and GYDP’s were higher up and therefore receiving more funding. UBU projects could not *“compete”* with organisations that receive *“mountains of resources”* and they were therefore *“losing young people”* to these organisations.

The following excerpt from the in-person focus group highlights the complexities associated with working in partnership with other organisations who work with young people, and an insight into the possible competitive dynamic being experienced by some participants:

Emma: *It's competitive. What other professional job would you say it's competitive?*

Laura: *You have to fight for every penny.*

Jean: *It's an NGO like.*

Daniel: *It's not just money. I did a placement in an inner-city project, and we were fighting for kids... You're competing for money, funding, people and then kids. All these professional project leaders were competing. What are you at? – surely as long as one is looking out for them [it should be ok].*

Jean: *Does it lead us to justifying our jobs? Do we feel we have to go to that point in order to say we do have these numbers, we need that money for these young people?*

Laura: *And you have your own young people who aren't engaging in the programmes you're trying to put out there – as long as there's bums on seats and they're in the door, and target groups, ticking boxes.*

One participant directly related these issues to the policy context and specifically to the very influential Value for Money Policy and Programme Review (VFMPR) published in 2014.

*“It's back to the Value for Money. That conversation was a big thing, and that is what has segregated youth work. You can even see the politics within that, within services, within young people. You've three services within one catchment, but again when it comes to those, you can't work with them [the young people] if they're not in your area, or [they] can't use the service if [they're] no longer in the catchment. The politics that creates in projects [is very damaging] - there's no collaboration anymore when it comes to services.” (Noah)*

#### 5.3.4.4 Continuing professional development (CPD)

As discussed in earlier chapters, youth workers in Ireland can engage in ongoing professional development and training in a variety of ways, although there is no formal requirement for it nor accreditation system for monitoring or recognising it. In the survey, 95% (n. 108) of

participants had engaged in some CPD relevant to their role as youth workers, signifying what seems to be a clear acknowledgement that participants see its value.

Carmel made a direct link between the need for CPD and the worrying trend of a lack of analysis on critical issues such as racism in youth work practice. *“I think it goes to not just people coming into this sector, but to people who’ve been in the sector for quite a while that there should be CPD. There should be ethical standards.”* More generally she highlighted the lack of inclusivity in youth work practice in a changing social context and the potential role of CPD in addressing this. Carmel was of the view that youth work should take the approach of other professions in which CPD, often alongside systematic regular supervision, is a formal requirement:

*“So, I think, the continuing professional development should be [as it is] in in the counselling or therapeutic profession[s], the way they do it in...other professions, I think that's really important because I think we can become complacent or we can think because we're having these conversations [about] the work that we're doing, you know,[that] it is wonderful. But we need to hold ourselves up to a standard as well and educate ourselves around the new world that we're living in.”* (Carmel)

Another participant highlighted the fact that one positive consequence of CPD for youth workers is their enhanced ability to ‘pass on’ relevant knowledge and learning to young people in projects:

*“There's always room for all of us to upscale and to train. And even as workers, I think sometimes workers need to do CPD as well in order to pass on the knowledge to young people.”* (Amy)

Eric related the role of CPD to the fact that youth workers have a range of backgrounds and qualifications and (as illustrated in the survey findings) many or even most of them may not be professionally trained and qualified in youth work. This includes people who have many years of experience but who have not been able, or been supported, to undertake a formal professional programme. In this context ‘continuing’ professional development may for some people be their *only* professional development with a specific focus on youth work.

*“People go in[to youth work] from a very huge diverse range of backgrounds and I'm really supportive of like being more inclusive in terms of the recruitment into the sector... [M]aybe the idea of like a one qualification size fits all isn't necessarily kind*

*of fit for purpose and maybe there needs to be a recognition [that] people have different kinds of [strengths and backgrounds]. [So], you know the CPD can feed into that in some kind of way. (Eric)*

The same participant saw CPD as having a role in supporting staff to develop their careers and possibly avail of promotion opportunities even though they would not want to, or would not be able to, return to study full-time.

*...I think that's why people [mid-career] haven't gone back to education in 20 years because [they might think] 'do you go back to do the exact same kind of thing again?' and there isn't necessarily a progression route that's obvious kind of for people... [So for] a lot of people in youth work and I was the same you don't necessarily want to go into management but you do want to progress your career but it's like there is no [framework to support you] - it's a complete glass ceiling." (Eric)*

#### 5.3.4.5 Code of ethics

Three quarters (74%) of survey respondents perceived the development of a code of ethics to be very important in progressing professional youth work in Ireland. There also appeared to be broad support for the idea in the focus groups although not many participants directly raised the issue or expressed specific opinions about it.

One focus group participant wanted to speak specifically regarding codes of ethics, and the need for youth workers to engage in a process of commitment to consistent values and standards of practice. Speaking specifically regarding human rights issues, the participant highlighted her frustration when seeing colleagues refrain from challenging oppressive or discriminatory discourse amongst colleagues or with young people regarding issues such as LGBT rights, feminism and toxic masculinity. Rose suggested that youth workers should not talk about values and human rights exclusively with regard to specific groups or issues, but must apply them consistently and comprehensively across the board:

*"You have to do it all. Because otherwise, young people that come into a service, they come from all these different types of backgrounds or all these different identities, all these different issues, and you just you have to, you have to be able to do it all. I know that's a really big statement to make. But I just feel like if you're not doing it all, you're not doing any of it". (Rose)*

The question of the relationship between ethics and professional education and training programmes arose in the discussion and one participant, who had not undertaken a professional programme, suggested that a code of ethics may be more important than professional qualifications since *“You could do the qualification and not have the ethical core and values bit that you need”* (Jane).

The professional endorsement criteria of NSETS require that ethics are adequately addressed in the content of programmes but there may be variability in the way in which they are covered and it was in response to requests from higher education institutions for guidance on the teaching of ethics that NSETS published a framework to support their teaching (Darcy, 2016). Eric offered the opinion that a code of ethical practice for youth workers in Ireland takes on added importance in a situation where managers are less likely to have completed a professional qualification:

*“I would have had a range of managers who wouldn't necessarily have a youth work qualification or deep understanding and part of the strength of youth work is that people can come from diverse backgrounds. What you need is an anchoring kind of piece to maintain the quality, and that's where I think the code of ethical practice [comes in].”*

The next chapter will return to this idea of ‘an anchoring piece’ and to the need for an integrated approach to professional education and training, professional practice and professional development, in which core values and ethics would be regarded as playing an ‘anchoring’ role for all elements.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed account of the findings arising from the quantitative and qualitative strands of this study, the survey questionnaire and the focus group discussions.

The questionnaire gathered information about the demographic composition, educational backgrounds, work circumstances and employment conditions of survey respondents as well as on their experiences and perceptions on a range of aspects of youth work: the rewards and challenges, the range of roles and tasks, the type of profession they think youth work is and ways in which it could be developed.

The focus group discussions allowed participants to explore some of the above issues in greater depth, especially the role of education and training for youth work, the variety and complexity of the work engaged in, the frustrations caused by inconsistencies in the funding and policy contexts, and the fundamental question of whether and in what ways youth work should be defined as an educational process, a matter on which there was considerable disagreement.

Taken together, patterns can tentatively be identified relating to the type of project workers are employed in (and its source of funding), the gender of respondents (differences could be seen in relation to a wide range of matters, including salaries, roles and tasks, rewards and challenges) and their education and training background (with differences discernible on a number of issues that may be associated with whether or not participants have completed a professional qualification in youth work).

The next chapter will explore these patterns more fully, relating them to the scholarly, professional and policy literature on youth work and also to the literature in the sociology of professions, in particular Evetts's framework of occupational and organisational discourses of professionalism.

# **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION**

## **6.1 Introduction**

This study was designed to address two main research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of paid youth workers of the nature and characteristics of youth work as an occupation in Ireland?
2. What are the implications for the development of youth work as a profession in Ireland?

This chapter will discuss the findings of the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research while making reference to the contextual material and the literature on youth work and on professions set out in Chapters 2 and 3 of the thesis. The two questions will themselves provide the basis for the structure of the discussion.

## 6.2 Youth Work as an Occupation

### 6.2.1 The workforce context

As stated in Chapter 2, no official data is collected on people employed as youth workers in Ireland and therefore it is not possible to make any judgement of how closely the sample for this study reflects the demographic composition of the workforce nationally (and of course the sample itself was a non-random one and does not claim to be representative).

Nonetheless, two features of the survey sample stand out as worthy of comment. The first is that almost three quarters of respondents (71%) were female. This is in line with the broader pattern of employment in the social professions (Banks, 2004) and specifically in formal education, where the majority of teachers are women, particularly but not only at primary level (INTO, 2024).

Annual monitoring figures collated by NSETS (and shared with HEIs offering endorsed programmes, but not published) consistently show a majority of youth work students (two thirds or more) to be female, so the composition of this survey sample is not unusual. More surprising perhaps is the distribution of those in roles that are deemed to have a management function as compared with those that are concerned with direct youth work. Once again, almost three quarters (72%) of those classified as ‘managers’ in this survey were female. It is highly unusual, across all professions and sectors, for the proportion of women in management roles to equal or exceed the proportion of female workers overall. In fact the opposite is usually the case, notably in the established professions and sectors such as business (CSO, 2023) and finance (Burke-Kennedy, 2026), but it can also apply in the social professions (Kelly, 2022). The pattern that is found in this non-random sample of youth workers is therefore one that should be explored further in future research, including policy-related initiatives concerned with workforce development.

The second striking demographic feature is that the sample was overwhelmingly white (91%). Since the proportion of the broader population identifying as White Irish in Census 2022 was 77%, the findings (again, with a caveat about the nature of the sample) clearly also raise a question for the programme of work currently being undertaken in the Department of Education and Youth relating to workforce development. Fulfilment of the second objective of *Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services*, whereby ‘an equality and rights-based approach is embedded across all youth work services and

supporting structures' (DCEDIY, 2024: 12), will require a commitment to the development of a youth work workforce that reflects the diversity of Irish society.

Some other features of the study's contextual findings confirm what would be expected based on the literature and on professional experience: most of the participants are engaged in youth work practice in urban areas and while their work is funded from a range of sources, there are two that account for a considerable majority of cases. More than half (51%) of the survey respondents were in projects funded by the DEY's UBU scheme and just under one in five (18%) were in Youth Diversion Projects funded by the Irish Youth Justice Service. The issues and tensions relating to the different funding sources will be taken up again later in this chapter (6.2.4).

In the *Worth their Weight in Gold* study in Northern Ireland more than twenty years ago, the most frequently mentioned concern for youth work graduates was the status of youth work in comparison to other 'aligned' sectors, 'with terms like "poor cousin" and "Cinderella service" often used' (Harland et al., 2005: 8). Participants in the current study, particularly in the focus groups, also expressed concerns about not being given adequate recognition and respect as compared with other professions (see 6.2.3). If salary levels are any indication of social status, the survey data would appear to provide some evidence (within this limited sample) for such a view. The mean annual salary of this group of youth workers, at €39,520, was well below the national mean income as estimated by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2024) and also well below the mean in two sectors that could be regarded as cognate to youth work: education and 'human health and social work'. In contrast, the sector classified as 'arts, entertainment, recreation and other services' has a considerably lower national mean income than this youth work sample (at €33,755) but that is likely to provide scant comfort since people involved in arts work, in particular, are well known to have to deal with low wages and precarity.

There was a gender pattern to the survey findings on salary. Female respondents, overall, earned some €7000 less per annum than male ones, and even female managers earned slightly less than their male counterparts. Differences could also be found according to funding source, with UBU funded salaries less than both Department of Justice and HSE ones, a point that helps to fuel a sense of 'inconsistency' within the youth work sector (see 6.2.4). Those with an NSETS-endorsed professional qualification in youth work recorded a salary on average €5100 higher than respondents without such a qualification, also potentially a source

of tension. This brings us to the topic of the range of ways in which youth workers in Ireland find their way into the profession.

### **6.2.2 Routes of entry into youth work**

As discussed in earlier chapters, it has been the stated policy position in Ireland since at least as far back as the *O'Sullivan Report* (Department of Education, 1980) that there should be a 'variety of routes' of entry into employment as a youth worker rather than one prescribed route. This position has not changed despite the fact that, as also explained earlier, the establishment in 2005 of the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS), whose role is to set and monitor standards for professional education and training programmes in youth work, was a government policy initiative arising from the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003), and one undertaken in partnership with the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland. The official position remains that the 'recruitment and employment of staff including youth workers is a matter for the youth organisations and services themselves' (DCEDIY, 2023b).

The findings of this study are in line with this policy position. Less than a half of the survey sample (45%) said they had NSETS-endorsed qualifications, compared with 48% who did not. Within the focus group sample, exactly half of the participants (9 out of 18) were professionally qualified in youth work. On the other hand, this study provides (tentative) evidence that youth work in Ireland is even more of a 'graduate profession' than it was when NYCI/Youthnet study was conducted some years ago (Monaghan, 2013), if only in the sense that those working in it possess third-level qualifications in any subject. In Monaghan's study, roughly two thirds of youth workers were recorded as having degrees. In this study's survey sample, the figure for those whose highest qualification is NFQ Level 8 or 9 (i.e. honours undergraduate degree or postgraduate diploma/masters) is 81%, and when Level 7 ('ordinary' or 'pass' degree) is included, the figure rises to 94%. Of course, this is in a context of increasing third-level participation across the board, with total enrolments in higher education in Ireland having gone up by 15% between 2017/18 and 2023/24 (HEA, 2024).

The focus group for this study provided the opportunity for participants to offer their views on 'pathways' into youth work. As described in Chapter 5, while there was strong broad agreement on the need for certain personal qualities ('passion' was a particularly commonly used word) and values (including equality and human rights), as well as on the benefit of having a background or personal experience that is relevant to the lives of the young people

being worked with, there was no consensus on the matter of youth work qualifications. It is possible however to discern a pattern in the contributions, perhaps not a very surprising one, whereby those participants who had not themselves undertaken a professional programme of education and training were less likely to see the value of such programmes than those who had.

To take just two examples: Jane, who was not professionally qualified, worried that *“If we become more standardised [on qualification requirements], do we lose grassroots youth work? People coming from the volunteer side with passion...?”*, while Niamh, who was professionally qualified, insisted that *“there is a set of standards and there is a set of principles and values that the work is about that we must not disregard in this struggle to [recruit and] employ”*.

In discussions such as those that took place in the focus groups, there is sometimes a sense (made explicit in the case of Jane’s view expressed above) that moving in the direction of professional education and training means moving away from what is authentic and ‘grounded’ in young people’s lived experiences. There is also a concern that a requirement for professional qualifications is elitist and exclusionary and will prohibit people from the local communities where paid youth work is most likely to happen, including youth work volunteers, from applying for the employment opportunities that arise. There are echoes here of the situation in England and Wales where, to a greater or lesser extent since the early 1980s, there has been a resistance to the professionalisation of youth work, even by many people within the profession and also by some of the scholars who have been key sources on programmes of professional education and training. According to Trudi Cooper:

An important argument against professionalized youth work suggests that youth work professionalization reduces responsiveness of youth work to the perspectives of young people and their communities. [The argument is] that professionalization and professional closure would undermine organic youth workers who would be replaced by professional middle class youth workers...[In addition, what Smith (2007) calls] bureaucratic professionalized youth work [is seen as being] concerned with instrumental management of young people in response to government funding and policy agendas [in contrast to] “youth work as a calling” [which operates] through informal education and community development methods to foster connection between people, social capital and civic society. [Smith argues] “youth work as a calling” is subverted by state-sponsorship (Cooper, 2013: 118-119).

Cooper, with direct knowledge and experience of the UK context but now considering the situation from the Australian perspective, argues that the dichotomy presented by Smith is too extreme because ‘it is not self-evident that most non-state sponsored youth work programs

have the goals he describes or use the methods of informal education' (ibid.: 119). She also argues that it is not professionalisation itself, or state sponsorship, that has damaged 'voluntary, relational, associational youth work' but rather the ideology of post-welfare neoliberal social policy. In the absence of robust institutional support for youth work (such as, in Cooper's example, prevailed in England and Wales in the early 1980s but has been substantially dismantled since), far from destroying 'grassroots youth work', professionalisation has the 'potential to provide resistance to post-welfare policy, and to sustain an alternative to bureaucratic youth work' (ibid.: 120).

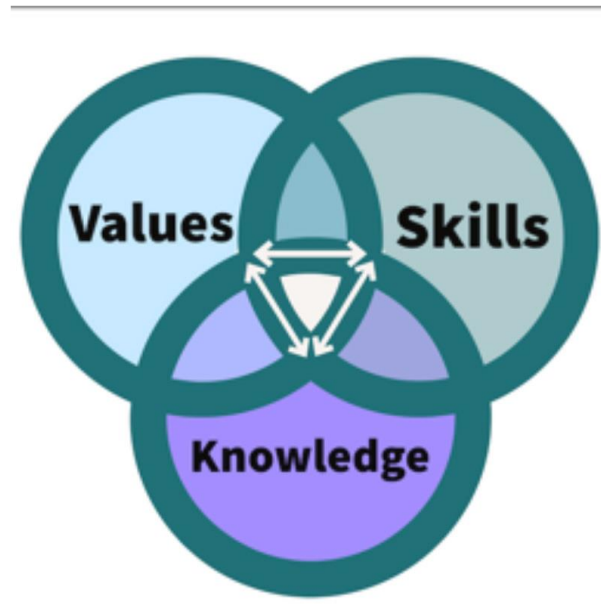
I think this analysis is directly relevant to the findings of this study, and specifically in this case to the question of professional qualifications. 'Passionate' youth work and 'professional youth work' are not necessarily dichotomous. The same can be said of 'volunteer commitment' and 'professional standards'. Programmes of professional youth work education and training in Ireland place a strong emphasis (and are required to do so by the criteria and procedures of NSETS) on ensuring that those who are accepted for entry have both relevant experience and demonstrable personal suitability for youth work.

Anecdotal accounts and my own personal experience as a young person, youth worker and youth work educator support the case that there is a very strong 'throughput' from young people's participation in youth work to volunteer engagement and leadership on to professional education and training and then practice. There is further evidence for this in the survey findings of this study: more than two in five of the youth workers (43%) had participated in youth work as a young person and well over half (56%) had volunteered in youth work prior to becoming a paid worker. Significantly, the proportion with volunteering experience was even higher, at 67%, among those with a professional qualification.

Instead of being detached from 'grassroots youth work', the content of professional programmes such as those I have studied and taught on is deliberately designed to enable students to build on their life experiences and to make optimal use of their personal qualities, commitments and values as well as to acquire new academic knowledge and practice skills. In fact, the process of education and training is itself intended to reflect the principles and key practice elements of youth work (and in the case of MU, of community development). It is a form of 'pedagogy as praxis' (Bradley et al., 2024). It is no accident that the tripartite (but overlapping and integrated) framework of 'values, knowledge and skills' presented by Bradley et al. (see Figure 6.1) as underpinning community and youth work *and* education and

training for community and youth work draws on a range of scholarly and professional sources that include Mark Smith's *Creators not Consumers* (1982), a publication that was very much focused on community-based 'critical social education' in youth work.

**Figure 6.1 Professional Formation in Community Work and Youth Work: Knowledge, Skills, and Values (Bradley et al., 2024)**



Another of the sources cited by Bradley et al. is Sercombe (2010), for whom 'a professional is [above all] someone who professes'. Devlin (2012: 178) makes a similar point to Sercombe in arguing that the act of *profession* (making 'a solemn declaration, promise or vow') is similar to the experience of a *calling* that defines a vocation. From this perspective, the vocational and professional aspects of youth work are not opposites but are in fact closely interrelated.

Similarly, an emphasis on the importance of professional education and training for youth work need not exclude volunteers and members of local communities provided that the necessary supports are put in place and that the 'pathways' into and through education and training are sufficiently flexible. In fact, the need for flexibility and accessibility of youth work training of all types (volunteer, part-time and full-time) and all levels ('pre-professional', professional and CPD) was stressed in the *National Youth Work Development Plan* that gave rise to NSETS (Department of Education and Science, 2003), although that commitment has never been fully implemented.

In the meantime, there has been a strong emphasis within professional programmes on ensuring participation by communities and groups that would otherwise not find a place in

academic institutions. In MU, this emphasis within the community and youth work programmes long predates more formal and widespread ‘access’ provision across the institution and sector. From the outset (in the early 1980s), people from working class communities, Travellers and ‘mature students’ were proactively recruited onto programmes, and in the intervening years the composition of student groups has reflected the increasing multiculturalism of Irish society:

In a diverse and divided society, we are committed to ensuring that diverse, marginalized and minority communities where community workers and youth workers work are also reflected in the next generation of workers in training (Bradley et al., 2024: 3).

The above features of the context of professional education and training for youth work in Ireland therefore throw into question certain dichotomies that feature in the discourse of some youth workers themselves. These echo dichotomies concerning the professionalisation of youth work that can be found in other contexts (Cooper, 2013). I have suggested that in Ireland such dichotomies may relate to existence of a variety of ‘routes of entry’ into paid youth work. For that reason, they directly raise questions about national policy on youth work which will be returned to later in this chapter.

### **6.2.3 What the work entails**

The previous chapter showed that when asked to respond to the question of ‘what youth workers do’, the respondents in one of the focus groups generated a ‘word cloud’ that was so varied that one participant joked ‘we can’t even agree on what we do’. However, my own analysis was that the range of responses did appear to include the major types of role and task that were included in the survey questionnaire, reflecting the literature on youth work practice (e.g. Batsleer and Davies 2010; Coyne and Donohue, 2013). As well as the planning, delivery and evaluation of work with groups and individuals, and the administrative and organisational duties that take up substantial portions of youth workers’ time, the spontaneity that is central to informal learning (Batsleer, 2008; Spence et al., 2008) and that has to be allowed for in a practice where conversation is the ‘central cog’ (Hammond and Harvey, 2021: 3), also featured. The word ‘unexpected’ appeared twice within this relatively small number of descriptions of youth work roles. However, there is no explicit mention of informal learning and/or non-formal education, a point that is taken up later (6.2.6).

In the quantitative strand of this research, survey respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they engaged in a range of specified roles and tasks. The highest-

ranking items focussed on the more direct aspects of youth work practice, including ‘planning for work with young people’ (mean=5.2 on a 6 point scale), ‘work with young people in groups’ (5.1), ‘individual work with young people’ (5.0) and ‘evaluating work with young people’ (5.0). Of the 15 items on the list, these four were the only ones scoring 5.0 or higher.

Not surprisingly however, given what is known of the background work that is required in order for direct youth work to happen (including work associated with fundraising, monitoring and compliance), the next most frequent activities were routine administration (4.8), staff meetings (4.5) and writing reports (4.1). It was in acknowledgement of how onerous this dimension of youth work practice has become, and in the context of organisations being generally under-resourced, that the NYCI in its *Vision for Youth Work* stressed the importance of maintaining ‘administrative requirements at a level that is proportionate, realistic and feasible for voluntary organisations’ (NYCI, 2023: 13).

There is a gender pattern to the findings on roles and tasks as there is to other aspects of this research. The pattern is somewhat stereotypical, with women more involved in face-to-face work and men more involved in CPD, supervision and administration. While caution is required based on the sampling, if the findings reflect a broader pattern within the sector they confirm the need for ongoing reflective work that ‘continually questions youth workers on how their practice challenges gender expectations’ (McArdle et al., 2012: 1).

There was also a pattern based on type of funding agency. UBU-based youth workers were working directly with young people more frequently than their colleagues in IYJS-funded projects, who in turn were spending more time applying for grants. This may not be what policy-makers concerned with reducing crime rates among young people would want to hear. It is also perhaps not in line with a perception on the part of many people that IYJS-funded positions are necessarily more attractive than other ones. But in any case, it does support a more general view that there are inconsistencies within the ‘youth work sector’ that can cause tensions between workers, a point taken up below (6.2.4).

Chapter 3 showed that building and sustaining constructive and mutually supportive relationships (between youth worker and young people; and between young people themselves) is one of the most commonly identified key features of youth work, in Ireland and internationally (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2013; Cooper, 2018; Davies, 2010; Devlin & Gunning, 2009; Hammond, 2018; Sapin, 2009; Spence, 2008; Tierney et al., 2019; Tilsen, 2018; Young, 2006). In this respect the practice of the survey sample of youth

workers, as perceived and reported by themselves, aims to uphold a key principle in youth work scholarship and also in professional and policy literature. 'Relationships' was ranked as the 'programme area' in which respondents engaged most frequently, with a mean score of 4.4 out of a possible total of 5. Significantly, and again very much in line with what the literature says about the nature of youth work, the second highest scoring item on the list (almost equally high at 4.3) was 'friendship', which is inextricably linked with relationship.

The more conventionally programmatic areas of 'drugs and alcohol' and 'youth health', as well as 'employment and training' also featured strongly, as did 'equality', 'anti-racism and intercultural work' and, to a somewhat lesser extent, 'youth arts'. All of these are in line with current policy national priorities (DCEDIY, 2024; Government of Ireland, 2023). Other areas that are regarded as important in policy and that are also central to the programme priorities of major youth organisations, because of their relevance to young people's contemporary learning needs, received middle-range frequency scores. These include 'STEAM' and digital youth work, along with global youth work and development education. The only area scoring below 2 (indicating practitioners 'rarely' engage) was international exchange. This is an type of work that youth workers may think presents particular resource and organisational challenges, but there may also be a lack of awareness of the supports that are available through the national agency Léargas.

An important aspect of youth work is engagement with other individuals, professionals and services beyond the direct interaction with young people and colleagues. The most frequent category engaged with by youth workers in the survey sample was parents/guardians of young people. Out of ten categories presented, this was the only one with a mean score of more than 4 out of a possible 5. This is not surprising since youth work 'almost always exists in a community context' (Tierney et al., 2019) and previous Irish research has highlighted the importance to youth workers of connections with parents, families and communities, a connection that sometimes extends across generations (Devlin and Gunning, 2009). The participants in the focus groups also made reference to the fact that their work involved engaging with young people's families, and that more than one member of a particular family often engages with youth work projects.

The survey showed that after parents and guardians youth workers in this sample were most likely to have contact with schoolteachers, gardaí and 'JLOs', school completion services and counsellors, in other words with other professionals that have contact with young people (in

contrast, the category least engaged with was politicians). The findings are in line with those from the focus groups, in which participants sometimes spoke about the challenge in asserting a distinctive youth work role and identity for professional youth work while collaborating in inter-agency contexts. Similar issues have arisen in previous Irish research, including the NYCI/Youthnet workforce study (Monaghan, 2013). However, while collaboration with other professionals may involve tensions and even disagreements, the focus group participants in this study were most vocal in highlighting tensions that exist *within* the youth work sector and that they perceive as being made worse by inconsistencies arising from policy decisions and funding arrangements (see 6.2.4 below).

A final point to address in this section, which relates specifically to the focus groups because the survey was not designed to cover such matters, is the difference of perspective among youth workers about the extent to which they should be available to work with young people late at night and at weekends. In a conversation that began with an exchange of views about conditions of employment (an extract is included in Chapter 5), participants went on to express very different views.

In summary, one view was that it is unreasonable to expect youth workers to regularly sacrifice their work/life/family balance (and risk burnout) because of ‘unsocial hours’ requirements, while the other was that youth work, precisely because it is informal/non-formal education and learning, by definition takes place when the formal education system does not operate and when young people have time to spend. More implicitly, it was suggested that as a non-commercial activity concerned only with young people’s development and welfare, youth work was more ‘competitive’ (as compared with online or offline profit-generating enterprises) when it made itself as available and accessible to young people as it possibly could.

This was one of only a small number of cases where there was direct disagreement between focus group participants. As in the other cases (regarding the need for professional qualifications, discussed in 6.2.2 above, and the definition of youth work as education, 6.2.6 below), it is possible to identify a pattern. In the discussion quoted, those most opposed to night-time and weekend working were those whose education and training background was not specifically in youth work, while the participant who argued most strongly for the ‘flexible availability’ approach was professionally qualified. It is not possible to make conclusive statements based on this small sample but it is certainly possible to say that

questions arise for policy on the education and training of professional youth workers and also for policy on the funding and resourcing of youth work projects and teams.

Overall the findings in this research relating to the ‘work that youth workers do’ suggest that the trend identified in the Youthcert study more than 15 years ago, which concluded that ‘youth work has become an increasingly complex and diverse practice’ (2000: 24), appears to have continued and even become more marked.

#### **6.2.4 Satisfaction and dissatisfaction**

Survey respondents were asked to assign a score to a series of factors that might influence their satisfaction with their job. As shown in Figure 5.11 in the previous chapter, working with young people, the social impact of youth work and participants’ relationships with their peers were the factors that were perceived as ‘greatly increasing’ satisfaction levels. Like many other findings of this study, this conforms both with the broader literature on youth work in Ireland and internationally and also specifically with the literature on youth work as a profession. Sercombe’s view is relevant here: ‘a profession is defined not by a set of practices but by a relationship’ (2010: 11).

It is also not surprising that the factors identified as reducing satisfaction most were cost of living, promotional opportunities/career prospects, administrative duties and the availability of housing, or that younger participants were more likely to be concerned with material considerations (such as getting a mortgage) than older ones.

As in other parts of the study, some gender differences could be seen. Male respondents scored higher on salary, impact, job security and promotional opportunities, while female respondents scored higher on areas relating to work with young people and the public image of youth work as a profession. While the pattern is not clearcut, and while it is not possible to generalise from this sample in any case, it is relevant to note that there were also gender differences in youth workers’ perceived ‘rewards and challenges’ in the research conducted for the Youth Services Interagency Group by Devlin and Gunning (2009).

In that study, the categorisation of responses to an open-ended question suggested that young people’s achievements were experienced as by far the most rewarding aspect for workers overall: almost two thirds of those surveyed identified this aspect, with significant proportions also mentioning relationships, young people’s enjoyment and the appreciation shown by young people to workers. Young people’s achievements ranked even higher among

men, being mentioned by four out of five male respondents, while relationships were mentioned by more than five times as many women as men. When it came to challenges, ‘behavioural aspects’, funding/finances and engaging young people were mentioned more commonly than any other dimensions. Once again there was a gender difference, with five times as many women as men identifying young people’s behaviour as challenging, and slightly more men than women identifying funding/finances. Taken together, the findings of these two studies (and other findings discussed above) support the argument that the gathering of robust evidence at national level on the gender dimension of youth work practice is long overdue.

In the focus groups for the current study, there were many instances in which participants expressed satisfaction with aspects of youth work such as those that were positively ranked in the survey results, although they were often expressed in less direct terms such as ‘the little things that happen’, ‘golden nuggets’ (of interaction or outcome) and simply ‘giving young people space’. When it came to identifying factors that caused dissatisfaction, there was one issue in particular that dominated discussion. This was the lack of consistency in the circumstances of youth workers (including pay and conditions but also arrangements for monitoring and reporting) across different types of funded projects. There appeared to be a heightened awareness of such differences in situations where the same organisation was in receipt of funding from more than one agency or department. In addition to causing friction between youth workers themselves, it was argued that the relatively low salaries, unfavourable conditions or short-term contracts in some projects (UBU projects in general were identified as less well-funded than IYJS ones) were driving youth workers into other sectors, especially social care work (the focus group discussions took place before formal regulation and registration of social care workers was introduced, with the requirement of a specialised Level 7 qualification).

Apart from the negative impact on individual workers of the situation described above, its significance for this study lies in how such experiences on the ground are shaped by the broader policy context. Focus group participants seemed broadly in agreement that the current context, far from encouraging cooperation and collaboration between workers and between organisations/agencies, actually fosters a spirit of competition and rivalry. This perspective is not limited to the small sample in the present study. The *Vision for Youth Work* published by the National Youth Council of Ireland in 2023, based on an extensive consultation exercise within and beyond its more than 50 member organisations, clearly

reflects widespread negative experiences when it urges that ‘policy frameworks and funding schemes should be designed in such a way as to support and encourage cooperation rather than foster division and competition’ (NYCI, 2023: 10).

However, the policy context does not just relate to matters of funding. Also relevant is the lack of policy recognition for youth work as a profession on a par with other professions like teaching, social work and now social care. As shown in Chapter 5, focus group participants themselves suggested that the lack of official support for the development of a professional association for youth work, despite the fact that consideration of such a body was included in the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (DES, 2003), may perhaps be because it would support youth workers to ‘make demands’ of employers, funders and policy-makers more forcefully.

One participant specifically suggested that the longstanding official position that ‘the recruitment and employment of [youth work] staff is a matter for the youth organisations and services themselves’ (DCEDIY, 2023b), as well as the lack of regulation or registration in youth work, continues to apply because the state wants maximum flexibility and minimum costs. Any form of ‘standardisation’ would mean having to ‘employ people differently’. “*That means pensions. That means rights, terms and conditions across the board. And they aren’t willing to do it.*” This has obvious negative implications for professional youth work that are explored further later in this chapter,

First the survey respondents’ perceptions of youth work as a profession are revisited briefly.

### **6.2.5 Perceptions of youth work as a profession**

In the survey questionnaire for this research, as explained in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, respondents were presented with a series of five statements regarding the nature of professional youth work in Ireland and in each case invited to answer a two-part Likert-style question, indicating (a) the extent to which the situation described in the statement is *currently* the case; and (b) the extent to which they think it *should* be the case. Responses when analysed resulted in a mean score for each (a) and (b) statement ranging between 1 (‘not at all’) and 5 (‘very much’). For the reader’s convenience, the five statements are reproduced below:

1. *‘I have a lot of leeway in making professional judgements about how I work with young people.’*

2. *'Professional youth workers make a significant contribution to the development of the national policies that shape their practice.'*
3. *'Youth work is a social movement inspired by values and a vision of how society could be better for all young people.'*
4. *'Youth work is a distinctive way of working with young people, drawing on a distinctive combination of theories, principles and methods.'*
5. *'The outcomes of youth work are set by youth workers in partnership with young people.'*

The statements were designed to reflect key elements of Julia Evetts's (2003-2013) conceptualisation of organisational and occupational discourses of professionalism, taking into account specific features of professional youth work in Ireland, for example the fact that it shares a history and continues to overlap substantially with the tradition of youth work as a social movement; and the fact that unlike other professions its identity has increasingly come to be defined in terms of partnership with the people (young people) who in other contexts would be defined as its clients, with the term 'client' not usually being used in an empowering sense. (Howard Sercombe, 2010, is relatively unusual among youth work scholars in arguing that the use of the term 'client' is not in itself disempowering and that it accurately describes the position of the young person or young people in the youth work *relationship* in a way that terms such as 'participant' or 'member' cannot.)

Overall, the above findings suggest that professional youth work is not being experienced in the ways that practitioners (at least within this sample) would like it to be. In the case of all five statements the *current* situation falls short of how respondents believe things *should* be, although in some cases by a very narrow margin. The first statement, which relates to professional 'autonomy' in Evetts's terms, is the one where the margin is narrowest, with the mean scores for the 'current' situation and how things 'should be' almost the same (4.3 and 4.4). However, it is noteworthy that female respondents scored lower than males in relation to the current situation, but higher in terms of what should be the case, meaning that the gap between the actual and the ideal is greater for these female youth workers.

It is also important to point out that in the focus group discussions, participants often gave examples from their practice of ways in which they appeared to feel that their professional autonomy (although that was not the word used) was being undermined or compromised. The inconsistencies highlighted in the previous section relating to pay and conditions as well as

administrative and reporting requirements would not seem likely to support a sense of autonomous practice, especially for youth workers who feel disadvantaged as compared with their colleagues, while in some other cases participants described interactions with (and expectations from) the ETB that did not support them in making their own professional judgements. These experiences would suggest a strong ‘organisational’ rather than ‘occupational’ discourse of professionalism. But the situation as reflected in the survey responses concerning perceived autonomy is still more positive than for the four other statements presented.

Respondents to the survey also seemed confident that what they are engaged in is a distinctive and coherent professional practice (statement 4), with a relatively small difference between the (a) statement (4.3) and the (b) statement (4.7). This statement also relates indirectly to professional autonomy, because the judgements that professional practitioners make, and the professional discretion they exercise, rest on an integrated grasp of the theories, principles and methods that are distinctive to the profession. However, the relatively satisfactory situation expressed by the difference between the mean scores is not the whole story. While just under one half of respondents ‘very much’ thought that ‘*youth work is a distinctive way of working with young people [etc.]*’, four out of every five (80%) ‘very much’ thought that this *should be* the case, which if it reflects the situation within youth work more broadly is a finding that has implications at a range of levels. As in other cases, this is a question for future research.

The picture within the sample under study is clear regarding the other three statements, where in all cases the mean score for the ‘actual’ current situation (part a) is substantially lower than the score for the ‘ideal’ situation (part b). It is a difference of roughly one point for the ‘youth work as social movement’ and ‘outcomes in partnership with young people’ statements, but almost two full points (2.9 vs 4.7) with regard to ‘professional youth workers’ contribution to national policies that shape their practice’ (an item that relates to ‘authority and control’ in Evetts’s terms). Here too, the Figures in Chapter 5 make it clear that there is a large gap between the proportions of youth workers responding ‘very much’ to the part (a) and part (b) statements. In relation to their contribution to national policy, the difference is enormous: 7% ‘very much’ believe they *do* make a contribution; almost 80% ‘very much’ believe they *should*.

This finding is consistent with the fact that when it came to asking respondents about the extent to which they thought a range of groups ‘place their *trust* in the professional judgement of youth workers’ (trust being another central concept within Evetts’s framework), policy makers scored lowest out of the seven categories presented and were the only group with a mean score less than 3 out of a possible 5. More than 50% of respondents selected ‘not really’ or ‘not at all’ in response to this question. In the light of findings discussed earlier it is not surprising that young people (4.8) and their families (4.4) scored highly, but it is striking and positive from a professional point of view that employers received the same score as families (4.4).

Finally, survey respondents were asked about the importance of a number of initiatives or ideas for the development of the youth work profession in Ireland. The two highest scoring items, both on 4.7 on a scale of 1-5, were research into youth work (which 79% of respondents considered ‘very important’) and a code of ethical practice, but all items received scores of at least 4 apart from the idea of a licence to practise youth work (which received a score of 3.6 and which only 34% considered ‘very important’).

The survey findings were reinforced by the discussions in the focus groups, in which participants similarly expressed strong support for both research in youth work and for a code of ethics. It was considered that research was increasingly important in making the case for funding, especially for work that was innovative, but it was stressed that youth work research should meaningfully involve both youth workers and young people at all stages.

Some participants saw a particular role for a code of ethics because of the fact that youth workers enter employment from a wide range of occupational and educational backgrounds, with one suggesting that such a code could provide an ‘anchoring piece’ in this context. Another respondent saw the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities as an ethical issue in itself, affecting both youth workers and the young people they work with, while another – again because of the ‘variety of routes of entry’ into youth work – suggested that for some workers ‘continuing’ professional development might be the *only* professional development in youth work they had experienced. All of these findings have implications for the profession of youth work in Ireland today.

### 6.2.6 A question of definition: youth work as education?

It was noted above and in Chapter 5 that when participants in a focus group formed a ‘word cloud’ with their responses to the question of ‘what youth workers do’, neither informal learning nor non-formal education was mentioned. When I raised the issue for discussion, the idea of youth work as a form of education was disliked or even resisted by some participants. One youth worker said that he *‘made sure that I let the young people and my colleagues and anyone who was talking to me know that I’m not an educator...I’m a facilitator’*. But other participants took it for granted that what they were involved in was educational. The following exchange illustrates the different approaches:

Laura: *It’s ingrained in us that [youth work is] non-formal education. So, we don’t think about it.*

Jean: *So, take that word away from it altogether. It’s about social and personal change.*

This makes it obvious that the key concern is not what youth work *is* but how it is *described* and how the description sounds to others, especially young people and their families who may have had a negative experience of the formal education system. Some of the exchanges quoted in detail in Chapter 5 make it clear how much participants had in common when it came to reflecting on what young people had gained from their participation in youth work, and in understanding how that had come about. But they sometimes disagreed, even strongly, on the terminology or ‘vocabulary’ that is appropriate to define and describe the process and outcomes.

This is very significant in the policy and funding context because as pointed out in Chapter 5 and also in earlier parts of this thesis, youth work is defined in Irish legislation (Youth Work Act 2001 and Education & Training Boards Act 2013) as a ‘planned programme of education...which is...complementary to...formal, academic or vocational education and training’. But it also raises vitally important questions for youth work in Ireland as a profession, concerning how practitioners conceptualise and communicate what they do, both among themselves and when engaging with policy-makers, other professionals and the public, including young people. These implications and others arising from the research are considered in the next section.

## **6.3 Implications for Youth Work as a Profession**

### **6.3.1 Occupational and organisational discourses: a hybrid picture?**

As stated in Chapter 1, it is a basic assumption of this study that the patterns of experiences, views and opinions of the members of any occupation – their perspectives and perceptions - can throw light on the nature of that occupation as a profession. Also introduced at the outset and throughout the thesis was Julia Evetts's (2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013) concept of discourses of professionalism. A 'discourse' in this context means a cluster of images, ideas and practices related to some area of social life, so different discourses refer to different ways of thinking and acting in a given social context (Devlin, 2013). Evetts is therefore suggesting that there are different ways of thinking and acting in relation to professionalism within an occupation, and she captures the differences through the distinction between two 'ideal types' (in Weber's sense) of discourse which she calls the occupational and the organisational. While conceptually distinct, in practice Evetts acknowledges that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive: neither one might apply to the complete exclusion of the other, and in fact Faulconbridge and Muzio (2008) use the term 'hybridity' to describe how different aspects of professional discourses can coexist and interact within a profession.

The occupational and organisational discourses do, however, rest on clearly different assumptions about what it means to be a professional. The differences (which were summarised in Table 1.1) primarily have to do with issues of occupational change, authority, autonomy and trust, which in turn all relate to the exercise of power and the capacity to make decisions and take legitimate independent action within a professional sphere. The findings of this study suggest that youth workers have very mixed experiences and therefore mixed perceptions concerning such matters.

In some senses, the responses of the study participants appear to suggest considerable professional discretion and autonomy. In responses to the survey question that was most directly designed to assess perceived autonomy, there was hardly any gap at all between the mean scores for the 'actual' and 'ideal' situation. Survey respondents also perceived themselves to be highly trusted by their employers, who were given the same mean score in this regard as the families of the young people being worked with. It is also very significant (and related to 'sense of control' as a professional) that the areas of work which respondents report themselves as spending most time on correspond extremely closely with the aspects of their work that they find most rewarding.

Focus group participants also appeared to derive great satisfaction from the same aspects, mostly relating to direct interaction with young people and seeing them benefit from their involvement in youth work. However, the focus group discussions also included examples of situations in which participants did not feel they were being supported or trusted to make professional judgements, and in particular a strong sense of frustration regarding some aspects of their work, notably inconsistencies and inequities relating to pay and conditions as well as administrative arrangements. One way of interpreting the findings is that the occupational discourse seems to prevail in relation to how youth workers go about doing face-to-face work with young people but that the organisational discourse comes to the fore when they are relating more directly with employers, managers or funders.

But I would argue that while the situation regarding the two discourses may be ‘hybrid’ it is not hybrid in such a straightforward way. This is because, even with regard to face-to-face work (for example), both discourses are in play. Policy makers, managers and practitioners may for instance all be in agreement that face-to-face work is the ‘core’ of youth work practice and the aspect of the work to which workers should devote most time. Funders and employers may even formalise requirements regarding the proportion of time that an employee should devote to such work, and youth workers may be happy if that proportion is high since it is the type of work they find most satisfying and rewarding (even if they struggle to complete administrative and organisational tasks within the time that is left).

However, there may still be differences or tensions between these ‘stakeholders’ regarding the nature of the work that should be done during face-to face sessions (for example between informal/conversational interaction versus more prescribed and programmatic approaches), as well as regarding how progress or effectiveness should be evaluated or measured and who should determine what the outcomes should be. The focus group findings outlined in Chapter 5 and discussed in Chapter 6 provide clear examples of such tensions.

It is also not necessarily the case that youth workers are against all ideas or approaches that might be described as part of the organisational discourse. Survey respondents were strongly in favour of the youth work profession being regulated and both they and focus group participants strongly supported more formal CPD requirements for staff. This bears out the findings of other recent Irish research (Cluskey, 2025) and is also in line with Evetts’s own view that organisational professionalism can present opportunities and benefits as well as challenges for the members of professional groups. It is also confirmed by wider

developments in the Irish youth work sector in recent years. For example, when the National Quality Standards Framework was introduced in 2010, some external professional observers and Irish media coverage seemed to assume that it must have been imposed ‘from above’ on the youth work sector because of a concern with poor practice or even safeguarding problems among youth workers. If true, this would have been a very good example of the organisational discourse dominating the occupational one.

However, the NQSF actually emerged from several years of deliberation and consultation led by a Working Group that included representation from major youth work organisations themselves and was rolled out after a substantial pilot exercise directly involving youth workers. The independent evaluation of the pilot reported very positive feedback by practitioners, as did anecdotal accounts in the years after its introduction.

This study therefore seems to confirm previous research and experience suggesting that youth workers are not necessarily (perhaps not at all) opposed to the aspects of organisational discourse that have to do with standards and accountability. They do however object strongly to a hierarchical structure of decision-making at national level that is widely perceived as neither fair nor rational. It is not rational because of numerous inconsistencies relating to pay, conditions, administrative and reporting requirements and because even though there is a stated policy emphasis on the importance of collaboration the system is actually experienced as fostering rivalry and competition between both organisations and professionals. It is not fair because workers undertaking similar roles in different organisations or with different funders are not treated equitably and because they do not feel that their voices are heard in relation to matters that affect them.

The gap between the ‘actual’ and the ‘ideal’ in relation to workers’ influence on policy was by far the widest of the survey responses to statements about ‘youth work as a profession’. In addition, politicians were the least frequently engaged with of a range of groups presented to respondents, and policy-makers were perceived as having low levels of trust in youth workers, compared to other stakeholders. These findings have direct implications for the status of youth work as a profession. One focus group participant captured what seemed to be a widely shared view when she said: ‘Often, I think the conversations around professionalisation happen among people who are not doing the work and the people doing the work on the ground are not often part of these conversations’.

At least in some respects, therefore, the findings suggest a working environment in which the organisational discourse (a way of ‘thinking and acting’ that primarily favours the perspective of policy makers, funders and in some cases large employers) is perceived to dominate or squeeze out the occupational discourse of the professionals themselves.

### **6.3.2 Towards explanation and action**

This raises the questions of why such a situation should exist and what can or should be done about it. In some ways the experience of youth workers is similar to the experience of other professionals, including even practitioners in the long established and ‘high status’ professions such as medicine and law. This is because today professionals of all kinds are much more likely to work in organisational settings and publicly managed services than they were in the past, and therefore to be subject to more supervisory scrutiny and bureaucratic controls. As Evetts puts it, professionalism has increasingly become organisationally defined. Much more than before, it is understood and regulated through ‘the logics of the organisation and market, managerialism and commercialism’ (Evetts, 2010: 3).

However, I believe that this study throws light on aspects of youth work practice (and, crucially, the policy shaping it) that make it particularly likely for youth workers in Ireland to have a well-founded sense that their professional autonomy, discretion and judgement are highly constrained, or in Evetts’s terms that an occupational discourse of professionalism is limited.

It is my analysis that the single most important aspect in explaining the situation is the continuation of the ‘variety of routes of entry’ into youth work practice, whereby completion of a programme of education and training in youth work is not a requirement for employment. As already indicated, the policy position is that ‘the recruitment and employment of staff including youth workers is a matter for the youth organisations and services themselves’ (DCEDIY, 2023). This is the case despite the fact that the state established the North South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS) in 2005, with the remit of assessing and endorsing professional programmes of education and training in higher education institutions. The ‘youth organisations and services’ themselves, even those who have been directly involved in the work of NSETS, have different views on the necessity or desirability of professional qualifications in youth work. This ‘sectoral ambivalence’ as it might be called, at the highest level of decision-making in youth work, helps to explain a number of this study’s most significant findings.

Most obviously, it is reflected in the figures relating to the educational backgrounds of the study participants, with the survey respondents roughly equally divided (and the focus group participants precisely so) between those with professional qualifications in youth work and those without. But at least as importantly, I have argued (tentatively) that this difference in background may be related to different attitudes among respondents to a range of matters. These include the very question of the role of professional education and training for youth work. They also include the question of the extent to which youth work should be available to young people during ‘unsocial hours’, with some participants arguing strongly that such availability is an essential feature of youth work as non-formal and informal learning but others much less convinced. Above all, the fundamental question of whether youth work is a form of education and should be defined and described as such was a subject of disagreement within the focus groups and I have (again, cautiously) suggested that the pattern of opinions and perceptions can be related to the education and training background of the participants. The disagreement is particularly striking given that youth work is explicitly defined in Irish legislation as a form of education.

In terms of concepts that are commonly used in sociology and specifically in the sociology of the professions, the situation is one in which there is a lack of a consistent and sufficiently widely shared socialisation process within the profession. Socialisation processes have been studied by sociologists of the professions for many years (e.g. Western and Anderson, 1968; Schein, 1971) but it is only relatively recently that this aspect of youth work and of other ‘social and educational professionals’ has received attention (Pusztai and Csók, 2020). In sociological terms, socialisation is the process whereby a culture is transmitted from one generation or cohort to another, and a culture can be defined as the interrelated ‘ways of thinking, feeling and acting’ that can be found within a social group or society. It need not however be a static thing: ways of thinking, feeling and acting can themselves be more or less orientated towards change and innovation. Language is a vital part of any culture, something that a culture’s members need to learn in order to participate fully, but also something that constantly evolves and that members may deliberately seek to change or adapt.

I would argue that it is because of the absence of a consistent socialisation process within the profession of youth work that it is possible for youth workers themselves to disagree on something as fundamental as how to define the nature and purpose of their work. The relative lack of socialisation does not just arise from the ‘variety of routes of entry’ into youth work jobs. Based on the findings of the survey, youth work practitioners have low levels of

involvement in ‘student placement supervision and/or support’ and ‘providing supervision to others’ both of which are important forms of professional socialisation (Crues & Crues, 2018).

I would also argue that this situation should be a matter of concern to policy makers and employers, because lack of a shared vocabulary is likely not just to hinder communication and perhaps cause unnecessary confusion or tension but also to undermine the effectiveness of practice. This is because education (including informal and non-formal education) is a *conscious* process and practice. Mark Smith’s seminal publication *Creators Not Consumers* (1982) defined critical social education through youth work as a ‘conscious attempt to help people to gain for themselves the knowledge, feelings and skills to meet their own and others’ developmental needs’ and the literature on youth work continues to insist on the importance of intentionality and ‘consciousness’:

[Integrating theory and practice in youth work through praxis] needs to be done consciously and deliberately through a process of reflection, and it takes time and ‘space’. As Dana Fusco says [in the YWELP training video]: ‘when you have space to reflect on practice you’re starting to articulate your concepts and your ideas’. The concept of articulation is an interesting one. To ‘articulate’ means to ‘utter explicitly and distinctly’ but it also means to ‘connect the parts to each other’ (Tierney et al., 2019: 9).

Irish youth work policy has included explicit statements of a similar approach. According to the *National Youth Work Development Plan*:

Youth work’s primary concern is with the education of young people in non-formal settings, and education is by definition a planned, purposeful and conscious process (whereas “learning” may or may not be planned and purposeful, and may or may not be conscious) (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13).

Such an approach does not involve ignoring or downplaying the role of spontaneity in youth work. With reference to the NYWDP statement, Devlin argues:

This means that youth workers approach any activity or programme, any situation or eventuality – structured or unstructured, expected or spontaneous – by asking themselves what opportunities it presents to further the education and development of young people, individually and collectively (Devlin, 2013: 331).

Such ‘asking’, and such reflection, on the part of an individual worker and between workers within teams, requires a shared vocabulary. This does not rule out disagreements about purpose, approach or outcomes, and it does even not rule out decisions to change the language being used, but a shared vocabulary is essential as a starting point. Based on the findings of this study it cannot be taken for granted that such a shared vocabulary relating to

the educational nature and purpose of youth work exists among those who are practising it in Ireland. Apart from its negative implications for good practice, this has the potential to undermine the very idea of youth work as a profession.

I am not arguing that professions with prescribed routes of entry in the form of specific programmes of education and training (in other words, the vast majority of professions) do not have communication problems or disagreements about purpose or direction. Nor am I saying that making NSETS-endorsed awards a requirement for youth work employment would provide a remedy for all youth work's problems or would even necessarily be a straightforward thing to do. But I would argue that in the light of the state's policy commitments to young people, and its substantial expenditure of public funds on youth work and youth organisations, its completely passive and arms-length approach to 'the recruitment and employment of staff' is not in the interests of youth work, youth workers or the young people they work with.

I do not believe such an approach continues to apply in any other type of 'work with people' supported by the state (recent significant change in relation to workforce development in the early years sector is a case in point) (Government of Ireland, 2022). In the short term and at a minimum, a national initiative is needed to ensure that there is greater coherence between policy objectives and legislation concerning youth work, the scholarly and professional literature that inform it (and that in turn are shaped by developments within it) and the professional formation, socialisation and development of those who practise it. In the words of a focus group participant:

*'I just wonder if youth workers don't know [about the educational purpose of the work] or don't learn that or don't acquire that information somewhere along the journey – then how would they identify as informal educators?'*

The response I am recommending will require attention not just to the 'initial training' of youth workers but also consideration for a code of ethics and a continuing professional development framework. As pointed out by participants in the focus groups for this study, ethics and CPD take on even greater importance in a situation where a large proportion of the workforce have previously undertaken no training whatsoever specifically in youth work.

An initiative to introduce greater coherence and consistency in the professional training and socialisation of youth workers should not be a top-down exercise on the part of the state. It should fully involve youth organisations, youth workers and young people themselves. But

the state has an overriding responsibility to support and facilitate it. This may require the state to overcome some of its own ambivalence towards recognising youth work as a profession, and youth workers as professionals.

### 6.3.3 Recognising youth workers

While Ireland has had policy relating to youth work for many years, and has had legislation defining youth work since 1997 (amended in 2001), the formal recognition of those who practise youth work has been limited. Different policy documents have given different amounts of attention specifically to the role of youth workers: there are hundreds of mentions of youth workers in the ‘Costello Report’ (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984), not a single one in Young Ireland, the current national policy framework for children and young people (DCEDIY, 2023a). In the latter, youth workers are not mentioned even when the context suggests there would be a very good reason to include them, for example:

Everyone has a role to play to make sure children and young people can realise their rights, and that those rights are respected by parents, early years educators, teachers, doctors and other healthcare workers, all professionals and volunteers working with and for children and young people, and the public at large (DCEDIY, 2023a: 15).

The Youth Work Act (2001), which included the definition of youth work that still applies through its restatement in the Education and Training Boards Act (2013), made no explicit mention of youth workers. There is a mention of ‘employees’ of youth work organisations, but only with the ‘negative’ purpose of limiting their presence on voluntary youth councils:

[A]s far as practicable, persons who are employees of...youth work organisation[s] shall not constitute more than one quarter of the total membership of the Voluntary Youth Council [S. 22(2)].

I believe that this lack of explicit recognition of youth workers undermines their status as professionals. In some ways their situation can be seen to correspond to that of ‘semi-professions’. As explained in Chapter 3, this term was used (and made more popular) by Amitai Etzioni in an edited collection published in 1969. According to Etzioni, the characteristics of this category of occupations are as follows:

Their training is shorter, their status is less legitimated, their right to privileged communication less established, there is less of a specialized body of knowledge, and they have less autonomy from supervision or societal control than the ‘professions’ (Etzioni, 1969: v).

However it is important to note again that the full title of Etzioni’s collection was *The Semi-Professions and their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers*. All three of these

named occupations have in the intervening decades undergone very significant further professionalisation and received widespread societal recognition as professions, not just semi-professions. As explained earlier in this thesis, social care work in Ireland has also in recent years become one of the registered professions, with protected title and subject to regulation by CORU; and as described above, those working in the ‘early years sector’ now also have a workforce development strategy and coordinated, consistent national approach to education and training, career structure and conditions of employment. ‘Early Years Educators, School-Age Childcare Practitioners and Childminders’ have a dedicated government-sponsored website where the following words greet them:

Welcome to Nurturing Skills.

This website is your central hub to find information on how the Government is supporting your profession, how you can advance your skills, how you can plan your career and how you can enter the profession. ([nurturingskills.ie](http://nurturingskills.ie))

The contrast with the situation of youth workers is striking. But the above cases also provide evidence of the dynamic nature of all occupations and all professions, and confirm the possibilities for change.

#### **6.3.4 Equality, diversity and inclusion**

There is another specific feature of semi-professions, or occupations that used to be regarded as semi-professions, that is important to note. As Etzioni put it: ‘the large majority of the labor force we deal with is female and its demographic attributes significantly affect our subject’ (1969: vi). Other studies of semi-professions have made the same point: ‘more typically, the semi-professional is female’ (Horowitz, 1985: 297).

As already stated, I am very aware of the need to be cautious about making generalisations because of this study’s relatively small sample and its non-random sampling strategy. Nevertheless, a consistently gendered pattern of responses is one of the most salient findings. The workforce within the sample has a very large majority of females, and women are also more likely to be in roles with a management function. But the women in the study earn a lot less than the men overall, and even the female managers earn somewhat less than their male counterparts. As regards the roles and tasks most frequently engaged in, the aspects of work found most rewarding and challenging, and the extent to which workers have as much professional autonomy as they think they should have, there are differences in the responses

of men and women who took part in the survey. Gender also arose as a significant issue, in a range of ways, in the focus groups.

Overall, the implication I would draw from the findings is that any systematic consideration of the future of the youth work profession in Ireland, by policy makers, employers and by youth workers themselves, must include very close attention to the gender dimension. In 1990, Jean Spence wrote that it had ‘taken a decade and more of determined effort to establish the comprehensive validity of gender questions within youth work’ (Spence, 1990: 69). More than three and a half decades later, important questions remain.

Also relating to equality and inclusion, the findings of the survey concerning the ethnic composition of the sample of youth workers (one Irish Traveller and respondents who were 98% white) are worrying. If the figures even come close to reflecting the situation nationally it is something that hinders the achievement of explicit policy objectives as well as being out of line with principles of good practice in youth work (and of social justice more generally). There is no way of knowing how closely they do reflect the situation within the sector but there is an urgent need to find out. I would echo here the recommendation arising from a recent study of the experiences of Black young people in Balbriggan, County Dublin:

There is an urgent need for a national workforce development strategy for youth work, to include incentivisation initiatives aimed at increasing the numbers of minority ethnic professionals and volunteers (publicly funded and drawing on examples in other sectors such as formal education) and with actions relating to both initial and continuing professional education and training (Centre for Youth Research and Development, 2023: 109).

### **6.3.5 Beyond false dichotomies**

Finally, and to return to a point made earlier in this chapter, there is no need to assume that greater recognition for youth work and for youth workers, more consistency in matters of education and training, more emphasis on shared professional ‘socialisation’ processes (including not just initial programmes but also ethics and CPD frameworks) – all of which are part of what is typically called a process of professionalisation – would be to the detriment of volunteers or the ethos of youth work as it has traditionally existed ‘on the ground’. As Cooper (2013) has argued, the dichotomy between professional and ‘grassroots’ youth work is falsely conceived and is not supported by the evidence. That evidence now includes the findings of this research, which must be interpreted with care but which appear to confirm a strong overlap (or what I have called a ‘throughput’) between young people who

experience and participate in youth work, adults who volunteer in it and practitioners who undertake programmes of education and training and become professionally qualified in it.

The respondents to the survey, as well as having a relatively strong sense of professional autonomy in their work, also seemed confident that what they are engaged in is a distinctive and coherent professional practice, a ‘distinctive way of working with young people, drawing on a distinctive combination of theories, principles and methods’ (although they certainly appeared to see room for further development). But this ‘professional identity’ did not undermine their commitment to the idea of youth work as a value-driven social movement. In fact the findings suggest they think that youth work should be ‘a social movement inspired by values and a vision of how society could be better for all young people’ *even more* than it currently is. In the terms used by Sercombe (2010) and Devlin (2012) this can be seen as a vital part of what it is that youth workers profess.

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has returned to the two main research questions that the study set out to address, discussing the findings in the light of the literature presented in Chapter 3 as well as the policy context and background described in Chapter 2, and exploring the implications of those findings for youth work as a profession in Ireland.

While generalisations cannot be made about the wider youth work sector based on this research, the patterns within the sample itself are clear. The picture is of a predominantly female workforce (as is the case in the ‘social professions’ more generally) and one that is not ethnically diverse (a matter of concern in a multicultural society) engaging in a youth work practice that is complex and multifaceted. These youth workers draw high levels of satisfaction from their work, especially the aspects that involve working closely and directly with young people. They also have close contact with the young people’s families. They are much less satisfied by other aspects, including administrative duties, the resourcing of their work and their material circumstances. They are highly frustrated by inconsistencies in pay and conditions across different types of funded projects and believe that the funding and policy context overall fosters rivalry and competition rather than collaboration.

In terms of discourses of professionalism as conceptualised by Julia Evetts (2003-2013) the situation can be described as ‘hybrid’ (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). In some respects youth workers in the sample appear to think they have a high degree of professional autonomy. They perceive themselves as having a ‘lot of leeway’ in making professional judgements, they spend most of their time doing the things they find most satisfying, and they feel trusted by young people, by young people’s families and by their own employers. However, they are not very satisfied by the public image of youth work, they do not feel trusted by policy makers and they have little contact with politicians. They certainly do not think they are involved in contributing to the development of policies that shape their practice as much as they should be.

This sample of youth workers is divided roughly equally in terms of those who are professionally qualified in youth work and those who are not. I have tentatively suggested that this might explain the fact that there were significant differences of opinion during the focus group discussion about important matters: whether such qualifications are necessary or desirable, how ‘available’ youth work and youth workers should be to young people outside of ‘normal working hours’ such as apply in formal education, and most fundamentally

whether youth work itself should be defined and described as an educational process and practice. This last difference is particularly striking since youth work has been defined as a form of education in Irish legislation and relevant policy statements going back many decades.

I have argued that the lack of a shared vocabulary to conceptualise and communicate youth work can possibly be explained by the absence of widely shared socialisation processes for people entering youth work as a career. This situation directly reflects the policy position that favours a ‘variety of routes of entry’ into youth work and may also be partly explained by a ‘sectoral ambivalence’ towards professional qualifications among youth organisations themselves. It is also no doubt made worse by employers’ difficulty in recruiting and retaining professionally qualified staff. Whatever the reasons, I have suggested that this situation – if it applies across the sector – has the potential to cause unnecessary confusion and tension and undermine best practice in youth work, therefore diminishing outcomes for young people.

Finally, I have argued that steps to address this situation and introduce greater coherence in socialisation processes, as well as enhanced respect and recognition for youth workers, need not be to the detriment of ‘voluntary, relational, associational youth work’ (Cooper, 2013: 119). A large majority of youth workers in this sample who were professionally qualified had themselves been volunteers in youth work, and the survey respondents expressed strong support for youth work’s identity as *both* a coherent and distinctive professional practice *and* as a values-led youth-centred social movement. This ‘dual focus’ (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013) transcends the false dichotomies that can be found in some policy and even in some youth work discourse, and if anything can be strengthened and sustained by the further recognition and development of youth work as a profession.

# CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

## 7.1 Introduction and Distinctiveness of Study

This study set out to address two main research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of paid youth workers of the nature and characteristics of youth work as an occupation in Ireland?
2. What are the implications for the development of youth work as a profession in Ireland?

There have been several occupational studies of youth work in Ireland, north and south (Harland et al., 2005; McCready and Warm, 1991; McCready and Morgan, 2014; Monaghan, 2013; Youthcert, 2000). There have also been a number of qualitative studies exploring the perceptions of youth workers of the nature of their practice (Cluskey, 2025; Hammond, 2018; Hammond and McArdle, 2023; Noonan, 2020). Devlin and Gunning (2009) gathered data on the ‘purpose and outcomes of youth work’ from both youth workers and young people using a combination of surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. All of the above sources have informed and benefited this study.

My own research is distinctive in bringing together aspects that have not been combined in any previous study. In addition to youth work, the research questions make reference to a second core concept, that of professions, and the work of Julia Evetts (2003-2013) on professionalism as well as other scholarly literature on professionalisation have been important in shaping the design of the research. The methodology has encompassed both quantitative and qualitative strands. No previous Irish study has combined the systematic mixed-methods collection of empirical data on youth workers’ perceptions and experiences with the analytical and interpretative lens(es) of the sociology of the professions. As stated in Chapter 1, therefore, the primary significance of this study is that it is the first to do so.

## **7.2 Key Findings and Contribution**

### **7.2.1 Overall approach and methods**

The findings of this study are drawn from a non-random survey sample of 141 youth workers who responded to an online questionnaire consisting almost entirely of closed questions; and a subsample of 18 respondents who volunteered to take part in a focus group discussion, of which there were two, one online and one offline. As explained in Chapter 4, the decision to combine quantitative and qualitative methods reflected the fact that I am drawn to a pragmatist worldview that is open to ‘using pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about [social problems]’ (Cresswell, 2009: 10). Like many people involved in youth work, I have a particular interest in conversation-based qualitative approaches, which tend to be associated with interpretivist and/or constructivist approaches in social science. From this point of view, focus groups are to be recommended because of their relatively small scale and interactive, potentially reflexive dimension. These features make focus groups particularly suitable for youth work research (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Tierney et al., 2019).

However, while not adhering to a positivist worldview, I do believe that it is possible to gain access to *certain aspects* of social life, even if in a limited way, through quantitative methods such as social surveys in which it is possible to gather information in a more standardised format and from a much larger number of people. In the case of the present survey, I was primarily interested in the perceptions of respondents regarding significant aspects of youth work as an occupation (relating to what Evetts calls ‘professionalism’ but also to its rewards and challenges, its public image and the extent to which its practitioners feel trusted by a range of groups). The survey gathered information that can be described as going beyond perceptions (demographic data, employment situations, range of roles and tasks) but the primary research interest (and question) related to youth workers’ perceptions and the other information was collected principally to contextualise and help to make sense of these.

### **7.2.2 Most important findings**

The study sample consists of a predominantly female and almost entirely white group of youth workers, in primarily urban settings. They appear to earn less on average than their counterparts in cognate professions. Those in IYJS youth diversion projects earn more than their UBU-based counterparts. Females earn considerably less than males, even female

managers (who make up the majority of the management cohort). This is just one of a number of areas in which the survey findings show a distinctly gendered pattern. In some cases the focus group findings also confirm the importance of gender as an issue in the workplace, and not in positive ways.

Less than one in five of the survey respondents is in a trade union. They are roughly evenly divided (and in the case of the focus group participants, exactly evenly divided) between those with and those without professional qualifications specifically in youth work, although the vast majority have engaged in some kind of training provided or supported by their employer. Most of them had volunteered in youth work before becoming employed in it, especially those who decided to pursue professional training, but most had also worked in another sector before entering youth work, including social services, formal education and retail work. In the focus group discussions, a pattern could tentatively be identified according to which participants who had undergone professional education and training in youth work were more likely to describe their work as a form of informal and non-formal education (in line with the Irish legislative definition) whereas those who had not were less inclined to do so and in some cases actively rejected the use of the word 'education' to describe their work. In a perhaps related finding, those who had not undertaken a professional programme of education and training seemed less likely to perceive such programmes as playing an important role in youth work.

These youth workers appear to experience a 'hybrid' mix of the two main discourses of professionalism as conceptualised by Julia Evetts (2003-13). They perceive themselves as having a high degree of autonomy in making professional judgements and they find the direct face-to-face aspects of their work (which take up most of their time) very rewarding, as well as deriving satisfaction from their relationships with their peers and feeling highly trusted by young people, young people's families and their own employers. These findings all suggest the operation of a strong occupational discourse.

However, in keeping with the survey findings on salary levels, focus group participants expressed considerable dissatisfaction with pay and conditions and extreme frustration at what are perceived as widespread inconsistencies in relation to such matters within different organisations and across different founding sources. This was identified as damaging morale and leading to an exodus of staff into other sectors, including social care work (which has recently become a fully regulated profession with 'protected title', but hadn't at the time of

the focus group discussions). Both the survey findings and the focus groups convey a picture of a group of workers who feel undervalued and not particularly trusted by policy makers, and who do not think that they get to make the contribution that they should be making to relevant national policy. The policy and funding context was also described in the focus groups as fostering competition and rivalry rather than cooperation and collaboration between workers and between organisations. All of these perceptions suggest that in important respects the youth workers feel that their own occupational professionalism is undermined by unwelcome and unsympathetic features of an organisational discourse.

### **7.2.3 Main implications**

My analysis and interpretation of the findings point to a number of implications for youth work as a profession, beyond the specific point about a hybrid mix of discourses. In fact the latter point might be said to apply in a wide range of contemporary professions, especially since as Evetts says professionals today are much more likely to work in organisational settings and publicly managed services than they were in the past, and therefore to be subject to more supervisory scrutiny and bureaucratic controls (2010: 3).

More specific to youth work is the striking lack of explicit acknowledgement and recognition of the distinctive contribution of youth workers, and specifically their role as *professional practitioners*, in legislation, in policy and in funding arrangements for the sector. As discussed in the previous chapter, this situation is strikingly different not just to the one that pertains in the long established ‘high status’ professions such as medicine and law, or the more recently recognised but now well established ones of teaching and social work, but also to the very recently recognised and regulated profession of social care work and to ‘early years’ work which now has a national framework for workforce development, education and training, employment and career structures. Information concerning all of these issues for early years educators and carers can be found on a public portal describing the various ways in which ‘the Government is supporting your profession’ ([nurturingskills.ie](http://nurturingskills.ie)).

In this context, the participants in the present study would seem to have good reason to feel that they are not being valued or recognised in the way that they deserve. From the point of view of the focus group participants, they were not seeking anything special, just fair and equitable treatment and respect. They – and the survey respondents - are open to initiatives that might be seen as likely to make greater demands of them (while also having benefits): more formal CPD requirements, a code of ethics, even a system of registration.

Both the empirical findings and my own wider studies and experiences suggest that efforts to change the situation are hampered by a number of features of youth work as it exists today. One of them, discussed in detail in Chapter 5, is the lack of a widely shared ‘socialisation’ process for workers entering the sector. This relates to the diversity of education and training backgrounds referred to above, but it is also reflected in the fact that respondents to the survey described themselves as spending relatively little time on ‘student supervision and/or support’, ‘volunteer supervision and/or support’ or, more generally, ‘providing supervision to others’. The contribution of professional practitioners to the supervision and support of colleagues and of students and volunteers undergoing training can be regarded as a key aspect of the professional ‘socialisation’ and ‘identity formation’ process within a professional field (Cruess & Cruess, 2018).

In the absence of both a robust framework for such support and of a coherent approach to ‘initial’ education and training for youth work, it is perhaps not surprising that focus group participants in this study could disagree strongly on something as fundamental as whether to describe their work as a form of education. I have argued in the previous chapter that this should be a matter of concern not just for youth workers themselves but for funders, policy makers and employers. Lack of a shared vocabulary, and therefore a shared conceptualisation of core purpose, is likely not just to hinder communication and perhaps cause unnecessary confusion or tension but also to undermine the effectiveness of practice and therefore lessen the beneficial outcomes for young people.

A second feature of youth work that hinders progress in addressing the issues raised above is the lack of a collective voice, and collective way of organising (and thus perhaps conceptualising, reflecting and ‘socialising’ incoming members), among youth work practitioners themselves. As already mentioned several times, even though the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003) included the idea of a professional association of youth workers, and a number of attempts have been made to take steps in this direction, none has so far been successful.

I believe that the findings of this study support the case for revisiting this issue along with the broader question of preparation for, and entry into, employment as a youth work professional. For me, it is not a matter of making specific prescriptions at this stage, such as a requirement in all cases for an NSETS-endorsed qualification (although my own background and experience convinces me of the value of such professional education and training). It is more

important that all those who have a 'stake' in such matters make a concerted and collaborative effort to agree on ways of addressing the problems and making progress.

As already stated in Chapter 5, an initiative to introduce greater coherence, consistency and 'fitness-for-purpose' in the professional preparation, training and socialisation of youth workers should not be a top-down exercise on the part of the state. It should fully involve youth organisations (who have different perspectives on such matters, and these should be respected and accommodated in whatever framework might emerge), along with youth workers (perhaps through an association or collective such as just mentioned) and young people themselves. Professional educators and academic researchers in youth work should also be involved.

But it is the state that has an overriding responsibility to support and facilitate such a process, since it takes the lead in policy formulation and funding. In fact, even though the relevant legislation defines youth work as education and assigns responsibility for statutory support of youth work to Education and Training Boards, the findings of this research might be interpreted as suggesting that the state itself has 'muddied the waters' regarding the educational nature and purpose of youth work, because of the both the overall orientation and specific terminology adopted in key policy documents, relevant to both the UBU scheme and to youth diversion projects. This adds to its responsibility to support a process of collective reflection and clarification. In addition, the fact that a comprehensive review of NSETS has recently been completed means that the state has access to a substantial body of information and insight from stakeholders relating to at least one important aspect of the issues that need to be addressed. It is for these reasons, along with its responsibilities and ongoing work in relation to workforce development, that recommendations arising from this research begin by addressing the Department of Education and Youth.

## 7.3 Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1:**

The Department of Education and Youth, working closely with all relevant strategic partners including the NYCI and its members, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the Youth Work Educators' Forum and higher education institutions, youth workers and young people themselves, should take timely action to follow up on its recent research and fulfil the commitment in *Opportunities for Youth* to 'produce a Workforce Development Strategy in respect of the youth work sector, to include consideration of training needs and the requirement for high-quality, accessible and inclusive youth work services and opportunities' (Action 7).

### **Recommendation 2:**

The Workforce Development Strategy should prioritise the need to ensure that the composition of the youth work workforce reflects the cultural diversity of Irish society and that it is in line with the strategic objective of embedding 'an equality and rights-based approach across all youth work services and supporting structures' (DEY, 2024: 12) in relation to gender, ethnicity, disability and all other relevant equality grounds.

### **Recommendation 3:**

The Workforce Development Strategy's consideration of training needs should take an integrated approach to the full range of levels and types of training that are relevant ('initial', pre-service and in-service; full-time and part-time; continuing professional development).

### **Recommendation 4:**

The Workforce Development Strategy should address the long overdue task of developing 'a comprehensive framework for accreditation and certification in youth work, taking into account...the need for accessible and flexible progression routes for both volunteers and paid workers' (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 33).

### **Recommendation 5:**

The Department of Education and Youth and the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) should publish the review of the North South Education and Training Standards Committee, or a summary of its main findings, and convene a forum of all relevant stakeholders to consider means of promoting and ensuring quality standards of education and training for

professional youth work, in ways that provide for robustness and rigour but also responsiveness and accessibility.

**Recommendation 6:**

The Youth Workers' Educators Forum and the National Youth Council of Ireland, bringing together institutions that offer professional programmes of education and training in youth work and organisations employing a significant proportion of professional youth workers, should jointly facilitate a meeting to explore the idea of a professional association of youth workers, options for what its role might be, how it might function, and how it might be sustained.

Given its potential importance in contributing to the youth work sector and addressing issues arising in this research, funding should be sought for such an event from the Department of Education and Youth.

## **7.4 Areas for further research**

This section is in effect a continuation of the previous one, because it identifies a number of areas in which, based on the findings of this study, I recommend that further research is undertaken:

### **7.4.1 Gender**

Given the range of ways in which gender patterns appear within this study sample (proportions of overall workers and of managers; salary levels; distribution of roles and tasks; areas of reward and challenge; perceptions of professional autonomy) there is an urgent need for a comprehensive national study of the gender dimension in professional youth work in Ireland.

### **7.4.2 Professional formation, socialisation and identity in youth work**

The patterns that have been tentatively identified within this study sample, according to which those with and without a background in professional youth work education and training may have different views of the nature of the work and, in particular of how to describe and communicate it, merit more systematic investigation.

### **7.4.3 Youth work in different contexts**

There were differences within the study sample between youth workers in UBU-funded projects and those in IYJS youth diversion projects as regards salary levels, time spent engaging in face-to-face work as compared with administrative duties and funding applications, and in the degree to which workers felt they were trusted by communities, funders and policy makers. This suggests the need for a carefully designed study exploring the impact on youth work practice of a range of aspects of the organisational, funding and policy contexts.

### **7.4.4 External perceptions of youth work**

Public trust is an important factor in shaping the working lives and experiences of all professionals (Evetts, 2006). The youth workers in this study sample felt themselves highly trusted by young people and young people's families and by their own employers, but they felt less trusted by other professions and, in particular, by policy makers. They were not very satisfied by the public image of youth work as a profession and, in the qualitative findings, described being negatively impacted by a lack of respect, recognition and even understanding

of youth work. Youth work and youth workers would benefit from research specifically addressing these interrelated issues of public attitudes, awareness and trust. Such research takes place regularly in the case of other professions, including teaching.

## 7.5 Limitations of the Research

Chapter 4 presented a detailed account of the limitations of this research. Here they will be noted again briefly.

This does not claim to be representative study of youth workers in Ireland. It is impossible to know how many youth workers are employed in Ireland as the statistics are not gathered or collated by the government department responsible or by any other agency. Apart from the issue of numbers, there is no ‘sampling frame’ (unified list) of youth workers from which to draw a random sample, and therefore ‘probability sampling’, in which each member of the relevant ‘population’ has the same chance of being selected for inclusion in the study, is impossible. This study is therefore based on a combination of ‘purposive’ and ‘convenience’ sampling (Flick, 2011; Taherdoost, 2016). For that reason, it is not possible to generalise from the findings of this study to the perceptions, circumstances and experiences of youth workers in Ireland more broadly. In this thesis, no claims regarding findings are made that cannot be directly attributed to the study’s own sample of participants.

However, questions have been raised and suggestions made as to what the implications would be (for policy, and for youth work as a profession) if the patterns found in the data *did apply* to Irish youth workers in general. This has helped to inform the recommendations and the areas for further research identified above.

Another possible limitation to this study is the fact that I have been a professional youth worker since 2008, and I have therefore brought my own perceptions of youth work into this research project. I have professional opinions about issues such as pathways to youth work, terms and conditions, ethics, professionalisation and the role of professional associations. I would argue that it is impossible to be an engaged youth worker for so long and not develop such opinions.

As explained in Chapter 4, it was therefore essential for me to build in reflexive methods within the research process so as to make any biases explicit. The use of reflexive tools such as journaling pre- and post-fieldwork, regular review and reflection with my supervisors and consultation with youth workers prior to each stage of the fieldwork helped me to remain aware of such bias and take corrective action if necessary. The adoption of an inductive as well as deductive approach to the analysis of the data collected, specifically the qualitative focus group discussions, also helped to ensure that the perspectives of research participants

could be heard and communicated in their own terms rather than being confined within a framework predetermined by me.

Notwithstanding these limitations, I am not aware of any other research study in Ireland that has heard directly from as many youth workers as this one about their perceptions and experiences of being a youth worker, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. I hope that the research findings, analysis and recommendations can support the work of the Department of Education and Youth in developing a workforce development strategy for youth work, while also contributing to education, training and further research relating to youth work policy and professional practice.

## 7.6 My Journey with this Research: A Concluding Note

My relationship with youth work has taken another turn with the completion of this research. Many years after I followed some friends in the front door of the local youth centre to get a cup of tea, I proudly present this doctoral thesis.

When I started this programme, my research plans looked quite different. I wanted to conduct a research project that would throw light on youth workers' and young people's experiences of youth work relationships and explore the possibilities and the boundaries. As my analysis and understanding of youth work literature evolved, and I became more aware of my own sense of place within that, it became abundantly clear to me that I wanted to conduct an occupational study of youth work, with youth workers.

This has been the biggest challenge of my career. The study has confirmed my view that I am not the only youth worker who enjoys the *'doing'* of youth work far more than the *'writing'* about youth work. I have stretched my competency with regards to academic ability and analysis throughout this process. At times, I have felt a million miles away from the work. But an important take-away from the study for me is how important research is for the work, for the workers and for young people.

Professional youth work needs to be supported with an evidence base that clearly communicates the values, principles and methodological approaches of youth work to new youth workers, families, communities, policy makers and decision makers; and ultimately to young people, whose individual and collective wellbeing is the point of it all.

It is time to re-ignite some of the conversations the Irish youth work sector has flirted with many times but never followed through on. The irony is not lost on me that youth workers spend their days encouraging young people to become empowered and critical agents of change and yet, collectively, *we* spectate as elements of organisational professionalism prevail.

Two statements stand out to me that were made during this research. Once the first meeting was finished, at which I had asked youth workers to contribute ideas for the types of questions that would be asked in the survey, one participant noted that the project had the potential to ask the questions that youth workers have been wanting to answer for a long time.

I was struck by this. Youth workers are ready and willing to contribute to the professionalisation of the sector and the jobs that they love. The findings of the survey support this. Youth workers are not apathetic towards the current or future landscape of their profession, but they need to be facilitated to contribute.

A second statement came up in the final focus group. *'You're really taking one for the team here with this Aidan.'* I interpreted this as meaning that although research is a demanding and at times gruelling process, it plays a vital role in the development of any profession.

Youth workers want to know more about what other youth workers think, do and experience. While this project was ultimately focused on the production of a research output, and despite the challenges in finalising the output, I also enjoyed the process. It has been a privilege to meet youth workers, learn about their experiences, and hopefully capture their insights.

Since taking up my place on the Department of Applied Social Studies DSocSc programme in 2020, my professional life has turned upside down and inside out. From being a youth worker (2008-2020) and youth work educator and researcher (2020-2024) to most recently being elected to Dáil Éireann (2024) – it has been a turbulent journey. The one task that has remained with me throughout has been this research. And so, I take great pride in concluding this thesis, the study, and the process.

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# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A: Survey Information Sheet



## Appendix 2

### Professional Youth Work in Ireland: An Occupational Study.

#### INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

##### Information Sheet

**Purpose of the Study.** I am Aidan Farrelly, a doctoral student, in the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for the doctorate in Social Sciences, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Professor Maurice Devlin and Associate Professor Hilary Tierney.

The aim of this research study is to develop an occupational profile of youth workers in Ireland, exploring for example: education and training, pathways into the profession, job titles, roles and responsibilities and rewards and challenges.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve participating in an online survey, which will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

**Who has approved this study?** This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because you are, or have been employed as a youth worker in Ireland.

##### **Do you have to take part?**

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. You are invited to take part in an online survey. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to consent on the opening page of the survey.

##### **What information will be collected?**

There is no personal data being sought in this survey e.g. name, address, contact details. The aim is to explore issues such as education and training, pathways into the profession, job titles, roles and responsibilities and rewards and challenges.

You don't have to answer all questions - every question in this survey are optional and can be skipped.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** This study is anonymous. You will not be asked to submit any personal identifiable information in the survey.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party.

Maynooth University requires the following statement to be included in all information sheets: *It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.*

**What will happen to the information which you give?** As noted, all the information you provide is anonymous, and will be stored on the Maynooth University server. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server for ten years, after which all data will be destroyed by Aidan Farrelly. Any printed documentation associated with this study will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by Aidan Farrelly in Maynooth University.

**What will happen to the results?** The research findings will be presented as part of a doctoral thesis. There may be associated use by way of articles, book chapters, conference presentations and other outputs

A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request. I plan to share the findings of this research directly with youth workers in a variety of fora.

If you give permission, I would also like the opportunity to re-analyse the data for future research projects. This is called secondary use.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

**What if there is a problem?** You may contact my supervisor Associate Professor Hilary Tierney ([hilary.tierney@mu.ie](mailto:hilary.tierney@mu.ie)) and/or Professor Maurice Devlin ([Maurice.devlin@mu.ie](mailto:Maurice.devlin@mu.ie)) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact me:  
Aidan Farrelly [aidan.farrelly.2021@mumail.ie](mailto:aidan.farrelly.2021@mumail.ie)

**Thank you for taking the time to read this**

## APPENDIX B: Survey Consent Form



### Appendix 3

#### Professional Youth Work in Ireland: An Occupational Study.

#### Consent Form (To be included on Page 1 of Online Survey)

I agree to participate in Aidan Farrelly's research study titled Professional Youth Work in Ireland – An Occupational Study of Professional Youth Workers in Ireland.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing. I understand who to contact should I have any further questions before taking part in this survey.

I am participating voluntarily.

I understand that my data is not submitted until I complete the survey, and once finished, my data cannot be withdrawn.

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my survey.

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects

*If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@mu.ie](mailto:research.ethics@mu.ie) or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

*For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at [dataprotection@mu.ie](mailto:dataprotection@mu.ie). Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.*

# APPENDIX C: Survey Questions

## Page 3: Education and Training

2. Please choose your highest qualification attained. This list is based on the [National Framework of Qualifications](#).

- Level 1
- Level 2-3 (E.g. Junior Certificate)
- Level 4-5 (E.g. Leaving Certificate)
- Level 6 (E.g. Higher Certificate)
- Level 7 (E.g. Ordinary Degree)
- Level 8 (E.g. Honours Degree / Higher Diploma)
- Level 9 (E.g. Masters Degree / Post-Graduate Diploma)
- Level 10 (E.g. Doctoral Degree)
- N/A

3. Please Detail All Qualifications in the table below:

	Name / Title of Award	Main Subjects Studied	NQF Level (if known)
One	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Two	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Three	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

4. Do you hold a professional qualification in Youth Work ([NQF Level 8/9 NSETs Endorsed qualification](#)) or EnglishWelsh ETS, Scottish CLD or international NSETs-recognised equivalent.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

4.a. If yes, which form did your professionally qualifying programme take (please tick one):

- Pre-service, Full-Time
- Pre-service, Part-Time
- In-service, Full-Time
- In-service, Part-Time

5. Have you participated in any Continuing Professional Development (CPD) relevant to your role as a youth worker?

- Yes
- No

6. Has your employer offered training relevant to your current role as a youth worker?

- Yes
- No

## Page 4: Pathways Into Youth Work

7. As a young person, did you participate in youth work?

- Yes
- No

8. Prior to becoming a professional youth worker, did you volunteer in youth work?

- Yes
- No

9. Prior to becoming a professional youth worker, were you in a different full-time occupation(s)?

- Yes
- No

9.a. If yes, please identify what this occupation(s) was.

## Page 5: Contract and Conditions

10. In what county does most of your youth work take place?

- Carlow
- Cavan
- Clare
- Cork
- Donegal
- Dublin
- Galway
- Kerry
- Kildare
- Kilkenny
- Laois
- Leitrim
- Limerick
- Longford
- Louth
- Mayo
- Meath
- Monaghan
- Offaly
- Roscommon
- Sligo
- Tipperary
- Waterford
- Westmeath
- Wexford
- Wicklow

11. In which of the following does most of your youth work take place?

- City Centre
- Suburbs of a City
- Town
- Village
- The Countryside

12. What is your current job title?

- Youth Worker
- Community Youth Worker
- Youth Justice Worker
- Youth Work Assistant
- Youth Employment Worker
- Project Leader
- Manager

- Project Assistant
- Coordinator
- Youth Officer
- Project Worker
- Development Officer
- Support Worker
- Activities Coordinator
- Youth Activities Worker
- Outdoor Education Worker
- Other

12.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

13. How long have you been employed in your current role?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 21-29 years
- 30+ years

14. How long in total have you been in paid employment as a youth worker?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 21-29 years
- 30+ years

15. What is your employment status?

- Permanent full-time
- Permanent part-time
- Fixed term contract full-time
- Fixed term contract part-time
- Community Employment Scheme
- Rolling Contract (Funding Dependent)
- Relief Panel / Casual Employment

Other

15.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

16. On average, how many hours do you work per week?

- 0-10 hours
- 11-15 hours
- 16-20 hours
- 21-29 hours
- 30-35 hours
- 36-40 hours
- 41+ hours

17. On an average week, in your current role how many evenings/nights are you rostered to work? (For the purposes of this survey, evening/night work is defined as any time between 18.00 - Midnight).

- Zero
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- Five
- Six
- Seven

18. On average, how often do you work on weekends?

- Weekly
- Bi-weekly
- Monthly
- Bi-monthly
- Quarterly
- Annually or less
- Never

19. How is your current role funded?

- UBU Scheme
- Irish Youth Justice Service
- HSE
- Tusla
- Department of Social Protection

- Local Authority
- Fundraising
- Philanthropy
- EU Funds
- Other

19.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

20. What is your annual gross salary (before tax - to the nearest thousand)?

21. Are you on a pay scale?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

22. Which of any of the following have applied in your current role? (Please tick all that apply)

- A Pay Freeze
- A Pay Reduction
- A Pay Increase
- None of the above
- Other Pay Modification

22.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

23. As part of your current employment contract, are you entitled to any of the following:

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Yes	No	Unsure	Prefer Not To Say
Paid Overtime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternity Leave (With Full Pay)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternity Leave (With Full Pay)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time Off In Lieu (TOIL)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Occupational Pension Scheme	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health Insurance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dental Insurance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Travel Expenses / Mileage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

24. Please describe your current Annual Leave entitlements (e.g. I am entitled to 20 days Annual Leave per annum).

25. Are you a member of a Trade Union?

- Yes
- No

25.a. If yes, please identify which Trade Union you are a member of:

- Forsa
- SIPTU
- Unite
- Mandate
- Other

Page 6: Role and Task

26. How often do you engage with the following people in your work:

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Parents / Guardians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
School Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
School Principals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gardai	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gardai Juvenile Liaison Officers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Workers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
School Completion Projects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Probation Officers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Counsellors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Politicians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

27. How often do you engage in the following tasks as part of your role as a Youth Worker?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Every Few Months	Annually	Never
Work with young people in groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Individual work with young people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Online work with young people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Detached / outreach / street-based work with young people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Planning for work with young people (any of the above types)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluating work with young people (any of the above types)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Receiving supervision as a staff member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing supervision to other staff members	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student placement supervision and/or support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteer supervision and/or support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participating in Continuing Professional Development / training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing grant applications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing reports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Routine administration (paying bills, maintenance, cleaning, shopping etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

27.a. If you have indicated Other, please insert type(s) of task here:

28. In terms of programme areas - how often is your work with young people specifically focussed on the following:

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Youth arts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Anti-racism and intercultural work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Equality*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friendships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Global youth work and development education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drugs and alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
International exchanges	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employment and training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Youth health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Digital youth work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

28.a. \*If your work focuses at least sometimes on equality, please specify which type(s) of equality:

## Page 7: Youth Work as a Profession

Below is a series of statements about youth work as a profession. Please consider each of these and indicate (a) the extent to which you think this is **currently** the case and (b) the extent to which you think this **should** be the case.

**29.** *'I have a lot of leeway in making professional judgements about how I work with young people.'*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not at All
Currently The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should Be The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**30.** *'Professional youth workers make a significant contribution to the development of the national policies that shape their practice.'*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not at All
Currently The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should Be The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**31.** *'Youth work is a social movement inspired by values and a vision of how society could be better for all young people.'*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not at All
Currently The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should Be The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**32.** *'Youth work is a distinctive way of working with young people, drawing on a distinctive combination of theories, principles and methods.'*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not at All
Currently The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should Be The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**33.** *'The outcomes of youth work are set by youth workers in partnership with young people.'*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not at All
Currently The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should Be The Case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**34.** Please indicate the extent to which you think each of the following categories places their trust in the professional judgement of youth workers.

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very Much	Somewhat	I Am Not Sure	Not Really	Not At All
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Young People	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Their Families	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other Professions Working With Young People	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Youth Work Employers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Youth Work Funders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Policy Makers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Page 8: Rewards and Challenges

35. How satisfied are you in your current role?

I am extremely satisfied  
 I am satisfied  
 I am not sure  
 I am unsatisfied  
 I am extremely unsatisfied

36. Please consider each of the following factors that might influence a youth worker's job satisfaction. With regard to your current job, assign each factor a score from 1 to 5, on the basis that 1 means "Greatly reduces my job satisfaction" and 5 means "Greatly enhances my job satisfaction".

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 14 answer(s).

	1	2	3	4	5
Salary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social impact of youth work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workload	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hours of work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working with young people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public image of youth work as a profession	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Job security	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contract type (e.g. permanent, time-specific.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eligibility to apply for a mortgage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Administrative aspects of role	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Promotional opportunities/career prospects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relationships with peers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Programme funding / resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Further education / CPD opportunities available	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Availability of housing in the area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cost of living	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

37. How important do you think the following are in terms of the development of the youth work profession in Ireland?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 9 answer(s).

	Very Important	Quite Important	Not Sure	Not Important	Totally Irrelevant
A formal register of professionally qualified youth workers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A code of ethical practice for youth workers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A license to practice youth work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

A regulatory body for youth work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A professional association for youth work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collaboration among youth work organisations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collaboration between youth work organisations and other organisations working with young people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A more flexible approach to employment terms and conditions for women in the sector	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A formal Continuing Professional Development framework	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research into the impact of youth work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Page 9: General Information

38. What age are you?

- 17-24
- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70+

39. Gender: how do you identify?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say
- Other

39.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

40. Ethnicity: what is your ethnic background?

- White - Irish
- White - Irish Traveller
- Roma
- Any other White background
- Black or Black Irish - African
- Black or Black Irish - Any other Black background
- Asian or Asian Irish - Chinese
- Asian or Asian Irish - Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi
- Asian or Asian Irish - Any other Asian background
- Arabic
- Prefer not to say
- Other

40.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

## Page 10: Final page

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

The next step of this research will be to invite a small group of youth workers to meet for a one-off session to discuss the findings of this survey. If you would like to be involved in this session, [this link will take you to a form to receive further details](#).

If you have any issues with the questions asked in this survey - you can contact Aidan Farrelly ([aidan.farrelly.2021@mumail.ie](mailto:aidan.farrelly.2021@mumail.ie)), Associate Professor Hilary Tierney ([hilary.tierney@mu.ie](mailto:hilary.tierney@mu.ie)) or Professor Maurice Devlin ([maurice.devlin@mu.ie](mailto:maurice.devlin@mu.ie))

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## APPENDIX D: Moderators Guide (Focus Groups)

### Moderators Guide

**Focus Group:** Professional Youth Work in Ireland – An Occupational Study

**Location:** Maynooth University

**PI:** Aidan Farrelly

May 17<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024

**Research Goals:** To invite a number of youth workers to discuss and respond to a series of statements about professional youth work in Ireland. The statements posed in this session are informed by the findings of the survey ‘Professional Youth Work in Ireland: An Occupational Study’ conducted by Aidan Farrelly in 2023 with 141 people employed as youth workers in Ireland. There are five main sections to the focus group: Education and Training / Pathways into Youth Work, Contract and Conditions, Role and Task, Youth Work as a Profession and Priorities.

### Structure:

1.	<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A brief overview of the study is presented.</li> <li>• Participants are reminded of the ethical considerations and ground rules before the session begins.</li> <li>• Participants are invited to introduce themselves and in one sentence, outline why they chose to attend.</li> </ul>	5
2.	<p><b>Education and Training / Pathways into Youth Work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What pathways are available to people to become youth workers in Ireland?</li> </ul> <p><i>Prompts if necessary:</i> Consider education pathways, previous employment experience, previous experience as a participants and/or volunteer.</p>	20
3.	<p><b>Contract and Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We hear about a recruitment and retention issue in the youth work sector in Ireland. Why might this be the case, and how could it be addressed?</li> </ul> <p><i>Prompts if necessary:</i> Contract type, salary, benefits, opportunities to progress, CPD.</p>	20
4.	<p><b>Role and Task</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is a day in the life of a youth worker?</li> </ul> <p><i>Prompts if necessary:</i> What youth workers do, who youth workers engage with (young people, families, other services etc.).</p>	25
5.	<p><b>Youth Work as a Profession</b></p>	20

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the characteristics that define youth work as a distinctive profession?</li> </ul> <p><i>Prompts if necessary:</i> Trusting youth workers? Values, Theory, Approach, Education, Relationship, Funding.</p>	
6.	<p><b>Priorities for Professional Youth Work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants have ranked the priorities for the profession of youth work as follows – what is your reaction to this list?</li> </ul> <p><i>Prompts if necessary:</i> What might participants mean when they say research in to the impact of youth work? What would a youth work association look like to you? What should be included in a code of ethics?</p>	25
7.	<p><b>Closing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants are reminded of the opportunity to withdraw from this study as per the consent form and information sheet.</li> <li>• Participants are thanked.</li> <li>• Should they wish to receive a copy of the research, participants will be invited to email Aidan for a copy.</li> </ul>	5

## APPENDIX E: Information Sheet (Focus Groups)



### Professional Youth Work in Ireland: An Occupational Study.

#### INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (FOCUS GROUP)

**Purpose of the Study.** I am Aidan Farrelly, a doctoral student, in the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for the doctorate in Social Sciences, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Professor Maurice Devlin and Associate Professor Hilary Tierney.

The aim of this research study is to develop an occupational profile of youth workers in Ireland, exploring for example: education and training, contract and conditions, pathways into the profession, job titles, roles and responsibilities and rewards and challenges.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve participating in one focus group, which will take approximately 90-120 minutes to complete. Participants will have an option to choose an in-person focus group in Dublin, or an online focus group via MS Teams. There will be an audio recording of the focus group for the purpose of transcribing the input.

**Who has approved this study?** This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because you are, or have been employed as a youth worker in Ireland and have registered your interest in participating in a focus group.

**Do you have to take part?** No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. You are invited to take part in a focus group. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to consent via an online form.

**What information will be collected?** The name and email address that you provide is the only personal information that is collected. The in-person focus group will be recorded in audio format and the online focus group will be recorded via MS Teams recording. All smaller group discussion within the focus group will also be audio recorded. All files will be held in a password encrypted folder on a secure Maynooth University server.

The aim of this focus group is to explore issues such as education and training, contract and conditions, pathways into the profession, job titles, roles and responsibilities and rewards and challenges, reflecting on some of the findings from the online survey completed by 141 professional youth workers in Ireland.

You don't have to answer all questions – your participation in the focus group is entirely optional and you will not be asked directly to contribute to any specific element of the focus group. You are free to withdraw from this research or change your mind about participation up to 14 days after you participate in the focus group. After 14 days, the date will be transcribed, after which, the removal of individual data will be challenging.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** This right to confidentiality is an important, but not absolute, principle that the University will strive to uphold by lawful means. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym – and any quotations used directly in the final research project will be under this pseudonym. The audio files, your name and email address will be held securely on a password encrypted file on a Maynooth University server. Participants will be asked not to share information discussed during the focus group. No identifiable data from the survey will be shared during this research project.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party.

Maynooth University requires the following statement to be included in all information sheets: *It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.*

### **What will happen to the information which you give?**

As noted, all the information you provide will be transcribed under a pseudonym, and will be stored on the Maynooth University server. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server for ten years, after which all data will be destroyed by Aidan Farrelly. Any printed documentation associated with this study will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by Aidan Farrelly in Maynooth University.

**What will happen to the results?** The research findings will be presented as part of a doctoral thesis. There may be associated use by way of articles, book chapters, conference presentations and other outputs. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request. I plan to share the findings of this research directly with youth workers in a variety of fora.

I would also like the opportunity to re-analyse the data for future research projects (e.g. academic articles, books, news articles etc.). This is called secondary use. I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

**What if there is a problem?** You may contact my supervisor Associate Professor Hilary Tierney ([hilary.tierney@mu.ie](mailto:hilary.tierney@mu.ie)) and/or Professor Maurice Devlin ([Maurice.devlin@mu.ie](mailto:Maurice.devlin@mu.ie)) if you feel the research has not been carried out as describe above.

**Any further queries?** Should the issues discussed during your participation lead to any discomfort, please don't hesitate to contact me. If you need any further information, you can contact me: Aidan Farrelly [aidan.farrelly.2021@mumail.ie](mailto:aidan.farrelly.2021@mumail.ie)

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@mu.ie](mailto:research.ethics@mu.ie) or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this.**

## APPENDIX F: Ethical Approval (Survey)

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,  
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett  
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

16 February 2023

Aidan Farrelly  
Department of Applied Social Studies  
Maynooth University

**Re: Application for ethical approval for a Project entitled: Professional Youth Work in Ireland: An Occupational Study**

Dear Aidan,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 1 rapid review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 31/01/2024.

Please note: all projects now require an end of project report which is attached. Please complete and upload the end of project report to your RIS ethics record after the project end date.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carol Barrett".

Dr Carol Barrett  
Secretary,  
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

C.c. Dr Hilary Tierney, Applied Social Studies  
Prof. Maurice Develin, Applied Social Studies

Reference Number SRESC-2023-35451
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## APPENDIX G: Ethical Approval (Focus Groups)

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,  
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett  
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

21 March 2024

Aidan Farrelly  
Department of Applied Social Studies  
Maynooth University

**Re: Application for ethical approval for Project entitled:** Professional Youth Work in Ireland: An Occupational Study

Dear Aidan,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 31/03/2025.

Please note: all projects now require an end of project report which is attached. Please complete and upload the end of project report to your RIS ethics record after the project end date.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carol Barrett".

Dr Carol Barrett  
Secretary,  
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

c.c. Professor Maurice Devlin and Associate Professor Hilary Tierney  
Department of Applied Social Studies

Reference Number SRESC-2024-37504
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## APPENDIX H: Job Titles of Survey Participants

<b>Concerned directly with working with young people</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Number</b>
	Youth worker	31
	Youth justice worker	21
	Community youth worker	14
	Project worker	5
	Youth work assistant	4
	Youth employment worker	2
	Support worker	2
	Youth at Risk Worker	1
	Two Roles- Community Youth Worker & Youth Integration Worker	1
	Youth information officer	1
	Youth Participation Officer	1
	Tutor	1
	Youth Integration Worker	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>85</b>

<b>Significant management component</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Number</b>
	Manager	16
	Project leader	15
	Co-Ordinator	10
	Development officer	5
	Youth officer	4
	Team Lead Youth Family Support Work	1
	Community Services Programme and Afterschool Programme Manager	1
	Youth Co-Ordinator	1
	Programme Officer	1
	Youth Resilience Coordinator	1
	Director	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>56</b>

## **APPENDIX I: Qualifications of Survey Participants**

- Youth and Community work
- MSocSc.
- Honours Degree
- Bachelor of arts in community sport's leadership
- Social studies diploma
- B.A. (Hons) Sociology & English
- BA Hons Youth Work Degree
- BA hons. Youth and community education
- Level 5 in Applied Social studies
- Postgraduate Diploma in Education
- B.Sc.
- Diploma youth/Community Maynooth university
- Bsoc Youth and community
- Applied social studies in social care
- BA Community and Youth Work
- BA Honours in history
- Sociology and English
- Bachelor of Arts Degree 2:1
- ND Applied Social Studies of social care
- Social and Community Development
- BA Applied Psychology
- BA (Hons) Social Care
- MA Community and Youth Work
- Bachelor of Arts Early Childhood Education and Care
- Bachelor of Arts
- community addiction studies
- Bachelor of Arts
- BA IN applied social studies
- Youth & Community

- MSc Counselling and Psychotherapy
- Master in Social Science Social Policy
- L 9 Non Profit Management
- Applied Social Studies in community youth work
- BA Social Science
- BA Hons Youth & Community Work
- MA
- Degree Social Science/Behavioural Science
- Honours degree in community & youth development
- DIP in Social Work
- Post Grad H-Dip in Youth & Community Work
- Social Care Practice
- BA (Hons) Social Care Practice
- HDYCW
- B.Arts
- Ba Hons Community & Youth Work
- Youth and Community Work
- BA Applied Social Studies
- BA Hons Drama (Performance)
- Software Development BSC
- BSc Health Science & Physiology
- BA Arts
- Bachelor of Science in Health and Social Studies
- Youth and Community work
- BA with Children's Studies
- Sports Studies BSc
- Post graduate
- Fine Art
- BA Social Care Practice
- BA

- Msc Equality Studies
- Social Care
- LLM child and family
- BSc Honours
- Masters in Human Rights Law in Criminal Justice
- Leaving certificate
- Bsc multimedia
- Leaving Certificate
- Radio & Television Studies
- Bachelor of Arts in European Studies
- social studies
- BSocSc
- Masters Restorative Justice
- Printing Management
- Honours Degree in Community Development & Youth Work
- BTEC diploma in social care
- BA (Hons) Applied Community & Youth Studies
- Youth and Community Work UCC
- fashion design HND
- DipHED Community Youth Work
- Bachelor of Education
- BA Family & Community
- MA Human Rights in Criminal Justice
- Level 4-5 Leaving Certificate
- Bachelor of Arts
- Certificate in youth and community work
- Adult and continued education
- BA Youth Work
- Community and Youth Work
- BA Hons

- Psychology
- BA (HONS)
- BA Applied Social Studies in Social Care
- Applied Social Studies in Social Care
- Level 5 Graphics and print making
- Dbl Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree
- Bachelors Business management
- Youth and Community with ucc
- NUI Certificate in Youth Studies
- Diploma in Youth & Community Work
- Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL)
- Youth Work
- MA Youth & Community Studies
- Degree
- Leaving Certificate
- BA Arts
- Master of Social Science (Social Work)
- Special Needs Assisting
- BA Computer Science
- Youth Work
- Bachelor of Arts: Joint Honours
- BA Honours
- Bioscience with Biopharmaceuticals
- BA Connect with Children's Studies
- Bachelor of Arts (Honours)
- Bachelor of Arts
- Youth and Community degree level 8
- BSc. Health Fitness and Leisure Studies
- BA in Social Care Practice
- Leadership and Community Development

- BA (Hons)
- Ordinary Degree in Applied Social Studies in Social Care
- BaCyw
- BA in Applied Social Studies (2.1)
- BA Community & Youth work
- Outdoor Adventure Education QQI 6
- Higher Diploma in Youth and Community Work
- Adult education & humanities
- Bsc hon degree
- BA Humanities
- Bachelor of Arts
- Masters in Community and Youth work Maynooth
- Research Masters

## **APPENDIX J: Training Undertaken by Survey Participants**

- Conflict resolution Child protection Neurodiversity training LGBTQI+ training Flourishing And all the standard trainings like first aid etc. where We complete 10 hours online training each year.
- Leadership Training; Facilitation course; HR course; Trauma informed care; StandUp training; Youth Mental health first aid
- Coaching Supervision, Leadership and Management, Games in Youth Work
- Intro to Youth Work, Child Safeguarding and Protection, Consultancy, outcomes Focused Programme Design, Evidence based practice and assessment of Needs, pro-social modelling, restorative practices, YDP specific training
- Supervision Digital Marketing Erasmus etc.
- Outcome star Trauma informed approaches
- MECPATHS human trafficking
- Level 5 Youth Work Ireland Way
- CPAP (train the trainer), Youth participation, gender in youth work, Meitheal Chair training
- Addictions, youth health promotion facilitation skills in house training
- Advanced group facilitation
- Motivational Interviewing, Assist Training, Group Facilitation
- Child Protection
- Youth identity, Youth positive body image, Drugs in the community, Well-being training for 10 to 12 yr
- We would often do training that is relevant to our work. pornography, transforming hate and ASD training recently.
- Did specialised training in Child safeguarding which is my role within the organisation.
- Creative supervision methodologies.
- Child Protection Global Youth Work
- Motivational Interviewing, A Life of Choices, ASD awareness training, Joanna Fortune and Edel Lawlor trainings (I have completed many other relevant trainings including Karen Treisman trauma informed trainings but through a network I am part of through work, not my employer directly)
- Transforming Hate (NYCI) ASIST Child Protection Meitheal TCI - behaviour management techniques
- CDYSB - Supervisory management Level 6

- Outcomes Star training; MECPATHS Child Trafficking Training
- Equality and Inclusion Trauma informed Child Protection
- National youth council of Ireland- 8 steps to inclusive youth work. trauma informed care
- Restorative Practice training
- RESTORATIVE PRACTICES MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEW REAL U MENTAL HEALTH
- Child Protection Awareness Programme Train the Trainer
- Child Protection Trainer CPAP NYCI Therapeutic Crisis Intervention TCI
- Nonprofit Management and a series of business management course
- Conflict Management
- Change management
- Mental Health First Aid
- Diploma youth and community practice Certificate in counselling  
Restorative practice training Facilitation techniques & programme development  
child protection training Motivational Interviewing
- Trauma Informed practice Currently starting my 4th year level 8 in counselling and psychotherapy
- Key work and case management training, ACRA
- Project Leader Training Designated Person Training
- NUI Maynooth Specialist Cert in Child Protection, 1 year, NYCI. Internal training has included training in: Outcome focused planning and programme design. Manualised Programmes such as Drugs and Alcohol/Sexual Health/Health and Wellbeing/Gender awareness/Internet safety/. External training has included Trauma Informed Practice, Autism training,
- Designated Liaison Training Intercultural Studies
- DLP Training Facilitation Youth mental health training Train the Trainer
- Logic modelling DLP Trauma Informed Practice RP
- Digital Youth Work Skills. Programme delivery
- Mediation Coaching Various Programmes for young people and parents  
Curriculum Design and Evaluation
- Foróige Induction Training Block 1-3, training on how to deliver manualised programmes, and external training on a wide range of topics relevant to my role
- I am currently completing my Msc in Community work and youth work as a part-time in-service student in Maynooth, supported by my employer.

- Motivational Interviewing
- Mostly programme training. Programs to be delivered in group settings.
- YLS
- Only in house training programmes
- First aid Child protection Mental Health First Aid
- Child Protection Training Connect Safely Aware Suicide Prevention Training Mind out Training Yes Facilitator Training
- Child Protection & Safeguarding Motivational Interviewing Parents Plus Training (Parents Plus Adolescents and Parents Plus Working Things Out) Wide range of manualised programmes training - Health and Wellbeing, Internet Safety, Sexual Health & Relationships, VR technology
- Trauma informed care Motivational interviewing Restorative practice
- Mental Health First Aid for youth
- Community Addiction Studies
- "Friends for Life" resilience programme training. Youth Mental Health First Aid training. Specialist Certificate in Youth Health Promotion. Child Protection Awareness Programme.
- Trauma informed care AIM training to work with Yp who sexually offend EARL easily assessment framework training Challenging behaviour MECPATHS child trafficking awareness trg Mental health first aid SAOR trg related to drug use
- Motivational Interviewing Restorative Practice Trauma Informed Care
- Motivational Interviewing Trauma informed Mental Health Stars
- Trained with YAP and some basic Foroige training
- Many opportunities to develop and train throughout my 12-year career in Foróige
- Conflict resolution
- NUI Certificate in Community Education and Equality Studies
- Certificate in Youth Arts Certificate in Health Promotion in Youth work setting Certificate in Addiction Studies Certificate in foundation Counselling Skills
- Youth mental health First aid
- Mind Out Substance Use Motivational Interviewing
- Restorative practice Motivational interviewing
- YLS training
- Management & Leadership

- Mental Health training, working with young people with a disability, sport leadership, European training
- Various inhouse training First Aid, Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, training around Drug misuse, Self-harm, LGBT awareness, Gender Identity awareness, Manual handling, GDPR, Servant Leadership, Trauma Informed Practice,
- Youth Justice level 7
- Mental health
- Child Protection Awareness Facilitator
- Youth Participation Training Motivational Interviewing Child Safeguarding
- Trauma informed practice Restorative practices
- CPAP Child Protection Training
- Child protection, Health and Safety Courses. Foundation Programme in Sexual Health Promotion, Introduction to motivational interviewing, key working, care planning and case management, Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Awareness and Response, Pavee Pathways, Implementing Guidelines, First Aid and Certificate in Supervision Theory and Practice
- Adult and Continued Education formally Train the Trainer
- Other organizations offer training opportunities offered to YWI i.e Youth Mental Health, Child Protection etc. I am also a verified assessor and verifier for OCN NI which allows me to lecture/facilitate training which results in qualifications from Northern Ireland which is recognized globally such as Good Relations etc.
- Suicide awareness training First responder training Restorative practice training Children's First training
- YLS Training, Motivational Interviewing, Restorative Practice
- CPAP, Trauma informed Care,
- Trauma Informed, MI, RP, Facilitation Skills
- I got the opportunity to complete the MA while working. I also got time and a financial contribution towards it.
- Level 6 Child and Adolescent Psychology level 6 Facilitation skills
- young people in society
- SAOR training (HSE) Trauma informed care. Working with LGBT+ young people.
- Trained to deliver Child Protection Awareness Programme Real U, leadership programmes to volunteers.
- Various Trainings in youth work such as Jigsaw, Copping on, Lgbt training

- Behaviour Interventions and Understanding Complex Needs. Young people and Pornography. Transforming Hate. Trauma Informed Practice. Safe and Together - Domestic Violence training
- Various Programme trainings in order to deliver programmes such as Drug & Alcohol Awareness, Sexual Health, Mental Health etc.
- ASIST. Suicide Intervention First Aid
- Motivational Interviewing Critical Reflection Child Protection ASSIST Suicide Training Line Management
- NVR training
- Connect Safely Programme
- Youth Mental Health Training Designated Liaison Person Training Train the Trainer qualification
- Children First Mandated Person, restorative practice, ASIST
- Specific skills training e.g. STEAM
- Conflict Management Digital Skills Music Production
- Child Protection Stand UPP Speak Out Against GBV YES Project - Youth Empowerment in SRE
- ASIST Training Youth Mental Health training Reiki training Squashy couch sexual health training Copping on training Auricular acupuncture training Reflective practice training Restorative practice training B4you decide training
- Child Protection Pornography Youth Sexual Health
- Connect Safely Training Child Protection Training safeTALK MindOut Meitheal
- TCI
- Trauma Informed Practice
- Internal training in programmes developed by the organisation.
- YLS 2.0 Training QQI 5. Working with young people
- Supervision Training Asist Training Self Harm Training NVR Phonography Training Friends Mental Health The Real U Mindout
- SAFETalk & Assist Training
- Motivational interviewing Leadership training Mindfulness
- Supervisory Management health and Safety Technology
- Level 8 Certificate in Transformative Leadership (NUIM) Level 8 Certificate in European Youth Mobility Project Management (NUIM) QQI Level 6 Certificate in First Line Management (NCI) Level 7 Higher Diploma in Drugs and Alcohol Studies (UL)

- Supervision course Employment rights course
- Diversity and Inclusion Training
- Global Youth Work Cert with Maynooth
- Supervision practice Trauma informed practice
- Master's in human rights and criminal justice
- Erasmus +
- QQI Level 6 Train the Trainer Facilitation Skills, Community Reinforcement Approach, Motivational Interviewing, Cognitive Behavioural Interventions
- Motivational Interviewing Restorative Practices YLS and Earl Training Trauma Informed Care
- Short courses and training on programmes that we are encouraged to run within our role as a youth worker such as Leadership for Life, Activating Social Empathy and Be Healthy Be Happy.

# APPENDIX K: Examples of Focus Group Analysis

## Doing the Work

### Codes

Name	Files	References
Competiti	1	1
Consistenc	2	9
Doing the	2	28
Emotions	2	7
Explaining	2	10
Funder	2	17
Gender	2	4
Pathways	2	24
Pay	2	8
Priorities	2	19
Security	1	3
YW as Edu	2	8

Drag selection here to code to a new code

7 Social change I think.

**Reference 9 - 1.03% Coverage**

7 In our organisation – we're talking about numbers a lot at the moment. And they're the nuggets in the day. This wouldn't be classed as education because it's not, they didn't do an exam and didn't get an A in it. But it's like, learning to appreciate.

4 I have a group of young people – and they were going out at the weekend. And they said to me don't worry, we will charge our phones. You know, those little harm reduction things. You think they weren't listening to me that day, but obviously they were.

7 Sometimes all you can hope for is that in 10/20 years, they will remember something that was said. And that's not measured.

**Reference 10 - 2.91% Coverage**

5 When we talk about collaboration, and services together themselves collaborating working with the same young people. Because few and far between, you could have next door neighbour projects, but they're separate in their field of work. And if you try to develop a relationship with them, they don't want to because again the values, the different logistics of the organisation will not let you do that. That's where – it's young people then start to divide and conquer. These are not giving me this thing because the money is not there, but the Youth Diversion Project is there and it can give us everything. That's not a dig – but the money is there.

3 No, not at all

5 The money is there and you have to use it. And the referral pathway is out the door because wherever they streamline towards it, ok they'll do this. And it's only until a certain age. And the politics starts at the

## Progressing Youth Work

### Codes

Name	Files	References
Competiti	1	1
Consistenc	2	9
Doing the	2	28
Emotions	2	7
Explaining	2	10
Funder	2	17
Gender	2	4
Pathways	2	24
Pay	2	8
Priorities	2	19
Security	1	3
YW as Edu	2	8

Drag selection here to code to a new code

7 The fourth one up – a more flexible approach to terms and conditions for women in the sector, I personally never noticed any differentiation between male and females in the sector.

3 I have – in favour of females.

2 There's way more female youth workers.

3 If you're a female, you're better off.

7 Is that down to the pay scales because the pay can be traditionally less than other professions, that it's nearly ok-

8 It's true for all social professions, it's true social work, for care work, youth work-

2 That there's more females like-

8 As it's care, it's seen as being lessor than other work, which is why the sector in a way, the terms of conditions are not on the same footing as other professions.

## Pathways

### Codes

⊕	Name	▲ Files	References
<input type="radio"/>	Competiti	1	1
<input type="radio"/>	Consistenc	2	9
<input type="radio"/>	Doing the	2	28
<input type="radio"/>	Emotions	2	7
<input type="radio"/>	Explaining	2	10
<input type="radio"/>	Funder	2	17
<input type="radio"/>	Gender	2	4
<input type="radio"/>	Pathways	2	24
<input type="radio"/>	Pay	2	8
<input type="radio"/>	Priorities	2	19
<input type="radio"/>	Security	1	3
<input type="radio"/>	YW as Edu	2	8

Drag selection here to code to a new code



who aren't in it, that's not going to work. They won't build a relationship, and eventually it will unravel.

Reference 5 - 0.72% Coverage

- 2 You have to have that motivation for change, and want to empower young people. I don't think that's something that can be taught. You have to have it, to bridge them gaps. Is it really just down to who we are? It could be through a CE scheme, and it ignites your passion. To study, to understand.
- 1 When you talk about CE, there's a difference now. What you're getting now is people who are being sent. It's not people who want to be there.

Reference 6 - 0.36% Coverage

- 2 You either have it or you don't. The amount of people in my personal life who are like, Jesus how do you work with teenagers? And I'm like how do you work with adults? I don't even like them. You have it or you don't.

Reference 7 - 3.56% Coverage

- 3 You said there, I think apprenticeship. I think that would be a start. When one does an apprenticeship, one would think it comes with accreditation, and funding and recognition of a proper pathway to accreditation. I also think it should be funded.
- 8 Being a mentor. To come through the experience. It's not just professional, but your personal experience as well.
- 7 For example, I was in [Location Anonymised], and a lot of our CE workers are retired from the army. They bring a huge amount of experience because they supervised the cadets etc.
- 3 The minimum requirements for the certificate - if they were to standardise something like social care or social work, before you get in the door, I am thinking how do you account for the experience? How do you account for the experience you've got to get in to a job that has a minimum requirement of a degree.
- 8 You can apply and come in to do an interview here in Maynooth for example. It's restricted entry. So the accreditation is good for that way.
- 7 Somebody with that experience would easily get in to the Community Employment, and work their way up.
- 3 In recent past, CE workers have been coming to projects, after being told to