



Like the Loch Ness monster, the subject of youth work professionalism raises its head now and then. **Judith Bessant** outlines the arguments for and against the development of a youth work professional identity in the hope that this will stimulate debate about the future of youth work in Australia.



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YOUTH WORK

The Loch Ness monster and professionalism

Youth work professional identity is a bit like Scotland's Loch Ness monster. Both phenomena involve stories that arise every so often and enjoy considerable attention. Both are central to powerful cultural stories with almost mythical qualities that are important to the identity of particular groups. Both keep lots of people very busy. And it is never clear how believable they are.

In Scotland the locals tell us wonderful stories about their monster from the deep. They even come complete with photographs, mysterious sound recordings, tales of near escape adven-

tures and a flourishing tourist industry with monster-merchandise and services. Indeed, without the monster, the place and people of Loch Ness would be as unknown to the majority of us as most other lochs or rivers and their associated communities in other parts of the world. So too with many of the stories told of professionalism and youth work. These stories reveal much about the way youth workers understand themselves, the world, their place in it and how they think they are viewed by others.

Like 'Nessie', the issue of youth-work professionalisation is sighted from

time to time as it pops its head up from the deep recesses. It is an event that is usually followed by great excitement and animated talk. Typically the commotion soon subsides, as the mythical object disappears and is seemingly forgotten for a while only to return some time later on being discovered one more time by new groups of enthusiastic sight-seers.

Major discrepancies in reports also characterise both phenomena. With youth work, we have some reports extolling the virtues of professionalisation, and urging us

to move further in that direction (Hamilton-Smith & Brownell 1973), while others warn of the many risks associated with that option – not only to youth workers, but also to young people and to the community generally (Illich 1975a, 1975b, 1978).

Whether or not youth workers ought to professionalise is hardly a new question for the sector (Hamilton-Smith & Brownell 1973; Chew 1995; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 1996; Wilson 1995; Sercombe 1998; Grogan 2004). It is an issue youth workers have struggled with for decades, and each time the question is raised we tend to get similar arguments.

The purpose of this paper is to solicit debate about youth work professionalisation by informing discussion. I do this by offering some background by way of a brief survey of theoretical trends in the literature about professionalisation, and then by considering the main arguments for and against youth work professionalisation.

Literature on professionalism

How occupational groups describe themselves and their employment relates to the range of theoretical traditions drawn from the sociology of professions. Many professional groups that have been established for a long time tend to fit conventional structural-functional descriptions of professionalism that were dominant in the 1940s through to the 1960s, and developed by classic sociologists like Durkheim (1956), Parsons (1954) and Merton (1967).

Parsons (1954) played a key role in creating an authoritative model of professionalism by identifying certain qualities seen to differentiate “real” professions (medicine or the law) from semi-professionals (like social work, teaching or nursing). Moreover, professionals were said to be morally superior to other occupations because their competence, skills and knowledge were scientific, and their interventions were benevolent and selfless (Pemberton & Boreham 1976). The traits and principles that defined

“real professions” included altruism, ethical practice, autonomy, specialist education, and control of access to a unique body of knowledge. In principle, those who fitted the “real professional” category had, to the exclusion of others, a legal entitlement to practice, a right maintained through professional associations rather than unions or guilds (Perkin 1990; Becker 1962). According to this model, youth workers, teachers, nurses and social workers were clearly identified as para-professionals (Bessant 1992, pp.155-73).

Through the 1970s and 1980s in Australia, many groups, like nurses and social workers, fought to attain government-endorsed definitions of expert knowledge and restricted control over the right to practice. By the 1980s, professional associations, like social workers, nurses and teachers, succeeded in gaining state support to regulate education, registration and the development of codes of practice (Etzioni 1968; Bessant & Bessant 1991).

Still reliant on those structural-functional accounts, those associations declared themselves professional by claiming they:

- enhanced the social and moral consensus of a liberal, modern society;
- were altruistic and served the public interest;
- had an exclusive access to a unique body of knowledge and a skill base earned through a specialist tertiary education program;
- had professional accreditation by a professional association;
- had an ethical code; and
- had a professional practice founded on scientific research and knowledge.

These identity markers were used by various groups to define themselves as professional.

Ironically, the 1960s and 1970s also produced a range of challenges to those older functionalist accounts of professionalism. Neo-Marxists and skeptics of professionalism, such as Donzelot

(1979) and Habermas (1974), explained how science was not a value-neutral activity as functionalists and others had argued. Science and professionalism had interests and operated as instruments of domination. In the 1970s, professionals were also subject to severe critique from a long-standing radical critical tradition. Ivan Illich (1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1978), who drew on the work of G.B. Shaw to condemn professions such as teaching, social work and medicine, argued they had a serious dysfunctional effect on individuals and communities, including the later’s dependence on expert prescriptions and interventions.

The argument was put that professionals were not impartial providers of quality services that people needed. On the contrary, professionals were deeply implicated in “capitalism”, “the patriarchal state”, and had powerful social and economic interests of their own that overrode any concern with those they “serviced” (Pemberton & Boreham 1976, p.29).

Many proponents of this critical response pointed to a conspiracy between professionals and certain other oppressive forces. That collusion was said to be evident in the ways professions replicated systems of class, race or gender-based domination and exploitation. This reaction was part of a tradition of radical, anti-professional activism that characterised the 1960s and 1970s and that was informed by the re-emergence of neo-Marxist thinking in conjunction with the sixties politics of student and peace campaigns and other forms of social action like the gay, black and women’s rights social movements. For many human service workers who identified themselves as progressive, this was translated into a practice of “anti-professionalism” or “community development” that focused on values such as equity, rights, social justice and empowerment.

More recently, interest in the professions as a subject of research has declined considerably. This may be explained partly in terms of a declining interest

in the academic areas that informed debates about professionalism (i.e. structural functionalist and Marxist sociologies) and an increasing interest in “post-modernism”, “post-structuralism” and “cultural studies”.

Interest in the professions seems to have been supplanted by a less specific interest in governmentality, informed by the work of Foucault. This has been a growing area of interest evident in the writings of Rose (1996, pp.327-56), Hunter (1996) and Dean and Hindess (1998). This shift towards governmentality theory saw a declining interest in professionalism specifically, and a more general interest in a range of techniques used to manage the self, various institutions, the state and professions.

Following this brief survey of the theories that have informed debates about professionalisation over the past few decades, I now present five key features of professionalism, and use those categories to articulate the arguments for and against professionalisation of youth work.

I The development of a professional body

Professional associations can take a range of different forms. They can, for example, like the Australian Medical Association, require registration before workers can practice. Alternatively, registration can be voluntary, as with the Australian Social Workers Association. All professional associations are concerned with governance or the self-regulation of those identified as belonging to an area of practice. Indirectly professional associations are also concerned with the governance of “clients” – in the case of the youth workers, “clients” are young people.

Professional associations typically lay a claim to a discrete and unique body of knowledge and field of practice, an exclusive entitlement and ability to practice, and a desire to serve the public interest by, among other things, securing and maintaining certain standards.

The establishment of a professional

association does not automatically rely on the adoption of traditional models of regulation, nor does it mean the instrumentalisation or micro-fascisms of practitioners’ everyday lives. In other words, the regulation of youth work can involve intervening heavily or lightly according to certain agreed upon principles.

For youth workers there is also a matter of competition over members. I refer to the tensions that exist between some trade unions and some of those interested in establishing a professional association. Some relevant unions are keen to protect their membership and, understandably, see the prospect of a youth professional association as a threat to that membership. In other words, if “their” members belong to a professional association, they fear those youth workers will be less likely to maintain their union ties. The argument put by some unionists is that there is no need for a youth work professional body because unions already serve youth workers interests in all the ways a professional body can (Harris 2004).

While this may present as an obstacle, it may not be one. Unions certainly can and do secure members’ interests in the workplace. However, in the context of the recent Australian High Court decision (High Court of Australia, 2 September 2004), trade unions, unfortunately, can no longer legally engage in activities that are not directly and specifically relevant to relations between the employer and employee. This ties the hands of unions in respect to the advocacy work they have traditionally provided on environmental, social, economic or human rights issues. And this has serious implications for youth workers interested in belonging to an organisation that engages in advocacy work.

While there is no denying that professional associations are primarily concerned with securing the interests of their members, many of those organisations also declare themselves to be concerned with the public interest and the well-being of their client

group. A youth work association, unlike a union, can advocate on a range of social, political, environmental and ethical issues pertaining to the sector and young people.

FOR a professional body

1 A professional body serves the interests of its members and in doing so indirectly serves the interests of young people – and the public. This later part of the claim helps give a professional association its legitimacy to exercise the power it claims.

2 A professional body can represent members collectively and advocate on their behalf to help secure reasonable working conditions and wages.

3 Professional associations can provide important political support and advocate for institutions and service that are critical to youth work by petitioning government and other key players in the relevant policy-making communities.

4 A professional body can claim to be representative of the sector, provide a sense of solidarity and a relatively unified voice.

5 Professional association can increase the status of youth work, benefiting youth workers and young people through improved services, workloads, etc.

6 A professional body can help prevent people from misrepresenting themselves about their work history and qualifications. (Membership would require authenticated qualifications.)

7 Youth sector research would increase because research is directly relevant to professionalisation. If we understand research as knowledge-making, it becomes apparent why it is critical to the status of youth studies as a discipline and to the legitimacy of any claim a professional body might make about having its own discrete body of knowledge, skills and expertise. A national body can have the clout to require relevant organisations (e.g.

universities) to increase their youth-related research activities and to develop or expand postgraduate options.

8 Professionalisation would raise the formal education level of youth workers. An extensive transitional period would be needed to permit practitioners who do not qualify for membership plenty of time to do so. Care would need to be taken, for example, to ensure youth workers without credentials were not penalised or lost, if formal education were to be mandatory, and that those workers had plenty of opportunity to “upgrade”. (Fear that uncredentialed workers might lose their job or come up against barriers to new positions may also be an argument against the establishment of a professional body that mandates minimum education requirements (Sercombe 2000).)

AGAINST a professional body

1 A professional body gives priority to its members – above the interests of the public and young people.

2 Professional associations have what Illich (1975a) called an “iatronic effect”. This means that, paradoxically, “helping professions” like youth work can cause and exacerbate pain, death, suffering and increase the number and severity of youth problems. This is due to the disabling effect of professionals who undermine respective communities’ capacity to care for their own young.

3 Professionals generate and exacerbate problems that members claim they have the exclusive capacity to remedy. This leads to rationales for responses to youth problems that were not problems until the relevant experts described them as such (Illich 1975a; Lasch 1977).

4 Professional bodies monopolise power, expand their territory and claims to expertise (Perkin 1990).

5 Professionals destabilise and undercut “alternative” knowledge forms, skills, confidence and competence for self-help.

6 A professional body can push for accepted standards of practice that eliminate styles that are effective but idiosyncratic and unorthodox (Sercombe 2000, p.2).

7 Professionals promote the overuse of services (including the multiplication of generalist and specialist youth services), and increases in defective treatments and fraud (Illich 1975a, 1975b; Lasch 1977; Donzelot 1979).

8 A professional association is not needed because trade unions already serve the interests of, and represent, youth workers.

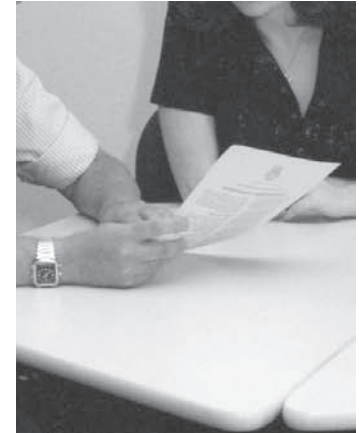
2 Establishing a code of ethics

Most professional associations have a code intended to guide the conduct of members (e.g. Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia 2003). For some professionals, like lawyers, a serious breach of the code of ethics can result in penalties, including the removal of a practitioner’s licence to practice.

The issue of ethics raises a related question about whether an ethical rationale exists for professionalising youth work, and whether such a rationale ought to be the primary reason for professionalisation. Indeed, would professionalisation add anything by helping to produce a more ethically defensible form of youth work? While I am constrained by the limited space in this paper to explore this issue, it is nonetheless a critical task for any project that is serious about youth work professionalisation.

This also involves thinking about how, or whether, a youth work profession can become a moral realm and how that might connect to the lives of individual practitioners. The answers to these questions are important because they inform how the professional organisation is structured and what strategies make members amenable to particular moral values.

It requires being clear about how that organisation might inculcate deliberate habits of self-management. This also



A code of conduct can help identify and prevent corrupt practices.

raises tricky questions about how individuals and collectives can be governed, while also respecting their rights to freedom, professional autonomy and judgment. This involves asking how youth workers can be governed in ways that do not subjugate individual conscience.

Implicit in most arguments for a code of conduct is the idea that a consensus does or ought to exist about core values among youth workers. There is also the question of whether a consensus is necessary for ethical practice and a code of ethics (Sercombe 1998).

FOR a code of ethics

1 A code of ethics or conduct helps clarify and articulate core values, acceptable practice and professional boundaries.

2 It can help provide guidelines for dealing with conflicting principles (Banks 2004, pp.218-26).

3 A code of conduct can help identify and prevent corrupt practices.

4 It articulates a duty of care and helps prevent the abuse of power, and protect the well-being of young people in care. This is important given the power differentials that typically exist between young people (many of whom are in vulnerable situations) and

the power of youth workers. It also has pertinence in a context of revelations of a history of systemic abuse of young people at the hands of carers.

5 It will help secure and restore public trust in those who work with young people because “the public” can observe internal regulatory processes operating that are directed towards preventing abuse.

6 The existence of a code of ethics means ignorance cannot be used to defend activities that harm young people (Sercombe 2000, p.4).

7 Beyond formal legal avenues, there currently are no official processes for dealing with unethical conduct. A code of ethics, especially if it had a disciplinary capacity, would go some way towards filling this gap.

AGAINST a code of ethics

1 Imposing a code of practice is itself unethical because it imposes moral requirements and in so doing overrides the individual’s right and need to act according to their conscience.

2 It removes the worker’s “rightful” entitlements to exercise professional judgment.

3 It is very difficult, if not impossible, to identify an agreed on set of values in the context of a multicultural, pluralistic society.

4 A code of ethics will not stop unethical conduct.

5 It sets up a watchdog or policing mechanism that can become cumbersome and/or oppressive.

3 Accreditation to educate or train youth workers

Accreditation is a public statement that a certain threshold of quality has been realised or surpassed by an education or training organisation. Ideally judgments about the requirements that need to be met to pass that threshold are based on transparent, agreed upon and predefined standards (Harvey 2004, pp.209-20).

In most cases, accreditation focuses on inputs of, and processes or outputs of, education or training programs. It can also focus on matters such as teaching, research, level of student support, and library resources (Harvey 2004, pp.209-20). This official endorsement requires a professional association to assume the authority to judge whether or not a program adequately prepares a student for entry into the profession. In other words, it can act as a gatekeeper by determining who has access to the field.

Accreditation is a powerful governing technique available to an association, and it is through this authorisation process that a professional body can exercise considerable political clout within education institutions.

FOR accreditation

1 Accreditation will help produce graduates with professional competence to practice. This involves the youth work professional body assuming an overseer role and ensuring that education and training institutions continue to fulfill certain expectations.

2 Currently, education institutions, like universities, can virtually do as they please when establishing youth work/studies programs, in developing curriculum, in specifying the qualifications and other credentials of teaching staff, in resourcing the library and in determining staff/student ratios. In a context where managers in many institutions are constantly looking for ways to economise, typically it is the smaller, or what are euphemistically called “boutique programs”, which are targeted. These programs also tend to be unprotected by a professional association. Indeed the proximity of a strong professional association, like the Australian Psychological Society or the AMA, can be seen as a good reason for leaving a program alone. “Savings” are made by “rationalising” subjects, which often results in the disappearance of youth-specific areas of study in favour of more generic studies. “Economies” are also

made through the imposition of rulings like the regulation that high minimal enrolments are required before a subject is offered. The imperative to economise can also result in unqualified staff from other areas teaching youth work subjects to “fill-up their workloads”, rather than the employment of specialist teachers. It can mean, for example, that social workers, psychologists or even nurses teach youth work subjects, or staff with no youth work studies qualification or knowledge teach other core units or coordinating programs.

3 Accreditation can positively influence important decisions about matters like staff/student ratios, the development of a relevant and up-to-date curriculum as well as the establishment of active higher degree and research programs. When youth work programs are under threat, a professional association can be called on to exercise its authority in ways that secure the program.

4 In the prevailing tight fiscal context, accreditation and a professional body can help build and secure quality youth work education.

5 Accreditation can increase the status, and marketability of the program.

6 Accreditation can attract “better” students.

7 Accreditation can lead to the standardisation of the curriculum. (This has advantages and disadvantages, which include the reduced likelihood of programs being able to cater for local needs or reflect local cultures.)

8 Accreditation processes can be used by academics to argue within their institutions for increased resources for the youth work programs.

9 Accreditation can help ensure that what is taught within education organisations is relevant to “the field” and up-to-date with required practices and issues.



A licence to practice can help secure and improve the quality of youth work and enhance the well-being of young people.

AGAINST accreditation

- 1 Accreditation is first and foremost about control of the sector by a specific group whose primary interest is their current members.
- 2 Improvement of the youth sector cannot be guaranteed through accreditation.
- 3 Accreditation is a deeply political process.
- 4 Accreditation reports can result in the closure or penalising of a program. (This can be both a negative and positive – depending on the quality of the program.)
- 5 Well-resourced institutions are more likely to succeed in obtaining accreditation because they can more readily accommodate the fiscal and other costs associated with accreditation.
- 6 Accreditation involves an external body controlling a learning area in an education or training institution. This may have an impact on teaching staff and the quality of the program.
- 7 The accreditation is not, nor can it ever be, an objective process. The quality of the accreditation process, and its capacity to be relatively equitable

across institutions and time, depends on the capacity of individual members of the review panel.

8 Absence of accreditation can affect student retention and recruitment into youth work studies programs.

9 Accreditation may result in rigidity and an inability to respond to changes and the specific needs of the community and students.

10 Accreditation can also inhibit innovative and creative education practices.

11 Accreditation adds considerably to the workload of teaching staff. This additional work makes a difference in the context of funding cuts to the university and TAFE sectors. Additional time spent on accreditation means, among other things, less time spent on other activities more directly related to educating youth work students.

12 Accreditation often incurs a substantial financial fee. This is significant for institutions already stretched fiscally. It is also likely to have a disproportionate impact on the smaller, less well-funded education institutions.

13 Accreditation can cause and exacerbate tensions between “the field” and academics or general teaching staff. This can be experienced as resentment and a perceived lack of trust in the competence of teaching staff to do their job properly. It can also result in a de-skilling of education staff who do not have the opportunity to exercise relative autonomy in the design, development and delivery of material (Harvey 2004, p.221).

14 It can lead to people making decisions about education who are not expert in the areas – who do not, for example, have pedagogical experience or knowledge.

4 Licensing and regulation

A licence to practice is an authorisation provided by a professional body and/or the state which allows a person to

practice. Typically it means that a set of requirements have to be met before the issuing of that licence. This can include, for example, receipt of a specified qualification from a “recognised” institution, a “police check” or, in some cases, additional examination that is external to and separate from the education institution.

A youth work professional association could realise the power to regulate the sector in this way either through legislation, or by establishing power over the sector so tightly that “a closed shop” existed. This would mean practitioners could not get work if they did not register or have a licence to practice.

FOR a licence to practice

1 A licence to practice can help secure and improve the quality of youth work and, in doing so, enhance the well-being of young people. It would help clarify youth work practices that do and do not meet expectations of credible practice (e.g. street clearing exercises, breaching young people) (Sercombe 2000, p.3).

2 It can help remove or eliminate suspect practitioners.

3 It will help eliminate practice that damages the reputation of youth work.

4 A licence helps regulate the sector. This can include, for example, the establishment of a database that has other positive outcomes (e.g. a capacity to establish a communication process with all practitioners).

5 Youth workers can be marginalised in some professional settings and teams. This relates partly to the absence of a registration or licensing system. As Sercombe (2000, p.3) observes, it can mean the knowledge and expertise of youth workers is often dismissed by other workers. A licence to practice can give some guarantee to other professionals (teachers, doctors, psychologists, etc.) of a standard of practice.



There may also be a need to draw distinctions between different kinds of youth work professionals.

AGAINST a licence to practice

- 1 A licence to work does not prevent bad practice.
- 2 It creates a “closed-shop”.
- 3 It can prevent people who do not meet the official licensing requirements, but who are good workers, from practicing.
- 4 A licence to practice can restrict entry to the field. Among other things, this can lead to an increased income for those interested in ensuring a scarcity of licensed practitioners.
- 5 There may be difficulties in regulating or getting practitioners to register for a licence. This is likely to be the case if it is not a legislative requirement. As Sercombe (2000, p.3) notes, youth workers have a history of resisting being organised and have a low membership of trade unions.

5 Developing a professional identity

Before youth workers will be amenable to any form of self-governance, the activities of youth work need to be conceptualised and described. This entails delineating youth work as a

specific milieu of activity or field of action. It involves asking questions like: what makes youth work practice distinctive and different from that of other professionals who also work with young people (e.g. school teachers, adolescent psychologists, social workers)?

This raises questions, such as: what can be referred to or used to mark out territory or space called youth work? It can refer to more than space in the physical sense of place or land and can include the identification of areas of knowledge. Articulating a professional identity also entails describing what happens in youth work, it means saying what conventions, customs and moral orders operate. And, who are youth workers’ “clientele”.

There may also be a need to draw distinctions between different kinds of youth work professionals, like those who identify themselves predominantly in terms of the traditional welfare state where they might continue emphasising the redistributive role of the state and seeing themselves as securing young people’s rights, and youth workers who see themselves as part of a neo-liberal state where ideas about economics, individualism and negative rights prevail and constrain state intervention and restrict investment in services (Tucker 2004, pp.82-83).

Having defined that identity (or identities), the spaces and rules of exclusion need to be developed to demarcate boundaries between youth work and other professions.

FOR developing a youth work identity

1 A collective identity can encourage collective action and the capacity of youth workers to operate in more collective ways. This can benefit youth workers because it will increase their bargaining power and ability to secure their interests.

2 A clear youth work identity helps establish a foundation from which youth workers can operate cooperatively

to promote the sector and interests of young people. This may, for example, provide opportunities for youth workers to inform relevant government policy. It can take the form of resistance to enterprises that may harm young people or youth work.

3 Clarity about youth work identity will require discussion about the purpose and role of youth work. This can help practitioners and others understand more clearly what youth work is and is not, and what the practitioners’ primary reasons for practice are. Identification of those objectives is important if they are to be realised.

4 A youth work identity provides an understanding of what youth work is for other professionals. This helps them understand how their work relates to the youth work practice. This can facilitate team work and improve general practices such as when and why it is appropriate to make referrals to a youth worker (Sercombe nd).

AGAINST developing a youth work identity

1 An attempt to articulate a youth work identity will create new divisions and exacerbate the existing points of difference between youth workers.

2 It will alienate and exclude those who do not fit the new definition of youth work.

Conclusion

The recurring debates about youth work professionalisation were observed and discussed in the context of the main theoretical understandings of professionalism in the late 20th century. While the time and space constraints of this paper prevent a detailed exploration of whether professionalism will, or can, improve the status and treatment of young people, some of the key arguments for and against professionalisation were identified. This intervention may go some way towards clarifying the issues and encour-

aging conversation and action about the future of youth work in Australia.

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XTRA

- The YACVic policy paper *That old chestnut: The professionalisation of youth work in Victoria* is available from the peak's web site at: www.yacvic.org.au/pages/policy/policypapers.htm
- A paper titled 'Professional education for youth work: Expanding field or anachronism', which was presented by David Maunders at the Australian Association for Educational Research Conference in 1990, is available online at: www.aare.edu.au/90pap/maund90443.txt
- The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia's *Code of ethics* can be downloaded

from: www.yacwa.org.au/section/publications.html

- For more information about the Commonwealth Youth Programme's youth work education and training (YWET) program, see the CYP web site at: www.thecommonwealth.org/Templates/CYPInternal.asp?NodeID=38434
- The UK National Youth Agency has just released a youth manifesto 'calling on local and national government to deliver better services to young people ... Central to its message is

the need to involve young people as experts in their own needs and to provide adequate and sustained resources for statutory and voluntary youth work sectors'. Copies of *The Youth Manifesto* can be downloaded from the NYA web site at: www.nya.org.uk/Templates/internal.asp?NodeID=90831

In addition, the NYA's *Professional validation* document and *Code of ethics* for youth workers can be downloaded from the NYA web page on youth work training courses and information at: www.nya.org.uk/Templates/internal.asp?NodeID=89721