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A knowledge-based youth pact

Informal Meeting of Youth Ministers and Austria Youth Event 2006:

Researcher's position paper

Rationale

- The White Paper on Youth gives priority to gaining more knowledge about youth, by bringing together existing knowledge, improving the quality and comparability of information and supporting knowledge exchange networks.
- The European youth research community is committed to the social co-production of useful knowledge and anchors this in the magic triangle (Luxembourg Presidency Conference, June 2005) between research, policy and practice. This, too, is a way to put democratic participation into practice and it contributes to making good governance a reality in Europe.
- Research-based knowledge complements experiential and practical knowledge. Its distinctive feature is its capacity to deliver quantitative and qualitative descriptions and analyses that are more detached from individual and political perspectives. Research-based knowledge therefore contributes to evidence-based policy and action, especially for the purpose of anticipating future needs and demands.
- What proposals can we offer to move the “youth knowledge agenda” forward and why is it important to do so?

State of play

- Gathering information and knowledge about young people is not a novel activity, but placing this explicitly within the context of EU-wide concerns began in earnest only around fifteen years ago. The 1990s proved to be a watershed: fundamental changes in the structuring and experience of youth within a rapidly transforming Europe — socially, politically and economically — prompted sharply rising need and demand for coordinated and transversal youth policy and corresponding action.
- This was the basis for the development of specifically European youth research, which aims both to generate an integrated, coherent knowledge base and to engage actively with youth policy and practice. This has produced not simply a wealth of comparative information about young Europeans lives and values, but also a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the social construction of youth in today's Europe. It has also led to new perspectives on youth research activity itself, with respect not only to its relationship with the wider society but also in reformulating classical distinctions between pure and applied research. These developments imply new and expanded sets of roles and tasks for youth researchers working in the European context, which in turn bring consequences for research training.
- The core dimensions of change for young people are not in question: we can no longer speak of normative transitions to adulthood; neither education nor the labour market correspond to young people's needs and aspirations; identities and lifestyles are increasingly plural, contingent and individualized; a chasm has opened up between young peoples perspectives and practices of participation and the participation options they actually have; intergenerational relations face major restructuring for both demographic and economic reasons; and the transition to knowledge societies mediated by information and communication technologies creates open, mobile economic and cultural environments that are re-shaping young people's life chances and risks as well as their social and learning environments.

- These changes cannot plausibly be treated in isolation from each other, whether in terms of research, policy or practice. We need integrated and coherent youth policy that is informed by integrated and coherent research-based knowledge, and we should not settle for less than we already know to be the case.
- This is why implementing the White Paper process and the Youth Pact could benefit from more research-based input and support: there is a risk that the individual elements of the White Paper and the Pact will not be brought into interaction with each other and hence the potential for effective policy measures will be reduced.
- The research community can also assist the quality of information and knowledge exchange between youth sector actors and interests: professional research skills and experience facilitate moderation between discourses and standpoints.

Employment — education — participation: integration and coherence

- The Youth Pact addresses the issues of education, employment, mobility, the inclusion of vulnerable youth and work-life balance. Each is relevant for the social situation of young people today, but with differing perspectives and implications. Taken together, these aspects of young people's lives comprise complementary aspects of active citizenship. At the same time, the Youth Pact as a policy package entails potentially contradictory implications for young people.
- The focus themes of the Austria Youth Event 2006 provide examples:
 - *Education (formal and non-formal)*: Young people face and experience rising formal education and qualification demands, but at the same time, these no longer guarantee good chances of labour market inclusion — and yet the price of education and training systems that are built on visibly differentiated achievement levels remains the exclusion of those who do not meet the required standards. This is ultimately a “lose-lose”

equation. Non-formal and informal learning seems to offer a promising solution, both bringing greater recognition of learning outcomes for all and increasing educational and social capital for vulnerable youth. But in terms of employment chances, non-formal learning participation and outcomes work most positively for those who are already educationally and socially well-resourced. For the formally low qualified and unqualified, the positive return will be lower and negative returns (stigmatising effects) are possible, hence doing little for the inclusion of vulnerable youth. This then becomes a “win-lose” equation. Finding “win-win” solutions can only work if education, employment and inclusion are handled as interdependent issues.

- *Employment* is young people’s chief concern, which is unsurprising given the now chronic hazards of increasingly extended and precarious initial transitions to the labour market. Active labour market measures for young people have made little real impact for vulnerable youth, whereas access to mobility as a solution remains out of reach for the majority of young people. Aiming for work-life balance makes sense for those who expect to be able to combine family work and paid work, but not so much for those whose employment chances are weak to begin with. Nor does it easily open up to other kinds of life balances altogether, such as between paid work over against identity and lifestyle choices. A coherent approach to working for young people’s inclusion must place the emphasis on social integration as a whole and not depend on labour market integration as the key determining factor. The fact is that paid work is not and can no longer be the only route to autonomy for young people today: linking social benefits eligibility too closely to employment and job search can undermine their access to independence and freedom of choice.

- The watchword for the *future* is indisputably participation as a transversal principle. This implies creating a social Europe capable of

flexibly welcoming young people as active citizens in their own right and on their own terms. This necessarily excludes treating young people instrumentally as “wombs and workers” in the service of Europe’s social and economic survival and wellbeing. Europe is facing large-scale social challenges in the coming decades:

re-balancing intergenerational relationships; managing diversity free of discrimination and disadvantage; making a mobile Europe possible and attractive for the population at large; and, perhaps most of all, reshaping democratic governance and forms of community engagement in order to adapt to the more individualised, fluid and diversified nature of participation that today’s young people favour (for example, environmentally-aware lifestyle; ad hoc civic action; social protest gatherings with a “leisured” character).

- Future action under the Youth Pact should, to correspond with the White Paper, therefore give greater emphasis to transversal approaches to gaining better knowledge about youth, for which research-based knowledge can provide a rational theoretical and empirical foundation.

IV Recommendations

- A knowledge-based youth pact that can rise to the above challenges must provide a framework for delivering:
 - a sound body of integrated, coherent information about young people’s lives from existing quantitative and qualitative sources;
 - comprehensive analyses of information and knowledge gaps;
 - continuously updated new information and knowledge for a fast-moving social world;
 - meaningful and robust comparative and intercultural analyses.

For the purpose of future oriented scenario-building it is necessary to support the early identification and anticipation of youth policy needs and demands.

- This requires a reliable infrastructure for exchange, networking and collaborative initiatives that maintains common standards by means of

professional (youth research community based) peer review mechanisms. The elements would include:

- sustained and sustainable development of the already existing European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCY) as the premier dynamic repository for European youth research-based knowledge;
 - a dedicated European reference framework for knowledge about youth (for example, regular European-level reports on youth research and policy, such as “Youth at a Glance”);
 - an advisory network which includes researchers capable of taking on a proactive and anticipatory role in supporting evidence-based policymaking;
 - support for higher education and training initiatives aiming to improve the quality and supply of European youth research specialists;
 - establishment of a standard-setting focus for communication, exchange and dissemination of research-based knowledge in this field (for example, a biannual conference with a high-profile publication of proceedings).
- These elements should lead to the establishment of a European Space for Youth Knowledge, structured by the White Paper’s priority topics and working on themes specified through the Youth Pact and future European policy documents on youth.