



# DIGITAL APPLICATIONS IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

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# INTRODUCTION

## - Digital applications in youth employment services

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Numbers of NEET young people are growing in many European countries. Many actions have taken place in order to prevent the increase of youth unemployment. According to related reports and desk studies, efforts to develop employment services and improve the employability of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are an effective way to contribute to these aims.

In most countries, the situation of young people living in sparsely populated areas in particular is difficult, if they are not willing to move away from their home regions to search for jobs and education opportunities. Services are concentrated in larger regional centres and in many regions there is a lack of services for young people which provide them with tools to gain the necessary skills for future career planning. It is necessary to develop additional and complementary methods and models for service delivery in order to ensure opportunities for participation, particularly for those, who have disadvantaged backgrounds and who have challenges to face in their education and working life.

There is clear evidence that digitalisation has improved engagement with services in remote and sparsely populated areas via improved access to technology. Internet and mobile applications provided for different types of services are part of that vast change, and this has reinforced the citizenship of young people. According to research, most young people use information technology daily in variety of ways and the smartphone is the basic way for them to search for knowledge and information (e.g. Mesch & Talmud 2010). In Finland alone, almost 96% of all young people use digital services and the Internet on a daily basis. (Merikivi et al. 2016.) However, digital services are not yet widely taken advantage of by official providers of services. There are many opportunities in regional youth services in different countries to improve the prospects of disadvantaged youth in their career planning by implementing digital solutions. The availability of digital services is better for many service users than that of traditional service practices with face-to-face appointments.

For example, in the USA, a digital-based model of services for young people specifically has been introduced, a LRNG platform that covers large demographic areas and several groups of people. The model is based on the idea of learning cities in larger city territories, where citizens of a certain territory are able to map out and make use of regional opportunities for work, education and other activities via the LRNG platform, the service of which is available for all living in the region. These kinds of solutions fit those who are able to use the Internet and who live in areas where the provision of face-to-face services is scarce. These solutions specifically provide opportunities to prepare for future careers.

Especially for young people who live in sparsely populated areas and those who have disadvantaged backgrounds, there is a growing need for personalised services in support practices. Such special practices, where young people's individual needs are in focus, are still lacking in several regions throughout Europe. There is a need for such digital-based solutions that recognise individual interests and needs in order for young people to learn and adopt different skills. This desk study maps out current opportunities for young people to make use of digital service solutions to enhance their future prospects and employability. According to the aims of the main project, it is necessary to develop tools for these young people to promote the possibilities to improve their career prospects by making use of different options according to their interests.

This desk study evaluates contemporary digital applications and solutions used in youth services in these countries that relate to mapping out different career prospects and opportunities. The evaluation includes ongoing practices in the countries and particular regions involved in the project, which are in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Finland. The first task of the study is to find out what sources of knowledge young people currently use in a particular region when they need information on their options for planning their future careers, and how they currently search for information on interesting job opportunities, education, courses and other activities.

The basic aim of the desk study is to discover what kind of digital solutions the regional service providers currently provide for these purposes and how personalised the services are. Therefore, the desk study provides a stock of knowledge on the current state of digital services for young people in terms of career planning and the level of personalisation of those services in terms of how they meet individual needs. This knowledge is valuable when evaluating the applicability of the service model based on learning platforms in different regional contexts.

The desk study provides knowledge for service developers to assess the regional and infrastructural preconditions for implementing this service model in the countries and regions involved in the project. The study provides tools to assess the level of personalisation of currently used digital youth services and develop a digital service, which meets individual needs and interests and provides opportunities to make choices according to individual preferences. These elements promote the well-being of young people and when applied in, for example, youth employment services for disadvantaged young people, they will improve the skills and hence the employability of disadvantaged young people.

The processes of implementation of digital services, their consequences and possible changes in the statuses of young people are also subjects scrutinised in the study, since it is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of current digital solutions in youth services. In addition to these stages of study and evaluation, the study also suggests ways to improve the level of personalisation in digitalised practices in youth employment services. It takes the opportunities for participation and self-determination of young people under careful notice and analyses to what extent these dimensions are involved in digital service practices provided in different countries. Both dimensions are important in developing such services, where the individual needs, interests and ambitions of young people are in focus as they plan their future paths.

According to a rapid survey implemented by a student in the Finnish sub-project, many young people get their information mostly online and by Googling when they need to map out any education or job opportunities in their home regions. In order to conduct the desk study it was important to get online links from each participating country relating to youth employment and education services, and other relevant sources of online information regarding to useful services for young people.

The first part of the study introduces current digital services addressed to young people in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Finland, when young people want to enhance their own career opportunities in general. The aim is to find out what kind of digital opportunities young people living in those countries currently have to help with mapping out their future study and work prospects. It brings out the current debates and discussion in each country concerning how digital services relate to the lives of young people and how the representatives of youth services recognise the opportunities of digitalisation in the service system.

The first part of the study also clarifies the level of individualisation in these digital services addressed to young people. It examines the level of participation of young people in planning and implementing these types of services and maps out their opportunities to influence their implementation. Personalisation of services is an ongoing process in support services in many countries, especially for vulnerable groups of people, and in this study, it is useful to scrutinise the level of personalisation or individualisation in current digital services provided for young people in general, when they are planning their education and employment futures.

The second part of the study involves scrutiny of the idea of non-formal learning and how its opportunities are enhanced in digital services. Non-formal learning has recently been a frequently studied area in many countries within, for example, the discipline of educational studies. They argue that using online services promotes non-formal learning. Another subject of analysis in this study is the current opportunities for non-formal learning provided in digital services addressed to young people, when planning their future career paths.

The last part of the report draws together the findings of the study and discusses the possibilities of developing digital services relating to young people's personal needs when they are searching for current education and employment opportunities in their home regions and planning their future paths. Being part of larger international project, where the aim is to develop and experiment with a digital platform to improve young people's future opportunities, this desk study provides tools for this specific work in the form of general guidelines to further develop the level of individualisation and opportunities for non-formal learning when using that service.

The study provides information on currently used digital platforms and their applicability for the purpose of enhancing young people's ability to build meaningful future paths. It also maps out the needs for the further development of types of digital services in order for them to be individualised and reactive to the needs of young people.

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# **PART 1**

## **NEED FOR SUPPORT TO PLAN FUTURES BY MAKING USE OF DIGITAL-BASED OPPORTUNITIES**

The first chapter deals with the current state of digital services in relation to career prospects and future paths of education and employment for young people in a few of the countries involved in the project. It introduces these types of services in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Finland. Ongoing public debates and discussions in those countries concerning digitalisation of youth services are also under scrutiny in this part of the study. It is important to look into that discussion to see what kinds of digital-based activities are currently available to develop opportunities for employment and education for young people and thereby improve their position in society and prevent social exclusion.

The second chapter concentrates on the level of individualisation of these types of services addressed to young people. It examines how personalised these digital service platforms are, how they meet young people's needs and interests and to what extent young people are able to participate in and conduct the actual planning of their own services. This information is important in order to see on one hand what there is to learn from currently available services. On the other hand, it is important to see if there are crucial elements that current services lack, but should be included in digital youth services in terms of meeting the individual needs of service users.

This knowledge is useful in developing digital solutions for young people to enhance opportunities to make their own decisions and individual plans during transition periods between educational levels and education and working life, and thereby to give them opportunities to lead independent lives.

# CHAPTER 1:

## Digital services for young people to enhance education and employment: Cases of France, Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Finland

The purpose of this chapter is to examine current opportunities for young people, especially those living in remote regions and rural areas, to make use of digital possibilities to improve their education and employment prospects in their home regions. The general aim is to introduce contemporary digital practices in related youth services in different European countries. These issues go along with the public debate and initiatives presented in each country concerning the digitalisation of youth services. In light of this discussion, it is possible to understand the general ethos prevailing in those countries when it comes to efforts to develop the digitalisation of services in general and in youth services especially.

It is important to compare practices between these countries in order to promote the transfer of knowledge and to enable learning from the experiences of others. Describing the activities in each country also provides general knowledge regarding the focus of policies on digitalisation, which is central to understanding the practices in different countries and finding important areas to develop them from young people's point of view.

### Digitalisation and youth services in general: the case of youth work

On the scale of European Union, there has been much discussion on general policies and policy recommendations regarding the needs of young people for digitalisation of services (e.g. *Developing Digital Youth Work* 2018). These recommendations also draw attention to dangers and risks that digitalisation poses to youth. Implementing actions to promote safe use of the Internet is included in youth policies in many countries. Recognising risks that young people face on the Internet is crucial in policy recommendations with regard to digitalisation. (Van den Eijnden et al. 2018.)

At the same time, interest in the benefits of digitalisation of youth services is high on the European scale. In light of international and national reports, nationwide policies of digitalisation and youth seem to relate strongly to youth

work, which is an important support service for young people in many European countries. National studies and reports conducted in, for example, Finland and the UK, emphasise the importance of developing digital services in youth work in accordance with young people's needs, therefore youth workers should update their professional skills for the purposes of digital development (e.g. *Challenges and Opportunities for Youth Information and Counselling in a Digital Era* 2016).

According to a report dealing with the overall development programme for the digitalisation of youth work launched by the EU, it is necessary to develop digitalisation from the viewpoint of both young people and youth workers, as well as other authorities providing youth services. Sufficient skills in using digital devices and applications are crucial. Digital development should therefore involve both sides of the process: innovating and designing digital solutions for the use of youth services, and ensuring opportunities for education to obtain sufficient digital skills to implement these changes and use the applications. These processes go along with nationwide and global policies to take use of the benefits of digitalisation. Improving the digital skills of all citizens is part of the national aims, for example, in Germany (e.g. Windhagen et al. 2017).

Despite the general digitalisation development in many European countries, digitalisation of youth services primarily seems to mean digital development of youth work. Many recent studies and reports that scrutinise these issues emphasise the role of youth workers and their professional development. For example, in Finland, youth service practices still rely on face-to-face interaction between professionals and young people. According to researchers, the professional skills of youth workers relate to skills needed in interaction and the capacity to create trusting relationships with young people. (E.g. Kiilakoski et al. 2015.)

The importance of young people's personal views and opinions has gained more attention in youth policies and other public discussions, and forms the tendency in developing youth services. However, it is still rare to let young people themselves plan and design service practices or solutions according to their own interests and needs. Especially in Finland, these service cultures are still professional-driven. Studies and reports underline the role of youth workers and other professionals, and professional adult expertise in youth issues is valued to the extent that the voices of young people do not necessarily get given attention. (E.g. Eriksson 2018.)

Digitalisation of youth work is very important, and is an ongoing process in Europe, but discussion about its significance for young people, its effects and practices for development, still focus on the point of view of the professionals and authorities. Upskilling youth workers' digital competences is considered one of the most important aims in the process. (E.g. *Developing Digital Youth Work*, 2018; Kiviniemi & Kriauciunas 2016.) When it comes to the benefits of digitalisation, discussion is still rare in many countries, where the needs of young people would be in focus.

## **Digital services for young people to promote their future career paths**

There has been recent discussion in Europe on enhancing the participation of young people in planning and designing their own services and digital solutions (e.g. Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al. 2010). Currently, practices in advice and support on issues of education and employment are mainly face-to-face appointments between youth service workers and young clients. If young people need general information on education and employment opportunities, officials in youth services advise them to seek online information on regional opportunities, such as available jobs provided by local employment services.

Generally, these online services are nationwide and available for all Internet users regardless of their life situation, educational backgrounds or home region. Digital solutions are rare that particularly serve the purposes of young people living in a certain area or having problems with their education plans or employability. Even such online sites that include all opportunities in a certain demographic region for searching for education or a job are not necessarily available on the regional or municipal scale, although there is a demand for such solutions for young people, where information on local services was centralised on a particular online site (Eriksson & Ronkainen 2016).

Available online support practices for young people relate to the needs of those having problems and hence difficulties gaining employment or otherwise governing their lives. For example, digital services are provided for young people with mental problems or substance abuse problems. Practices of support provided in these websites and digital applications vary greatly in character. For example, there are possibilities to chat online and get online support from pro-

fessionals, and some solutions provide platforms for writing their own life-stories if they have problematic life situations in order to gain peer support from those with similar problems.

In general, if there are digital solutions provided for young people within youth services, they concern youths with specific problems. Online services that provide personal support for young people in general to plan their education and employment paths are not available in any of the countries related in this study, neither are there services for those who have problems finding education and employment caused by learning difficulties or other specific reasons.

Promoting the employability of young people could serve as a general guideline for developing digital applications for youth in Europe. Currently the services provided for these purposes function intertwined with digital applications and online services of service providers, such as local or regional employment services, that provide lists of available jobs and education placements on their online pages. These types of integrated solutions help many young people in the transition period between education and employment, when they are mapping out future opportunities.

The problem with these types of solutions is that there are not necessarily other kinds of personal support available – these particular solutions provide available opportunities, but they do not provide individual support. The service user cannot do mapping according to personal interests or individual skills in any other specific way than to take them for granted already when starting scrolling through the available options. There are necessarily no particular online possibilities to widen the scale of one's own capacities, abilities or personal interests in order to investigate what kind of education placement, potential job or workplace would match those personal attributes.

Regional employment services do not necessarily have the resources to provide face-to-face client services for those needing them. For example, in Finland, special support is outsourced to private enterprises providing consultation and help for employment problems caused by learning difficulties or disabilities. In larger regional centres and towns, young people's employment services are centralised in support centres, where support in health, housing, finance, education and employment are all under one roof. Funded by the state ministry of culture and education and its youth department, these youth support centres (Ohjaamo) have functioned for a few years, and there is support available for those who

need guidance in their education and employment plans. The Finnish Government has also invested in outreach youth work, so that in remote and rural areas they serve as a resource for education and employment issues.

The websites of these service providers usually include similar types of integrated online service solutions, as described earlier. There is no individual type of support provided in these solutions in Finnish youth services. In the Netherlands, Internet-based services promoting young people's employability are in many ways similar to those in Finland. Certain online links are gathered on one site from other websites to provide information for young people on issues of education and employment, student funds, student exchanges abroad, etc. Applications providing particular individualised support as such are not available in the Netherlands, either.

In Lithuania, there have been efforts recently to increase the availability of both face-to-face services and digital services for young people living outside urban areas. These issues are a crucial part of local youth policy, as improving the digital skills of the Lithuanian population is one of the basic national aims. Technical development has been rapid in recent years and the expanding service economy has benefitted from that trend. The developing technical infrastructure provides grounds for new digital solutions for young people's services. Currently there are no particular digital individualised solutions provided for young people living outside urban areas, and larger regional centres provide the same types of youth employment services as in other member states of the project. (E.g. Youth Policies in Lithuania 2017.)

In Germany, the state governs services for young people in employment and educational issues, although the third sector is influential in youth issues, especially in remote and rural areas. The legislative and policy levels are established and developed regarding youth issues, but they usually serve as basic guidelines. (Tackling Unemployment Among Germany's Disadvantaged Youth 2014.) On the regional level, the digital development of youth services generally is similar to other related countries: there are digital solutions, but they usually serve those with special needs for support, while solutions and applications that would serve young people in general are not available as individual online sites.

## CHAPTER 2:

### The need for personalised digital services - the case of young people at the margins

Personalisation of services is an ideologically based practice that originates from policy changes in social care in the UK, mainly from early the 2000s until now. This has been a part of a huge social reform, in which the British Government has implemented expense cuts on the public costs of social care. Some scholars argue that responsibility for the well-being of citizens has shifted from public services to civil society. The shift is ideological in character, and justified measures making the third sector powerful in providing well-being services. (Prideaux et al. 2009.)

The disability movement in the UK has adopted the idea of the personalisation of services together with initiatives for families with disabled children. Dissatisfied with the services provided by the public sector, they needed to diversify the arrangement of services and meaningful activities for their children. The key idea was that service and the principles of its arrangement should focus on the personal needs and interests of the service user. In that way the service user gets service based on their actual needs, not only on the views of service workers, who probably do not have time to discuss their interests and preferences, therefore provide ready-made solutions based only on existing expert knowledge. (E.g. Hatton & Waters 2013.)

According to the basic idea of personalisation, a person needing support in arranging health services, education placements, employment or other important activities, gets support according to their personal needs. In youth services, the idea of personalisation has not been in use in relation to this definition, but in accordance with ideologies related to individual-based services or personal encounters with the clients, when the workers genuinely listen and try to understand their needs, personal preferences, life situations and living conditions.

This chapter deals with individualisation of digital services in the countries involved in the study. Digital and online solutions are available for young people in those countries, but only integrated into online services governed by other service providers. The main issue of this chapter is to scrutinise the level of personalisation or individualisation of digital services provided for youth who need to map out available options for employment and meaningful activities to



improve their employability according to their personal interests and abilities. The main issue in the previous chapter was the availability of digitally based support services for those young people who need special support due to issues, such as those with mental health issues or a disability. In some cases, these digital solutions provide interactive platforms, chatting and other personalised opportunities to operate. However, it is not necessarily evident that the digitalisation of services would include all young people or reach everyone needing support.

## **Availability and attainability of digital services amongst rural young people**

Attainability of online services is technically similar for those living in rural areas as it is for those living in larger regional centres and towns, since it depends on functional infrastructure and online networks. If networks are not nationwide, digitalisation of services excludes young people living in remotest areas.

However, opportunities for young people living in remote areas are not necessarily similar to those living in urban areas, if solutions are not available that serve their specific needs depending on regional demands. If young people cannot find information on local opportunities from online sites that introduce available jobs, education placements and other relevant activities, they have to rely on other sources of information, such as local youth services and newspapers. In that sense, rural young people are unequal with those who live in urban areas, where possibilities are diverse. Therefore, the availability of digital services in rural areas is not only a problem of functional networks and infrastructure, since available digital services vary much in character. (E.g. Eriksson et al. 2017.)

Rural young people struggle with similar issues everywhere in Europe. Jobs and educational facilities are concentrated in larger centres and towns, and young people have to move from their home regions in search for better future opportunities. Those who are not prepared to move for better work and education opportunities are at risk of social exclusion, especially if they are not skilled workers or have learning difficulties. (Ibid.)

Structural changes in the labour markets speed up this development, since in many professional fields, technological work has increased, and has gradually changed the nature of work to knowledge-intensive professional jobs and positions. Young people who have difficulty coping with studies or learning are at

risk of dropping out of the changing labour markets. These structural changes have caused social polarisation that has been intensified in several European countries. This tendency has increased the numbers of NEET young people (not in education, employment or training) in the past few decades in many parts of Europe, such as the Nordic countries and the UK (e.g. Powell 2017; Eriksson 2020 forthcoming).

Young people living in rural and remote areas in Europe are in an unequal position regarding the availability and attainability of educational and employment services, and research on their living conditions indicates that digital development of services could improve their opportunities in particular (e.g. Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016). When developing digital services for young people, those living outside urban centres should be included in the process with special regard for regional variation. Young people who want to stay in their home region have fewer possibilities and probably fewer opportunities to improve their employability than their peers who live in urban areas, and their needs should be addressed in activities to develop digital solutions.

### **Digitalisation of services for young people with special needs**

In addition to young people living outside city centres, the digitalisation of youth services must also include those who have special needs and therefore difficulties gaining education or employment. Problems with learning difficulties or disabilities and mental health and other health conditions are increasing among young people living in remote and socially deprived areas (e.g. Raffe 2017). Disadvantaged young people should have access to additional services to improve their future prospects and employability. The need for special support in employment and education issues is evident for many. For their special needs, face-to-face interaction with a worker is necessary, but digital services are important to develop for those who live in remote areas and have scarce financial means to travel longer distances to youth service centres.

For example, digital service solutions would benefit their aims that provide interactive platforms in which special individualised support and possibilities for online learning were available. Although all young people living in rural and remote areas would benefit from digital interactive service models or solutions due to their attainability, these solutions would provide better opportunities

for those with special needs caused by, for example, a neurological syndrome, learning difficulties and different ways of learning. Interactive solutions could provide them with possibilities to improve their capacities, for example.

The system of services usually relies on the high professional qualifications of their employees, which constitute specific professional cultures. Often these cultures have an impact on service practices with young people. Professional power relations and practices of expert power may dominate in such a way that the young clients are not necessarily able to express their wishes or interests. The dominance of professional cultures relies on the assumption that professionals know the best solutions to the problems of various clients.

Recently, there have been signs of change in professional relations. Changes in social care legislation have reinforced clients' rights, for example, in Finland. These developments have influenced client work and contributed to equality of relations between social workers and clients. However, many professional cultures still rely on credential expertise in such a way that, when dealing with issues of education or employment, the professionals easily disregard their clients' wishes or interests and offer solutions without sufficient attention to their specific life situation and their own capacities to change their lives.

At an ideological level, processes of personalisation and individualisation have changed professional approaches to client work in general. For example, in the field of social care, the professionals want to learn and adopt principles of individual-based client interaction, where the client's personal needs are crucially in focus. In that sense, the principles of personalisation serve as part of professional development within the field of social care. (E.g. Eriksson 2014).

The focus of these principles is that service users should have the power to make decisions on their own services and participate in planning. When it comes to digital development, the personal involvement of young people in planning activities and suitable digital solutions seems to be an important part of the process when related to initiatives on their civic participation (Banaji 2011). According to recent debate, the levels at which the personal involvement of service users is present in the context of personalisation is a matter of complex policy issues, all of which aim at creating common good (Prandini 2018). In that sense, personalisation and personal involvement still function strongly in the ideology at the policy level, although these principles invite new forms of user participation in processes of social development and gradually transform

and change client work practices in different fields of services, such as those designed for young people.

Digital applications and solutions that provide opportunities to map out individual preferences and build paths for meaningful activities would solve problems that rise from professionally led practices in youth services and lack of communication in client interaction. They would serve as additional support and benefit specifically those who have social problems and disadvantaged backgrounds and therefore are not necessarily cooperative. However, these types of solutions do not replace practices of face-to-face interaction to help those who need a great deal of personal support, but they would serve young people by providing a space for thorough thinking and scrutiny of individual needs and interests, and thus provide opportunities to plan different future paths.

Interactive digital platforms based on an understanding of youth as a life stage and recognising the individual needs and preferences of young people, their personal skills, capacities, interests and choices, are still not available in the countries involved in this study. However, requests to take into consideration young people's personal needs are one of the basic standards when developing digital services for them.

Young people are at a period of life where their needs are very specific. They are often insecure and not necessarily aware of the options that could match their interests. They are probably not able to verbalise their capacities or skills, or are unable to describe their preferences. In particular, if a young person has a learning difficulty it can be hard to express plans or wishes. Furthermore, it is usual at a certain age to have problems with governing one's life. It can be difficult to maintain a normal circadian rhythm, especially, if the young person is outside education or employment.

These factors and risks related to young people's life stage or age are usually familiar to professionals in youth services, but not necessarily in all fields that offer support to young people. Therefore, the special needs of young people serve as grounds to recognise the importance of individualised service practices designed for them particularly, and it is important to take notice of them when developing digital solutions. Individualised practices are not only important for those who have severe problems finding a job or education placement, but in general all young people would benefit from an opportunity to make more choices and create multiple and more imaginative career paths from a wider variety of options.

## PART 2

# NON-FORMAL LEARNING AND INDIVIDUALIZATION AS PATHS FOR BETTER FUTURE PROSPECTS

The first chapter in this part of the study presents the recent debate considering non-formal learning and its usage in educational practices and education policies. It provides a view on how non-formal learning could be used in the development and implementation of digital applications for young people to improve their employability. The second chapter draws together the findings of the study and presents an overall picture of the state of the digitalisation of youth services in different parts of Europe. Finally, it provides guidelines on what should be considered when developing digital practices for young people.



# CHAPTER 1:

## Policies and opportunities for non-formal learning in digital solutions for youth services

One of the most important aims of the main project is to develop opportunities for non-formal learning when using learning platforms. The idea of non-formal learning serves as an opportunity to learn outside the formal learning curricula. It means the things that a person learns away from the formal or official aims or objectives of learning within certain educational contexts, such as comprehensive school.

Definitions of formal, informal and non-formal learning have their origins in learning psychology, but the conceptual framework differs in its definitions and explanations according to its purpose. Conceptual definitions of non-formal learning vary according to particular learning environments and disciplines and according to different policy aims of digital and technological development. Currently the idea of non-formal learning is included, for example, in many initiatives throughout Europe to promote the digital skills and employability of citizens, and of young people in particular.

Non-formal learning means any structured education provided by, for example, activities arranged in the third sector, outside accreditation or certification associated with formal learning, e.g. provided in schools. Non-formal education is considered as part of educational policies and related to the concept of life-long learning, and means acknowledging the importance of education, learning and training taking place outside formal, recognised educational institutions (Tight 1996). The notion of non-formal learning has been in use for several decades in education policy, and it has receded from its psychological origins and the discipline of behavioural studies.

The idea of non-formal learning has also been in focus in policies of digital development and digitalisation, as well as at the level of national policies to recognise the importance of non-formal education and to expand and systematise its forms. In Latvia and Lithuania, developing opportunities for non-formal learning and forms of non-formal education are crucial issues in current youth policies, and will form an integral part of the process of the digitalisation of youth services, as well.

The process of developing opportunities for non-formal learning benefits from the digitalisation of youth services, and vice versa. Developing digital learning platforms contributes to a change in educational culture by recognising the importance of non-formal learning in providing more opportunities for young people to increase their knowledge and skills, which is in line with current youth policies. Educational cultures have changed in the process of taking digital technology into use for learning purposes, even simply using laptops in classrooms and lecture halls (Thomas 2011). Thus, the notion of non-formal learning or discussion of new types of learning in new contexts reflects the digital development itself and the pressure it places on traditional modes of learning and education.

Simultaneously in this process of digitalisation, providing digital-based services to young people increases their opportunities for social participation through non-formal learning, which is important especially for those with disadvantaged backgrounds, poorer educational attainments and thus fewer opportunities. Young people represent and construct the generation of “digital natives” in contemporary culture, and there has been debate on how their digital skills and abilities are not yet in full use when designing practices and activities to enhance their well-being in different spheres of life. (E.g. Thomas 2011.)

Young people’s ability to benefit from non-formal learning is under debate, at least in Lithuania, Finland, Germany and France. Currently, initiatives in different countries are striving to develop opportunities for young people in employment and other forms of social participation with the contribution of opportunities for non-formal learning. The digitalisation of youth services such as youth work is going forward as a process of this development. Youth workers plan and develop digital services promoting activities for social participation for young people, as well as trying to update their own skills to face the challenges of digitalisation.

In other fields, such as employment services for young people, the provision of special digital or online solutions relates primarily to those needing special support. The opportunities for a service user to access non-formal learning are not explicit when implementing different digital services or solutions. The importance of non-formal learning is more prominent at the level of policy declarations than yet in terms of actual measures.

On a larger scale, ideas about new ways of learning are important in the context of measures implemented in different countries in order to promote long-life learning opportunities for all citizens. Specifically in relation to young people and their employment opportunities, the idea of non-formal learning contributes to their opportunities to improve their employability by learning skills in addition to and outside official curricula. However, according to officials, widening options for non-formal learning is important when planning youth services, youth employment services and support services that enhance the well-being of those with special needs.





## CHAPTER 2:

### Conclusion and suggestions for measures to enhance personalisation in digital youth services

There are not many individualised digital or online services for young people in the countries involved in this desk study which focus on the personal needs of the service user. There are lists of options to choose from when searching for opportunities regarding employment, placements for education, activities and hobbies. They are generated from the online pages of different service providers, such as national employment services and educational institutions. In accordance with the aims of this project, digital solutions provided for young people to enhance their employability currently do not work in a centralised way. There are websites that provide multiple, important information on educational options and other educational facilities, job opportunities, funding and subsidiary systems, for example, for students, but no digital services for all of those young people who are still working on their plans to access suitable educational or employment possibilities.

Even the advisory centres for young people, where employment services, financial advice, youth work and services relating to health care are under the same roof, still do not provide digital solutions that include support in making choices and building possible future career paths. Many countries in Europe lack solutions that would benefit especially those young people, who live in rural areas outside networks and centres of services and those who have had difficulties in their studies and thus face problems in finding possibilities for employment.

Digital solutions that function as support mechanisms on educational and employment issues would be useful for young people in general, although disadvantaged young people and those with problems are primarily entitled to receive special support. Certain interactive digital solutions are available, for example, for young people with problems of substance abuse and those with mental health problems. A variety of digital solutions functioning to support people with special needs intertwine with general support policies and the systems and practices that enable special support.

Individualised support for young people is important in digital solutions as well, and not just a privilege in practices of face-to-face client interaction. Although individualised support is not fundamentally self-evident in face-to-face practices, its idea of considering the personal needs of a young person should be gen-

erally in focus in practices of support, along with those that are digitally based. Currently the options to use digitally based support for young people are quite rare in European countries, and plans to provide digital support in mapping out their personal needs and preferences is still under development, or even remains at the stage of innovative ideas.

It is the responsibility of developers, policy officials and practitioners to plan and innovate digital solutions and applications for young people that serve everyone in accordance with their specific needs. Working on an individualised basis and personalised in character, they should be able to coincide with personal attributes according to terms determined by the service user. The applications should not only react to commands between readily available options, but should be able to configure optional, more complex ways to build plans for the future according to personal life situations and needs, individual skills and abilities, specific interests and preferences.

Discussion has been vivid in promoting possibilities for non-formal learning in the process of the digitalisation of services. The discussion has taken place mainly in the form of policy declarations when pursuing enhancing digital-based learning possibilities. It has been especially important in the measures to support young people at risk of social exclusion and widen learning opportunities to improve their employability. Enhancing opportunities for non-formal learning in different digitally based applications and solutions is in the interests of many European countries with its recognised possibilities to improve the situation of disadvantaged young people.

In order to adopt personalised practice in digital youth services, multiple options offering the available choices should be provided for young people regarding jobs, educational choices, facilities for taking on a hobby and other activities, and taking into consideration their diverse skills, abilities and educational backgrounds. Moreover, there should be a sufficient functional range available for use in those applications to tackle the variety of options and to put together diverse options for paths for future employment. In sum, it is important to include a multiplicity of variations of optional activities in these solutions, and the functionality is crucial in order to govern as wide range of options as possible. In that way, it will be possible to develop and implement a personalised or person-centred approach at a technical level.

When developing person-centred approaches in digital youth services, the focus should be on the individual needs of the young person. This is based on practices

of social care established to better understand the needs of service users, especially vulnerable groups of people who have special needs. There should be careful consideration of how and on what terms person-centred practice can benefit different groups of people in a variety of settings. The ideological and practical grounds of person-centred practice are based on social care legislation and the right of the client to express personal needs. (E.g. Hatton & Waters 2013.) Professionals have the obligation to take the client's own views about their needs into account, and needs assessments regarding services should be based on hearing the individual.

When digital services are functional for the needs of the service user, it should not only be a matter of knowing how to use the application technically. If the intention is to develop an application that will help young people to find possible career paths for the future, there should be at least a sufficient diversity of programmed possibilities to choose between options in creating those paths, and a multiplicity of options would benefit them more than just one or two possible future solutions to follow. When the basic idea is to follow a person's abilities and interests, these should coincide with the skills that are important in certain educational or employment fields. Knowing what jobs, posts or activities match those skills and abilities will need negotiation with experts.

In order to gain knowledge about possible employment solutions, it will be necessary to consult external experts in the process. For example, job trainers could contribute to the development work by diversifying the possible options for suitable jobs and future employment paths. Their knowledge is indispensable, for example, in employment services, especially when regarding clients with special needs. Job trainers have a great deal of practical knowledge concerning different fields of employment, professions and jobs, as well as the skills and qualifications for different fields. They will provide expertise in creating combinations of solutions for educational and employment paths.

Youth workers and other professionals in the field who have knowledge of youth as a life phase should also participate in the development work. They can provide knowledge on behaviour, values, habits, daily life and the risks facing young people, and their practical expertise at that level will be important in developing digital services for young people.

All of the experts involved in the development work should have practical knowledge of the principles of individualised practices related to experience in client work. It will be extremely important for them to have knowledge and experience of person-centred client work where young people's needs are the focus.

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