



## Reflection on Practice. Cross the Line, European Youth Work for Future Youth Workers

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## **Reflection on Practice**

### **Cross the Line, European Youth Work for Future Youth Workers**

**March 2024**

**By Mark McFeeters (UU) and Garreth Smith (TUD)**

From 18<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2024, six students from Ireland participated in an international training course called *Cross the Line* in Tata, Hungary. This provided an exciting opportunity for students from Ireland, Estonia, Belgium, and Hungary to learn more about European youth work. The project was led by the Hungarian National Association and through Léargas in Ireland, students from Ulster University, University College Cork, Technological University Dublin and Maynooth University were invited to participate in this week long training.

*Cross the Line* sought to build bridges between higher education and youth work and between formal and non-formal learning. This created space for sharing, reflection, debate, and dialogue regarding value-based youth work at the European level. The project helped students identify common dilemmas and obstacles in value-based youth work, using a critical approach to understand the role of a youth worker in overcoming these. Students had the opportunity to enhance their professional identity by exploring different European contexts and explore how EU programmes such as Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps can be used to empower young people to tackle different topics and challenges through international cooperation.

Students brought their experience of youth work, their understanding of the values of youth work and drew on their training at university thus far to engage in critical conversations with peers from across Europe. Within the programme a framework for professional identity was explored which engaged students in sessions that allowed them to reflect on personal and professional values. Working in small groups, students creatively explored and reflected on youth work in Hungary primarily, but, also about practice in Belgium and Estonia. Commonalities and shared values of the potential for social change through youth work themed throughout the discussions and reflections. The project comprised also of study visits to three contrasting youth work projects and drew on the Competence Model for Youth Workers (2023). Students gathered in their national groups each evening for a group reflection, where they were able to reflect, discuss and share key learnings from each day and build connections within the Irish context also.

Students from Ireland felt the project was unlike anything they had experienced before and has helped raise awareness around youth work in a range of challenging, European contexts. Students reflected that they had been challenged to reflect on themselves in new ways, challenged to see their own work and understanding of youth work in a different way and expressed a sense of gratitude for the Irish context in terms of the range of work they are able to engage in and how young people are supported in Ireland. The stark realities of different European contexts, where young people are viewed differently was a key point of learning for many of the group. Interestingly, students also expressed a sense of solidarity with their European counterparts, recognising that the values that underpin youth work are

shared and students felt that whilst there are differences to acknowledge, equally, there are a range of similarities which unite youth workers at the European level.

As the group leave this experience and return to their home institutions, they have built relationships and connections both within Ireland, North and South, across Europe and leave with a renewed sense of learning and development regarding European youth work. Equally, the connections made between educators representing the various institutions, also has led to conversations regarding future pieces of work, future possibilities, and a motivation to continue to cross the lines within the European context.