



Empowering  
young people

**POLICY PAPER – COVID-19**

**IMPACT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Consultations With Young People And Education Professionals**

Editor: YES Forum

Author: Çağla Ezgi Yıldız

Contributions: Thais Dutra Fernández

Proofreading: Marine Trolet

Design: Ralf Schnarrenberger

December 2022



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

This publication has been funded by the European Commission's ESF+ Social Inclusion operating grant (EuroPower-101059198).

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

## **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 ..... 4**

**Policy Responses So Far ..... 5**

**Policy Recommendations ..... 6**

**Conclusion ..... 9**

**Bibliography ..... 10**

## Introduction

In times of crisis, young people are more likely to be disproportionately impacted, compared to other social groups. The COVID-19 pandemic is not an exception, and young people were negatively affected, especially in terms of employment, education and mental well-being. The pandemic has also deepened inequalities between different age groups and among young people from different backgrounds and identities (OECD, 2020). To that end, there is a need to make a distinction between the general population of young people and those in marginalised situations.

In 2021, the rate of young people<sup>1</sup> neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) was 13% in the EU (Eurostat, 2022). There are variations across Member States, and the proportion of NEETs ranged from 6% in the Netherlands to 23% in Italy. In 2019, 12.6% of young people were NEETs, which was the lowest point in a decade in the EU, but following the COVID-19 pandemic this increased to 13.7% in 2020. From these figures we can see that COVID-19 had a significant impact on the number of NEETs in the EU.

Those already in this situation at the onset of the pandemic were among those most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, as they often also lack the digital skills to access the limited opportunities for education and training. Beyond the lack of digital skills, another obstacle that was observed was the lack of adequate facilities, equipment and environment for digital learning for young people as well as youth work organisations. [Inequalities in internet access and digital devices have translated into obstacles to learning and working in remote settings.](#)

Similar to other work fields, the first and fastest response to the pandemic in the field of education, training and youth and social work was switching from on-site activities to online ones by using digital tools more often than ever. For young people, this has been more challenging as there are also obstacles to young people's digital engagement stemming from digital poverty and limited access to technology (McArdle and McConville 2021, Marshall et al. 2021).

NEETs are a heterogeneous group, so in order to be able to establish appropriate and tailored strategies to reach them we first have to hear them. In this report we will mainly focus on the topic of digitalisation, its effects on youth and social work organisations and young people. We will first present the policy responses that have been provided so far, and then our own policy recommendations.

In October 2022, the YES Forum published two reports on the COVID-19 impact on young people and youth and social work organisations. The report [“YOUTH AND SOCIAL WORK and the COVID-19 pandemic: Impact and perspectives”](#) is based on consultations with education professionals, and it gathered and analysed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the YES Forum members to identify common challenges, and share best practices that could be used to inspire our members as well as other social and youth work organisations (YES Forum, 2022a). According to the results of this report, the most common COVID-19 impacts are the decrease in outreach to the target group, the increase in

---

<sup>1</sup> population aged 15–29

telecommuting, reduced or cancelled on-site activities and the restricted movement of staff. In one way or another, all of these impacts required the digitalisation of activities and interactions with the target group and colleagues.

The second report *"The value of learning mobilities in a post-pandemic context"* is based on consultations with young people and professionals, and explores how they experienced learning mobilities in a period of transition to an almost-post pandemic context (YES Forum, 2022b). The key message of this report is that online activities cannot fully replace on-site learning mobilities, especially regarding the benefits of intercultural exchanges. Besides confirming the benefits of learning mobilities for young people and professionals, the report also points out the challenge of addressing the environmental impact of international exchanges.

In this policy paper, we aim at presenting our recommendations to the policy level for dealing with the COVID's impact on young people's lives and on the activities of the youth and social work sector. We will mainly focus on the "forced" digitalisation for young people, education professionals and the youth and social work sector. We will draw our conclusions from our continuous consultations with young people and the two reports mentioned above.

## Policy Responses So Far

In general, the younger generation is considered to have higher levels of digital readiness and to be more used to digital tools than older generations. The most recent European-wide statistics about young people's digital participation indicate that 95% of young people aged 16-29 in the EU use the internet every day (Eurostat, 2022b). 83% of these young people use the internet to participate in social networks, while only 24% use it for civic and political participation and 35% used it for online courses. These European statistics might have some limitations such as not being representative enough to include young people in marginal situations in the data collection process. When discussing young people's realities, it is crucial to note that they are indeed a very diverse group of individuals, whose digital participation might be affected by intersectional factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, or/and disability (Alper, Katz, & Clark, 2016).

Even for those who use the internet regularly, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the extent of existing digital gaps and inequalities, even raising questions on the availability of data related to internet and computers access within households. The digital gap and inequalities have had an effect on the topics regarding education and skills, employment and professional activities, health and mental health and information and counselling (Ştefan and Şerban, 2020).

After the pandemic hit, a number of changes took place at the EU level in the area of youth policy. Policy-makers recognised that young people were especially vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, and

efforts were made to protect them. At the EU level, the Youth Guarantee<sup>2</sup> was extended to those aged 25–29<sup>3</sup>, and large amounts of funds were made available to help young people, in particular to help in achieving the new target goal of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030 (Eurofund, 2021). [These initiatives show that the EU is giving all the incentives to support young people’s post-COVID-19 recovery, however, there is still much to be done in order not only to address the immediate needs, but also to aim at protecting and fulfilling young people’s rights in the long run.](#)

With regards to national policy responses in Member States, youth-specific policies particularly aimed at keeping young people in education and encouraging internships and VET, while most direct employment support measures were aimed at the general population (Eurofund, 2021). A lot of measures related to education and youth services concentrated on facilitating distance learning and improving the digital infrastructure. Most of the identified national-level measures were temporary and intended to last only until the pandemic ends.

## Policy Recommendations

### **Bridging the digital divide and decreasing inequalities in access**

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified pre-existing digital divides and technical inequality. Effective policies should benefit the already connected while bridging the digital divide and decreasing inequalities between the general population and the young people from diverse backgrounds with the objective of leaving no one behind.

First and foremost, policy responses should be developed with a strong intersectional dimension to ensure that they adequately address the situation of young people from diverse backgrounds, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised (Moxon et. al., 2021). To that end, policy-makers at the EU level should introduce a holistic approach to collect data that are inclusive of all young people and can be disaggregated based on the socio-economic status. Only in this way can we understand, analyse and provide appropriate solutions to the diverse challenges young people face.

Concerning the digital divide and inequalities, policy-makers should take further action [to expand broadband internet and computer access to make it more accessible and affordable](#). This should ensure that all digital tools and platforms used in formal and non-formal learning are perceivable, operable, understandable and robust, and can be accessed by all young people.

---

<sup>2</sup> The reinforced Youth Guarantee is a commitment by all Member States to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

<sup>3</sup> Before 2020, it only included young people aged below 25.

In addition to access to the tools, there is a need [to invest in the public programs to develop young people's digital skills throughout their life course](#), granting them easier access to education, training, employment, and other services.

### [Recognising digital youth work](#)

Here it is important to mention youth and social work organisations as they foster active youth participation in society. The “forced” digitalisation following the pandemic has brought significant changes to European youth and social work.

Before the pandemic the activities of youth organisations were mainly in-person where young people could meet, cooperate and interact with each other. Youth work methods and their delivery have been affected by the sudden need to go digital. Youth organisations and workers had to react and find solutions quickly in a sustainable way by adjusting to the new digital norm. This has been challenging as there are also obstacles to young people's digital engagement stemming from digital poverty and limited access to technology.

Furthermore, as a result of physical distancing, young people's emotional well-being and mental health have been negatively impacted. Therefore, youth organisations faced a particular challenge in discovering and developing innovative methods to work with young people and reinvent themselves as digital youth workers.

At the policy level, [digital youth work should be recognised and supported as an essential field of youth work practice](#). Youth and social work practice has a significant role in supporting meaningful digital youth participation (Farrow, 2018) and digital citizenship. To this end, the role of youth work settings should be further recognised as an “informal, responsive and democratic education hub for young people” (Pawluczuk, 2020).

### **The on-site experience cannot be fully replaced**

The shift to online activities from on-site ones could be seen as adding flexibility to both participants and organisers. In reality, however, the pandemic forced young people, education professionals and youth workers to equip and integrate the online tools at an unprecedented speed. Young people, especially the ones in vulnerable situations, experienced difficulties with distance learning as educational institutions and service providers struggled to move to online teaching. Inequalities, particularly affecting disadvantaged young people, and their disengagement were mentioned among the main challenges experienced by youth workers.

A shift to online services is not always the best solution. There are advantages and disadvantages to both virtual and in-person activities, and sometimes they are complementary. On one hand, virtual activities are considered to be more flexible, time efficient, environmental-friendly and accessible as they do not require travelling. On the other hand, on-site activities offer important benefits such as interpersonal relationships with the target group and colleagues, a more sociable environment, and

more creative results. In addition to this, most of the engagement methods used in physical spaces (such as informal conversations, body language and group work) are not as effective via online outreach.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the change from on-site activities to online or hybrid activities, the outreach of youth organisations to their target group has also been strongly affected. This impact has neither been fully negative or fully positive. On one hand, limited digital access of vulnerable young people has led to their disengagement from online youth work activities as some youth organisations did not have the capacity to access digital tools and reach their target group with those instruments. On the other hand, for some organisations, an increase in online activities and digital methods opened doors to reach even more young people through social platforms (YES Forum, 2022a). However, this is highly dependent on the capacity and resources different organisations have.

In this sense, while fully recognising the value of on-site activities, [providing and promoting more blended learning approaches between online and on-site activities](#) can be a good opportunity for more inclusive education and training.

#### **More emphasis on mental health and well-being**

As a result of physical distancing, young people's emotional well-being and mental health have been negatively impacted. Limited access to technology has been an incredible obstacle, completely isolating young people or leaving them with very few options.

Young people with disabilities have faced extensive challenges as many of the digital platforms and services do not meet their needs. As a result, youth mental well-being was negatively affected because of distance-learning, lockdowns and curfews following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental health services had difficulties reaching young people, particularly those who needed them most. Youth mental health had already been an issue that had remained largely unaddressed by policy before the pandemic, and the youth mental health debate focused mostly on social media and health behaviour aspects (Eurofund, 2021).

The pandemic, which has lasted a relatively long time bearing in mind the duration of young adulthood, has created significant additional issues in terms of mental well-being, which is unlikely to recover as quickly as the economy and employment rates might.

[Greater policy attention and funding are needed to ensure the availability of mental health professionals, to facilitate access to mental health care, to continue to reduce stigma around mental health and to reach vulnerable young people.](#) Meanwhile, although there is a role for digital services to be played in the area of mental health, this method of delivery needs a rethink if fast and effective services are to be developed.



## Creating and sustaining a safe digital world for young people

Keeping in mind the opportunities and potential digitalisation has on people's lives, it also generates many risks such as cyberbullying, exposure to harmful online content, information bubbles and lack of critical thinking, and questions of privacy and data protection (EU–Council of Europe youth partnership, 2020). Following the fast digitalisation and use of the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, young people were the most vulnerable ones in the face of these risks.

If young people are not supervised and trained in the use of digital media, they may also face the danger of social isolation in an offline world and discrimination from those with different views. This is especially true of young people who belong to vulnerable groups: they might isolate themselves if they do not have reliable support in the offline world. Limited digital skills and competences also make young people more prone to these risks.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many privately-owned technologies and applications were used, including in education and training. These were not secure enough, not properly verified and not ready for increased usage. This made both young people and education professionals even more vulnerable in the face of cyberattacks.

In this sense, policy-makers should ensure that the online world is a safe space for young people and an empowering and inspiring one in which they can participate, learn and share. To this end, all educational curricula should include the best practices for online sources and applications to avoid any misinformation and bullying among young people. Furthermore, policy-makers should raise young people's awareness on their individual rights regarding personal data and safe use of the internet.

## Conclusion

Digitalisation is definitely the change the younger generation wanted to see, but it also might be the one that will impact the activities young people are mostly engaged in. Overall, all challenges mentioned in this report need consistent policy responses. These responses should not be only based on short term, emergency solutions but on tailor-made, long-term ones where digital tools are part of a human-centric approach, fostering equity for all young people.

## Bibliography

Alper, M., Katz, V. S., & Clark, L. S. (2016). Researching children, intersectionality, and diversity in the digital age., Available online: <https://bit.ly/3YwkAdZ>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

EU–Council of Europe youth partnership (2020), SOCIAL INCLUSION, DIGITALISATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3Wi8B1w>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Eurofund (2021), Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the EU, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3VVKB4B>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Eurostat (2022a), Education and training in the EU - facts and figures, Available online: <https://bit.ly/30SvllH>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Eurostat (2022b), Young people in Europe a statistical summary, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3uT3ZmS>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Farrow (2018), SALTO THINK TANK ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION: closer to the edge of participation and activism, Available online: <https://bit.ly/2CyOgQM>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Marshall, T., O'Prey, L., Parkinson, A., Grunhut, S., Teifi, I., Usher, S. & Knight, E (2021). Research to inform development of the youth work strategy. Available online: <https://bit.ly/31D0tIj>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

McArdle, Eliz and Leighann McConville (2021). At the Threshold: youth work through the COVID-19 pandemic. Available online: <https://bit.ly/31Eo30D>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Moxon, D., Bacalso, C, and Şerban, A (2021), Beyond the pandemic: The impact of COVID-19 on young people in Europe. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3PvFkhC>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

OECD (2020), Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3Skq47K>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Pawluczuk (2020), European Digital Youth Work and the Covid-19 pandemic: What's next?, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3FYmxsg>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

Ştefan V. and Şerban A. M. (2020), Youth inclusion, digital solutions and the global pandemic, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3YxikDk>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

YES Forum (2022a), YOUTH AND SOCIAL WORK and the COVID-19 pandemic: Impact and perspectives, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3W7AqtY>, accessed on 01 December 2022.

YES Forum (2022b), The value of learning mobilities in a post-pandemic context, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3iZ25hM>, accessed on 01 December 2022.