

23 Summary and Conclusion

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The third study on confirmation work was conducted in the confirmation year 2021/22. Following the first study (2007/08) and the second study (2012/13), the empirical results contribute to a rich and evolving body of knowledge on the reality of confirmation work. In contrast to the former studies, the confirmation year 2021/22 doesn't simply resemble a normal confirmation year, as it was shaped by the challenges and problems of the COVID 19-pandemic. Due to the circumstances, several of the countries involved in the former studies were unable to conduct the third study as planned. Austria and Denmark were unable to collect relevant samples in the study, so their country reports are based on other empirical material. In the other seven countries, sample sizes were smaller than in earlier studies, but they offer enough empirical material for relevant results.

Altogether the study presents data from 9621 confirmands and 1609 workers (including full-time employees and volunteers) from seven European countries: Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. With the exception of Poland, where only the survey t_1 for confirmands was possible, all these countries managed to conduct a survey for confirmands and workers at the beginning of confirmation time (t_1) and one at the end, shortly before confirmation took place (t_2). The study was conducted with digital tools. Most of the countries involved used the feedback tool i-konf, which was developed as part of the third study. The study was funded by churches, universities and other institutions in all of the participating countries and was organised by an international research team which has also worked collaboratively on this volume.

After an introductory part with background and methodology (part I) and basics for the developing confirmation work (part II) this book presents the results of our study from the point of view of the respective countries (part III) and on certain topics using international data (part IV). In this final part, V, a selection of the most important findings and consequences will be described in brief, without references to chapters or bibliography. Readers with a more detailed interest in these topics may consult the respective parts of the book via the table of contents or simply by searching a keyword in the open access digital book file. The summary starts with the guiding idea of feedback-based quality development (23.1). The next sub-chapter (23.2) focuses on the pandemic and its consequences. Sub-chapters 23.3 to 23.5 summarise the find-

ings on religious heterogeneity, digital media and agency, which were key topics of the third study. As the study identified many aspects for advancing church development, this topic merited another sub-chapter (23.6). With some final thoughts about research on confirmation work (23.7), we conclude the summary.

All sub-chapters are divided into a presentation of central results and perspectives for the future. Thus, the summary wants to build a bridge from empirical research to the practice of confirmation work. It tries to break down the results of the large scale international study into concrete suggestions for persons responsible for confirmation work in church governing bodies, as well as in the local parishes, aiming at improvements for those who are at the core of all efforts: the confirmands.

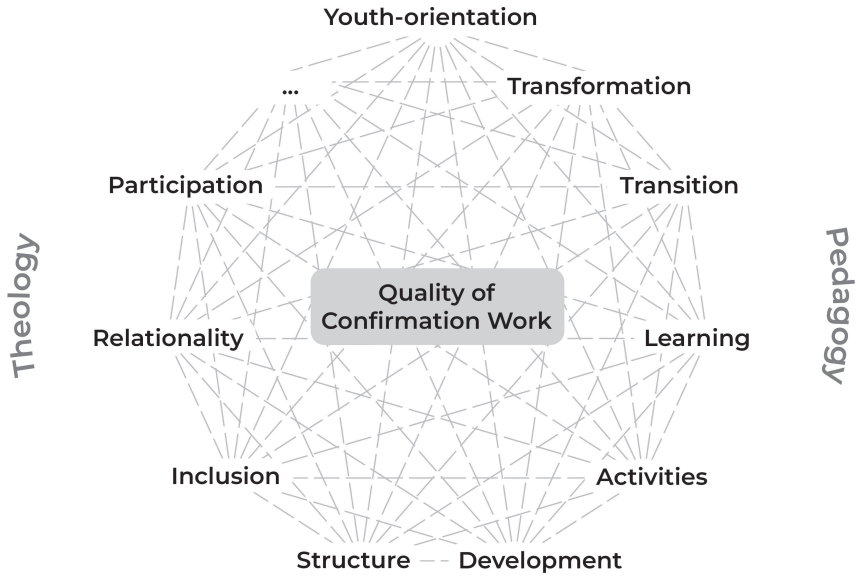
23.1 Quality Development and Feedback

The third study on confirmation work breaks new ground by focusing on the aspect of quality development, which was implicit in the previous studies. There are two main benefits to this approach. Firstly, it addresses the basic question of what is meant by quality in confirmation work. This is especially crucial because, without a clearly defined understanding of quality that can be demonstrated through operationalisable criteria, all efforts to further develop confirmation work are more or less built on sand. Secondly, quality development is guided by the concept of feedback. The perspective of feedback-based quality development finds its most concrete manifestation in the feedback tool *i-konf*, which was developed and implemented in the context of the third study.

23.1.1 Central Results

Ten interdependent quality dimensions of good confirmation work

The quality model presented in this book distinguishes between ten interdependent dimensions of »good« confirmation work, which are defined, further elaborated through criteria and operationalised for empirical research in chapter 4. The graph on the next page illustrates the interlinked relation of the dimensions.



Particular attention should be paid to the three dots at the top left: they indicate the provisional status of the model, which has been developed in the international research group based on the previous studies. This model does not claim sufficiency; rather, it is intended to provide a – potentially expandable – basis for future discussions of quality in the field of confirmation work. That all dimensions are linked by dashed lines emphasises the relational interconnectedness of the dimensions, which should be brought into a contextually coherent fit in local or regional processes of quality development.

Developing confirmation work through digital feedback

The quality model assumes that confirmands' expectations, perceptions and experiences serve as both the starting point and target for determining and implementing good confirmation work. Following John Hattie and Jon Ord, the concept of feedback was presented in chapter 5.1 as an effective strategy to develop confirmation work in a participatory and empowering way.

More specifically, the study explored the potentials and limits of digital media for establishing a feedback culture in which standardised questionnaires complement dialogical forms of oral feedback. For this purpose, the online tool *i-konf* was developed and implemented during the course of the study. As elaborated in chapter 5.2, *i-konf* (www.i-konf.eu) makes it possible to obtain feedback from the confirmands via their smartphones by using customisable questionnaires. The digital feedback tool is particularly closely linked to the third

study in that the empirical surveys during this study were conducted through *i-konf* at the beginning and the end of the confirmation time.

23.1.2 Perspectives for the Future

The quality model presented can be used to positive effect for further developing confirmation work on a local, regional, national or even international level. In such processes, it is important that any quality assessment and development is preceded by a conceptual clarification. Based on feedback from confirmands, in consultation with them and possibly also in consultation with volunteers, those responsible for confirmation work can utilise the interdependent quality dimensions to reach a mutual and consensual understanding of good confirmation work that is suitable for their parish. Setting priorities is essential here: depending on the agreed target perspectives and local contextual conditions, certain dimensions can be emphasised more than others.

Also, when utilising the *i-konf* tool, attention must also be paid to contextualisation and participation. The feedback tool contains a whole series of optional additional modules developed in international cooperation that allow certain aspects to be surveyed in a more differentiated way (including digital media, inclusion, church services and volunteerism). Additional questions can also be included depending on local needs and personal preferences. Finally, to achieve a truly participatory feedback culture, young people must feel empowered to influence and shape the feedback process as co-responsible actors. This means suggesting areas for feedback, discussing the results and having a say in the conclusions that guide further development. The process of evaluation can thus become an expression of youth-orientation in confirmation work.

At this point, however, a glaring research desideratum becomes apparent. In education, the task of research-based quality development has been the driving force of empirical research for several decades – with a broad spectrum of research approaches that are increasingly being applied to religious education in schools (cf. Schweitzer, 2020). Not only are pupils' and teachers' perspectives analysed, but also the product and process quality of learning and teaching. In the best case, this analysis is based on indicators. While it is clear that such school-based approaches cannot be directly transferred to confirmation work as a non-formal educational program, the approach described here should serve as a challenge and inspiration for empirical research on confirmation work. More specifically, this approach illustrates one of the most urgent research deficits in the current discourse on confirmation work: to date, there are hardly any videographic studies that take a closer look at educational interaction processes in confirmation work. The German research project »Youth

theology in everyday practice of schools and churches«, which is being carried out at the University of Bochum and is funded by the German Research Foundation, promises to provide valuable insights into this unknown territory (cf. Roose, Loose & Seifert, 2022; Roose, 2023).

23.2 Confirmation Work during the Pandemic

For most of the countries involved in this study the COVID-19-pandemic from 2020–2022 can be regarded as the most severe disruption of confirmation work in Europe since the Second World War. By highlighting the perceptions and experiences of young people, this study adds to existing literature on church activities and youth work during the pandemic.

23.2.1 Central Results

Effects of the Pandemic

Mirroring the different responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across Europe, protective measures related to the pandemic varied considerably between countries and churches. As the country chapters show, there were fewer restrictions in Sweden and Switzerland compared to other countries. Similarly in Finland, most confirmation camps could take place during the confirmation year 2021/22. Meanwhile, in other contexts, confirmation work was more severely affected by the considerably stricter protective regulations.

Overall, only one out of ten respondents felt unsure about whether to sign up for confirmation time due to the pandemic. In most countries the rate of uncertainty was even lower. Only Germany stands out somewhat with a higher share of 14%. Correspondingly, only 4% of the confirmands in the overall sample felt that the coronavirus pandemic had a very negative impact on their confirmation time. 23% rated the pandemic-related effects as »rather negative«, while more than half of the respondents (54%) stated that the pandemic had no impact at all on their confirmation time. Remarkably, 12% perceived the impact of the pandemic as rather or very positive. Unsurprisingly, the impact of the pandemic was not considered particularly significant in countries with comparatively few restrictions, whereas confirmands from countries with stricter regulations experienced more negative effects as a result of the pandemic.

In general, the confirmands' perspectives presented in this study defy simplistic interpretations of successful or unsuccessful pandemic management. Instead, they reflect the complex challenges that those responsible for confirma-

tion work were confronted with. 68% of confirmands felt connected to others in their group. 63% affirmed that workers stayed in contact with them – results which are both important to the quality dimension of relationality. 15% felt uncomfortable when meeting physically. Slightly less than a third were worried about whether their confirmation ceremony would take place and what this would look like. In all these cases, the results can be interpreted in two ways: On the one hand, it's encouraging that the clear majority of the confirmands choose the more favourable option each time. However, from a more critical perspective, the share of those who didn't feel comfortable, connected to the others or contacted by the workers remains rather high for a non-formal educational setting. Conspicuously, the issue of the pandemic wasn't addressed much during confirmation time. Only 42% of the workers reported that they addressed confirmands' questions and concerns about the pandemic. Correspondingly, less than a third of the confirmands say that the activities during confirmation time helped them to cope with the pandemic situation.

When interpreting these findings, the timing of both surveys needs to be factored in. The t_1 -survey was mostly conducted in late autumn 2021, when many routines for coping with the pandemic had already been established. The t_2 -study in spring 2022 was in turn preceded by months that were characterised by a continuing easing of the pandemic situation. However, it is not enough to attribute the strikingly positive results solely to the improving conditions. From the perspective of the confirmands, their positive experiences are largely due to the commitment of the workers. 86% report that the workers did their best to enable them to have a good confirmation time. This seems to be in line with the finding, that 87% were satisfied with the minister or the person primarily responsible for confirmation work and 84% with other teachers and workers. Both items show a considerable increase in comparison with the second study.

High Level of Satisfaction

The more general findings on the confirmands' experiences during confirmation time also demonstrate that a lot was done right in the parishes that participated in the study. The already high level of overall satisfaction in the previous studies is exceeded in the third study. 84% of those surveyed expressed satisfaction with the confirmation time overall. As in the previous studies, satisfaction with the camps, topics and the main responsible workers contributed the most to overall satisfaction. Compared to the previous study, two items saw a particularly increase in approval: 83% of the young people surveyed stated that they had a lot of fun during their confirmation time, 13 percentage points more than 2013. An even greater increase is visible in the proportion of those who felt that their questions concerning faith played a role during confirmation

time, with 69% approval compared to 42% in 2013. It should be kept in mind that, in some countries, »competent« parishes were overrepresented in the survey due to the challenges posed by the pandemic. However, against this background it is even more remarkable that the young people's answers on having fun and having their existential faith questions addressed correlate significantly. Consequently, rather than being in competition, it seems both these aspects appear to reinforce each other in successful confirmation work.

23.2.2 Perspectives for Developing Confirmation Work

For the further development of confirmation work, the question of whether to continue or break with existing practice plays a central role. The results of this study suggest that the aspect of continuity should be particularly emphasised – but not in the sense of carrying on as before or having more of the same. Rather, the results can be read as a mandate to decidedly continue on the path forged in recent decades: towards more youth-oriented, experience-driven and community-based confirmation work. Parishes with this particular profile were most successful in the troubled times during the global pandemic.

According to another key finding of the study, full-time workers including ministers, and youth workers play a key role in this. The finding, that the vast majority of confirmands attested to the workers' high level of commitment, is of particular importance for the interpretation of the overall satisfaction with confirmation time in this study: From the perspective of the confirmands, the quality of confirmation work seems to stand or fall with the commitment of those who are responsible for this field. In many countries that participated in this study, a glaring shortage of ministers is to be expected in the medium term. As a result, discussions about how ministers should spend their valuable time resources may become even more common. The findings of this study emphatically show that confirmation time should remain a core task of the pastoral profession as well as of other professions in the church. Hardly anywhere else does the work of main responsible bear such visible fruit as here. As the quality dimensions mentioned above show, good confirmation work depends on adequate resources, and full-time workers are an important aspect of these resources.

Finally, the findings presented here carry a message of relief, namely: it's okay to have fun. There is hardly any other factor that has such a positive effect on the satisfaction of the young people taking part as much as having fun. The still widespread concern that an increased focus on fun might come at the expense of the »substance« of confirmation work is, as is demonstrated by this study, empirically untenable. On the contrary: those who have a lot of fun dur-

ing confirmation time are generally not only more satisfied, but also experience confirmation work as more meaningful, both for their own faith and for their everyday lives.

23.3 Religious Heterogeneity

As defined by the quality dimension »inclusion«, good confirmation work values difference as enrichment, overcomes social boundaries and welcomes young people with little or no religious socialisation; it aims at a group spirit in which no one feels excluded.

Religious Heterogeneity as Central Factor and Fundamental Challenge

The third European study is not the only one to find that »heterogeneity« constitutes both a central factor and fundamental challenge for religious education, and thus also for confirmation work. Complimentary studies on the socioeconomic backgrounds, concrete life experiences, and – most optimistically or depressingly – the future prospects of young people in Europe clearly indicate that we are no longer dealing with a homogeneous generation, if we ever were.

The concept of »heterogeneity« provides an umbrella under which a variety of education-related factors can be theoretically reflected upon and practically examined. These include aspects of the economic and social situation of young people, their familial and increasingly their cultural backgrounds, their gender identities, pre-school and school educational experiences, and last but not least, their experiences of religious socialisation, ranging from personal experiences of prayer to their familiarity with the church and its offerings. Neither do the staff who participate in confirmation work represent a homogeneous and consistent group. They not only differ noticeably from the confirmands but also amongst themselves in terms of their social, religious, private and professional backgrounds, not to mention their age, gender, and motivations and goals in this field of work.

Heterogeneity characterises not only the group of surveyed adolescents, but also the way they perceive their environment as religiously diverse. Many of them grow up in multi-religious and secular contexts where practicing Christianity is no longer a given. Confirmation groups are likely to become increasingly heterogeneous, encompassing both young people who have been religiously socialised by their parents and those who have had little or no religious socialisation within the family home. As confirmation rates continue to decline, it is becoming less common for young people and their peers to get confirmed. The developments on confirmation rates show that the share of

adolescents taking part in confirmation time is declining in all countries involved. Considering the religious and sociodemographic trends projected for the whole of Europe, the group of »non-firmands« (Protestant adolescents who don't register for confirmation time) is expected to grow in the coming years. This phenomenon can be described as »cohort secularization«, where each successive generation exhibits lower levels of religiosity than the preceding one. Various factors contribute to this phenomenon, including pluralisation and the availability of secular alternatives, all of which make religious socialisation more challenging. It also seems reasonable to anticipate that, especially among less religiously socialised adolescents, fewer young people will see any reason to take part in confirmation time or to get confirmed in a traditional church service.

Additional Aspects of Heterogeneity

Regarding our study in particular, at least three additional aspects of heterogeneity are important for interpreting our findings. These relate to the contextual setting of our research itself: Firstly, the many country-specific differences in matters of faith, religion, culture, and even national and or regional tradition. Secondly, confirmation work was also influenced by quite different crisis responses in the individual countries during the pandemic time our study was conducted. Thirdly, the use of smartphones in a cross-country comparison reveals differences among adolescents in their mobile device use, as will be further discussed in the next sub-chapter of this summary.

These various aspects of heterogeneity, particularly those related to religion, must be taken into account if one is to even begin to meet the quality criteria described in the quality dimensions. Indeed, objectives such as »development«, »inclusion«, »learning, »participation« and of course »youth-orientation« can only be conceived and practiced if these aspects of heterogeneity are clearly kept in mind and appropriately considered at every stage of planning and implementing confirmation work.

23.3.1 Central Results

Among confirmands and confirmation groups, there is such a wide range of perspectives regarding central religious beliefs that it is unrealistic to assume any unanimous agreement on the objectives, contents, and formats of confirmation work. A large proportion of confirmands report that they come from a non-religious (16%) or low-religious (54%) family background. Thus, many adolescents often have little prior religious experience before encountering

confirmation work, be it religious knowledge, rituals, familiarity with church spaces, or even with individuals who identify with the church.

Common Ground despite Many Differences

Does confirmation work therefore increasingly attract children and adolescents who are more religious, more familiar with the church, more engaged in church activities, and thus more motivated? Our findings indicate that religious and faith-related themes, experiences with the church, reflection and communication are all interesting and important topics for adolescents, or could become so. Despite all their differences, most adolescents exhibit a positive attitude towards faith-related topics and the church. For example, 52% of the confirmands report believing in God at the beginning of confirmation time. This belief, as well as the importance of prayer during the confirmation period, increases during confirmation time, showing their openness and willingness to engage with religious questions. Most adolescents also perceive the church as a socially active institution. Thus, the familiar phenomenon observed in other studies emerges »for others,« even if it is not considered necessary for one's own way of life.

Gender Heterogeneity is of Importance

Regarding gender heterogeneity, certain differences are evident regarding the motivations, interests and perceptions of confirmands. On the whole, it's fair to say that gender interacts with overall satisfaction and motivations for becoming a confirmand. For instance, it is more common for girls to state that they made an active choice to attend confirmation work because they wanted it themselves compared to boys, who have stronger answers on the relevance of money or presents as motivating factors. Girls seem to be more motivated by faith-related motives and expectations in participating in confirmation work than boys. Moreover, the satisfaction with »music, songs and singing« is higher for girls than for boys. In gender comparisons of which topics girls, boys and non-binary confirmands found most interesting during confirmation time, girls had more of a recognisable interest in topics like friendship, the meaning of life, justice, and responsibility for others. However, questions related to love and sexuality interested non-binary youth more than others. These are evidently topics that touch upon important questions in their own lives. Non-binary confirmands express less interest in Christian topics, which aligns with a more critical attitude towards the church and Christianity and a stronger skepticism towards the Christian faith. On the other hand, it appears that non-binary individuals find it inspiring to be challenged in their thinking and would like to continue in a similar atmosphere after confirmation time. Surprisingly, findings from Finland especially suggest that males are becoming more religious

than females, which might indicate a pattern of stronger faith development in male confirmands. Results from the Nordic countries regarding this aspect raise the question of whether churches have started to lose girls especially and, similarly, whether the traditional gender difference might be reversing.

23.3.2 Perspectives for Confirmation Work in a Heterogeneous Situation

If heterogeneity initially appears hardly manageable, it can nevertheless be understood as a promising starting point. The question of how to creatively deal with that fact remains, especially as confirmation evolves from a practice for everyone to a practice selected by individuals. One of the greatest challenges for the church will be to offer a confirmation time that is appealing and relevant to all, especially considering the different backgrounds of confirmands.

Being Aware of Heterogeneity and Open to Individual Interpretation is Crucial

It appears that workers are aware of the heterogeneity of their confirmation groups. While their goal is to achieve high-quality joint learning beyond all milieu and performance boundaries, it is challenging to make confirmation work appealing for different groups while also reaching young people who are distanced from the church and who don't consider confirmation a high priority in their daily lives.

New motivational factors and incentives are needed in order to also attract more distanced confirmands. It can be reasonably assumed that it may take more time to lead this group to their own faith questions and decisions than with confirmands who have more faith experience. This can make it harder for workers to deliver on their aims, especially regarding the goal of faith empowerment.

When designing educational offerings, preserving confirmation as an open and multifaceted symbol, open to individual interpretation, is crucial. To this end, workers must first perceive the heterogeneity of children and adolescents and then incorporate this into the conception and design of their work. Only then is it possible to fully integrate these adolescents who feel misunderstood or excluded, and who may have withdrawn, either internally or externally, from the wider group. Notably, this group may include both those with little religious experience or those who are more religiously influenced and practicing participants. In the sense of »faith empowerment«, it will therefore become even more important in the future to meet confirmands at their own (faith) positions and to accompany them on their individual faith journey.

The Importance of Positive Experiences with Church and Faith

As indicated, the results of the third study suggest that early positive experiences with church and faith have a distinctly positive influence on perceptions of the church and on developing an interest in the Christian faith. This speaks to the necessity of early church contact, relationship building, and educational work, and thus also for clear strategic bridge-building between the offerings before and during confirmation time. The church must therefore find ways to address young people and point out why attending confirmation time and confirmation can be personally important and relevant. Consequently, a fruitful and successful confirmation time must involve adequate forms of contact between the church and children (and their families!) long before the actual confirmation period begins. This is especially important if the church wants to fulfill its educational responsibility to everyone.

In this respect, the sacrament of baptism could emerge as an essential focal point in many ways. As baptism is a motivation for confirmation across motivational clusters, it could also be a fruitful common topic in the curriculum – as sacramental foundation and as an important personal step – regardless of other differences in the group.

However, this also brings the socialisation institution of parents into view, since parents' educational goals significantly influence what adolescents bring with them into the confirmation period. A broader, multi-perspective view of confirmation work is therefore needed, one that also considers how it can connect with church-based activities for parents and family. From the Swiss study, which included confirmands' parents, we know that parents of confirmands generally have a positive attitude towards church educational offerings. More research on parents seems to be of vital importance for gaining deeper insights into these issues.

Experiencing confirmation time, in some cases, may also lead to a critical distance from the church and faith, especially when they engage deeply with their faith, should not be surprising. Rather, such critical and independent engagement should encourage those responsible to actively involve the participants, allowing them to participate in decision-making, and providing them with the opportunity to experience the everyday relevance of faith during an educational period that is valuable for them and their future path. Discussing other religious views could promote acceptance and tolerance among young people – even beyond the confirmation group – and hopefully contribute to a more peaceful multi-religious coexistence.

Workers' Self-critical Attitudes are Important

Regarding the workers, their own religious beliefs and church affiliation require them to critically examine and reflect upon their own perspective, while re-

maintaining sensitive to the religious and faith-related backgrounds of the learning groups. This is important even if they encounter individuals whose distance from the church and faith may seem foreign to them. That workers' sensitivity to heterogeneity can be maintained and fostered through shared team experiences among workers with different backgrounds and perspectives hardly needs to be emphasised. Thus, in each case, it's important to assess whether a stronger »mixed heterogeneity« among workers, established through working in multi-professional teams and or in cooperation with volunteers, for example, would be helpful. This approach could provide opportunities to meet similarly aged individuals and to better tailor confirmation work to the needs of those heterogeneous learning groups.

23.4 Digital Media

The Development Process of the Confirmation Research from the Viewpoint of the Digital Media

The development of the confirmation research questionnaires from 2007 to this third study offers a clear insight into the rapid change in the digital media landscape. During the first (2007/08) and the second (2012/13) rounds of research, questions about digital media were only included in the workers' questionnaires and did not play a major role. This research indicated that the Internet, social media and even text messages were not widely used. During the third round of research, the reality of smart devices had changed notably compared with the previous studies. For example, it was possible to assume that almost every adolescent owns a smartphone, despite regional differences in Internet availability, free Wi-Fi access and individual circumstances. Altogether, the coronavirus pandemic situation contributed to a greater understanding of digital media since COVID-19 leading to a boost in the usage of digital media. Hence, in this third study, it was necessary to ask more questions related to digital media in confirmation work and to consider the viewpoint of both workers and adolescents. In addition, the i-konf-tool in itself reflects this shift in understanding the potential uses of digital media in confirmation work.

23.4.1 Central Results

Confirmands' Perspective on the Use of Digital Media

In our study, 70 % of the confirmands affirmed that digital media play an important role in their life. This situation was not homogeneous between studied

countries, but these findings are in line with other international studies and reports about the matter. A heterogeneous result can also be seen where we asked the confirmands about their expectations for the use of digital media in confirmation work. Even though over half of the confirmands expected or wished to use digital media in confirmation work, there were considerable differences between countries, ranging from 26 % in Sweden to 61 % in Finland. The rather low figures might result from the lack of trust that confirmands have in the digital skills of the church workers, or confirmands may just have little enthusiasm for using digital technology as part of their confirmation period. In addition, coronavirus restrictions may have affected the results as well. At the end of the confirmation period, less than half of the confirmands (44 %) answered that digital media should have been used more, indicating that there was not enough digital media use during their confirmation period. Altogether, 63 % of the confirmands were satisfied with the use of digital media in confirmation time.

Workers' Perspective on the Use of Digital Media

Research results from the workers did not cover every studied country. In those countries where questions were assigned to workers, their perspective on digital media use is similar to the confirmands' results. Like the confirmands, 70 % of the workers answered that digital media has a major role in their daily life and a total of 50 % of the workers also confirmed that they use digital media regularly as a part of their work. As a result, perhaps, resistance to using digital media was quite low in this third confirmation study. Rather, the results indicate that digital media was used in very different ways in confirmation work, even if it was not used particularly widely in all of the studied countries. Moreover, answers from the confirmands revealed that the most common use of digital media in confirmation work related to intra group communication, using tools like WhatsApp. Although there were differences between countries with the lowest value (39 %) in Norway and the highest (66 %) in Switzerland. On average, the rate was 61 %. Compared to this rather pragmatic use, digital media were used less frequently in concrete learning situations and creative work. For example, the use of online versions of the Bible was not particularly common, with only 23 % of the confirmands reporting that they used it. Regarding other digital formats, like online games, the number was even lower (18 %).

23.4.2 Additional Perspectives on the Use of Digital Media

Our research revealed a certain correlation between family background and digital media use, though this correlation was not exceptionally high. The more

religious their parents are, the less important digital media use in confirmation work and in confirmands' life seems to be. This finding may serve as an explanation of the heterogeneity regarding the role of the digital media in confirmands' lives in the studied countries. More research is needed, for example, on the question of whether confirmands with a strong connection to digital media tend to register for confirmation classes less than others, as they would not expect to experience high quality use of media in their confirmation time.

The role of digital media in our study illustrates the significant changes that have taken place in this sphere since the first and second studies. Even if we found certain differences between countries overall, digital media are part of the everyday life of both confirmands and workers. Therefore, in any future studies, questions about digital media and social media must be included. However, the content of the questions needs to be considered carefully in order to better understand the reality in which young people live, their digital awareness and their digital competence. In addition, technological developments raise new questions like the influence that artificial intelligence might have on the perception and production of confirmation work content. In a positive sense, digital media can widen participation opportunities despite long distances or other obstacles to physical presence. However, from the other point of view, technological developments can also lead to new topics of discussions among adolescents and change adolescents' everyday life in an as yet unknown direction. In this respect, confirmation work faces the dual challenge of keeping up with these developments and appearing as an attractive option for adolescents for participating in the future as well. In addition, confirmation work should be seen as an excellent environment for the discussion between adults and confirmands about the chances, risks, and challenges that new digital media brings to the fore.

23.5 Agency and Relevance

In this study, the concept of agency is defined as the young people's capacity to actively engage in their learning, express their opinions, raise questions, and build on prior knowledge. Agency is associated with freedom, autonomy, and the capacity to influence and transform one's own circumstances. It is tied to the relationship between individual autonomy, sociocultural structures, and power relations that constrain human practices, including learning. Previous research on agency and learning indicates that interactive, participatory, and collaborative learning promotes pupils' agency. This study therefore evaluates the involvement of young people in their own learning process, the dimensions

and dynamics of learning and elements that facilitate learning. This kind of learning and individual development relates to the quality dimension of transition, as a sense of agency can support the notion of shaping one's path in life, where confirmation work might be one important step from childhood to becoming an adult.

23.5.1 Central Results

The results suggest that while 82 % of adolescents state that confirmation work allows them to express opinions and 58 % felt they could influence activities, their agency remains constrained. Confirmands appear to lack intellectual challenges, as only 39 % stated that they felt challenged. In addition, 51 % struggle to find relevance between confirmation content and their daily lives.

Dimensions of Learning in Confirmation Work

Confirmation work primarily promotes gaining knowledge and personal growth, with less focus on affective and attitudinal learning. Our results suggest that it places greater emphasis on certain aspects of learning compared to others, in particular: Gaining more information and knowledge, serving as a significant milestone in the process of individual maturation and faith development and to some extent, encouraging the confirmands' commitment to and connection with other people.

In terms of cognitive learning, the majority of those participating in confirmation work expressed high levels of satisfaction with their learning experience. It appears common for individuals to acquire new knowledge about God and Christianity during their preparation for confirmation. However, despite the acquisition of knowledge, only 39 % of confirmands felt intellectually challenged, suggesting that the content may not resonate as personally meaningful. There may be a perception among young people that their capacity to grasp complex concepts is underestimated, and that the material is overly simplified.

The affective and attitudinal aspects of learning received the lowest scores in comparison to the cognitive dimensions of learning. While 62 % of those undergoing confirmation reported an increased commitment to others, and approximately half (48 %) reported a heightened awareness of their responsibility towards ecological issues, it is essential to consider that these concerns may already be prominent among young people. Moreover, interest in church youth groups remained low, with only 29 % expressing willingness to participate in youth activities post-confirmation – although that is more than the share at the beginning of confirmation time.

Conversely, the personal and spiritual dimensions of learning scored rela-

tively high. 61% of those taking part in confirmation work felt they had taken a significant step towards maturity, and 76% indicated that they had solidified their stance on matters of faith. It's important to note, however, that these changes may not necessarily indicate exclusively positive decisions regarding faith.

The Surroundings of Learning in Confirmation Work

When evaluating the confirmands' satisfaction and experience of the content, methodologies and overall learning conditions, it appears that the majority were quite content. 83% felt that the topics and content were effectively explained. 66% expressed satisfaction with the content, and 68% were pleased with the teaching methods. Moreover, most confirmands experienced a diverse range of teaching methods. It is noteworthy that the diversity of teaching methods does not consistently indicate challenging or meaningful content; however, it does show a clear correlation with overall satisfaction.

The confirmands report positive experiences related to satisfaction, fun, relationships, and community during confirmation, which facilitates their learning. When delving into the exploration of how learning methods and the confirmands' sense of agency distinctly influence learning outcomes, a regression model highlights some factors as predictors. When young individuals feel engaged in the learning process – by expressing their views, having their questions acknowledged and addressed, and exerting influence over topics and activities – their learning outcomes are notably improved. These findings underscore that a sense of agency, defined here as active participation in the learning process, indeed fosters learning. Furthermore, this form of agency is strongly associated with satisfaction. Therefore, it makes sense to base the content and methodologies of confirmation programs on the youths' own inquiries.

23.5.2 Perspectives for Learning and Agency

Overall, these results highlight the need to continue moving towards more dialogical, experience-oriented, faith-centred and exploratory approaches to confirmation work to empower confirmands to be active subjects in their learning and faith development. To enhance the agency of confirmands and the relevance of confirmation, it is essential to provide more opportunities for confirmands to influence topics and content based on their own meaningful questions and concerns. One possible digital tool for doing so would be the i-konf-tool. Additionally, incorporating theological reflection that connects faith with

everyday life could strengthen the link between confirmation and the lived experiences of confirmands.

It is important to acknowledge that the scope of this study is limited in its ability to fully capture the nuanced and multifaceted concept of agency. Given the nature of the variables examined, the focus has primarily been on the participatory aspects of agency, which represent only a small part of this construct. Further research is therefore necessary. Furthermore, it is worth noting that confirmation work in an educational context differs significantly from formal schooling. As a result, the phenomenon of agency and learning may manifest in distinct ways in this setting compared to the dynamics observed in traditional academic environments.

In other words, while this study provides valuable insights into the participatory dimensions of agency within confirmation work, the findings should be interpreted with an awareness of the inherent limitations in fully representing the breadth and depth of the concept of agency in this particular educational context. It is evident that agency and learning in confirmation work have not yet been sufficiently researched across Europe, even though there are already initial research projects underway. This represents a research gap for the future. Particularly, it seems sensible to further explore how confirmation work and its contents can gain more relevance in the future.

23.6 Impulses for Church Development

In discussions on church development, confirmation work only rarely appears as a model for innovation in church. As a well-established form of church work, it is widely associated with a traditional approach to church activities. According to the results of our study, it seems worth considering confirmation work as an important chance to develop church work and membership.

23.6.1 Central Results

Confirmation as a Defining Feature of Protestantism

Confirmation has become one of the defining rituals in Protestant churches in Europe. This is true both for Lutheran and Reformed churches, which both took part in the study. In the Hungarian country report, which included both the Lutheran and Reformed churches, it is remarkable to see that confirmation practices are similar, despite the differences between the churches in other areas.

Although participation rates in confirmation have decreased in recent years,

confirmation is still a comparatively stable field of work of Protestant churches. Especially in the Nordic countries this has to do with confirmation as part of social life. Historically, being confirmed was the starting point of adulthood, the basis for civil rights and often the point in time when pupils left school and started to work. This rite of passage – almost a kind of civil religion – is no longer connected to a relevant change of legal status: No matter if confirmands are 12, 13, 14 or 15 – they remain pupils after confirmation. Nevertheless, the societal support for this religious event has remained strong. While the church has lost its anchoring in many other societal areas, confirmation is acknowledged as an established, appreciated and celebrated tradition, at least in the countries with a notable Protestant population. In terms of church development, confirmation work can contribute to the public presence and relevance of Protestant churches in civil society – at least as long as participation rates remain high enough to ensure the visibility of confirmation in the respective society.

According to the recent church membership survey in Germany, confirmation is considered the most important event in life when it comes to religious socialisation in childhood and youth. This is probably also the case for most of the other countries. The strong significance of confirmation work on the religious development of church members will probably motivate further support in this field in the future, perhaps giving it a greater role in debates on the future of church and its development.

If church development is associated with the personal and religious development of church members, confirmation appears to be the largest voluntary educational activity provided by the church. This is especially important at a time where churches have lost ground in religious education in schools in many countries. In Norway and Switzerland, this trend towards non-denominational religious education has led to a shift in the educational efforts of the churches from a formal to a non-formal setting. Meanwhile, Hungary appears to be going in the opposite direction with religious education being re-invented as a compulsory subject in schools in 2013.

As confirmation work is strongly connected with baptism and the Holy Communion, two sacraments that define Protestant identity and faith practice, it's crucial to consider theological perspectives when examining church development in this area. Indeed, the topic of baptism has seen renewed interest in the third study on confirmation work, as noted, for example, in the Norwegian country chapter. Baptism is a motivation for confirmation, a topic of interest in the curriculum, and a sacramental foundation for confirmation. One of the most important reasons for taking part is »because I was baptised when I was a child« which 51 % of the confirmands assert.

Quality Development: Based on Feedback and Dependent on the Workers

With the introduction of the feedback tool »i-konf«, the third study on confirmation work provides an opportunity for quality improvement based on feedback. As discussed earlier, fostering a feedback culture in confirmation work goes hand in hand with youth-driven church development, which is in line with the Lutheran idea of the priesthood of all believers. The feedback is embedded into and combined with a quality model presented in the beginning of this summary. If church development is to mean anything more than just »changing the church somehow«, it requires following a target of improving the quality of church work. By presenting specific criteria for local confirmation work, the model avoids the danger of remaining a purely theoretical framework without any practical application.

One of the quality dimensions in the new quality model is described as follows: »Good confirmation work is based on a concept, which evolves continuously within a culture of open feedback and dialogue«. This is a difficult but important task for quality development. A culture of open feedback and dialogue requires the willingness of local teams to hear about strengths and weaknesses and to take feedback seriously. The online tool i-konf serves as an easy-to-use-tool for this purpose. Giving and receiving feedback can empower workers to reflect on their respective goals and experiences, which may also encourage them to actively improve their pedagogical and theological competencies.

23.6.2 Perspectives for Church Development

While confirmation work can be seen as a success story within the Protestant churches, it also faces some major challenges in the future:

Participation Rates

Despite the relative stability of participation rates in confirmation work, at least in comparison to other church offerings, like traditional church services, weddings or funerals, confirmation rates are steadily declining in almost all countries involved in this study. There are also examples of rapid decline in some areas, for example the successful launch of a Danish atheist campaign in early spring 2016 which might have contributed to strengthening »non-firmation« as an alternative, reducing the number of confirmands in Denmark. These experiences make clear that churches can no more simply rely on young people registering for confirmation time as a matter of course. It is instead necessary to shape confirmation work in a way that attracts young people and offers answers to their most important questions.

With shrinking numbers of church membership, confirmation groups are

getting smaller in many countries. Especially in rural contexts, it is sometimes hardly possible to organise groups for regular meetings. As the Hungarian country chapter reports, this leads to confirmation meetings taking place only on weekends. The situation in Poland is even more extreme, as many parishes may not even have one confirmand per year on average. The churches in countries where Protestantism is a minority religion which participated in this study, including Austria, have already started developing ideas for attractive group settings even in the context of small numbers in the local parish – with regional camps as one of the well working ways of doing confirmation work also in a diaspora situation.

Time after Confirmation

As the German PostKonf-study, based on the sample of the second study, showed, confirmation time provides a »one-year-boost« for young people's attitudes concerning church and faith. After confirmation there seems to be a continuous decline in enthusiasm for the Christian faith and the church. Despite being confirmed, many members withdraw from the church ten or fifteen years after confirmation. For many of them, confirmation time was their most intense contact phase with the church. Although their experience during this time is generally a positive one, there is a lack of attractive follow-up offers in the years after confirmation. In the present study the share of confirmands interested in taking part in a Christian youth group after confirmation rose from 18 % at the beginning of confirmation time to 29 % shortly before confirmation. Still this means, that more than two thirds of confirmands are not interested in this at the end of their confirmation time. The issue of follow-up offerings, which was highlighted in the second study on confirmation work, is still one of the key challenges for the development of the church in the future. In Finland, the model of young confirmed volunteers (YCVs) is very well established: One third of confirmands sign up for the YCV programme after their confirmation time and continue this activity for 1–4 years. YCV activity is considered as a chance for those adolescents who are interested to learn more about Christianity, church, and themselves. YCV activities have been found to promote learning through active participation. The confirmation group often seems to form its own small Christian community and becomes an important part of the life of the adolescents after confirmation. Thus, church development is taking place in small groups year by year – although young people might not describe their activities as developing the church.

How can more confirmands be encouraged to volunteer in the church after confirmation? Data from the third study shows that volunteerism often results from personally experiencing volunteerism and youth work: Among the confirmands who temporarily worked in internships during confirmation time,

47% can imagine volunteering in church after confirmation. Among those who missed this experience, only 24% report wanting to volunteer later. This result provides a compelling argument in favour of strengthening internships during confirmation time in order to entice adolescents to engage more with both the church and society. This is a huge challenge, not only in terms of local churches and parishes having to create attractive educational offerings, but for the strategic development of a comprehensive and consistently attractive programme and presence.

Enlarging the Scope of Possible Target Groups

It has already been stated that confirmation work – and the church for all its activities – can no longer rely on people simply joining in year by year. In a mediatised world with attractive offerings from a variety of institutions, young people will expect the church to explain the reasons why it's worth taking part in confirmation time. The motivations described by the confirmands show that the church has good arguments on its side: Confirmation is associated with being an activity one decides about independently, which promises a mixture of fun, community and learning about the faith while supporting and acknowledging every single young person and addressing issues which are important and relevant to them. Additionally, it is supported by families and wider society, with presents accompanying the blessing at the end. As the analyses show, not one of these motivations is dominant over others. The decision to participate is rather based on a mixture of motives. However, it is no longer enough to simply provide a good offering: churches also need to showcase it in an attractive way, as well as actively reaching out to adolescents to invite them to take part.

It is not only baptised adolescents who should receive invitations for confirmation time: As shown in chapter 22 on distanced confirmands, there is often an interesting variety of motivations for participating. The number of confirmands is but a small proportion of all the young people in this age group – and this number is getting smaller every year. But confirmands are not only adolescents who were baptised as infants. There is also a relevant group of confirmands who start their confirmation time without being baptised. In some countries, this group is rather stable, for example in Germany, where about 6% of all confirmands were not baptised as infants. In some countries, this share is rising, for example in Sweden where the rate increased from 5% in 2007 to almost 10% in 2021, or in Denmark, where the rate increased from 4% in 2011 to 7% in 2023. By contrast, in Austria, participating in confirmation time is restricted to baptised youth. As shown by the experiences from countries which include non-baptised adolescents in confirmation time, non-baptised confirmands tend to have a stronger interest in faith issues. At the end of their confirmation time, they show more motivation to keep up their rela-

tionship with the church. Confirmation work proves to be one of the major opportunities for joining the church apart from infant baptism. When church development includes the idea of growth in membership numbers, confirmation time should be at the centre of future church development efforts. It will succeed if confirmation time is not simply an offer *from* the church to young people, but if confirmation time is shaped as a time where young people can experience that they *are* the church – and that they shape the church with their ideas and activities.

23.7 Researching Confirmation Work

With 17 years of empirical surveys in the field of confirmation work, this study is part of a well-established tradition of research which seems almost unique in the field of non-formal religious education on an international level. This research should not only continue but also should broaden its scope in the future.

23.7.1 Central Impulses

Participating in Research as a Way of Contributing to Local Development

The series of three international studies on confirmation work has contributed to making confirmation work one of the fields of practical theology with the highest quality empirical research. It is never easy to see exactly how this kind of research has had a direct effect on the practice of confirmation work in the respective countries. There is some evidence indicating that earlier studies encouraged improvements in the practical work. In many of the countries involved, the framework regulations or training programmes for confirmation workers reflect the results and challenges identified in earlier studies. Furthermore, the current results show that some problematic parts, regarding church services, for example, seem to have improved in recent years, which might be a consequence of discussions after the first and the second study. In many of the countries involved, the series of empirical studies has contributed in general to a greater focus on confirmation work in the church. For example, the Hungarian church organised a thematic year on confirmation in 2023, which was inspired by the empirical results of the studies.

The third study on confirmation work has made significant progress in integrating young people's perspective into the planning and conceptualisation of confirmation work. By asking young people for their expectations and experiences, they are taken seriously in the planning and developing of the confirma-

tion time. With the i-konf tool, the responsible persons in local parishes can better understand the goals and wishes of their individual local group rather than relying on general youth studies, which might not accurately reflect the local situation. Thus, the new approach offered by i-konf also actively contributes to local research.

Broadening the Knowledge with Specific Research Projects

The international study shows the potential of international exchange in this field of church work. Within the international research team, there is an exchange of local studies which would not otherwise be available to other countries. It has often been the dissertation projects of members of the international team or persons connected with the studies which provided an opportunity for more detailed research in some of the working fields. Examples of dissertations connected to the present research network are multi-level analyses on the effects of different aims of confirmation work (Ilg & Schweitzer, 2010), confirmation work with children (Voirol-Sturzenegger, 2014), gender issues (Kokkonen, 2016), confirmation service sermons (Beile, 2016), young confirmed volunteers (Porkka, 2019), confirmands and their faith language (Koch, 2020), digital media in confirmation work (Ojala, 2020) and the topics of death and grief in confirmation work (Held, 2024).

23.7.2 Perspectives for Future Research

The series of three studies on confirmation work generated a lot of open questions and research desiderata, paving the way for more research in this field.

Establishing a Continuity of Research

While the first (2007/08) and second studies (2012/13) were conducted in an interval of five years, it took nine years until the third study was completed (2021/22). The results show continuity in the field of confirmation work as well as some important changes, coming from both, sociological developments and variations in the field of confirmation work. In some respects, the results of the third study on confirmation work provide a snapshot on confirmation work in the circumstances of a pandemic, which might be different from the reality of confirmation work in the following years. For example, confirmation camps suffered from the restrictions which were in place in many of the countries in 2021/22.

It therefore seems necessary to continue the series of empirical studies within the next years. A fourth study should again keep those core items which have been asked in every previous study, guaranteeing continuous monitoring of the

practice of confirmation work. Additionally, though, a fourth study could incorporate new elements and research topics which have not yet been covered in enough detail.

The feedback tool i-konf also provides a chance to establish an ongoing way of winning empirical data from confirmation work. If parishes decide to make their anonymous data available to i-konf for research purposes, countries could decide to set up a panel of 50 or 100 parishes that work with i-konf every year. With the data from such a panel, comparisons of developments over time would become available. This kind of data supply cannot replace a scientific study, which requires in-depth analysis and interpretation, but it could simplify the approach of a fourth study, or even be the core of establishing a year-by-year monitoring.

New Research Questions for Studying Confirmation Work

As different chapters in this book point out, there are a number of open questions worth scrutinising in additional studies. Examples for these questions are:

- The number of Protestant adolescents who don't register for confirmation time is rising – in this book we call them the »non-firmands«. What are their reasons? Does this reflect a deliberate decision or did they just miss out on the opportunity to register? How do their families and peers react to this decision?
- Are there typical characteristics for »non-finishers«? This term describes a confirmand who has started confirmation time but who drops out before confirmation. Are the non-finishers frustrated by what they experience? Or did confirmation time represent a phase of consciously testing the Christian faith before reaching the decision to say »no« to faith and the church?
- What makes confirmation attractive for non-baptised adolescents and in what way can their decision to register be influenced?
- How accessible is confirmation work for adolescents with special needs? Is a personal handicap an obstacle to taking part in confirmation work and what kind of support do parishes and workers need when working with handicapped confirmands?
- What is really happening in the teaching situations of confirmation work? To date, there are hardly any studies that focus on the multi-layered interactions that take place during confirmation work meetings. Especially compared to the multitude of research studies in school classroom settings, the practice of confirmation work sometimes seems to be a »black box«.
- While existing studies have focused on the positive potential of confirmation work, it might be necessary to also shed light on the question of where confirmation work runs the risk of perverting its objectives. As the German country report indicated, a recent study on sexual abuse in the Protestant

church in Germany revealed confirmation work as a possible setting also for sexualised violence and abusive behaviour. Existing research, including our studies on confirmation work, have not sufficiently recognised and named the destructive potential of this field of work. This blind spot is a task for further research projects, which should include a historical account, and certainly need qualitative research methods, especially interviews with adults who experienced abusive behaviour during their time as confirmands.

- The parents of the confirmands play an important role during confirmation time as the adolescents' decisions for or against participating are probably not completely independent of their parents' view. In addition, for many families, confirmation time is their first contact phase with the church after a long time of little contact. It would be very interesting to learn more about the parents and siblings of confirmands. In the current study, a parents' survey was only conducted in Switzerland, and this revealed interesting insights. Parental feedback on confirmation time was surprisingly positive. In the future, the degree of secularisation in the families will probably grow, so confirmation work could be a chance to bring back discussions about the meaning and purpose of religion into the families.
- What are the differences between rural areas and cities concerning confirmation work? In some of the country reports, it became clear that participation rates are much higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Is this the case in every country?
- The present studies have restricted their focus to countries in Northern, central and Eastern Europe. Little is known empirically about confirmation work in other countries (with the exception of the US, cf. Osmer & Douglass, 2018). What does confirmation work look like in Protestant churches on other continents? And what characterises Protestant confirmation in comparison to Catholic practice, or even to rites of passages in non-Christian religions (cf. Höring, 2022)?

Methodological Challenges

Although the existing studies on confirmation work offer an impressive collection of large-scale studies, it is clear that more sophisticated research designs could be applied in the future. Current research on school education has shown enormous developments in research methods which could also provide a paradigm for future research in the field of non-formal education. For example, the topic of learning in confirmation work was one of the focus points of the third study, but there is a gap in research using knowledge tests to track the actual knowledge gained by confirmands over the course of a confirmation year.

Another possible way of expanding the confirmation studies would be to

strengthen the role of qualitative research. Until now, qualitative studies have mostly taken place within the single countries, since comparative approaches to qualitative research are connected with language problems, which would require researchers to spend much more time bringing together the findings in an international setting.

A further desideratum relates to the accessibility of data. Other big international studies, which usually have a lot more resources, provide their data through an open data strategy, so that interested researchers can use the data on their own. This has not yet been possible with the international datasets because a lot of preparatory work is required for this kind of data provision.

Studies in Confirmation Work as a Starting Point for Researching Non-formal Offers in General

In East Germany, there are some examples of churches offering confirmation classes to all young people, regardless of religious affiliation, with the confirmation ceremony offered as just one of many options to mark the completion of this time. It is highly interesting – albeit hard to predict – how confirmation work will develop in an increasingly secular and multi-religious society as it is developing all over Europe. Research could broaden its scope to include adolescents in general, to analyse if and how they could be made interested in such a format. Research of this kind might support the development of confirmation work in this time of rapid social and religious change.

Besides confirmation work, churches offer a variety of other activities for young people, from toddlers up to young adults. Many of these educational working fields lack in empirical knowledge. The studies on confirmation work could be used as a source of inspiration for studies on these working fields within the church, but also for studies on general youth work independent of the church setting. Experience from 17 years of international research on confirmation work has shown that an empirical approach provides valuable knowledge which can be used as a starting point for improving a field of work. Studies provide feedback that can serve as a basis for further developing the quality of confirmation work as well as of other programmes.