

# More young people active in public affairs despite negative perceptions

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FEARS that democratic society could be undermined because young people are not participating enough in public affairs have been dispelled by researchers at the University of Huddersfield.

After taking part in a large-scale European project they have found that although some [young people](#) spurn conventional institutions, they are highly active in participating as citizens in a range of different ways through developing their own methods of campaigning on a wide range of issues, such as homelessness and refugee rights.

"We were looking beyond the customary focus on formalised, structured processes of political engagement and exploring how young people get involved in ways that are often off the radar," said Professor Barry Percy-Smith, who is Director of the University of Huddersfield's Centre for Applied Childhood, Youth and Family Research.

"We were challenging the assumptions that young people aren't participating in democratic systems and we found evidence of the alternative ways that they are engaged," he continued.

Professor Percy-Smith and his Huddersfield colleague Dr. Gráinne McMahon, a Senior Research Fellow, have been members of a three-year, EU-funded project named PARTISPACE. Focussing on eight European cities, it set out to discover how and where young people participate, what styles of participation they develop and in what spaces it takes place.

## Youth politics in action

One of the eight cities was Manchester and it was there that Professor Percy-Smith and Dr. McMahon used the collaborative process known as action research to explore the social activism of young people. One of the groups they worked with was called Hidden, which campaigns on refugee issues. One of the outcomes of this was the development of a play developed by young people, that explores the invisibility and plight of the asylum seeker.

"We also undertook a project with young people from Manchester Youth Council," said Professor Percy-Smith. "We started to talk about their experiences of participating on the [youth](#) council and what that means to them and what their experiences are. We took them out of the formalised setting of the youth council and supported them in developing a project around youth homelessness, exploring how they can make a difference.

"The whole purpose of PARTISPACE was to start from the assumption that actually we know young people are very active in doing things, but what they do is not always accepted or recognised."

Full details of PARTISPACE and its various work packages and the outcomes are [available for download](#).

## Youthquake

A key conclusion of PARTISPACE is that young people are not apathetic or disengaged but are "more inclined to less formal spaces of participation that are built around their own terms, that are biographically relevant and in which they have more opportunity for engaging in ways that are more meaningful for them".

Policy implications are that young people—defined by PARTISPACE as the under-30s—should be "given the space and autonomy to participate as autonomous and self-determining citizens".

Professor Percy-Smith believes that there is a trend towards more decentralised, grass-roots politics.

"The so called 'youthquake' has been disproved, because the amount of young people coming out to vote hasn't changed," he said. "The young are not completely divorcing themselves from the mainstream system, but they are increasingly saying this system doesn't really work for them, so they are going to start becoming active in a self-initiated, self-determined way".

"So you will see issue-based politics in which young people are starting up their own movements, which is very exciting for democracy."

The PARTISPACE project is part of an ongoing programme of work on youth participation and citizenship in the School of Human and Health Sciences, including current work on voting age reform by Dr. Andy Mycock.

Provided by University of Huddersfield

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