

National Occupational Standards for Youth Work - an Update

Mark Edwards outlines the latest moves in the development of UK-wide standards for youth work, which will have reaching implications for youth work qualifications in Wales.

The focus of youth work standards development has been on establishing a set of occupational standards and consequent national qualifications for those working directly with young people in youth work settings. These standards were not in existence previously but the Eraut report (1994) 'Preparatory Study to Explore the Scope for Developing NVQ's for Youth and Community Work', and latterly the 'Occupational and Functional Mapping of Youth Work' by Heather Brown and Martin Draper (1997), paved the way for the recent developments.



Although the consultation process for the development of National Standards has been wide ranging across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, there will be many practitioners who have not been included nor caught up in the debate. It is important therefore to present these developments to as wide an audience as possible within the very tight time constraints. This will allow practitioners to unravel what the standards will mean for them both personally and professionally in the not too distant future.

In January 1999 the National Youth Agency, in partnership with the four UK nations held a national consultation conference in London. Draft copies of the Youth Work Standards were distributed and were generally well received by those representatives of the youth work sector that were present. Feedback from the participants did raise some concerns about the 'NVQ' style language of the document but generally it was felt that the key roles and units were understandable, relevant and achievable. Of greater concern was the need to integrate the core values and principles of youth work into each and every unit descriptor. This was seen as being particularly important in the case of management units, most of which had been imported from existing MCI Management Standards.

We have not in the past had a clear blueprint of our occupational sector and now is an opportune time for the maintained and voluntary youth work sectors in Wales to consider the use of the National Standards in the future development of their services. Managers may consider using the standards as a development tool, which will help identify the organisation's strengths but also the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the interpretation of processes, policies and procedures. The standards could be used to inform recruitment and selection processes, job descriptions, training and development, benchmarking, career structures etc. I believe these uses should all be viewed in a positive light as it will, in my opinion, move youth work a step closer towards the professional recognition that it seeks and deserves.

Youth service managers and practitioners across the UK were asked to respond to the second draft of the National Standards by the end of February 1999. The revised third draft came out in early March and coincided with the launch of the pilot phase of the development plan, which operated between mid-March and mid-June. This is to be followed by further consultation on the results of the pilots and questions about the future development of vocational qualifications, assessment procedures and quality assurance. The final agreed National Standards Document, with training support materials, is to be produced by December 1999. It will then be handed to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) with recommendations on how the standards are to form qualifications at different levels.

The National Occupations Standards for Youth Work are currently available in draft form and can be viewed in their updated form by accessing the National Youth Agency's website on www.nya.org.uk

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