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Beyond Brexit: The Impact of Leaving the EU on the Youth Work Sector?

Abstract

This article examines the context and potential impact for youth work, in light of the result of the UK referendum on whether to remain or leave the European Union. Having voted to leave, the article considers potential problems and possibilities for youth work practice within a post-'Brexit' Britain. It notes a continual erosion of resources across the UK that has led us to note that youth work has reached a 'tipping point' in its evolution, where austerity measures have curtailed capacity for youth work in a range of settings. The article goes on to articulate the potential impact of Brexit on continued professional development among staff and a reduced social return on investment, due to loss of EU funding. This is particularly cogent in communities where acute conditions and effects of poverty and unemployment are important drivers of community and youth work practices. Recognising that this is entirely uncharted territory, our assertion is that despite inherent concerns in shifting funding and mobility contexts, this decision also creates conditions for renewal of youth work practice as a creative and resistant sector within social and informal education.

Key Words: Brexit; Youth Work; Tipping Point; Emancipatory Practice

Background and Context

On the 23rd June 2016, 52% of the UK electorate who turned out to vote in the EU Referendum, stated their wish to leave the European Union. Whether this was a protest vote, an anti-establishment vote or a vote of no confidence in the EU, the impact will be long lasting. Young people may arguably feel this impact more acutely than many, particularly given that, according to Moore, 2016), the under-25 age range were identified as more than twice as likely to vote 'Remain' (71%) than to 'Leave' (29%)'. In this referendum, as the age of the voter increased, so too did the likelihood of voting to leave, with over 65s twice as likely to vote leave, than remain. Drawing on Bruter and Harrison (2016), it was reported that 'the referendum stimulated feelings, particularly among young people, of "sadness but also ones of anger and frustration at people who voted to leave, and often at older generations"' (Helm, 2016).

This article is based on a briefing paper that was produced in February 2017, in response to a request from YouthLink Scotland to offer an overview on which to brief elected officials and other

interested parties, on the potential impact of Brexit, and the difference this decision might make to young people, youth workers and youth projects. The extended context for this specific interest group is broad ranging. It incorporates economic, legal, political and social aspects such as, employment prospects, human and social rights, ideological perspectives on community and youth work development, and the social mobility and integration of people across a post-Brexit Europe. In a general sense, while recognising the importance of such extended contexts, we quickly recognised that our brief required a micro-focus on the specifics of educational youth work. So, while our analysis and subsequent conversations have been set within this wider context, we remain focussed on concerns for the future for youth work and those, young people and youth workers, engaged in its practice.

The article is based on desk-based analysis of Scottish specific data on Erasmus +, international youth exchanges and social return on investment, combined with wider UK sources in terms of relevant literature. Although much of the data were drawn from Scottish sources, it is our understanding that similar information is available in other parts of the UK and so, despite its geographic focus, we believe that the concerns raised may resonate with other parts of the UK. Further, our conclusion also notes that there is a need for more research and additional dialogue across all parts of the UK.

Where are we now?

The impact of leaving the EU on the youth work sector is unknown and unpredictable. What is known however is that youth work across the UK has experienced a steady range of cuts in public funding since the current economic crisis began in 2008 (Unison, 2016a). It is also known that young people have been disproportionately affected by this economic crisis where unemployment is higher than for any other age group (Unison, 2016a); they are in more precarious jobs, have lower wages, and are 'torn between their aspirations…and their need for income' (Standing, 2011, p.74). Further, the European Commission (2014) has identified that, 'there is a growing use and reliance in EU level support and financing for the youth work sector as other sources of funding at national level are reduced' (p. 12).

Our concerns about the impact of 'Brexit' on youth work in Scotland, specifically but not exclusively, are grounded in contribution analysis (Mayne, 2012) as a logical method for informing understanding of what might reasonably be possible in the future. However, what was planned and

what actually happens may be quite different. Illogical or unexpected events can redefine aspirations and make it difficult to develop a logical pathway for change. Thus, as a specific measure or predictor of the future, contribution analysis is flawed. However, in these times of uncertainty, with increased demand on youth work to engage young people in times of deep-rooted economic crisis, 'there is pressure to do more with either the same or less funding than before' (European Commission, 2014, p.13). Thus, we use logic in our analysis of what is known in order to consider the problem of 'Brexit' for youth work. This analytical frame and conversations across the UK leads us to assert that, despite our initial focus, the potential impacts we identify also resonate beyond Scotland, both within the UK and across the EU.

Considering the Impact of leaving the EU on the Youth Work Sector

Our initial assertion at this time of change and uncertainty is to note that youth work has reached a 'tipping point'. Gladwell (2000, p.12) defined this term as 'the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point'. With Unison (2016a, p.4) estimating that '…between April 2010 and April 2016, £387m was cut from youth service spending across the UK' the impact on sustaining quality youth work provision is becoming more difficult. Specifically in Scotland, a survey carried out by Unison (2016b, p.4) on the impact of austerity on youth workers found that '79% of those who responded stated that there had been cuts or severe cuts to their team budgets this year, 82% said the same about "last year" and 83% said they had experienced cuts or severe cuts over the last five years'. Despite the Christie Commission calling for preventative spending, cuts to local government spending were increased and so seemed to be sending Scotland in the opposite direction (Unison, 2016b).

The subsequent stress and strain of service cuts, that workers face, will have an impact on their morale (Unison, 2016b) and potentially there is a risk of 'burnout' through self-sacrifice (Hughes et al, 2014, p.5) as workers are required to do more, beyond their contracted hours, in order to sustain practice. This loss of resource for youth work projects takes this tipping point to a more critical level than ever before, thus any loss of investment due to leaving the EU will present extreme challenges across a sector that is already struggling to sustain the minimum level of services and project management. It could also impact on the CPD opportunities that are currently available to practitioners through international partnership working and youth exchanges which align with the National Youth Work Strategy 2014-19 to build workforce capacity (YouthLink, 2014). Such a lack of CPD opportunities is combined with evidence that over 70% of youth workers saw an increase in

their workload in the last few years (Unison 2016b). Taken together, this means that an already stretched workforce will have reduced capacity for innovative and creative youth work responses to as yet unknown social and political scenarios or emerging new contexts.

Thus, despite the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (Scottish Government, 2015), which seeks to strengthen community voice and decision making through improved community planning processes, and the statutory regulations on the Requirement for Community Learning and Development, which came into force in 2013 (Scottish Government, 2013); the promise of reducing inequalities and ensuring that local services are managed by local communities is potentially compromised by a reduced infrastructure for youth work support and participation in, for example, asset transfer projects. Against this backdrop, there are obvious impacts in terms of a financial gap in the level of investment in youth work projects. Currently this includes significant levels of funding via Erasums+ and workforce investment, as demonstrated in this extract from Beever and Green (2017).

- 10% of the total Erasmus+ funding is ring-fenced for the Youth strand.
- Participation in European projects increase young people's commitment against discrimination, increase interest in political life, increase respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity, increase readiness to work and live abroad.[1]
- Between 2009 and 2016 Scotland received over €2,193,700 for Erasmus+ and formerly Youth in Action youth work.[1] This figure does not include the funding received indirectly as partner beneficiaries meaning the total received is much higher.
- Erasmus+ offers funding to support the professional development of youth workers in three different ways including youth worker mobility, strategic partnerships and SALTO (Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities) resource centres.
- International partnership working provides invaluable CPD for youth workers. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain similar CPD opportunities exclusively within the UK.

[1] RAY, Youth in Action: Findings and Implications for Practice, 2014, p.4, http://www.researchyouth.net/wpcontent/uploads/2013/07/RAY_YiA_Findings-

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Fig (i) Extract from Beever and Green (2017)

The level of investment from Erasmus + and similar previous EU funding programmes, has underpinned long-standing engagement with EU Partners in promoting understanding and mobility across the EU (European Commission, 2001) through international youth exchange programmes and the mobility of youth work students who have come to, and travelled from, Scotland and across the EU in order to undertake youth practice learning placements. Incoming and outgoing student exchanges have brought international perspectives to the wider youth work sector workforce and more directly to the heart of our most deprived communities, which adds a social benefit in transmitting important values of social justice and equality, citizenship and sustainable development (European Commission, 2014; European Union, 2009).

According to Mayne (2012) logical claims to contribution are strongest when they provide a mix of context information, the perspectives of beneficiaries, theoretical and research information. Thus, in addition to information provided on EU funded projects (Fig i), and student exchanges, we also draw on longitudinal research on international youth exchange work. This research showed that youth exchanges created chances for young Scots, to meet with young people who were different to them, and whose beliefs and values were different to their own. Articulated as a border pedagogy (Giroux, 2005) this research identified that crossing social and cultural boundaries, helped young people to learn about difference, and promoted mutual understanding, trust and the building of social and cultural capital (Coburn, 2011).

The research also showed that international youth exchanges engage young people in developing a range of practical skills in negotiation, planning and leadership (Coburn and Wallace, 2011), all of which impact on participants' lives beyond their time engaged in youth work. The young people involved in this research described their experiences of an exchange as life changing. This kind of work is firmly established across Scotland which embraces the EU values and principles for equality and social justice, to bring benefit to youth work practice across Scotland.

Applying the logic model, if EU funding for youth work projects and youth exchanges are no longer available to the Scottish sector, it could be argued that the contribution of youth work to enhancing young people's capacity for social and cultural connectedness, for understanding and accepting difference, and for using such experiences in formation of their own identity, would be clearly impacted.

Of course, investment of EU funding for youth work is only part of the story in considering its value. Commissioned by YouthLink Scotland, Hall Aitken (2016) have estimated that the social return on investment in youth work that contributing £656 million to the Scottish economy and shows a return of £7 for every £1 of public cash. Their findings show that:

- Youth work contributes at least £656 million to the Scottish economy
- Youth work has made a major difference to the lives of over 450,000 people in Scotland today (over 13% of the Scottish population)
- The confidence and motivation that youth work develops is rated by 85% of employers as very important compared with 27% rating qualifications this way
- The social return on investment of youth work is at least 3:1

Thus, a reduction in available spend, which might be reasonably anticipated in a Post-Brexit scenario, would impact on the current social return that youth work contributes in the Scottish economy and to our young people.

Where could we be going now?

While we recognise that the impacts identified here are not fully inclusive of the range of investments in youth work projects from the EU, across the UK, they do give an indication of the iterative effect of how such a loss of funding is potentially damaging to an already damaged sector. Yet, we remain optimistic in the uncertainties of the current situation, as a means through which to find a way of galvanising practice.

Bauman (2000;2012) uses the term 'liquid modernity' to denote this period of history as a time when ideas about what was known about the world has become so fragmented and unrecognisable that people seek core ideas to help sustain an otherwise precarious existence. Bauman offers hope in conceptualising networked communities, whereby human interactions and identities are

sustained because individual people believe that something is important. In this sense, we have argued that the concept of community, for example, 'has utility for community practices that are aligned to social movements for change, in connecting people around a particular cause or interest' (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, p.84).

In asserting our position as a discrete community of practice (Wenger, 1998) within education we believe that connected conversations can help in counteracting the precariousness of youth work at this time. We may not always agree with each other but by working through and across those borders or boundaries that divide us, we can find new ways of understanding the world and reimagining new possibilities for as yet unknown futures. In doing so, our aim is contribute to a vibrant and socially just practice that is sustainable and vital in a post-Brexit Europe.

Conclusion

These concerns about the potential impact of Brexit on youth work are, at this uncertain moment in time, somewhat speculative or 'best guess' potentials. As yet, exit negotiations are not finalised and initial talks appear fragmented. It may be some time before attention turns towards the future contribution and funding of youth work. In this light, the challenges of exiting the EU are unknown and untested. So, in responding to the concerns raised in this briefing, we believe that is would be useful to embrace this moment or 'tipping point', in order to reconsider and reimagine how youth work, and youth workers, might work towards developing new kinds of practice.

Set within a narrative of transformational creativity, it may be possible to establish a new or alternative discourse as a counterbalance to the very real fears, exceptional conditions and inherent uncertainties that a series of public sector cuts have brought to an already hard-pressed workforce (many of whom give their time voluntarily).

An alternative discourse is required, but at this stage, the conversation about Brexit has not collectively been established in youth work or among youth workers. Having spoken with youth workers in Scotland, Northern Ireland and with colleagues involved in teaching youth and community work across the UK, we hear that such conversations are at best, ad hoc and at worst, are actively discouraged or blocked by line managers who are fearful of politicising practice!

Further, the kind of re-imagined youth work that is necessary in a contemporary successful Scotland or rest of the UK in the post-Brexit era is also unknown. This raises a question around the extent to which we as practitioners, and the young people we work alongside, can begin to help shape that unknown future, if we do not engage, or are prevented from engaging, in such conversations?

Yet, our initial examination of what is already known combined with the application of logic, can offer insights into the financial and other impacts of Brexit on youth work provision. Missing from this analysis is a robust understanding of the views and capacities of a committed workforce, we which offers a high social return on investment, for a renewed creative, resilient and strong youth work sector both inside the UK and across Europe.

The 'doom-and-gloom' scenario is not without substance as cuts take effect. Yet, the creative possibilities that this tipping point brings, have still to be fully explored and their impacts considered. We believe there is an urgent need for a creative and forward facing dialogue between, and with, youth workers and young people engaged in youth work, that responds to current Brexit discussions. Rather than becoming consumed or driven by a reaction that is grounded in uncertainty and fear of the unknown, additional research and space for dialogue in this area could fill the void and help to ensure that the youth work sector is adequately prepared for whatever Brexit negotiations may bring. Thus we end on an optimistic note, where practitioners may be galvanised in taking forward this dialogue in order to ensure that, when the time comes, we are resilient and clear on our purpose and position within a Post-Brexit European youth work sector that asserts a refreshed social and democratic purpose for emancipatory practice.

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