

features

The European dimension - the challenge for youth work in Wales

In a summer of high-profile European events, including the opening of the Channel Tunnel in May and the Euro elections in June, Bert Jones examines the emerging European dimension to youth work in Wales.

In the 1860s, William Low, a railway engineer from Wrexham, joined forces with a French colleague in a bid to tunnel under the English Channel to France. Though the sub-aqueous dream ended just half a mile out from the Kent coast, the ambitious engineers toasted their endeavours with champagne - though Wrexham lager may have been more appropriate. Had Low succeeded, the "Europeanisation" of Britain might have been swift.

As it is, that process has waited until the past 25 years and UK membership of the Common Market, now known as the European Union. With the Tunnel open, Europe's young people are even more mobile - and many will have voted for the first time to elect members of the European Parliament.

At many levels though, the UK seems to stay on the fringes of efforts to become "European". Wales, for example, seems to lag behind others in creating networks in youth and community affairs. Yet there is an emerging European dimension to youth work in Wales - and it needs to be nurtured.

In 1982, the Thompson Report advocated that "youth workers should build an awareness of the international perspective of their

work". Some youth workers in Wales have pursued this approach, mainly through exchange programmes with partner groups in other European states. The location of the Youth Exchange committee in the Wales Youth Agency may well help promote a wider and more active programme of exchanges. But these are just one facet of the European dimension; there are others that can create positive linkages between youth work practice in Wales and the expanding field of work across Europe.

First, however, there is the problem of definition - finding an exact equivalent to the term "youth worker" is difficult. In most countries, though, people "working with young people" are called "social pedagogues".

The function of the social pedagogue has been set out as "that of a professional educator, who with specific education and training, by means of social and pedagogical methods and techniques, promotes the personal and social development and autonomy of his/her clients. She/he shares their different life situations, whether in residence or in their natural life environment. The work is based on the continuous and co-ordinated action in favour of the clients and their environment".

This description of the work of the "social pedagogues" is shared by more than 150 training centres and colleges in the European Union that are affiliated to the European Committee of Training Centres for Social Pedagogues (ECTCSP). The Committee is one of the leading organisations attempting to create a coherent structure of youth and community work, and other "people-work" activity, in Europe.

The Committee aims to:

- promote the education and training of social pedagogues;
- encourage the exchange of workers, practice and ideas between countries;
- ensure the status of professional youth and care work within the EU; and
- secure the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in "youth and community work" across and between European states.

ECTCSP has members from every EU member state, a secretariat based in Denmark, and the presidency in Wales.

Among the organisations ECTCSP works closely with is AIEJI, the International Association of Workers for Troubled Children and Youth, which holds its biannual conference in Potsdam in September. The conference theme is "Action and Crisis among Young People: a Challenge for the Profession". Other organisations of note are the European Centre for Community Education and the Comite European D'Action Specialisee Pour L'Enfant et la Famille dans Leur Milieu de Vie.

ECTCSP and these bodies are active in seeking to widen the European dimension of working with and for young people. Networks are being created, dialogue is continuing, and support is being sought from the European Commission in Brussels to strengthen this dimension.

Youth Workers in Wales need to respond to these initiatives and be part of action towards the new Europe. Others in the UK are ahead of Wales, but only just. The National Youth Agency sent small groups to France and Italy in 1987 and 1988 to explore the European dimension, and the Scottish Community Education Council hosted an important conference in 1992 on the status of youth workers and their training in Europe. Wales and its youth service must be involved in developing a vibrant "European youth service".

In June 1988 a European Commission Directive required

all member states to promote awareness of the "European dimension" in the broad field of "Education". In 1989, the Commission set out objectives for the European dimension. They included:

- A Multinational Europe - strengthening young people's sense of belonging to a European community;
- A Mobile Europe - encouraging young people to move across Europe, by travel, exchange, work programmes; and
- A Europe of Training - including appropriate teaching and training for those working with disadvantaged young people.

In the May 1993 edition of the Welsh Joint Education Committee's pamphlet 'Profile', an article called "Developing the Common Core - a new approach to the comparison of qualification in Europe" reports on the WJEC's collaboration with other members of the European Union. The purpose of this initiative is to explore both the transparency, and mutual recognition, of qualifications across Europe. The focus of the WJEC's work is on technical qualifications and the world of work, but is there hope that the WJEC, in collaboration with organisations in other EU member states will take an in-depth look at the training of youth workers? It is, after all, the "Education" committee.

The WJEC group engaged in this exercise will be familiar with the Resolution on Transparency of Qualifications adopted by EC employment ministers on December 3 1992. They will also be aware of the complexities involved in mutual recognition of professional qualifications. What they may not know is the limited attention to, and ignorance of, matters related to professional youth and community work within the European Commission. Perhaps the WJEC could take a lead in prioritising that work within its debates with its European counterparts.

There are, of course, Priority Actions in the Youth Field, a resolution adopted in June 1991 by the ministers responsible for

youth work. The actions offered are relevant to youth and community workers, and an indication of growing awareness of professional youth work among those ministers.

- Action 1 relates to co-operation between structures responsible for youth work in the Member States;
- Action 2 offers opportunities for workers engaged in youth information; and

- Action 4 focuses on the training of youth workers.

Keeping up with the changing grant programme within the European Commission, and dealing with often complicated application forms, is a difficult and time-consuming business for youth workers. However, most local authorities have European Officers who are familiar with the programmes and language of

Brussels. They can offer explanations and support.

Welsh youth work needs to be proactive in moves to establish the European dimension; we need to be at the conferences, sharing our practice and helping to shape policy; we need to be applying for the European Commission's grants; we need to bring our colleagues from other countries to Wales to share our

training and development.

Above all, we need to be committed to the vision, and be creative and innovative in establishing the European dimension as an everyday aspect of our youth service.

Ben Jones is Principal Lecturer in Youth & Community Work at the North East Wales Institute, Wrexham, Clwyd.