

YOUTHCERT: PROMOTING CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION OF COMMUNITY BASED YOUTH WORK TRAINING

by Maurice Devlin & Hilary Tierney

Introduction

Youthcert, an EU Youthstart funded project, managed by NYF and CDYSB closed at the end of May with the launch of its publications. Youthcert was a strategic action to promote a partnership approach to the provision of certification and accreditation for the many community based training programme called Practitioner Learning Programmes (PLP's) which currently have little or no currency outside the immediate context. Youthcert involved collaboration among youth, community and voluntary work, education and training provision and certification and accreditation stakeholders. The project has demonstrated both the commitment of youth work PLP providers to the provision of community based accredited training and their ability to develop and deliver quality training in a variety of contexts. It has also demonstrated the capacity of the Youthcert consortium (ACSM) to facilitate greater co-operation between certifying bodies and providers in the formal and informal sector.

The initiative taken by the CDYSB and the NYF in establishing the 'Youthcert' programme with EU Youthstart funding was timely and important. Youth work in Ireland is undergoing rapid and unprecedented change and there are several areas in need of urgent review and rationalisation, among them the accreditation and certification of training for youth workers.

Changing nature of youth work

For most of the history of Irish youth work, of course, the question of accreditation and certification simply did not arise: youth work services were provided almost entirely by volunteers who did not need, and were not expected, to be 'accredited'. When, gradually, paid staff began to be employed by youth organisations (to 'support, not supplant, the volunteers') what mattered was demonstrable experience, aptitude and commitment rather than the possession of specific qualifications. As a result, until quite recently there was no such thing as a 'professional youth work' qualification.

The situation was transformed in the last twenty years or so, in response to a dramatically changing

social environment and the emergence of pressing new social problems affecting young people. It is now widely recognised that doing youth work – whether on a voluntary or paid basis – is a complex and demanding job; that – as with other difficult jobs – not everybody can or should do it; and that comprehensive training is required to be able to do it properly. At present two universities within the NUI system, Cork and Maynooth, offer professional third-level training in youth and community work, and numerous other institutions and organisations are providing youth work (and related) training at various levels which is accredited by a variety of bodies, Irish and British. The National Council for Vocational Awards (one of the members of Youthcert's Accreditation and Certification Support Mechanism) is also currently developing 'Level 2' certification in youth and community work, and it is particularly helpful that this has been happening parallel to, and with close reference to, the work of Youthcert. At the same time, it is increasingly common for newspaper advertisements for youth work jobs to stipulate the requirement for a 'qualification'.

In the context of all these developments, it is most important that agreement be reached between all stakeholders as to what 'qualified' status means, or at the very least how the various forms and levels of training relate to one another. It is also vitally important, of course, that any new developments do not simply serve to increase the difficulties already faced by those from disadvantaged backgrounds or communities who wish to gain access to training or careers in youth work. The work of Youthcert was intended to enhance rather than diminish such access, and its particular focus on community-based, practitioner-centred learning reflected this.

Need for clarity

There were other developments for Youthcert to take into account. The sheer number of people doing jobs called 'youth work' has increased substantially in recent years, and will increase even more noticeably in the Drugs Task Force areas in Cork and Dublin with funding from the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund. This is also part of a broader process of institutional proliferation and diversification, with 'youth work' (or at least 'youth work approaches') being adopted in agencies and organisations other than the traditional ones e.g. Health Board Neighbourhood Youth Projects, Department of Justice 'Special Projects', in Youthreach and Youthstart programmes and in numerous community development and area partnership settings. Given this proliferation, and for reasons both of effectiveness and efficiency, it is important to define clearly what 'youth work' is, how it differs from, and is related to, other forms of provision or intervention and, of course, how one gets to be called a 'youth worker'.

The increase in the number of paid staff has coincided with a perceived fall-off in volunteer numbers, which may also have been adversely affected by the widespread use by youth groups and organisations (for perfectly legitimate reasons and with substantial benefits both for them and the individuals concerned) of Community Employment schemes. Furthermore, it appears that nowadays volunteers are themselves more likely to see their volunteering in 'instrumental' terms, as a means perhaps to help them gain access to youth work training and/or a youth work career. Related to this, it is increasingly common for volunteers to want and expect some form of accreditation or certification for training they undertake as *volunteers*, which is part of a broader process of increased 'credentialism' in society as a whole.

Policy Developments

A number of other factors have made the work of Youthcert particularly relevant and useful. One is the dramatically increased awareness in recent times of the issue of child protection, and the concern to provide for it more fully in law. This is of obvious importance for youth organisations and youth workers, and is likely to lead to a general "tightening up" of arrangements for entry into youth work, whether paid or voluntary. Another is the Youth Work Bill 2000, which, if implemented, will for the first time provide a legislative basis for the development of youth work services as well as a definition in law of youth work itself. It is likely to lead, among other things, to the further 'professionalisation' of youth work, and systems of accreditation and certification are crucial to any professionalisation process.

The National Youth Work Development Plan, preparation of which is now underway under the aegis of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee, will among other things consider the human resource requirements of the youth work sector over the next five years, including of course the various issues related to training. The National Qualifications Authority established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 will provide the framework for the sector to establish a qualifications framework and address issues of access, transfer and progression within a quality-assured system.

2000 and Beyond

Issues of training, accreditation and certification are highly political ones and moving forward on any coherent 'sector-wide' basis will mean convincing a wide range of parties that no one vested interest has set the agenda. In early 2000 Youthcert convened a series of meetings of interested parties to try to ensure that the valuable learning generated by the project was "mainstreamed". Youthcert was particularly concerned that the insights regarding accreditation and training might be fed into the appropriate

channels (such as the National Youth Work Development Plan) and that the value of the quality assurance framework and the Youthcert "brokerage model" be realised. As a result of these meetings an interagency forum has been established which will co-ordinate a response to some of the issues raised by the Youthcert experience. If this forum is sustained, Youthcert will not only have been an innovative, imaginative and productive project in itself but it will have made a lasting contribution to the development of the youth work sector in Ireland. Enormous credit is due to the managing organisations, to the PLP providers and (where relevant) their parent organisations, to the members of the ACSM and, last but not far from least, to the very able, hard-working and dedicated staff team.

It is evident that Youthcert has carried out its work at a time of rapid change and unprecedented challenge. There is reason to be very pleased with the outcomes, since they have the potential to strengthen the youth work sector's capacity to respond to these changes and challenges more promptly, effectively and inclusively than might otherwise have been possible.

Youthcert Publications

As mentioned earlier Youthcert has produced a series of publications which capture the learning from the various actions undertaken by the project since 1998. Briefly these publications are;

- 1) **Youthcert Final Report,**
- 2) **Irish Youth Work Practice – an Occupational Profile,**
- 3) **Promoting Quality - Quality Assurance Practices for Community Based PLP's,**
- 4) **Credit Where Credit is Due – a report on the brokerage process**
- 5) **and finally, Exploring Accreditation - a guide and workbook on the certification and accreditation process.**

A limited number of these publications are available from the Irish YouthWork Centre. Details of the publications are available on page 23 of this magazine.

YOUTHCERT TEAM

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