

Digital Youth Work in Flanders: practices, challenges, and the impact of COVID-19

Lotte Vermeire

imec-SMIT

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Email: lotte.vermeire@vub.be, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6334-9248>

Wendy Van den Broeck

imec-SMIT

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Leo Van Audenhove

imec-SMIT

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

University of the Western Cape

Ilse Mariën

imec-SMIT

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Abstract

The pandemic had a considerable impact on Flemish youth work, as many face-to-face activities had to shift online. For many organizations, this was their first encounter with digital youth work, either online or blended. Despite this recent boom, the concept is not new. It was mentioned in the 2017 conclusions on smart youth work¹ by the Council of the European Union. Digital youth work is defined as using and discussing digital

¹ "Smart youth work enables young people and youth workers to, based on existing experiences and seeking new connections and means, create innovative solutions (including digital solutions) for coping with both current problems and new challenges. Smart youth work activities are based on the needs of young people and youth workers, and take into account developments in society and technology" (Schlümmer, 2018).

media/technology in different types of youth work, whilst still adhering to its objectives (Council of the European Union, 2019). This paper examines the effects of COVID-19 on Flemish youth work and explores the challenges and opportunities, using the quick-scan-method to map practices. Identified opportunities are strengthening participants' and youth workers' digital competences, combating social isolation, increasing accessibility and space to experiment and blended teaching methods to strengthen youth work. Barriers are the limited know-how amongst youth workers, digital exclusion, high cost of hard- and software, and the importance of the correct working method for the desired goals.

Keywords: digital youth work, Flanders, COVID-19, practices, challenges and opportunities

Introduction: Context and concern

The pandemic has had a considerable impact on youth work in Flanders. The COVID-19 lockdown forced many youth work organizations to set up digital activities as an alternative to reach their target group during this period of social restrictions. During the Belgian COVID-19 lockdown (March 18th, 2020 - July 1st, 2020), all public activities were closed down and schools and companies had to function remotely, making use of online tools. Activities were limited to essential services, such as grocery shopping (Maerevoet et al., 2020). It immediately became clear that several individuals and groups were being digitally cut off from work, school, family, friends, social and public services due to a lack of digital material, internet access, digital skills and/or required help. Schools worked hard to ensure that all children were included in the remote teaching (Van den Broeck & De Bonte, 2021), but also youth work organizations did their best to organize alternative activities for their members.

For many youth work organizations, this was their first experience with digital youth work. COVID-19 can thus be seen as a trigger for initiating digital youth work activities on a bigger scale in Flanders. In this paper we will focus on the impact of COVID-19 and how this has influenced the Flemish digital youth work landscape. Our main goal is to investigate how COVID-19 and digitalization in general challenges daily practices and digital literacy among youth workers and how this has impacted the implementation of Flemish digital youth work. Our study also looks at how the sector and youth workers interpret and understand their own practices and roles related to our increasingly digitized society.

Thus, the research questions are:

1. What are the characteristics (presence, frequency, accessibility, intensity ²) of

²Abovementioned characteristics are defined in this study as 1. What is the typology of Flemish digital youth work (presence), 2. How frequently is digital youth work being organized and how sustainable are these practices (frequency), 3. How digitally inclusive and accessible are the Flemish digital youth work practices (accessibility) and 4. How many digital activities or activities related to digital

Flemish digital youth work?

2. What was the influence of COVID-19 on the presence of Flemish digital youth work?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities for Flemish digital youth work?

This is also relevant at policy level. To date, the Flemish government has not yet developed a fully-fledged strategy for digital youth work, and as a result, the current youth work regulations are still mostly geared towards physical activities. However, in an increasingly digitized world in which being able to work with digital media has become indispensable, we can no longer see digital youth work as an exception. Lauha and Nõlvak (2019: 16), experts on digital and smart youth work, formulated this as follows: “[T]he digitization of youth work is an absolute requirement to keep up with the times, and it is no longer appropriate to distinguish digital youth work from face-to-face activities or treat it as a separate method or branch of youth work”. Many Flemish youth workers see digital youth work as a purely online activity, yet it is much more than that.

In this context, the Flemish Youth Department wanted to map the current practices and challenges, to substantiate policy choices regarding digital youth work. Our research, commissioned by the Flemish government, extensively maps Flemish digital youth work practices by making an inventory and an in-depth analysis of these practices. Based on our research, we’ve developed concrete policy recommendations on how to provide a policy framework for Flemish digital youth work.

This is the first study to analyze digital youth work in Flanders, and it is important to properly document a field that receives increasing attention. A quick-scan-method, based on deskresearch, a survey and follow-up interviews, was applied to map the different digital practices of Flemish youth work.

This paper is structured as follows: In section 1, we discuss the state of the art of digital youth work. Section 2 discusses the methodological approach. In section 3 we take a closer look at the results, followed by a discussion and a conclusion with concrete policy recommendations.

Conceptualization of digital youth work

Digitalization, or the “restructuring of our society around digital media and technology” (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016: 1) is not a new phenomenon. It impacts various aspects of our everyday lives, including work and education. Digitalization impacts formal learning, but also informal learning, of which youth work is an example. In *The Necessity of Informal Learning*, Coffield (2000) addresses the importance of informal learning. Learning is

media and technology are organized (intensity)?²

presented as an iceberg, of which formal education is merely the distinguishable surface. Most of this iceberg is submerged and this part stands for all types of informal learning, e.g., work-related, recreational activities, etc. Coffield (2000: 8) states that “[i]nformal learning should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning [...]; it needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary, and valuable in its own right”. Coffield (2008) claims that policy makers recognize informal learning’s importance (Coffield, 2008), but do not actually take it into account when developing policies. This also relates to our work on digital youth work. It is important that policy makers acknowledge and support youth work as an informal learning setting in which youth workers guide and train youngsters to safely navigate the digital world.

An important related concept is that of digital literacy: “[A] person needs to understand: (i) how to use modern digital technologies to access information, (ii) how to maneuver through the complex web of information made available by digital technologies, (iii) how to “read” and understand the messages on digital media, and (iv) how he or she can contribute to the digital information economy by using digital technology” (Baron, 2019: 1). In an increasingly digitized society, access and being able to handle digital media has become indispensable. This not only refers to using digital media, but also to understanding digital media (Seymoens et al., 2020). This is also important in the context of digital youth work. When a digital component is introduced, both the youth worker and the participating youth require the necessary skills. But also access to the necessary hardware and software is sometimes an issue. Digital literacy in this study therefore relates to the accessibility and inclusion of digital youth work practices and to the youth workers’ competences when introducing digital media/technology into their practices.

Not everyone in society has the same level of digital literacy. Youngsters are often referred to as ‘digital natives’, first mentioned by Prensky in *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. Prensky (2001: 1) states that they are “native speakers of the digital language”. Despite the fact that we often talk about a generation of ‘digital natives’, not every young person is necessarily digitally literate. This relates to the concept of e-inclusion, which “refers to actions and solutions needed to prevent digital exclusion, so that everyone can fully participate in the digital society” (Mediawijis, 2020). This remains an important point of attention when designing activities and is situated at the level of access as well as skills and support. Flemish youth work aims to be inclusive, which means that not every participant can be expected to have the necessary devices, internet access or skills (Mariën & Brotcorne, 2020), a critique also focused on in Thomas’ *Deconstructing Digital Natives* (2011). This is important to realize for the youth work sector, which typically targets all youngsters in an inclusive way.

In 2016 the European Commission (EC) set up the expert group ‘Risks, opportunities and implications of digitalization for youth, youth work and youth policy’ under the European Union Work Plan for Youth 2016-2018. The outcome was a clear definition of digital youth

work, as well as policy recommendations on “mutual understanding of digital youth work; strategic development of digital youth work; youth participation and youth rights; knowledge and evidence” (Expert group on Digitalisation and Youth, 2019: 7).

In the report, digital youth work was defined as follows:

“Digital youth work means proactively using or addressing digital media and technology in youth work. Digital media and technology can be either a tool, an activity or a content in youth work. Digital youth work is not a youth work method. Digital youth work can be included in any youth work setting and it has the same goals as youth work in general. Digital youth work can happen in face-to-face situations as well as in online environments, or in a mixture of the two. Digital youth work is underpinned by the same ethics, values and principles as youth work.” (Expert group on Digitalisation and Youth, 2019).

In short, digital youth work stands for the use and discussion of digital media and technology in different types of youth work contexts, e.g. online, physical or blended and in diverse ways, i.e., as an instrument, an activity, or as content. It also pursues the same objectives as regular youth work. Based on the decree of 20 January 2012 containing a renewed youth and children's rights policy, the Flemish government recognizes and subsidizes various youth work organizations. In the decree, youth work is defined as: “Social-cultural work based on non-commercial goals for or by young people aged three to thirty, in their spare time, under educational guidance and to promote general and integral development of young people who participate therein on a voluntary basis” (Vlaamse Regering, 2012). Digital youth work can be included in this definition, and as indicated above, it can be seen as a subdivision of general youth work.

Digital youth work across Europe

Digital youth work in Flanders is still in its infancy, but there are already some good practices across Europe. Erasmus+ set up the Digital Youth Work-project (2017-2019). The project had four main objectives: (1) offering good practices of digital youth work, (2) capacity building of youth workers, (3) raising awareness among youth workers and policy makers, and (4) improving planning and strategies (Erasmus+, 2019). The project shared 36 good practices, developed digital youth work guidelines and training materials for youth workers, and shared tips on how to set up quality online youth work. (Erasmus+, 2019). The guidelines offer a clear description of digital youth work, and relate this to outcomes, such as “more accessible and relevant” youth work, “including reaching those who may be geographically and socially isolated” or youngsters' ability to “manage personal, social and formal relationships in the digital era” (Erasmus+, 2019).

Another relevant project is the Skill IT for Youth-project, which wants to “increase the quality of youth work, combining higher levels of excellence and attractiveness in services,

obtained through the digitalisation of youth work [...] [and] to equip youth workers with digital tools and skills to enhance young people's futures in the 21st Century" (Skill IT, 2021). The study had three goals: (1) Mapping digital skills in both education and youth work in Ireland, Norway, Poland, and Romania, (2) identifying Youth NGOs role in developing youngsters' digital skills, and (3) identifying youth workers' and organizations' needs to cultivate projects for young people and their digital skills (Skill IT, 2021). Interesting findings are youth organizations perspectives towards developing youngsters' competences concerning digital media and technology: these organizations are often "well placed in society to support young people to access information and to develop new skills" (Skill IT, 2018: 30). Youth workers see their organizations as "facilitators or actors that provide complementary services to the digital education programs that the public education system should provide" and agree that they "could fill the gap between the formal education system's learning outcomes and the labor market's demands" (Skill IT, 2018: 31). The study indicated that the youth work field needs to know more clearly what their position is concerning enhancing youngsters' competences related to digital media and technology (e.g., the digital literacies) (Skill IT, 2018). Concrete issues that were identified are: "a lack of public digital learning policy and digital strategy; [...] poor [...] ICT infrastructure including broadband and publicly accessible devices; formal education overloaded and unable to keep up with digital advances; lack of funding or, in the better funded countries: excessively restricted funding stifling innovation; many of the staff or volunteers who work with young people lack confidence, feel inadequately equipped to use digital technology with them" (Skill IT, 2020: 5)

In 2020 the Council of Europe youth partnership and the European Commission published *Social inclusion, Digitalization and Young People*, with a focus on the link between social in- or exclusion of young people and an increasingly digital society. The study mentions the impact of digitalization on youth work and the need for more smart youth work (see footnote 1) and claims that "[t]he fast pace of digitalization and technological changes [...] are quickly reshaping youth work, and also demand development of new skills and competences of both young people and youth workers" (Şerban et al., 2020: 51). The work concludes that digital media and technology form an opportunity to socially include youngsters who are often marginalized or experience disadvantages, however they note the need for policies, strategies, platforms, and tools addressing e-inclusion and digitalization, such as support of access/connectivity and internet safety, digital skills and competence development, involvement of youth in the co-creation of new tools and platforms (Şerban et al., 2020).

The Finnish organization Verke published *Digitalisation & Youth Work* (2019) together with the Estonian Youth Work Centre. 23 experts in the field focus on topics including the need for digital and smart youth work, the competences that come with this evolution of society, the possibility of (e-)participation, and the opportunities and challenges digital youth work can provide an answer to (Lauha & Nõlvak, 2019). According to the

publication, digitalization has impacted the skills youngsters need to participate in society, thus youth work needs to give attention to digital media/technology in their activities and not differentiate between digital and regular youth work. This supports the need for digital literacy amongst young people, as well as applying e-participation and taking inclusion into account. The editors believe it is youth workers' obligation to adapt to the evolutions in youngsters' world, which includes digital media/technology. Youth workers do not need to be technological experts to support youngsters' skills nor do all youngsters need to become experts, but it is important to provide them with a solid basis, encourage critical competences as well as curiousness and willingness to independently research and train their skills, and give them opportunities to use and think about digital media. This positively influences digital inclusion, by offering more vulnerable youngsters' access to tools, platforms, etc. It is important to "take equality, accessibility and usability into account in the planning and design of digital services and activities for young people" (Lauha & Nõlvak, 2019: 91).

We will evaluate how these recommendations are relevant in the specific context of the Flemish youth work sector. In the next section we will first discuss the methodology we applied, followed by concrete results and recommendations.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to comprehensively map digital youth work practices; to identify challenges and opportunities organizations face and to understand the influence of COVID-19 on Flemish youth work. We applied a quick-scan-methodology based on comparative case study research.

The quick-scan is a method in which information is collected about existing practices in a structured and uniform manner and then presented schematically in a predefined matrix. The method is particularly useful for research topics that are new or insufficiently documented in scientific and other publications and a cross-case analysis of a large number of cases can lead to the identification of the order of magnitude of similarities and differences between these cases (Gerring, 2016; Van Audenhove, Baelden & Mariën, 2022). This is also the case for Flemish youth work.

Our research concerns the youth work organizations that the Flemish government recognizes and subsidizes. In addition, the Flemish experimental projects and the film educational organizations are also involved. The scope concerns organizations that already use digital youth work to achieve their objectives, organizations that only use digital youth work to a limited extent and those who did not yet use digital media/technology in their youth work. In total 190 youth work organizations were included in the research. Analyzed practices focused both on youngsters as on youth workers, for example related to training opportunities.

Concretely, our research consisted of an initial inventory and rapid assessment of digital youth work practices, based on deskresearch, followed by an online survey, and supplemented with online interviews for more complex cases that required additional information. Materials analyzed via deskresearch include the official websites and social media of 190 organizations, as well as newspaper articles, press-related interviews, and other online documents, such as statements.

The survey consisted of four parts:

1. The general information of the organization, such as type of youth work, target group, amount of (digital) activities per year, et cetera;
2. The digital youth work activities set up, questions focusing on the type of digital youth work (see above), the focus and theme, the duration, platforms/tools used, the use of internet/hard-/software;
3. The competence level of youth workers and youth, such as the competence level needed to partake in an activity, digital training provided for youth workers, digital competences occurring in the activity (e.g., producing, analyzing, presenting, ...);
4. The effects of the COVID-19 measures on the organization.

The follow-up interviews were non-exhaustive semi-structured interviews based on a topic list including ‘interpretation of digital youth work’, ‘experience with digital youth work’ and ‘internal and external policy related to digital youth work’ (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001; Longhurst, 2003). The survey and interviews are purely organizational and practice-related. No personal data of the respondents was required.

Of the 190 youth work organizations contacted to participate in the survey, 74 (39%) of them filled in the survey. 33 (44.6%) follow-up interviews were executed between June and July 2021, with representatives from the organizations that also completed the survey. This provides us with a clear picture of the state of the art of Flemish digital youth work.

Results and discussion

The following discussion is structured based on our three research questions. First, we will look into the presence, intensity, frequency, and accessibility of Flemish digital youth work. Next, we will discuss the influence of COVID-19 followed by the challenges and opportunities for digital youth work.

Presence, intensity, frequency, and accessibility of digital youth work

The first part of our research consists of an inventory and analysis of digital youth work practices. The quick-scan maps the presence, frequency, intensity, and accessibility of

digital youth work in the Flemish youth sector. The following discussion will be organized according to these concepts. We will also reflect on the COVID-19 crisis and its effects on our results.

Presence

1. Based on our research, we were able to distinguish four types of digital youth work:
 1. Online synchronous, (50% of digital youth work activities);
 2. Online asynchronous (14% of digital youth work activities);
 3. Blended (19% of digital youth work activities);
 4. Physical practices involving digital media/technology (17% of digital youth work activities).

The majority of activities mentioned in the survey are online (64%), specifically online synchronous (50%), where participants and supervisors are present online at the same time, for example in an online instructor training or to play a game. This is a logical consequence of COVID-19, where most organizations switched their face-to-face activities to an online alternative. A concrete example is the online training for instructors.

Pre-COVID-19 most digital youth work activities were physical or blended. 19% were blended activities. Blended practices are hybrid, where activities have both an online and an offline part, like preparing online and meeting physically to discuss or an online activity with real-time chat, such as organization Karavaans' travel preparations drawn up by the supervisor and then discussed online.

For the physical practices involving digital media/technology, three variants can be distinguished, in which participants (a) make use of digital media, (b) create digital media/technology themselves, or (c) take a critical look at digital media and focus on understanding it. These focused mainly on the use of digital media/technology. Activities 'Using digital media' mainly focus on basic ICT-skills, followed by social media and computational thinking. When 'creating digital media', the emphasis is on digital storytelling and film and editing. 'Understanding and critically reflecting on digital media' is rarely mentioned. When mentioned, it invariably focuses on the following themes: Information literacy, privacy, personal data, and personalization. An example is the card game 'Mediaklap' on media literacy from organization Chirojeugd Vlaanderen. The survey focused on the practices organized in 2020. Hence, data also includes practices organized before the first lockdown in March, when physical activities were not restricted by COVID-measures.

Online asynchronous is mentioned the least, and focuses on non-live forms, where participants and supervisors are not online at the same time. These are often DIY assignments, videos, and forums.

Overall, our results support the view that most organizations see digital youth work as online youth work. This is confirmed several times in the survey's open questions, where participants were asked to share their view on digital youth work and where they indicated that the use of hardware and the internet is required for digital youth work. Digital youth work is almost always interpreted as 'online' youth work. Although organizations may have other forms of digital youth work, they do not define it as such.

An important finding is therefore that youth organizations tend to interpret the concept of digital youth work as 'online' youth work. Even organizations that offer other types of offline digital youth work (e.g., social media camps) do not always define it as such. This may be related to the pandemic, where youth workers used online youth work as an alternative to their physical youth work activities. It is however an important finding, as it indicates that clear communication about the definition, formats and opportunities of digital youth work is required.

Intensity and frequency

The narrow definition of digital youth work by Flemish youth workers is also reflected in the response to the survey question on the number of digital activities in the total offer of activities ('How many activities are digital or include a digital component?'). Fewer than five activities per year is the most common answer with 23%, 13,5% says between five and ten activities, and 16% mentions more than 50. In contrast to these digital activities, 60% of the organizations generally set up more than 50 non-digital activities per year. Based on our deskresearch, 61 of the 190 (32%) involved organizations do not offer any form of digital youth work, 68% do offer a form of digital youth work, even though they do not necessarily define it as such.

We also wanted to analyze the frequency by which these activities were organized, thus respondents were asked to classify their activities as: (1) organized once, (2) organized several times and (3) permanent part of their official list of activities. We can therefore distinguish more sustainable (part of the 'permanent' activities list), as well as one-time ad hoc activities. The survey results showed that the majority of the activities (49%) had already been organized several times. These activities often have a strong focus on the online aspect and were set up during the pandemic. 17% are mere one-off activities and 34% are part of the organization's permanent offer. Organizations where digital youth work is part of their permanent offer are organizations that strongly focus on digital media/technology in their operation and/or work on e-inclusion, for example a youth editorial and medialab or workshops on digital media and digitalization.

Accessibility

Questions related to the accessibility of youth work, focused on the platforms, tools, hardware and software and internet access used during a practice, as well as who had to provide the

hard-, software and internet (participants, organization). The most common platforms are Zoom (55%), Instagram (19%), YouTube (15%) and Facebook Live (12%). Frequently used tools are Kahoot (21%), Mentimeter (19%) and Miro and Padlet (both at 15%).

In addition, the majority of organizations work with hardware, with an emphasis on laptops (85%), smartphones (59,6%) and tablets (39,5%). Before COVID-19 restrictions, hardware (and software) was almost always provided by the organizations themselves, but online practices assume that the participants have the necessary skills and equipment, and therefore do not take e-inclusion into account. A few organizations did provide their youngsters with the necessary material. For example, by taking part in a laptop collection campaign. Organizations that provided their youngsters with hardware and/or internet were most often committed to supporting young people in vulnerable situations. Physical digital youth work activities never expect participants to provide their own material, which emphasizes the fact that this barrier is due to the pandemic. However, the majority of the respondents mentioned the importance of e-inclusion during the follow-up interviews. Youth workers are aware of this obstacle, but often do not have sufficient resources to provide their youth with the necessary support and infrastructure.

It is clear that the pandemic has had a major effect on the accessibility of (digital) youth work, which normally has fewer barriers, as equipment was provided by organizations. But besides the fact that the participants usually have to provide their own equipment, there is another barrier, not just related to the pandemic. Hardware, such as laptops, smartphones, tablets etc., is expensive.

Apart from the access to the hardware and tools, also the digital skill level of both youth workers and participating youth is an important factor. Our research indicated that for many youth workers, the level of digital literacy is not sufficient to confidently set-up and execute digital youth work activities. For example, we asked organizations whether they provided youth work training related to digital skills. Only 45% of activities were accompanied by training for the supervisors, 81% of these focused on digital skill training, but mainly looked into the technical skills needed to organize an online practice, and not into information skills. When we asked organizations about the expected digital competence level of supervisors, 63% answered 'advanced', compared to 23% 'starter' and 36% 'intermediate'. However, when asked what these advanced competences entailed, most organizations cited know-how about using tools/platforms (such as Zoom, Office Outlook) and providing technical support during online activities. This means that the main focus is on using rather than understanding digital media, which is only one dimension of digital literacy. Nonetheless, during the pandemic many youth workers actively taught themselves the necessary digital competences to organize online activities. They were able to set up activities via platforms like Zoom or Jitsi and use tools like Kahoot or Padlet. There is however need for a more structured training of youth workers. This implies there should not only be attention to funding of material, but also attention for the

education of youth workers, to enhance their digital skills. Only this way they can support youngsters in their learning process, something Lauha and Nölvak (2019) also state in their report. Youth workers need not be digital experts but have to be digitally literate and knowledgeable enough to support and possibly even train youngsters (Lauha & Nölvak, 2019).

The impact of covid-19 on Flemish digital youth work

The research shows that COVID-19 has functioned as a 'lever' for digital youth work. Various online activities were organized because of COVID-19, as an alternative to regular youth work. The results of our survey show that for many organizations this was their first introduction to digital youth work (35%). For others, COVID-19 expanded their existing digital youth work, without necessarily classifying their pre-COVID activities as digital youth work, such as a youth camp about vlogging. The results of the survey therefore point to the predominant role of online activities organized during the pandemic. A large part of the Flemish youth work organizations is not (yet) familiar with 'digital youth work' in the broad sense of the word. Some organizations already have a notion of what it entails or can entail. However, Flanders does not reach the levels of digital youth work present in countries such as Finland and Estland where digital youth work is fully integrated in youth work (Lauha & Nölvak, 2019; Verke, 2021).

However, great strides have been made because of the pandemic. Youth work organizations also indicate this in the survey: "Before the corona crisis, almost everything happened physically." Many new practices emerged during COVID-19, such as virtual youth centers, online training for youth workers, online art expositions, etc. What these practices have in common is the online aspect, as most organizations define digital youth work as online youth work, as mentioned above. For example, the Formaat-organization has a social media trajectory for youth centers but does not mention this in the survey. Organization Krunsj has a Ready Player One camp, but only mentions online activities.

Several organizations say they have gained new insights, learned a lot, and wished to continue to focus on this (40,5%). They noticed the advantages, such as the large reach, anonymity, or the opportunity for children to experiment and learn whilst using new digital media and technologies. Youth workers also experimented during the pandemic, figuring out the best way to reach their target group, and creating new innovative practices in the process, like an anonymous online trajectory offering guidance to youth with a gaming addiction. There are however also disadvantages, including the fact that it is more difficult to achieve connection, interaction and even playfulness in online activities. Organizations do see a possibility for physical or blended activities, as they realize the digital world is inherently part of youngsters' lives and that their competences are not

always as good as first assumed. Youth workers have realized the importance of being digitally literate, both for themselves and the young people that join their activities, as COVID-19 has put greater attention on the digital part of our society. Issues that have also been noted by Lauha and Nölvak (2019) and the Skill-IT project (2021), as youth workers themselves need to be digitally literate to support participants.

These results are in line with recommendations made by other research projects focusing on digitalization and youth work. The 2020 report on social inclusion, digitalization and young people in Romania, Croatia, and the United Kingdom, addressed this issue thoroughly in other European countries, stating that not only youth workers need new skills (21st century skills), there also need to be more options to support young people in socially vulnerable situations, not only noting the need for policies, but also youth work practices focusing on e-inclusion. This is also stated in the Skill-IT report (2021), which focuses on Ireland, Norway, Poland, and Romania, that also notes a lack of funding, access, proper infrastructure. Thus, these are evolutions not only national but also European youth work needs to entertain.

Challenges and Opportunities

From the abovementioned results, different challenges and opportunities were uncovered. We will discuss four main opportunities and four main challenges for the Flemish digital youth work sector. As a first opportunity, online youth work can combat isolation amongst youngsters. They can visit online youth care organizations or can join online activities if they are unable to participate in physical activities for certain reasons. In some ways, it is also 'more accessible' as it is a straightforward way to bridge distance or to set up a spontaneous chat. In this way, digital media can be a tool to connect, or it can create an extra dimension for activities, i.e., organize blended activities that involve both the physical and virtual world. In addition, digital media offers possibilities of experimentation to allow youngsters to play with media and technology, while learning about the techniques through gamification or via maker spaces and media labs. This relates to Coffield's (2000) informal learning theory, that most learning takes place outside of formal training and that it is important to acknowledge its opportunities. Furthermore, digital youth work offers the opportunity to involve youngsters in the creation of activities, tools, platforms, etc. The virtual world is an inherent part of youngsters' daily lives. Digital media also offers the possibility of e-participation, which may be perceived as more accessible for young people.

A first identified challenge is the limited presence of the required expertise and digital competences among supervisors. In many organizations we see a clear need for proper digital youth work training. A possible solution for this is to set up a network in the field of digital youth work. This way beneficial partnerships can be set up, expertise and knowledge can be shared, and youth workers are able to participate in training opportunities. A second challenge is the possibility of digital exclusion. Youngsters do not

always have the access, skills, knowledge, or attitude to use digital media and technology properly. Even though we often talk about a generation of digital natives, not every young person is digitally literate. The third challenge concerns organizations' access to hardware, software, and the internet. As these tools cost money, the organization needs access to a certain budget to purchase the necessary material and subscriptions. But a budget for training is also required to develop the competences to guide youngsters in using digital media.

A fourth challenge is properly working out the digital component of an activity. Not every form of digital youth work is the right working method for a certain practice or goal. It is important that this is considered when drawing up a digital youth work policy plan, so Flemish youth work organizations have sufficient input regarding the meaning and type of digital youth work. It is important to monitor the quality of digital youth work. Both the policy makers and the youth work sector agree that digital competences and the virtual world should be given attention within youth work. However, organizations need to carefully consider why and how they want to implement digital youth work, whereas policy makers must provide a clear framework with guidelines on implementing digital youth work.

Conclusions

The pandemic has had a positive influence on the use of Flemish digital youth work. As a result of the first Belgian lockdown, many youth work organizations have organized online activities as an alternative to their 'normal' practices. Youth workers adopted an inventive attitude, taught themselves certain digital competences and made themselves familiar with online tools such as Zoom, Jitsi, and so on. This way, organizations were still able to organize activities and reach their target group virtually. Organizations that were already committed to digital youth work maintained their digital youth work or expanded it further, for example by creating an online version of an activity. Many digital youth work organizations started experimenting, leading to innovative practices and input of youngsters.

Whereas youth workers showed themselves resilient in the face of the pandemic, certain evolutions were notable. Not every organization uses the same definition for digital youth work. Organizations that started focusing on digital youth work during the first lockdown, see this as purely an online operation, regardless of the theme, activity, or target group. Organizations that have been focusing on digital youth work for some time, often have a clear focus and idea that digital youth work is used to strengthen 'regular' youth work or that it gives an additional dimension to it. However, the bulk of digital youth work organized these past two years is online synchronous – live – youth work. Secondly, blended – mixed method – activities occur, followed by physical digital youth work, and finally various asynchronous – non-live – activities were set up.

Despite a difference in interpretation of digital youth work, this resilient sector has gained a lot of knowledge during the pandemic. This has expedited the amount of Flemish digital youth work practices. The proposed definition by the Council of the EU offers the opportunity to set up these activities in a way that fits the working method or focus of an organization. For example, the definition indicates that digital media and technology may be used as an instrument, an activity, or a subject, by a method and setting of your choosing, if it meets the values and standards of 'regular' youth work (Council of the European Union, 2019).

The knowledge youth workers have acquired throughout the pandemic can be summarized by the following:

- Knowledge about online platforms and tools;
- The possibility of setting up blended activities and use of tools/platforms to increase (online) interactivity;
- The possibility of combating isolation and positive aspects anonymous youth welfare practices, as it has a lower threshold to seek help/guidance;
- The possibility of reaching a more widespread audience via online activities;
- The shortcomings of online activities other than the need for inclusion, i.e., more difficult to have interaction or playfulness
- The need for attention relating to e-inclusion and competences and the intertwining of the virtual and physical world in young people's lives;
- The need for attention related to media and information literacy (e.g., fake news);
- The importance of your own digital competences and the role they can play related to supporting youth's digital competences.

Another effect of the pandemic is the awareness about digital competences and e-inclusion, mentioned in Digitalisation & Youth Work (Lauha & Nõlvak, 2019) and in the Șerban et al. research study (2020) on e-inclusion of youngsters. Youth organizations are mindful of the digitalization of our society and the importance of digital literacy. The sector was already aware of this evolution, but the pandemic made it more imperative and urgent. It is impossible to ignore the fact that digital media and technology are an inherent part of young people's lives and that their future professions will more than likely require 21st century digital skills such as handling digital tools, problem-solving and critical thinking (Soffel, 2016). Nevertheless, youngsters do not always possess the competences or opportunities to use digital media and technology properly, for example in families that cannot afford an internet connection. It is therefore crucial that every youngster has the opportunity to develop these competences during their free time, via playful and non-formal education, which will prepare them better for their future.

The focus of youth work is on the development of youngsters, by stimulating and

strengthening them. As a result, youth work can contribute to the digital competences of young people in a playful and meaningful way, as also referred to in the Skill IT study (2018). However, right now most organizations have insufficient knowledge on this topic. It is therefore critical that clear guidelines are created, (financial) support is provided, knowledge is shared, youth workers are adequately trained and that a network of partnerships for setting up digital youth work practices is created.

Based on our research, concrete policy recommendations include:

1. Strengthen Flemish digital youth work, as digital skills are a key competence for participating in a digitalized society. However due to the lack of a widespread definition of 'digital youth work', it remains unclear to organizations what does and does not belong to this concept.
2. Strengthen communication about digital youth work, as clearer communication is needed about the actual meaning of digital youth work and what place it has within youth work.
3. Reinforce the focus on e-inclusion in digital youth work, extra reflection on digital inequalities is necessary.
4. Strengthen knowledge sharing and partnerships in digital youth work with network-strengthening activities, such as intervisions, a range of flexible external training options, and so on.
5. Strengthen the sustainability of Flemish digital youth work by integrating monitoring and impact measurement, financial options for experimental projects with e-participation platforms and an annual evaluation.

However, the limitations of this study must also be considered. Firstly, as there has been no previous research relating to Flemish digital youth work and the research took place during the pandemic, results could not be compared to the status of digital youth work before the pandemic. Secondly, our research focused on official, subsidized Flemish youth work organizations. We did not take into account nationally funded organizations, nor did we analyze organizations not funded by the government, as this was out of scope. Also, not all organizations participated in the survey. Nevertheless, we were able to provide a clear picture of the current status of Flemish digital youth work, together with its challenges and opportunities. As this paper mainly focuses on the link between digital youth work and the effects of COVID-19, i.e. e-inclusion, it also adds another layer to the European youth work projects. By analyzing current practices and challenges, we were able to formulate concrete policy recommendations to the government on how to support Flemish digital youth work, considering the actual needs of the sector.

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