

# Youth inclusion, digital solutions and the global pandemic

By Veronica Ștefan and Adina Marina Șerban

Illustrations by Zilvinas Mazeikis and Vanda Kovacs

The topic of digitalisation has been one of the key priorities for the European institutions over the last years, as well as the topic of great significance for the youth field, including policy makers, youth researchers and youth practitioners. The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the youth sector have highlighted the need to look at the existing practices that link digitalisation to the different aspects that are relevant **to and for young people**. Across Europe, there is an increasing interest in the opportunities digitalisation offers, but also for the needs and interests of young people that are still uncovered by the existent digital tools and platforms. The debate also includes a discussion of the challenges that the state and non-state actors face in responding to young people's needs in the online world.



*Illustration by Zilvinas Mazeikis, from the Symposium "Connecting the dots: young people, social inclusion and digitalisation"*

*Tallinn, 26-28 June 2018*

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

Based on available data, only 1% of young people in the EU have never accessed the Internet, while 95% use it daily and 93% prefer to use mobile devices as access points<sup>1</sup>. Yet, even for those who use the Internet regularly, reliance on the Internet due to COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the size of existing digital gaps and inequalities, raising questions even on the availability of data related to access to Internet and computers within households. Although statistics are updated annually, the pandemic left different European governments blindsided when it comes to digital needs of **marginalised young people**. An increased strain has appeared even in households equipped with a computer or tablet, as families with one or more children had to navigate through overlapping timetables of children and parents studying or working remotely.

Furthermore, based on pre-crisis data, when it comes to the use of technology and the Internet, young people have shown a clear preference for entertainment activities - 93% and participation in social networks - 86%. On the other hand, only 60% of young people have used it for seeking health information, 31% searching or applying for a job, 25% to communicate with instructors or students through educational platforms and just 13% to take part in online consultations or voting<sup>2</sup>.



*Illustration by Vanda Kovacs, Coyote, Issue 27, 2018*

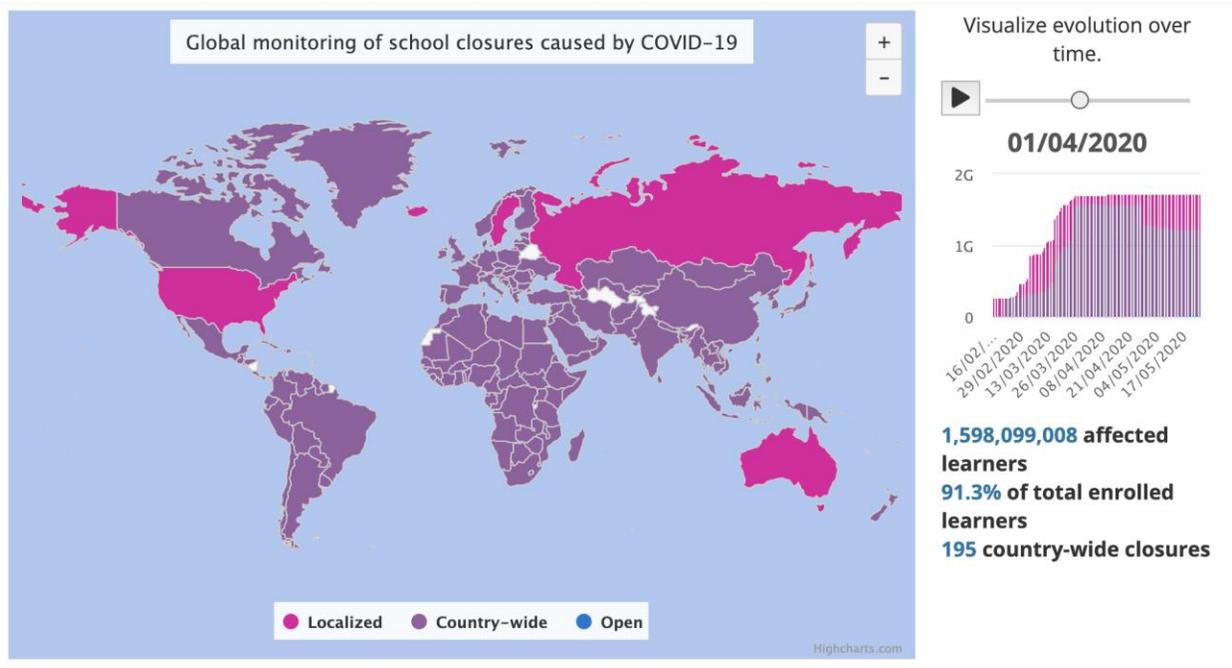
<sup>1</sup> Eurostat, 2019, [Individuals - internet use](#), [Individuals - frequency of internet use](#), last checked 24 May 2020

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, 2018 and 2019, [Individuals - internet activities](#), last checked 24 May 2020

The following topics look at challenges augmented by the covid-19 pandemic and solutions, approaches and digital platforms different stakeholders and countries attempted to use before and during the pandemic.

### **Education and skills**

At the peak of the lockdown measures, about 1.6 billion learners have been impacted globally, or 91.3% of the world's enrolled learners<sup>3</sup>.



Adding to this the EU context, where 43% of citizens lack basic digital skills<sup>4</sup> and just 15% of young people have done an online course on any subject<sup>5</sup> we already have an understanding of the pressure the pandemic has created. The shift to education online could be seen as adding flexibility to both teaching and learning. In reality, however, the pandemic forced learners and teachers to embrace online tools at an unprecedented speed, which based on testimonies, created stressful processes. Currently, it would be fairer to say we are assisting to a distance learning movement rather than online learning one. This difference is important as online teaching and learning are dependent on the skills of both educators and young people - “in contrast to experiences that are planned from the beginning and

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO Global Monitoring of School's closures by COVID-19 crisis, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/>

<sup>4</sup> Digital Society and Economy Index (DESI) 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/desi>

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, 2019, [Individuals - internet activities](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&code=sdg_4_4_1), last checked 24 May 2020

designed to be online, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances”<sup>6</sup>. The outcome of this led to teachers using the same methods as in face-to-face formats while asking students to perform more tasks with less support and explanation - affecting the quality of education.

On the positive side, the crisis has showcased solidarity among countries and stakeholders, sharing resources and opening access to platforms. The [European Commission](#), [Council of Europe](#), [UNESCO](#) and many other international institutions and organisations have created dedicated web-pages, aggregating resources available for young people, educators and parents. [Education Nation](#) is an internationally open platform including more than 40 free solutions from various European countries.

At the national level, platforms developed before the crisis have proven to be useful. Some of them are addressed to specialists and educators working with young people, including those at risk, such as [Mitteformaalne](#) (Estonia) and [EDU-HUB Distance Learning Platform](#) (Belarus), while others support young people during their preparation for admission to academic institutions such as [LearningPark](#) (Romania). Some online repositories also offer significant support, as they aggregate information from various sources and offer inspiration for those in need, such as [Digi Youth Portal](#) or other curated [lists](#).

### ***Employment and professional activities***

The pandemic takes a toll on the employment as well, with young people particularly affected by the economic shutdown as they tend to work more in the sectors most affected by the crisis. At the same time, many young people are often employed in precarious forms of work, a characteristic known since the previous economic recession. In the first months of lockdown young people already indicated that 6% lost their jobs permanently, 23% lost their jobs temporarily, 16% fear that they will lose their job in the next three months and 49% had their working hours reduced. On a more positive note, 43% of young workers have started to telework, significantly more than other age groups - 34%<sup>7</sup>. Based on what is known, we might assume that this option was particularly available to young people with higher profiles, working in bigger or technology oriented companies, with the capacity to ensure remote working options.

---

<sup>6</sup> Educause Review, “[The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning](#)”, last checked 24 May 2020

<sup>7</sup> Eurofound, “[Is history repeating itself? The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth](#)”, May, 2020

This context highlights the importance of digital tools at work and of the very possibility to work remotely. Thus, productivity platforms have proved vital, among them platforms for collaboration - Google drive, Onedrive, Dropbox; tasks and project management - Slack, Trello, Asana; conferencing - Webex, Zoom, Skype, Discord, Jitsi; messaging applications - Whatsapp, Telegram, Viber, but also many others developed by local innovators.

National platforms have also proven their utility in guiding young people's professional path, as some are designed to support young people in learning more about the labour market, about how to draft a CV or even be matched with jobs and internships such as [I do it myself](#) (Belarus), [Teeviit](#) (Estonia), [Posao za mlade/Work for youth](#) (Serbia), [MiFutureApp](#) (United Kingdom). Other platforms offer more specific opportunities as they encourage work experience in social institutions – [AHA+](#) (Austria) or support youth with disabilities to engage in virtual internships - [VIVET](#) (Serbia).

### ***Health and mental health***

For young people from remote areas and disadvantaged backgrounds (rural areas, minority groups, youth with disabilities, institutionalised children and young people), the health crisis posed a specific challenge as social and medical services, usually provided directly in the communities, were suspended by the lockdown.

The limited access to technology has been an incredible obstacle, isolating young people completely or leaving them with very few options. Young people with disabilities have also faced their share of challenges as many of the digital platforms and services don't cater for their specific needs. Even when technology was available, additional challenges were encountered in countries where telemedicine wasn't properly regulated, leaving entire communities for weeks if not months without any medical access.

Along with the health pandemic an "invisible pandemic" has been augmented too - domestic violence - with the majority of victims among children, girls and women, and LGBTQI+ community. Driven by the side-effects of the health crisis growing unemployment, increased anxiety and financial stress, domestic violence has increased by 30%<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "[A Double Pandemic: Domestic Violence in the Age of COVID-19](#)", May 2020

Last but not least, mental well-being is probably the most pressing challenge of the pandemic, particularly for young people. Unlike trends of previous years, when young people were assessing their life satisfaction above other age groups, during this crisis, in all categories they performed lower than those above the age of 35 - 20% of young people felt lonely, 28% felt difficult to deal with problems in their life. Overall, data suggests that 50% of young people are at risk of depression<sup>9</sup>.

As a response to all these issues, at least for the contexts where technology was accessible, various solutions have been used and new ones have been created. Young people could specifically access national platforms or mobile applications providing information and guidance in the areas of mental health (emotional crisis, depression, and suicidal behaviour), substance and alcohol abuse, sexual activity or HIV services. Most of the platforms include chat-rooms and helplines available 24/7. Some examples of national platforms include: [Pretežno vedro](#) (Croatia), [Enesetunne](#), [Peaasi](#), [Amor](#), [Tubakainfo](#) (Estonia), [Sekasin chat](#) (Finland), [Kooth](#) (Ireland), [Krug zdravlja/Circle of health](#) (Serbia), [Mind.se](#) (Sweden), [Free2ask](#) (Ukraine).

Young people with disabilities could access some platforms, based on their particularly needs: for those with hearing and speech difficulties - [Live advisor](#) (Ireland) or [BeWarned](#) (Ukraine); for those visually impaired - [Tactile images reader](#) (Romania); for those with various health disabilities there are also psychology counselling tools such as [Dobrá Linka/Good line](#) (Slovak Republic). For many others who do not benefit of platforms in their own languages, they could use other assistive technologies provided by big technology companies such as [Google](#) and [Microsoft](#).

The responses to combating domestic violence included hotlines, text message-based reporting, and mobile applications. Additionally, in order to ensure legal protection, some countries have shifted to virtual court hearings and facilitated online methods for obtaining protection orders.

### ***Information and counselling***

Access to information and contact with educators and social workers was essential during the lockdown and will stay as a priority until the global society will return to its previous dynamic. Interactions with these specialists was particularly important in low-served communities, where schools or youth centres were offering young people access to basic services, moral support or even the main meal of the day.

---

<sup>9</sup> Eurofound, "[Is history repeating itself? The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth](#)", May, 2020

While many educators haven't proved digitally skilled enough, they have successfully managed to replace some of their face-to-face services by using phone calls and messaging apps as a solution to, at least, keep in touch with their students/beneficiaries.

Where available, digital platforms developed before the crisis have reconfirmed their high added value. Most of them were designed to raise awareness and provide guidance on a number of issues relevant to young people - from emotional well-being and self-esteem, rights of young people to social problems and relationship issues (couple, friendship, family) - [WatWat](#) (Belgium), [Kellimni](#) (Malta), [Umo](#), [Youmo](#), [Ungdomar](#) (Sweden), [Ciao/Tschau](#) (Switzerland), [Mind of My Own](#) (United Kingdom).

### ***Safety and security online***

During the COVID-19 crisis offenders are likely to exploit the voids generated by the unprecedented use of technology as children and young people might engage in unsupervised Internet access or even use less secure online educational applications. The crisis has forced the use of many privately-owned technologies, many of which were not properly verified by teachers or parents, or that were just not ready for an increased usage, thus, making them vulnerable in the face of cyberattacks, implicitly exposing the users to unwanted risks (unpleasant visuals, frauds or breach of private data)<sup>10</sup>.

In order to prevent these situations, individuals and organisations can use Guidelines that offer them concrete tools and recommendations for their online activities such as the [Digital Security in Youth Work Guideline](#) or the [Working Safe Online Guideline](#).

*Online safety platforms* particularly offer tools to deal with cyberbullying, illegal and harmful content or behaviour, hate speech and more. Helplines and other online reporting mechanisms accompany most of these platforms, where young people, parents and youth workers can report online abuses. National examples include: [ISIGURT](#) (Albania), [Suurimjuljus/GreatestCougare](#) (Estonia), [BeSmartOnline](#) (Malta); [FaraFrica/NoFear](#) (Romania), [Friends](#) (Sweden). Also, many other countries can rely on the network of [Safer Internet Centers](#).

---

<sup>10</sup> Europol, "[Catching the virus](#)", April 2020

## ***Thoughts for the future***

As parts of the world are ceasing some of the lockdown measures, the future is still uncertain for young people in particular. Schools are expected to either stay closed or to put in place new safety measures in the near future, possibly affecting access and quality of education. Young graduates and new job seekers face further uncertainties, as the labour market situation seems dire. Automation, a trendy discussion so far is looming more pressingly into the picture, possibly forcing many companies and institutions to digitally transform their processes and thus, lead to more job losses. Digital is definitely the change young people wanted to see, but it also might be the one that will impact negatively the sectors young people are mostly dependent on. Mental wellbeing will put its landmark on this decade, too. Overall, all these complex challenges will need consistent policy responses - based not on emergency solutions but on well designed and lasting ones - evidenced based and tailored made, where digital tools are part of a human-centric approach, fostering equity for all young people.



*Adina Marina (Calafateanu) Serban, PhD in Political Sciences has extended expertise in grassroots youth work and youth work methodologies and practices, youth participation methodologies and inclusion policies. Adina is the leading figure of CSCD – Center for Sustainable Community Development, Giubega, Romania, a rural youth NGO that implements programmes and activities aiming to support rural youth to reach its full personal and professional development. She is a former member of the Advisory Council on Youth, member of PEYR – Pool of European Youth Researchers and National Correspondent for Youth Wiki.*

*Veronica Stefan is the founder of the first Romanian digital think-tank, Digital Citizens, and an advocate for inclusive digital transformation. Veronica is a professional focused on policy, education, digital sector and innovation in both national and international contexts. She has been working with various stakeholders for more than 14 years, at all levels. Veronica has extensive experience in advocacy campaigns, youth initiatives, research and public policies - connected to human rights, labour market, technology literacy and digital governance.*

