



Mental health in digital environments

The role of European Youth Card in supporting a resilient generation

18 October 2021, online

Ljubljana, Slovenia

REPORT

The seminar was organised under the Partial Agreement on Youth Mobility through the Youth Card and the European Youth Card Association (EYCA)



Introduction

The seminar was organised as a response to one of the strongest side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic: a rise in anxiety, depression and other mental health issues among young people. Youth Work services across Europe had to re-adapt and pay more attention to the well-being of youth, as they are navigating unprecedented challenges, uncertainty and economic instability. The seminar was dedicated to youth leaders, policy makers, mental health professionals and youth workers.

About the organisers

The Partial Agreement on Youth Mobility through the Youth Card exists since 1991 and is a programme of the Council of Europe aimed at developing the youth card scheme, particularly at European level, in the best interests of young people with a view to facilitating their mobility as well as access to the various goods and services necessary for their personal and cultural development.

The European Youth Card Association (EYCA) groups around 36 youth card organisations all over Europe and is the Partial Agreement's statutory partner. EYCA's vision is a Europe where all young people are mobile and active (socially, culturally, educationally and economically). EYCA's mission to reach this objective consists in delivering quality youth card services and in contributing to a better policy on youth mobility and active citizenship. Today, over seven million youth card-holders benefit from youth card opportunities.

The Slovenian Youth Agency (SLOAM) represents the juncture between young people, non-governmental organisations, public institutions, and responsible companies. Through the development and implementation of programs and regular communication, we encourage young people into active citizenship, social and environmental responsibility and enable their personal growth.

SLOAM is a non-profit organisation in the public interest in the youth sector in Slovenia aimed at bringing together different stakeholders for the overall well-being of young people.

The Slovenian Youth Agency helps young people to develop competencies, as they are aware that during this period young people are most susceptible to personal growth and the development of skills that will be most useful to them later in life.

The International Youth Health Organisation (YHO) is an international network of youth organizations that co-create environments and policies for all-inclusive youth health. YHO works towards health and wellbeing of young people through promotion of healthy lifestyles, prevention activities, capacity building and advocacy for effective, comprehensive and inclusive policies. The main priority areas include non-communicable diseases, mental health and environmental health, with a special focus on health inequities, health literacy, determinants of health and meaningful youth engagement. YHO's vision is to empower young people to take care of their own health, make informed decisions about their wellbeing, conduct high quality work in the field of youth health and actively engage in decision-making processes.



Context

The pandemic has particularly impacted young people in complex ways, from taking a toll on their mental health to negatively impacting their education process as schools moved classes online, or to disproportional loss of their already vulnerable jobs. Addressing the effects of the pandemic requires creativity and cross-sectoral approach in youth policy development.

Since the start of the pandemic, the everyday life of young people has transitioned to the virtual setting. While younger generations have been characterized as the “digital natives” even before the pandemic, the COVID-19 measures together with lockdowns and social distancing contributed to major lifestyle changes which is why youth are spending more time online and in different digital environments than ever before. Even before the pandemic, there was evidence of how the digital world negatively impacted mental health and COVID-19 only exacerbated the problem. Youth in the COVID-19 era are reporting rising levels of depression, anxiety and feelings of isolation and loneliness. Heightened levels of stress and substance use have been noted amongst the young people as well. We are seeing a rise of new and emerging mental health issues, such as Zoom fatigue or Snapchat and Instagram dysmorphias, as well as the worsening of mental health disorders like gaming addiction, self-harm and other psychiatric illnesses.

The worsening state of mental health and wellbeing of youth also reflects exponential levels of uncertainty that young people are facing in their everyday lives. Spending an increased amount of time engaging with digital technologies and social media is influencing the mental health of youth by disturbing their sleep patterns and making them more vulnerable towards cyber-bullying.

That is why mental health in digital environments is a crucial topic to be addressed throughout Europe. It is critical to intervene early and ensure a cohesive, holistic and rigorous policy action to transform the narrative. Prioritising the topic on the national and European level requires a cross-generational and interdisciplinary policy approach with a non-siloed mentality, keeping in mind the potentials and limitations of digital environments and investing in solutions, such as but not limited to digital mental health, increasing health literacy of youth on appropriate digital use and risks, and establishing support systems for young people.

The event featured representatives from International Organisations focused on mental health, National Governmental representatives and EYCA member organisations. It was for the first time when presentations focused European Youth Card and mental health services, thus voicing the concerns of many cardholders and showcasing how the EYC can rapidly be used to address new topics in youth policies.

The seminar was organised for only half a day, fully online, thus being mindful of the time we requested participants and guests to spend in front of their screens.



The seminar aimed to:

- Ensure mental health is being promoted as a policy priority at national and European level, respectively that youth work adapts and includes services to identify, guide and support young people with mental health challenges;
- Offer the space for professionals and young people to have a coordinated approach on this topic and make recommendations for policy makers;
- Expose policy makers and youth workers to a meaningful conversation about mental health and encourage them to reflect how youth work services and policies should be adapted to new realities.

During the event, participants and speakers engaged in conversations on youth mental health – from policy to practice. The seminar’s speakers were eclectic, featuring decision makers, representatives of international organisations, specialists in public mental health, youth workers and EYCA members.

Although it represented a relatively new topic to be addressed by EYCA, the member organisations showcased examples of good practice on how the European Youth Card services can be adapted to address youth wellbeing overall.

The presentations of EYCA member organisations were followed by short group discussions among participants, in breakout rooms. They focused on making practical recommendations to youth workers and youth policy makers, to ensure the services are funded and professionals are equipped with the right tools.

Among the recommendations of participants, we mention:

- Online appointments, consultations for young people, but they **MUST** happen in person mainly as this gives young people strength;
- Schools should get qualified psychologists;
- Working against stigma of getting help and having mental health problems;
- Training youth workers and personnel who work with youth workers on how to provide mental health first aid and how to react;
- Council of Europe Youth Unit strength is the wide outreach to youth organisations, which should be used, but work on health is not a core issue for the Council of Europe.

All presentations of EYCA member organisations are available [at this link](#).



The group discussions were then followed by an **online panel** bringing together international experts on mental health and youth policies. The discussion raised awareness on the rapidly evolving online environment for young people and its impact on issues such as: raise in anxiety, self-image perception and consequences on mental health, capacity to focus and resilience. It also highlighted the impact that COVID-19 had on young people beyond physical health: the rise in social anxiety, limited access to their peers' circles and youth services, a feeling of being stuck, especially if family relationships were not harmonious.

The discussion concluded with a need for flexible policies and urgent measures to prevent higher rates of mental issues among an entire generation. It sounded the alarm for policy makers to work closely with practitioners, youth workers, parents and youth leaders to provide support systems, fund and equip professionals and educate youth about mental health.

PROGRAMME

Monday 18th October 2021	
9.00 – 9.45	<p>Welcome and short presentations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Health, Slovenia • Ministry of Education, Slovenia • World Health Organisation • Council of Europe – about PA on Youth Mobility • EYCA Director – about EYCA • SLOAM
9.45 – 10-00	<p>Aim and objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mapping the audience - expectations <p>Introduction of the facilitator, presentation and expectations of participants</p>
10.00 – 11.00	<p>New realities for young people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Matej Vinko – Slovenian National Public Health Institute
11.00 – 11.15	Coffee break
11.15 – 12.00	<p>BREAKOUT ROOMS: Thematic working groups led by EYCA members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movijovem, Portugal – supporting youth wellbeing and mental health • SLOAM, Slovenia – sustainability and mental health at the core of youth participation • Young Scot – involving young in codesign of mental health services / presentation of iFeel programme • Instituto Aragones de la Juventut, Spain - EYC as a tool to offer integrated youth services <p>Participants will work in parallel groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Attend a short presentation on how EYC is used as a tool for supporting young people</i> • <i>Share good practices and challenges they face given the new realities of young people</i> • <i>Map and identify possible new policy priorities and topics to be tackled in youth agenda</i>
12.00 – 12.15	Back to plenary Q & A session
12.15 – 12.30	Coffee break
12.30 – 14.00	<p><i>Round table event: Mental Health in the Digital World: Future of Policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mental Health Europe: Dominique de Marne, Senior Policy Advisor for Youth - YHO: Andrej Martin Vujkovic, President - EFPSA: Deianara Couwet, President (or their external representative) - IFMSA: Mohamed Mamdouh Eissa, Liaison Officer for Public Health Issues (or the Regional Director for Europe) <p>Closing remarks</p>

