

# Youth Partnership

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



## Engaging Youth Researchers: A guide for policy makers and practitioners

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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union-Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

## Contents

Introduction .....	2
Why work with youth researchers? .....	3
What are the benefits of youth research to policy makers and practitioners? .....	4
What does the youth researcher role include? .....	4
Where to find youth researchers .....	6
Commissioning or initiating a youth research project .....	8
Identifying the purpose of the research project .....	8
Setting the scope of the research project .....	9
Deciding on what sort of competencies are needed by the researchers .....	11
Engaging with the researchers during the research project .....	11
Developing longer-term relationships and partnerships .....	12
Summary .....	14
Checklist for initiating a youth research project .....	14
References and key links .....	15

## Introduction

The guide is designed to help youth researchers, policy makers and practitioners work effectively together when collaborating on youth research. It is intended to help policy makers, youth organisations, youth work practitioners or others who are thinking of working with youth researchers to engage with researchers effectively.

The triangle of governance in the youth field has the following angles:

- **youth research:** aimed at developing knowledge on youth to better understand current and upcoming challenges and trends in the lives of young people, and their implications for youth policy and youth work;
- **youth policy:** informing youth policy by offering relevant evidence, knowledge, and building capacity of the youth policy actors;
- **youth work:** promoting and strengthening youth work and recognition of its contribution to, *inter alia*, youth participation and social inclusion of young people.

These three angles are interconnected and the role of the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership is to strengthen the dialogue among them, involving young people and youth organisations. Wherever relevant, stakeholders from other sectors are invited to engage in a cross-sectoral exchange.

Youth policy and youth work seem to be closer to the general public – as youth work is linked with practices, instruments and working methods, as well as through the services that are being delivered by trained professionals or volunteers. The policy domain is perceived through the actions that the stakeholders take in order to put in place programmes and policies aimed at supporting young people to reach their full personal and professional potential. But youth research is the angle of the triangle that is hardest to understand by the general public, the assumption being that the language that is used by the researchers is highly sophisticated and the results may be presented in a manner that only other researchers would understand.

The overall goal of the partnership is to foster synergies between the priorities and programmes pursued by the two partner institutions in the youth field. It contributes to their respective work: for the EU – on implementing the aims of the EU Youth Strategy: engage, connect, empower; for the Council of Europe: on the 2020-2021 priorities of the youth sector: young people's access to rights, youth participation and youth work, inclusive and peaceful societies, as well as the Council of Europe Youth Strategy 2030. The partnership offers a platform for their co-operation and has the function of a "think tank" and a laboratory, gathering and producing knowledge, translating it for an effective

use in youth policy and practice, developing and testing new approaches, considering traditional themes and innovative trends. The geographical coverage of the youth partnership encompasses the 50 signatory states of the European Cultural Convention (hence including all EU and other Council of Europe members), as well as neighbouring countries in the South Mediterranean region. Some of the activities may have an explicit regional focus on specific regions: Eastern Europe and Caucasus, South-East Europe (Western Balkans), South Mediterranean. All activities are communicated, and their outcomes popularised and disseminated, on the youth partnership's website, through social media, in publications and at relevant events.

In support of this goal, this guide has been produced to enable greater collaboration and more effective working with youth researchers, in order to support the youth field as a whole in the development of knowledge-based approaches.

### **Why work with youth researchers?**

Youth research can be defined as a multidisciplinary area of scientific inquiry into the condition of young people that uses social, psychological, economic, political and cultural perspectives. Within [Youth Research: The Essentials](#) (Petkovic et al. 2019), the role of youth research is mainly perceived through three stances:

1. The ethical obligation of our societies is to understand youth realities in a systematic way.
2. In order to understand broader social change, it is necessary to know how young people contribute to societal transformation, and how external circumstances influence their lives.
3. When designing policies, interventions, programmes, projects, activities and so forth, professionals need to know whether what is being done is likely to be of some help, and if so, to what extent. That extent may then be monitored to illustrate the impact. Without being naïve about the ways in which policy and practice interventions are actually shaped, we assert that sound evidence on and from young people offers a better base than ideology or intuition.

Consequently, it is essential to understand the realities of young people in order to develop coherent and inclusive youth policies. In a long-term perspective, youth research is the key to understanding the role of young people in society; while pictured in a short-term perspective, it is essential when trying to understand the different crises, circumstances or turning points that also have an effect on young people and require immediate action. It can be beneficial to involve youth researchers throughout the policy cycle. Within the public policies' development cycle, youth researchers can

accompany the policy development team in setting up the objectives, measures and indicators as well as the expected results.

### **What are the benefits of youth research to policy makers and practitioners?**

The benefits of using youth research are numerous:

1. It can be used for learning about youth needs, interests and realities.
2. It can be used to further the types of practices and instruments that better function in supporting young people and to map out the youth realities. For the policy makers, research is also an asset into projecting policy and thinking about what could work and what could be improved.
3. It can enable a knowledge-based approach to developing a new approach to policy.
4. It can be used to identify the effectiveness, relevance, efficiency and impact of policy/practice.
5. It can be used to facilitate learning about policies and youth practice working in different places and contexts, thereby encouraging the transfer of best practices.

Research can be based on knowledge collected through direct observation and human interaction, known as primary empirical research, or it can be based on the analysis of various texts, referred to as secondary research. When answering questions posed by policy makers in regard to the effects of policy interventions, the outcomes are often called evaluation, monitoring or impact studies (Petkovic et al. 2019).

### **What does the youth researcher role include?**

Youth researchers operate in a variety of areas within the youth field (they can be specialised in “youth studies”, but they are also labelled sociologists, political scientists, psychologists etc.). Broadly, youth researchers are specialists that have been trained in using research methodologies, have the skills and competencies that can support the data analysis and can generate a coherent set of research results and an interpretation of the collected data.

Researchers might sometimes have an expertise working with a particular type of data and will specialise in particular area methodology. Some of them might be familiar with using qualitative methods while others would be oriented to using quantitative methods. The research format and

research objectives are the things that would suggest the methods needed and therefore the potential researcher with whom to work.

It should be understood by different stakeholders that the youth researcher role is quite specific and requires a specific set of knowledge that covers youth realities. It is a specialised role relating to knowledge production and not only restricted to academia. Essential to youth research is also the potential and role of the youth researchers in disseminating and distributing the outcomes of the research projects in a language and manner that the other two angles of the youth triangle would approach and use in their work.

Whilst some researchers, particularly those based in universities, might seek grant funding to develop research following their own research interests, others undertake research based on commissions from policy makers or practice-based organisations. Potential commissioners might look for youth researchers in the universities or research centres, institutions that are traditionally associated with research. But the non-governmental institutions also have excellent research departments that produce tremendous numbers of research projects with excellent outcomes for policy and practice. Depending on the research project and its aims and objectives, stakeholders interested in developing a youth research project can work with individuals or teams of researchers.

Commissioning an individual researcher or teams of researchers allows the commissioner to **develop research that is specific to the needs** of the organisation/institution and ensure that they have access to research that meets their needs. This has a variety of benefits relating to:

1. Ensuring that **youth policies and youth practices are knowledge based**.
2. Increased **professionalism in documenting and developing** instruments, practices, projects, programmes and policies.
3. Increased **objectivity** and clear application of ethics that are relevant for policy and practices.
4. Determining a **smoother approach for the monitoring and evaluation** of the practices and policies, allowing for the development of the set of **indicators** to follow.

A researcher can undertake a range of tasks a project/organisation/institution:

- evaluating the effectiveness and impact of policies that have been implemented
- conducting a literature review and sourcing data on a thematic area in order to provide access to the most up-to-date knowledge in that area

- reviewing how policy is implemented across different countries/territories
- providing advice on programme design based on current research knowledge
- undertaking needs analysis of a community
- collecting data and developing instruments for data collection
- analysing programme data
- conducting research into a key theme topic
- conducting mapping of practices
- evaluations of programmes or project results.

What also makes a difference when speaking of youth research is that youth researchers can actually do a lot for young people! Youth researchers at times play the communication link role between young people and the decision makers. Especially when putting into practice participatory research and working directly with young people, youth researchers have the opportunity to go directly close to the youth voice, to the youth needs and interests and to represent these interests in front of the policy makers through the research reports that they are drafting.

Speaking of the youth role in research, young people might be at times research subjects, while in the other stances they can also play the researcher's role, especially in participatory action research activities when young people are trained to work with their peers in documenting different research activities. Also, young people could be consulted to frame the research and also to be the presenters of the research outcomes.

### **Where to find youth researchers**

At the European level, there are several opportunities to approach youth researchers.

1. [The Pool of European Youth Researchers](#) – PEYR for short – is a unique initiative on the European level and it represents a contribution of both the Council of Europe and the European Commission to evidence-based policy making in the field of youth. The PEYR network consists of 35 researchers and experts from across Europe who possess a wide range of expertise in different policy areas connected to youth. PEYR provides knowledge and expertise to the European Commission and the Council of Europe, as well as to the wider European youth field. PEYR members meet once a year to discuss broader issues

connected to youth research and provide input to policy initiatives of the two partner institutions.

2. The [EKCYC](#) is supported by a Europe-wide network of European Knowledge Centre correspondents nominated by the member states' ministries. The correspondents draft country sheets on national youth policies and answer questionnaires on the topics of Participation, Information, Voluntary Activities, and Better Understanding of Youth. The results can be found in the section country information of the EKCYC. The answers to the questionnaires are either quantitative (e.g. the numbers of young people who belong to youth organisations, the number of young people who vote in elections) or qualitative (e.g. measures to foster voluntary activities, actions that have been taken this year on the different topics and methods for increasing citizenship).
3. The [EKCYC expert database](#) allows experts in youth matters to place their own portfolios setting out their expertise and make them widely available. This database intends, amongst other things, to support the network building between youth practitioners, policy makers and researchers. The expert database contributes to the development of a European area of youth knowledge, in accordance with the overall mission of the EKCYC.
4. [Youth Wiki Network](#) – The Youth Wiki is an online platform presenting information on European countries' youth policies. The main objective of the Youth Wiki is to support evidence-based European co-operation in the field of youth. It does so by providing information on national policies in support of young people – in a user-friendly and continuously updated way. Currently, 29 countries participate in the Youth Wiki. The information is provided and annually updated by national correspondents (NCs), designated by the governments of each participating country. It is essentially qualitative, and allows for the analysis of reforms and trends in policy orientations in the participating countries.
5. **National networks** – At the national level, there are various research networks, some of them formal – set up by different authorities and institutions – either stable ones, project-based or set up for a specific purpose such as drafting policy documents and national youth strategies or running consultation processes on youth related matters (Roe and Stanojevic, 2020) or informal networks. A mapping of some of these networks is available in the report on [Mapping of Youth Research Structures, Key Stakeholders and Data Collections across Europe](#) (Ignatovitch and Petkovic 2020), where a full list of structures and examples can be found.



## **Commissioning or initiating a youth research project**

In the context of the above, commissioning a specific youth research project can be useful to both policy makers and practitioners. When engaging youth researchers on this basis it is important to be clear on the purpose of the research, its scope, and the competencies needed to undertake it. Identifying these before initiating a research project or call for youth researchers will likely lead to a more effective engagement. However, once the youth researchers are engaged it can be useful to fully review the terms of reference for the project. There may be alternative possibilities or problems in the project design which the researchers can identify before the project begins. This process can also help ensure that there is shared understanding on all sides.

## **Identifying the purpose of the research project**

Like any project, having a **clear goal or objective** is central to conducting research effectively. In a research project this usually means having a clear understanding of what knowledge you hope to produce through the research. Identifying this involves considering what topic or issue you want to gather knowledge about, what is already known about that area, what the gaps in knowledge are, and which gaps are important to address. It can sometimes be useful to create a research question as the central focus for a piece of research. An example could be: “How have disabled young people been affected by COVID-19?”

Alongside this, developing a clear understanding of **how you hope to apply the knowledge** produced can also be beneficial. Identifying why this knowledge is valuable and how research stakeholders might use it can also help give research a clear focus. This is often about identifying which areas and levels of policy and practice the research hopes to inform and improve.

For example, the research question above about disabled young people and COVID-19 could generate a wide variety of results. This could include anything from health outcomes and loss of income to the effect of COVID on social and education activities. If the purpose of research is to help local municipalities provide better support for young people with disabilities, the research can be further focused on identifying the practical measures that municipalities can implement to achieve this. However, if the research is intended to inform an advocacy campaign by youth organisations, it might focus on demonstrating the scale and impact of COVID-19 in order to demonstrate the need for more support to policy makers. However, in some cases it might not be possible to specify in advance how knowledge will be used. Research can also be open ended and exploratory, and how knowledge is used might be decided after the research is conducted.

Identifying what the **target audience** for the research results and key stakeholders is can also be useful. Knowing if the end results are intended primarily for policy makers, practitioners, academics, or young people and youth organisations will further help guide what the research explores. Each audience might have a different set of information needs and interests. Stakeholders may be more or less concerned with developments at local, regional, national or European level depending on their own interests. Further information on communicating research can be found in *Communicating Youth Research in Six Steps* (de Salvo and Moxon 2020).

### **Setting the scope of the research project**

After a clear purpose is defined, it becomes possible to identify the scope of the research project. This can be specified in terms of reference and used when engaging or contracting youth researchers. Ideally terms of reference should outline clearly:

- **The purpose** of the research project – What are the research questions and what will the research findings be used for?
- The **expected research outputs** – What documentation or other products are expected to be created by the researchers at the end of a project? Who are these documents intended for and how will they be published?
- The **budget and expected time frame** for the research – Is the research linked to any key events or policy process for which strict deadlines must be kept?
- How **data management**, sharing and research participant confidentiality will be dealt with – What data will be shared between stakeholders and how will the researcher or the commissioner be responsible for controlling research participants' personal data?

A term of reference might also outline an initial research **methodology**. There are pros and cons to specifying the methodology for the research in advance of engaging with youth researchers. There is a wide range of different methodologies used within youth research and not all methodologies can deliver the same results. Having a good understanding of which types of methodology are suited to the purpose of the research is necessary to select an appropriate methodology. If a methodology is specified without this understanding there is a risk that it may not be fully suitable for the project.

On the other hand, the choice of methodology will influence the required budget and timeframes for the project (and vice versa) and what researcher competencies are required. The commissioning organisation may also have access to resources (like stakeholder networks, or stored data) that make a particular methodology attractive. On balance, having some general indication of the

methodology before engaging researchers can be beneficial. In this case, the long-term relationship with researchers, having a partnership established, supporting or being part of a research network is very beneficial in supporting the research commissioner/beneficiary to determine the general guidelines for the research. However, a willingness to discuss and change this once youth researchers are engaged is also important.

Common methodologies can include:

- **Quantitative research** such as conducting surveys. This is useful for identifying trends amongst a large number of participants. It can be useful for identifying common opinions and issues amongst young people, identifying the impact of a programme, or mapping trends amongst stakeholders.
- **Qualitative research** such as focus groups, interviews or case studies. This is useful for creating in-depth understanding from a range of different perspectives. It can be useful for identifying what strengths or limitations exist within a particular practice or policy, or to develop a rich in-depth understanding of why certain social issues might occur and how they can be addressed.
- **Participatory research.** This involves supporting young people, or other groups to undertake research themselves as a method of creating participatory social change. It can be useful to help develop advocacy programmes, or design policy and practice in a participatory manner.
- **Secondary data analysis.** This involves conducting analysis on data, which has already been collected. It can be used for things such as analysing the population of young people in a certain area based on census data, and comparing this to who uses a youth programme.

These methodologies can also be combined in mixed methods research.

It is a good idea to draft **terms of reference** when deciding on the purpose, expected output, target audience, timeframe and data requirements for the research. If a research needs to be selected, terms of reference are key for the selection process and should be a common practice. They are not always used if the researchers are engaged in an organic way, as part of a network or as members of a research organisation supported by the research beneficiary and/or if the researchers are involved in defining the purpose and audience of their job. However, terms of reference are useful in all cases, beyond the selection of researchers, because they can be used as a permanent reminder of the purpose, scope and target audience. In a nutshell, terms of reference are an instrument helping the researchers to focus their work.

## **Deciding on what sort of competencies are needed by the researchers**

Youth research is a specialised role and not all researchers have the same skills and knowledge. Youth researchers usually have areas of thematic specialism within the field of youth (such as youth participation, or youth work). They will also focus on methodologies they are more experienced in (such as quantitative or qualitative methods). Although a researcher often has the flexibility to work on new topics and with new methods, it is important that the youth researchers engaged are well matched to the project. A researcher whose work focuses on statistical analysis of youth unemployment would be unlikely to be well suited to running participatory research on youth sexualities, for example. With a clear understanding of the purpose and scope of the research, it is possible to identify what competencies potential researchers need.

## **Engaging with the researchers during the research project**

The co-operation between a research commissioner and the researcher does not end once the researcher has been selected and the project has been agreed. Experience shows there are several important elements to keep in mind during a research project. In a nutshell:

- a common understanding of the research scope and methodology needs to be ensured during the research project;
- researchers often need support, especially for data collection;
- unplanned and unexpected issues can arise during research, and flexibility is needed;
- feedback is a key element to ensure the quality of research outputs;
- research doesn't end with a report, because how the research output is communicated and used is fundamental to achieve the initial aim of the research.

Before starting data collection and analysis, it is good practice to ensure that the researchers and those asking for research **have a common understanding of the research scope and clarity on the methodology** to be used. This is particularly important if the researchers have not been involved in the design of the research project, when its goal and scope have been decided. This common understanding is usually achieved through an **inception report**.

**Researchers need the opportunity to express their support needs** when conducting the research to ensure effective co-operation with the research commissioners and any other stakeholders. This can be done by clearly stating the roles of each of the parties involved in the research projects (the researchers, the commissioner) in the inception report. Moreover, **researchers may support in accessing research participants in order to collect data**. More often than not, research involves

collecting data using surveys, interviews, focus groups, other participatory methods or by requesting the data from institutions that are collecting and analysing them. Ensuring access to potential research participants and also data needed for the research may be a responsibility shared by the researcher and the organisations or institution commissioning research.

**Flexibility** is needed during a research process. Access to some data can be limited, the quality of data can be poor, access to data sources or the use of some methodologies can be impossible or very difficult (e.g. face-to-face surveys became almost impossible during the COVID-19 pandemic) or unexpected circumstances can hamper the research process. In this context, both the researchers and the research commissioner need to be flexible and to adapt the methodology and the research plan to the new circumstances, keeping in mind the goal/objectives and the target audience of the research.

**After collecting and analysing data, researchers need feedback** on their draft work. Drafting a research output (a report, a presentation, an article) is a process in itself and needs several drafts. Receiving clear constructive feedback on draft outputs is essential for the researchers and contributes greatly to the quality of the end result of a research project. General feedback is needed, but if it stays vague and broad, referring to the entire output rather than to specific elements, it is less useful and integration takes more time. For a quality output and a quick and smooth drafting process the most useful feedback is an honest and direct one, formulated to the point and if possible on the draft text or presentation.

**A clear plan on how research findings can be disseminated or communicated** to other stakeholders can be beneficial. It can be important to agree who has responsibilities for this and how it will be done. Researchers and those demanding research may also need to agree who owns the rights to the materials produced and if they can be publicly distributed. Communicating research findings can involve production of a number of different communication products for different target audiences. For further information on this see *Communicating Youth Research in Six Steps* (de Salvo and Moxon 2020).

### **Developing longer-term relationships and partnerships**

Ideally, the research activities of an organisation or an institution would not stop at an individual project. Building long-term relationships and partnerships with the research community are a guarantee of developing policies, programmes and policies that are effective, easy to measure and monitor and tailored to the youth needs, interests and realities.

In some countries, the authorities with responsibilities in the field of youth might have their own research departments or research associates that ensure the knowledge-based approach to the policies and programmes that they develop for young people. In other countries, these authorities would work with external organisations and experts whenever the research activities are needed. These individual experts or teams of experts are contracted through publishing the calls for experts or putting in place granting schemes for research activities. Additionally, in some countries, the public authorities are establishing partnerships with academic institutions in order to support research-training programmes, including support for PhD students.

Ideally, **creating and supporting research networks** at the national level could be the aim of every national authority/ministry. These networks would then have a valuable essential role in providing the policy makers with the essential information that would give validity to the policies that are to be developed.

Consequently, these **partnerships with grant-funded research institutions** should be on the policy makers' agenda as well as on the practitioners' working plans. Especially ministries and governmental agencies with responsibilities in the field of youth should be focused on more than commissioning a researcher or a team of researchers for individual pieces of work but should be interested to fund youth research centres, set up and develop research networks or to offer recurrent research grants for youth research projects that take place periodically. More than that, at the local level, youth organisations and public institutions might be interested to keep working with universities or local research centres, aiming as well for an on-going type of exchange that would definitely help the three angles.

For practitioners it is also essential to be constantly updated with most recent youth research outcomes and to base their projects and initiatives on accurate data. Establishing a dialogue with the research community and using the exchange of information with this community would help the development of youth projects and programmes that are tailored to youth needs and interests. Moreover, the research outcomes would also help the practitioners better understand the trends in the youth field and the potential upcoming issues and challenges that young people face. The youth organisations can also be seen as the sites of access for researchers to engage with young people, especially when participatory research methodologies are put in place. Having this dialogue setting put in place would also help researchers to adapt the communication of the research findings to a format that would be accessible to a wider audience and to inform practice and practitioners about the urgency and importance of these findings.

## Summary

Youth research has a strong contribution to both policy and practice: it can help review policies, evaluate programmes, identify key social trends and bring a knowledge-based approach to the youth field.

There are a number of ways to develop relationships between research and policy or practice. Individual research projects can be initiated or commissioned from researchers by policy makers or practitioners. Longer-term relationships can also be beneficial – this can be achieved through the use of grant funding or support for research networks and institutions. When initiating a youth research project it is important to be clear on the purpose and scope of the research in order to work with youth researchers effectively.

Youth researchers operate in a variety of research fields (they can specialise in “youth studies”, but they are many labelled as sociologists, political scientists, psychologists etc.). A researcher will have a set of thematic and methodological interests that they specialise in. Matching the researcher skills to the needs of a project is an important part of working effectively.

This checklist can be used to help ensure that the relevant discussion has taken place when initiating a youth research project.

<b>Checklist for initiating a youth research project</b>	
Create a clear outline of what knowledge the research is intended to produce	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify who the key stakeholders and audience for the research are	<input type="checkbox"/>
Create a clear outline of how that knowledge might be used	<input type="checkbox"/>
Develop an agreement on how data will be gathered, shared and controlled securely and legally between the actors involved	<input type="checkbox"/>
Define a research methodology that is suitable for the purposes of the study	<input type="checkbox"/>
Develop terms of references for the research	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ensure that the researchers involved have the relevant thematic and methodological competencies	<input type="checkbox"/>
Develop a timeline	<input type="checkbox"/>
Set a budget	<input type="checkbox"/>

Request an inception report to ensure that the researchers and the research beneficiaries have a common understanding of the research scope and to clarify the methodology to be used and the (possible) needs of the researchers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Co-operate with the researcher during the researcher's process and, if needed, support them for data collection	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide feedback to the researcher on draft outputs	<input type="checkbox"/>

### References and key links

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The ECKYP Expert Database, <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/expert-database>.

The European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKYP), <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/knowledge/-ekyp>.

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The Youth Wiki Network Contact Database, <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/youthwiki-contacts>.