RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE ROLE OF DIGITALISATION IN YOUTH WORK AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMMES (RAY-DIGI)

CONCEPT NOTE FOR 2026 & 2027

20 JANUARY 2026

Please note that, to ease contract and project administration, we have used 2025 to switch from an annual mid-year cycle to a two-year calendar year cycle. The previous concept note and its accompanying budget covered half a year, from July 2025 until December 2025 – this was the first part of the switch. This concept note and budget, now cover 2026 and 2027 for a two-year cycle – the second & final part of the switch.
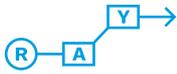
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1. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Digital Transformation is one of four programme priorities both in Erasmus+ youth and the European Solidarity Corps. The RAY research network supports and monitors the implementation of this objective through various research activities. Among these, and in this regard, *RAY DIGI – research project on the role of digitalisation in European youth work and non-formal learning in the context of the European youth programmes* is the most prominent thematic research project. It set out to explore dimensions and document the progress of digitalisation in European youth work.

> *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.[1]*

During the first research cycle of RAY DIGI (2021-2024), the spotlight was on digital youth work practices.[2] By examining digital youth work projects and their pedagogical approaches, our research identified crucial features for successful digital youth work. However, besides the educational aspects, it became clear that structural dimensions of digital youth work also play an important role. The digital transformation of youth work organisations, in particular, emerged as a significant area that had been previously overlooked in our research activities:

Additionally, our previous research underscored the necessity for strategic approaches in digital youth work. Although the Covid-19 pandemic led to a general increase in the use of digital technologies in youth work, responses to pandemic restrictions were often characterised by improvisation and adapting to situational requirements.[3] Many organisations lack strategic approaches, which contrasts sharply with the objectives of the youth programmes. Within the priority of digital transformation e.g., the Erasmus+ youth programme guide calls for the development and implementation of "digital transformation plans for educational institutions".[4] In short, a better linkage of European, national, and organisational strategies on the topic of digitalisation is a long-standing challenge:

> *For organisations, it can sometimes be difficult to make the connections between European digitalisation strategies, national youth policies and organisational / practice development clear.[5]*

Against this backdrop, in the second research cycle (2024-2027) RAY DIGI will explore strategic approaches to digital transformation of youth work organisations. It will build a foundation to understand and assess the digital readiness of the European youth field and the role of the European youth programmes in this regard. In addition, RAY DIGI will explore the role of European and national strategies with respect to the digital transformation of youth work organisations and how to better align these strategies with the needs and realities of youth work organisations.

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[1] Stefan, V., 2022. Digital Competences and Capacities in Youth Work, 2022. Available online.
[2] Digital youth work means proactively using and/or addressing digital media and technology in youth work practice as a tool, an activity and/or as content. It is a concept introduced by the European *Expert Group on Risks, opportunities, and implications of digitalisation for youth, youth work, and youth policy:* https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/782183.
[3] Horta, A., Schwenzer, F., 2024. Exploring successful approaches to digital youth work. Available online.
[4] Erasmus+ Youth programme guide, 2024. Online: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-11/2024-Erasmus%2BProgramme-Guide_EN.pdf.
[5] Kiviniemi, J., 2022. National strategies for digital youth work. Online: https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/Report%20LTA%20on%20Digital%20Youth%20Work_National%20strategies%20for%20digital%20youth%20work_Work%20package%201.pdf.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1. OVERALL AIM OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This research project aims to explore dimensions of digitalisation in the European youth programmes, to identify good practices and develop recommendations to strengthen and support the digital dimension in youth work (RAY-DIGI).

2.2. KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Within the second research cycle of RAY DIGI, we will …

- … identify, explore, and analyse strategic approaches to the digital transformation of youth work organisations.
- … develop recommendations for the development and implementation of digital strategies for youth work organisations.
- … build a foundation to understanding and assessing the state of the digital transformation of the European youth field.
- … analyse the contribution and role of the European youth programmes with regard to the digital transformation of youth work organisations.
- … explore the effects of European and national strategies on the digital transformation of youth work organisations.
- … develop recommendations on how to better align European and national strategies with the needs and realities of youth work organisations.
- … develop recommendations for youth work organisations to better align with European and national strategies.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1. CORE RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE PROJECT

The core research questions of the project are:

- What is the state of digital transformation in European youth work?
- How can youth work organisations be supported to develop strategic approaches to digital transformation?
- What is the contribution and role of the European Youth Programmes in the digital transformation of youth organisations?
- How can European and national strategies be better aligned with the needs and realities of youth work organisations?

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND INSTRUMENTS[6]

4.1. MODULE 1: LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF YOUTH AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

We will carry out a review and analysis of relevant literature on the digital readiness and the digital transformation of youth work and civil society organisations in Europe.

4.2. MODULE 2: BEST PRACTICE NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL CASE STUDIES ON DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The case studies on successful approaches to digital transformation in youth work organisations will consist of a) desk research on explicit and implicit digital strategies and successful practices within youth work organisations and b) focus groups with staff and volunteers in strategic positions. The focus groups will explore 1) the design and implementation of digital strategies for youth work organisations, 2) goals, visions, and attitudes towards digital transformation in youth work, 3) the alignment of European, national, and organisational strategies, 4) youth work's role within and contribution to national and European digital education ecosystems, 5) the role and contribution of the European youth programmes to the digital transformation of youth work organisations, 6) needs of European youth work organisations with regards to digital transformation.

4.3. MODULE 3: SURVEY ON DIGITAL READINESS OF YOUTH WORK ORGANISATIONS

The survey on digital readiness of European youth work organisations will aim at assessing the state of the digital transformation of youth work organisations. It will address organisational strategies, goals, resources, infrastructures and needs. A special focus will be on non-formal digital youth work offers.

4.4. MODULE 4: ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMMES' CONTRIBUTION TO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF YOUTH WORK ORGANISATIONS

Based on the data collected in this project and the monitoring surveys (RAY MON and RAY SOC), the contribution of Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps to the digital transformation of European youth work will be analysed and assessed.

4.5. MODULE 5: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS ON DIGITAL STRATEGIES IN EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK

Key stakeholders of the European youth programmes (European Commission, national agencies and national ministries) will be interviewed on the design, understanding, implementation and effect of relevant strategies. A special focus will be on the programme priority *Digital Transformation* within [Erasmus+ Youth](#) and the [European Solidarity Corps](#), the [European Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027](#) and relevant national youth strategies. These interviews will also explore the effect, synergies and dysergies of European and national strategies relevant for the digital transformation of youth work organisations.

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[6] Note that these are all research modules of RAY DIGI and that they span across multiple years (including previous ones), so not all of them will need to be implemented in 2026 and 2027.

5. RESEARCH SCHEDULE

The following table provides an overview of main activities at transnational and national level for the next project phase (January 2026–December 2027):

Time period	Activities at transnational level	Activities at national level
01.2026 – 12.2026	• Module 2: Writing a trans-national case study report • Module 4: Analysis RAY MON & SOC data • Module 3: Survey development and data collection • Module 5: Development of interview guidelines and reporting templates + conducting interviews with key stakeholders	• Module 3: Support of survey development and distribution • Module 5: Conducting interviews with key stakeholders
01.2027 – 06.2027	• Module 5: Analysing stakeholder interviews + development of recommendations • Module 3: Analysing survey data + writing survey report • Development of research and policy reports as well as fact sheets	• Support in research communication

6. RESEARCH OUTLOOK

While the next programme generation remains under development, no research outlook beyond 2027 can be usefully provided.

7. PARTNER CONTRIBUTIONS

The following table provides an overview of basic and optional contributions to the research project by project partners:

Basic contribution of partners	Optional contributions of partners
• Financial contribution to the transnational costs of the research project	• Interviews with key stakeholders on European and national digital strategies
• Support in distributing the findings of the research project at national level	• Participation in the working group of the research project

8. RESEARCH PARTNERS

Research partners of this project are the RAY Network partners in Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, and Türkiye. Further partners are always welcome to join.