

Policy recommendations on the development of digital youth work

The expert group on risks, opportunities and implications of digitalisation for youth, youth work and youth policy, set up by the European Union Work Plan for Youth for 2016-2018:

Acknowledging that:

- New technologies emerge rapidly. Through the Internet of Everything, billions of objects and people are connected to each other. Automation, machine learning, mobile computing and artificial intelligence are no longer futuristic concepts, they are our reality (Gartner 2016). Knowing how technology is built, learning to be critical towards information, and being curious as well as critical towards new technologies is more important every day. Digital literacy and 21st century skills play a crucial role as part of modern-day citizenship and modern life in general. All young people of today will need technological skills and an agile mindset towards technology in their future work and everyday life, and youth work should be able to encourage this.
- Young people in Europe spend an increasing amount of their time consuming digital media and technology (video streaming, messaging, blogging, gaming, etc.). These can provide a place for young people to learn, to share their experiences, to exchange their views, to have fun with their friends and to actively participate in society.
- The term 'digital native' falsely suggests that young people intuitively know how to use digital technologies. But evidence shows that a substantial percentage of young people in Europe lack basic ICT skills (ECDL Foundation 2015). Another challenge is the digital divide: access to the internet and social media can become problematic in many EU countries for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds when they leave school or are not in training (Youth participation in democratic life, LSE 2013). This inevitably leads to a 'voice divide' in digital settings.
- There are a lot of youth work practitioners who lack the digital skills or attitudes to fully benefit from the opportunities created by digital technologies for delivering quality youth work (National Youth Council of Ireland 2016).
- Many youth workers see digital media only as social media. Their understanding of the possibilities of digital media and technology should be widened (National Youth Council of Ireland 2016).

Defining digital youth work as:

- Digital youth work means **proactively using or addressing digital media and technology in youth work**. Digital youth work is not a youth work method – digital youth work **can be included in any youth work setting** (open youth work, youth information and counselling, youth clubs, detached youth work, etc.). Digital youth work has the **same goals as youth work in general**, and using digital media and technology in youth work should always support these goals. Digital youth work can happen **in face-to-face situations as well as in online environments** – or in a mixture of these two. Digital media and technology can be either a tool, an activity or a content in youth work.

- Digital youth work is underpinned by the same ethics, values and principles as youth work.
- Youth workers in the context of these recommendations refer to both paid and volunteer youth workers.

Recommends the following to ensure and enhance the development of digital youth work:

Common understanding of digital youth work

1. Member States should consider the working definition of digital youth work, of the expert group on digitalisation and youth, in their understanding and development of digital youth work.
2. As digital cultures and media are an intrinsic part of young people's lives, every youth worker should understand the importance of digital youth work and be able to address digital issues in their work.
3. Youth work should embrace technological developments and support young people to develop the skills, competences and courage to actively shape digital technologies and society.

Strategic development of digital youth work

4. Every Member State should have a plan for developing and resourcing digital youth work as an integral part of their youth policy. Young people and youth organisations should be consulted and engaged in the development and implementation of this plan.
5. Every Member State should provide strategic financial investment in digital youth work. Resources should be allocated to youth worker training, development of innovative digital youth work methodology, working time, infrastructure, and devices/technologies to be used with young people.
6. Digital youth work should be incorporated into youth worker training, national youth work occupational standards and youth worker competence standards.
7. Digitalisation and young people's digital cultures should be taken into account when designing youth work policy at local, national or European level.

Youth participation and youth rights

8. It should be ensured that digital youth work incorporates an inclusive approach, recognising the barriers to participation in digital engagement. Youth work should make use of technology and pedagogical practices to increase access and break down barriers for all young people to participation in society.
9. Digital youth work shall respect the safety and privacy of all young people, and equip both youth workers and young people with the necessary competences to safeguard the rights of young people online.

Knowledge and evidence

10. Development of digital youth work should be evidence based. To ensure quality in digital youth work, systems should be developed for evaluating its impact, reach and effectiveness.
11. Continuous academic research on young people's digital uses and cultures is needed to ensure youth work is meeting the needs of young people in the digital age. The research should be done both on national and on European level.
12. As digitalisation is a global phenomenon, it is imperative to facilitate knowledge exchange on digital youth work and young people's digital cultures on international level. Initiatives should be supported at local, national and European level to share knowledge and practice. Cross-sectoral knowledge exchange should be encouraged to promote innovative thinking.

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