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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**The situation of young people in the European Union**

*Accompanying the document*

**Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European  
Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**

**on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2021**

{COM(2021) 636 final} - {SWD(2021) 286 final}

## 9. Youth work

Youth work is defined as ‘activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people’ <sup>(1)</sup>. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation.

Youth work is an essential part of supporting young people in their transition from childhood to adulthood. Through participation in youth work activities, young people acquire key competences and skills for their personal, civic and professional growth. Because they are carried out in diverse settings, youth work activities reinforce young people’s inclusion in education, society and the labour market.

In light of its unique role in young people’s lives, youth work has been established as a distinct field within European youth policy by successive resolutions and conclusions of the Council of the European Union <sup>(2)</sup>. In their most recent action, EU Member States adopted a resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda in the field of the Youth Work, a strategic framework for strengthening and developing the quality of, innovation in and recognition of youth work <sup>(3)</sup>. This chapter focuses on the first two objectives.

One of the central elements of quality in youth work is its responsiveness to the needs of young people, in order to contribute fully to their personal and social development <sup>(4)</sup>. Another crucial factor related to quality is the inclusiveness of youth work activities, i.e. their ability to reach out to and include all groups of young people <sup>(5)</sup>. To support these objectives, establishing methods for evaluating the outcomes of activities is key. The first section of this chapter illustrates the existing modalities for ensuring the quality of youth work across European countries.

Quality in youth work goes hand in hand with innovation in its practices to respond to the evolving needs of young people <sup>(6)</sup>. One of the most powerful drivers of change is the digitalisation of society. With more and more dimensions of life moving to digital settings, the way that young people experience education, civic engagement, cultural activities and the world of work is changing. Consequently, new needs are emerging that require the adaptation of the content and methods used in youth work. The second section of this chapter illustrates the measures taken by European countries to support the digitalisation of youth work.

These include public policies and programmes established in European countries and initiatives implemented by civil society actors, as long as they are recognised and (at least partially) funded by public authorities. Information was sourced from Youth Wiki, the platform reporting on national policies in the youth field <sup>(7)</sup>.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2020b.

<sup>(2)</sup> For an overview of the main documents, see the annex to the Council resolution referred to in footnote 1.

<sup>(3)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2020b.

<sup>(4)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2013.

<sup>(5)</sup> A complete discussion of all indicators of quality in youth work can be found in European Commission 2015b.

<sup>(6)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2016.

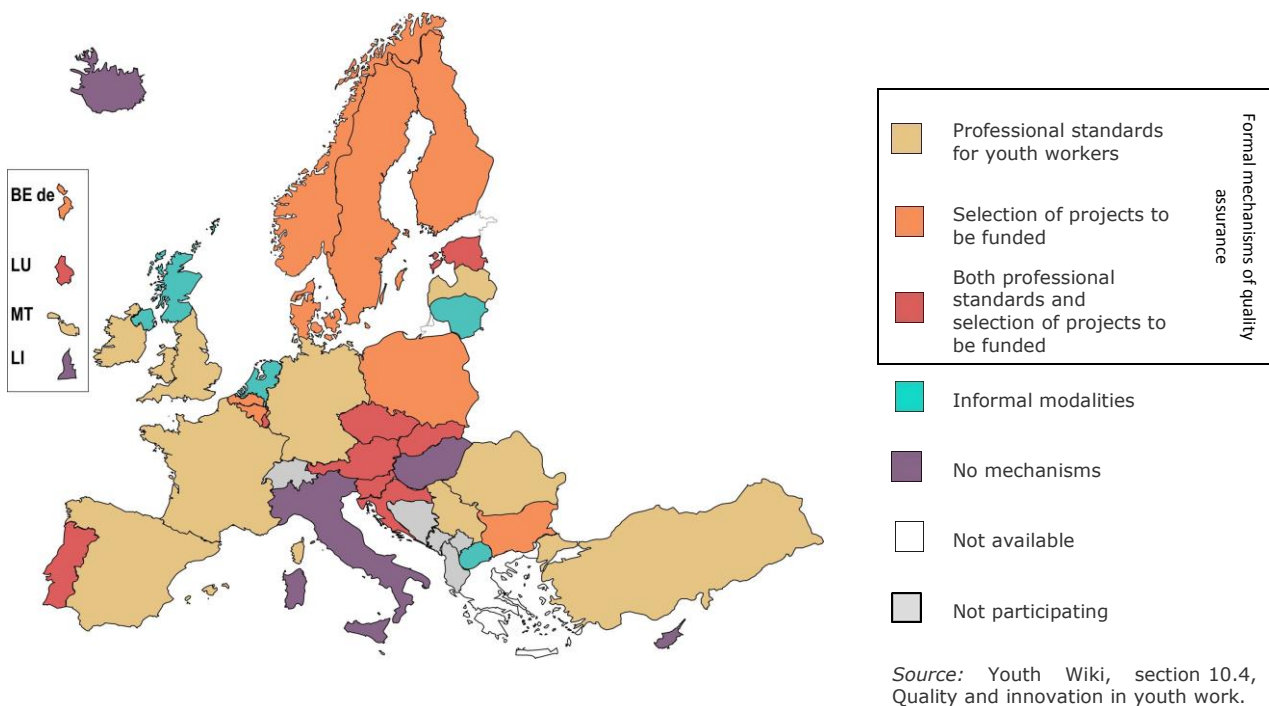
<sup>(7)</sup> The Youth Wiki platform is regularly updated to include new policies and initiatives. To access the most recent developments, see its website: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki>. [Accessed on 24.03.2021]

## 9.1. Quality assurance

Enhancing the quality of youth work activities requires the identification of specific objectives and standards. Criteria and indicators for measuring outcomes are agreed and the degree of adherence to quality parameters is evaluated through monitoring modalities. These modalities can be based on formal mechanisms (requirements and procedures that must be complied with) or on informal practices (which often consist of evaluations and processes of self-assessment).

Figure 9.1 shows that public authorities have established formal mechanisms of quality assurance – often in collaboration with representatives of the youth work community – in two thirds of the reporting countries. In the remaining countries, either only informal modalities are used or no specific approach to quality assurance exists.

**Figure 9.1:** Prevailing modalities of quality assurance, September 2020



Notes: The term 'project' covers different activities across countries, such as services and initiatives.  
BE de: German-speaking Community of Belgium.

### 9.1.1. Formal mechanisms: professional standards and public funding requirements

Countries where formal mechanisms prevail follow two different approaches to quality assurance. In some contexts, the focus is on youth workers' professional competences. According to this approach, quality assurance mechanisms define youth workers' occupational standards and the processes for the validation of their competences.

In **Estonia**, the Education and Youth Board awards professional certificates to youth workers. First, youth workers perform a self-assessment and create a portfolio of their competences, according to established occupational standards. Second, they undergo an interview to determine if they have achieved the competences required to be awarded the certificate.

Youth workers in **France** are required to obtain a Facilitator's Certificate of Aptitude (BAFA) to supervise and work with young people. The BAFA is a non-professional qualification that enables holders to run activities in community centres for minors, and in holiday and leisure centres. As part of the assessment, youth workers must demonstrate the ability to coordinate teams of

educators, design and run socially driven activities and ensure the well-being, development and safety of children and adolescents, among other things.

The second approach to establishing formal mechanisms focuses on project characteristics. In this case, quality is measured based on predefined criteria (such as the content of activities, accountability of fund management, and outreach to young people) and endorsed by allocating public funding to projects complying with those criteria.

The 'Ordinance on government grants for child and youth organisations' is the reference document for the distribution of funding in **Sweden**. In order to receive a grant, youth work organisations must commit to pursuing the objectives indicated in the ordinance and respecting procedural rules in their activities. Organisations are required to report annually on how any funds received have been employed. If the two conditions are not met, organisations may need to repay the funds.

In some cases, the use of funding is specified in contractual terms. For example, in the **German-speaking Community of Belgium**, youth work providers must conclude 'performance contracts' with the government and local authorities in order to receive funds. These contracts specify the modalities of implementation and the expected results of projects. Performance is monitored through regular reporting.

In some instances, monitoring can lead to financial penalties. In **Slovenia**, when applying for public funding, organisations must demonstrate that they operate in the public interest, based on the correspondence of their projects with the content, scope and quality of public calls. If monitoring processes discover inadequacies in the implementation of activities, the Office for Youth can withhold funds.

### 9.1.2. Informal modalities: evaluations and self-assessment

Some countries ensure the quality of youth work through evaluations and self-assessments. This method is widespread among countries and, in some countries, is the only method in place. These informal mechanisms can be overseen by public actors (often local administrations) in partnership with youth work organisations or by organisations alone. They are organised on a voluntary basis and represent opportunities for guidance and improvement. Exchanges of best practice between organisations, shared benchmarks and peer learning are the most common instruments used. The outcomes usually consist of non-compulsory recommendations on competence development, widening of outreach activities and application of new methods. In some cases, quality labels are attributed to organisations receiving positive assessments.

In **Lithuania**, quality assurance takes place in two stages. First, organisations perform a self-assessment of their projects to identify aspects that need to be improved. Assessments are conducted against (non-binding) performance indicators, such as the number of projects delivered, the level of participation and the amount of funds raised. Feedback from young people and their parents is also part of this internal review. In a second step, based on the outcomes of the self-assessment, exchanges are carried out with the municipal youth coordinator to identify objectives and strategies for improvement.

As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, the capacity for innovation is one of the main pillars upholding the quality of youth work. Indeed, to stay relevant in supporting young people, youth work has to adapt its contents and methodologies to the transformations taking place in society <sup>(8)</sup>.

The developments brought about by digitalisation – and accelerated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic <sup>(9)</sup> – pose an unprecedented demand for innovation in the youth work sector.

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<sup>(8)</sup> Council of the European Union, 2016.

<sup>(9)</sup> For an analysis of the effects of the pandemic on education and learning, see Chapter 6.

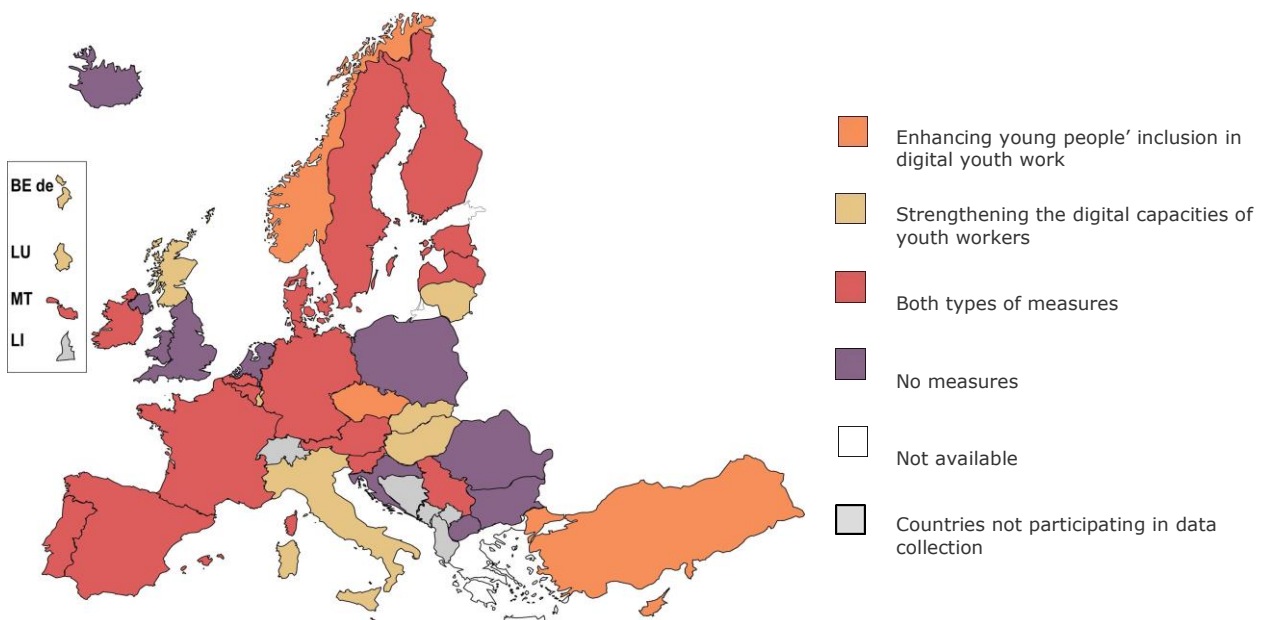
Digitalisation requires rethinking the way that projects and activities are delivered. Face-to-face activities are adapted to help young people benefit best from new modes of learning, working and participating in society<sup>(10)</sup>. In this context, offsetting inequalities in the access to digital opportunities (the ‘digital divide’, discussed in Chapter 5, ‘Youth and the Digital World’, and in Chapter 6, ‘Education and Training’)<sup>(11)</sup> and fighting digital exclusion<sup>(12)</sup> become the core purposes of youth work.

The main strategies adopted by European countries to meet this challenge are described in the following section.

## 9.2. Digital youth work

The application of digital technologies to youth work opens up new opportunities: new virtual environments become available; new outreach modalities are designed; and new ways of addressing risks such as isolation and exclusion come to the fore.

**Figure 9.2:** Measures supporting the digitalisation of youth work, September 2020



Source: Youth Wiki, section 10.4, Quality and innovation in youth work.

Notes: BE de: German-speaking Community of Belgium.

While not a new phenomenon, the application of digital technologies to youth work has accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of reduced personal contact, young people are more vulnerable to physical and emotional isolation, detachment from education and exclusion from the labour market. These challenges can be offset by participating in youth work through digital means.

<sup>(10)</sup> European Union and Council of Europe youth partnership, 2020.

<sup>(11)</sup> The digital divide is ‘the distinction between those who have internet access and are able to make use of new services offered on the World Wide Web, and those who are excluded from these services’. See Eurostat, 2019b.

<sup>(12)</sup> Council of Europe and European Commission, 2020.

This digital acceleration has also had an impact on youth workers. In a survey conducted in 2020 among youth workers in different European countries, nearly half of respondents had been compelled to initiate or expand the use of digital applications<sup>(13)</sup>. The same survey also reported a noteworthy increase in the proportion of youth workers needing support to develop digital competences and access better digital infrastructure (e.g. broadband internet hardware).

To support the efforts of the youth work community to incorporate the use of digital tools and develop digital competences, measures have been established in about two thirds of the European countries that participate in data collection (Figure 9.2). Several countries (mainly in eastern Europe) report the absence of measures.

### 9.2.1. Enhancing young people' inclusion in digital youth work

One of the most common objectives of national measures is supporting youth work providers in delivering digital activities that foster youth participation. Support can take the form of partnerships between public bodies (e.g. national agencies) and non-governmental actors, and the funding of projects organised by youth work organisations.

In **Malta**, social media is one of the tools used by the national youth agency [Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ](#) to reach out to young people. Among other initiatives, the agency maintains the OPIN platform, which creates online opportunities for young people to exchange ideas and contribute to the political discourse.

In **Serbia**, [NAPOR](#) runs the project 'The first decade of recognising youth work' in cooperation with the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The project includes a series of educational activities ('Youth online work – Show and connect!') based on online platforms and digital tools for use in youth work initiatives. It manages seven digital youth clubs, which have over 100 participants. Their activities revolve around the application of digital media and tools.

The **Danish Centre for Digital Pedagogy** provides support through public funding. The centre receives partial or total funding for digital counselling services for young people. Young people who encounter obstacles in physically accessing counselling (e.g. because of geographical distance) can obtain support through online chats with youth workers. Training is also provided for volunteers wishing to serve as counsellors.

As mentioned above, the application of digital technologies to youth work has gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many organisations have reinforced the use of digital technologies in their activities, with the backing of public authorities.

The **National Youth Council of Ireland** promotes new methodologies that make use of digital media, to adapt youth work activities to the changing reality. The document 'Youth work in an online setting during COVID-19' offers specific guidance for designing and managing online projects.

Other initiatives focus on migrating existing activities from offline to online environments. The **Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth** has provided an online version of its face-to-face project *Cuida-te+*. The project promotes healthy behaviours among young participants. The institute has also launched a new initiative called *#serjovememcasa*, to ensure the continuity of youth work activities during the pandemic.

### 9.2.2. Strengthening the digital competences of youth workers

The application of digital technologies to youth work activities means that youth workers must acquire and strengthen their digital competences, such as digital literacy, digital communication and digital safety<sup>(14)</sup>.

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<sup>(13)</sup> European Commission, 2021c.

<sup>(14)</sup> The European Digital Competences Framework 2.0 defines digital literacy as the ability to identify and retrieve relevant digital content; digital communication as the ability to interact and collaborate through digital technologies; and digital safety as the ability to

This can be encouraged by facilitating youth workers' access to opportunities for professional training in digital technologies <sup>(15)</sup>. Accordingly, the majority of countries participating in the 2020 survey have put in place measures to help youth workers gain and reinforce the necessary competences.

The project [Awareness Centre SAFE.SI](#) in **Slovenia** provides training and workshops for youth and social workers (as well as parents and teachers) to reinforce their capacity to guide children and teenagers in the safe and responsible use of digital media. Training programmes include class-based courses and supporting material. Because youth workers engage in a wide variety of activities, the training programmes usually cover multiple skills and competences and are often organised by partnerships of providers.

In **France**, the project [D-Clics numériques](#) is run by the French Education League, Paris Descartes University, the National Education Research Network and seven educational associations. D-Clics numériques provides training in digital technology for youth work facilitators and volunteers and its purpose is to help young people use digital technology responsibly.

Youth workers can also acquire and reinforce their digital competences through formal education. In some countries, digital and media literacy is part of the curriculum for degrees leading to the qualification of professional youth worker.

In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science in **Latvia** introduced media literacy as one of the competences to be acquired by youth workers during their studies.

Similarly, youth workers in **Estonia** can attain competences related to smart youth work during their formal education (as well as through non-formal opportunities). Competences include skills in digital tools and their application to youth work, understanding the digital behaviour of young people, and knowledge of the trends in digital communication.

Besides education and training, many European countries promote the creation of resources supporting the use of digital technologies by youth workers. Toolboxes, collections of best practice and guidelines are among the most common instruments provided.

For example, youth workers in **Slovakia** can use an online tool to assess the competences needed for setting up digital projects. The tool – called 'Discover your competencies online' – has been developed by non-governmental organisations with the support of the national programme for youth.

**Austria** operates the virtual exchange platform [Medienkompetenz.Ja.Wien](#) dedicated to youth workers who are active in Vienna's Child and Youth Work service. It consists of a virtual space where youth workers can share knowledge, experiences and information about media work with children and adolescents.

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protect personal data and physical and psychological health. Further information is available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp/digital-competence-framework>. [Accessed on 23.03.2021]

<sup>(15)</sup> European Commission, 2020b.



## Conclusions

Two crucial aspects for youth work to stay relevant to the needs of young people are the capacity to assure the quality of its projects and services, and to evolve along the transformation in society.

Data show that public authorities have established formal mechanisms of quality assurance in the vast majority of countries. The analysis illustrates that supporting and validating youth workers' professional competences, and allocating public funding to youth work projects that match pre-established criteria represent the most common mechanisms of quality assurance.

The chapter has also illustrated the measures established by European countries to reinforce the role of youth work in the context of digitalisation, which has seen an acceleration during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiatives implemented aim, on one hand, at incorporating the use of digital tools in youth work projects, and on the other at supporting youth workers in acquiring and strengthening their digital competences.