YES FORUM

Empowering
young people

Navigating the digital transition:

New Technologies in Youth and Social Work

About the YES Forum

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

Content

Introduction

Digitalisation is the transformative process of integrating digital technologies into everyday life. It refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities – including the most disadvantaged – have access to information and communications technology (ICT).[1] Efforts to digitalise continuously shape our broader society. The topic of digitalisation has increased in popularity since the internet was established. It has become even more discussed since the Covid-19 pandemic, as people and services moved away from physical spaces. Yet, digitalisation has the potential to lead to more inclusion, or more exclusion.[2]

Knowing how technology works, learning to scrutinise information, and being curious, as well as critical, towards new technologies is more important every day.[3] Digital technologies have already profoundly changed our lives and become essential in our communication, interactions, work, and education. Digitalisation has already impacted our access to activities and services such as those related to travel, shopping and entertainment. There is no doubt that digital literacy plays a crucial role in what it means to be a modern-day citizen and to access modern life in general.[4] Digitalisation is both vital and inevitable to young people's future. Every day, they use digital tools and instruments to communicate, learn and to exchange information, for leisure and entertainment.[5] All young people today will need technological skills and an agile mindset towards technology in their future work and everyday life, and youth work should encourage this.[6] This presence of digitalisation in youth work has grown significantly over the last few years and is now accepted as a part of the sector's practice.[7]

Digitalisation and AI are great tools to help reach more young people, especially those considered 'hard to reach' because of different social, geographical or economic conditions, disabilities, physical constraints or cultural barriers.[8] However, the rapid digitalisation process has also determined a new landscape for inequality, caused by varying access to ICT, as well as the risk of exclusion within online spaces and communities. Strategies on digital youth work must grapple with utilising the advantages of digitalisation, while mitigating the negative aspects of it. The world is becoming digitalised and young people are at the heart of this development, accordingly, digital youth work should not be seen as separate from youth work, but as an essential element of it.[9]

This policy paper focuses on the opportunities and risks of new technologies in youth and social work and provides insights from the experience of the YES Forum. In a nutshell, the first part of the policy paper provides general information on the EU's initiatives which are aimed at making Europe fit for its

[1] Șerban et al., 2020
[2] Bohnenkamp and Findeisen, 2021
[3] European Commission, 2017
[4] Ibid.
[5] Șerban et al., 2021
[6] EC, 2017
[7] Șerban et al., 2021
[8] Ibid.
[9] Siurala, 2021

digital future. Two further sections elaborate on the opportunities, and critically address the risks stemming from the increased use of digital tools and AI in youth (social) work which affects vulnerable youth and youth professionals. Finally, we present recommendations for how policy makers, education institutions and social service providers can support and equip young people and professionals to navigate the digital landscape responsibly and effectively, mitigating potentials risks.

The EU's approach to its digital future

The digital future has also proven to be an increasingly important topic for the European Union, prompting the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.[10] This Declaration presents the EU's vision for digital transformation, which is dedicated to ensuring a secure, safe, and sustainable digital transformation which prioritizes people, aligns with fundamental rights and the core values of the Union.[11]

To guide the EU's digital transformation, the European Commission has presented the Europe's Digital Decade policy programme, with the aim of making Europe "fit for the digital age" and "empowering people with a new generation of technologies". This programme consists of concrete targets and objectives for 2030. One of these concrete objectives is that by 2030 a minimum of 80% of European adults should have basic digital skills.[12] Recognising that digital skills are central to the EU's strategy for achieving technological sovereignty, closing the digital divide, and fostering a human-centred digital environment, the European Commission is committed to addressing the digital skills gap and advancing initiatives and strategies to enhance digital competencies among Europeans.[13] To keep pace with ongoing digital (and green) transitions, people must engage with lifelong learning, given that in the changing world skills will be a "determinant of social cohesion and personal well-being."[14] For these reasons, improving education and skills is an important part of Europe's overall vision for digital transformation.

The new European Skill Agenda was therefore adopted in 2020. The agenda is a five-year plan to help individuals and businesses develop additional highly sought after skills and to put them to use.[15] In addition, the European Pillars of Social Rights serve as a social framework to guarantee that the digital transformation, alongside the European Commission's goals of climate neutrality and managing demographic changes, is equitable and socially just.

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[10] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/european-declaration-digital-rights-and-principles

[11] For more details see Europe's digital decade: 2030 targets | European Commission (europa.eu)

[12] For the first digital agenda for Europe 2010-2020 see Digital agenda for Europe (europa.eu)

[13] European Commission, Shaping Europe's digital future Digital skills and jobs | Shaping Europe's digital future (europa.eu)

[14] European Commission, Digital Transition Digital transition - European Commission (europa.eu)

[15] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en

What are the benefits of the digitalisation in youth (social) work?

Artificial Intelligence and digitalisation are increasingly reshaping youth work, social services, and non-formal educational contexts in many ways. Firstly, the reach of youth work has grown since digital tools and AI improve access to resources, training, and educational materials. It has partially enabled to connect with young people who may previously have been defined as 'hard to reach'. Consequently, both the role of social services and education has expanded.

For youth work, improved levels of remote support and services are now accessible in marginalised and rural areas. For example, in the case of the German youth migration services, enquiries from rural areas can be made via the advice platform by youth seeking advice who do not have the possibility to visit an advice centre in person. Hence, digital tools ensure better accessibility of the target group in accessing support, by connecting young people who may have previously been excluded from face-to-face counselling with a service they need. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and in times of reduced social contacts counselling centres were able to continue offering their services by utilising digital tools

Digital youth work offers young people faster access to information and basic guidance, through an interactive approach. Digitalisation may also result in improved availability of services, regardless of young people's place of residence or their willingness to expose their identity.[16] However, online counselling is not yet an integral part of the youth counselling landscape. Often it is the youth service centres themselves which choose to offer online counselling in addition to their on-site services.

Moreover, digitalisation and AI can contribute to a more inclusive youth sector. Access to technology is an important factor in determining how youth with disabilities engage in the development of their community, participate in the labour market, or in the democratic processes of their country.[17] For example, for people with visual or hearing impairments specialist tools and applications exist which read things aloud and even have the capacity to teach people sign language. Additionally, new assistive technologies such as eye-tracking devices can provide a high quality of life for young people who otherwise are unable to communicate. Arguably, there are also positive aspects of digitalisation for young people. For example, in the case of LGBTQIA+ young people, the digital word enables them to access information, find representation and media that reflects them, create online communities, and share stories with others.[18] Within the youth sector it is likely the case that there is a limited number of specialist LGBTQIA+ educators and relevant organisations, but digitalisation offers young people to build their own support system.

The anonymity the internet offers is often portrayed as a gateway to bullying and hate speech, but it has been shown that the ability for young people to remain anonymous while expressing issues they face offers a freedom which face-to-face support cannot.[19] It appears that young people in current times find it easier, or at least more accessible, to express themselves online. By engaging with the digital world,

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[16] Șerban et al., 2021

[17] Banari, 2021

[18] Moxon et al., 2021

[19] Curwen, 2021

youth workers can help young people who would otherwise not seek help. In addition, anonymity can also provide an outlet for young people, as they are not only consumers, but also creators who are able to utilise digital tools for self-expression.

Digitalisation, when applied to youth work well, includes offering user-friendly advice and support with minimal barriers, ensuring that even those with limited digital literacy or resources can benefit. In essence, digitalisation can make services not only more affordable but also more inclusive and straightforward for everyone. With the support of chatbots, young people can get access to the services they need faster, while digital tools can be used to offer more personalised information and guidance based on the real needs of young people.

Moreover, it is anticipated that AI will automate a bulk of administrative tasks, making more time available for professionals to conduct human-centred work and grassroots youth work. While digital transitions in youth counselling offer exciting opportunities, they also come with certain challenges. For instance, providing youth counselling via apps (WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, etc.) presents a great potential, nevertheless data protection concerns and restrictions on the use of these platforms by youth professionals can limit their full implementation.

In international settings, the use of AI-powered translation tools has become a standard practice, enabling seamless communication and removing language barriers. This trend is also gaining momentum in youth counselling, where both professionals and youth are increasingly turning to AI-supported translation tools to enhance understanding and accessibility. These tools allow advisors to communicate more effectively with young people from diverse linguistic backgrounds, ensuring that language differences do not become a barrier to support.

In conclusion, embracing digitalisation in the sector of youth work can significantly enhance accessibility and inclusivity in social services and education. By breaking down geographical barriers, digital tools enable young people in rural or marginalised communities to access the support system and resources they need. Moreover, technology has the potential to foster an inclusive environment for vulnerable youth, allowing them to engage more fully in their communities. The anonymity provided by online platforms empowers young people to express their challenges more freely, facilitating connections with support services. Additionally, AI can streamline administrative tasks, allowing professionals to focus on more meaningful, human-centred work. Overall, the digitalisation of youth services is complementarily to on-site services and may not only simplify access, but also enriches the experiences of both youth and the professionals supporting them.

What are the risks of the digitalisation in youth (social) work?

While digitalisation is positively affecting youth (social) work practice and has been evidenced to make access to social rights easier,[20] the digital transition entails certain risks and challenges that require critical reflection.

One of the most prevalent risks of digitalisation and AI stems from the lack of digital literacy, both for vulnerable young people as well as for youth workers. Traditionally, the digital divide has been seen as a problem of access to digital technology. However, more recent research frames the digital divide as a 'divergence of skills'.[21] The less digitally literate young people are, the more likely they are to be exposed to online risks such as harassment and cyberbullying. Additionally, they may be unable to recognise misinformation and filter bubbles. A filter bubble is the intellectual isolation that occurs when websites use (AI)-driven algorithms to selectively present information based on user behaviour, such as clicks, browsing history, search history, and location[22]. Filter bubbles occur when an internet user sees only information and opinions that conform to their own beliefs as a result of social media algorithms which 'personalise an individual's online experience' but which can act as a filter from other people's perspectives.

Contrary to the myth of young people being 'digital natives', it is now known that contact with digital technologies may not be enough to ensure that one acquires advanced digital skills. The same is true for digital youth work, it is not only about youth workers having access to computers and knowing how to use them, but also about the ability to use, understand, create, and communicate content[23]. Moreover, the young people who are the least likely to have digital skills are those most likely to be facing multiple forms of chronic and acute disadvantage (e.g., poor literacy skills, living in households affected by drug/alcohol misuse, experience with the criminal justice system). The same factors which in general cause social exclusion – the EU-Council of Europe refers to five areas of possible inclusion or exclusion: education, the labour market, living, health, and participation – these factors also affect digital exclusion[24].

There have also been concerns about the effect of digitalisation – especially social media – on the mental health of young people. Associations have been made, for example, between high daily social media use and depression, as well as anxiety. In addition, social media use may also be associated with a decrease in self-esteem and life satisfaction because users compare themselves to photos of people looking their happiest, which can lead to body image concerns and potentially eating disorders.[25] In this context, we can clearly observe the risks stemming from problematic smartphone or internet use, and the impact of

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[20] European Social Work Conference (2024) Core messages. 20240424 EUSWC core messages (departementwvg.be)

[21] Bohnenkamp and Findeisen, 2021

[22] Beal, V. (2024) Techopedia, accessed 02-10-2024

[23] Siurala, 2021

[24] Ibid.

[25] Street, El Asam, and Katz, 2021

digital addiction on young people. A trend which the European Parliament aims to address by suggesting that new EU rules will contribute to making digital platforms less addictive.[26]

The use of digital tools and AI in social and educational settings presents several risks, with data privacy being a primary concern. As these tools often handle sensitive personal information—such as health records, behavioural data, and sensitive socioeconomic data—there is a significant risk of this data being exposed, misused, or inadequately protected. If not securely managed, this data is vulnerable to hacking, unauthorised access, and data breaches. Potential leaks could have serious consequences for individuals and youth work organisations.

In youth social work, the issue of bias in AI algorithms poses a serious challenge that can worsen existing inequalities, particularly for marginalised groups. Since AI systems are often trained on historical data, it may contain inherent biases which reflect historical societal inequalities. If these biases are not adequately addressed, AI can perpetuate and even amplify discrimination against already vulnerable populations, such as youth from low-income backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, or those with disabilities.

Another significant risk of using AI in youth work, particularly in counselling, is the potential change in communication dynamics. Traditional face-to-face or even phone consultations often rely on personal interaction, emotional cues, and the ability to build trust over time. When AI is introduced, especially through automated messaging or chatbots, there's a risk that personalised communication may be lost. One key issue is that AI-driven consultations can abruptly break off without proper feedback or conclusion, leaving young people feeling unheard or misunderstood. Without a human presence to ensure follow-up or closure, young people may disengage from the process, leading to unresolved issues and an absence of support. Additionally, AI may not fully grasp the emotional depth or nuances of interactions with young people, potentially resulting in impersonal or inadequate responses. This shift could undermine the core trust-building element that is critical in youth work, reducing the effectiveness of counselling overall.

As AI systems become more integrated into the daily tasks of youth work professionals, there is a concern that youth workers may become less engaged in critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving processes that are essential to their roles. Relying too heavily on AI for assessments, case management, or even counselling could reduce the development and use of key professional skills, such as empathy, intuition, and nuanced understanding of individual needs. Furthermore, there is a risk that these AI systems – and digitalisation in general – will make systems more complicated, instead of simplifying them.

The shift to online counselling for youth work also brings risks due to the change in workload and the impact on staff well-being. With digital tools enabling constant communication, staff members face an influx of emails, chats, and calls that can arrive at any time of day. This creates challenges in maintaining

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[26] European Parliament (2023) New EU rules needed to make digital platforms less addictive. New EU rules needed to make digital platforms less addictive | News | European Parliament (europa.eu)

clear boundaries between work and personal time, leading to difficulties in separating professional responsibilities from private life. The lack of structured working hours can result in burnout, as staff may feel obligated to respond to requests outside of regular hours, eroding their work-life balance.

Lastly, youth workers seem to be divided in their opinions about the digitalisation of youth work. There are youth workers who admire young people's mastery of the digital media and their quickness as early adopters, and there are the more traditional youth workers, who prefer face-to-face work, are critical of young people's media habits, and who have a negative attitude towards the virtual world.[27] The resistance of the last group of youth workers to adapt to the digital world, and to embrace its innovations, must be managed.

In conclusion, while digitalisation offers numerous benefits for youth (social) work, including improved access to services and support, it also presents significant risks that warrant careful consideration. A notable concern is the lack of digital literacy among both youth and professionals, which can expose vulnerable youth to online dangers and perpetuate existing inequalities. Additionally, the impact of social media on mental health, coupled with data privacy risks, highlights the need for robust regulations and protections in digital space and environments. The reliance on AI in counselling can shift communication dynamics, potentially eroding trust and personal connection between youth workers and those they serve. Furthermore, the increased demands on staff due to digital tools can lead to burnout and work-life imbalance. Ultimately, as the field navigates these complexities, it is essential to strike a balance between embracing digital advancements and addressing their associated challenges.

Policy Recommendations

Involve Youth as Equal Stakeholders in Digital Policymaking

To foster a more inclusive and cohesive Europe during the digital transition, it is essential for policymakers to prioritise youth participation in decision-making processes related to digital topics. This involves not only acknowledging the presence of young vulnerable people in these discussions, but also recognising their critical role as equal stakeholders. Creating safe and participatory platforms for dialogue, where youth and youth work professionals can share their perspectives on equal terms, empowers the younger generation to actively shape the future of our society and ensures their voices are heard and represented. By integrating youth into the policymaking process, we can create more effective and relevant policies that reflect the needs and aspirations of younger generations.

Invest in Youth Services to Safeguard Well-Being and Foster Long-Term Social Cohesion

Austerity measures that lead to reduced budget allocations in youth services have a direct impact on the well-being and future prospects of young people, as well as on the sustainability of the support systems

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[27] Siurala, 2021

themselves. In turn, this could lead to higher long-term costs such as increased social welfare expenditure and undermine social cohesion. Investment in support systems for vulnerable youth is crucial since these structures provide the stability, guidance, and opportunities young people need to thrive and navigate the digital transition. Prioritising funding for preventive youth social services, which engage early and directly with youth at-risk, helps avert negative outcomes.

> **Prioritise Digital Inclusion in EU Policies to Empower All Citizens**
> **Through Comprehensive Digital Education**

Digitalisation means there are numerous opportunities to reach and engage individuals, deliver support, connect people and to promote social cohesion. However, not everyone in our society is able to keep pace with these advancements. To leave no-one behind, it is important that EU policies prioritise digital inclusion and establish the necessary conditions for all individuals can benefit from these developments.

Digital inclusion should not only focus on providing everyone with access to digital tools, but also on improving access to digital education (and digital literacy). Basic digital skills are necessity for participation in a rapidly-changing society, and within the labour market. Comprehensive digital education programs are needed to ensure that young people, educators, and youth social workers obtain the necessary skills to utilise AI and digital tools responsibly. In today's increasingly digital world, it is essential that individuals are not only proficient in using technology but also understand the ethical implications of its use. These programs should encompass a range of topics, beginning with digital literacy itself, which includes training on how to effectively navigate, evaluate, and create digital content. This basic knowledge is crucial for empowering young people to engage with technology critically and creatively.

> **Promote the Institutionalisation of Online Youth Services to Enhance Integration**
> **and Effectiveness in Youth Work Across the EU**

To enhance the effectiveness of youth services across the European Union, it is essential to institutionalise online youth services as a core component of the overall youth service framework. Digital youth work should be seen as a part of a mixed offer for young people, and not be viewed in competition with physical face-to-face delivery. Each has its merits and should complement each other. The primary consideration should be how young people want to engage with youth workers and youth work.[28] This vision requires developing policies that support youth service providers in integrating online services alongside traditional services, providing targeted resources and training for professionals, and fostering collaboration between service providers and policymakers.

Importantly, funding must be allocated to ensure the successful implementation of digital youth services, and to enable an inclusive youth service environment which effectively utilises digital tools and

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[28] Taylor, Johnston, and Hatfield, 2021

AI, and ultimately improves outcomes for young people throughout Europe. Good management is needed to facilitate a smooth transition to digital youth work and to meet resistance and criticism from youth workers. The task of managers is twofold: to seriously listen to resistance and criticism, and to create opportunities for the staff to learn about the meaning and use of new media to young people.[29]

> **Implement Comprehensive Data Privacy Policies and Education to Protect Personal Information and Create Awareness among Social Media Users**

Institutions and organisations handling private, personal data must adhere to strict data privacy standards to ensure the safety and confidentiality of individuals' information. Robust privacy policies should protect against unrestricted data collection by big companies and limit targeted advertising practices that can manipulate user behaviour and decision-making. Additionally, digital education programmes should prioritise data privacy awareness and algorithm literacy. It is essential for young people to understand that using free online platforms often entails "paying" with their data and attention. In other words, these free platforms track people's interests and preferences, and advertising companies are paying for these data to target people with personal advertisements[30]. In addition, the AI-driven algorithms learn what people like and will use this to influence users into spending more and more time on a given platform. The more time is spent for example on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc.), the more income they generate via advertisements.

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[29] Siurala, 2021

[30] Sturges, 2020

Conclusion

The prominent narrative about the potentially negative impact of digitalisation, in particular the impact of social media use on young people's mental health and well-being, has often led to neglect of the positive effects that it has on young people's lives.[31] Young people tend to view social media as a positive influence and recognise the social benefits it can provide (e.g., being able to connect with family and friends, being involved in a community). The world is becoming digitalised and young people are at the heart of this development. Youth work cannot stay outside this space but should actively engage with the topic.

This does not mean that youth workers, educators, and policymakers should neglect the risks that are associated with digitalisation. If we focus on targeted efforts in improving infrastructure, providing access to digital tools, enhancing digital literacy training, and fostering collaboration with community organisations, we can more effectively close the digital gap for vulnerable youth across Europe. Ensuring that young people and youth workers have the necessary resources and skills to navigate the digital landscape is essential for fostering inclusivity, enhancing educational outcomes, and empowering them to thrive in both their personal and professional lives.

It is crucial to emphasise that AI tools should be designed to support, rather than replace, human interaction in education and social work. Institutions and policymakers should promote the development of technology that prioritise inclusion, empathy, ethics, and fairness. By ensuring that a human-centred approach is retained, AI solutions can enhance the quality of interactions and decision-making processes, ultimately benefiting both professionals and the young individuals they serve.

As discussed earlier, digitalisation and AI have the potential to either enhance social inclusion or deepen social exclusion. By thoughtfully addressing both opportunities and challenges, we advocate for the implementation of the policy recommendations outlined in this report and for a stronger emphasis on the social dimension of the digital transition. This approach will help advance social inclusion and foster a more equitable and inclusive society in Europe.

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[31] Street, El Asam and Katz, 2021

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