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YOUTH FOR INCLUSIVE E-EDUCATION

E-mpACT

Inclusive Digitalisation in Youth Work after COVID-19

D4.2 EU Policy Paper

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Inclusive Digitalisation in Youth Work after COVID-19

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced societies into lockdowns, digital technologies became essential for maintaining access to both formal and non-formal education.This reliance exposed deep-rooted inequalities within education systems, particularly the lack of access to technology and adequate training for educators. In the case of non-formal education, while some youth organizations adapted quickly to the digital shift, creating online platforms and resources to reach young people, others struggled due to insufficient resources, infrastructure and support.

In response to this, IFM-SEI launched the E-mpACT project. "E-mpACT: Youth for Inclusive e-ducation" is a a 3-year E.U.-funded project designed to address the needs of youth impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly focusing on digitalization, non-formal education, and international solidarity. This initiative aims to bring about meaningful changes in our societies by exploring the global impact of the pandemic on youth, youth workers, and youth-related activities.

As part of this project, eight partner organizations from four continents—DUI leg og Virke in Denmark, Framfylkingen in Norway, Independence Youth Union in Palestine, Los Cachorros in Peru, Patsimederu Trust in Zimbabwe, The Slovenian Falcon Youth Union in Slovenia, and Woodcraft Folk in England—conducted national research on how COVID-19 and digitalization affected youth work.

The findings from this research were developed into national policy papers that reflect the diverse range of issues identified across different regions with suggestions to governments on how to alleviate the issues, and how to respond adequately to the new challenges after the pandemic. To maximize the impact, these national papers have been synthesized into this EU policy paper on inclusive digitalisation after COVID-19.

2. Defining the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened the digital divide, revealing systemic barriers to education that have long affected marginalised communities. As digital learning became essential, youth and youth workers faced both challenges and opportunities across diverse contexts. This shift underscored the importance to address individual needs to ensure equitable access to education. Despite the fatigue regarding digital learning and the pandemic, there is now greater awareness of the pandemic's impact and a commitment to using digital tools to bridge educational gaps.

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The closure of physical spaces during the pandemic, with 74% of youth organizations temporarily shutting down and 3% facing permanent closure (RAY Transnational Research Team, 2020), significantly impacted the accessibility of youth services. Despite these challenges, more than half of the young people who participated in youth activities found them beneficial, highlighting the critical role these organizations play in supporting youth during crises.

Financial constraints further compounded the accessibility issues, as budget cuts led to reduced services and staff layoffs within the youth sector. This, combined with the challenges of digital fatigue and the uneven distribution of digital resources, underscored the urgent need for targeted interventions to bridge the digital divide and support youth in adapting to new learning environments.

In response, some organizations adopted hybrid models, blending online and in-person activities to maintain engagement while adhering to safety protocols. Nevertheless, the pandemic highlighted the need for more robust digital infrastructure and training to ensure that all young people, regardless of location or background, can access quality education and support services.

3. Research overview

The E-mpACT Research Report used 7 research projects conducted across the world (Denmark, Norway, Palestine, Peru, Slovenia, UK and Zimbabwe) to examine the impact of COVID-19 on young people, youth work and their communities. The researchers were young people from each country who were trained by specialist youth-research think tank, Youth Policy Labs.

The research report was commissioned in response to how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities by intensifying the digital divide, particularly affecting young people in rural and underserved areas. Many lacked access to reliable internet or the necessary devices to participate in online education, leading to a marked drop in the quality of education received. Additionally, the sudden shift to digital platforms revealed a lack of proper training and support for educators, who struggled to utilise technology to engage students. This shift not only eventually caused digital fatigue among students and educators alike, but also resulted in a loss of institutional knowledge, as traditional learning environments were disrupted.

Through online and in-person trainings and virtual meetings, over 130 young people across 4 continents developed the skills to conduct local research. By empowering young people in each country, and develop a focus from their own priorities and experiences, the final E-mpACT Research Report represents a multi-faceted and organic examination.

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Across all the research projects, over 500 people were interviewed in person, online and through focus groups, with the significant majority aged 30 or below.

The wide breadth of focuses across the 7 research projects is a reflection on how vast and varied the challenges were for youth work to overcome during the pandemic period. Though the focuses were diverse, the findings showed recuring themes, environments and attitudes.

4. Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted young people, youth organisations and the professionals who support them. The E-mpACT Research Report examines this impact and identifies 7 areas that collectively represent the personal, logistical, organisational, and mental consequences from a youth perspective.

Impact on Youth Work

The research showed there was continued interest throughout the pandemic from young people to continue participating with youth organisations and activities, with 87.5% of young people interviewed maintained or increased their engagement in youth activities during lockdown and 56% actively sought out youth activities. Strikingly, only 12.5% of young people expressed no interest in participation, citing dangers or restrictions as barriers (Independence Youth Union, 2024) .

But, due to frequently changing rules and guidelines, and unclear communication about COVID-19 policies, it was very hard for youth organisations to know what can be organised, if anything, and there was a fear of breaking the rules, contributing to a reduction in services (Pawluczuk, 2022). Yet with this, youth organisations faced increased demand for services (mental health support, career guidance, educational support) but struggled with reduced resources and lack of support from the government (Independence Youth Union, 2024).

To add to this conflict, financial cutbacks exacerbated these issues, leading to reduced services and staff layoffs within the youth sector. 49% of youth organisations experienced budget reductions, with some cuts exceeding 40%. Furthermore, 38% of organizations reduced staff hours, and 12% had to lay off employees (Böhler et al., 2020). In addition to human resources, the pandemic led to the closure of physical spaces and forced youth organizations to adapt quickly, with 74% temporarily shutting down and 3% closing permanently their physical spaces (RAY Transnational Research Team, 2020).

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Despite these challenges and limitations, more than half of the young people who managed to engage in available activities found them beneficial, underlining the essential role these organizations play in supporting youth during crises (Independence Youth Union, 2024).

Transition to online work

Though the pandemic is considered a booster (Horta & Pitschmann, 2022) or "lever" for online youth work (Vermiere et al., 2022), the process of moving services and activities online caught the youth sector off guard. Often, both youth work infrastructure and youth workers were not prepared for the swift transition, and for many youth organisations, it was their first encounter with youth work in online spaces (Vermiere et al., 2022).

With this, the digital divide became more apparent, revealing deep-rooted inequalities as many young people lacked reliable internet access or the necessary devices to participate in online education (Böhler et al., 2020). Educators, too, were often unprepared for the rapid transition to digital platforms, struggling with inadequate training and support (Vermiere et al., 2022).

Digital technologies are both perceived as facilitators and barriers to participation and accessibility. While online allows for wider participation, the pandemic led to a renewed sensibility for the ways in which social inequalities are translated into digital inequalities.

No matter their access to online youth work, young people still felt isolated and missed being part of a group or community, and the pandemic led to digital fatigue and sparked a strong desire among both young people and youth workers for on-site experiences (Framfylkingen, 2024).

These findings prove the multi-facited consequences of COVID-19 on youth work and the significant need to anlyse the benefits and limitations of the sudden demand for digital-based youth work. This is important not only to be more prepared for the next lockdown scenario, but also for a more comprehensive strategy to improve education inclusivity during 'normal' periods. With this understanding, suggestions can be made to develop education and digitial systems and infratstructure.

5. Suggestions

As a result of the conducted research, we have formulated a set of suggestions to the European institutions to work towards a more inclusive digitisation for the youth work and education sector.

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1. *Accessible Funding for Youth Work Organisations*
Releasing funds to support the digital transition is certainly critical, yet it is also key to ensure that these funds are accessible to youth work organisations with limited staff capacity. By creating more inclusive processes to apply for EU funding, the transition to online work and education in youth organisations and NGOs will be better supported. Ensure that funding remains accessible and adaptable as activities develop online.

2. *Creation of Tool Libraries*
Tool libraries reduce over-consumption by allowing individuals to borrow rather than buy digital tools and resources. The initiative can even include online subscriptions and platforms, allowing those with limited access to online education to access high quality equipment and thereby connect to online educational and youth activities.

3. Training educators and youth workers in the use of digital tools
Increase EU investment in training programmes to equip educators with the necessary skills to use digital tools effectively. Address disparities in digital readiness between Member States and ensure that online education is seen as an opportunity rather than a challenge for educators.

4. *Tackling inequalities by providing digital infrastructure to children and young people with limited resources.*
Given that home resources are more significant during school closures than during other periods, we can conclude that the links between lack of resources and lower achievement increase during school shutdowns, further widening educational inequalities. EU funding should be targeted to address these inequalities, not only by providing training, but also by equipping young people and children with the necessary digital infrastructure to access education and online activities.

5. *Funding for inclusive digitisation beyond EU borders*
It is a reality that international work and connections are becoming more and more widespread. In response to this internationalisation of youth work, and alongside the principle of international solidarity, we believe it is crucial that international bodies and institutions provide funding for digitisation covering areas outside Europe. We call for the extension of EU funding for digital education to non-EU countries, especially those that face significant challenges in accessing technology and education.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital divide, highlighting systemic barriers to education and youth work that have long affected young people with limited resources. As

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digital learning became essential, young people and youth workers and educators faced challenges to effectively access the online education and training. In this context, EU institutions are at a crucial juncture in shaping the future of education in their member states and beyond. By facilitating access to online youth work and education, the EU can lead the way in making digital transition more equitable and accessible for all.

Integrating digital training into education programmes and increase accessibility to digital infrastructure is essential to ensure that young people are well prepared and equipped for the challenges of a rapidly evolving digital landscape. By focusing on reducing the inequalities exposed by the pandemic, the EU has the opportunity to create a more welcoming and accessible digital ecosystem.

We would like to conclude by stressing the potential of extending EU funding and support beyond its borders, in particular to countries that face significant challenges in terms of access to technology and education. By opening up resources to these regions, the EU can contribute to global educational equity and improve outcomes and access to education in an international context.

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