A new
impetus for youth research in Europe?

The Commission's White Paper in relation to seeking and using information and knowledge about young people's lives

by Lynne Chisholm

Having worked in both research and policy contexts, I frequently find myself mediating between what remain two quite distinct communities of practice. Not long ago, I was describing and interpreting the European Commission's recent policy developments in lifelong learning to a largely academic and sceptical audience. I argued that whilst the scientific world is certainly a political world, scientific practice differs from political practice. Researchers seek feasible truths through systematic questioning of different accounts, usually but not always supported by empirical data of one kind or another. Politicians and their executors, the policymakers, seek a workable consensus amongst a range of different and usually divergent interests. Policymaking processes are also a bit like teaching and learning processes – both have to be satisfied with small and incremental steps forward, steps that are frequently only visible as part of a longer-term process which always remains partly unknown and hidden from everyone's view. Research is always on the lookout for big leaps forward that tear down all the veils and show how things really are, brushing aside all previous or alternative accounts of the world. We might say (see here Frank Coffield's forthcoming article on training policy in the Journal of Education Policy) that researchers and policymakers inhabit two separate 'normative worlds' with different goals, constraints and sensitivities, and with different timescales, agendas and audiences for their work. While researchers are able to think and argue for the unthinkable, policymakers have to work within the parameters set by others. Moreover, there exist so many serious gaps in our knowledge that it is frequently not possible for researchers to offer cast-iron advice to policymakers.

When we look at the Commission's White Paper on youth issues from a research-based perspective, the first thing to remember is that this is a policy document and not an intellectual or scientific account of what it means to be young in today's Europe. In the policy context, the world according to research-based knowledge is just one source of information, argument and interpretation. It ought to be a significant source, since at its best it offers a solid basis for rational judgements, decisions and actions. More usually, research-based knowledge offers several plausible accounts and delivers few certainties. Frequently, it provides awkward findings that, even if rock-solid, are political non-starters. This is the case with other sources of information, too, as the young people who participated in the White Paper consultation process were disappointed to discover. It is little consolation for them to know that researchers, too, get frustrated and annoyed with the policymaking process, since they also believe that they possess valid and reliable knowledge that should be taken more seriously. This is one reason why many researchers keep as much distance from policymakers as possible – just like many young people, they distrust 'politics' and fear that they will be used to legitimate decisions and policy measures after the event instead of helping to shape these before the event. The researchers who took part in this White Paper consultation process are positively committed to building mutually productive relations between research and policy – and with the practice of youth work, non-formal youth education and related fields of social and political action. At the same time, it would be disingenuous to claim that they were fully satisfied with the consultation process or that they think the outcome does full justice to what research-based knowledge could offer to developing European-level youth policy and action.

How were researchers involved in the White Paper consultation process?

Following the Conference on Youth Research and Policy under the Portuguese EU-Presidency in May 2000, the European Commission asked a small group of European youth research experts to take part in the White Paper consultation process. (Short accounts of the outcomes are included in the reports of the Umeå Swedish Presidency Conference in March 2001 and the Ghent Belgian Presidency Conference launching the White Paper in November 2001.)

The Commission deserves sincere praise for having engaged in a consultation process with a variety of interest groups, of which the research community was just one small element. The White Paper on youth issues and the Lifelong Learning Communication (COM (2001) 678 final, Brussels, 21 November 2001) which undertook a similar process during the same period, are the first European policy documents underpinned by this kind of broad consultation exercise that explicitly seeks the views of civil society and the public at large. The very fact of having done so is a step forward in all respects.

Those who represented the European youth research community in this process appreciate the opportunity and the recognition. However, the process might have been more systematically carried through and could certainly have made better use of the knowledge base, the networking resources and the purely technical skills of the research community. The Commission might have asked for quick-fire background reviews and reports on selected key themes as these gradually emerged from the consultation process as a whole. This would have demanded more forward planning and a higher level of resources, but it would have been possible to deliver – even if those familiar with Commission procedures understand the practical difficulties this can involve.

It would also have been profitable to involve researchers in the planning and the analysis of the 2001 Youth Eurobarometer *(for further details, see http://europa.eu.int/comm/youthpolicy)* which itself should have been more effectively dovetailed with the preparation of the White Paper. We can recoup some of this after the event, working with the data that the survey has now produced. But – for example – would it not have been beneficial to know and to publicise in the White Paper that the gender and regional differences in access to and use of new information and communication technologies remain as marked as they were four years ago, when the last Youth Eurobarometer was conducted? And this despite significant rises in absolute levels of access and use? And all the more so given the political priority attached to the eLearning initiative? Would this not have made some difference to the scope of the White Paper's recommendations on its priority theme 'youth information', which focus above all on the need to develop electronic information portals?

Finally, the decision to keep the different 'consultation pillars' separate from each other was, in my view, an error. This simply served to underline the existing distance between research, policy and practice and between the research community and young people themselves. It left room for the quite misplaced view in some quarters, for example, that the research consultation pillar enjoyed some sort of privileged status vis-à-vis the other pillars. It also misjudged the realities of the inter-milieu networks that have built up over the past fifteen years or so – communication takes place regardless of the official position on the question! Most importantly, perhaps, this decision relinquished the opportunity for systematic, constructive dialogue and exchange between the different interest groups involved, which would have been a source of enrichment in the preparation of the White Paper.

How might researchers judge the White Paper?

The Umeå researchers' report argued that the pace and nature of contemporary economic and social change affects young people in particular ways – but not that they are those automatically 'primarily' affected, as the White Paper baldly states. Concepts – words and their precise meanings – are crucial in the world of social research. Everyone familiar with the European policy world knows that we have to be flexible and tolerant with respect to language and translation. But unless readers of the English-language version can mentally translate the phrase "our various life roles are becoming confused" (p. 4) back into French (the original language of this part of the text), researchers are likely to conclude that the White Paper reflects simple confusion rather than clear-sighted understanding of contemporary European life. This example serves, above all, to illustrate the fact that policy documents at European level habitually suffer from a mad rush at the last moment to get the text ready on time – and this does not serve the Commission's legitimate interest to present itself as a serious political actor beyond the corridors of the European institutions.

The Umeå report also draws attention to the wide-raging potential effects of the sharp demographic transition to ageing societies in most of Europe over the coming decades – and this is a message that the White Paper does pick up well. This is particularly important, given that the youth research community has been slow to take up the theme of intergenerational relations, despite the growing interest in youth within the social life-course as well as a life phase with its own rationale, concerns and problems. The White Paper's explicit attention to such questions could and should send a signal to youth researchers about the need to respond more rapidly to the changing socio-political context.

However, the White Paper does not sufficiently reflect the well-substantiated view that social polarisation processes are deepening in Europe, so that the gaps between the profiles of chances and risks in young people's life chances are widening rather than narrowing. Whilst the text clearly acknowledges the difficulties today's young people experience in transition to adult life and full citizenship, it does not adequately differentiate between young people's circumstances. Here, the Ghent experts' workshop report makes the point that adopting a holistic or integrated approach to youth affairs should not lead to over-generalisation. By no means all young people enjoy or suffer (depending on their situation and aspirations) an extended youth phase. Rather, we can observe a multiplicity of trajectories, amongst which vulnerable transitions or pathways into marginalisation and exclusion play a significant role. The impression of over-generalisation is partly a consequence of a forcibly condensed text – Commission guidelines stipulate that Communications should be no longer than 20 pages (in formal terms, all Commission policy documents are Communications from the Commission, including White Papers).

Nevertheless, the White Paper has not grasped the essential point about the relationships between similarities and differences in young people's circumstances and orientations. The simplistic formula of "despite highly divergent situations, young people largely share the same values and the same ambitions, but also the same difficulties" (p. 4) cannot encompass the complex and multi-dimensional patterns that more accurately describe European social and individual realities. Macro-level changes may be relatively similar everywhere, but they impact very differently across specific context, groups and individuals.

Furthermore, it is less a question of similarities vs. differences between young people, or alternatively, of whether the 'young European' is more than a figment of Euro-political imagination. It is more a question of discovering the interrelationships between similarities and differences. This does not mean – as many like to imagine – that generalisations are impossible and always illegitimate, but rather that the generalisations should be situated at the right kind of level and scope. In this case, the fact is that all European youth is increasingly affected by the same broad societal trends. Just as clearly, the effects take hold in differentiated and differentiating ways.

On this count, the White Paper fails to provide any evidence of any kind, whether for or against such a hypothesis or whether in support of another position altogether. However, discussions over similarity vs. difference characteristically raise uncomfortable tensions in European policy discourse. Whilst the White Paper includes the "EU as a champion of values" as one of its key messages, research unequivocally confirms that this perspective does not resonate with the majority of European citizens. Young citizens value European integration above all for the quite pragmatic advantages it may bring for expanding life-planning horizons in studies, training and employment. Those of us who engage with EU policy processes, whether we are young people active in youth associations or whether we are European youth researchers, are on the whole convinced of and committed to the 'European project' – but we are not a representative sample of the European population, whether younger or older. Not for nothing, then, is there a continuing lack of clarity around the concept of active citizenship, which is all too often genuinely confused with the notion of European citizenship. The core of active citizenship is social and political participation, which can be exercised at different levels of the polity. Active citizenship, however, does not have in itself a specific European dimension, except insofar as one might want to denote it as a principle to which the European Union adheres as a desirable and worthwhile aspiration for those who live within its borders. European citizenship, on the other hand, refers both to a complex of embryonic legal rights/responsibilities and to an intrinsic identification with a given community, here the 'EU family' of nations, states and cultures. There is indeed a certain level at which evidence exists to show that young people in Europe share certain basic values, but whether these are specifically European or not is another question. The White Paper contributes little to clarifying the basis for further debate on such questions, although there is sufficient information on which to do so. On a positive note, the text does place the

issues of participation and autonomy not only at the forefront of discussion but also side by side. This certainly acknowledges the interdependency of these two dimensions of young people's lives, and it recognises that youth policies must address and redress their lack of access to full and active citizenship in all its dimensions.

What might the research community like to see in follow-up to the White Paper?

Overall, the White Paper adopts the strategy of focusing on method rather than content. This might disappoint many, not least the youth research community, but in a relatively weak policy domain the joint proposals to establish an open method of coordination (which is based on closer links between the Commission and the Council) and to promote mainstreaming (linking youth issues more closely with related policy domains) are evident ways forward.

Researchers will be most interested, though, in the priority attached to gaining "greater understanding of youth" (p. 18). The White Paper makes four proposals: to take stock of existing structures, studies and research in progress and network these; to focus discussion on the right approach at European level; to draw up a research programme based primarily on work carried out at national level; and to make optimum use of the European Statistical System. All these proposals are worthwhile and welcome. They just do not take us far enough forward, given the existing progress made, largely on its own initiative, by the European research community in the past decade or so. The reasons for the modest ambition of the White Paper proposals are likely to be due to lack of close familiarity with the research field rather than the exercise of politically judicious caution, at least in the first instance.

Research is an important part of the sharing of experience in Europe. It can serve the function of organising experience in a rational and transparent way; furthermore, research can bring hidden and illuminating experiences into the open. Research may provide systematic rational knowledge, but it also has a wider social role, not least by voicing the experience of young people who are not present in the current channels of representation and debate. However, the information about young people that we typically produce in Europe reinforces national boundaries. We learn about the differences between (for example) Greek youth and Dutch youth – but less about what they share, and less about more focused kinds of comparisons. More varied approaches would yield richer information. One very simple example might be comparing the experiences of rural youth in Nordic countries with the experiences of rural youth in the Mediterranean countries (on which the YOUTH programme has in fact produced a study report).

We have the opportunity in Europe to go well beyond aggregate, additive descriptions of differences and similarities between nation-states. Doing so requires a lot of effort and commitment, though, because intellectual traditions and the structures of research funding and research careers are still very largely organised within national borders. This works against the collaborative development of innovative perspectives and more integrative intercultural-comparative research. If the White Paper's

proposal "to focus discussion on the right approach at European level" (p. 18) can be interpreted as the intention to tackle this problem more energetically in future, then those who have been working to establish the basis for doing so over the past decade will warmly applaud and will gladly contribute to making further progress. Closer co-operation with the Community's Research Framework programme will rightly be a significant element of the strategy.

However, developing a European youth research programme that is "based primarily on work carried out at national level" (writer's own emphasis) will not be adequate for the purpose at hand. The YOUTH programme, using its own resources and in co-operation as appropriate with the Community's education, vocational training and research programmes, could well choose to become an example of innovative good practice in this respect.

At the Ghent White Paper launch conference, the experts' workshop welcomed the proposal to lend more European-level support to existing structures and networks. These continue to rely heavily on voluntary personal and professional commitment, and they remain institutionally weak. Greater continuity in research on the European level is important, not only through securing more consistent overviews of what is already known and underway, but also through systematic consultation with the research community itself on where priorities for relevant research and related activities should best be placed in the future. The Ghent report therefore made a strong claim for the active and independent participation of the professional research community in these processes. This implies opening access beyond officially designated youth affairs coordinators for each Member State. Expert advisory panels, whose members draw their legitimacy from their recognition by the scientific community and not as representatives of governments and their agencies, should complement and enrich such channels. This will contribute not only to impartiality of judgement, but equally to innovative thinking, to constructively critical debate and to more dynamic policymaking all round. Finally, yet importantly, taking the research community seriously provides access to the appropriate professional resources for consistent and independent monitoring and evaluation of policy measures.

Furthermore, it is essential to support a broad-based view about the kind of research-based information and knowledge to which European policymaking can profitably refer. Modern social research uses both quantitative (numbers based) and qualitative (interpretive description and analysis based) methods. Individual researchers may prefer, in their own work, to use particular kinds of methods rather than others, but all agree that there are issues and questions that are better suited to some methods of inquiry rather than others. Put crudely, statistics are essential to the enterprise, but there are many things they do not describe well or cannot describe at all. Alternatively, rich textual analyses of youth cultures are highly illuminating, but they are not very useful for finding out what is typical for young people as a whole. This is all self-evident for researchers, but in the everyday world, many people are inclined to believe that

information and knowledge is only valid and reliable if it comes in the form of numbers. Politicians and policymakers are no exception, even more so given that the ability to fire off a few quick and impressive figures has become a strong currency of public debate and persuasion. These points are not an argument against quantitative research and the use of surveys and statistics. They rather underline the need for the research community to intervene more actively in the interests of bringing about more balanced views on these questions and to demonstrate more effectively how other kinds of information and knowledge can be just as useful and relevant. Therefore, whilst there is every good reason to optimise the use of the European Statistical Service (ESS), there is equally every good reason not to restrict the search for more and better information and knowledge about young people to this kind of material. The ESS can provide good quality and essential data in a number of important areas, such as social demography, family and household patterns, and especially for tracing transitions between education, training and employment. It would also be the first to point out that it does not and perhaps cannot produce useful material on a whole range of relevant issues for social, educational and youth policymaking.

Finally, good quality European youth research demands high quality human resources – in other words, researchers with well-honed cultural, linguistic and social skills as well as the technical skills to deal with very complex empirical material. All those who work in this field know that such researchers remain quite rare and that in the research community at large a significant skills gap in these respects is very much a European reality. Twenty years and more of contraction and flexibilisation in the academic labour market across much of Europe have also meant the loss of large numbers of promising young researchers to other kinds of employment. Those familiar with the current situation in Central and Eastern European countries are well aware of the dramatic effects of economic and political transformation on their research communities. The vast majority of young youth researchers from these countries are in highly vulnerable employment circumstances and have few prospects for developing stable and secure research careers in the coming years. The White Paper has nothing to say on the question of securing the supply and raising the quality of European youth researchers, although this was something that the researchers' group repeatedly stressed during the consultation process. Notwithstanding the broader responsibilities of Community policy and action in the research domain proper, the youth policy domain has both a salient interest in and a particular responsibility for addressing and helping to improve this situation. This would be a more than judicious investment to improve the knowledge base in the youth field, and it would, indeed, lend a much-needed positive impetus for youth research in Europe.

Contact address:
Lynne.Chisholm@gmx.de