

# Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



## Future agenda for youth research – exploring young people's lives for development of youth policy and youth work

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The input for the report was gathered during the joint meeting of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) and the network of correspondents of the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYC) at Budapest on 7 September 2016.

The aim of the meeting was to discuss the development of youth research in five thematic areas: learning mobility, youth participation, transitions to adulthood, young migrants and refugees, and protection of young people. The participants debated the state of the art in the above-mentioned research areas, and identified existing methodological and theoretical challenges. Second, they reflected on connections between youth research, youth policy and youth work in five areas. Finally, the future agenda for the research concerning each theme was suggested.

The meeting comprised input from experts, working groups and open plenary discussion to which both PEYR and EKCYC members contributed alongside invited guests, including youth researchers, youth organisation representatives and youth policy experts.

### GENERAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE MEETING

The meeting has shown that the research agenda is going in the right direction. Academic discussion was present in the five themes identified in advance, and methodologies and

theory are developing within the given thematic areas. The five proposed thematic areas seem to match what youth researchers consider the important fields to concentrate upon. Nevertheless, some transversal themes or sub-themes were mentioned. These include inequality, health and mental health, attitudes and norms among young people, well-being, and citizenship.

Nevertheless, there are gaps and possible spaces for improvement concerning the availability of data, methodologies employed and theoretical development within the five thematic areas (discussed in detail in the report). It is important to underline that there are no fully blank fields or total vacuums, as each thematic area receives strong attention, but rather there is urgency for further development. This includes the necessity of finding new methodological approaches, the need for gathering more or other types of data in order to answer emerging research questions, or moving forward theoretical debates around concepts or phenomena. Some themes are waiting for a “breakthrough” in order to find new understandings or perspectives that would allow advancement in research agendas (for example participation).

The important issue is the emerging need for research on current issues, such as inflow of refugees and the rise of nationalism. It is essential to ensure available funding for such inquiries, avoiding very lengthy grant application procedures. This would allow research to provide policy making with a current diagnosis. Nevertheless, it is important not to remove research funding from other themes which have not lost relevance (for example migrant integration).

It is important to realise the Europe-centric perspective in youth research, which focuses on specific themes that are most relevant to European countries and processes taking place within them. Eurocentricism is also reflected in the working definitions on youth/adolescence used within research and policy. They are relevant to our social and cultural contexts but may not always be shared by those from outside Europe, for example among refugees coming from other cultural contexts. Acknowledging differences in the understanding of concepts is not only relevant from an academic perspective but also has consequences for policy solutions, for example concerning interventions directed towards refugee minors from a children’s policy perspective.

Youth work is linking policy, research and youth organisations: it is an important space for conducting research, as well as acting in the field of youth policy. The participants stressed multiple times the need to base policy and youth-work interventions on current and relevant research outcomes. The importance and availability of research results that are potentially useful from the perspective of youth policy and youth work was stressed multiple times. Additionally, there was discussion concerning the role of research – should youth research only provide data and results or also advocate for good solutions in youth policy and youth work?

The participants noted the usefulness of theoretical approaches and concepts developed by youth researchers for youth policy. While on the one hand some theories might seem complex, on the other hand they can guarantee a common language for speaking about the contemporary lives of young people. Some concepts have entered the policy language from research and now constitute relevant and useful frameworks in youth policy (such as youth transitions, traditional and non-traditional forms of youth participation).

The links between policy and research are slowly strengthening. While research triggers can be multiple, starting with simple curiosity among researchers, they more often seem to be driven by social and policy needs (and also through funding offered). As policy actors invest to a limited extent in data gathering, therefore some policy areas lack data or research outcomes that might be relevant to policy development. There is the need for the continuous work on the knowledge management and development of tools to enable the flow of information between different actors in the youth field. All actors in the youth field call for more intensive and more effective knowledge exchange. The importance of bridging the gap between research and policy was frequently mentioned, with less debate on bridges between other areas, for example research and youth work.

The meeting has proved the capacity of youth research. From the European perspective, the number of researchers engaged in the exploration of given topics is relatively high, there are strong research teams, and results from on-going European and international research projects were presented. From a country-level perspective, the strength of the youth research community is varied, depending on size of country, its research traditions, resources, and the multidisciplinary composition of the youth research community. Nevertheless, in most cases youth research has limited resources and little impact on national youth policy. This shows that a European agenda for youth research is needed to empower youth research at national levels.

## THEMATIC AREAS AND THEIR CHALLENGES

### LEARNING MOBILITY

Based on the presentation of Soren Kristensen, Techne, Denmark and the discussion in the working group (rapporteur Ondras Barta).

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#### STATE OF THE ART

Learning mobility in the youth field is understood as a transnational mobility undertaken for a period of time, consciously organised for learning purposes (EPLM), in forms such as bilateral and multilateral youth encounters, work camps, school stays, voluntary service or placements. Learning mobility aims to strengthen young people's future employability, intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship (Council Recommendation on Youth on the move, 28 June 2011).

While learning mobility has been widely researched within the formal education field (for example Erasmus within universities), in general, the scope of research in the field is limited, often linked to certain programmes or schemes and aimed at evaluating outcomes and effects on participants. There are few longitudinal studies which could measure the outcomes after long periods of time, as well as those which approach mobility participants before and after exchanges (usually studies concern participants' evaluations only after mobility experience). The field is characterised by a lack of dedicated pedagogical theories, and there is hence a need for the development of new theoretical frameworks.

Finally, while research reveals generally positive outcomes of mobility experiences, researchers are aware of the danger of the self-fulfilling prophecy. While mobility programmes are in general directed towards young people who are very resourceful and with more opportunities and a relatively high economic and social standing, positive outcomes should be viewed critically.

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## AGENDA FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND YOUTH WORK

1. **Better exploration of determinants and processes leading to learning during mobility:** deeper analysis is needed of the impact of pedagogical interventions that could produce positive change for young people and strengthen learning. The research should concentrate on how different characteristics of mobility experience, such as scheme, duration, intensity or mode, impact on diversified learning outcomes. Such research results would give a good indication for policy and youth work on how to design mobility schemes.
2. **Reconsider the learning dimension of mobility:** researchers should critically reconsider their understanding of the concept of learning, including what is understood by learning during mobility, and what is now considered to be a learning outcome. Possibly, more qualitative studies could allow a deeper and wider concept of learning to emerge.
3. **Exploit the potential of research in involving young people with fewer opportunities:** research should deepen the knowledge in the field concerning the participation of young people with fewer opportunities in order to encourage and widen their participation in mobility programmes that are largely taken up by university graduates and/or young people from privileged backgrounds. Youth work also needs to creatively search for new approaches to encourage and support young people with fewer opportunities to take part in mobility programmes.
4. **Exploration of learning mobility outcomes for youth workers:** there is a need to analyse the impact of learning mobility on youth workers (mostly through the Erasmus+ Programme) in areas developed with a view to improving the quality of youth work in Europe. To what extent do these activities build competences among youth workers, develop their skills and knowledge, and shape attitudes and values?

5. **Conduct research focusing on legal arrangements concerning some learning mobility opportunities such as long-term volunteering:** the outcomes should be used to adapt current legal arrangements (for example social security benefits, employment status of volunteers) in order to ease entrance procedures into mobility programmes.

## PARTICIPATION AND E-PARTICIPATION

Based on presentations of Tomaž Deželan, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and Kerstin Franzl, Nexus Institute, representative of the project “EUth – Tools and Tips for Mobile and Digital Youth Participation in and across Europe”, and the discussion in the working group (rapporteur Nuala Connolly).

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### STATE OF THE ART

The number of studies of political participation has grown in recent years, showing a high level of interest in this theme. On the other hand, we can observe a certain deadlock in the field, notwithstanding extensive research engagement. The field strives for a methodological and conceptual turn which would allow researchers to better describe and explain young people’s participation and activism.

Research has observed the diversification of repertoires of youth participation, linked on one hand to e-participation (activities undertaken by young people online), but also other forms of youth participation called “non-traditional”. This discussion is tightly linked to the existing sets of indicators that measure levels of participation. Most commonly, indicators are split into those measuring traditional and non-traditional forms of participation (for example voting, membership of political parties or organisations versus online petitions, urban movements). Those two forms of youth participation should not be treated separately (digital participation or modularised participation were proposed as concepts to suggest the merging of online and offline activism).

The challenges that lie ahead include the debate about the concept of participation. There are many determinants why there is a need to reconsider definitions and indicators. One reason is that the definition of political action has changed: politics no longer entails a clear separation between traditional political institutions and everyday life. The expansion of the political sphere means that political expression is manifested in everyday lives, such as in choices of food, clothing, music and use of public spaces, contrary to the narrow political criterion of participation used in conventional survey methodologies, which may neglect political engagement of youth. Additionally, non-participation should be also treated as meaningful. The trend of distancing young people from political institutions is well discussed and proven in the field; young people take part in conventional politics to a lesser extent than older age groups.

Another issue appearing concerns the legitimisation of selected forms of participation – what kinds of acts of participation are considered “good” or “proper” forms of participation? Would protest be considered as “youth participation”? Anti-system movements or anti-governmental protests cease to be considered “youth activism”, and co-optation, when youth organisations start to closely collaborate and take on the priorities, or adjusting to priorities of those in power are creating an illusion of influence on political priorities. Additionally, the participation of some groups, for example refugees, is not generally considered, as they are not treated as having agency or ready for self-initiative.

Another issue concerns linkages between participation and democracy. Participation is assumed by many researchers to be the main tool to strengthen democratic processes, legitimise them and give citizens power to act. Today, with growing anti-migrant or nationalistic movements, this may come into question. How then to classify young people’s activities of a non-democratic or discriminatory hue? To what extent would growing nationalisation of policy change definitions of active participation? Are young people expected to be active citizens in the “right” way e.g. fulfilling priorities of the certain government or following given ideology? The aim would be to capture what are the values of different groups of young people in society and see if these groups communicate or negotiate social order and societal values.

Existing ideas of participation also assume that it will have only positive outcomes, the negative consequences resulting from participation being less visible and rarely considered.

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## AGENDA FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND YOUTH WORK

1. **Critical reconsideration of the concept of participation:** there is a need to reconsider the participation concept, its linkages to democracy, human rights and other values. A critical approach as to why some forms of participation are valued more than others is necessary to uncover value-based expectations towards young people from diverse actors (such as political parties, government, educational systems). The question appears if participation is the right concept to be used when studying the engagement of young people in diverse activities, and if it should be used when it concerns those which are not being based on democratic and human rights principles.
2. **New indicators of youth participation:** there appear questions related to the measurement of participation and what indicators are chosen to judge intensity of participation. More quantitative studies (survey evidence) with a broad definition of political participation are needed, but also more exploratory qualitative studies on diversified understanding and practice of political engagement.
3. **Impact of different forms of participation on policy and social change:** while new forms of participation (also e-participation) are being described and highlighted, there is less diagnosis of their actual impact on politics and social change. It is

important to remember that it is not participation that is an aim in itself, but what young people want to achieve (social change?), and if they achieve it, is this through being active and engaged? Youth work should consider using tools for bringing together both offline and online participation.

4. **Studying political parties' mechanisms:** the impact of political parties is still rather strong and critical studies on parties' mechanisms should help to understand their role in democracy and the role of young people in political parties' systems.
5. **Impact of participation on the quality of life of young people:** beyond the assumption that participation is necessarily positive, there is a need to study impacts of activism on quality of life and well-being.

## TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Based on presentations of Ken Roberts, University of Liverpool, UK, and Helena Helve, University of Tampere, Finland and the discussion in the working group (rapporteur Siyka Kovacheva).

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### STATE OF THE ART

As youth is characterised by transitions, this perspective remains one of the most important in youth studies, having a long tradition. Young people experience life course events linked to areas of education, work, partnership, family, housing and parenthood, but also gaining welfare rights and becoming an active citizen. Researchers are in agreement that today in Europe, the transitional paths of young people are becoming prolonged in time, more complex, de-standardised, non-linear and individualised.

Transitional paths depend both on structural conditions and individual capabilities, agency, social and human capital, personality. They rely on transition regimes resulting from economic, social and political contexts in a country, what is visible in variations in paths, structures and outcomes (for example when and if transitional events occur and in what sequence), but also young people's strategies and the range of actors engaged in youth transitions (such as the state or the family). Nevertheless, typologies of youth transitions regimes can lead to stereotypes and simplification, being limited to a few categories based on characteristics of western European countries (for example central and eastern European countries are not comprehensively captured within typologies). Beyond the impact of structure, the importance of agency in transitions is stressed in the light of individualisation processes and the diminishing impact of the institutional support to young people.

The transition from education to work proves challenging to young people and causes most debate at European level. Unemployment rates for young men aged 15-24 increased, we observe an increasing percentage of young people in temporary, part-time work or other non-standard forms of employment, and unemployment rates are higher among those of a migrant background and low educational achievers. We also observe the work poverty of

young people who are in employment but do not earn enough to make a living. Deregulated capital markets seems to have had a strong effect on youth employment. Precariousness is being normalised among young people, indicating the internationalisation of new insecure modes of functioning of the labour market.

Finally, the study on youth transitions is often criticised as normative, meaning it assumes that the ideal and perfect pathway for young people is to be undertaken. The end of transition (reaching the expected aim: such as finishing education, getting married) seems to be more valued than other choices young people take (such as not to marry). The challenge to researchers is to be aware of such normative evaluations, and for policy makers to reconsider the assumptions in policy making. It is suggested by some researchers that young people should be involved in the judgement about the accuracy of research findings so that they mirror not societal expectations but rather what young people think, feel and desire for their futures.

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## AGENDA FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND YOUTH WORK

- 1. Capturing the diversity of transitional regimes:** there is a need to develop, widen and deepen typologies of transitional regimes (including regimes of countries that are not as yet reflected upon), as well as in-country variation concerning opportunity structures for young people.
- 2. Identification of early predictors of transition outcomes:** while research often concentrates on young people “in transition” (between 20 and 30 years old), there is growing importance in capturing early predictors of inclusion/exclusion of young people. Data from longitudinal studies and in-depth analysis of individual biographies, using life course perspective, would allow discovering both preconditions of transitions, as well as outcomes of transitions – especially if we continue studying young people over 30 years old. This would allow better planned early intervention programmes within youth work and policy to take place.
- 3. Diverse transitional pathways and interplay between them:** studies on youth transitions often concentrate on the main transitional pathways, meaning that there are other areas of life that need investigation, e.g. mobility/migration processes, transition from good health to poor health in youth, or pathways to becoming an active or passive citizen. Researchers should look at processes of change in value systems. This includes studies on the role of religion in the formation of youth identities and the trend towards radicalism and re-traditionalisation. The analysis of interplay between diverse pathways is needed.
- 4. The search for new theoretical models and concepts to study transitions:** in the light of discussion on normativity of youth transitions (assuming an ideal way of becoming an adult), research should consider that growing numbers of young people, of different cultural, social, ethnic and ideological backgrounds, might have different visions of their perfect adult life and the pathways to reach it. Therefore, new



concepts and theoretical models on transitions should enter the field in order to discover the diversity of potential young lives.

- 5. Supporting youth transitions without imposing “one vision”:** youth work and policy should be supportive of youth transitions, especially those from lower-income or lower-social-capital families, or with fewer opportunities, at the same time not imposing the ideal perfect vision of life (often based on old paradigms), allowing the divergences of transitional pathways or more dynamic changes in the life course.

## YOUNG MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Based on the presentation of Barbara Giovanna Bello, University of Milan, Italy, and the discussion in the working group (rapporteur Sofia Laine).

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### STATE OF THE ART

The large numbers of those arriving in Europe as refugees has created a need to obtain knowledge about the situation of refugees and migrants. The number of first-time asylum applications within the EU-28 in 2015 reached 1.26 million (rising from 563,000 in 2014), and almost four in every five asylum seekers in the EU-28 was under 35 years of age. So if refugees are in general young, should we consider this issue as a youth studies issue? Would youth theories and concepts be useful in describing the situation of young refugees? In fact, the current research on the situation of refugees takes place outside the field of youth studies, largely conducted within law (humanitarian law, human rights and social rights), health/psychology (community psychology), migration studies and refugee studies.

Current research includes the needs assessment of refugees, access to education or analysis of the situation of young refugees in detention and refugee centres. There are studies on the transition to adulthood of young refugees that occurs when they become 18 years old and reach a point of “transition into illegality” (Gonzales 2011), and cease to be eligible for support services dedicated to children. Two new topics that are more frequently studied concern trafficking for sexual and work exploitation and young men and criminalisation (which became a theme more prominent after events in Cologne).

Missing areas in research concern the themes of exploitation (sexual, in work), issues of foster care for unaccompanied minors, mapping of actions and initiatives from youth work and youth policy that are taking place at the moment in connection with young refugees, as well as active participation of refugees.

Youth work with refugees, still rather limited, has concentrated up to now on awareness raising among young people and the general population about the situation of newcomers and direct work with young refugees (mostly through provision of information, legal advice, help with documents, provision of meals and social services).

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## AGENDA FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND YOUTH WORK

1. **Research should aim to gain a deeper understanding of who the refugees who came to Europe are:** it should on one hand try to see the diversity in the incoming group but also describe refugees' histories and biographies – it is important to talk about their origin, the experience of leaving and arriving at a new place and their future aspirations.
2. **Reconsider the role of youth work with young refugees:** debate is needed about to what extent youth work can offer support to young refugees. Should it concentrate on immediate interventions or work on supporting initiatives for young refugees so that they can receive structural support? It was suggested that youth work should stretch from providing “blankets” to “training courses and capacity building of young refugees” and provide social rights education to refugees and migrants.
3. **Youth work should educate the general population, young people in particular:** youth work should provide information on the situation of refugees, aim to analyse the situation of young refugees through a human rights perspective, reasons for their arrival in Europe, as well as the political context affecting the arrival of refugees. Youth work should actively produce counter-narratives against the growing rhetoric of fear.
4. **Mapping of young people's attitudes towards refugees and migrants:** the determinants of young people's attitudes should be explored.
5. **Continue to study integration and belonging:** while the refugee issue is now gaining more attention, the studies in integration of migrants, including intra-European and second-generation migrants, should continue, looking at their access to social rights, their input into the welcoming society, and the processes of integration and belonging.

### BRIDGES IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROTECTION – CROSS-SECTORAL APPROACHES

Based on the presentation of Pink Hilverdink, The Netherlands Youth Institute, the Netherlands, and the discussion in the working group (rapporteur Maria-Carmen Pantea).

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### STATE OF THE ART

We observe a growing importance and practice of cross-sectoral co-operation in the youth field, especially when it comes to integrated services for young people. While previously young people were approached by multiple institutionalised social workers and then separately by youth workers, today we notice nascent co-operation projects between municipalities and youth work. The Netherlands is an example among many other countries where the development of integrated services towards young people is happening. It is based on collaboration between diverse professionals working with children, young people and their families, often under the leadership of local municipalities. These services offer a new approach, arriving from service-led to needs-led support, thus focusing on the

individual and providing tailored preventive support and care rather than offering a given set of services. They aim to empower young people towards self-responsibility and developing informal co-support systems (networks).

The existing examples of such an approach show that the collaboration of public services responsible for youth policy with youth work, schools and organisations is critical to bring together resources of diverse actors (for example youth work may have better access to outreach, public services could ensure access to professionals, schools and could provide spaces). These kinds of intervention prove to be cheaper, more effective and of higher quality, as well as having further positive outcomes on communities.

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## AGENDA FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND YOUTH WORK

1. **Theory-driven youth work:** a common framework for developing integrated community-based services helps co-operation between partners as it gives them a shared language and concepts that allow building a strategy and programmes for young people. The researchers' work is needed for development of theories that could be useful for youth work.
2. **Strengthen research on integrated services for young people:** there is a need for better knowledge on the effectiveness of diverse models for intervention at community level. While a comparative cross-country research is instructive and provides knowledge on good and bad practices, the importance of data on local initiatives (through a case study approach) is growing as it proves useful in improving services. It supports collaboration with ongoing evaluations, gives knowledge background for the next steps and shows the progress made. Possible methodologies include action-based research, participatory or experimental research.
3. **Research on the role of youth work in prevention services:** research results highlight the specific role of youth work within integrated services for young people and further give recognition to youth work as an important actor in the process. This could lead to a discussion on the professionalisation of youth work and steps towards levelling up the understanding and respect for the activity and, eventually profession of youth worker on the same footing as educators, social workers or psychologists.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN THE YOUTH FIELD

Based on the discussion in the working group (rapporteur Magda Nico)

The need for more knowledge exchange within the youth field appears to be a constant urgency. This need was expressed in the 1990s, when the first international knowledge exchange networks were created. These processes led to the creation of the EU-CoE partnership in the field of youth, and further, of the European Knowledge Centre on Youth Policy as well as the Pool of European Youth Researchers. Additionally, most of the countries in general have already developed a national knowledge network, taking on diverse forms.

From the experiences of different countries we observe a variable and difficult balance between independence and support from the government to the national research structures, societies and networks. Sometimes independence is missing, in other cases financial and political support. The effectiveness of the knowledge networks is dependent on their level of institutionalisation or informality – but the answer as to which networks prove to be more effective is not easy.

In conclusion, there was an agreement about the importance of European knowledge networks for sharing knowledge produced in different countries. Also, the possible usefulness of knowledge exchange between the global South and Europe was mentioned in the case of the research tackling issues related to young refugees and migrants.

Second, there is a need to build capacity to communicate in the field through diverse tools such as open platforms and workshops within institutions, learning how to communicate research results. Still, as there already exist multiple tools (also online) and ways of communicating between actors, research into efficient communication in the youth sector could allow improvement of existing tools and further support evidence flow between institutions and networks.