Youth in knowledge societies: challenges for research and policy[1]

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The capacity for social action is ultimately dependent on the creation and application of knowledge. In this sense, human society has always been based on knowledge production and reproduction. However, the historically specific use of the term knowledge society first gained currency along with optimistically framed 1970s accounts of the coming of a post-industrial society, and has always been most closely associated with describing and analysing the social implications of structural changes in advanced western economies. During the 1990s, rapid technological change and intensifying globalisation processes have prompted renewed interest in analysing the characteristics and consequences of knowledge societies.

In effect, this interest signals a widespread concern to define and understand the changing times Europeans are living through. Why use the term 'knowledge society' as the signifier? Firstly and from a theoretical point of view, it leads directly towards the fundamental problematic of understanding the structured and structuring relations between knowledge, power and education under changing social and economic conditions. Secondly, in the past five years, the term 'knowledge society' – alongside that of the 'knowledge-based economy' – has taken on an anchoring role in policy discourse at European level, and this essay seeks to link research with policy issues.

Relevant accounts of the nature of contemporary change largely describe and analyse its economic features (such as finance markets and trading patterns, structural shifts in labour markets, changes in employment conditions and working environments). This is partly due to the fact that these are features for which empirical data are most readily available, whereby it has to be recognised that official (assembled by national

statistical services or by EUROSTAT) and quasi-official (assembled by publicly-funded agencies such as OECD) economic and social statistics are perforce a major source at the aggregate and macro level. But the impact of political discourse, not least at European and international level, has also played a significant role in shaping the course of social scientific interest in these issues.

In the 1990s, national governments have both individually and collectively been primarily concerned to renew their economic competitiveness and to hold the negative effects of structural changes in check (above all, high unemployment). In this context, the recent introduction of the term 'new economy' signifies the purely political assertion that technology and globalisation have together definitively pushed Europe across the threshold into a new historical epoch. Key policy documents at European level (such as the conclusions of the Lisbon Summit of EU Heads of State in March 2000) are also far more likely to use the phrase knowledge-based economy than its politically less powerful alternative, knowledge society.

At the same time, raising the quality of human resources – that is, of people's contribution to society as seen in purely economic terms – has taken on a decisive role in policymaking strategies designed to meet the challenges of knowledge-based economies. This means that education and training moves to centre stage – and it is both unsound and imprudent to apply purely or primarily economic frames of reference to what are clearly much more complex phenomena, which, furthermore, serve wider purposes than the supply of human resources to the labour market (Chisholm, 2000). Distinctively social description and analysis is essential, which explains why, for example, current European policy documents in the fields of education, training and youth underline the social dimensions of change and use the

term knowledge society either alone or in conjunction with the term knowledge-based economy.

Nevertheless, distinctively social accounts of knowledge societies remain scarce: theoretical analyses are situated at highly abstract levels, and it is too early in the day to expect rich empirical descriptions of emergent phenomena and patterns. Making sense of contemporary change is no less of a struggle for social theorists and researchers than it is for anyone else, although respective pathways to understanding may follow distinctive aims, routes and methods. In this context, sociological approaches are particularly important, partly because these are the main source of theories of social change. At the same time, sociology as a distinct and self-conscious discipline is itself one of the consequences of the transition to industrial societies in the western world.

The sociological imagination was the outcome of the attempt to understand and explain rapid economic and social change, using rational and systematic methods. Its conceptual terminologies historically situate the discipline's life-course: industrial society is the fixed reference point, with the term modern society regarded as an approximate synonym (though historians, of course, would not altogether approve of this practice). The social past – that which came before sociology was born – is typically defined as pre-industrial or pre-modern, that is, in relation to the standpoint of sociology as a science of the present. For the first time in its life, the discipline faces the historicity of its constitutive present. It, too, confronts an intellectual transition to reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), in which the co-ordinates and modalities of its own knowledge production and reproduction must respond to an intensely changing world.

This social future has, until very recently, been labelled as post-industrial (or post-Fordist) or as post-modern (or post-material) – the two terms in this case signifying quite distinctive theoretical approaches, frequently enough interpreted as 'either-or' communities of identification and interest by those involved in their development and exploitation. In both cases, the future was still being conceptualised from the standpoint of the present, that is, *what no longer will be*. The 1990s have seen a gradual shift away from these ex negativo definitions towards proposing *what the main features of the new epoch will be*, underpinned – if still very partially – by the empirical observation of change in a variety of life domains. The process of proposing and adopting an agreed term of reference for the new social present continues. Each of these terms (risk society, reflexive modernity, information society, learning society, network society, knowledge society …) reflects a choice to emphasise some aspects over others, even if, for the most part, the analyses behind these terms share a good deal of conceptual overlap and rely on much the same empirical information.

A summary of the key issues arising in these analyses thus provides the starting-point for defining the new epoch. In knowledge societies, the axis of economic activity shifts from material to symbolic inputs, processes, products and distribution systems. The basis of aggregate prosperity increasingly lies in the creativity, information and knowledge an economy and its productive units possess and use intelligently to feed a continuous and rapid cycle of innovation and change. Most importantly, knowledge societies are themselves human constructs, operating within a high level of interactive complexity. In Touraine's terminology, the social actor, individually and collectively, returns to centre stage. The focus on creating and using knowledge for problem-solving in open-ended, less predictable contexts means that constructivist and dynamic forms of knowledge – characteristically produced in action, through

experience and in network environments – gain in significance and effectiveness. Individuals come to experience social life as more contingent, fragile and uncertain. The construction of subjectivities and identities, too, becomes attuned to greater openness and hybridity.

<u>Youth in knowledge societies</u>

Contemporary youth studies in Europe faces at least two important challenges. Firstly, how will current macro-changes impact on the social and cultural construction and reconstruction of youth, both in its own terms and as a constituent element of the social life-course? Secondly, what are the consequences for the shaping and reshaping of personal and social chances and risks in young people's lives in the coming decades?

By definition, these questions do not lend themselves to a directly empirical response – although extrapolations from current trends can be used – since they both refer to the future rather than the past. Moreover, the first question demands, in any case, an ultimately interpretive approach. No pretence is made here that what follows is empirically validated, although it would be a fascinating challenge to design a research programme that tries to move towards doing so in a coherent and comprehensive way.

My proposition is that the impact and consequences of contemporary change for youth and young people can be usefully approached through the analysis of material and symbolic boundary shifts, including the ways in which such boundaries themselves organise, mark and regulate movement within and across terrains of activity and experience. This perspective is clearly linked with the critical sociology of education as a broad intellectual tradition (Castells et al, 1999; Wexler, 1990) and,

most specifically, draws inspiration from Basil Bernstein's work on the classification and framing of educational knowledge and on pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 2000). This kind of perspective does not focus on the socio-historical question of when and how childhood and youth were invented or discovered. Rather, it seeks to describe and understand the social construction of the life-course as an essentially arbitrary phenomenon that is normatively recognised and experienced in spatially and historically distinct ways. Sociologically, childhood and youth undergo recurring processes of re-invention and re-discovery – as do other life-course phases.

Industrial society – or, the first modern era – constructed both childhood and youth as distinct life phases, and these terrains have been socially institutionalised, above all, through schooling. The social integration process was organised on the principle of social separation, so that children and young people are defined and recognised as members of these social age groups by being placed into specified terrains of activity and experience (Honig, 1999; Hornstein, 1985). Schools represent a strongly bounded life domain in which people of different ages exercise distinctly different roles and tasks, legitimated by the characterisation of young people as needing and deserving a protected context in which to develop and prepare for the real world of adult and active life. Within this framework, young people learn and older people teach; these boundaries are well defined and relatively impermeable under usual circumstances.

Whatever the positive aspects of this way of socially constructing and managing youth, sharp tensions and contradictions have become manifestly evident over the course of the past thirty years, that is, in late modernity. The current consensus amongst youth researchers is that both pluralisation and individualisation processes have exerted pressures on the standardised patterns of people's lives and have increased the range of socially acceptable and desirable identities and lifestyles. The

very theses of extension and fragmentation of the youth phase that dominated 1980s youth research only made sense against the background of a normatively standardised past in relation to the life-course and the way youth was conceptualised within that context. The liberalisation of parent-child relations and the development of autonomous youth cultures, bolstered by commercially-led powerful youth lifestyle images, have also given people more leeway to behave more freely and flexibly, including with respect to formerly age-specific roles, identities and activities.

Youth and age are relational categories with a highly flexible potential for internal differentiation across their full range. Movement across the resulting boundaries is traditionally regulated through the combination of an age-graded social division of labour and quasi-natural physical markers confirmed through appearance, dress and behavioural norms. At the beginning of the 21st century, a whole series of biomedical, cultural, demographic, economic and social factors are effecting a decoupling of chronological age from recognisable life phases and their normative divisions of labour and distributions of identities. The sequential organisation of the social life-course is undergoing a process of recontextualisation into what Stehr (1994) – in describing the social organisation of knowledge societies tout court – has termed delicately decentred mosaics.

Both youth cultural studies and empirical data on youth transitions do, in this case, already provide some evidence for material and symbolic boundary shifts. Examples might include a generalisation of the 'Bill Gates phenomenon', that is, the emergence of young e-commerce entrepreneurs, carrying the kind of wealth, responsibility and company position previously almost unthinkable for such age-groups (beyond child-monarchs, perhaps) – and practising organisational cultures and work lifestyles very different from those most of us are familiar with. More prosaic and more widespread

is the statistically observable trend towards combination statuses (for example, conscious simultaneity of employment and education/training, both on a part-time basis) and patchwork-like transition trajectories in young adulthood, which evidence the shift away from strongly bounded and linear sequences in the construction of social biographies.

Certainly: the principle of social integration through separation is no longer practicable as a fundamental classifying principle for constructing youth and regulating the course of young people's lives. Knowledge societies – or, the second modern era – are clearly characterised by the weakening and dissolution of established borders and boundaries across the whole of social life. The implications for the organisation of teaching and learning are, in principle straightforward. Lifelong learning is the structural solution, that is, education and training provided and delivered in open and diverse forms, facilitating and encouraging individualised and recurrent or continuous learning and qualification pathways. Age in itself thus becomes far less relevant as a classification principle for participation and progress. The methodological solution becomes the much wider adoption of symmetrical pedagogies, that is, in which learners are defined as active autonomous agents, and teachers take on the roles of resource persons, guides and mentors who respond to needs and demands as formulated by learners themselves. The boundaries between teaching and learning also become less well defined and more permeable, so that young people are not only or always learners, and older people not only or always teachers.

The ideas of lifelong learning and symmetrical pedagogies are by no means new in themselves, but their cultural 'thinkability' and their practical realisation is only now becoming both possible and desirable under the economic and social conditions of

knowledge societies. In any event, these kinds of changes will certainly amend the ways in which youth is socially constructed as well as how young people can live their lives. The popular term 'patchwork biography' to describe emerging patterns of youth transitions thus has more than an empirically descriptive significance. It picks up a new normative framework for youth, henceforth informed by the capacity to overcome all kinds of borders and boundaries in an ideally fun-loving pursuit of contingency and uncertainty – in effect, of risk itself. Youth is to be rooted in a self-reflexive subjectivity that constitutes one's life as a permanent construction site – and, as ever, for some groups of young people this represents positive chances, for others negative risks, as Côté (2000) has described in his empirical analysis of developmental versus default individualisation.

Wherever one looks, breaking down and crossing over boundaries is the new normatively desirable solution to the stressful constraints and potential opportunities of contemporary life. But is this the royal route to agency, empowerment, active democracy – all those qualities to which most youth researchers would subscribe as desirable goals for young people and, indeed, for everyone? Perhaps, and perhaps the alternatives are much less desirable. But the risks are not inconsiderable either.

Firstly, the normative expectation for patchworking is not matched by facilitative social structures and policy measures. This means, in practice, the reinforcement of existing polarisations in the social patterns of chances and risks in young people's lives. This might be expressed in another way to expose a potential paradox: weaker classification principles (softer boundaries and greater permeability across these) may well produce stronger separations between social inclusions and exclusions.

Secondly, established formal education and training systems are manifestly losing their capacity to provide an appropriate and relevant 'toolkit' for economic and social

participation. In modern democracies, organised teaching and learning became the main instrument for an intended enrichment and redistribution of personal, cultural and cultural resources. The outcomes have never fully matched the expressed intentions, but current trends – including re-privatisation in some parts of Europe – suggest an encroaching process of the *dis*empowerment of education as a tool for entitlement to participate in society and economy.

And thirdly, there is the question of a potential colonisation of subjectivity that arises from the *boundless and boundary-less* imperative to construct a lifelong learning biography (Chisholm, 2001a). Lifelong learning, as noted earlier, is the instrument that enables a pedagogic realisation of flexibility and contingency for infinitely malleable identities. This particular manufactured risk has been addressed on repeated occasions in the critical sociology of education – Apple's (1982) description of curricula that build what he termed the 'possessive individual' is paradigmatic; Cohen (1984) took up a similar argument in his critique of the 1980s 'new vocationalism' approach to secondary schooling in the UK.

Michael Apple argued that the way in which school curricula are organised in late modernity promotes the integration of the logic of technical control into individual subjectivity via *pre*-specification of teaching and learning processes and outcomes. Possessive individualism marks an ideological shift away from the thesis of an individual autonomy in which people are in control of their own destinies, towards constructing a personal career through the vector of organisational mobility and advancement by following technical rules in order to control (or rather, be controlled by) social processes and outcomes. Today, we might argue that as knowledge societies succeed industrial societies, the logic of communicative control is gradually replacing the logic of technical control. In terms of the production of subjectivity, the

accompanying ideological shift emphasises the continuous construction and reconstruction of individualised coherence, and this is to be achieved via the *de-*specification of teaching and learning processes and outcomes.

Phil Cohen's empirical example of the production of the possessive individual argued that the content and methods of the 'new' vocational education curricula introduced for 14–16-year-olds contained strong elements of technical manipulation of the presentation of self and skills in everyday life in order that young people could manufacture the right image to get jobs and get noticed for promotions in a brutally competitive youth labour market. Twenty years later, however, these practices are regarded as quite unremarkable – in other words, the exercise of technical control over the self has become a routinised aspect of young people's life-management techniques. The emerging logic of communicative control is exemplified, for its part, in learning to handle the mise en scène of the chameleonic self, which serves as a means of experimenting with hybrid identities and flexible role constellations.

Against the background of critical analyses such as these, analysing the impact and consequences of the transition to knowledge societies must surely ask when and how the weakening and permeability of borders and boundaries can be interpreted as individual and aggregate risk rather than chance. The concept and practice of what, in 1990s youth research, has been most typically termed post-modern youth could well be interpreted as a softening-up process in advance of the hardening demands of the knowledge-based new economy rather than the potentially emancipatory promise of knowledge societies.

<u>Challenges for youth research and policy</u>

Youth affairs itself might be seen to have experienced a similar history as its research and policy subjects, in that it is a field of activity whose own integration has been achieved in the context of its separation from the mainstream. Youth affairs characteristically occupies relatively marginal academic and political positions, but in response constructs for itself a highly cohesive internal arena of discourse and action. At the same time, youth research and policy have played illuminating and change-generating social roles at historically distinctive moments, as Stafseng (1992, 2000) has described, in particular for the Nordic societies.

Do we perhaps face another of those distinctive moments, offering an opportunity to lead intellectual and political debate on the grounds that young people are critically positioned as far as the impact and consequences of contemporary social change are concerned? The preceding discussion suggests at least two key dimensions of change in this respect. Firstly, the demographic transition to ageing societies in Europe raises questions about changing *power* relations between generations in the coming decades. Secondly, the rapid advance of digital technologies raises questions about how *knowledge* is produced, used and distributed within and across different age groups.

In May 2000, the European Commission sponsored a meeting in Lisbon to debate the future challenges for youth research and policy, in order to generate initial discussion around the preparation of a White Paper on youth affairs (which is due to be published by the close of 2001). The meeting brought together some 150 research and policy experts from across Europe, including from the EU pre-accession countries. Communicating productively across the research–policy interface remains a notoriously difficult process to achieve, but the outcomes of a variety of thematically

diverse workshops were quite remarkably convergent as far as the key issues for a future research agenda are concerned.

In broad terms, globalisation processes were regarded as a social fact rather than a speculative hypothesis. These effectively create and re-create new boundaries and divisions between young people, with very complex consequences for patterns of chances and risks. Four key axes along which these complexities should be analysed were identified:

- changing <u>intergenerational relations</u>, both material and social;

- multifaceted expressions of political and social <u>participation</u>, in particular opportunities and constraints on the development of informed agency;

- changing social constructions of <u>identity</u> (towards hybridity) and of the <u>life-course</u> (towards recursivity);

- the genesis of <u>social inclusions and exclusions</u>, and in particular the changing role of <u>education</u> in these processes and outcomes.

This list holds no surprises, but the absence of specific emphasis given to gender, ethnicities, the evolution of youth labour markets and the impacts of digital multi-media technologies is worth noting. Gender and ethnicity issues were mainstreamed into the broader notion of mosaic societies, in which pluralities and heterogeneities are constitutive elements (in principle on equal terms, if hardly so in practice). Labour market issues were contextualised within a broader framework of loosening links between education, training and employment trajectories, but equally in terms of the need to build youth policy around a package of entitlements including a guaranteed income, from whatever source (on this issue, see Williamson, 2000). The lack of specific focus on youth and NICT is perhaps an indirect reflection on the youth

research community itself, which visibly needs generational renewal: the bulk of today's youth researchers can no longer readily think their way into all aspects of youth cultural practices – the experiential generation gap between the researchers and their subjects is showing signs of over-stretch.

The 7th Nordic Youth Research Information conference took place less than a month later, which offers an opportunity to compare the spread of thematic attention in the Nordic research community with that emerging from a Europe-wide meeting. The NYRI 7 conference attracted some 170 participants, of whom just over one-fifth came from non-Nordic countries, almost all from other parts of Europe but with very few from southern European countries. In all, 24 different countries were represented in Helsinki, which was a real step forward for developing closer links between the Nordic research community and other parts of Europe (see here Gudmundsson, 2000a, b).

On this occasion, significantly more attention was given to gender as a specific focus throughout the programme and one session was fully devoted to the theme of the digital generation. These differences reflect both the greater political importance attached to working towards gender equality and the policy commitment to provide sufficient resources to the youth research field, which in turn has ensured much more consistent generational renewal than in other parts of Europe. The longstanding strength of the youth cultural studies school in the Nordic countries continues to ensure, for its part, that the social construction of identity is always a prominent research theme. This was one of the three most popular themes at NYRI 7, together with, secondly, empirical studies of young people's life-plans and transition patterns and, thirdly, the linked issues of participation and active citizenship, in which critical policy analysis was a noticeable component.

However, the NYRI 7 programme included very few contributions on employment and labour market themes, which, together with its relative absence from the discussions as the earlier Lisbon meeting, probably counts as a significant marker of shifting interests in the youth research community. It probably also reflects a shift in Nordic youth research funding priorities away from this topic following a downturn in previously rising youth unemployment rates towards the end of the 1990s. And whilst several contributions delivered cohort-based comparisons of young people's lives and transitions over time, virtually no analyses focused on changing intergenerational relations as a consequence of demographic, technological, economic or cultural changes. I would speculate that any current youth research conference would repeat this feature; we are dealing here with a genuinely emerging agenda. Finally, very little comparative or intercultural research was presented at NYRI 7. This, too, reflects a continuing gap in the European youth research field as a whole. The gap is related to inadequate funding resources as well as relatively underdeveloped transnational networks, professional mobility and necessary skills. These points were made forcefully at the earlier Lisbon meeting, whose conclusions once more underlined the need to improve the European funding, knowledge and skills resources base if youth research and policy are to work together more effectively in the future.

In my current view, four broad guidelines might usefully lend impulse to designing youth research and policy in the coming years. Firstly, we must move towards more complex perspectives, beginning by unpacking dualisms. This invokes a renewed search to transcend deficit models of youth, or particular groups of young people, by appreciating a wider range of competences, resources and strategies. More attention needs to be paid to the 'how' of trajectories and biographies as social processes, and alongside that, to study not only routes into marginalisation and exclusion but equally

survival stories, that is, those who manage to construct satisfying and productive lives in the face of significant personal and social disadvantage in the early years. There is now plenty of research to show that different strategies and responses are available to and are used by young people to negotiate transitions to adulthood well enough, despite the unrelenting pressures exerted through the institutionalised organisation of education, training and employment systems. The question is rather one of what kinds and how much of the necessary personal and social resources are available, and which young people can and do acquire the knowledge and skills they need to use these to good advantage. We need more precise research studies in a variety of contexts, including comparatively.

Secondly, we have to move towards more effective research practice by <u>rethinking method</u>. This invokes the challenge of transcending aggregate description and culturally non-sensitive analysis (Bynner and Chisholm, 1998). This means, on the one hand, developing more sophisticated and intelligent research designs, especially for comparative and intercultural youth research. On the other hand, empirical studies need to be able to rely on a good quality supply of European comparative baseline data – preferably longitudinal in nature – about young people's lives. Furthermore, this information needs to advance beyond charting the development of education and training participation rates or of labour markets and employment – undeniably important as these are. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, an effective response to the methodological challenge must include expanded opportunities for research training, in particular for acquiring intercultural and comparative research skills and experience.

Thirdly, we need to take a fresh look at <u>renewing engagement</u> with youth studies as an organic field of intellectual practice and social action. This invokes the challenge of

transcending our own 'political correctness' via more incisive analyses of youth in relation to participation, democratic practice and civil society. For example, discussion at the NYRI 7 conference included concern about how to study and to propose potentially appropriate responses to some young people's very real non-democratic attitudes and practices, in both their violent and non-violent expressions. Faced with the unrelenting evidence of racist and sexist discrimination and violence and the need to construct frameworks of explanation and understanding capable of generating an informed policy response, the potentially darker side of empowerment stalks uncomfortably across our landscapes of practised tolerance (Chisholm, 2001b).

Furthermore, as argued at several points in this essay, there are equally worrying aspects of the transition to knowledge societies with respect to the organisation and process of socialisation and learning. We would do well to work out and try to study more precisely the prospect of a wholly mentored society, in which musing and meandering are instrumentally harnessed and in which a complex of difficult-to-avoid guidance and counselling services logs everyone's lives. Whilst the post-adolescence thesis of contemporary youth as a moratorium for reflection and experimentation is the product of affluent societies alone, the notion of a generalised moratorium masquerading as a world of infinite scope for self-development and free-ranging life planning could turn into a highly problematic illusion for many young people in the coming decades.

Finally, we have to refocus strategies for developing more productive research–policy relations in general. From the perspective of the professional research world, this invokes the challenge of transcending anxieties about the potential loss of the distinctive terrain of research activity as a particular category of social action, that is, dealing with a 'fear of pollution' by those who are not professional researchers in the

conventional sense of the term. It also entails finding more pro-active solutions to the problem of boundary maintenance in an institutionally relatively weak and marginal specialist domain, that is, dealing with a 'fear of extinction' of the specificity of youth and youth studies in the face of much more powerful specialisms (such as education, training and employment).

However, it is increasingly necessary, in the interests of young people themselves, to build strategic alliances with related domains of research and policy in order to strengthen positions for analysis and negotiation. This agenda is already gaining momentum – for example, both the Council of Europe's Youth Directorate and the European Youth Forum have begun to rethink the importance of rebuilding alliances with educational research and policy communities as a means of promoting integrated and holistic youth policies with direct impact on young people's lives and opportunities. The emphasis on giving greater recognition to non-formal learning is thus currently becoming a powerful shared policy platform. However, beyond identifying specific themes for building alliances, it is time to make critical policy analysis itself more of a consistent and recognised dimension of youth research than it has typically been in recent decades. The European youth research community should see the upcoming European White Paper on youth affairs as a positive opportunity to pursue this agenda, both in the process of its preparation and in the analysis of its proposals.

In conclusion, the whole point of challenging – making and breaking – borders, boundaries and divisions in youth studies has ultimately only three meaningful purposes:

   ✍ to produce theoretically more innovative perspectives for better quality research;

- ✍ to work towards a more humane and just society, in which inclusions and exclusions become less definitive, for the greater well-being of young people;

- ✍ to learn to live positively with diversity and uncertainty, in the interests of a firmer basis for developing young people's personal agency.

The youth studies community in Europe has, by and large, a reasonably honourable history of commitment to these kinds of aims; the challenge is really only one of how to continue to do so under changing conditions.

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Abstract: Youth in knowledge societies: challenges for research and policy

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During the 1990s, rapid technological change and intensifying globalisation processes have prompted renewed research and policy interest in analysing the characteristics and consequences of knowledge societies. Both theoretically and politically, this moves education and training to centre stage, in both economic and cultural terms. The focus on creating and using knowledge for problem-solving in open-ended, less predictable contexts means that constructivist and dynamic forms of knowledge – characteristically produced in action, through experience and in network environments – gain in significance and effectiveness.

What are the implications of these developments for youth and young people? Knowledge societies are characterised by the weakening and dissolution of established borders and boundaries across the whole of social life – including a gradual decoupling of chronological age from recognisable life phases and their normative divisions of labour and distributions of identities. In practice, these changes may also produce stronger separations between social inclusions and exclusions. The concept and practice of 'post-modern youth' could well be interpreted as a softening-up process in advance of the hardening demands of the knowledge-based new economy rather than the potentially emancipatory promise of knowledge societies.

In political terms, do current youth policy developments offer a new opportunity for youth researchers to lead intellectual and political debate? Two recent major meetings (an EU-sponsored conference in Lisbon and NYRI 7 in Helsinki) suggest that the European youth research community is in the process of defining new priorities; and on the policy front, a European Commission White Paper on youth affairs is underway, whose preparation has included consulting with researchers as well as civil society groups. In this context, contemporary youth research could well make a valuable intellectual and socio-political contribution in the coming years by working to unpack simplistic approaches to categorising young people; to rethink research methods in a changing techno-social and intercultural environment; to renew positively critical engagement with young people and civil society more generally; and to refocus strategies for developing more productive relations with the policymaking world at all levels, including building strategic alliances with related fields of research and action.