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„The future of Youth Information in Europe“

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“The development of Youth Information in Europe”

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Generalist Youth Information has always been based on the conviction that young people have a right to have access to complete, accurate and balanced information that meets their needs and questions and is understandable and customized. Over the past 40 years Services have been developed in different ways depending very much on the national situation (socio-cultural environments, legal background that youth work operates in, other offers available and so on) but always taking this underlying principle into account. Working methods, training, professional principles and tools have been developed on all levels.

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1986 the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) was established to respond to a growing need for exchange and cooperation in the Youth Information Field also on European level. Since then the network has developed and grown always being open to new cooperation partners from all over Europe. In 1990 the first member from a former communist country joined ERYICA. Nowadays more than 8.000 Youth Information Centres are represented in the network – nevertheless we have to bear in mind that there is still a lot of countries which have not been able so far to apply for membership because there are no national coordination structures or those structures are not yet in the position to join a European network.

2.3. European developments **page 9**

Some milestones in the European development of Youth Information Work:

- 1986 establishment of ERYICA
- In 1990 Recommendation N° R (90) 7 of the Council of Europe´s Committee of Ministers concerning information and counselling for young people in Europe gave a strong message to member states.
- In 1993 the General Assembly of ERYICA adopted the European Youth Information Charter
- During the 1990s more specialised networks such as EURODESK, the information network on European opportunities for young people and EYCA, the European Youth Card Association were established and reinforced. Nowadays the three networks strive for possible synergies and close cooperation.
- In 1997 the Council of Europe signed a Partnership Agreement with ERYICA with the purpose to promote and develop European cooperation in youth information and counselling, in particular by organising training activities for persons involved in youth information and counselling.
- In 2001 the European Union published the White Paper "A New Impetus for European Youth" including Youth Information as one of its key areas.
- In 2004 ERYICA adopted a new version of the European Youth Information Charter including new aspects of Youth Information Work such as e.g. participation of young people or the use of new technologies.
- In 2005 and 2006 the networks ERYICA, EURODESK and EYCA engaged in organising joint seminars on topics that are relevant for all three of them such as quality issues and participation of young people.

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Youth Information has gone through huge changes in relation to the new technologies and that new technologies have equipped us with a range of new methods and tools that need to be integrated into our information strategies to form a holistic offer responding to the needs of young people. New technologies and the Internet in particular are important information and communication channels for and with young people and have proven to be extremely helpful especially in areas where no or little on-site youth services are close by. Nevertheless there are important factors to be taken into account to help young people in making the best use of the available technologies and minimise the risks that might come with some of the new possibilities.

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We tend to speak about THE youth knowing on the other hand very well that there are big differences within our target group leading sometimes to very diverse needs, questions and preconditions. Modern Youth Information Work has to take this into account and create services that respect those differences and create appropriate offers and methods for different target groups. To reach our aims we have to use all available channels from face-to-face and counselling to group information, printed material and new technologies. An outreaching approach to get to those young people that would not be likely to address a Youth Information Centre on their own initiative is clearly also part of this strategy.

3.3. Participation of young people

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Participation of young people in Youth Information Work has been discussed largely within the Youth Information Field in Europe over the past years and there is a clear willingness and commitment to involve young people more actively in all stages of our work. We should start quickly now to implement new initiatives and develop training for the workers involved – as such projects require new set of skills for trained Youth Information Workers. Looking further ahead we have to strive for thinking of Participation of young people not only in a project-related way but take the possibilities for young people to be actively involved into consideration whenever gathering, processing, designing and disseminating information for young people.

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Youth Information Centres and Services serve as a compass for young people directing them to the right services for their specific needs. This leads to the fact that YICs have close cooperation and contact with a lot of specialised services and have therefore quite a clear picture of the overall situation concerning available offers for young people. This can be used not only for day-to-day information needs but also for bringing together actors of different sectors and creating a platform for exchange and cross-sectoral cooperation. Cooperation can also be extended to joint production of information material or the transfer of know-how in classic Information Skills such as research, documentation or dissemination.

3.5. Non-formal and informal learning

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3.5.1. Living in the information-society

3.5.2. The role of Youth Information work

More and more emphasis is given to skills that young people acquire in informal and non-formal learning processes. In today's societies competences in dealing with information have an increasing importance. Youth Information Centres and Services are already contributing in informal and non-formal settings to help young people developing the necessary skills in choosing the relevant and reliable information from a surplus of available data. We see a growing importance of this kind of guidance in our work and room for a lot of innovative and complementing new ideas

3.6. Professionalization, evaluation and quality

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3.6.1. Bringing together two professions

3.6.2. A Quality impulse

Following the developments in professionalization in the two relevant sectors of information/knowledge-management and youth work "Generalist" Youth Information is in the fascinating, yet challenging position to bring together findings and experiences from both sides in one profession. This gives us on the one hand the unique opportunity to combine the best of both worlds and on the other hand challenges our workers to a great deal as they have to gain expertise in many different areas to fulfil all the requirements. A lot of quality initiatives have been undertaken over the past years from the development of quality criteria and indicators to the definition of quality in Youth Information Work. Especially in this field European cooperation has given an important impulse and a lot of local and national structures could benefit from exchange of experience

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The increasing importance of reaching the "non-organised" young people as well as the possibility of Youth Information Centres through their day-to-day contact with young people to identify new trends and needs at a very early stage are some of the aspects that make the Youth Information Field a possible partner for the further development of Youth Policies on national and European level. Direct feedback and statistical data that Youth information Centres collect every day and that is nowadays mainly used for adapting the services to current needs can also generate knowledge for youth research and people responsible for youth policies when summarised and analysed in the right way.

4. Perspectives for the future

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4.1. On-going training as a prerequisite for Quality

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Youth Information Work is constantly undergoing a lot of changes adapting its services and offers to the fast changing needs and requests of our target group. Therefore ongoing and quickly adapted training as well as possibilities for exchange of experience and good practice is crucial for providing young people with high quality information.

4.2. Involvement of young people

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It is quite clear that the direct participation of young people is one of the main aims for the future in European Societies being connected also directly to democratic and active citizenship and political awareness. Although we are aware that it is a quite ambitious aim when looking at the level of participation in other groups of our population we share the belief that especially young people can and should be encouraged to take a more active role in Society. Youth Information can contribute to this e.g. by involving young people directly in our work, informing them about their possibilities to participate, taking up a role of advocacy whenever appropriate and many more.

4.3. National structures and European cooperation

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Although Youth Information Centres and Services can be the most effective when operating close to the young people on local and regional level and so having the opportunity to react directly to changes in a certain region and tailoring their services exactly to the needs of the local area, national coordination and a national strategy have proved to be extremely fruitful. The involvement of the Youth Information Field on national and European level in National Youth Policies and Strategies will give a strong message to Youth Information workers as well as to local and regional authorities when discussing their strategies in the youth field. As described in other parts of this documents Youth Information has different offers for authorities and decision makers and will be happy to contribute to further development..

4.4. Needs of newcomers to the subject

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We are still facing some white spots in Europe when it comes to "Generalist" Youth Information and Counselling and we have to put an emphasis on efforts to help newcomers from countries concerned to develop a solid basis for services in this area. Supporting measures such as sharing of know-how, development of starters-kits, enabling those partners to take part in training, study visits and European conferences and many more have to be one of our main working-areas also for the coming years.

1. Introduction

The Youth Information field in Europe has been developing rapidly over the past 40 years being influenced by changes in our societies, political changes, national and European discussion on the subject and a target group that is by nature even more affected by new trends, developments and changes than the rest of society.

The reality of Youth Information has been and is characterised by a big variety of national situations and backgrounds. The systems differ from country to country in many aspects – such as:

- different legal situation of youth work
- different levels of political responsibility for the Youth Information area (local, regional, national)
- different structures in which the area of Youth Information is included – varying from NGOs to administrative bodies
- different kind of links to other areas of youth work (youth/culture, welfare, education, ...)
- different ways on how youth information is embedded in youth policy issues and strategies
- different lengths of experience

and so on.

On the other hand, when thinking about Youth Information in Europe, a fascinating and encouraging fact is that - despite all differences - the general line of thinking as well as the challenges and developments we are facing (given that the sheer existence of the services is not questioned) are quite similar and start from a solid common ground of underlying principles and missions. Thus young people all over Europe can benefit from professional services and activities of the Youth Information Centres and Services that are based on those working-principles.

This paper will bring together some background on the “bigger” developments and trends in Europe and tackle current issues and challenges that we face in Youth Information Work apart from national day-to-day work. We must not forget though that we still face some white spots in Youth Information Services in Europe and there are still a lot of structures that are just at the starting point.

2. History

A glance at why and how...

2.1. 40 years of experience

In his article in Forum21 on the "all different-all equal" European Youth Campaign Ralf-René Weingärtner, Director of the Directorate of Youth and Sports of the Council of Europe, remarked that "Accession and Inclusion – this is, in a nutshell, what all policy with and for young people is about."¹

This is also the common starting point for Youth Information: being a service for young people that helps them to take their own autonomous decisions and realize their aspirations in the way that suits best their abilities and possibilities.

The basic idea behind the development of Generalist Youth Information Services and Structures has always been the right of young people to have access to complete, accurate and balanced information that meets their needs and questions and is designed especially for them, thus being understandable and customized.

The right to information has been recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in the European Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and in the Recommendation N° (90) 7 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. These documents and the intention expressed therein have always been and still are an important point of reference both for Youth Information on national and on European level.

In 2007 Youth Information can look back at a history of around 40 years since the first initiatives took place following the changes in western societies in the late 1960s. As in this starting phase terms as "knowledge and information-management", "IT" and "information society" were still quite some time away, the newly created structures had to find their own ways of dealing with the challenges of researching information, processing it and designing suitable services for young people. It was a period of many innovative ideas and also of trial and error.

In the different countries the services and structures developed in different ways, depending very much on the socio-cultural environments they started to operate in. So structures were sometimes based on existing youth services, were grass-root initiatives or were set up by governmental or administrative authorities. What they all had in common was that "Generalist" Youth Information Structures from the very beginning did not intend to double already existing services but were looking for the gaps that needed to be closed and the networks that could be created.

The organisations started to work on their own professional principles, training for their staff, methods and tools for research, documentation, dissemination of information, and communication with youngsters. Consequently they developed know-how in those areas closely linked again to their different backgrounds as for example the long-lasting discussion in Europe among professionals on the role and intensity of counselling in Youth Information Work shows.

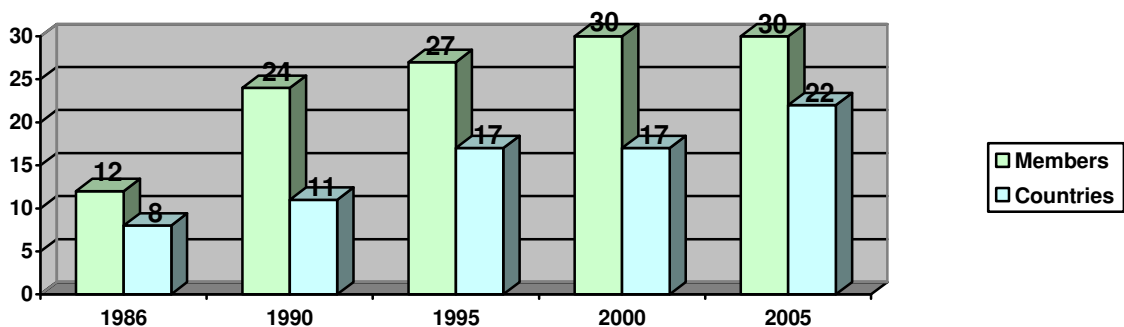
¹ Ralf-René Weingärtner, article „all different – all equal 2006 European Youth Campaign for Diversity, Human Rights and Participation” in Forum 21 – European Journal on Youth Policy, N°5-6 – 3/2006

2.2. The start of European cooperation – ERYICA

As the need for exchange of good practice and know-how was seen in more and more countries where information services existed, first initiatives were taken to find ways of gaining more knowledge about and better cooperation with each other.

In 1985 the first European Colloquium of Youth Information Centres was held in Marly-le-Roi/France and led to the creation of ERYICA, the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency, as a European Network of "Generalist" Youth Information Centres and Services in April 1986. 12 organisations in 8 countries constituted ERYICA's initial partners.

The ERYICA partnership developed quite rapidly from that point on proving that there indeed was a great need for exchange and cooperation.



When looking at the chart showing the development of ERYICA Members and Affiliated Organisations over the past 20 years, we have to bear in mind that the Youth Information field is quite dynamic also in regards of changing structures. So we have seen organisations coming and going (for example in the beginning 90ies ERYICA changed the membership-rules to admit only members that were national coordination bodies or had the scope to create a national coordination for their country – thus some regional partners dropped out of direct membership and were henceforth represented through their national networks).

In the 1990s organisations from former communist countries – the first one being HAYICO (Hungary) in 1991 – joined the ERYICA partnership; thus the efforts of the organisation to stay open to all European countries (not being limited to the European Union) and to give support to new structures and initiatives showed effect.

Over the last years ERYICA memberships have been quite stable. This indicates on the one positive side that in many countries national structures have found their place and a solid position but on the other side is an indicator that there are still many countries where no national coordination bodies of Generalist Youth Information exist or those that do exist are not yet in the position to join the European platform. ERYICA is well aware of the fact that there are services in place also in countries where there are no official member organisations of ERYICA. Therefore it keeps in contact with a lot of partners in these countries in an informal way trying to help wherever possible with materials, expertise and opportunities for professional discussion.

The last available figures, collected in late 2006 and giving the numbers for 2005, show that there are more than 8.000 Youth Information Centres with more than 13.000 youth information workers dealing with the information needs of young people and responding to nearly 23 million visits per year. Bearing in mind that these figures only show us part of the dimension as they do not include internet-based services or the work that has been done by the other information networks this shows anyhow the significant impact Youth Information has in nowadays Europe.

2.3. European developments

In 1990 the Recommendation N° R (90) 7 of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers concerning information and counselling for young people in Europe gave a strong message to member states and the youth information field and has been an important reference document ever since –among other things also for a further step in European Cooperation within the ERYICA-network:

In 1993 the 4th General Assembly of ERYICA adopted the European Youth Information Charter which quickly became the underlying set of work principles for Youth Information Centres and Services in Europe and has served ever since as a basis for all activities and developments undertaken in the European network as well as a starting point for new structures and work principles on national, regional and local level.

In 1997 the Council of Europe decided to increase its efforts in the Youth Information field even further by signing a Partnership agreement with ERYICA with the purpose to promote and develop European cooperation in youth information and counselling, in particular by organising training activities for persons involved in youth information and counselling.

When looking at the analysis of the results of this agreement for the years 1997 to 2004 we can see that in the beginning of the cooperation rather general training seminars for novice workers on "Different Approaches to Youth Information and Counselling in Europe" were offered and the demand for this kind of offer considerably exceeded the places available.

On a later stage the trainings started to be more specialised dealing e.g. with "Training needs in Youth Information" or "Youth Participation in Youth Information Work". Responding to the demand from different countries, a "Minimum Basic Training Course (MBTC)" was developed and national trainers got the chance to take part in a "Train the Trainers-Course" for MBTC. That gave the national networks the possibility to organise MBTCs on a national level being able to best meet the need of their Youth Information Centres. This development shows that over the years many national networks had in principle found their approach to Youth Information and Counselling and had started to undertake also more coordinated national activities. They were now ready for more detailed discussions on different (new) aspects such as youth participation, new technologies, quality assurance and so on.

The European Union, which in regard to youth issues had initially concentrated more on mobility issues, started to intensify its cooperation in youth policy matters with the Council of Europe in 1998 and later on launched the White Paper process. With its publication in 2001, including Youth Information as one of the key areas, the White Paper gave another boost to European discussion concerning this part of youth work – naturally more intense within the member states of the EU but also having effect on wider Europe.

During the 1990s also other - more specialised - networks developed their activities on European level and so we have seen the establishment and reinforcement of EYCA, the European Youth Card Association, and EURODESK, the information network on European opportunities for young people, within the Youth Information field. As the three networks all are dealing with information for young people but differ in focuses, methods and working areas, they acknowledge that close cooperation on all levels (European, national, regional and local) is of great importance to avoid duplications and to use synergies in the best ways for the benefit of quality information for young people in Europe. In 2004 the networks signed a declaration stating that they will strive to cooperate by undertaking projects dealing e.g. with training, participation of young people in youth information work, better access to information and other quality issues.

As a consequence, two joint activities have already been organised, one 2005 in Paris dealing with "Quality Matters in Informing Young People" and one 2006 in Vienna dealing with "Participation of Young People in Youth Information Work".

Other thematic networks such as "Use-it", a European touristic youth information network, have enriched the Youth Information Services in Europe and have been supported and welcomed by the existing European Youth Information structures.

In view of all the European developments and following the internal exchange of ideas and experiences and discussions within the network, ERYICA saw the need and wished to adapt the European Youth Information Charter in order to incorporate principles dealing with aspects that had revealed a growing importance in Youth Information Work over the last years such as participation of young people or the use of new technologies. A group of experts developed new principles and adapted the old ones to the current state of the art and after consultation with the whole network the new version of the European Youth Information Charter was adopted by the 15th General Assembly in 2004.

Some other initiatives were undertaken such as:

- publishing "How to create a Youth Information Centre" in cooperation with the Council of Europe.
- Adopting a set of indicators for National Youth Information Policies which are intended to serve as a reference point for decision-makers and youth information workers involved in including Youth Information in youth policy strategies;
- Doing an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of ERYICA and on that basis developing a mission statement and strategic areas of work for the period of 2007 – 2009.

3. “Generalist” Youth Information Today Current situation, issues and challenges

“Generalist” youth information can be characterised as a user-centred approach and as such - as described in various ERYICA documents - puts the expressed needs and questions of young people and their perceived information needs always in first place. This leads naturally to a wide range of addressed topics since young people can turn to a Youth Information Centre with whatever question or concern and the YIC will give the needed information directly, discuss with them the different options they have or refer the young person directly to the appropriate place or institution.

“Generalist” Youth Information, following the underlying working principles that are stated in the European Youth Information Charter and from that point of view a stable factor in youth work, has still the same aims and mission that are based on the right of young people for information. Nevertheless, being that close to the demands of our target group Youth Information work is constantly evolving as expectations, living conditions and needs of young people are undergoing even more rapid changes than the rest of society.

Some insight in the most frequent topics and issues that are discussed in the Youth Information field nowadays at regional, national and European level:

3.1. We have the Internet – do we still need Youth Information Centres and Services?

During the 1990s when the impact of the possibilities of new technologies showed its effects also in youth work, it has been perceived not only as an opportunity but also as a threat to the classic Youth Information Centre. In public discussion it seemed that web-based information simply means to put everything online and no more service would be required as youngsters will find everything they need on their own.

Although the changes that Youth Information has gone through in relation to the new technologies have been huge, time has shown that neither the initial euphoria nor the fear have proven to be justified – but that new technologies have equipped us with a range of new methods and tools that need to be integrated into our information strategies to form a holistic offer responding to the needs of young people.

3.1.1. better access – but only if you can use it

The Internet opens a whole world of information and opportunities but apart from the simple fact that you need to have access to the right equipment (starting with a computer) to get access, you also need a lot of skills not only to find not “just something” but “the right thing” (the answer to what you have been looking for). Once you have found what could be the answer to your question, you will have to decide if this information is reliable and accurate – so you need strategies to select and assess the information.

Youth Information Centres have adopted their role as orientation guides in many different ways when it comes to online-information: offering pre-selected information on youth-related topics on their own websites and contributing to web(youth)portals, running databases which young people can scan for different topics, giving guidelines on different searching strategies, when talking to the young person face-to-face giving advice on what could be indicators for selecting and assessing information and many more ways.

3.1.2. Face-to-face is still a quality-factor

The questions that Youth Information Centres and Services are dealing with have also changed significantly due to the broad usage of Internet services. Whereas in the 1980s many young people turned to us with requests for rather basic information on certain topics, they nowadays find those on the web. Contrary to the fear of "not-being-needed" anymore of parts of the sector, it turned out that young people frequent their Youth Information Centres simply in a different way now – when it comes to more complicated issues or when they already found information on the net but want to be sure that they understood everything correctly and can rely on what is written there, a face-to-face colloquy with a professional Youth Information Worker is a quality assurance measure that is taken.

3.1.3. Real anonymity guaranteed

The right of users to privacy and not to reveal their identity has always been a principle of Youth Information Work which YICs have respected. Nevertheless, the young person needed to go to some place in person or revealing his/her voice on the phone. The interactive tools of new technologies offer complete anonymity to youngsters as e-mail, chats and forums are nowadays integrated parts of Youth Information Services. This fact leads (also) to a certain area of topics that are addressed more often through these channels such as family problems, sexuality, drugs and all other kinds of sensitive subjects. The role of first (easy, low threshold) contact points and the guidance to find the way to the appropriate specialised services (if needed) of "Generalist" Youth Information can be once again essential also in web based communication with young people.

3.1.4. Consuming, Producing – Infotainment

Last but not least Web 2.0 and other new technologies have provided us with a great variety of quite easy-to-handle tools for online interaction. We know from experience that young people like to produce their own Internet content (blogs, web diaries, online photo albums, podcast and video and so on) and are also interested in sharing their own personal experience as well as getting first-hand information from peers. Even if this is quite new, some first projects in this area are already up and running and definitely this is not only a chance for more direct participation of young people in the creation of Youth Information but also a chance to reach through this infotainment aspect target groups that would normally be reluctant to consult information products. Although we can see – as described above – a lot of chances in this active use of new technologies for involving young people in the design and production of information there are also some risks concerning mainly safety that we have to bear in mind when it comes to the use of new media by young people: giving away personal data, getting into interaction with unknown people, reliability of the produced information are only some of them. As this is a quite new development we will have to watch this issue closely and explore its chances as well as its risks. The role of youth information in this context will also be to develop appropriate ways of guidance also in this field – some ideas that could be integrated in our strategies:

- informing young people not only about the possibilities but also about the risks
- including in our daily work with young people non-formal and informal learning possibilities on how to make the best use of those technologies and how to deal with the safety-issues
- creating "safe" (as far as this is possible when talking about the Internet) online-environments where young people can test several tools and experience the impacts and consequences of their online-activity
- ...

We are only at the beginning of the technical possibilities and will have to adapt our strategies and offers currently as we gather experience and new technologies evolve.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the common point of discussion in European Youth Information Work concerning the impact of new technologies today is that new technologies and the Internet in particular are important information and communication channels for and with young people and have proven to be extremely helpful especially in rural areas where no or little on-site youth services are close by. For serving the information needs of young people best we need a balanced mix of tools and methods including all the different approaches from face-to-face, printed material, peer-to-peer projects and the different offers of new technologies.

A lot of innovative and creative projects are on their way on local, regional, and national level and will get a chance to present their results and exchange experiences in early 2008 during a joint conference of the three information networks ERYICA, EURODESK and EYCA initiated and hosted by the German partners.

3.2. Different offers for different target groups – THE youth - who is that?

3.2.1. Individualisation and diversification

We tend to talk about THE youngsters or THE youth knowing on the other hand very well from youth studies and experience that there are big differences within this target group and that those differences lead to sometimes very diverse needs, questions and preconditions.

This reality has even evolved further in the last years as Marina Hahn, Deputy Head of Department – National Youth Policy, Austrian Federal Ministry of Health, Family and Youth, says in Forum21: "In our highly individualised society, a 'normal youth biography' is no longer found. Collective biographies, pre-structured patterns shaping the transition from childhood to adulthood have lost their significance. Non-standard youth biographies are therefore the new normality, and a colourful diversity of life patterns, realities and situations characterise the youth biographies of our times."²

For "Generalist" Youth Information Centres and Services when it comes to face-to-face-communication on the one hand, this doesn't really have any impact as the user-centred-approach always concentrates on the individual anyway and gives customized answers to specific questions.

On the other hand, when thinking of the design of information material, online services or information events, we have to bear in mind though that young people tend to wish for individual answers to their individual questions and thus will prefer to get into interaction with their personal question instead of consulting prepared material. Youth Information will not be able to answer all questions on such an individual basis but has to seek ways (low-threshold face-to-face offers, forums and chats, outreaching information work as going to schools and youth-clubs,...) to ensure as much of those services as possible.

3.2.2. One aim – a package of methods

Whereas the aim of Generalist Youth Information Work is always to give young people the necessary information and tools to enable them to take their own decision that suits best their abilities and options we have the choice of a wide range of methods to attain that goal. As stated above we have a target-group that is characterised also by rapid changes and a large diversification of needs – this goes for the content as well as for the methods to be used for passing the information on.

² Marina Hahn, Article „European Youth Policy – For the Benefit of Austrian Youth” in Forum 21 – European Journal on Youth Policy, N°9 – 6/2007

Youth Information started out mainly as face-to-face-services with the use of printed material. There has always been a special link to the area of counselling as is reflected also in the name of ERYICA. There are differences in Europe concerning the understanding of counselling and the concepts of the integration of this service in the offers of our Youth Information Centres depending not only on the various concepts of Youth Information Work but also clearly on the overall situation in the national contexts.

What we can see however as common ground is that counselling is an integrated part of Youth Information Work insofar as exploring the real need behind the question and clarifying the information needs taking into account the personality and contexts of the young person can be seen as a part of a clearing-counselling-process. Counselling as a long-term form of assistance or even therapy is not what we intend when using this term in the Youth Information Context.

Over the last years – as we have seen that young people are faced with increasingly individualised and complex questions during the transition from childhood to adulthood – the service of undergoing with the young person an professional conversation with the aim to clarify the individual situation (starting point, needs, personal resources, options,...) is increasingly important.

Some Centres might even offer more specialised counselling on certain topics such as housing, employment, education and many others either through close cooperation with specialised organisations or through special training for their own staff but this can not be stated for the majority of the Youth Information Field.

Apart from the “traditional” one-to-one-approach described above Youth information has developed also other forms of passing on information in group-settings which are used e.g. when going to schools and youth clubs or working with groups of interested youngsters in projects. Workshops on information, Group discussions, theatre plays and informative games are just some examples of interactive and innovative methods put into practice in several countries.

Peer-to-peer projects are another important development that is of increasing importance especially when linked to more involvement of young people in all areas of youth-information work.

Also written information such as brochures, leaflets, books but also Internet-sites taking into account all the differences that the different media imply has remained an important channel for informing young people and is used in a supporting way when getting into interaction with them individually or in group-settings.

3.2.3. Opening to new target-groups

Different offers that are tailored for the needs of a specific part of our target group have to be developed. Differences in the needs, topics and presumption of information between different age-groups, gender, cultural backgrounds, levels of education and many more have to be respected and taken into consideration.

The efforts made in this area can not be limited to a different design of information-material but must have a much broader approach – once again using all the different information-channels that we have at our disposal from online-services to close cooperation with specialised service-providers, schools and youth-organisations to going out of the Centres to the places young people are (youth clubs, schools, public places such as parks, neighbourhood-events,...)and “meet them on their own ground”.

It is quite evident that including different approaches for different target groups into the Youth Information offers and seeking to meet the increasing demand for individualised information will need a lot of effort to be realised and thus will need quite some resources and planning.

3.3. Participation of young people –

3.3.1. Information is a prerequisite for participation.

The White Paper “A new Impetus for European Youth” states very clearly – as have other documents before – that the access to information is a prerequisite for an active involvement and participation in our societies. This fact has always been one of the *raison d’être* of Youth Information Work and has served as a mission for our structures and activities from the very beginning. Therefore the Youth Information Field was quite well prepared – e.g. already in 2000 the Benelux ERYICA partners had organised in Brussels the “Working Together” conference where participative projects from all over Europe were presented by youngsters themselves.

Luckily the general European discussion on this topic over the last years has clearly moved on towards ways to get young people more involved not only in the Youth Information Work as such but in our Civil Societies on the whole.

Different levels and possible ways of participation have been identified. Involvement of young people in finding out current information needs, creating and designing of information products, dissemination of information, peer-to-peer events and approaches and many more ways have been discussed and implemented over the last period. The Youth Information Sector clearly sees the benefits of this approach not only for the young people but even more so for the involved structures and organisations.

A joint seminar of the three networks ERYICA, EURODESK and EYCA which has been organised with the support of the Austrian Federal Youth Ministry, the Council of Europe and the European Commission in 2006 in Vienna brought together over 60 Youth Information workers to exchange experiences and discuss developments. With the contribution of over 20 young people that are already personally involved in Youth Information projects the seminar has also produced some concrete proposals for further work. The report of the seminar plus a compendium of over 60 descriptions of concrete projects directly involving young people can be downloaded at www.eryica-eurodesk-eyca.net

The young people produced their own Charter on Participation in Information projects called the “Rainbow Paper” and after presentation at the plenum that Charter was signed by all participants. See Annex 2.

3.3.2. “stop talking – just do it” – rapid prototyping

During and after the last seminar the general feeling was a bit “stop talking – do it”. While many projects are already in place and a lot of fruitful experiences and outcomes have been gathered, there is still a broad discussion going on in Europe and many Youth Information Workers see the need for concrete action to take the issue one step further. Rapid prototyping - meaning that we should start quickly implementing new initiatives and not stop ourselves by trying to discuss every philosophical detail of the subject before getting into action.

Of course there is still need for concrete training on working methods, tools and special support for such projects as it involves a new set of skills for trained Youth Information workers. Those trainings should be developed, adopted and implemented as quickly as possible. The ERYICA Training Supervisory Group had already developed a prototype for such a training in 2004 which can serve as well as other existing modules on national level as a starting point for this next action.

We have to bear in mind though that we do not only need well trained and motivated Youth Information Workers and interested young people for such projects but also a considerable financial, political and structural support for real participation of young people to ensure high-quality projects and avoid tokenism.

3.3.3. A horizontal working principle

Participation of young people in Youth Information Work cannot stop at particular – very productive and creative – singular projects but has to become a horizontal working principle which is always and constantly taken into consideration when gathering, processing, designing and disseminating information for young people.

One of the principles of involving young people directly is the belief that the process is as important as the result. In our case though the result still has to be high-quality information for all young people (not only those directly involved) and therefore we have to find ways to ensure that a “quality product” is produced. To achieve this aim we have to take decisions on which level of participation of young people we want (youngsters and professionals together) and communicate this in a transparent and binding way to the young people willing to participate.

There is still some road to go down but listening to the discussions in all European networks over the last years, it seems that within the Youth Information Area this is well on its way.

3.4. Networking and cooperation

3.4.1. Networking and cooperation as vital aspects of any information work

One of the core businesses of Youth Information Work is to serve as a compass for young people: directing them to the relevant services and institutions whenever needed thus avoiding them to get astray in the maze of authorities and institutions. As this implies an excellent knowledge of the offers and duties of relevant facilities for young people, networking and cooperation are naturally a vital aspect of Youth Information Work.

The past years have seen a growing number of specialised services for young people addressing different issues such as education, the European Union, housing, health, drug abuse, sexuality and many, many more. Sometimes young people are reluctant to frequent such services in the first place because it is “unknown territory” – whereas the local Youth Information Centre is usually a low threshold contact point for all questions. Youth Information Centres therefore put a lot of effort in having close connections to these specialised services because this enables them not only to further disseminate issue-related information the services provide but also to guide young people to use the offers by explaining beforehand what they will have to expect there and encourage them to benefit from their expertise.

3.4.2. Overview and cross-sectoral approach

Being in contact with all different kinds of specialised information services, the “Generalist” Youth Information Centre or Service usually has a quite clear picture of the overall situation as this is part of the core business of our work. It can share this knowledge with interested partners and help to highlight existing gaps in already provided services for young people.

Youth Information Centres are experts on dealing with targeted information to young people whereas they can of course not be deep into every single subject tackled by young people when using their services. Specialised information-providers or service-structure on a special topic (drug abuse, housing, sexuality,...) may have young people as one of their target groups among many other and are therefore experts on the subject but not necessarily on designing suitable information offers for young people.

Cooperation between two partners like this – also in producing concrete information material - will be very fruitful as the young people can benefit from different expertise on both sides.

Youth Information Centres and Services can not only be partners for one single project but can also function as a junction between the various service providers bringing them together into youth-related projects and help in that way in sharing knowledge and experience in cross-sectoral groups.

3.4.3 Information for young people is not the monopoly of YICs

“Generalist” Youth Information is well aware that it has no monopoly of information for young people and has never striven to obtain something like that. Apart from specialised (Youth) Information Services lots of other organisations are dealing naturally out of their context with information for young people such as youth organisations, youth clubs, schools and many, many more.

“Generalist” Youth Information doesn’t want to double any existing services but can offer to those information providers an extra platform to display their information as well as a central place where an overview of the different offers can be given and analysed.

The transfer of know-how in classic Information Skills such as research, documentation or dissemination whenever needed or asked for is another increasingly important task for Youth Information Centres and Services which has maybe been a bit overlooked in the past. We could even think of designing special training-offers for those that work with young people and are interested in a more professional approach to dealing with providing information for their target groups, members, pupils,...

3.5. Non-formal and informal learning

3.5.1. Living in the information-society

More and more emphasis is given to soft and hard skills that young people (and all other persons) acquire in non-formal and informal learning processes while involved for example in volunteering, youth work or other activities. Youth policy and decision makers are nowadays very aware of the added value of such skills. Different initiatives of valorising those skills and getting the profit-sector and other possible employers interested in those learning outcomes are on their way.

In today’s societies abilities and skills in dealing with information gain an increasing importance as we are literally flooded with data and the competences to choose the relevant and reliable information from the surplus of available data is getting essential for modern living. Schools can only respond partly to this need for expertise and therefore - if not solved - this lack of know-how is contributing to the information gap between those who have learned how to make the best use of the offers of information society and those who didn’t have the chance to do so.

3.5.2. the role of Youth Information Work

Youth Information is contributing to those learning processes in informal and non-formal settings already today by e.g.:

- Not just presenting young persons with predefined answers when they come to seek information but going through the different options together with them thus letting them take part in the selection process;
- Defining and applying clear selection criteria when researching information and making the criteria transparent for young people;
- Designing checklists and lists of questions for different topics and include them in their information products thus encouraging young persons to go through these lists when having to decide from a variety of options;
- Interactive games and methods used at seminars when e.g. working with youngsters that wish to engage in peer-to-peer-information or counselling projects.

Concerning the role of Youth Information Work in non-formal and informal learning there is still a lot of room for innovative ideas which could be further developed if the need is seen also by decision makers and support can be gained for this kind of projects – such could be:

- designing special workshop on the topic for youth groups
- close cooperation with schools in having special sessions on information issues
- further development of material that can be used while having face-to-face-communication in the Centres
- ...

3.6. Professionalization, evaluation and quality

3.6.1 Bringing together two professions

As already stated in the first part of this document, when “Generalist” Youth Information Work first started in the end of the 1960s there was still not much scientific basis, specialised training or best-practice to refer to and so the structures and networks had to learn on the job – adapting their services and working methods while going along.

A lot has changed since then and the whole “information business” has indeed become an issue relevant to quite all areas of life. IT and other tools have been developed to deal with knowledge and information management and a lot of research and professional debate have taken place over the last years.

In the meantime also the whole youth sector has seen a great deal of professionalization over the last years: trainings and formal education-opportunities have been implemented, national and European synergies have been sought, quality criteria and standards have been developed and implemented and many other initiatives have taken place.

Following the developments “Generalist” Youth Information is in the fascinating, yet challenging position to bring together findings and experiences from both sides in one profession. This gives us on the one hand the unique opportunity to combine the best of both worlds and on the other hand challenges our workers to a great deal as they have to gain expertise in many different areas to fulfil all the requirements.

3.6.2. A Quality impulse

The professional approach the Youth Information Area has developed over the years and the challenge to bring together important quality aspects for both sides - youth work and information management - demanded more explicit measures in quality and evaluation. Therefore a lot of effort has been put into the realization of different tools and the development of quality criteria and indicators as well as definition(s) of Quality in Youth Information Work.

All the Youth Information providers started to develop different tools to ensure, enhance and valorise the quality of our products and services. European cooperation not only helped those who started up by being able to benefit from the knowledge already gained in other parts of Europe but also gave a significant impulse for development by exchanging best practise and research-results.

In 2005 a joint seminar of the three information networks ERYICA, EURODESK and EYCA supported by the European Commission and the Council of Europe and hosted by our French partners gave the Youth Information Field an opportunity to discuss different aspects of Quality Matters in Youth Information and to exchange results of existing projects and measures. The full report of the seminar and a compendium of detailed project descriptions can be found on www.eryica-eurodesk-eyca.net

The fast and innovative approach to the "Quality subject" in Youth Information Work – not only within one network but across all three European Information structures for young people – shows once again how much significance the European cooperation can have in making Youth Information Centres and Services work in a more effective way.

3.7. Contribution to Youth policies – It's not only about getting the message across but also about listening.

3.7.1. A channel to reach "non-organised" young people

Decision makers and authorities put more and more emphasis to the involvement of young people in decisions that might concern them and civil society as such on local, regional, national and European level. For this purpose luckily youth organisations and youth councils are consulted and integrated in the decision making process. This is an encouraging development and has already shown a lot of fruitful results. We must not forget though that there is a part of the young population that is not active in youth organisations and has therefore no direct influence on decisions taken. Moreover those young people are actually the ones that need to be reached as the already organised ones are usually the better informed and actively involved.

Youth Information Centres and Services do not require any kind of appointments or long-lasting commitment and are offering services for all young people – hence they are frequented also by a large number of the so called "non-organised" youngsters and can contribute in informing them on current issues in youth policies and possibilities for those youngsters to "take the floor" and have their say.

3.7.2. Trends, needs and seismographs

But it would be too narrowly considered to limit the role of Youth Information Centres and Services just to a channel for "getting the message" across. Youth Information Workers are in daily contact with young people in different ways (face-to-face, on the phone, in chats ...) and therefore constantly get direct feedback from them concerning all the questions raised. This feedback can be used for analysing if the offers actually meet the needs and living conditions of young people.

Questions raised by youngsters in a Youth Information Centre are changing permanently and new trends in information can be identified at a very early stage. Almost like seismographs Youth Information Workers are collecting first evidence of changing realities and challenges young people are faced or concerned with. A broader use of those facts can be of interest not only to the information officers who have to constantly adopt their offers and the topics covered to new requirements but also to decision makers and people involved in designing and developing youth policies

3.7.3. more knowledge of young people

Youth Information Centres and Services not only have a direct day-to-day contact with young people and gain knowledge out of those but are also collecting statistical data that is nowadays mainly used for developing the services and adapting them to changing needs.

But this data can also generate knowledge about our target-group in a useful way for youth research and responsible people for youth policies when summarized and analysed in the right way. The Youth Information Field is currently discussing different possibilities to gain more knowledge – also on an European level – out of those existing statistical figures about e.g. the most asked topics, the ways young people approach us or the sociocultural background of our users.

4. Perspectives for the future

Having a closer look at the development of “Generalist” Youth Information Work in Europe we see a very dynamic part of youth work that has gone through a lot of changes especially in the last two decades following the needs and requirements of the young people as well as changes in society as such.

4.1. Ongoing training as a prerequisite for quality

One of the very clear perspectives for the future is that Youth Information Work is constantly undergoing a lot of changes and developments – such as:

- the professional use of new technologies in research, dissemination, communication, guidance, and in producing own web content for young people;
- the increasing diversification of information needs and within our target group which calls for a diversification in services concerning topics, ways of presenting, tailored offers, responding to individual biographies etc.;
- the active involvement of young people in all stages of Youth Information work which requires different skills for bringing together groups of interest, encouraging them, keeping the motivation high, analysing and evaluating group-work-results
- networking and cooperation not only in getting to know all the offers but also offering a platform for professional, cross-sectoral discussion, offering know-how and training for other actors involved in informing young people and analysing information gaps and existing offers once having the overview.
- The whole new opportunities that a more active involvement in informal and non-formal learning can provide for the Youth Information Sector;
- quality criteria, indicators, different methods of evaluation and valorisation;
- providing information not only for young people themselves but also providing information on the needs and questions of young people to decision makers and authorities;
- and probably some more that we might not yet be aware of!

All these new developments are connected to different sets of new skills a Youth Information Worker has to have or acquire and consequently shows the ongoing need for training and exchange of experience and good-practice opportunities in the field of Youth Information and Counselling.

4.2. Involvement of young people

It is quite clear that the direct participation of young people is one of the main aims for the future in European Societies being connected also directly to democratic and active citizenship and political awareness. Although we are aware that it is a quite ambitious aim when looking at the level of participation in other groups of our population we share the belief that especially young people can and should be encouraged to take a more active role in Society.

Youth Information can contribute to this overall aim by:

- involving young people directly into all aspects of our work
- taking participation of young people as a horizontal working-principle seriously
- informing young people about their possibilities and opportunities to have their say and be actively involved
- taking up our role of advocacy for young people whenever given the chance by being involved in discussion about youth policies on all different levels.
- Networking with all relevant structures and organisations to make it clear that young people are not only an interested party when it comes to youth policies but also are affected and therefore have to be involved by all other areas of policy-making.

4.3 National coordination and European cooperation

Although Youth Information Centres and Services can be the most effective when operating close to the young people on local and regional level and so having the opportunity to react directly to changes in a certain region and tailoring their services exactly to the needs of the local area, national coordination and a national strategy have proved to be extremely fruitful when it comes to:

- assuring the existence of Youth Information Services by giving emphasis to its necessity and benefits also from a national point of view;
- training and exchange of experience;
- developing of working principles, quality criteria and indicators;
- cooperation with other structures that operate on national level;
- sharing of resources and using synergies for the benefit of more and better services for young people.

The integration of Youth Information Work into national policy plans and strategies seems of great importance as this will give a strong message to Youth Information workers as well as local and regional authorities when discussing their strategies in the youth field.

The area of "Generalist" Youth Information holds different offers for authorities and decision makers when it comes to dialogue with the young population as well as services not only for the youngsters themselves but also for other actors in the youth field such as youth organisations, specialised information services, youth clubs and so on and would be happy to contribute to further development of youth policies on national and European level.

European efforts in youth policies have shown a big effect in youth work and especially in the Youth Information field as they have been a starting and reference point for discussion. Cooperation between the different information networks on European level has proven to be very fruitful also because it brings together different points of view on shared subjects and therefore something really new can be developed in those settings. Hence the Youth Information sector welcomes those efforts very strongly and wishes to intensify cooperation and discussion also on European Level.

4.4. Needs of newcomers to the subject

We must not forget though that we are still facing some white spots in Europe when it comes to "Generalist" Youth Information and Counselling and we really wish to put an emphasis on efforts to help newcomers from countries concerned to develop a solid basis for services in this area.

Luckily the Youth Information Field already can look back at a lot of developments and experience in some countries and partners are absolutely willing to share their know-how and expertise.

Some measures that could be taken to give a new impetus to development where no or little structures have been created so far:

- stress once again the importance of specialised structures and trained workers in this field of youth work in European policies and documents;
- develop a starter kit for Youth Information and Counselling that can be distributed to interested organisations and member states;
- enable partners from those countries to take part in European debate through participation in conferences and seminars about the subject;
- support study visits, job shadowings and other individual learning experiences for interested people;
- support initiatives on local, regional and national level by giving the possibility to invite experienced Youth Information Workers for technical assistance, trainings on national level and national debates.