Youth Partnership

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

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Being "The researchers" in a political participatory environment

LEARNING FROM UNDERTAKING THE RESEARCHER ROLE IN THE EU YOUTH DIALOGUE

Dan Moxon and Ondřej Bárta

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Introduction

This report outlines learning from undertaking the roles of researchers within the 6th and 7th Cycles of Youth Dialogue[1] from 2017 to 2020. Authors of this paper are youth researchers and members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR[2]) who, in the specific capacity described further below, were involved in the EU Youth Dialogue processes for the first time in 2017, and also in subsequent years, along with other researchers, at the European level.

The report aims to reflect on the roles and undertakings of the researchers within a highly political, participatory process, and explores the following:

- Implications of connecting research practices with a political sphere in general
- Lessons learned within the EU Youth Dialogue processes
- Important aspects of balancing research and participation domains
- Where research stops and participation begins.

All of these sections strive to critically reflect on the experience gathered in the role of researchers in the EU Youth Dialogue processes. The intention is to explore what could be learnt from such experience, and consider how that might apply in the continuation of the EU Youth Dialogue - as well as how this might relate to researchers operating in similar roles elsewhere. This form of reflection and reflexivity is a crucial part of research. The points in this document are based on an ongoing internal discussion between the researchers, some of which was shared in short presentations to colleagues on various occasions, and a previous informal paper.

About the EU Youth Dialogue and the researcher role

The EU Youth Dialogue is a flagship youth participation mechanism at the EU level aiming to bring youth voice to the EU policy making, forming a key part of the EU Youth Strategy. Its main element is the dialogue between young people, youth organisations and policy and decision makers, as well as experts, researchers, and other relevant civil society actors. It serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection and consultation on the priorities, implementation, and follow-up of European cooperation in the field of youth.

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[1] The EU Youth Dialogue is a continuation of the Structured Dialogue held before 2019. 6th cycle was held from 1 July 2017 - December 2018, and the 7th cycle from January 2019 to 30 June 2020.
[2] PEYR is a network of researchers and experts from across Europe who possess a wide range of expertise in different policy areas connected to youth. This shared European-level initiative by the Council of Europe and the European Commission aims at enhancing evidence-based policymaking in the field of youth. For more information, please see https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/peyr

In general, the researchers were invited to provide assistance with the overarching processes within the EU Youth Dialogue coordinated by the European Steering Committee which is formed by each Trio of Presidencies of the Council of the European Union. Each cycle of dialogue spans across three presidencies and lasts 18 months within which each Presidency holds their own European Youth Conference (EUYC) attended by youth delegates and decision makers.

A key part of the researcher role involves producing methodological guidance for National Working Groups which conduct consultation and dialogue activities throughout the cycle in their respective member states. Researchers then analyse the findings of these for use at European level. A European Working group also contributes to this process undertaking similar activities on a pan European basis through international non-governmental youth organisations (IYNGO's).

The full range of duties of the researcher role are outlined below. However, it is important to note that the definition of the tasks as well as their concrete execution were, due to the nature of the process, not clearly defined at the start of the work, and by necessity had to evolve as the cycles progressed. More details of the methods and outputs can be found at the website of the European Commission[3].

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[3] https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy/youthgoals_en

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Researcher roles in EUYD

- Working with facilitators from the EU Youth Conferences (EUYC) to develop tools and approaches to capture conference outcomes and discussion, such as online 'harvesting tools' to be used by the EUYC participants.
- Designing methodological support for the working groups to conduct the national and European dialogue activities. Tools developed by researchers included:
  - Consultation questions and thematic guidance
  - Methodological guidelines
  - Reporting templates.
- Offering methodological and practical support to working groups during their consultation processes in areas such as survey design or use of other consultation methods, including the webinars with instructions on how to use research methodology during the consultation cycle.
- Analysing the data and reports from National and European Dialogue Activities produced by working groups, and creating written inputs for EUYC delegates in various formats, such as:
  - Full and detailed report on processes and outcomes of the consultations
  - Summaries and infographics of the outcomes of the consultations.
- Undertaking specific tasks connected to the overall process of consultations and the EUYC, such as:
  - Diversity monitoring of participants at the EUYC
  - Diversity monitoring of young people involved in the consultation processes.
- Providing spoken input at the EUYC in various formats, such as:
  - Plenary presentations
  - Interactive presentation sessions
  - Discussions and round tables.
- Reporting the consultation outcomes to various stakeholders, such as at the meetings of:
  - The Director-Generals of Youth from across the Member States
  - The Steering Committee of the EU Youth Dialogue.

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Guiding principles adopted for the research

The approach we took was based on a number of principles. Above all we saw our role as impartial experts invited to increase the quality and usefulness of the consultation activities to the political outcomes of the Youth Dialogue.

The purpose of the researcher role is to ensure that the knowledge generated from the activities was reported in high enough quality to be useful for policy making of the European institutions. At the same time there was a tension at the heart of the work. EUYD is a participatory process, not a research process. This means it is necessary for the tools and methods to be accessible and engaging to young people, and enable young people to

influence policy making. Sometimes these two goals, of high quality knowledge production and participation, sat in opposition to each other. Furthermore, different actors valued them differently. For instance some working groups are critical of the survey for not being simpler and quicker to complete for young people, whilst others seek for it to be more complex to conform to higher standards of researcher validity.

Youth Dialogue has a wide number of actors, with varying capacities, expectations and histories in relation to their role in Youth Dialogue, as well as different attitudes and abilities toward research. In recognition of this, we sought to create flexible tools, methods and pathways that allowed different actors, particularly the working groups, to build upon and improve their own contributions to generating knowledge and capturing the voices of young people within Youth Dialogue consultation.

It was necessary to work progressively and take a pragmatic approach to research design - for example we sought to work towards a more standardised methodological process across working groups, whilst still recognising the need and space for a significant variation in the way working groups would conduct consultations. Further pragmatism and flexibility was required to accommodate the incredibly tight timescales. In this respect, necessity to compromise on more rigorous academic research standards in order to build capacity and stimulate development amongst the working groups was crucial.

We also felt that the political complexities within Youth Dialogue meant that it was important we did not act, or be perceived as acting, politically. It is crucially important that research within the EUYD process is not there to advance one political agenda over another. Whilst it can be argued that all social research has a political dimension, what we mean by this was that us as researchers, and our host the EU-CoE youth partnership were not active political actors within the EU Youth Dialogue process.

We attempted to demonstrate this neutrality by being transparent and visible in our decision making processes. It required us to embed ourselves within the conferences and various meetings, being willing to take time in plenary to explain our role and methods, and also being open to one-to-one conversations, to discuss criticism and concerns with delegates on the conference floor. Over time this evolved to a role that went well beyond the one of a traditional academic researcher, and we both found we were able to become active in supporting facilitation, conducting ad-hoc analysis and reporting of working groups as well as assisting in roles such as editing the final draft of the youth goals. In this regard our background as youth workers as well as researchers has been crucial to the role.

At the same time, it was also important to recognise that having researchers within a neutrality or objectivity role, does not reduce the need for other actors to make political decisions. For example it was important that the final themes for the youth goals were

selected by the European Steering Committee rather than researchers. In such instances we saw the role of the researcher as to present options to political actors to better enable them to make these choices, but to recognise when it was inappropriate for us to take a decision.

While the role of the researchers in the EUYD process is a crucial one, perception as to the researcher role in the cycles might have occasionally been understood as more central to the overall Youth Dialogue design than should be the case. In order for the EUYD to remain a political and participatory process it is fundamental that the EUYD is not led by research design or researchers. It is not intended to function as a Eurobarometer or pan European research project. Instead the leading role in the process should be carried out by the European Steering Committee, which would bring young people and the Presidencies together in a participatory process.

Key learning within the EU Youth Dialogue 2017 to 2020

The EU Youth Dialogue is a complex process involving a very wide range of stakeholders across a substantial timespan. To encompass this complexity, key learning points are differentiated below in line with the level to which the different points mostly connect, the European level and the working group level.

The European level covers such key learning areas which are related to the overarching structure of the whole EU Youth Dialogue process, namely to the European Steering Committee and the teams coming from the Member States in positions of Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The working group level covers such key learning aspects which are connected to national and international working groups conducting the consultation processes with young people across the Member States.

The European level

The first key learning point is the absence **of a long-term institutional memory** in terms of processes of the EU Youth Dialogue from one cycle to the next (i.e. from one set of teams of the current trio of presidency countries to the next). Whilst the European Youth Forum, as permanent secretariat works hard to transfer learning between cycles, the main leadership of EUYD is highly transitory, changing partially every six months and wholly every 18 months. This is a highly unique dimension compared to other researcher roles, that stems directly from the political context.

This absence of long-term institutional memory limits effective capacity building of all stakeholders on the European level and creates pressures not only to the European Steering Group and the teams coming from the Member States in positions of presidency of the Council of the European Union, but also to the researchers who accompany such processes.

Researchers are the principle carriers of the research know-how created at the European level during the given cycle and should they not continue their roles in the future, the know-how is potentially lost. At the same time, the researchers themselves need to dedicate energy to renegotiating and recreating conditions or processes which were already established in the past cycles. It would be highly beneficial for the EU Youth Dialogue as a long-term project to initiate and keep some form of institutional memory, either in terms of keeping detailed documentation or in the form of keeping a permanent team which would support the European Steering Committee and the teams coming from the Member States in positions of Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as any youth researchers engaged in the given cycle. These resources could be used in initial phases of the whole Youth Dialogue processes to ensure all stakeholders are updated on established mechanisms (e.g. via orientation meetings), as well as throughout the whole cycle to keep track of further developments and potential improvements.

The particularities of the EUYD process mean that there is often **a level of ambiguity** involved in the process at the European level. Researchers recognise the fact that some levels of ambiguity are necessary in order to allow for the innovation and creative processes to take place, hence, to enable the development of the whole EU Youth Dialogue scheme. At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that ambiguity exceeding certain levels becomes harmful and inhibits innovation, rather than allowing it. The process has functioned most effectively when the Trio of Presidency has a clear and consistent vision about what it wants to achieve. This allows the researchers and other actors to concentrate on *how* this may be done. In order to keep the ambiguity in reasonable limits, it is advisable to balance the uncertainty in some aspects with clarity in others. As an example, ambiguity in processes and methods can well be balanced by clarity in the types of desired outcomes. Fluidity of the preparatory processes can be balanced by clear and timely contractual procedures. And flexibility in conference proceedings can be balanced by extra support staff present to allow for quick adjustments, should they be needed. Overall, when research actors and political actors collaborate together, it is advisable for political actors to keep the ambiguity at reasonable levels in order to allow for the best support by the youth researchers.

Establishing the common understanding of the researcher role as neutral, non-political actors is vital as described above in this text to any research in this kind of political setting. In EUYD, this understanding needs to be shared by all stakeholders within the process and should be kept in mind when negotiating the concrete tasks of the researchers in the given cycle. As an example, it is fully in line with the researchers' neutrality to analyse results of the working group consultations and provide the input for the EUYC, but these should be explicitly and transparently kept aside from the political conclusions of the EU Youth Dialogue cycle. Common understanding of the role of the researchers in the whole process should, therefore, be communicated explicitly and transparently to all involved stakeholders at the beginning of the EU Youth Dialogue cycle, or any other similar endeavours.

EUYD researchers are engaged in their capacity as experts in both applied research and participation and the **research support** they generate **should be seen primarily as utilising applied youth research to support participatory processes**, not to generate transferable research findings. Applied research differs widely from the one conducted in academia, as it is using research methods to support processes in a given practical context, in this case enhancing youth participation in the EU Youth Dialogue framework. As such, the research outcomes serve the purpose of enhancing youth participation and, inherently, may not compare directly to the research findings from elsewhere generated primarily for the purposes of researching youth. The presence of research outcomes and research support should not cloud the fact that young people are taking part in a participatory process, and therefore voicing their opinions. The research methodology applied in the context of the EU Youth Dialogue aims at strengthening the transmission of ideas from the young people to the policymakers, not to blur the process into a research exercise. All of these, again, should be explicitly and repeatedly shared with all stakeholders of the EU Youth Dialogue cycle in order to prevent misconceptions of the role of research methodology in the whole process. Whilst there are some aspects of this learning that may remain unique to EUYD, other initiatives undertaking research activities in a policy context may find themselves similarly needed to reflect on the true purpose of their work.

Transparency of the EU Youth Dialogue cycle is vital, starting from the roles of all actors, through the foreseen processes, and most importantly, all the way to the desired outcomes and the role of the outcomes in upcoming political processes. Since transparency is a transversal topic mentioned in previous key learning points, it can only be repeated that the more transparent the roles of the researchers as well as the purpose of the research methodology is to all involved stakeholders, the more efficient and smoother the EU Youth Dialogue process can be. Such learning is transferable to research in political contexts elsewhere - trustworthiness of research is linked directly to being accountable to all stakeholders.

The working group level

Rapid capacity building was observed in the national and international working groups across the EU Youth Dialogue cycles when it comes to the quality of data stemming from the local and European Dialogue processes. This capacity building could be seen in both the skillset of the members of working groups as well as in their ability to engage with external subjects to enhance their own consultation procedures. This capacity building should be exploited and supported. Exploitation could be done via a series of round tables in which national working groups could share their processes with others. Support could take a form of additional round tables with experts in particular methodologies, who could help

members of the national working groups develop concrete methods further. A key learning point for researchers working in similar contexts is the importance of understanding the capacities of stakeholders. Often there may be ways to enhance or improve research procedures identified by some stakeholders, that may be simply beyond the capacities of others. Understanding the limitations and strengths of the network and system you are operating in is vital.

Time pressure was repeatedly observed to pose a substantial hurdle for working groups during the consultation processes and subsequent reporting period, as well as for the researchers in designing methodologies and analysing working group consultation data. It needs to be noted that there is almost no real opportunity for alleviating this issue through the streamlining of processes or increasing of capacity at either level. Some tasks, such as the analysis of consultation reports, the development of questionnaires, or the translation of questions are complex tasks which are not necessarily made easier by the involvement of more individuals. The political timeframes and strictly governed institutional procedures often leave no opportunity to simply 'be late'. Unless the time pressure issue is efficiently resolved, it needs to be perceived as a substantial limiting factor in consultation design and implementation. This could be avoided by enhanced planning of the EU Youth Dialogue project, managing the whole timeline outside of political cycles more in line with the needs of the participation processes, than in line with the change of presidency teams in charge. However, such an approach may also detach the process from policy making timeframes and processes so is not without its drawback. This contrast between speaking to political timeframes versus project needs is likely to be felt by any researcher in a political context.

Understanding and appreciating inclusion in the EU Youth Dialogue needs to be based on information provided by the working groups. It is claimed that the EU Youth Dialogue processes do not engage with or represent the diversity of young people across Europe. However, the diversity monitoring undertaken throughout the consultation and among the EUYC participants show clearly that the consultation is very close to being reflective of the European youth population, albeit not perfectly so. Descriptions of methods from working groups also demonstrated there were very concerted efforts to engage with some of the most marginalised young people such as young Roma, young people in social care or prison. It is also worth noting that conference participants are a more diverse group than representatives of some political bodies, such as Members of the European Parliament. So, whilst there are undoubtedly areas for improvement in the area of inclusion, the process is substantially more diverse than it is commonly perceived or understood to be. This being said, there is still space for a dedicated process to capture minority voices as distinct from the overall dominant themes and experiences of young people. The interesting learning point here is how the research data has begun to shift the political perception of the process. By providing findings on diversity the research reporting has helped to shape how a process was perceived by senior political actors.

Conclusion - is everything researchers do research?

One of the big questions about the role of "the researchers" in the EUYD is whether research is done. Being called "the researchers" - a term we are often referred to in lieu of our names - has led to understandable impressions that we are. This in turn creates impressions about what is, or should be done in EUYD, which are based on stakeholders' ideas of what research is or should be. This has come particularly from those who value scientific method within social research. This method, drawn from the natural sciences, values strict well-followed procedures, associated with statistical testing, surveys, sample representation and repeatability[4].

Both of the authors of this paper agree that their work in EUYD does not, and cannot be guided only by strict scientific methods. It is not therefore research in the tradition of scientific method per se, but rather using scientific methods as well as qualitative research methods which do not follow the scientific tradition in a way to strengthen the participation of young people. The EUYD process is simply not capable nor intended to be a research endeavour. To steer it heavily towards this would undermine the participatory aspects - removing more and more spaces for young people to lead the process- and placing research above participation. Nevertheless, elements of scientific method can and need to be adopted. As an example, survey support within the EUYD process can be detailed: NWGs are supported in terms of preparing and implementing the surveys and the data obtained are analysed using statistical procedures, hence utilising scientific methods in order to help young voices in being heard. The goal does not lie in large scale research into young people, but in using research methodology to support large numbers of youth to share their opinions.

More complexly however, not all of the social science research community subscribes to scientific method as the ideal research method. Some, particularly those inspired by feminist methodologies[5] or participatory methodologies[6] reject it entirely, and instead favour emphasis of things such as voice, emotion, positionality, democracy and power. Participatory research is a growing field of research which almost entirely rejects scientific methods in favour of processes that enable participants to influence and shape the world around them (albeit often with small numbers). Just like EUYD, it places participation above research findings and so EUYDs values and goals chime strongly with participatory research.

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[4] For a discussion of scientific method in social research, and how other social research epistemologies see Crotty, M., 1998.
[5] See for example Ramazanoglu, C. and Holland, J., 2002.
[6] See for example Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. eds., 2001. or Cammarota, J. and Fine, M. eds., 2010.

Though it would no doubt generate much debate to do so, it could potentially even be argued that EUYD is the largest participatory research process in the world.

Ultimately, however, social research is complicated. Politics is complicated. Multinational policy making is complicated. Youth participation can be complicated. So the answer to whether it is the researcher's role in the EUYD to do research is: "It is complicated." The two authors of this paper may even have slightly differing opinions.

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