



JFF – Institut für
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Digital Projects in International Youth Work

Final report of the scientific monitoring of the project

„IYW.digital - International Youth Work.digital“

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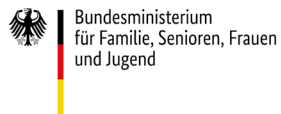
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1 Introductions

Digital transformation is considered to be one of the key changes taking place in the world today. It influences practically all aspects of society, with digital systems now commonplace in business and administration. However, digital change is also clearly visible in our daily lives; as such, it also shapes young people's realities and impacts on educational processes.

Social distancing as well as other measures introduced to curb the spread of Covid-19 can be said to have acted as a catalyst for digital transformation – suddenly, digital media were present in virtually all fields of education. Without these tools, education, along with international youth work, would have been practically impossible to offer. That said, the rapid transformation that occurred during the pandemic obscured the fact that the use of digital media in international youth work in fact began long before the pandemic, giving rise to new formats and approaches. These were then applied more frequently during the pandemic, during which it emerged that the changes taking place in the international youth work field require providers to carefully consider how they design their activities to ensure the quality of their work meets the high standards that exist in this field.

This is where IJA.digital – Internationale Jugendarbeit.digital comes in. The study was occasioned by the pandemic-induced switch from analogue (offline) to digital (online) projects in international youth work and was designed to systematically evaluate the insights gained during this period so as to identify the success factors at play and in turn, help the international youth work field to develop and evolve.

The project was run in cooperation with IJAB – International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany between May 2021 and December 2022, with funding and support from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the specialist and funding agencies for international youth work.¹

It was preceded by another, shorter, project that ran between October and December 2020, again with BMFSFJ funding, which included an online symposium for international youth work experts to start identifying opportunities and needs for action in regard to digital transformation in international youth work.

The key terms of reference were a set of quality criteria for international youth work (IJAB – Fachstelle für Internationale Jugendarbeit der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e. V. 2004) that had been drawn up in 2004 by representatives of German youth organisations and their umbrella associations, with IJAB as coordinator. IJA.digital was designed to reflect on and adapt the objectives and criteria detailed therein.

With the support of practitioners, the team researched how and to what extent it is possible to realise new potential through digital and hybrid formats (e.g., in regard to obstacles to access and participation) and what challenges may need to be overcome.

This translated into the following key research question:

To what extent are the quality criteria for international youth work suitable for adequately evaluating the quality of digital youth exchanges, in particular given the new challenges and opportunities resulting from the use of digital media?

Building on the answers to this question, the research project sought to create an evidence-based framework for developing a digital methodology for the international youth work field.

The (learning) experience of the participating young people as well as of the experts played a key role in this context. The analysis centred in particular on extra-curricular youth exchanges and workcamps for young people.

¹ Franco-German Youth Office (DFJW), German-Polish Youth Office (DPJW), ConAct – Coordination Center for German-Israeli Youth Exchange, Tandem - Czech-German Youth Exchange Coordination Centre, Foundation for German-Russian Youth Exchange, JUGEND für Europa, German-Greek Youth Office (DGJW) and Deutsch-Türkische Jugendbrücke.

2 Elements and methods

The study comprised two elements during which different methods were applied.

The backdrop of the project was a document detailing the transformational requirements, opportunities and challenges for the methods applied in international youth work that was drawn up following a debate among around 90 representatives of the international youth work during an online symposium (Brüggen et al. 2021). The project then concentrated on the extent to which these identified opportunities and challenges are reflected in current digital practice and how this may influence the adaptation of existing quality criteria. The project also took account of any open questions that had come from partner organisations. This part of the study was dealt with in two parts.

Element I: First, the researchers undertook a systematic analysis of reports on digital international youth work projects that were run in 2020 and had used a variety of digital elements. Both purely online projects, but also blended and hybrid projects were in scope (for an explanation of these terms, see below). The 43 analysed project reports were submitted by the specialist and funding agencies, the partner organisations of the project. 36 projects involved young people, the other seven were for experts.

Element II: During this phase the researchers undertook a qualitative evaluation of ongoing projects. Again, they assessed to what extent the identified theoretical opportunities and challenges manifested in practice and what factors were at play. The team also focused on aspects for which element I had not produced sufficient (or sufficiently clear) data. Nine projects were evaluated in depth during this part of the study. The researchers used a variety of methodologies that allowed them to triangulate the data and hence examine it from a number of perspectives. This phase ran from November 2021 to July 2022.

For element II, each evaluated project was visited online by observers at least once, and structured one-on-one interviews with experts were conducted online. These interviews focused on the opportunities and challenges the experts had experienced during the online visit;

they were also asked to share their thoughts on more general issues around digital international youth work, such as the ideal minimum length of a project.

Online group interviews were conducted with the young people who had participated in the observed online sessions; they were asked to share how they had experienced the activity. They were also questioned on the advantages and drawbacks of the online and offline elements of international youth work projects. During offline group interviews, the young participants were invited to design their “ideal” digital international project.

The data were analysed according to a number of focus points that were selected based on the opportunities and challenges identified during the preceding expert symposium. More focus points were added over the course of the project. This exercise resulted in the following eight areas of evaluation, based on which the empirical material was analysed:

1. Digital international youth work formats
2. Access and participation
3. Communication and interaction
4. Participants’ skills and preparation
5. Team members’ skills and training
6. Cooperation with partner organisations
7. Factors relevant to planning, implementation and achievement of objectives
8. Team leaders’ evaluation concerning the future of IYW projects with digital elements

Additional data for analysis came from the minutes taken during internal team reflection meetings for two of the nine projects. These had been initiated by the project partner IJAB as part of IJAB’s project “Living Labs: Internationale Begegnungsorte für Toleranz” and received special attention from the research team. Further information came in the shape of summary reports of the DIY2 Labs – a series of digital events run by IJAB during which international youth work experts together tried out new methods and tools and discussed their respective experiences.

The recorded interviews and group discussions were transcribed and pseudonymised. The audio transcripts and project reports were then coded using the MAX-QDA software package. The researchers used a deductive code tree that incorporated the areas of evaluation listed above. Codes were added to the code tree inductively based on the material analysed. Once coded, the material was paraphrased and interpreted according to the areas of evaluation and enriched by additional relevant information from the minutes of the reflection meetings and the summary reports. The interpretations were then discursively validated by the project team.

3 Results

The results section of this publication is segmented according to the eight areas of evaluation mentioned above. Each segment is preceded by a short text detailing the key research questions in each area.

3.1 Digital international youth work formats

This area of evaluation focused on questions such as:

- How are online and offline elements combined during digital international youth work projects?
- According to the young participants and experts, what is the ideal minimum duration of a digital project?
- How long should individual online sessions last?
- What online tools are used most frequently and what is their function?

These questions yielded the following insights:

Online and offline elements can be combined in various ways. In practice, this can result in a wide variety of formats that, roughly speaking, can be categorised as purely online, hybrid, or blended. These three categories were developed over the course of the project to help describe the many different digital formats in international youth work. As detailed below, however, some of the examined projects used a combination of these basic categories. Even so, the categories can help to create some common ground when it comes to understanding the different options.

- The evaluated online-only formats were exactly that – all participants were connected online and each took part in the activity using a personal device.
- In the hybrid formats, online and offline phases took place at the same time. For instance, one youth group was offline in one location while the other connected from another location online.
- The blended formats involved an alternating sequence of online and offline activities. Depending on the project, the online phases took place at different points in time: in advance, at the same time, or afterwards.

However, as mentioned above, some projects used a mix of these formats. The feedback from the team leaders as well as the participants clearly showed that they wanted any future formats to involve a suitable and proportionate mix of offline and online elements. In other words, training curricula and funding regulations should be adapted to ensure that such a suitable mix can result. Particular mention was made of online elements in the run-up to and after an exchange. As regards memorial site-related projects, the feedback suggested that didactically, it makes sense to have an online preparatory phase that focuses on a range of aspects in advance of the actual site visit.

Asked about the ideal minimum duration of a digital project, the feedback was mixed. Some team leaders and young people stated a preference for short projects lasting a number of consecutive days (without a break). Others said they preferred medium-length programmes with between four and five meetings spread over two or three weeks. Yet others stated they would rather take part in longer-term projects over a number of months with a monthly online meeting. The actual duration of a project was felt by the team leaders to be a secondary consideration; they stated it was more important to incorporate sufficient time for learning processes to evolve, for reflection to take place on the individual sessions, for building trust and for engaging in an intercultural dialogue. Also, they said, programmes need to be easily compatible with the young participants' daily lives.

As for the ideal length of individual online sessions, the interviewees felt that three hours was the maximum. Important aspects to them were an attractive programme design and structure as well as sensible scheduling, given that activities in online settings often take longer, which can lead to undesirable breaks and delays. The team leaders also said that obtaining feedback from participants as well as technical difficulties can cause delays that in online settings (in contrast to in-person settings) are more difficult to bridge with informal conversations, etc. As one expert put it,

“You need to consider that when you’re doing online or hybrid activities, people’s perception of time is very different to how they perceive time offline. Every single activity, every single item on the agenda takes longer and consumes more time overall. The technical issues alone! You need to explain everything. And then there’s the lack of non-verbal feedback from participants. You can’t always be sure that everyone’s heard you, everyone’s understood, everyone’s still on board. To make sure you don’t lose that connection, you need to keep reaching out to the participants verbally, which again takes time.”
(Team leader, one-on-one interview)

Besides the ideal length of the projects overall and of individual online sessions, interviewees were questioned about the online tools they most frequently used for the projects. The three most commonly mentioned tools were Zoom, Padlet and WhatsApp. The team leaders in particular appreciated Zoom because it was easy to use, plus unlike other programs it offers a simple language interpretation function. However, the participants were not quite as keen about Zoom; they preferred applications such as wonder.me as they are more dynamic. They also proposed incorporating virtual reality (VR) sessions because these create a sense of “presence” in the virtual space and help everyone to get to know each other and build more meaningful relationships. One participant said,

„And [...] this is just an idea. Maybe one could also think of other ways of meeting each other, for example, via VR or something, so that everyone really sits in the room together and we see each other. [...] it could be a good way to get a deeper connection with the other participants, because they really see a person, not just this at the laptop or something.”
(Participant, group discussion)

Padlet was mainly used as a file repository and documentation tool and to provide participants with information and documents ahead of the actual project. Participants also used it to engage in asynchronous collaboration.

WhatsApp was mostly used by team leaders to share organisational and logistical information with participants. The participants also used WhatsApp to interact between online sessions.

It is evident that the tools were selected and used according to their respective specific functions. It is also evident that while it is frequently used as a platform for digital formats, Zoom does not necessarily respond to the needs and desires of the participants, as evidenced by their feedback. The tools and media that young people use most often amongst themselves are mainly seen as an add-on, but are rarely considered as the main platform. The primary consideration, however, is how the tools in question are actually used and what functions they offer to the respective user groups when implementing digital formats.

3.2 Access and participation

As regards access to and participation in digital projects, the following questions were asked:

- Do new channels of access open up if online tools are used?
- What new disadvantages can result?
- To what extent is (new) potential for participation that can emerge from the use of online tools opened up in the projects?
- What challenges to access and participation are there in connection with using online tools?

First, it should be noted that in the case of the projects in scope, the use of online tools was shown to have made access easier in many ways:

- The elimination of travel expenses made it possible for young people to participate who have few financial means at their disposal.
- The digital activities were accessible to participants who had difficulties physically leaving their country because of, e.g., travel restrictions or a difficult political situation.
- Some interviewees stated that digital projects are suitable for young people who feel uncomfortable meeting new people or who are anxious about travelling. Being able to take part in an online activity from the comfort of their usual surroundings is “reassuring” to them, as one respondent said (team leader, one-on-one interview). He also said:

“[...] an online activity allows us to reach out to people who we may never have been able to reach out to even in ten years. People who maybe would never have dared to travel abroad [...]. So we are certainly removing some of the barriers.” (Team leader, one-on-one interview)

This is also reflected in the statement of a young participant who said he preferred online interaction to offline. As he explained,

“Firstly, it’s your home, it’s comfortable. It’s warm and it’s great, you can just sit in the kitchen, your room and talking in comfortable atmosphere.”
(Participant, group discussion)

While some barriers to access are removed, new forms of disadvantage arise.

- The project reports and interviews suggest that digital projects put young people at a disadvantage who have few or no financial means and hence cannot afford the technical equipment they need to take part in a digital project.
- Interviewees also cited other negative factors, such as unstable internet connections or a lack of privacy. Because of these, some young people are unable to participate in digital activities at all or (have to) drop out over the course of a project.
- When it comes to the inclusivity of online formats, it emerged that there are no suitable software solutions and no methods to incorporate said solutions that would enable young people with hearing or visual impairments to take part in a digital project.

In other words, the study shows that the implementation of digital elements removes certain barriers to access and opens up new target groups. However, new forms of disadvantage arise that exclude certain groups from participating. These disadvantages need to be addressed.

Another insight is that the (new) potential for participation that results from the use of online tools is not always fully lifted.

On the one hand, the opportunity to involve the young participants in designing some or all of the programme was utilised. Many project reports mentioned the fact that everyone involved attended online preparation meetings and contributed input to the project. For instance, the participants weighed in on scheduling, the design of certain activities or helped prepare an in-person meeting. In theory, though, the use of online tools enables a large variety of other forms of participation, such as contributions from those participants who have media skills and expertise of their own. However, in practice, none of the insights gained during elements I and II of the study suggest that these

opportunities were used. In some projects, participants were asked to state their preferred online tools for the project, however there is no indication that they were invited to make an active contribution to the project using said tools (which would have allowed them to put their skills to good use).

It also became clear that voluntariness – a principle fundamental to open child and youth work – poses a challenge in digital settings.

Some project reports and interviews suggested that some participants failed to attend some or even all of the online sessions, or that they turned up but did not switch on their cameras and microphones and hence appeared as if absent. It also emerged that even the use of familiar communication channels did not necessarily elicit more active participation. For instance, a WhatsApp group was set up for one project but the participants barely used it. This is vital because a lack of interaction in online settings has a knock-on negative effect on the motivation levels of the active participants. As one participant expressed it,

„And I also found confusing that the participant’s number changed on the country A side so much, because I felt like, okay, why shall I get to know you if there’s a possibility that you won’t be there when we really meet? Or we might not really work together, why shall I like put the energy into it?” (participant, group discussion)

It appears that the agenda needs to be designed and structured in such a way that the young participants feel motivated and invited to play an active role. Preference should be given to interactive and varied methods that encourage participants to engage in a lively dialogue both during the online sessions and in between.

3.3 Communication and interaction

In regard to communication and interaction in online settings, the research team asked the following questions:

- Do the projects use online tools to obtain easy insights into participants’ lives?
- Are the identified theoretical challenges around communication, e.g., getting to know the partner culture in online settings, confirmed in practice?
- How do informal interactions and group dynamics evolve in online settings?
- To what extent can the young participants communicate successfully?

In some cases, the use of online tools in digital projects enabled easy insights into the lives of the individual participants. For instance, in some cases the participants produced short videos to introduce themselves and their everyday lives to the others. Besides these videos, which were created ahead of the project, some participants went live on camera and showed the others their apartments, or even trained the camera on the street outside or walked through their neighbourhoods. This gave the participants an impression of the others' daily lives without having to leave their own homes. However, the majority of the projects focused less on participants' personal lives and more on the specificities of the partner countries in question (cuisine, traditions and customs, etc.). In other words, it became clear that the country-neutral nature of online spaces does not necessarily mean the focus is directed at individual, i.e. personal, differences or commonalities, a potential benefit that had been discussed previously.

In addition, the results indicate that in online settings, a deliberate effort has to be made to explain the partner culture. Reasons for this include a less active "transnational" dialogue and the lack of opportunity to experience the partner country's culture up close and personal. This was particularly the case with hybrid sessions, where groups from both countries connected online. In settings like this, one challenge is to structure the online activity in such a way that there is genuine interaction between the two groups, not just activity within the respective national groups.

Getting to know the partner culture is not the only challenge; informal interactions and group dynamics, too, acquire a different character in online settings. This needs to be taken into account when structuring a digital project. Some interviewees indicated that if the structure of the project is too rigid, there is not enough space for informal interaction. They spoke of too strong a focus on the actual agenda and too little time for chatting. To account for this, the team leaders and participants made the following suggestions:

- More frequent work in small groups
- More interim activities to loosen up the agenda
- Offline (in-person) meetings at the beginning and end of a project, so that participants have a chance to get to know each other informally right from the beginning

In regard to communication among the young people, the data suggest that even online, this can pose challenges and – not unlike in offline settings – needs to be actively encouraged. One potential reason for this may be technical obstacles, such as the need to switch on one's camera and microphone before speaking, as one young participant suggested in the group discussion. He shared why he thought there were problems with communication among the participants in his project, and why he felt it was easier to interact in person:

„Maybe it has something to do with the barrier ‚you have to open your microphone‘, ‚you have to open your video camera maybe and then you say something‘ maybe like that? And yes, if you're talking on site, live, it is easier. You can see your opponent all the time. You can see his emotion great. You can see his sound great. You can contact with him. You can, I don't know, shake your hands with and say hello and a lot of things.“ (participant, group discussion)

Most of the projects in scope had chosen English as their working language. This, too, was seen by some experts as the reason why communication was occasionally difficult. Asked for their opinion, the interviewees said that participants were afraid of making mistakes in English. However, some team leaders felt that using interpreters was not the solution. They explained that it was more important to create an atmosphere in which participants could feel comfortable using less-than-perfect English to interact, and in which they felt they could ask for help if they had difficulties with comprehension. However, communication was also hampered by technical problems such as a slow internet connection or too many live microphones at once. When English is chosen as the working language for an online project, participants have little opportunity to engage with the language spoken in the partner country. This is where Language Animation methods can be helpful, provided they are adapted to the specific requirements of an online setting.

Hybrid settings pose particular challenges when it comes to microphone discipline, because here often an entire country group shares just one camera and mic. In formats like these, care must be taken to ensure that every participant can be heard and seen well. Hybrid can also mean one or several country groups are in one

place, with several participants in the same room connecting to the session using one personal device each. If one participant speaks on mic, the others in the room may be audible in the background. All participants should be adequately briefed on this. For instance, the group may be asked to give themselves a shared set of rules on microphone discipline and verbal interaction.

3.4 Participants' skills and preparation

In this section, the following questions were asked:

- To what extent do young people who take part in digital international projects learn how to use online tools?
- What additional preparation is required when using digital elements?

As for the first question, it emerged that the types of skills participants acquired when using online tools were primarily technical. In other words, in the opinion of the team leaders they predominantly learned how to deal with the instruments that were used. Only few projects focused on other media skills-related aspects, such as a personal reflection on one's media habits or creative ways to apply media. In these cases, the young participants created digital media products of their own, such as podcasts. These approaches could be used more often in future. Besides actual media production, a debate about young people's media habits and on the intercultural aspects of media could also be put on the agenda of a digital project, since these issues are understood to be part of intercultural education.

The responses to the second question indicated that **besides a thorough briefing on the partner country's culture, participants need to be instructed on how to use the intended media appropriately before the digital project begins.** This was confirmed in both the project reports and the interviews with the team leaders. The aim was to get the young people ready to deal with the situations that can arise in a digital setting. Specifically, this meant ensuring that all participants had access to suitable devices and knew how to handle them. Some participants had to be taught how to use the devices themselves, for which some time had to be set aside.

3.5 Team leaders' skills and training

When it comes to team leaders' skills and training, the research team looked at the following aspects:

- What skills do team leaders feel they need in order to run a digital project?
- To what extent do team leaders who run digital international projects learn how to use online tools?
- What kind of training would team leaders like to have ahead of implementing a digital project?

According to the team leaders, various skills are required in order to run digital projects. For instance, they need to be open to the idea of digital technologies and generally embrace them as a concept. In fact, the interviewees felt that these two requirements were more relevant to running a digital project than actual experience in using digital media for educational purposes. Expertise in using online tools for work could then be acquired on the job, as it were. The experts also stated that they would appreciate support in the form of training, for instance (see below), so that they could become more skilled at designing activating methods that relate to the content of the project.

The interviewees felt that fundamental (including educational) skills of the kind required for offline settings were instrumental to implementing digital projects. Asked for examples, they mentioned project management, communication, stamina, intercultural skills, and a good feel for group dynamics.

It also emerged that like the participants, the team leaders acquired expertise in using the online tools, especially of the instrumental variety. They did so in particular by learning on the job. One of the project reports analysed by the research team stated that "learning by doing is more valuable than theorising" (project report, partner B). This approach also enabled the interviewees to acquire methodological experience, something they have been able to expand in recent years. In fact, many team leaders have meanwhile acquired an extensive methodological repertoire. As one interviewee put it,

"...whether it's a yes-or-no game, a name game, or if we decide to draw a picture together. Or if we want to do a simple whiteboard seminar. How does all of that work? All these technical issues that we had to look into when we started out so we could actually put something together. And I can actually claim that it's worked out quite well. We now have a great

collection of tools that we can work with.“ (Team leader, one-on-one interview)

Team leaders said that when it comes to training, they would like to acquire more advanced knowledge in particular, meaning they want to learn about interactive, creative and playful methods that go beyond the basics. As one team leader said,

“Of course I’d say that you need to learn how to use the tools, but maybe not the classic tools that everyone knows, but something new and unusual. It would also be good to learn new methods, especially ones that go beyond the stuff that everyone already knows. Of course we realise that you can also go ahead and do the same standard things as always, because they work. But they’ve already been done to death (...)“ (Team leader, one-on-one interview)

In this context, said the team leaders, any training course should offer ample opportunity for participants to try out online tools themselves. They also asked for more opportunities for networking and exchanging experiences with colleagues from the international youth work community. Finally, they said they would appreciate more support in regard to data privacy and consent forms in particular.

3.6 Cooperation with partner organisations

During this part of the study, the researchers examined the impact of digital elements when cooperating with partner organisations. The following questions were asked:

- How do digital elements change the way that partner organisations cooperate?
- How does the host principle work in online settings?
- How does an uneven playing field among partner organisations impact on the running of a digital project?

It emerged that the use of digital elements can have a positive impact on cooperation between partner organisations; for instance, it makes it easier for them to communicate. In particular, preparatory meetings are made easier if digital tools are used. The team leaders said that the process of preparing for a project felt more personal because they were able to see as well as hear each other on a videoconferencing plat-

form. Some interviewees also said that they had met up more often with their colleagues in the partner countries than they would have before the pandemic, when they would not have used new forms of digital communication. Contact between the partner organisations was hence not just easier and more personal, it was also more intense.

As for the host principle, a whole new approach is needed when working with digital settings. One of the challenges is the need to maintain “country neutrality”, a key aspect of the host principle that is central to international youth work. To explain: in an in-person exchange, one youth group is hosted by the other group. But in online projects, everyone is a guest. It was not evident that any of the projects examined in this study succeeded in either re-creating the host principle or in making conscious use of this new setting. If the host principle is to be applied also in online settings, new methods will have to be developed. That being said, the country-neutral nature of an online space offers opportunities for levelling the playing field without having to assign “host” and “guest” roles. There is potential here for giving greater attention to the country-unspecific, personal aspects of the exchange and to focus on similar as well as differing backgrounds.

What also emerged during the study was that the partner organisations were not equally equipped to run a digital project. For instance, there were differences in terms of technical equipment and the presence of a stable internet connection among the organisations for which data was available. Youth clubs or educational facilities in rural areas, in particular, often lack the internet bandwidth required for complex videoconferencing sessions. Differences also emerged in regard to data privacy attitudes, which made cooperation across international teams more complicated. Finally, team leaders felt challenged by differing opinions in the partner countries on how to structure an online session. For instance, there were differences in opinion regarding how structured the online sessions should be (ranging from extremely structured to more free time and more breaks), and how much opportunity participants should get to work on their own (ranging from leaving them to “get on with it” to strong intervention from team leaders).

3.7 Factors relevant to planning, implementation and the achievement of objectives

In this part of the study, the researchers looked at factors relevant to the planning and implementation of digital projects and to the achievement of the projects' objectives. The following questions were asked:

- What resources are required in order to implement a digital project?
- In the interviewees' opinion, what rules and regulations around funding are required in these settings?

The data suggested that of all the resources required for digital projects, human resources were considered most relevant. Many interviewees emphasised how vital it was to the success of a project to have having technical support on hand in the shape of someone who can assist the educational team in all technical matters. One team leader also mentioned the need for a sufficiently large number of team leaders in the partner country, too, with an understanding of the methods that can be used in digital projects. The interviewees also stated that in digital projects, additional staff are required who ensure the technical equipment in the venues remains in good working order.

To make sure no participants are disadvantaged, the team leaders said, the venues need to be equipped with suitable technical resources. Participants on both sides should ideally have access to a range of different technical equipment. As one interviewee put it,

“And if you really want to ensure that no one is at a disadvantage, no one is excluded, you need to consider that aspect as well. You need to remember that not everyone has a laptop at home that they can just open up whenever the digital project starts. You need to make sure the preconditions are in place.”
(Team leader, one-on-one interview)

Special attention needs to be paid to participants who do not have access to suitable equipment, either by giving them the equipment they need, or by adapting the hybrid settings to compensate for any deficits.

The experts also stated that institutional resources are required, such as stable internet access. Many of the venues where youth work activities take place are located in rural areas, such as education centres

that, as a team leader explained, are designed as a sort of retreat and hence can often be quite remote. However, stable internet is not necessarily the norm in these locations. To explain, the expert said, “It’s like we’re fighting against our own infrastructure and our geographical location” (Team leader, one-on-one interview).

As for funding for digital projects, the interviewees stated that more stability is required and that it needs to be integrated in existing funding schemes. Specifically, more financial resources should be earmarked for suitable software solutions that are at the same time sustainable: a stand-alone solution that cannot be used for any other project is not desirable. The experts also called for a more flexible budget to account for any unexpected costs as well as less complicated access to software tools. In regard to the latter, they spoke of challenges arising when, for instance, the subscription period of an online tool was set to expire in the midst of an ongoing project.

3.8 Team leaders' evaluation concerning the future of IYW projects with digital elements

The last area of evaluation sought to answer the following question:

- How do team leaders feel about the future of digital projects in international youth work?

The majority of interviewees believe that digital elements in international youth work are here to stay, not least owing to the advantages that they were able to experience while running digital projects, and also because of the ample experience they have obtained and on which they plan to build. As one expert explained,

“[...] I think that over the last years, a lot of people who weren't really keen on the whole thing [= projects with digital elements, ed.] just had to get on with it. And then you go ahead and start to realise that there's quite a few advantages to it (...) Personally, I don't want to go back to the way it used to be. That would be really bitter, given the amount of work we've already put into it.” (Team leader, one-on-one interview)

The interviewees also emphasised the relevance of in-person phases, however. They felt that online phases made sense especially at the beginning of a project (preparation, familiarisation), in between two in-person phases, or as an add-on phase at the very end. This suggests a move towards blended or hybrid formats.

For the longer-term future, some interviewees said it would be good to try out other methods and forms of access (e.g., virtual reality) in combination with in-person phases. As one team leader said,

“[...] I think that we’ll be seeing some pretty funky stuff, more than we can imagine right now. Think of VR headsets and things like that. We’re at the very beginning of this process and we’re still a bit hesitant about it. But I think that maybe in five years, for sure in ten years, we’ll be seeing more innovative approaches. Ideally, we should embrace that but never forget how important it is to get together in person.” (Team leader, one-on-one interview)

4 Condensing the results – Identifying the success factors

The final part of this report condenses the results detailed above into three hypotheses. It also outlines what factors ensure a successful digital international youth work project.

Hypothesis 1: **Digital elements allow for more varied and more accessible international youth work formats.**

Offline and online elements can be combined in many different ways, translating into a wide variety of different formats. Indeed the study showed that some of the projects examined cannot be easily assigned to defined categories such as “online”, “blended” or “hybrid”. Rather, there are many different mixed types that incorporate a number of elements from each of these categories. Furthermore, the duration of the projects is quite varied. The length of some of the projects did not correspond to that of a typical in-person youth exchanges (between two and six days).

Digital elements also enable greater accessibility provided they remove certain forms of disadvantage. In the projects in scope, the following barriers to access were eliminated: no travel expenses, no dealing with travel restrictions, and less social and personal discomfort.

Success factors

- Thanks to digital formats in youth work, activities can be offered over a longer period of time. Their duration corresponds to the objectives that are to be reached in each case and is aligned with participants' daily lives.
- Offline and online elements are sensibly and carefully combined. A set of criteria is in place to ensure this is the case.
- The funding can be used for a broad range of digital formats.
- When planning a project, new target groups are taken into consideration and a deliberate effort is made to reach out to them.

- New forms of disadvantage that arise when implementing digital elements are actively addressed. In the projects in scope, these were: lack of financial resources, unstable internet connections and the exclusion of young people with hearing or visual impairments.

Hypothesis 2: **Digital formats require specific competences and resources.**

In all projects that were examined, selecting an appropriate set of methods was a key challenge. Specific educational competences are required here to ensure that digital projects, too, meet existing quality criteria. For instance, it emerged that informal interactions and group dynamics acquire a different character when they take place online. Also, since participants have no opportunity to experience the partner country in an up-close-and-personal manner, a suitable environment has to be deliberately brought about so that they can familiarise themselves with the culture of the partner group.

Meanwhile, online settings are challenging from a communication point of view because, e.g., participants cannot just speak spontaneously since they first need to switch on their camera and microphone. Specific competences are also required to encourage young people to actively participate in the session. Interaction levels are naturally lower in online settings than offline. For instance, the team leaders reported that fatigue tended to set in due to the lack of opportunities for interaction, or because certain activities took unusually long. It must be considered that processes take longer online and that any delays or breaks that occur because of this cannot be bridged with informal chats or similar.

Besides competences, specific resources are necessary to run digital projects. For one, human resources, that is, additional staff, such as a technical support person who can assist the educational team, or additional

staff to keep the technical equipment at the venues in good order. The technical equipment used by the venues and participants also plays an important role. Ideally, a range of different technical equipment should be available to all participants. Institutional resources are also important, such as stable internet access. Finally, financial resources are highly relevant. The team leaders expressed a desire for a larger budget for software solutions that meet the specific needs of international youth work projects. They also called for the easy provision of tools as well as for a more flexible budget to account for any unexpected expenses.

Success factors

- Sufficient resources are provided that meet the differing needs of the partner organisations. Care must be taken to address the following identified differences between the partners:
 - Differences in internet access and technical equipment
 - Differing opinions over the methodology to be used in digital settings
 - Differing ideas around the relevance of data privacy
- A specific methodology is in place that enables intercultural exchange and informal interactions online and that encourages lively communication among the participants.
- In the run-up to the digital project, team leaders have taken part in training that meets their specific needs. During the study, the team leaders called for training in the following areas:
 - Interactive, creative and playful digital methods that go beyond basic approaches
 - Opportunities to try out methods themselves
 - Dialogue with other team leaders working in international youth work
 - Advice on various issues including data privacy

When designing training courses, consideration should be given to the needs of team leaders with fewer digital skills.

Hypothesis 3: The potential offered by digital formats in international youth work is currently not being lifted to the maximum.

As outlined in the results section, this is particularly the case when it comes to the possibility for young participants to contribute their media skills to a digital project, yet also applies to the way in which online sessions can be designed to be more activating. Young people should not just be asked to state their preferences regarding online tools for the project; they should also be invited to use these tools to help design the online sessions. This allows them to bring their skills and interests to the table.

The study also showed that, as confirmed by the interviewees themselves, the type of digital skills they acquired was primarily of the instrumental variety. In future, skills acquisition should be leveraged more effectively so that other types of media skills can be developed during a digital project, too, such as the ability to reflect on one's personal media habits or creative work with media.

Finally, unlike an in-person exchange, digital settings are country-neutral. This can produce some interesting opportunities, such as a shift in focus towards country-unspecific, personal differences and commonalities.

Success factors

- The digital space occupied during a project is designed with due care. This means that team leaders consider ahead of time what principles should apply when designing the digital settings (e.g., host principle, thematic sessions, country neutrality).
- Participants' experience and media skills are seen as a valuable resource that they are invited to contribute during the planning and implementation of a project.

In the context of experience made with digital formats in other youth work fields during the pandemic, it has been shown that there is specific potential in the long-term integration of digital elements in international youth work activities. In some other fields, the expiry of restrictions on distancing and travel due to Covid-19 has occasioned a return to the previous state of affairs; when it comes to international youth work, the situation is quite different. The amount of time that young people spend in contact with one another during an international exchange or trip is by its very nature already limited – time that all interviewees felt was significant and indispensable. However, this limited time can be extended by means of digital elements, whether that is in the run-up to (preparation) or after an activity (debriefing), in meetings among experts or team leaders, and even meetings with the young participants.

The results of the study, along with the above hypotheses and success factors, clearly indicate that successful digital formats require due care and attention. In digital settings, the principles fundamental to international youth work, such as voluntariness, the host principle and intercultural dialogue, must be carefully and deliberately planned and shaped. In this context, it is vital to incorporate activating methods that go beyond what was observed in the classic online meeting and presentation settings witnessed during this study. The success factors and results summarised above represent an evidence-based foundation upon which to adapt and evolve international youth work. They can serve as a backdrop for work in the following areas:

- Continued development of quality criteria for digital international youth work formats
- Adaptation of funding schemes and funding criteria for digital international youth work
- Development of a methodology and pedagogy for digital international youth work
- Training on digital formats for experts.

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