

COMPETENCE-BASED APPROACH: TOOLS FOR SELF-MANAGEMENT OF THE YOUTH WORKER

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce the competence-based model for youth workers and to link it to diversity of personal youth work practices. The first part is devoted to the youth work and a wide range of activities, topics and measures provided by a number of actors in assorted fields and settings. It also discusses the roles of youth workers and proposes different tools for their self-management. The second part of the text is devoted to the competence-based approach (content, origins and intentions) and its applicability in the context of youth work. It puts the European Training Strategy (ETS) competence model for youth workers within the context of European youth policies and programmes and explains the benefits and challenges in front of youth workers. It also discusses how this model can support training and provoke professional development.

Key words: competence model; youth workers; tools for self-management; youth policies

JEL: H83, I29, L30

Introduction

The youth work is not a new concept in the European Union and the landscape of youth work continues to evolve. Various policies related to the development of youth work in European countries were created, discussed and introduced. In addition, over the years, different methodologies, techniques and tools have been developed to ensure, monitor and maintain the quality of youth work. Although youth work has greater recognition and visibility today in comparison to the past, there is still much to be done as there is a need to recognize youth work for the contribution and value it has in the lives of young people. The article studies the diversity of youth work practices, the mixture of competencies of youth workers and a set of self-management tools related to quality assurance. In order to strengthen the non-profit sector's capacity to provide meaningful activities for young people in their leisure time that lead to identifiable success, the European Union and all European countries need to facilitate and provide a policy framework and funding provisions to support youth work.

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The ever-changing role of youth workers requires an understanding of how this work will continue to evolve over the next few years and beyond. Gaining this insight requires addressing the tension that exists between how a profession is generally defined and whether youth workers are categorized as professionals.

The profession of youth worker has been established in Bulgaria in the last decade, covering various specialists - trainers in non-formal education, non-profit activists, business volunteers, etc. In connection with the growing role of this type of activity, the lack of regulation and clarity on how to differentiate, evaluate and recognize the efforts of this work, the development of standards and tools for self-assessment and self-management is in progress.

This article presents different tools for self-management of youth workers. The second part of the text discusses the challenges of using a competence-based approach as a relatively new to the Bulgarian environment way for set up standards and allow the youth workers to look at and analyse their own competences and address their professional goals.

Youth work – definitions, features, policies

The term youth work is used to describe a diverse range of activities, topics and measures provided by a number of actors in assorted fields and settings. Not all countries have a formal definition of youth work and amongst those who do, there is a variety of definitions. The broad understanding of the term includes a variation of activities such as volunteering, youth initiatives, participation in youth clubs, running a youth club, making contact with different groups of young people on an estate, mentoring a young person, facilitating a church fellowship, social activities for young people, (especially ones from poor backgrounds or with fewer opportunities). Initially, youth work has taken place through the action of volunteers and workers in local groups. Youth work is historically said to focus **on five areas:**

- 1) namely on young people;
- 2) creating voluntary participation and relationship;
- 3) a commitment to association by youth and adults;
- 4) friendly and informal atmospheres, and
- 5) acting with integrity.

In the official documentation of the European Union, youth work encompasses a broad range of activities (e.g. social, cultural, educational, sports-related and political) carried out with, by and for young people through non-formal and informal learning. Youth work helps young people to reach their full potential. It encourages personal development, autonomy, initiative and participation in society.

The different definitions of youth work and their development can be shortly summarized as follows:

- “Youth work was born, and remains fundamentally a part of civil society. It is wrapped up with associational life, community groups and voluntary organizations”. (Jefferies and Smith, 2010);
- This is recognized in Ireland where youth work is defined in a special law: The Youth Work Act of 2001 states that “Youth work means 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 (a) complements their formal, academic, or vocational education and training; and (b) is provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.”;
- “Youth work should aim to engage with society and bring about social change in an unequal society” (Jenkinson, 2000);
- The Council of Europe gives a full definition. According to it: “Youth work is a broad term covering a broad scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature by, with and for young people.” (Council of Europe, 2009)
- “Youth Work belongs both to the social welfare and to the educational systems. [...] The general aims of youth work are the integration and inclusion of young people in society (Lauritzen, 2006).
- “Youth work is an extra-curricular field of work; in that it involves specific leisure activities and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes and on voluntary participation. It promotes young people’s development in a multi-faceted manner, enabling them to become active outside their families, formal education, and work” (European Training Strategy, 2009).

The youth work belongs to the area of “out-of-school” education (Coussée, et al, 2010), as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation. In brief, the youth work can be organized in different ways: 1) by youth-led organizations, 2) organizations for youth, 3) informal groups or 4) through youth services and 5) public authorities. It is delivered in a big range of forms and settings (e.g. open-access, group-based, programme-based, outreach and detached) and is given shape at local, regional, national and European level. Youth work activities and processes are self-managed, co-managed or managed under the guidance of educational staff and can develop and change in line with various dynamics.

However, at the heart of youth work there are three core features that define it as differing from other policy areas:

- A focus on young people,

- personal development, and
- voluntary participation.

The European Commission says that youth work has three essential aspects:

- Young people choose to participate.
- The work takes place where the young people are.
- It recognizes that the young person and the youth worker are partners in a learning process.

Jeffs and Smith (2010) provide some key elements that define youth work. They interpret five dimensions:

- Focusing on young people, their needs, experiences and contribution.
- Voluntary participation, young people choose to become involved in the work.
- Fostering association, relationship and community, encouraging all to join in friendship, to organize and take part in groups and activities and deepen and develop relationships that allow them to grow and flourish.
- Being friendly, accessible and responsive while acting with integrity. Youth work has come to be characterized by a belief that workers should not only be approachable and friendly; but also, that they should have faith in people; and be trying, themselves, to live good lives.
- Addressing the education and, more broadly, the welfare of young people.

Youth workers work with young people in a wide variety of non-formal and informal learning contexts, typically focusing on their young charges' personal and social development through one-on-one relationships and group-based activities. While acting as trainers/facilitators may be their main task, it is just as likely for youth workers to take a socio-educational or social work-based approach. In many cases, these roles and functions overlap.

The European Union has been running a dedicated European Union Youth Policy cooperation based on the principles of active participation and equal access to opportunities since 2002, in synergy with other policies targeting young people, such as education, training and employment. The cooperation prompted policy and legislative changes in the national policies and contributed to capacity-building of youth organizations.

Expert groups set up under the European Union Work Plan for Youth (2014-2015) dealt with the following subjects: a) youth work quality systems in European Union Member States and the role of common indicators or frameworks; b) specific contribution of youth work to address the challenges young people are facing, in particular the transition from education to employment.

According to the European Union Youth Work Plan (2016-2018), the expert groups are committed to work on the following topics:

- Defining the specific contribution of youth work as well as non-formal and informal learning to: foster active citizenship and participation of young people and respond to the challenges raised by the increasing numbers of young migrants and refugees.
- Addressing the risks, opportunities, and implications of digitalization for youth, youth work and youth policy.

The current **European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027** (Council of the European Union, 2019), based on the Council Resolution of 26 November 2018, defines that youth work in all its forms can serve as a catalyst for empowerment: it brings unique benefits to young people in their transition to adulthood, providing a safe environment for them to gain self-confidence, and learn in a non-formal way. Youth work is known for equipping the youth with key personal, professional and entrepreneurial competences and skills such as teamwork, leadership, intercultural competences, project management, problem solving and critical thinking. In some cases, youth work is the bridge into education, training or work, thus preventing exclusion. It is discussed that in order to reap these benefits, there is a greater need for recognition of non-formal and informal learning through youth work, improved by a more systematic use of quality tools. Some of the main priorities are: a) to develop and implement a European Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work. In order to unleash the full potential, it is necessary to integrate the expertise of youth representations, organizations, workers and researchers; and b) to support quality youth work development on all levels, including policy development in the field, training for youth workers, the establishment of legal frameworks and sufficient allocation of resources.

Currently, the Youth Act in Bulgaria (Art. 31) (Zakon za mladezhata, 2020) stipulates that a youth worker is an adult who has undergone special training for working with young people and/or has gained professional experience in working with young people and performing youth activities. Also, too generalized, the youth worker supports the activities of youth organizations by analyzing, planning, organizing, monitoring and evaluating youth activities, based on an individual approach and assessment of the specific needs of young people. This once again comes to show that we need practical tools, approaches and standards through which to formulate the requirements for carrying out this activity and for monitoring the professional progress of youth workers.

Tools for self-management of youth worker

At European level, there are several tools that can be used for competence self-assessment and self-management in youth work.

YOCOMO self-assessment tool

SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre is developing a YOCOMO self-assessment tool to be used by youth workers to self-assess their competences for international youth work using ETS competence model. The tool is web-based, includes all eight competences in four dimensions. The youth worker can pass through the selected ETS competence area and complete self-assessment of behaviors, after that to go deeper and to continue in the same competence area and complete self-assessment of one of the elements: knowledge, skills or attitudes. Based on the given answers (typical five-level Likert item), the platform systematizes, calculates and presents a report with the result. It is important that the self-evaluation is as objective as possible in order to outline the main areas for interaction, improvement and refinement. YOCOMO self-assessment tool is especially developed for ETS competence model and fully meets its needs. The platform has additional sections for summary, charts, reflections, evidences and it is easy to explore it.

Youthpass for youth workers (<https://www.youthpass.eu/en/>)

Youthpass is a tool to document and recognize learning outcomes from youth work and solidarity activities. It is available for projects funded by Erasmus+: Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps Programmes. All participants of the projects approved within these frameworks are entitled to receive a Youthpass certificate, whereby a recognition of their non-formal learning outcomes will be formed. While creating their Youthpass certificate youth workers are given the possibility to describe what they have done in their project and which competences they have acquired. Thus, Youthpass supports the reflection upon the personal non-formal learning process and outcomes. As a Europe-wide recognition instrument for non-formal learning in the youth field, Youthpass strengthens the social recognition of youth work. Youthpass supports active European citizenship of young people and of youth workers by describing the added value of their project. Youthpass also aims at supporting the employability of young people and of youth workers by raising their awareness of and helping to describe their competences, and by documenting their acquisition of key competences on a certificate.

European Youth Work Portfolio (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio/online-portfolio>)

The Council of Europe Youth Work portfolio is an online tool to self-assess youth work competences and plan professional development. This tool helps to analyze where the youth worker stands with his youth work competences, to gather evidence on the quality of his work, and identify areas to improve. It also should help to explain better youth work and showcase competences to others. To start using Portfolio, the youth worker will be requested to register in the Council of Europe system and create an account for Portfolio. The portfolio area is divided into two sections: one is self-assessment and the other one is a learning and development plan.

The portfolio is structured along the functions of youth worker and linked to competencies required to perform these functions in the daily work with young people. Each area has several competencies listed and the youth worker is asked about to what extent this competence is relevant to the specific youth work context and why the certain level of relevance is chosen. The portfolio is working in such a way that the youth worker will be encouraged to add text reflections, to help him to become more aware of his competences and to see the progress in self-assessment. It is also possible to add a function which is specific to the context or job.

The plan is structured following the same logic as self-assessment. It has functions and then a list of competences. The two parts are connected and if something is already indicated as a learning goal, it will instantly show up on a plan and can be more specific by adding concrete actions to take to achieve a bit of improvement or learning in that selected area of competence by the youth worker. It is convenient that an instant snapshot of the moment can be generated at any time and can be processed, presented or sent.

Professional development matrix

The Professional development matrix is an adaptation of the Time management matrix defined by Stephen Covey (Covey, 2004), also known as Eisenhower's Urgent-Important Principle. The Quadrant II is crucial for professional development.

Table 1: Matrix for professional development goals

Importance/ Urgency	Urgent development needs	Not urgent development needs
Important for reaching your professional goals	<p>Quadrant I</p> <p>Which competences are primarily important for your current work that you do?</p> <p>Which ones would give you increased productivity and quality of work with young people in the short term?</p>	<p>Quadrant II</p> <p>Which competences are linked to your long-term professional goals?</p> <p>Which competences are not urgent in your present position or role, but are linked with your future goals?</p> <p>Which competences might take a longer time to develop including training, education, practice, etc.</p>
Not important for reaching your professional goals	<p>Quadrant III</p> <p>Distractions with high urgency - things that someone else thinks you should learn this and do that immediately, but actually it is not related to your nowadays work or your long-term professional goals.</p>	<p>Quadrant IV</p> <p>Activities with little to no value. These could be things that others might suggest you learn because of some external institutional priorities, someone else's agendas.</p> <p>You might get distracted by all these offers, but after all these would be neither urgent nor important and should be avoided.</p>

Source: ETS online course on competence-based development for youth workers, March-April 2020

Professional development plan (PDP)

This is the tool, considered as “classic” or even sometimes as “overused”, is not a particularly difficult task, it does require self-awareness. There are a number of easy steps that the youth worker can take to ensure that the plan they establish is efficient. These steps are not necessarily linear; information gathered or decisions made at each step could cause to reassess previous steps:

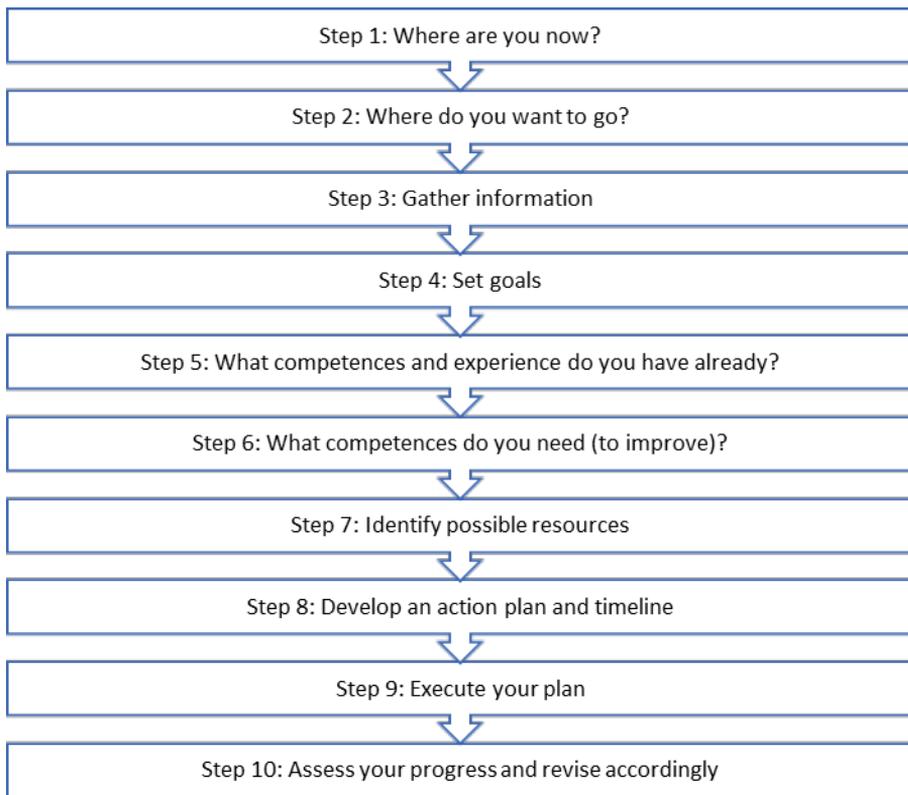


Figure 1: PDP Steps

Formulating a PDP, therefore, should be considered an ongoing process. It is important to remember that a development plan should not be treated as an administrative task that is filed away and forgotten after completion. The PDP should be used to hold a youth worker accountable for their own professional development or career trajectory, hence including the learning process that goes with it.

Competence-based approach

The competence-based approach starts from defining a competence framework developed for a particular profession, profile, institution, organization, etc. all the way to professional development steps. It consists in developing the necessary generic or transversal (instrumental, interpersonal and systematic) competences and the specific competences pertaining to each profession.

It is important to distinct the terms “competency” and “competence”. It can be explained in the following Table 2:

Table 2: Difference between Competence and Competency

Competence (what can be done?)	Competency (how do it?)
Skill-based	Behavior-based
Standard attained	Manner of behavior
What is measured	How the standard is achieved.

Source: Difference between Competence and Competency (Explained with Diagram), <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/entrepreneurship/difference-between-competence-and-competency-explained-with-diagram/40696> (accessed on 22.07.2020)

From Table 2 it becomes clear that competence describes what people can do while competency focuses on how they do it. In other words, the former means a skill and the standard of performance reached, while the latter refers to the behavior by which it is achieved.

We accept the idea that “competency” is a personal attribute or behavior, while “competence” depends on the knowledge and skills of the employee and means the ability to perform a task to a prescribed standard. The term “competences” refers to a system of values, attitudes and beliefs, and skills and knowledge that can be applied in practice to manage various complex situations and tasks successfully. Confidence, motivation and well-being are important prerequisites for someone wishing to successfully apply developed competences.

The competence-based model for youth workers can be defined as a flexible structure that allows them to progress in their learning after they have demonstrated mastery, which is oftentimes at their own pace regardless of environment. This method is tailored to meet different learning abilities and can lead to more efficient outcomes. Nowadays, learning is perceived in a dynamic way, and learning paths are open and multiple. The focus is moving towards learning as a lifelong and life-wide process with an emphasis on the development of competences. A competence-based approach can be perceived as offering a framework and a process, both with the aim to capitalize on learning throughout a whole range of activities and experiences over a longer period. The framework takes into account all types of learning in many different areas and contexts (e.g. learning in school, work, volunteering, free time activities, in household and family, big social and/or political changes, etc.) Such an approach makes youth workers aware of their own learning and provides opportunities to further develop their competences, starting with considering them one by one to reach a wider learning objective or goal. Also, competences need to be defined in order to identify knowledge and skills gaps and plan for training provision.

The process consists of a series of steps that support going from the general level to defining the competences and indicators. There are many ways to set up

and carry out a competence-based approach, but the core steps can be five, with the additional explanation that it is necessary to regularly self-assess and collect documentary evidences. (Fig. 2). It is also beneficial to be able to use such a framework to also express the competence, which supports its recognition.



Figure 2: The core steps to set up a competence-based

The advantages and disadvantages in the competence model for youth work has been shown in the following Table 3:

Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages in the competence model

Advantages:	Disadvantages:
The process can begin at any time and it does not depend on a person's age, intelligence, level of education or personal background.	It takes efforts to adopt the framework and use it actively for professional development.
It is inclusive and places equal value on learning, irrespective of its form or where it happens.	It is a complex, very flexible process that requires taking charge of one's own learning and being a conscious, responsible and lifelong learner.
It can help to strengthen one's motivation to learn, since it allows recognising the strengths and being directly in charge of one's own learning and development.	Generally, analysing one's own learning process gets easier with external help - colleagues, employers and young people can be of support, in order to make sense of the identified competences, monitor and evaluate the quality of thinking and behaviour.
It focuses on what one can do and how it is done, rather than strictly on what one knows, even if these elements are interdependent.	

Advantages:	Disadvantages:
It leads to new possibilities and a much greater flexibility, particularly when it comes to finding a job, because the competences gained in one area or field can be more easily transferred to others.	
It sets foundations for lifelong and life-wide learning.	

The European Training Strategy (ETS) (European Commission, 2013) encourages decision makers, experts and practitioners to cooperate in improving the quality of youth work and its recognition. The ETS aims to establish a peer-learning process so that stakeholders can exchange concepts and good practice. Since knowledge about the effects of capacity building on quality youth work is limited, the ETS encourages the use of online platforms and research studies to gather knowledge and raise awareness. Based on these measures, the goal is to produce common guidelines and a set of quality criteria for capacity building in the field of youth on national as well as European levels.

The Competence model for youth workers defines quality criteria and indicators (in and for youth work), as highlighted in the Council conclusions on quality of youth work (Official Journal of the European Union, 2013) and in the final declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention: “[...] there needs to be a core framework of quality standards for youth work responsive to national contexts, including competence models for youth workers, and accreditation systems for prior experience and learning [...]”. Developing specific key competences has become increasingly important for youth workers.

One competence model for youth workers to work internationally (Salto-Youth, 2013) was developed in the frame of the European Training Strategy (ETS) by SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre and a number of international experts. It focuses precisely on international youth work settings and youth workers’ competences, trying to make them more explicit. This competence model is a tool to support quality youth work activities that have an educational dimension. It focuses on competences needed to prepare, implement and evaluate learning projects.

The ETS competence model for youth workers involves different experts, trainers and researchers in the consultations around it, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the model. Competences are always connected to a specific context (intercultural work, youth work, social work, etc.). This makes them challenging to explore and assess. For this reason, competence development frameworks vary according to target groups, youth workers and work context.

The Competence Model (Fig. 3) consists of the following seven competences:



Figure 3: Competence model

These competence areas complement each other, and it is important to look at them holistically and not individually. This is a generic model that does not claim to be exhaustive, but aims at serving as a dynamic framework that will keep on growing and evolving. It can be adapted to the needs of users, contexts and target groups to make the most out of it in their professional context and reality. In this model, each competence area is explored in the following four dimensions: attitudes (a combination of willingness and a natural and intuitive way of approaching things), knowledge (gained through experience, books, the Internet, etc.), skills (the ability to perform a task, apply knowledge and turn attitudes into actions) and behaviors (observable, encompasses or sums up attitudes, knowledge and skills). There is a clear crosscutting dimension on the competence model; all the elements are interlinked and, together, they make competence work.

When youth work takes place in an international context, it is even more interesting to follow up on additional competencies to complement the framework, because the international youth work promotes self-conscious and self-determined individuals, and provides spaces for young people's development in the fields of intercultural competence and international cooperation. The most common formats of international youth work activities are international youth exchanges, international volunteering, training courses, work camps and other forms of youth encounters. This unique international and intercultural nature of activities provides extra valuable learning experience and motivation for young

people as well as youth workers. Indeed, international youth work activities are often an eye-opener for those who participate as they find themselves part of a bigger community that breaks down borders between local, regional and national identities and practices. In most cases, this form of youth work is implemented in a foreign language and offers intercultural learning, which includes intercultural communication and sensitivity, empathy and raising the awareness for actual issues, diversity and current challenges in front of youth.

This, in turn, creates a demand for youth workers to handle intercultural situations in an educational manner or, in other words, to create learning opportunities out of a real-life situation in the international group.

Youth workers take a variety of roles in international youth work, depending on the activity type in an international context. Usually, youth workers take the role of supporting a young person or an international youth group, for instance:

- helping to define ideas for international activities;
- supporting the attraction of necessary resources;
- guiding the process of reflection and understanding learning outcomes;
- helping to manage difficult situations;
- consulting on possible cooperation opportunities with other organizations and institutions;
- supporting young people or implementing international activities together.

Youth workers also need to cooperate with funding institutions, partners and youth workers from other countries. The international character of activities demands to be agile and adaptive to ever changing situations, to be able to communicate remotely with young people and colleagues and to deal with a lot with ambiguity in various intercultural situations.

Competence models allow the youth workers to look at and analyze their own competences and address their professional challenges. A competence model is a good basis for self-assessment, peer-support and peer-review. It gives impulses that might encourage the youth workers to try out new things, to self-manage and conduct their career path and invest further in their personal and professional development. The benefits and the challenges are presented in the table below (Table 4):

Table 4: Benefits and challenges in front of youth workers to use competence model

Benefits:	Challenges:
monitor and evaluate the quality of thinking and behaviour.	potentially increases workload by on-going guidance on performing self-evaluation.
identify strategies that improve the understanding and skills.	self-evaluation has a risk of being perceived as a process of presenting inflated grades and being unreliable and subjective.
self-assessment and monitoring to improve performance.	self-assessment assignments can take more time.
identify discrepancies between current and desired performance.	difficulties to put the right competence/right place/right evidence/right understanding.
encourage involvement and responsibility.	high self-esteem or underestimation
understand and reflect on the role and contribution to the process of the group work.	choice to do it alone/ peer-to-peer/ with somebody/ in group or combined
help gain understanding of the concepts of quality.	
provide a foundation for lifelong learning.	

Conclusion

Exploring the importance of youth work, the diverse roles of youth workers and the use of tools for self-management allows us to structure several conclusions:

- Being able to identify and describe youth worker competences better will help improve the image and recognition of youth workers in society.
- On the European level, the European Training Strategy is the main strategy for sharing, exploring and discussing ideas and strategies for better capacity building and quality development within youth work, through enhanced youth worker education and training.
- A number of competence models focus on several dimensions of competence, such as attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviors.
- A competence model enables the youth worker to analyze his own competences and address professional challenges.
- A competence model allows the youth workers to look at and analyze their own competences and address their professional goals.
- A competence-based approach is a good basis for self-assessment, peer-support, peer-review and offers a basis for developing self-management tools.
- There exist benefits and challenges in front of youth workers to use competence-based model.
- Finally, it is important to see competences together as a whole and not individually and to collect and add examples of evidence that supports self-

assessment (feedback, evaluation, references to achievements and formal acknowledgement of competence).

This development is now showing up on the agenda of the European institutions and is reflected in European countries' policies for youth. Youth workers and trainers are crucial stakeholders in the quality development of youth work projects and processes. The next step is recognizing the value and contribution of paid and volunteer youth workers and their status compared with other occupations in the social field and this should be an objective of youth work policy at all levels.

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