Youth Research: the Essentials

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Introduction

[Dear readers,

We are pleased to present the publication "Youth Research: the Essentials". It aspires to help experts in the youth sector to gain a better understanding of the purpose, scope and use of research on youth, and on how to effectively communicate it to non-specialised actors. The document presents the various stakeholders of the youth field that can make use of youth research.It also focuses upon examples of innovative tools and methodologies as well as references and links, encompassing the scope of youth research and its developments over the recent years.
We invite you to anticipate the content of the publication thinking over the following questions:

- *What is youth research? And why do we need it?*
- *How is it related to other research areas?*
- *What are the key themes and trends in current youth research?*
- *Who are the actors involved, and what is their role in developing and implementing youth research?*
- *How can youth research contribute to the active involvement of young people in the society?*
- *What is the policy relevance of youth research?*
- *How can youth research be effectively communicated and its results disseminated, especially to decision makers and practitioners?*
- *What are the open questions and challenges of contemporary youth research?*
- *How to foster positive synergies between national research priorities and realities with the themes and objectives set by the European Union and the Council of Europe?*

We aimed not to open many questions about youth research that cannot go unresolved but rather give answers through the overview of the main concepts, principles, values and challenges of youth research. Still we understand that much more has been written, analysed, debated on youth issues and research than is included in this document. Thus, we want to encourage you to use the references included in these "essentials" and the website of the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth (EU-CoE youth partnership) to explore much more about youth research.]

1. Concepts and Definitions

What is youth research?

Youth research is a field of social science inquiring about the condition of young people. Researchers operate from social, psychological, economic and cultural perspectives. Youth research considers 'youth' as a phase in a person's life course, worth being studied because it is characterised by specific features.

Youth research became a distinct field in Europe in the early 1990s, as an intercultural and international coalition committed to supporting an organised (or structured) interaction among those active in research, policy and practice in the field of youth. Both the Council of Europe and the European Commission have supported the development of youth research, in particular through the EU-CoE youth partnership.

Why do we need it?

To understand how society changes, it is necessary to look at how young people contribute to social transformation, and at how social circumstances affect young people.

Youth research supports youth policy with knowledge and understanding of the realities, needs and expectations of young people. It considers data gathered with and by those working with and for young people, as well as facts and figures, evidence and experience coming from the scientific community, civil society and policy makers.

A knowledge-based youth policy is not only based on political and moral objectives, but on accurate empirical information on the situation of young people while looking at the changes in their expectations, attitudes and life-styles across different areas of the society. Knowledge-based youth policy results in more accurate, consistent and effective goal-setting of policy approaches and youth work practice.

2. Target Group, Actors and Methodology

Target group of youth research

Historical studies show that the category of youth was recognised only from the eighteenth century, at the passage from preindustrial to industrial society, and in particular with the advent of modernisation. The twentieth was the century of young people, where adolescence and the young became visible as a specific group: educational reforms, state intervention, the regulations of working conditions, the reorganisation of juvenile justice system, the recognition of leisure as a specific feature of youth experiences contributed all to this process of creation of the concept of 'youth'.

In this initial phase, young people were mostly seen as a potential source of problems. However, contemporary definitions of youth are more positive looking at each young person as a unique individual in a specific context. But what is the definition of 'youth' nowadays? Age is the prevailing determinant, but definitions vary across countries. The age-range 15 to 29 is often used at EU level. Under the Erasmus+ programme, various opportunities are available for young people aged 13 to 30. The Council of Europe youth sector's activities are available for young people aged 18 to 30, with justified exceptions.

The United Nations for statistics purposes define youth as those persons between the age of 15 and 24 years.

Theoretical background

Youth research studies the social and cultural identity and practice of young people using cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary approaches.

The theoretical background of youth work and youth research lies in Freud's theory of psychosocial development, Bowlby's work on attachment theory, Ericson's views of psychosocial development, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development, and theories about risks and resilience from the field of development psychopathology. Since the 1990s, one of the most influential theoretical approaches in youth studies has been developed by Beck and Giddens. Other theories that are relevant for youth research are theories on parenting, social networking, theory of change, life stressors and coping with adversity, prosocial development, gender development, the impact of trauma and loss, sibling relationships, peer relationships, morality and conscience, memory development, the impact of school etc.

Actors

The metaphor of the 'magical triangle' is used to indicate the synergy among actors involved in generating and utilising different forms of knowledge on youth: it refers to cooperation among researchers, policy makers and practitioners, particularly youth workers.

This cooperation provides opportunities to synthesise different points of view, needs and approaches towards social, collaborative production of knowledge on youth.

Youth Research methodologies

Youth research lies within quantitative and qualitative methodological traditions:

> ➢ **Quantitative** research methodology is based on positivism and on constructivism, post structuralism and postmodernism. It is based on assumptions about the nature of young people as a permanent object of study.

> ➢ **Qualitative** research methodology is based on assumptions about the nature of young people as changing depending on those who observe and on every person who is studied.

Youth research is also **participatory** by nature which means that people, in particular young people, who participate in a research are active part of it, not a mere object of study. This means that :

- all phases of the research are planned and implemented jointly by all actors involved, on an equal basis;

- the research makes use of simple methods which are understandable for all those involved;

- the knowledge generated belongs to all those who participated in the research.

3. Key Thematic Areas

In recent times, there has been a shift from viewing young people as a source of problems to perceiving them as a resource both for their own development and for the society in general. This trend has also influenced research that is increasingly focusing on a positive youth development approach that is related to defining, and incorporating external and internal factors for development of youth potential.

We list below some contemporary challenges young people face as well as some key thematic areas for youth research to support youth policy to respond to these challenges:

- Social exclusion of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups of young people, which is not only associated with poverty and lack of financial resources, but also determined by gender, disability, social status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, etc.;

- Inequality of young people in the labour market with the risk of being unemployed or in less secure employment, or of receiving low wages, etc.;

- The gap between the skills and competences developed within the educational system and the ones needed for the labour market;

- The contradiction between aspirations to live independently [or to be independent] lives and financial dependence on their families;

- Risks arising from the increasing influence on young people of radical religious and political propaganda and populism;

- A rising gap between young people and institutions with the threat of a declining of youth participation in civic and political life;

- Coherence of primary (i.e. family, siblings, friends, peers, neighborhood milieu) and secondary (political and institutional stakeholders, i.e. schools, institutions, schools, institutions, youth social work organizations, associations, employment agencies, local authorities, job centers, companies) resources in development of youth potential and capacity to cope with risks;

- Different types of transition that young people go through from childhood into adulthood and successful initiatives supporting the process;

- The contradiction between the necessity to tackle youth issues and decline of civic engagement of young people and low conventional political participation.

4. Communicating Youth Research

Communicating the findings of research is an essential part of any youth researcher's work. This is a complex task, and some of the most common mistakes are

- Not knowing the target audience;

- Creating too complicated and long research papers which are not understandable;

- Making confusion in presenting research and presenting outcomes.

Therefore, one must first identify the target audience to direct messages in a way which is meaningful for the receiver. By 'target audience' we mean the people who may be potentially interested in the research findings, for instance academics, policy makers, decision makers, educators, practitioners, young people, media, funders, parents.

Once the target audience is identified, a researcher can create a strategy to reach out and communicate with them. Shaping an effective strategy for communicating findings could consist of

- elaborating different reports for different audiences;
- receiving suggestions from the users on how to best present the findings, through, for instance, user group panels, involving stakeholders and target groups before, during and after the research;

- presenting, in concise and plain language, and also using user-friendly visual support tools such as pictures and graphic elements, concrete recommendations that are easily reconcilable to research outcomes, and showing how to make use of these outcomes;

- ensuring adequate funding, within the budget of a research project, for communicating research;

- considering translations in different languages;

- identifying the most relevant occasions for dissemination of results, taking into account the nature of the target group. For instance, to inform young people on research's results one may go to concerts or events organised in the framework of the EU Youth Week.

Regardless of the tools and strategies applied, when young people are involved in any research we must always remember to provide them with feedback and to let them know when the research results are available.

5. European level: Policy Context and Relevance

The Council of Europe formally identified a need for youth research in 1967 [through directive n. 165](#) of its Parliamentary Assembly and reaffirmed its role as a principal element of the youth sectors' approach aiming to generate knowledge on the situation of young people in Europe within the [Declaration on the Future of the Council of Europe Youth Policy – Agenda 2020](#), and the Committee of Ministers [Resolution 2008 (23) on the youth policy of the Council of Europe](#).

The Council of Europe, therefore, promotes knowledge-based youth policy and co-operation between youth researchers and policy makers, with particular attention to supporting youth workers and other practitioners (see [The Portfolio for Youth Leaders and Youth Workers](#)).

The European Union proclaimed knowledge on and greater understanding of the condition of young people as one of priorities of the [EU Youth Strategy – Investing and Empowering](#) (European Commission 2009) and identified knowledge building and evidence-based youth policy as the first of seven instruments of effective implementation

of [The renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)](). [The EU Youth Strategy proposed by the European Commission for 2019-2027]() focuses on three areas of action: ENGAGE - CONNECT - EMPOWER and recognises evidence-based policy making and monitoring as valuable instruments for improvement of multi-level and participatory governance.

The EU-CoE youth partnership promotes a 'Better knowledge' on youth as one of its specific objectives focusing on collection and elaboration of knowledge on young people through organisation of [thematic research seminars]() followed by [research publications in the youth knowledge series]().

6. Monitoring and Evaluation of Youth Policy and Practice

The goals and objectives of monitoring and evaluation of youth policy

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are a process to assess the implementation of goals, objectives and strategies. Policy makers develop M&E guidelines by consulting with youth representatives, including young people. The policy process has to start with an analysis of the social context to provide a better understanding of the reality, which is affecting the ability of young people to complete the transitions to the adulthood.

The types of monitoring and evaluation

Governments develop the respective national youth strategies which should foresee how their implementation will be monitored and when and how a midterm- and a final evaluation will take place.

The **midterm evaluation** should *preferably* be carried out by an external team of experts, who assess progress of the strategy. Additional objective of the midterm evaluation is to recommend, if appropriate, any adjustments or revise the goals of the youth policy based on experiences learned, or due to external factors..

A **final evaluation** is an independent assessment of the policy, which *must* be carried out by an external team of experts. Its purpose is to assess the extent to which the goals and objectives of the strategy have been achieved.

Key Performance Indicators (KPI) must be defined during the design of any strategy and before its implementation begins. They must be accompanied by assessment techniques to measure and evaluate progress or impact. KPIs specify what parts of the strategy are to be measured, while assessment techniques detail how and when the strategy will be measured. The source of monitoring data therefore depends largely on what each indicator is trying to measure.

After creating KPIs, it is necessary to decide on methods for gathering data (data collection techniques) and how often various data will be recorded to track indicators. This phase should be undergone in cooperation among youth policy makers, stakeholders, and donors (if any).

Monitoring and evaluation methodology

The most common data collection methods which could be used for monitoring and evaluation of youth policy are presented below:

1. **Surveys: Baseline, mid-term and end-of-the-project survey** – a **baseline survey** is often part of a well-planned impact evaluation survey where data are collected at or before the start of a project. **Mid-term surveys** and end-of-the-project surveys use a similar questionnaire administered at baseline so that data can be compared.
2. **Key informant interview or in-depth interview:** A key informant interview is conducted with a person who can provide detailed information and opinion on a particular subject based on his or her knowledge or experience of a particular issue. Key informant interviews are open-ended, semi-structured interviews.
3. **Focus group discussion:** A focus group discussion is a facilitated discussion among a group of participants, carefully selected according to criteria of age, gender, employment etc. The idea is that group members discuss the topic among themselves with the guidance from a moderator. It is a method used to obtain in-depth qualitative information on perceptions and ideas from a group of people who have something in common.
4. **Desk review:** Documents on youth policy, youth programmes, legislations on different aspects of the lives of young people, databases and reports from previous youth studies, as well as statistical data on youth could be analysed in the framework of monitoring and evaluation of youth policy.

It is now strongly recommended that M&E be conducted with a mix of methods so that results obtained can be better assessed. By approaching the same question from more than one perspective or by using more than one technique, evaluators can better compare results. This process is known as **triangulation**. If the findings from the different methods are similar, or reinforce one another, then users can have greater confidence in the findings than if they are based on only one method.

7. Ethics

Ethics is generally defined as a set of moral principles and rules of conduct. To achieve an excellent standard of research it is necessary to incorporate relevant ethical principles and national/international legislation (the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)](#), the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#), the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) etc.), into all stages of the research process, from the design, to the data gathering, data analysis, report writing, dissemination, monitoring and evaluation phases. Each of these stages, for example, needs to be: Cautious and protective, Empowering, Consultative, Sensitive and flexible, Sensible and prepared, Sanctioned by informed consent, Confidential, Accountable (UNICEF's Child Protection Policy and Code of Conduct). The most common ethical issues however include the involvement of children, vulnerable groups, privacy and data protection issues. It also includes the avoidance of any breach of research integrity, which means, in particular, avoiding fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism.

8. Challenges and Open Questions

- Youth research is facing major methodological challenges concerning the definition of youth. Any discussion of youth practice, youth policy or youth research raises a question about the meanings of 'youth', its social and historical construction, as well

as the social and political implications for our understanding of young people. Youth is defined as the passage from a dependent childhood to independent adulthood when young people are in transition between a world of rather secure development to a world of choice and risk. But age distinction has been mostly considered as prevailing discriminant in defining youth. So **the final concept of "youth" is under theoretical and practical discussions**.

- Processes of social, economic and political integration are arguably leading to an increasing convergence of youth policies in Europe. The changing face and shape of Europe however adds to the challenges for youth research and the ways it may contribute to the emerging policy debate. This strengthens the **need for comparable and reliable information within and between European countries**.

- The development of viable methodologies for comparative youth studies and youth policy evaluation is a necessary dimension within youth research. Given the very different political and cultural traditions across Europe - and the place of young people within them - a significant task is to produce credible and meaningful understandings of youth which may assist the conceptualisation and formulation of youth policy within the broader European context.

- Despite efforts, notably by the EU-CoE youth partnership, to create a European youth research space, most youth researchers remains located at the national or local level. It is, therefore, essential to invite (the younger generation of) youth researchers to take part in dialogue at a European level. This can provide an impetus for international exchange and collaboration and inform them about resources (networks, programmes, events and publications) specifically available for international youth research. Such opportunities are particularly important for researchers from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe who have fewer possibilities to participate in the international arena for various reasons. Their participation is a priority if the information gap that exists with the rest of Europe is to be bridged. To this end, this publication may be of some use.

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