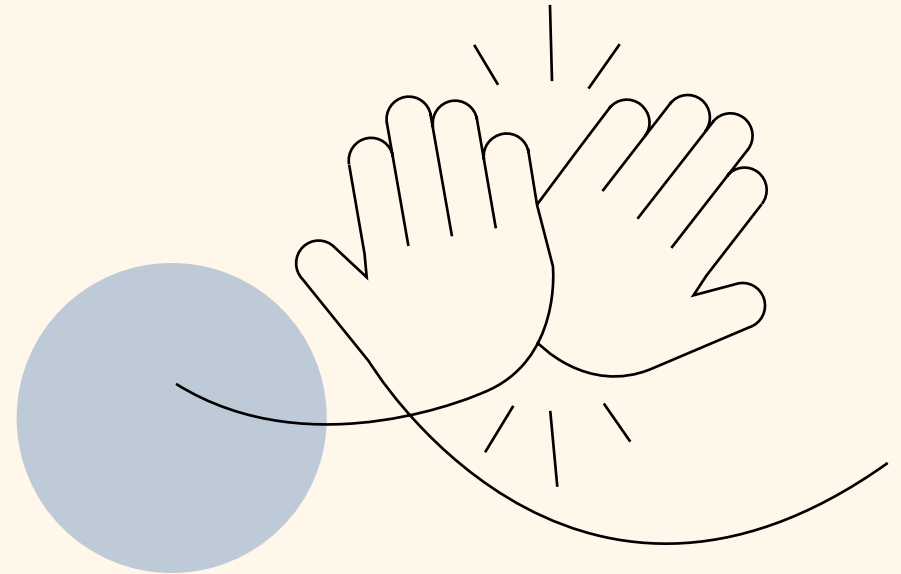# The application of youth work codes of ethics and practice in Estonia, Australia and Iceland

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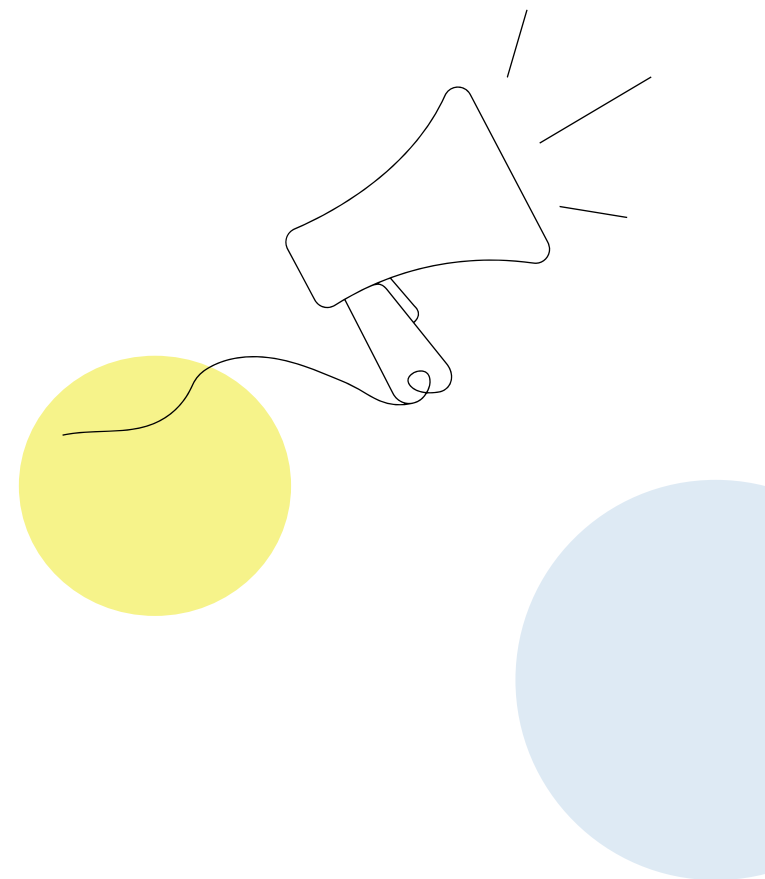Helen Puistaja, Design studio Ruum 414

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VICTORIA UNIVERSITY MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

YWA YOUTH WORKERS' ASSOCIATION

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Project Description

This report presents the findings of data collected from youth workers using a mixed-methods comparative analysis to answer the following research question: *'What are the main challenges relating to the use of Youth Work Codes of Ethics in youth work practice in Estonia, Australia and Iceland?'* There were limitations in accessing youth workers as research participants (either qualified, non-qualified and/or students) in some countries during the global pandemic. This was due to social distancing regulations imposed by country-specific governments to minimise the spread of the virus. These social distancing requirements differed between countries and were applied differently and at different times across the three participating countries, with Australia, for example, experiencing extreme lockdown measures for nearly all of 2020 and 2021. This made data collection difficult and restricted the Australian sample to a single dataset collected remotely via a single online interview using standardised open-ended questions, with a sample of only qualified youth workers. As such, the research took a pragmatic approach to the research design and collection of data, focusing on 'what works' in answering the research question under investigation (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003).

This research report attempts to address gaps in the youth work body of knowledge across the three participating countries in relation to applying Codes of Ethics and Practice in youth work, adding to the initial data collected in Intellectual Output Number One (IO1). The research collected data through a survey and/or interviews and focus groups of youth workers in each country. In addition to identifying the gaps and challenges in national contexts, the main aims of the report are to compare results across countries, acknowledge any differences and find commonalities and recurring themes. It is hoped that while the results are specific to each country, there may be learnings from the research that are potentially transferable and usable by youth-focused organisations in countries beyond those sampled. The results of this research report, along with the results from IO1, will inform the development of IO3 — a practical guide-for-reflection tool regarding the application and implementation of Codes of Ethics/Practice. The IO3 resource will be presented to the relevant stakeholders to guide and inform future planning and debates around ethical practice and the professionalisation of youth work. Furthermore, it will be used by the Participating Organisations in further planning their work and activities about promoting the use and application of Codes of Ethics by the youth sector; and by the associated partner universities in their youth work curriculum development and program delivery.

Division of work and applied methodology

This IO2 activity was coordinated by the Icelandic Félag fagfólks í frítímaþjónustu (FFF), who took responsibility for agreeing on the detailed concept, methodology, conduct and distribution of the IO2. Each partner organisation took responsibility for the collection and analysis of data in their respective country.
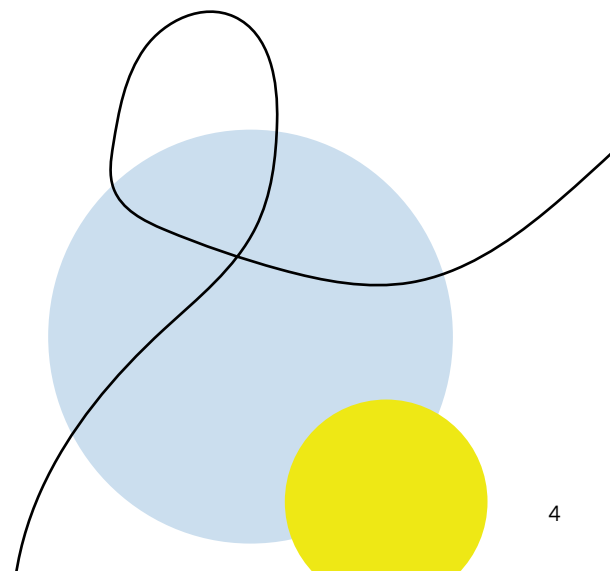
Research methodology and methods
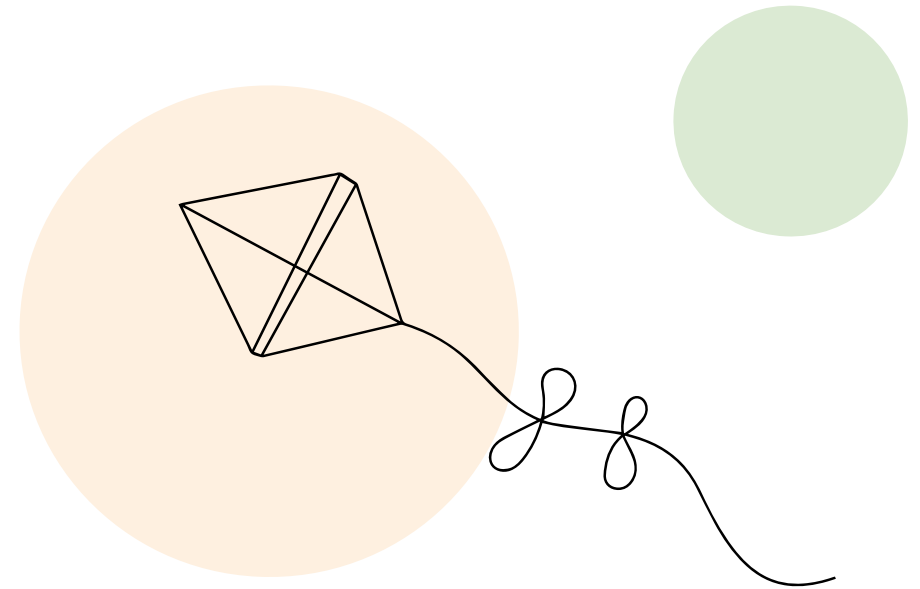
Different countries used differing data-collection methods in concert with pragmatic approaches (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). Further detail on methodologies and methods is provided in the results section of each country. All countries used qualitative approaches to the research design and data analysis, from semi-structured interviews with individuals or in focus groups. Estonia and Iceland interviewed both qualified and non-qualified youth workers, and Estonia also interviewed youth work students. As a result of pandemic restrictions, however, Australia only interviewed qualified and experienced youth workers. For the purpose of this research, the term 'qualified' youth worker is defined as having a formal tertiary-level qualification (e.g., a university degree) in the field of youth work. All countries have a formal qualification in

the field of youth work available, and in Estonia and Australia, they also include and/or recognise competency or occupational standards within the formal tertiary-level qualification. Those participants who were defined as 'non-qualified' in this research did not have a formal qualification in the field of youth work; however, these participants may have been tertiary qualified (and/or experienced) in other fields or disciplines.

The research design and questions for all countries represented in this report were informed by the data collected and presented in the IO1 Report. This data was analysed and interpreted according to thematic analysis. Despite the pandemic restrictions and the differing research cohorts, there are clear results that provide consistent answers across

the three countries to the research question. These results enabled the research team to document and report on '*the main challenges relating to the use of Code of Ethics in youth work practice in these countries?*'

Regarding methodology, all interviews were informed by qualitative research methods using semi-structured interview techniques. These techniques align with qualitative theorists who suggest that qualitative research draws on small samples of human experience that are examined 'in-depth' (Miles & Huberman 1994).

Research participants and recruitment

The research adopted a 'purposeful' sampling strategy (Creswell 1998, pp. 118–20) for recruiting participants who knew the youth work issues under investigation, were available for interviews and were willing to share with the investigators the degree of detail and depth required to enrich the study (Gray 2003, p. 101). The project's purposeful recruitment process was conducted based on 'convenience' insofar as it maximised opportunities for identifying suitable participants within the short timeline of the project (Wright & Sim 2002) and was practically possible within the social distancing restrictions imposed by the global pandemic.

The recruitment processes and decisions were based on the rich information contained within the experienced and qualified individual youth work participants. Patton (2002, p.230) describes various strategies for undertaking purposeful sampling prefaced on the concept of obtaining 'information-rich cases'. Patton defines these cases as those 'from which one can learn a great deal about issues' and are of 'central importance to the purpose of the inquiry' (Patton 2002, p.230). Suri (2011, p.66) states that to undertake purposeful sampling successfully, 'key informants in the field' are crucial in identifying information-rich cases. As such, the purposeful sampling of experienced and/or qualified youth work informants can be described as youth work knowledge 'gatekeepers' and provide rich and detailed information (Kawulich 2011).

The interviewees were purposefully drawn from the networks of the Youth Worker Associations in the three participating countries. The participants were qualified youth workers with experience in face-to-face youth work and/or management of youth workers and services for young people, or they were non-qualified or students in training. Participants were contacted via email through their membership or association with a Youth Worker Organisation and invited to participate in an interview (face-to-face or online). Participants were provided with indicative semi-structured interview questions. In addition, the email invitation included information about the research project, including a plain language explanatory statement and information regarding participant consent. This information was provided as part of the recruitment process, consistent with university research ethics processes across the three participating Universities.

Iceland

Two focus groups were conducted in Iceland, with one group consisting of five qualified youth workers (with a degree in youth work). The other group contained seven experienced but non-qualified youth workers (with no formal qualification in youth work). Of the qualified youth workers, four had received education in youth work and leisure studies from the University of Iceland and one from Sweden. All the youth work participants in Iceland had a history of working in youth work, ranging from 8–25 years of experience. The participants had diverse experiences and roles in youth work. For example, they had worked in youth centres, after-school programs, the scouts, leisure work with youth with disabilities and as a department manager of leisure work in a municipality. The non-qualified youth workers had been in the sector for 2–17 years, most for more than five years. The interview process allowed individual interviewees to provide an open-ended response to the question. Interview responses were audio recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were thematically analysed for repetition and patterns in responses across participants. The themes and verbatim quotes representative of the responses are represented in the following chapters.

Estonia

Estonia undertook three focus groups. One group consisted of experienced youth workers with 2–13 years of experience who were qualified in youth work at different educational levels (Diploma of Professional Higher Education; BA; MA). This group came from diverse backgrounds, including a camp leader, a youth recreation leader working in a school, a youth worker from the youth organisation and a manager and youth workers from the Open Youth Work Centre. Another focus group contained members who did not hold a specific qualification in youth work. However, all four practitioners in the group were working in the Open Youth Work Centre, with their time working there ranging from six months to nine years. The last focus group contained first and third-year youth work students. The

interview process was conducted by two interviewers, who, by asking open-ended questions, allowed the group to dialogue on the question. Interview responses were audio recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were thematically analysed for repetition and patterns in responses across participants. The themes and verbatim quotes representative of responses are represented in the following chapter.

## Australia

In Australia, individual qualitative interviews were conducted with a small sample of 12 qualified and experienced youth workers who were all members of the Australian Professional Association of Youth Workers (Youth Workers Australia) and were recruited through the Association's networks and social media platforms. Due to the social distancing requirements imposed during the pandemic by Australian governments, the interviews could not be conducted face-to-face and were conducted online using standard semi-structured questions for all participants. The interview process allowed individual interviewees to dialogue on the question in an open-ended response. Interview responses were audio recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were thematically analysed for repetition and patterns in responses across participants. The themes and verbatim quotes are representative of responses in the following chapters.
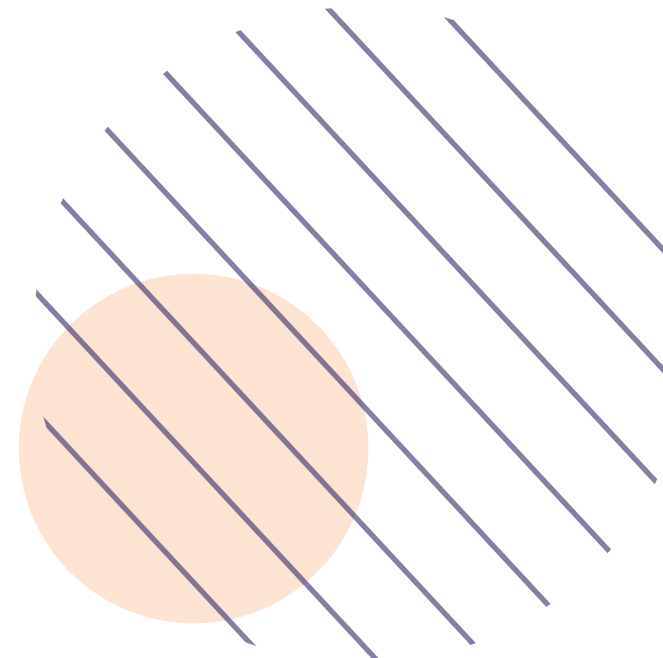
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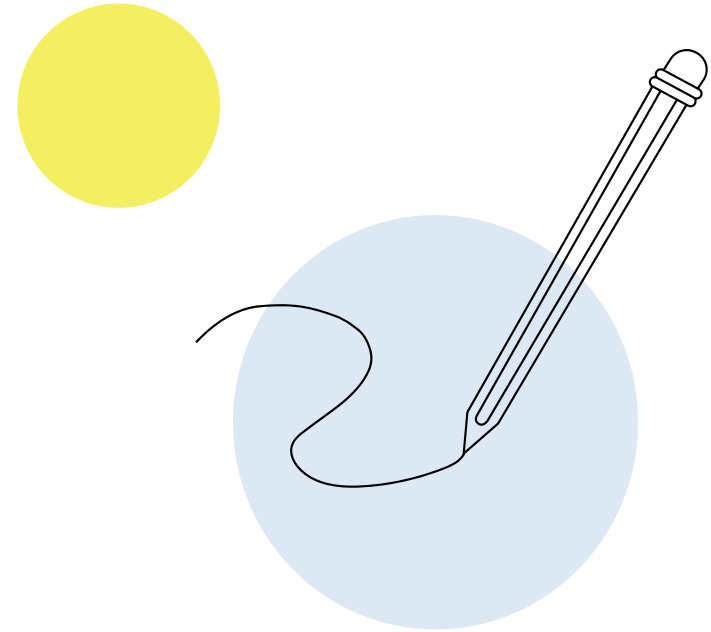
Primary interview question:

The primary overarching interview question for all countries was: *'What are the main challenges relating to the use of a Code of Ethics in youth work practice in your country?'* All three participating countries used the same topic areas to pose their semi-structured interview questions to participants. This standard approach provided a level of consistency to the interview processes across the countries.

Australia – Results

The data was collected from 12 interviewees who were defined as 'qualified and experienced' youth workers. All interviewees were categorised as 'qualified' as they held formal qualifications from an accredited university at degree-level in the field of youth work. All interviewees were further cate-gorised as 'experienced' as they had been working in the field of youth work for 10 or more years. The youth work contexts and roles that the youth work

interviewees were currently (or previously) occupied were multiple and various. Interviewees listed these roles, and they covered such things as:

> *'Practitioner, advocate, researcher, non-formal educator, youth worker, youth justice worker, alcohol & other drugs worker, youth homelessness prevention, community worker, youth program manager, youth casework, youth outreach worker, team leader, youth service manager'*

The interview data was examined using thematic analysis methods (Guest 2012) and involved identifying common concerns across the interview cohort. Initial and emerging themes were cross-checked with field notes and through member checking with the interviewees in situ at the time of the interview. The final selection of themes was based on frequency and relevance to the aims of the study (Guest 2012). The data collection and analysis were in line with qualitative research methods, using small samples of human

experience and examined 'in-depth' (Miles & Huberman 1994).

Following the thematic analysis of the interview data, the following six overarching themes were identified: Theme 1. 'Awareness and Knowledge', Theme 2. 'Usefulness', Theme 3. 'Values', Theme 4. 'Promotion', Theme 5. 'Review', Theme 6. 'Application'.

The themes are presented below under broad headings and represent the dominant themes from the analysis of the interview transcripts. Various minor sub-themes also appear under the main theme headings and are highlighted in the presentation of results below. The presentation of the results is strengthened by using verbatim quotes to illustrate and elaborate on the particular theme or sub-theme. The verbatim quotes used were representative of the participant responses across the interviews. At various points in the presentation of themes, there is engagement and reference to relevant youth work literature to confirm commonalities, or elaborate distinctions between themes that may also be found in the body of knowledge on youth work and/or Codes of Ethics and Practice, and/or allied disciplines.

Awareness and knowledge

The analysis of the interview data found a high level of both 'awareness and knowledge' of the Code of Ethics among the qualified youth workers. While this is positive, it is not surprising, as qualified youth

workers in Australia are educated on the Codes of Ethics through formal, university-based youth work training. In addition, all tertiary degree-level courses in youth work that are accredited with the Australian professional body Youth Workers Australia (2022) have either the relevant Code of Ethics as units of study or have the Code of Ethics embedded within the general curriculum of the course.

The use of the Code was described as a 'common situation', and it was a 'common occurrence' to refer to the Code when a youth worker interacts with a young person as part of a 'client/worker relationship'. Participants described the Code as:

> '…becoming part of the youth workers' professional practice' and that 'the contents of the Code' are 'a well-formed part of their personal DNA'.

Others suggested that the Code's guiding principles and practice responsibilities were well known and that there is 'alignment and authenticity in how those principles are espoused'.

Interestingly, while participants acknowledged awareness of the Code, some participants went further, suggesting that the Code be a non-negotiable requirement of youth work practice.

> 'The Code should be a standard obligation for all youth workers in the sector and not merely

a voluntary document that runs the risk of allowing youth workers to "take or leave" their accountability and responsibility when involved in the lives of young people.'

Relevance and usefulness

The Code was described by participants as 'relevant and useful' in everyday youth work practice. The following verbatim quote represents and illustrates the usefulness of the Code to participants.

> 'The Code is very useful; it has built our youth work practice foundation.'

Participants further explained and elaborated on the relevance of the Code to their practice. They pointed to how the Code enabled practice and, importantly, how it positioned the young person as the primary focus of their youth work and ensured a level of quality of their practice.

> 'The Code enables youth workers to position young people at the centre of practice, ensuring that safety, ethics, respect, trust, inclusion are intrinsic to everyday interactions with young people.'

Participants also explored the application of the Code to various workplace contexts as examples of its usefulness and relevance. They demonstrated the value of the Code to employers and managers of youth services and organisational contexts.

'I have found the Code to be of clear value when inducting newly qualified staff into complicated case management roles with complex young people.'

Interestingly, participants saw the Code as setting a 'standard' for youth work practice, particularly for new entrants to the sector or those taking on new roles in complex environments with vulnerable young people.

'[The Code] provides a minimum standard on how they need to begin working with young people and then as the professional relationship forms and the case management tasks become more complex, it serves as a reminder that those values need to be preserved.'

Values

The human rights basis of the Code was seen as important to the participants, providing them with a value-based framework for practice with young people.

'[The Code] has given us a practice frame of human rights.'

While acknowledging the human rights basis of the Code as foundational, participants further identified other values-based principles that they saw as underpinning the Code.

'…ensuring human rights are always paramount, [however], privacy and confidentiality, ensuring duty of care is always observed, ensuring worker wellbeing is paramount in the organisation, and that self-care is a regular part of the workplace practice.'

The participants also specifically referred to the value-based principles that are stated in the Code as foundational to youth work practice. Interestingly, participants identified these value-based principles as foundational to their impetus for practice.

'The Code principles of participation, empowerment and social justice are big ones for me. They are the values that keep me motivated in my youth work practice.'

Promotion

All participants suggested the wider promotion of the Code to those working in the youth sector, especially as part of employment and staff induction processes in youth organisations delivering youth programs and services.

'The Code should be promoted as an integral aspect of a youth worker's recruitment and appointment in any workplace involving young people.'

Participants provided a range of comments on the training of youth workers and the inclusion of

the Code in youth work training. *'All youth work training at university or TAFE College should have lectures on the Code.'* However, participants interestingly also suggested that those who are not qualified youth workers but were working in the youth sector, either as managers of youth workers or of youth services, should also be trained in the Code of Ethics through such mediums as *'[providing] PD for managers who aren't trained in youth work'*. Further, that professional development for all workers in youth agencies should be a regular occurrence.

'Yearly workshops in all youth agencies to reiterate the Code and the importance of utilising it when working with vulnerable young people.'

Review

While many felt the Code was adequate and useful in its current form, they also suggested that it was worthwhile reviewing it from time to time and involving youth work practitioners in the review process.

'The Code doesn't need to be improved, but it could be reviewed at some point– perhaps using co-design methods.'

Some participants suggested regular reviews/ updates of the Code would be useful, particularly to stay abreast of legislative or regulatory changes in the youth services or child protection area.

'Regular reviews of the document to ensure it meets all the needs of the current environment and to deal with any legislative changes that may have occurred in the time.'

Application

The participants made a variety of suggestions regarding how the Code could be better applied in workplaces and youth programs and services. In particular, '*to ensure young people's needs are met*', that the Code is used in '*everyday decision making*' by workers and that,

> *'The Code should be used regularly in youth work team meetings and supervision'.*

Participant's suggestions included management applications such as '*the Code of Practice should be an essential part of staff induction*'. However, one of the stronger application themes was the suggested use of the Code as a 'reflective practice' tool in youth worker 'supervision' or as a peer support process used by youth workers in their workplaces.

> *'The Code should be used as a framework to assist in the supervision of youth workers in their employment.'*

The theme of using the Code in reflective practice and group supervision is interesting as it aligns strongly with the pedagogical (Jeffs & Smith 1987, 2005; Smith 1988) underpinnings (informal and non-formal education and learning) of youth work practice. In particular, the critical and transformative pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1972) and specifically his use of critical dialogue as part of a process of critical reflection that is present in British-influenced youth work (Cooper 2012; Beck & Purcell 2010; Corney et al. 2020; Mayo 1999; Chouhan 2009; Singh & Cowden 2009). According to Freire (1972), critical dialogue is a reflective process that proposes provocative questions and reflects on them critically. The responses that flow from this dialogue process are then used to inform future action. This research theme of 'reflective learning' relating to the use and application of Codes of Ethics in youth work has been developed further in IO3 and forms an integral and substantial part of the IO3 resource.

Conclusion

While there are differences in the Australian results, there are many similar themes to those found in the countries of Iceland and Estonia. The commonalities and differences will be explored further in the combined results and discussion section of this report, following the individual country presentation sections. One interesting theme to be explored further is the use of Codes of Ethics in reflective practice. In youth work, the use of reflective practice is a relatively under-researched area in the literature (Herman 2012). This provides scope for further research on the development, application and use of Codes of Ethical Practice as reflective practice tools in youth work.
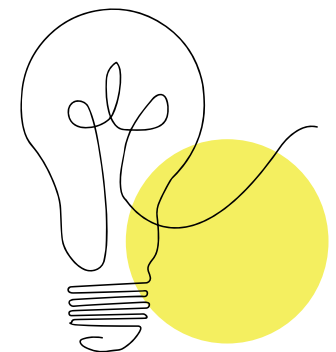
Iceland – Results

Data from the survey showed that 83% of the respondents were aware of the Code of Ethics.

Participants were asked to rate the importance of the Code of Ethics in their work on a scale of 1–10. Of the 63 people that answered this question, over 80% found the Code to be relevant or highly relevant in their everyday work. Respondents' answers to this question ranged from 3–10. Of these respondents, 57.1% (45) rated the relevance between 8–10, a further 25.4% (16) rated the relevance between 5–7, while 3.2% (2) rated the relevance between 3–4. One respondent rated it at three and another at 4.
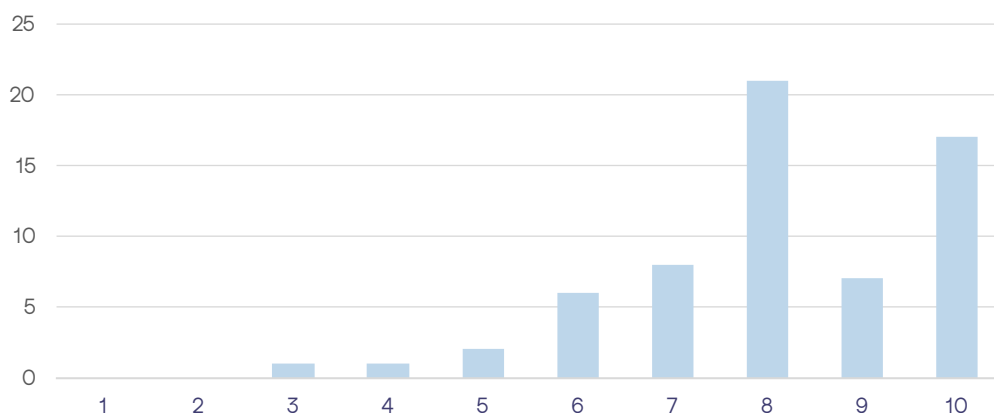
In the survey, participants were asked 'what are the strengths of a Code of Ethics in youth work practice?'

The most common answer to this question was unity on professional standards (23). Youth workers also see it as important that the Code supports professionalism (6) and that it is supportive in work practice (6).

'It keeps youth workers grounded. In youth work, it is important to treat everyone equally. It can sometimes be challenging, so it is good to have the Code of Ethics to remind us of our duty.'

'Good guidelines help workers understand the values and ethics that should define the work.'

'Important to ensure the safety of all participants and to support workers in promoting the wellbeing of participants.'

Awareness

In the qualified youth workers focus group, four out of five participants knew the Code of Ethics, but one read them online while participating in the focus group because they did not know them. Not all knew them well and said, for example, that it: *'hangs on my office wall'*, *'we have them in the staff manual'*, *'read them regularly'*, *'just know of them'*. One participant who knew the Code said: *'Yes, but I don't know them by [the] book, [I] check it regularly and find it useful and suitable on a broad level. Could be more visible.'*(E)

The participants who had not finished their youth work or leisure study education had heard of the Code of Ethics for youth workers, but most had not observed them or used them in their work. However, those who had read the Codes or had heard of them said they were important and useful if used correctly.

'I haven't read them, but I recognise them and think it is important to introduce them to youth workers. It's important to legally bind youth work in Icelandic law.'

'I have read the Code through the years. Some parts of the Code are in the confidential agreement that the staff members need to sign – It's good to have them.'

Figure 1: How relevant is the Code of Ethics to your everyday work?

Relevance and usefulness

Qualified participants agreed that the Code is relevant and useful in a range of contexts, as they discussed it during the focus group. For example, they said the Code was useful when you have new workers that are not educated in this field, that the Code tells everybody what youth work stands for, is useful as instructions on how staff should work, and to show that you have professional values and guidelines as a youth worker. One said the Code affects '*what lingo we are using in our work*' and defines '*what makes a person a professional*'. One mentioned that there are often many discussions about a 'dramatic' article in the Code of Ethics about youth workers not doing anything that diminishes the reputation of youth work. People often stop and want to have some explanations and discussions about what that article means. Additionally, participants mentioned that the Code is useful in the workplace itself and important to promote the work to others. The Code can, for example, be especially important and useful in many smaller municipalities that don't have their own Codes of Ethics. One talked about seeing '*sometimes strange job description – leisure worker who also is a cleaner*' and that '*everything is open when it comes to job descriptions for youth workers*'. It was also mentioned that the Code was useful when fighting for the importance of youth work.

> *'[The Code is] useful in turbulent times and when decisions related to the job are made. Useful when you need to negotiate or fight for*

the existence of youth work when politicians or others want to make changes in youth work that you don't agree on.'

The non-qualified participants agreed that they were working with the values and objectives mentioned in the Code of Ethics but without using the Code itself as a tool or guide. The participants said that ethical duties and things like professionalism and confidentiality that are mentioned in the Code of Ethics are discussed more in a general sense. Other areas addressed without using the Code itself can include the role of the youth worker, their duties and how to behave at work. Since most of the non-qualified participants had not observed the Code of Ethics, they did not have much experience in using the Code in their organisations. In some organisations, the Code of Ethics is mentioned in training for new employees or when there is an ethical dilemma at the organisation.

> *'When we have new staff members, we discuss these things. We don't use the words or mention specifically the Code of Ethics. It is more like a general discussion about things that you need to know and how to behave in this field of work.'*

> *'We have not discussed the Code specifically, but we often work with ethical dilemmas and discuss how we would respond to difficult ethical situations.'*

Qualified participants were, in most cases, not regularly using the Code in a systematic and purposeful way but could all agree on the relevance and importance of the Code of Ethics. Some of the participants were using the Code as a practical tool, but during the discussions, all agreed on the importance of the Code. Ideas were put forward about how and in what circumstances it could be used more.

Though the non-qualified participants had not seen or used the Code of Ethics much before the interview, they had many good things to say about it after reading and discussing the Code in the interview. They mentioned that there were many things in the Code that are important and should be used in the youth work sector. Most of them mentioned article four in the FFF Code of Ethics which states:

> *'Youth workers seek to create a platform for individuals to have a say and determine for themselves on the issues that matter to them. At the same time, emphasis should be placed on good cooperation with the custodians of minors and seek their approval where appropriate.'*

After the discussion, most of the articles in the Code were mentioned as important, which indicated the participants were positive about the Code of Ethics. In addition, participants mentioned that managers of youth clubs should present and use the Code of Ethics more in their work.

'The Code of Ethics is pretty general, but you are basically following them in your work each day; I would like to praise the ones that wrote them. They are general, but you can really relate to them.'

Participants in the focus groups all agreed that the Code of Ethics is important and can be used in a variety of ways in leisure work. However, it was clear that the Code of Ethics is currently not used purposefully enough, and this needs to be addressed. Ways must be found to increase visibility, discussion, accessibility and awareness of the Code within the leisure sector. The focus groups also reflected on a lack of a legal framework for the leisure work sector. As a result, youth workers in the field must regularly fight for the existence of leisure work and demonstrate its importance to those who distribute funding. Leisure staff are quite a young profession in Iceland, and the discussion in the group is an indication of that.

Sufficiency, promotion & revision

In the survey, participants were asked, 'what are the limitations of a Code of Ethics in youth work practice?' Twenty-six participants gave answers, with the most common answer (10 mentions) being that a Code of Ethics is limited and does not ensure quality; professional competencies and professionals are also needed.

The second most common answer (eight mentions) said that a Code of Ethics had no limitations that participants could think of. '*Needs regular review*' and '*how to use them in praxis*' got two mentions. '*Invisibility*', '*Lack of connection to the workers*', '*needs to be promoted better*' and '*lack of inspection and penalties*' all received one mention.

All participants, both qualified and non-qualified, agreed that there could be more done to *promote* the Code of Ethics as many youth workers are not aware that the Code exists. They said there is a need for more visibility and introduction to the Code and that, for example, the Association of Youth Workers, the Association of Youth Centres and the Association of Sports and Leisure Representatives in the municipalities could all provide the necessary forum. In the qualified focus group, four out of five participants knew the Code and used it in their work, but how much they used it and in which circumstances were diverse.

The non-qualified participants had heard of the Code, and some of them had read it in the past, but nobody had used it in their work. This lack of knowledge and use of the Code is the biggest obstacle and challenge in Iceland.

One of the participants said:

'I wasn't sure if I had seen them if I wasn't a student in leisure study at the University of Iceland, which is sad because they are really good.'

One of the qualified participants said that they worked with the Code of Ethics at the University of Iceland, where they were supposed to discuss and criticise the Code of Ethics in a course they were taking in leisure studies. The qualified participants all agreed in their discussion that the appearance and look of the Code of Ethics should be '*revised and updated*' to make it more visually appealing for youth workers.

Most of the qualified participants felt the Code was '*sufficient*' and quite clear, but one mentioned that it is important to ask critical questions regarding youth work and step in if it is necessary to introduce and explain the Code of Ethics for those who don't know or understand it. Of course, it is not possible for the Code of Ethics to contain every little detail regarding youth work, but it should cover the main ethical points as it does in the Code today.

The non-qualified participants mentioned that it would be good to present the Code of Ethics in more forms and have concrete examples of each article. Some wanted to change the Code to be more specific, but others mentioned that it is important that the Code is general and not too specific.

'There should instead be extra material with concrete examples of each article.'

'I think the Code explains a lot; the only thing I think is missing are concrete examples that the Code solves. For new employees for example, what does this article mean and how can it be used.'

'I am not sure about these concrete examples. It takes a bit of professionalism from the Code and the workers. It is a professional document and well written. It is general and covers a lot of things. You can interpret it for a lot of situations as a professional. When you have new staff members, you maybe don't use this document but discuss these things in a more general way.'

Conclusion

The conclusion from the discussions in the Icelandic focus groups is that it is not enough to have a Code of Ethics; it must also be promoted. Codes of Ethics must also be used systematically, and managers must take that responsibility in every workplace. It is important to occasionally revise the Code of Ethics and ensure that it is relevant and covers all the current topics in the youth work field. Participants agreed that it is important to present the Code of Ethics appealingly with different visual methods and ensure it is not only text-based. Some participants wanted more concrete examples and case studies used in the Code of Ethics, while others preferred it to be more general. All suggested the need for Code-based educational material and examples for educational purposes.
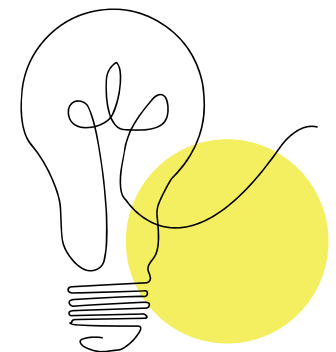
Estonia – Results

Data from the IO1 survey showed that most Estonian respondents were aware of the Code of Ethics, only five out of 72 had not read the document itself, and one of those five was not aware of its existence. The majority (90%) of Estonian youth workers acknowledged the Code of Ethics being used in their everyday work.

Awareness

Awareness was a dominant theme in the thematic analysis of the interview data. Quotes are coded as follows: S – youth work students, E – qualified youth workers, NE – without specific education.

Figure 2: Do you know about the Code of Ethics for Youth Work in your country?

All Estonian youth workers who participated in the focus group interviews were familiar with the Code of Ethics. However, some youth workers without specific youth work education confused it with other relevant documents or had only heard about the Code at the job instructions at the beginning of their career. At the same time, they still shared and described some of the main values and principles that are written in the Code of Ethics.

'In a sense, there are such general directions and guidelines for behaviour.'

Youth work students were familiarised with the Code of Youth Work Ethics during their studies, and they strongly supported the principle that the Code of Ethics is an essential part of the practice. Something

that 'must be' on the table and in everyday use of each youth worker, but especially for the youth workers who have no specific youth work education (to guide them in the 'right' direction).

For youth work students who participated in the focus group interview, the Code is a set of values, not just a document, although they are very aware of the document. They see the practice, maybe even in an idealistic way, starting from those values, and they see that the best way to get acquainted with those values is through the long-term educational process. This process gives enough time and room to discuss, reflect, practice and create collective and shared understanding.

'There are still a lot of people in the youth field who do not have an education, and they are not trained, so professional ethics could be what they should follow, or the employer could give it to the employee to follow in their work.' (S)

Qualified youth workers see the Code of Ethics not so much as a document but rather as a set of universal and human values that should be an integral part of the youth workers' competencies. The dilemma posed is if this is a good or challenging aspect of the Code of Ethics. For example, the question was asked, *'if we take away the heading, is it still the Code of Ethics of youth work?*

'... we haven't had it on the table like that, well, if you come to work now, you'll read it.

But somehow those values come; I've never even had to take it as a topic with my staff. Rather, there are some human values that seem elementary.' (E)

It can be concluded that the Youth Work Code of Ethics, in the opinion of Estonian youth workers, especially those with youth work education background (including students), is an important set of values and principles. These values and principles are (or should be) an essential part of youth work practice and youth workers' competencies. This finding supports the idea that youth work is a value-based practice.

Relevance and usefulness

Youth workers were asked to rate the importance of the Code of Ethics to their work on a scale of 1–10. Over 70% of the respondents found the Code to be relevant or highly relevant in their everyday work.

The data from the survey showed that two-thirds of the respondents endorsed a Code of Ethics as one of the important characteristics of youth work as a profession. Respondents identified the use and purpose of the Code as a set value base for youth work and as a guideline or Code of Conduct for practice. Also, respondents mentioned the role of the Code in the protection and safety of both youth and youth workers.

Figure 3: How relevant is the Code of Ethics to yout everyday work?
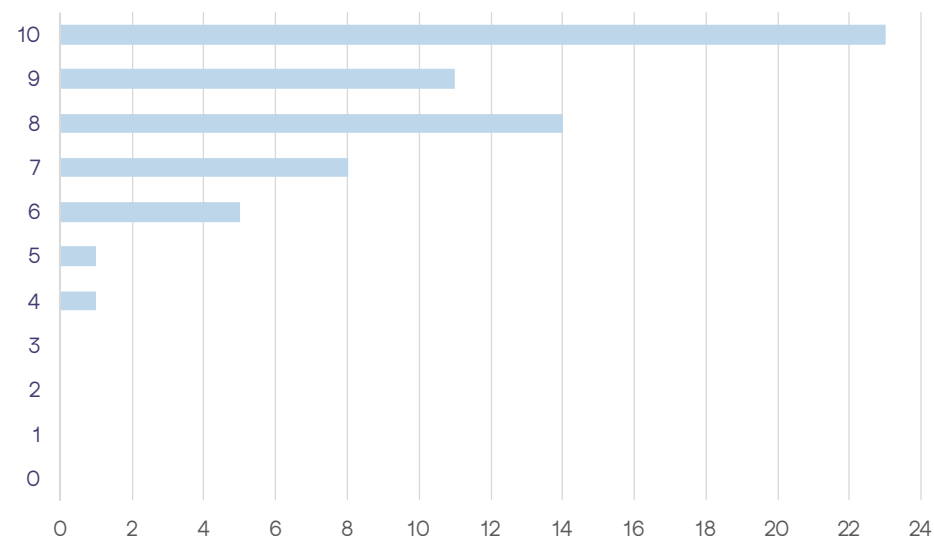
There were three main themes that became evident from the focus groups' data regarding the relevance and use of the Code of Ethics. These were '**guidance and quality**', '**professional self-determination and reflection'** and **'defence and fight'**. The themes will be explored below in more detail.

Guidance and quality

Youth workers in all focus groups talked about the relevance of the Code of Ethics in guiding youth work – being the main framework of the practice – including setting the common ground for all youth workers and, consequently, influencing the quality of youth work. Additionally, in all focus groups, the idea that the Code is especially important for novice youth workers was stressed. However, there

were counter opinions presented as well – the Code needs interpretation, as it is rather generally worded, and this may be difficult for the newcomers.

'If you do not have any such base to rely on or any of the points that are given, then how do you know that you are doing youth work and that it is youth work. It has to be based on something.' (S)

More specific topics underlined by all youth workers under the 'guidance and quality' theme included providing a safe environment for youth that supports their wellbeing and development. There were concerns raised that the youth work environment as described in the Code of Ethics is not always

achievable due to, for example, the lack of resources available. At the same time, youth work students elaborated more on material and non-material resources, bringing to attention that the youth worker themselves is a part of the safe environment. Therefore, the 'quality of the youth workers' is important and strongly connected with the values and ethics of youth work.

> 'In my opinion, as a whole, professional ethics and values are very much connected with the creating conditions for young people.' (S)

Another topic discussed in the focus group interviews was connected to the principle of prioritising youth in all actions. Youth work students and qualified youth workers both saw the relevance of the Code of Ethics in first, and most of all, defending young people and 'putting youth first'. Principles of valuing young people, listening to them and understanding their needs, and treating everyone equally were also evident in the focus group of non-qualified youth workers.

> 'When we have events that are somehow related to religion or something, You may say – I can't organise it because it doesn't suit me, then I ask the question that if we don't and this thing won't be organised, but young people want it... that's where it comes from ... that I like to emphasise from the professional ethics, that we need to listen to young people. That this is what young people themselves want. And that's what we have to base our practice upon.' (E)

There was a discussion present in all interviews about the role of the Code in guiding youth workers through different work-connected situations, challenges, conflicts and ethical dilemmas. For example, questions were raised about the use of alcohol and drugs or involvement in criminal activities among youth and the need to either report them or send them away from the youth work facility. Similarly, the dilemma of informing parents and other parties such as police or child welfare services was raised – when (and if) it is appropriate and how to keep the young person's trust. Many youth workers seem to struggle with this issue no matter their educational background.

Professional self-determination and reflection

Codes of Ethics can be used for reflection- some participants compared it with having a mirror. Qualified youth workers tended to elaborate more on the topic, going somewhat deeper into discussing the possibilities of using Codes of Ethics for reflection. This discussion included comparing their own values (discussing them with colleagues) and professional values and detecting possible stereotypes or patterns of thought, and working on them. Values were also mentioned by youth work students.

> 'I understand that everyone has their own values and opinions, but at the same time, if you work in a place like this and you do it with young people, you have to kind of let go of some of your assumptions and opinions.' (E)

When discussing reflection, youth work students and youth workers without specific educational backgrounds talked mostly about reflection on actions – what went right, what went wrong and how to assess if professional conduct was right or wrong. A Code of Ethics was here seen mainly as a guide for right actions, not so much as a tool for deeper self-determination and reflective practice. Importantly, having more work experience was considered an important factor in gaining self-confidence in making professional judgements. When talking about experience, youth work students felt that although during their practice they saw some more experienced colleagues making mistakes in the light of the Code of Ethics, they didn't feel secure or confident enough to talk about these dilemmas as they were less experienced.

> 'Of course, one possibility is that you introduce [the Code of Ethics] or talk about something that could be done differently. For example, in my first observation practice [during the studies], I felt that since I am a first-year student and I don't know that much, I don't dare say much. Maybe if I went now, I would go more in this direction. A lot depends on your own knowledge, how much you have to say.' (S)

In each focus group, long discussions were held about the borders between a youth worker's personal and professional life and how or if the Code of Ethics should help to draw these borders. Some of the main themes discussed focused on the use of alcohol and

how convenient it is for a youth worker, for example, to buy a bottle of wine in a small community shop or visit a local bar. These kinds of discussions were held in all groups- is a youth worker a role model in the community? However, it seems that youth workers with a specific youth work education were more established in their views about the clear line between work-life and personal life. For example, they were more certain about their right to have a private life.

'In my opinion, it [Code of Ethics] is a great help in self-analysis as well. In the case of some dilemmas like, on the one hand, you are an example that you should not promote things that are not healthy. On the other hand, you need to be honest and open. So why are you hiding part of yourself, like I'm not drinking, I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm going to a friend's for dinner and taking a bottle of wine with me, and youngsters see me buying alcohol. It can contribute a lot in self-analysis – you take these two sides and try to understand what they actually mean.' (E)

Defence and fight

A thought-provoking theme appeared mainly in the interview with qualified youth workers. They saw the Code of Ethics as a 'weapon' in defending the professional choices and practice of youth workers in the eyes of politicians or local government departments, or even the community. They also expressed thoughts on if and how the Code helps them fight for extra resources or fight for the rights of young people – this refers to the previous section on defending young people or putting them first with and through youth work. This idea was supported by all youth workers who participated in the research.

'I also have an example. Since in the school it was all the time emphasised all the things to think about [inclusion] and what kind of people to involve, etc. As soon as I went to work at the youth centre, I could immediately see that okay, people with special needs basically can't get here. Then, about two years in a row, every time there was an event, I asked myself if they could attend – they can't even enter the house, I can't organise the event. And then someone said we had a separate kind of open room for disabled people. But I am a youth worker, and it is my job to involve all young people! And now, we are so far that we have already had visit from the disabled people's organisation to check the premises, and as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic eases, we can move on. Well, that's an example – I used professional ethics in this moment – that I know I have ensured, and that our environment allows everyone to participate.' (E)

The possibility of using the Code of Ethics as a tool to discipline colleagues who are making doubtable choices in their practice was also mentioned by both educated youth workers and youth work students.

'These were young people at risk and those from generally poor situations and orphanages. It was a camp practice, and their [youth workers] attitude towards young people was that they will not become anything anyway. And this attitude was clear and obvious for everyone. So, it was very bad in that regard. Not everyone was equal, and there was a lot of preference. And even if there were problems in the air, there was no interest for it [professional ethics]. The whole experience was that I was alone with 40 young people and their problems. In that sense, I gained experience, but I think that if there are people with such an attitude in youth work, it will not be very progressive.' (S)

Challenges and solutions

Based on the data of the survey, the limitations of a Code of Ethics for youth work practice related to the Code being too broad, too narrow or too limiting. One issue articulated in the survey results was youth workers not following the Code because it is not visible enough or practitioners are unaware of it. There are also some contradictions or dilemmas within the Code itself. More than half of the respondents (54%) replied that ethical issues are discussed in the staff meeting sometimes, while 19% of the youth workers reported doing it all the time. Only four respondents (6%) admitted that it never or rarely happens.

The challenges and solutions are presented together. There were three main themes that occurred: '**learning together**', '**needs**' and '**promotion**'.

Learning together (Code of Ethics as part of the youth work working culture?)

Youth work students often underlined that the Code of Ethics had become familiar to them during their studies. Consequently, they posed the question- when and where is the Code of Ethics introduced to youth workers who haven't conducted youth work studies? The question seems justified as it has also been raised, although in different ways, by qualified youth workers, who note that there is not sufficient attention paid to the Code at places of work. Thus, it is not yet a substantial part of the youth work culture in different youth work institutions or projects. Youth workers without specific education admit that most of the discussions around ethics happen during some coffee breaks and unsystematically.

> *'Rather, we have these issues behind a common coffee table. /.../Well, every time we sit down and just have a little coffee, but we don't have such formal meetings. Women behind the table with a cup of coffee, that's how it usually is.' (NE)*

'Learning together' refers not only to the Code of Ethics as an official or formal part of working culture (either as a document available in the organisation or as part of the working contract you abide by). It also refers to the wish of youth workers to discuss ethical dilemmas together and learn together. All youth workers expressed this need to a greater or lesser extent, but it was especially highlighted by youth workers with a youth work specific education. They also stressed the importance of educating supervisors and managers of youth work about these issues so they could support their teams.

> *'I got caught with the idea that it all starts with the head [from the top], that the bosses are very, very different, that we are not just talking about the fact that we have youth centres, but many of these are units under cultural/ community centres or hobby schools. That it all [Code of Ethics] has to come downward from the table "upstairs". That one thing is that we [youth workers] use it all the time, but the other thing is that understanding of it has to start from the top-down.' (E)*

Needs

This theme refers both to the need to change the Code of Ethics and to the expressed needs of youth workers regarding the Code. Firstly, rapid changes have been occurring in society, and even more changes have arisen with the pandemic situation. There are relevant topics not covered (enough) in the Code, like digital youth work, environmental issues and gender stereotypes. Estonian youth workers agree that the Code should be reopened for discussions, and there will be a chance for that as the Occupational Standard of Youth Workers is being reopened for changes in 2022. The role of youth work has been changing as well, or there may have just been more discussion on the topic, which was also expressed in the focus group interviews. Reopening the Code for revisions might help to create a clearer understanding of the role of youth work and the youth worker.

> *'If this title is taken away, I wonder if everyone understands that this is the professional ethics of youth worker? It just seems to me... I don't know, I'm a little sceptical because when I read it, it's so general and elementary for me, so I can entitle it to someone else's perception of a person working with or in contact with young people. So... maybe it should be in some way more specific, like focused on the youth work environment or target group age.' (E)*

Promotion

Regarding the promotion of the Code, two directions were explored during the interviews – one concerned the youth work field itself and the other concerned partners and broader public opinion. Firstly, both qualified youth workers and youth work students raised the issue of integrating the Code of Ethics more solidly and deeper into the working culture. The suggestions were made to equip leaders of youth work institutions better to promote the Code and make it an integral part of everyday work and support youth workers in basing their practice and decisions on the youth work values presented in the Code. It was also seen as necessary to present the Code to the partners, local community and

politicians to explain why some choices can or cannot be made in the youth work process. The youth work students and youth workers with specific youth work education gave a clear message: '*promotion of the Code starts with ourselves*'.

'One idea is to organise peer to peer coaching sessions between youth workers /…/We can talk about our own work-related cases or situations that have caused us problems, and we use Code of Ethics in these sessions to describe the situations and to solve the cases based on professional ethics.' (S)

'There should be separate guidelines for managers; they should be as simple as possible since often the manager is not a youth worker and may not understand it in the same way. From manager to the youth worker guidelines – how to guide a youth worker and help him or her implement or follow professional ethics.' (E)

Some practical advice was given by all youth workers who participated in the interviews for promoting the Code within the youth work field, for example:

• To introduce training for novice youth workers, where professional ethics, basic documents and principles would be taught, and their application in everyday youth work through examples and role-play.

• To introduce professional ethics to youth workers and young people through a poster on the wall.
• To create an application tool for the Code, such as a calendar to be filled in for self-analysis or a folder or workbook.
• To create a poster of the ideal/good youth worker based on professional ethics (listens, notices, etc.), this could also be aimed at the community and young people as a promise – this is what a youth worker does! This allows youth workers to formulate the values of youth work and would also be an observation point for the youth worker as to whether they are behaving ethically.

Conclusion

The Code of Ethics is first and foremost seen as important in putting young people first and providing them with a safe environment. In some opinions, the Code even helps fight for young people's rights in public or political discussions. The Code is also seen, although more so by qualified youth workers and youth work students, as a tool of reflection and professional development. All interviewed youth workers wanted the Code to give direction or answers to work-related dilemmas (mainly concerning the topic of borders and confidence) – some wanted specific answers, while some wanted broader guidelines.

Participants agreed that there was a need for greater awareness of the Code and that a more

systematic approach should be taken to promote the Code of Ethics. This should start from the youth work field itself by making the Code more visible, practical and known among youth workers in their everyday practice. There was also agreement that the Code should be reviewed and renewed when required to meet the needs of the sector and wider social change.
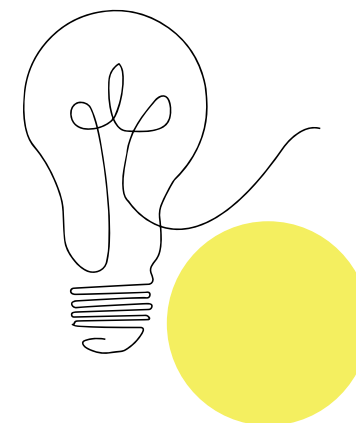
Comparison across countries
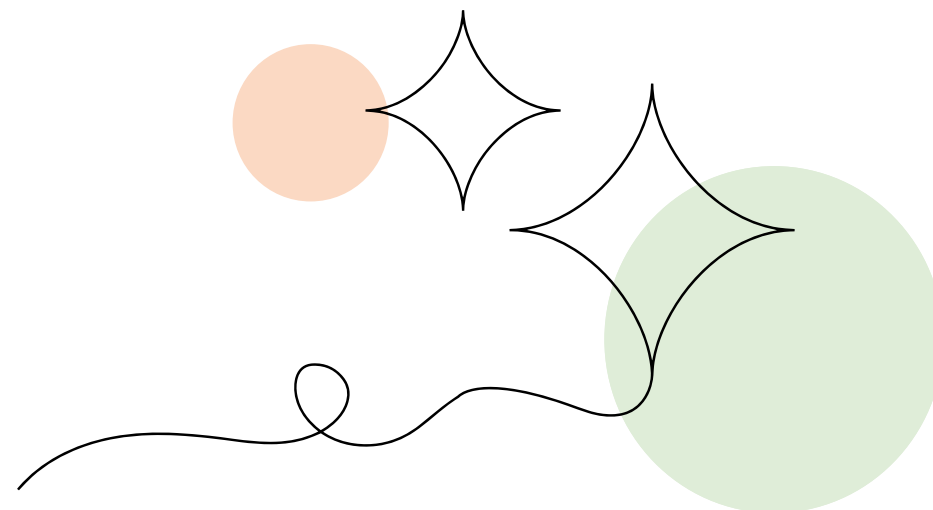
A common finding across all countries was the need for greater awareness of the Code, particularly by those not formally trained in youth work, and the importance of taking a systematic approach to promoting the Code of Ethics. This promotion should start with the grassroots of the youth work field itself, making the Code more visible, practical and known among youth workers in and for their everyday practice. There was also agreement on the review of the Code as and when necessary to meet the changing needs of the sector and wider society.

A common theme in the three participating countries is that those who are qualified in youth work know the content of their countries' Code of Ethics quite well, but less so do those who are not qualified. The results indicate that Codes are more integrated into the education and work of youth workers in Australia and Estonia than they are in Iceland. It is apparent that in Australia and Estonia, the Code is used as a foundation of professional youth work. In contrast, the Code of Ethics is seen more as an extra tool for youth workers in Iceland. As such, there are opportunities in Iceland to improve education and increase the use and discussions about the Code of Ethics. All countries agreed that it is not enough to simply know about the Code of Ethics; if it is to be useful, it needs to be applied in day-to-day use. All agreed that educating youth workers on the use of the Code was crucial to integrating it into their practice.

In the Australian interviews, it was suggested that the Code should not be optional but an obligatory part of youth practice; however, this view was not expressed in other countries' interviews. In all countries, youth workers agreed on the importance of the Code of Ethics and that it provides essential information on what their obligations and duties are and what priorities are relevant, for example, on the importance of safeguarding human rights and creating a safe space for young people. They further agreed that the Code lays the foundation for the values and professional standards that must be safeguarded and not compromised in youth work but can also be used to promote youth work to others outside the youth work field.

In all interviews, participants agreed that the Code of Ethics is useful and important in youth work and gave examples of how it can be used. In the

Icelandic focus groups, participants mentioned that the Code of Ethics could be useful to lobby for increased government funding. Similarly, in the Estonian focus groups, participants mentioned that the Code of Ethics could be used as a tool to explain youth work and protect the sector.

In all countries, participants mentioned that the Code of Ethics was useful for informing good youth work practice, and in Australia, it was mentioned that the Code of Ethics is useful for managers and team leaders to work with staff members about the values and purpose of youth work. In Estonia and Australia, it was mentioned that the Code of Ethics is a professional standard that promotes profession-alism and is useful for purposeful, reflective learn-ing on the job. In all focus groups, it was seen as important to promote the Code of Ethics to youth workers as well as people outside the sector. It was mentioned that students in youth work get lec-tures in their training on the Code of Ethics, ideas were raised on how to promote the Code of Ethics better within each country. Participants mentioned creating ways to link the Code of Ethics better with training and youth work education, as well as promotion methods and case studies on how to use the Code of Ethics in professional reflection on the job. In the Icelandic focus group, it was clear that the Code of Ethics was not well known within the sector, and it was important to find new ways to promote the Code better.

There was a discussion within the Icelandic and Estonian focus groups on how general the Code of Ethics should be. Participants discussed how much space should be provided for case studies within the Code of Ethics that allow for professional evaluation on particular issues or circumstances. Some participants wanted the Code of Ethics to make judgements using examples of what is right or wrong. However, others wanted the text to be based on more general principles and values and trust that the youth workers would apply the principles and thus find the right answers within that frame. There was no clear conclusion to this discussion other than providing a range of options for those both new to the sector and for those with many years of experience. The Icelandic focus groups mentioned the option of basing the Code of Ethics on general principles and values but having training and edu-cational materials where youth workers are provided with practical examples of the principles being applied in real-life situations. The Estonian focus group mentioned similar ideas, where the Code of Ethics allows youth workers to reflect and discuss in their workplaces, learning together and creating val-ues and a mutual culture based on the Code within their workplace.

All countries mentioned that it is important to regu-larly review the Code of Ethics, to have discussions and update it according to changes in government legislation and society, without losing the core val-ues and foundation of the Code of Ethics, such as human rights.

It is clear from these interviews that the Code of Ethics is important in all countries. There are many similarities in responses and themes from the research. While there are some differences in how the Code of Ethics is presented and used, all partic-ipants agreed on the importance of having a Code of Ethics and promoting it and using it in education and the youth worker field. The Code of Ethics is a set of guiding principles and values, a professional standard and a strong tool to develop professional-ism, reflective learning and practice in youth work and the youth sector.

Discussions – Moving forward
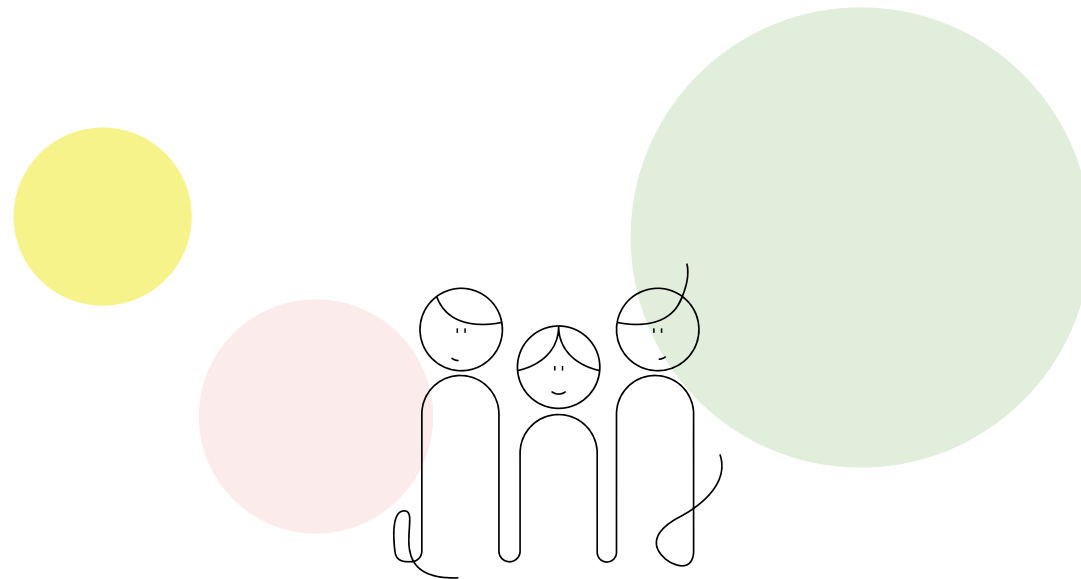
An interesting theme to be explored further is the use of Codes of Ethics in reflective practice. In the youth work literature, reflective practice is a relatively under-researched area (Herman 2012). This provides scope for further research on the development, application and use of Codes of Ethical Practice in youth work.

Another question that could be explored further is how general or precise a Code of Ethics should be? What are the benefits and downsides of a general and value-based Code of Ethics versus a more precise Code of Ethics with clear examples and rules? Code of Ethics should be in constant revision, and this question is an important aspect of that development.

The importance of a Code of Ethics is clear. The development and review process for the Code of Ethics in each country varies, as does the application of the Code in the youth work sectors. Each Code of Ethics has similar principles and values but also differences. This is because of these different processes as well as the different situations of the youth work sector at the time it was created. Professionalism and the environment of youth work are constantly developing alongside society and culture as a whole.

The information and technology revolution of the 21st century will lead to new obstacles and opportunities in youth work, which will call for the revision of Codes of Ethics but also assist with the promotion and use of Codes. However, this does not mean that the core values and principles of the Codes of Ethics will change, but it may mean that the Codes evolve to meet new situations. The research confirms the Codes' commitment to the core values of human rights: respecting all individuals, believing in the potential of young people, and the role of youth work to enable safe spaces for young people to thrive and flourish.

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