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Digitally inclusive youth work, a blueprint

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The significance of working with digital appliances has become increasingly evident, especially for young people whose lives are predominantly digital, including their learning and leisure activities. In this policy brief, we aim to share the lessons learned from three national research projects focused on 'digital youth work', digital non-formal education and counselling. Within this project, we zoomed in on digital youth work for vulnerable youth. We will discuss the key findings from Belgium (Flanders), Ireland, Germany, provide reflections on the challenges, and provide recommendations for establishing effective digital youth work. These projects were conducted as part of the larger Digital Youth Work study by the National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps¹, which seeks to enhance and develop digital youth work practices throughout Europe.

Highlights of our study

- Digital youth work involves using and discussing digital media and technology in various youth work contexts, including online, physical, or blended formats. It can be used as a tool, activity, or content to achieve similar objectives as regular youth work, mainly to **empower and engage young people**. It applies or enhances youth work principles to support youth in engaging with digital technologies or tools.
- **Challenges** in digital youth work encompass digital exclusion, a lack of digital competences among youth workers and educators, and the sustainability of practices. Many young people lack access to hardware and internet connectivity and they may not possess the level of digital literacy that we sometimes think.
- Digital youth work offers **opportunities** such as reaching marginalised and vulnerable youth, reaching a broader audience, enabling accessible counselling services, and introducing new dimensions to youth activities. It also allows experimentation and development for both youth and youth workers and improves their digital literacy skills.
- Successful digital youth work that also reaches those vulnerable to digital exclusion and those being excluded, focusses on co-creation and **youth participation, collaborations, and knowledge-sharing**. Collaboration with expert youth work and digital technology organisations, and involving young people in co-creation are essential for sustainable practices.
- Youth work organisations require **policy and strategy guidance** on best practices, particularly for incorporating youth voices within the user design of digital and online platforms, tools, and practices.
- Online youth work in the form of digital platforms and tools is recognised within the field and on the international stage as a way to **break barriers for young people** to more easily access counselling services, youth information, training, and learning. The youth work sector can support digital citizenship and provide online safe spaces for young people to access digital environments outside of private industry-led platforms.

¹ Read more information on the project here: <https://www.oph.fi/en/education-development-and-internationalisation/long-term-cooperation-projects/digital-youth-work> and the European report here: <https://www.oph.fi/en/statistics-and-publications/publications/report-exploring-new-appealing-inclusive-and-engaging>

Highlights of this topic underscore the importance of addressing challenges and leveraging the opportunities of digital youth work to empower young people whilst also ensuring effective inclusivity.

1. Context of digital youth work

We can frame the importance and focus on sustainable and quality digital youth work within Europe's 'Digital Decade' initiative, as well as within the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan. The Commission is determined in its aim to transform the coming decade into a 'Digital Decade', enhancing Europe's digital autonomy and establishing benchmarks, such as ensuring a human-centric and transparent use of AI. With both policymakers and youth workers increasingly recognising the importance of digital youth work in our highly digitalised society, the European union put forward guidelines for digital youth work. They asked member states to include digital youth work in their policies, encouraged youth workers to engage in digital youth work, and commit to strengthening the digital skills and abilities of youth organisations and youth workers². Related to these guidelines, the European Erasmus+ program³ has integrated digitalisation as a crucial focus and set up this research project, reflecting the significance of digital youth work for Europe.

*"Digital youth work means **proactively using or addressing digital media and technology** [...] [It] is not a youth work method – digital youth work can be included in any youth work setting [...] [and] has the **same goals as youth work in general** and using digital media and technology in youth work should always support these goals. Digital youth work can happen **in face-to-face situations as well as in online environments** – or in a mixture of these two. Digital media and technology can be either **a tool, activity or content** in youth work. Digital youth work is underpinned by the same ethics, values and principles as youth work"⁴*

Digital youth work consists of using and/or discussing digital media and technology in different types of youth work contexts, e.g., online, physical, or a blended format, and in different manners, i.e., as a tool, activity, or content. It pursues the same objectives as general youth work and aims to achieve these goals through digital media and technology. Based on the definition of digital youth work and an in-depth mapping of digital initiatives in Flanders-Belgium, a typology was developed for digital non-formal education and the concept of digital youth work⁵:

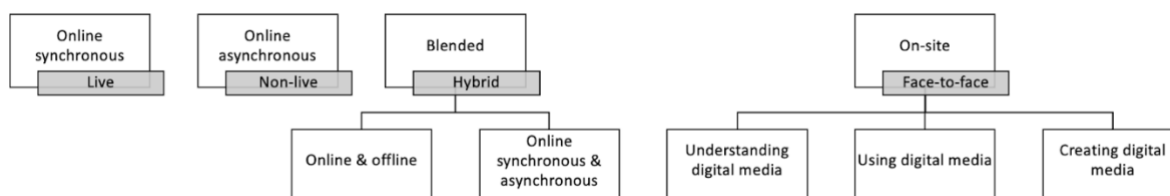


Figure 1: Digital Youth Work Typology

- Online synchronous entails a live, **real-time interaction** where both participants and facilitators are engaged online at the same time, for example, in a quiz.
- Online asynchronous is **non-live**, in which participants and facilitators are online at different times, for example, in a peer-to-peer discussion forum or by completing offline challenges set by the youth workers and sharing the results online.

² Council of the European Union. (2019). Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Digital Youth Work. Retrieved from <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ad692045-1b46-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>

³ The EU Erasmus+ program supports the organization of education, training, youth and sports throughout Europe.

⁴ Council of the European Union. (2019). Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Digital Youth Work. Retrieved from <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ad692045-1b46-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>

⁵ Vermeire, L. & Van den Broeck, W. (2022). SNAC Digital Youth Work Work Package 4 "New practices for online youth work" National report – Belgium, Flanders.

- Blended is a hybrid approach that either **combines** both online and offline components or integrates live and non-live elements. As an example, a Discord channel where youth workers offer guidance, structure, and fun activities.
- On-site practices focus on **engaging with digital media** in various ways, such as using digital media, creating digital media, and adopting a critical perspective, and focussing on understanding digital media, such as through a group game to improve digital literacy.

This typology not only serves as a framework for understanding the landscape of digital youth work but also lays the foundation for exploring the opportunities and challenges presented in the following chapters, which delve into how these different approaches can empower and benefit young people in today's digital age.

2. Opportunities encountered in digital youth work

Digital youth work has the potential to be a powerful tool for **supporting youth in their development** and empowerment. It offers several advantages, such as bridging distances, counteracting social isolation, providing a safe space and community (online), reaching a broader audience of young people who are unable to join on-site activities, enabling anonymous and low-threshold information and counselling, working on digital literacy, and reflecting on current topics such as cyberbullying, sexting, and AI, even introducing new dimensions to activities.

We note that youth work practices often focussed on challenging young people through active learning and reflection on certain decisions throughout the activity. It provides room for experimentation for both youth and youth workers. Due to youth work being more responsive to sudden societal changes and not being as restricted by specific learning targets, they are able to respond to signals and needs from young people more quickly and more effectively. Digital youth work is thus more **flexible and experimentative** than formal schooling, giving young people the opportunity to define their own boundaries, explore their interests, and develop their own voices in digital formats.

Due to youth work's youth-led and non-formal nature, a **trustworthy environment** is created where young people are free to experiment and participate without setting explicit learning targets. This especially has a positive influence on vulnerable or marginalised youth. Respondents noted that their target groups require **structured and safe spaces** for personal growth, self-expression, and a sense of community. Consequently, low-threshold initiatives, such as anonymous online counselling or short, clear minigames, are likely to positively influence their target group's well-being and (digital) competences. Formal education is not effective for everyone, principally those already marginalised by society, which is where digital youth work can come in. It can provide space for their voice to be heard and cater to specific needs, e.g., being disability inclusive. The reactive nature of youth work further reinforces this.

Zooming in on online youth work, we also see that **interactive engagement** is another key feature. It encourages young people to explore and reflect on their online activities. Privacy-compliant, easy-to-use counselling services are easily accessible, aligning with the daily habits of the target audience. Moreover, these platforms often offer various modules for **participatory processes**, from brainstorming and idea competitions to participatory budgeting and structured debates. This fosters more interactive and democratic engagement among the youth.

Additionally, online youth work offers crucial emotional and educational support, making these resources **accessible to a wider audience**, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, digital literacy and the accessibility of digital media remain significant challenges. Ensuring that initiatives are well-developed and tailored to the target audience is essential.

In short, when young people are provided a chance to access the right hardware, and given the support to develop digital competences, it can achieve very positive outcomes. The successful implementation of digital youth work within youth organisation requires a team that has experience in youth work as well as a passion for creative and digital technologies. Youth workers who are developing practices require support to implement and try creative innovative projects with young people. This setting has the potential to continuously develop and grow based on a feedback loop of youth-led support. As such, young people who are struggling with formal education structures, who are marginalised and vulnerable

for any reason, are supported to engage with peers and develop their passions to **create and engage with digital media**. Adopting an active, hands-on, playful, and possibly experience-based pedagogy that balances theory and practice is motivating the promotion of better learning outcomes. Digital youth work can be and often is, to give a few examples, pivotal in political education, media literacy education, and youth participation by raising awareness, providing resources, and fostering networking.

3. Challenges encountered by youth workers

Our results highlight several important challenges encountered by youth workers when establishing their digital practices. The themes encompass digital inclusion, a need for expertise and collaboration, co-creation and youth participation, and sustainability, discussed below.

Youth work organisations, particularly those focussing on vulnerable youth, have witnessed instances of **digital exclusion** among their target group, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts to address digital inequalities and enhance inclusivity. Most youth workers acknowledge that digital youth work initiatives require certain **digital competences** as well as access to hardware and software. There are certain assumptions among youth professionals and educators about young people's digital literacy. Young people are not as digitally literate as society tends to assume. Access to hardware, software, and the internet poses another issue, with many young people being digitally excluded, a concern observed particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Accessibility varies widely amongst organisations offering online or blended youth work. Some services employ multiple methods and on-site appointments to improve accessibility, while others are limited in their reach. For young people with disabilities, certain tools are designed to be widely accessible, often undergoing frequent testing with screen readers, keyboard navigation, and reduced colour contrasts. Some youth workers have spent several years on these tasks, showing just how big the challenge is. Rapid changes in internet topics and media literacy demand **quick responses** and frequent content updates. Dealing with software complexity, especially in accommodating the unique procedures of larger providers while ensuring user-friendliness, is also a struggle. Balancing accessibility, user-friendliness, and compliance with data protection regulations is a concern among youth workers, primarily for online practices.

Youth workers emphasise the importance of **expertise tailored to a target group**. Understanding the unique needs and challenges of different demographics is essential for effective digital youth work. Therefore, youth workers must have a clear understanding of their initiative's objectives and the needs of the target audience, as this understanding will influence the type of digital youth work required. It is vital to have a **signal/needs-oriented approach** to address other crucial issues the target group may face, such as ensuring access.

Within this research project, we note that **collaboration and knowledge sharing** among youth organisations emerges as a central theme. Collaboration with other organisations seems like a crucial part of developing sustainable, viable, and relevant digital initiatives. This emphasis on collaboration is not only echoed throughout the interviews, but it also aligns with the overarching goals of digital inclusion and the need for expertise as mentioned above. Research underscores the significance of collaboration as a means of adding to and complementing each other's work⁶. However, **effective communication** is paramount, especially when working together with partners outside of the youth sector. Properly aligning the target group's needs to, for example, the technical partner is crucial. Additionally, having ownership over one's platform or tool is essential, as a technical partner's involvement may change.

This also links to the importance of collaborating directly with young people. The findings stress the significance of **co-creation** and expertise in addressing the needs of their target groups. Who better understands their needs than the young people themselves? This approach empowers young people, **strengthening their voices**. Resulting in a digital initiative that actually caters to their needs through

⁶ Vermeire, L. & Van den Broeck, W. (2022). SNAC Digital Youth Work Work Package 4 "New practices for online youth work" National report – Belgium, Flanders.

thorough research and feedback. Initiatives that involve young people in their creation lead to more successful practices and more motivated participants.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge ongoing challenges related to the **sustainability and inclusivity** of digital youth work. While not all digital youth work is inclusive for every target group, youth workers are committed to working towards inclusivity and relevance. For example, making the necessary adjustments to initiatives, such as incorporating voice-over features or borrowing hardware from other organisations. To establish sustainable and accessible initiatives, three key criteria must be met. Firstly, **expertise** in the chosen theme, target group, and digital competences is essential. Many initiatives thrive due to partnerships with organisations that complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, thorough **research** before the launch or start of the activity is highly advisable. Looking into previous, similar activities and learning from them is recommended to ensure effectiveness. Especially for creating an online activity, this is a long-term process that requires meticulous oversight, preliminary research, and effectiveness measurement. Thirdly, it is crucial to **keep the target group in mind** and include them throughout the development process. Awareness of their needs, living environment, and context is essential. An activity that feels useful and relatable to the target audience's life experiences is more likely to be well-received and impactful.

It is important to address the above-mentioned themes comprehensively and collaboratively to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of digital youth work. Therefore, the study provides concise recommendations for improving youth work. They address the challenges of digital inclusion, sustainability, participation, collaboration, professionalisation, and regulation.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Provide guidelines

Address the lack of clear regulations for digital and online practices by creating understandable and feasible guidelines at the European level. Member states can further adapt these guidelines to their contexts. Cover topics like an online code of ethics and hardware provision. This can be in the form of a to-the-point guidebook with tips and tricks, a best practice database, etc. Ensure that existing evidence-based national guidelines are considered in the adaptation of these.

Recommendation 2 – Set up sustainable practices

To ensure long-term impact, conduct preliminary and subsequent research when implementing a practice. Involving the target audience, conducting impact measurement and effectiveness research is crucial. Provide practical guidance and inform youth workers of the financial support opportunities and calls, including European or international funding opportunities.

Recommendation 3 – Pay attention to digital inclusion and literacy

Emphasise the importance of digital inclusion and literacy for both participants and youth workers. Recognise that digital exclusion is not solely age-related but influenced by factors like disability, education, social support, and socioeconomic status. Therefore, support structures and policymakers need to raise awareness and share information on digital exclusion. Offer support for both participants and youth workers, including access to hardware and software, and provide accessible information, such as webinars and information guides.

Recommendation 4 – Support capacity building and organise train-the-trainer sessions

Develop a skills or training framework for youth workers and youth professionals that includes digital literacy. This can be a more general guideline on European level that can be adapted by member states to suit their specific needs. The need for applied capacity building and training is emphasised, along with post-session reflections to enhance the learning experience. Thus, provide accessible and flexible training opportunities on a national and local level.

Recommendation 5 – Set up collaborations and encourage peer learning

Promote knowledge-sharing and partnerships among youth organisations. Networking and informational events that promote peer learning can provide support and enable the identification of potential partners. Encourage qualitative partnerships by setting clear expectations and understanding each other's work methods and terminology.

Recommendation 6 – Have a clearly defined goal and target audience

Before implementing practices, define clear goals and a target audience. Consider the needs, access to resources, and digital competence level of the target group. Translating offline methods to online platforms is not straightforward and requires additional time for adaptation. Based on this, select the most appropriate type of digital youth work.

Recommendation 7 – Commit to youth participation and co-creation

Involve young people in the creation of digital practices, for example, allow them to beta test a service, or involve them in the first decision-making stages and consider pilot studies for validation. Prioritise a bottom-up and signal-driven approach. Actively listen to young people's needs, but also take into account and appeal to their talents and knowledge. Tailor activities to their specific needs and backgrounds. Equip youth workers with the required knowledge and tools for organising co-creation and participation discussions, and encourage knowledge-sharing amongst youth workers. Adapting to specific needs is crucial, and success is often achieved when a multi-professional team is involved.

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This research was conducted within the MUX Unit of imec-SMIT, VUB. The Unit is comprised of 14 junior and 7 senior researchers and specialises in media innovations, marketing and living lab methodologies. The Unit is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Wendy Van den Broeck.

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