



The role of digitalisation in youth work and non-formal education in the context of the European youth programmes

Digital
Transformation
in the European
Youth Field

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RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE ROLE OF DIGITALISATION IN YOUTH WORK AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMMES



RAY DIGI: LITERATURE SNAPSHOT

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FIELD

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation became a strategic priority of the European Youth Programmes in 2021. However, it remains an ambiguous term that is not widely used and recognised in the youth field. Up to this point, discussions and research on digitalisation and youth work have mainly focused on pedagogical practices, with the concept of digital youth work at the centre. The first research cycle of RAY DIGI (2021-2024) focused on digital youth work practices and identified key success factors of digital youth work. In addition to pedagogical approaches, structural dimensions of digital youth work also play a pivotal role and have emerged as a significant area previously overlooked in our research activities:

A blind spot seems to be the digital transformation of youth organisations. To address the issue, first of all, data should be collected on the current state of the digital transformation of youth organisations.

(Stefan, 2022)

Therefore, the focus of the second research (2024-2027) cycle within RAY DIGI is on youth work organisations and their digital transformation. RAY DIGI aims to build a foundation for understanding and assessing the state of the digital transformation of the European youth field.

The objective of the literature snapshot at hand is twofold. First, it aims to provide an overview of terminologies and concepts, and how they are understood and utilised in the youth field. Second, the document collects and reviews literature on the digital transformation of youth work organisations. In this snapshot, we use the term youth work organisations to refer to those engaged in structured youth work activities. This includes organisations focused on non-formal education, social support, and developmental work with young people. The term youth organisations can refer more broadly to entities that involve young people but may not deliver youth work as defined within the field. Where relevant, we distinguish between these to reflect the diversity of actors involved in digitalisation efforts. This literature snapshot is intended to lay the groundwork for the second research cycle of RAY DIGI.

2. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: EXPLORING A TERM AND ITS USE IN THE YOUTH FIELD

2.1. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: A UBIQUITOUS YET AMBIGUOUS TERM

Digital transformation is an alluring and increasingly prominent concept that has gained widespread attention in recent years. Using Google Trends as an indicator, there has been a steep increase in public interest in the term since the early 2010s.¹ However, the increase in attention and importance has not led to a clearer understanding of what digital transformation actually entails. On the contrary, the literature on the topic frequently highlights the complex and diffuse nature of this concept. The vast number of literature reviews conducted on different aspects of digital transformation further underscores a strong need for clarification.

The terms digitisation, digitalisation, and digital transformation are often used interchangeably, they refer to different concepts. Digitisation often refers to the purely technical process of converting analogue information (e.g. paper documents, photographs, audio recordings) into a digital representation that can be processed by computers (Bockshecker et al., 2018). While digitisation focuses on the implementation of digital technologies, digitalisation refers to diverse technical phenomena and processes involved in the adoption and integration of these technologies in individual, organisational, and societal contexts (Legner et al., 2017). Digital transformation (DT) is the most ambiguous of the three terms. In their 2021 paper, Gong and Ribiere (Gong & Ribiere, 2021) sought to clarify the term and developed a unified definition based on a rigorous literature review and analysis of more than 130 well-received and published definitions of digital transformation. They define DT as:

a fundamental change process, enabled by the innovative use of digital technologies accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities, aiming to radically improve an entity and redefine its value proposition for its stakeholders.

2.2. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: AN IMPORTANT, YET NOT FOCAL CONCEPT IN THE YOUTH FIELD

In the European youth field, digital transformation is a less prominent term and often perceived as something external:

To date, most digital transformation primarily processes have been corporate-led, externally governed and thus imposed on the youth field. Many stakeholders have had no choice but to adopt and utilise pre-designed tools to sustain an effective delivery of youth services. This means that many stakeholders have been primarily viewed as consumers, users and end receivers of the digital transformation changes in Europe.

(Pawluczuk, 2022)

The youth field's discussions on youth work and digitalisation are centred on the concept of **digital youth work**, a term that was mainly conceptualised by the *Expert Group on Risks*, *Opportunities*, *and Implications of Digitalisation for Youth, Youth Work, and Youth*

¹ Google Trends shows relative frequency of searches on a scale from 0 to 100. While the relative frequency in early 2010s is in low single digits, the relative search frequency peaks at 100 in spring 2024.

Policy (European Commission, 2017). Academic and professional discourses on digital youth work tend to focus on pedagogical practices while leaving organisational and sectoral change processes largely unaddressed. This is also reflected in key strategic documents of European youth work. For example, the EU Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018) and the Bonn Declaration (3rd European Youth Work Convention, 2020) refer to digital youth work, but the term "digital transformation" is absent. Simply put, Digital youth work refers to proactively using and addressing digital technology in youth work. The expert group's recommendations remain a key point of reference within discourses on digitalisation and youth work in Europe. However, these recommendations make no reference to digital transformation. While digital youth work is a concept deliberately positioned within the field of youth work (Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024), digital transformation is often seen as external to the youth field.

Early contributions to this discourse, such as Verke's 2017 report Digital Youth Work -A Finnish Perspective, highlighted the growing relevance of digitalisation in youth work. Drawing on national experience and cross-European dialogue, the report argued for a proactive, participatory approach that supports young people's agency in digital contexts (Kiviniemi & Tuominen, 2017). While this perspective did not yet extend to structural organisational transformation, it helped position digitalisation as a necessary topic of discussion and practice across youth work settings. In recent years, this discourse has gradually expanded from a focus on practices to broader questions of organisational transformation and strategic alignment.

Although the concept of digital transformation is not yet widely used, there is a clear and

pressing need to engage with it. Since 2021, digital transformation is a horizontal priority of the European youth programmes, including Erasmus+ youth and the European Solidarity Corps. Despite its prominence, neither programme guide offers a formal definition of the term. Instead, the Erasmus+ programme guide 2024 emphasises supporting the strategic priorities outlined in the *European Digital Education Action Plan*.² This highlights the urgency of clarifying and operationalising digital transformation within youth work practice and research.

The first and only attempt to conceptualise digital transformation for the youth field was made by the SALTO resource centre on participation and information. Researcher Alicja Pawluczuk carried out a stakeholder consultation and identified key features considered important by actors in the field:

In the European youth field, digital transformation is understood multi-stakeholder and inclusive process encompassing the co-design, implementation and utilisation people-centred digital technologies with and by young people, youth workers and other relevant stakeholders. Digital transformation changes the way most areas of the youth field operate. Digital transformation describes the evolving integration of digital technologies into social, economic, and cultural processes and structures.

(Pawluczuk, 2022)

So far, the impact and reach of this definition have been arguably limited. It has not yet been included in youth policy documents or used in research on the subject.

² Its first priority is particularly relevant for the context of the digital transformation of youth work organisations: "The programme will support the first strategic priority of the Action Plan, the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem, by building capacity and critical understanding on how to exploit the opportunities offered by digital technologies for teaching and learning in all types of education and training institutions at all levels and for all sectors, and to develop and implement digital transformation plans for educational institutions."

3. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK ORGANISATIONS

While comprehensive digital transformation strategies and frameworks for individual youth work organisations remain scarce, emerging research has begun to investigate the role of digital transformation in youth work, alongside assessments of current organisational capacities and available evaluation tools.

The digital transformation of youth work remains an evolving field, marked by notable gaps in structured strategies and frameworks at the organisational level. Although digital youth work is increasingly acknowledged as essential to contemporary youth engagement, research indicates that its integration into youth work organisations tends to be fragmented, reactive, and often shaped more by external pressures rather than by deliberate, internal strategic planning.

3.1. EVOLVING FROM PRACTICE TO STRATEGY IN YOUTH WORK DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The Digital Competences and Capacities in Youth Work report (Stefan, 2022) highlights that youth work organisations have not yet undergone a structured digital transformation, primarily due to a lack of dedicated strategic approaches, frameworks, sustainable training initiatives. While digital youth work practices are gradually emerging, they remain fragmented and reactive rather than systematically integrated into organisational structures. Moving forward, policy-level interventions and organisational frameworks are necessary to embed digital transformation as a core element of youth work across Europe.

The first RAY DIGI research cycle suggests that digitalisation efforts within youth

work organisations have often not been strategically embedded (Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024). In many cases, digital tools and approaches were adopted in response to immediate needs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These decisions were often reactive rather than a part of long-term, organisation-wide strategies. While there are examples of more structured approaches in some contexts, these remain relatively limited across the youth sector.

Within this landscape, the EU youth programmes have played a visible role digital practices. However, in shaping they function more as catalysts experimentation than as structural enablers of sustained organisational change, since such long-term support is not embedded in the programme design. Project funding can open space for digital innovation, but it rarely supports the deeper, ongoing transformation of organisational processes and strategies. As a result, digitalisation may be present, but structural transformation remains elusive.

Findings from the "Digitalisation of Municipal Youth Work in Finland 2019" report by Verke further illustrate this landscape (Verke, 2019). Although youth workers and managers generally hold positive attitudes towards digitalisation, its practical application varies significantly across municipalities. Key challenges identified include a lack of clear objectives, insufficient training, and limited resources dedicated to digital initiatives (Verke, 2019). One in three youth work managers (33%) reported that their team had no policy or strategy for digital youth work, and only 45% felt confident in systematically incorporating digital tools into practice (Verke, 2019). Teams lacking strategic direction were also less likely to allocate time for digital work or to integrate digitalisation into

job descriptions and strategic development. Nonetheless, the report also noted gradual progress: between 2017 and 2019, the share of youth work managers who had set team objectives for digital youth work rose from 17% to 30%, and 44% had incorporated it into their action plans (Verke, 2019). Municipalities were also beginning to implement both qualitative and quantitative indicators, such as team talks (48%) and youth satisfaction surveys (33%), to evaluate digital youth work (Verke, 2019).

Verke's 2021 follow-up report shows that while youth workers and managers increasingly perceive digitalisation as beneficial: 84% of managers believed digital services had improved and 72% observed a diversification of digital youth work. However, strategic development remains uneven, with only 33% reported that their organisation had defined goals for digital youth work (Verke, 2021). This modest change since 2019 suggests that while practical digitalisation has advanced, particularly in response to pandemic-driven needs, the structural transformation of youth work organisations has not kept pace.

3.1.1. TOOLS AND RESOURCES SUPPORTING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

In the absence of widespread organisational frameworks, a growing body of grey literature emerged to support youth organisations in their digital journeys by offering assessment tools, guidelines, and training models. The European Guidelines for Digital Youth Work (European Expert Group on Digitalisation in Youth Work, 2019) offer comprehensive advice on embedding digitalisation into organisational strategies and governance, fostering a culture of innovation and openness to experimentation. SALTO's Self-Assessment Tool on Digital Capacities (Stefan & Siurala, 2023) enables organisations to evaluate digital maturity across leadership, culture, competencies, infrastructure, and quality dimensions.

Complementary resources such as IJAB's handbooks on digital international youth work (IJAB - International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2022) and SALTO Youth's handbooks on digital tools for engagement (SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre, 2021) provide practical, hands-on guidance to support organisations in navigating the digital shift. Practitioners and experts across Europe have also called for a unified European digital competence framework, available in national languages, to support national-level practices. The 2022 European Report on Digital Competences and Capacities in Youth Work underscores that the availability of such frameworks is an essential condition for local implementation (Stefan, 2022).

3.1.2. BARRIERS TO SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

Despite the availability of these resources, systemic digital transformation in youth work remains elusive. The earlier RAY-DIGI report (Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024) revealed that only a small proportion of youth organisations had developed formal digital strategies, with most digital practices emerging informally or in response to immediate needs, especially during the pandemic. Organisational readiness remains limited, with respondents frequently citing a lack of funding, insufficient training, and unclear leadership direction as major constraints (Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024).

Furthermore, the study pointed to a significant disparity between individual youth workers' enthusiasm and organisations' structural capacity to support digitalisation. While many youth workers expressed a desire to innovate, they lacked the tools and strategic backing to implement sustained digital transformation (Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024). These findings reinforce the need for strategic frameworks, robust infrastructure, and long-term investment to realise systemic change.

3.1.3. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITALISATION

Critical insights from adjacent sectors further illuminate the complexities of digital transformation in youth work. Researchers note that youth workers often lack confidence in their digital skills, which reduces the likelihood of effectively integrating technology into practice (Pawluczuk et al., 2018). Insufficient infrastructure, limited funding, unclear policies, cultural resistance to change, and challenges in measuring the impact of digital practices also continue to hinder progress. Furthermore, the top-down nature of many digitalisation efforts raises concerns about alignment with youth work values and needs (Höylä & Reponen, 2019).

Policy analysis in related fields, such as child welfare services, highlights additional risks. In their examination of digitalisation in child welfare services, scholars have argued that digital policy instruments often reflect top-down attempts to solve structural inefficiencies, rather than addressing the lived realities of service providers or beneficiaries (Kvakic et al., 2023). Such systems, while efficient, may fail to capture the complexity of youth work and can marginalise those with lower digital access or skills. Moreover, rigid ICT systems may reduce professional discretion and create barriers to relational, adaptive forms of support.

This perspective suggests that youth work organisations have not fully embraced digital transformation partly because digitalisation efforts often lack a grounded understanding of the sector's unique needs and challenges. Emphasising the need for critical evaluation, it is essential that the introduction of digital tools enhances rather than constrains the core mission of youth work.

Broader insights from the non-profit sector reinforce these concerns. For instance, O'Grady and Roberts observe that Irish non-profits face similar barriers in their digital journeys, including short-term funding, low public trust in administrative investment, and risk-averse leadership (O'Grady & Roberts, 2019). These constraints apply equally to youth work organisations, highlighting the need for long-term strategic planning and culturally grounded implementation.

Taken together, the literature suggests that while foundational tools and pilot frameworks exist, youth work organisations have not yet undergone systemic digital transformation. Supportive policies, dedicated funding streams, and ongoing professional development are essential to ensure that digital innovation aligns with youth work principles and effectively enhances organisational impact.

3.2. MEASURING PROGRESS: TOOLS AND APPROACHES FOR ASSESSING THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF YOUTH WORK ORGANISATIONS

As youth work organisations strive to navigate an increasingly digital landscape, the ability to assess their level of digital transformation has become essential. Although formal strategies remain scarce, a growing number of assessment tools have emerged to support organisations in evaluating their digital capacities, identifying gaps, and guiding future development.

One such tool is the Assessment Tool on Digital Capacities of Youth Work Organisations, developed by the SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre (Stefan & Siurala, 2023). This framework offers a structured and holistic view of an organisation's digital readiness, built around five core competencies: leadership of digital transition, a broadminded and transformational working culture, digital competences for both youth workers and young people, digital infrastructure, and internal quality assessment. Each area is broken down into sub-elements and rated along four levels of maturity, enabling organisations to reflect on both strengths and areas requiring development.

Complementing this tool, a related guide exists for individual youth workers, focused on the self-assessment of digital competence (Stefan & Siurala, 2023). It encompasses dimensions such as supporting creative self-expression, digital rights and safety, peer learning, critical digital literacy, and identity development in digital environments. Like the organisational tool, it applies a graduated proficiency model to facilitate reflection and growth.

In broader terms, the DigCompOrg framework, originally created for educational institutions by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, offers a transferable model for youth work (European Expert Group on Digitalisation in Youth Work, 2019) (Kampylis et al., 2015). While not youth work-specific, its structure and domains—such as infrastructure and professional development—can inform the design of sector-specific assessment tools.

For organisations at an earlier stage of development or with limited capacity, simpler diagnostic tools such as the Digital Readiness Self-Assessment Tool by DigiPathways offer a lightweight but insightful entry point (Stefan & Siurala, 2023). This tool enables a rapid self-check across key operational areas, helping smaller or newer organisations establish a baseline understanding of their digital maturity.

Despite the value of these tools, gaps remain. Most notably, few frameworks explicitly account for emerging technologies such as AI or immersive digital environments, and youth participation in the assessment process is not yet common practice. Moreover, many existing tools are designed for one-off assessments rather than continuous monitoring, which limits their usefulness for organisations aiming to embed digital transformation as an ongoing strategic process.

To address these limitations, existing tools may need to be updated or expanded with modular add-ons. These should account for rapid technological change, engage young people directly in reflective processes, and allow organisations to track their digital progress over time. A stronger culture of co-creation and iteration in digital self-assessment could support not only more accurate diagnoses but also more inclusive, future-facing strategies for change.

3.3. DEFINING DIGITAL COMPETENCES: FRAMEWORKS FOR YOUTH WORK PRACTICE AND DEVELOPMENT

Three frameworks have emerged as particularly relevant for shaping digital competences in youth work: DigComp, Verke's Toolbox, and SkillIT. Together, they illustrate different approaches to defining, applying, and maintaining digital competences while offering lessons for developing future models tailored to youth work organisations.

developed DigComp, by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), is one of the most influential digital competence frameworks in Europe. Initially designed for citizens, DigComp has since been adapted for multiple sectors, including education (DigCompEdu) and organisations defines five (DigCompOrg). Ιt core competence areas-information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem solving—and presents eight proficiency levels (European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2022). Competences are understood holistically as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. DigComp is grounded in multi-stakeholder consultation and regularly updated based on research, policy feedback, and expert validation (Stefan & Siurala, 2023).

Although DigComp is not youth work-specific, adaptations have emerged. The Expert Group on Digital Youth Work recommended adding two additional competences: digitalisation of society and planning, designing and evaluating digital youth work (European Commission, 2017). These adaptations have been applied

in tools such as the curriculum developed by Youth Policy Labs (Schwenzer, 2024) and in SALTO's Self-Assessment Tool (Stefan & Siurala, 2023).

Among youth-specific digital competence frameworks, the Verke Professional Toolbox appears to have had the widest documented use to date, with over 900 self-assessments completed across Finland and (Schwenzer, 2024). It includes a competence framework, a self-assessment tool, and a digital competence test. The Verke Professional Digital Competence Toolbox includes six core areas: using and maintaining devices and applications, organising one's own work, digital safety, media and information literacy, digital creativity, and communication and interaction. Its strengths include accessibility, multilingual support, and availability in multiple formats (e.g. digital, printable). However, the toolbox is limited by its need for regular updates and better adaptability to different organisational contexts (Schwenzer, 2024). The discontinuation of Verke's national funding has halted its operations at the end of 2024, placing the sustainability of the toolbox at risk.

The SkillIT framework, developed under an Erasmus+ project led by an Irish organisation, offers a thematic structure based on the Partnership for 21st Century Learning framework. It organises nine competences into three zones: (1) learning innovation and skills (e.g. creativity, collaboration), (2) media and information literacy, and (3) life and career skills (e.g. adaptability, productivity) (SkillIT Project Team, 2019). While evidence-based, the framework lacks a sustained update mechanism and institutional ownership, limiting its impact beyond the duration of the project (Schwenzer, 2024).

Several shared insights emerge from the comparative analysis of existing digital competence frameworks, as synthesised by Schwenzer (2024). Sustainable frameworks require clear ownership, regular updating, and engagement from relevant stakeholders.

The DigComp framework exemplifies this approach through its structured revision cycles and active community of practice (European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2022). Effective frameworks should also be adaptable and device-agnostic, ensuring they remain relevant as technologies evolve (Schwenzer, 2024). Accessibility is another essential feature; tools should offer lowthreshold entry points that support both individual self-assessment and organisationallevel application (Schwenzer, 2024). addition, frameworks should lead to practical outcomes that support strategic planning and competence development as demonstrated in tools such as SALTO's Self-Assessment Tool and Verke's digital competence toolbox (Schwenzer, 2024; Stefan & Siurala, 2023).

These findings provide a useful foundation for the development of youth work-specific digital competence frameworks. Building on well-established models like DigComp, adapting practical tools such as Verke's, and incorporating principles of participatory design and inclusivity are likely to enhance relevance, uptake, and long-term sustainability within the youth sector. These European-level insights, such as the DigCompOrg framework (Kampylis et al., 2015) and the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020), have already demonstrated how a structured, policy-driven approach to digital transformation can support inclusive, longterm change. Youth work organisations could draw on these lessons to move beyond reactive adoption of tools toward strategic, sector-wide transformation (Pawluczuk, 2022; Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN YOUTH WORK ORGANISATIONS

This literature snapshot has mapped the conceptual, empirical, and practical approaches to the digital transformation of youth work organisations. The evidence reviewed suggests digital transformation is rarely treated as a strategic, organisationwide process. Rather, it often emerges in fragmented ways, such as through individual projects, ad hoc innovations, or as a reactive response to external pressures such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While initiatives such as SALTO's assessment tools and national strategies like Finland's municipal digital youth work provide useful reference points, these remain the exception rather than the rule.

This uneven landscape is mirrored in the findings of the first RAY DIGI research cycle, which revealed that while digital tools were increasingly integrated into youth work practices, they were seldom supported by coherent strategies or organisational frameworks (Horta Herranz & Schwenzer, 2024). Youth workers demonstrated high levels of individual initiative and adaptability, but often lacked the structural backing needed to sustain meaningful organisational change, including leadership support, digital infrastructure, and competence development pathways. As a result, the digitalisation that did occur was largely practical and operational rather than strategic or transformational.

What emerges across the literature is not only a recognition of these structural deficits but also an underlying conceptual challenge. Digital transformation is inconsistently defined, and often conflated with digitalisation or digital youth work. While the former entails a systemic reorientation of organisational processes and culture, the latter often refers

to the operational use of digital tools or pedagogical approaches. As several sources note, including Vial (2019) and Pawluczuk (2022), digital transformation in the youth field must be understood as more than the accumulation of digital practices. It requires rethinking participation, power structures, and how organisations relate to young people and their needs in digital contexts.

Furthermore, this review has shown that while there are emerging models and frameworks such as DigCompOrg, the SALTO Self-Assessment Tool, and national-level initiatives are emerging, there is no sector-wide consensus on how to measure or define successful digital transformation. Indicators tend to be either technical (i.e. adoption of tools) or aspirational (i.e. values-based commitments), but few combine both dimensions in a way that reflects the realities of youth work. While some examples of innovation exist, they are typically isolated and rarely embedded across whole systems.

This literature snapshot provides not just a conceptual foundation, but a synthesis of open questions and research gaps that can now be explored. Particular attention must be given to how youth work organisations define and navigate digital transformation internally; how their strategies align with or diverge from European policy priorities; and how these efforts are experienced by those implementing and affected by them. It is only through this grounded, multi-perspective understanding that the field can move from fragmented innovation toward sustainable and inclusive digital transformation.

While this review highlights the structural and conceptual gaps surrounding digital

transformation, it is equally important to note that relevant practices and innovations are developing at national and local levels. Some national contexts have developed strategic frameworks or piloted structured approaches to digital youth work. National contributions, especially when supported by sustained investment or coherent policies, deserve closer attention to understand what enables or constrains long-term transformation.

At the same time, youth-centred dimensions such as informal learning, peer culture, creativity, and enjoyment is often absent from discussions of organisational transformation. These aspects, although central to how young people engage with digital spaces, are not consistently reflected in strategy documents or assessment tools. Exploration of complex issues like digital wellbeing, ethics, artificial intelligence, and digital justice remain underdeveloped, not only in this literature snapshot but in the larger discourse of digital transformation.

The next module of the DIGI project will explore these gaps through qualitative case studies, offering space to examine not only formal strategies and practices, but also the values, contradictions, and lived experiences that shape how digital transformation unfolds in youth work organisations.

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