



netWorked Youth Research for Empowerment in the Digital society

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## WYRED Independent Ethical Review

WP10\_D10.11

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## 1 Introduction

### Background to WYRED Project

The emergence of the young as a distinct social group, and their slowly increasing empowerment through the availability of digital technology, has brought with it an understanding that they have a key role to play in the digital society, as drivers of new behaviours and understandings. However, their active participation in society is not reflected sufficiently in policy and decision-making, especially in relation to digital issues. Because of this, they are not well represented and unheard, and this makes it hard for research and policy to identify and understand their needs. These issues are further complicated by the fact that the group is a swiftly moving target, it is as heterogeneous as the wider society, and young people can be unwilling to be subjects of research.

The WYRED (netWorked Youth Research for Empowerment in the Digital society) project (García-Peñalvo, 2016b, 2017; García-Peñalvo & Kearney, 2016). (funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Grant Agreement No 727066) aims to provide a framework for research in which children and young people can express and explore their perspectives and interests in relation to digital society, but also a platform from which they can communicate their perspectives to other stakeholders effectively through innovative engagement processes. It will do this by implementing a generative research cycle involving networking, dialogue, participatory research and interpretation phases centred around and driven by children and young people, out of which a diverse range of outputs, critical perspectives and other insights will emerge to inform policy and decision-making in relation to children and young people's needs in relation to digital society.

The project is informed by the recognition that young people of all ages have the right to participation and engagement. It has a strong focus on inclusion, diversity and the empowerment of the marginalised. The aim is to replace the disempowering scrutiny of conventional research processes with the empowerment of self-scrutiny and self-organisation through the social dialogue and participatory research (Griffiths et al., 2017).

## Objectives of the project

The overall aim of WYRED is the empowerment of children and young people. The WYRED project has several central objectives:

1. to provide a framework for research in which children and young people can express and explore their perspectives and interests in relation to digital society
2. to provide a platform from which children and young people can communicate their perspectives to other stakeholders effectively through innovative engagement processes.
3. to engage children and young people in a generative research cycle involving networking, dialogue, participatory research and interpretation
4. to generate a diverse range of outputs, critical perspectives and other insights that can inform policy and decision-making in relation to children and young people's needs in relation to digital society.
5. to make this process continuous and sustainable

These objectives involve a series of challenges that are a natural corollary of the work we propose, these are as follows.

1. **ENGAGEMENT** - children and young people are to a large extent immersed in a set of activities that take up most of their time, and their free time is precious. The engagement in WYRED of children and young people can involve competition for attention with existing activities.
2. **RESEARCH** - research is frequently understood in society as a dry activity divorced from everyday reality. This misconception can affect the way that WYRED is perceived both by the young participants and by third parties. Horizon 2020 is a research programme, but exploration may be a more fruitful word to use in this context.
3. **LEGITIMACY** - one of the ultimate aims of WYRED is to help young people communicate their issues and concerns to those who take decisions about them. There is a sense in which WYRED functions as a bridge. The challenge will be to ensure that the work done by children and young people in WYRED and its outputs are perceived as legitimate by decision-makers
4. **TECHNICAL ISSUES** - configuring a safe space for the activity in WYRED, that is both sufficiently attractive to children and young people and compliant with the necessary ethical requirements, is a challenge. In particular competing with the digital expectations of the young on a very tight budget will be bracing.

5. DIVERSITY – WYRED is committed to diversity and inclusion, however it is frequently the case that the easiest children and young people to access are to be found in middle-class schools with receptive families, the challenge is to move beyond this context.
6. SUSTAINABILITY - the activity in WYRED is initially resource hungry, hence the need for EC funding, making the activity sustainable involves promoting self-management among young people and facilitating the transition from funded project to self-funded youth-led activity. This is a considerable challenge activity.
7. ETHICS OF EMPOWERMENT - the central conundrum in a project like WYRED that focuses on facilitating the empowerment of young people and their agency is the question “when is the right moment to let go” (of the balloon). This is an ethical question.

Many of these challenges are identified in the proposal, others acquire significance as the process progresses. These are particularly areas of importance in a project that aims to innovate in this way.

## Structure of the project

The project work plan involves 10 work packages. The first of these focuses on the definition of the different processes involved in the research cycle, the second is dedicated to the preparation and implementation throughout the project of the inclusion strategy, and the third focuses on the development of the WYRED platform, which will be used throughout the project as the space in which the activities and interaction take place.

These first three preparatory WPs are followed by 5 WPs which cover the full cycle of research activity in WYRED. This starts with network building in WP4, in which the children and young people who will participate in the research cycle are attracted and engaged, and the principal themes that represent their concerns are identified.

The next work package (5) focuses on social dialogue around these themes, which are further explored to identify key research questions relating to the digital society that concern children and young people.

In the subsequent work package (6) these children and young people, supported by the partners, will focus on designing and implementing research activities to explore these questions and issues in a range of ways.

WP7 focuses on the interpretation and evaluation of the process and its results in the production types by the young research participants and the partners, of different formats and artefacts that will be used to present the results, principally insights and recommendations to different target groups at policy level and in the wider society.

The final phase of the cycle in WP8 focuses on the dissemination and exploitation of these results, though this work package runs throughout the project engaging in the valorisation of the WYRED activity through workshops, event participation, online activity and an the creation of an association to manage WYRED activity after the funding period.

These 5 work packages form a cycle that is aimed to generate insights relating to the perspectives and concerns of children and young people in relation to digital society. The cycle repeats twice during the funding period of the project and will continue after the funding period indefinitely under the aegis of the WYRED Association. The WYRED cycle is supported by 2 other work packages focusing on management (WP9) and quality (WP10).

WP no.	WP Title	WP Owner
WP1	WYRED PROCESSES DEFINITION	BOUNDARIES
WP2	INCLUSION	MOVES
WP3	WYRED PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT	USAL
WP4	BUILDING THE WYRED NETWORK	YEU
WP5	SOCIAL DIALOGUE PHASE	EARLY YEARS
WP6	PARTICIPANT RESEARCH PHASE	DOGA SCHOOLS
WP7	EVALUATION AND INTERPRETATION PHASE	PYE GLOBAL
WP8	VALORISATION	OXFAM
WP9	PROJECT MANAGEMENT	USAL
WP10	QUALITY MANAGEMENT	BOUNDARIES

It is worth noting that there are challenges involved in implementing a project that begins with a traditional work package structure, but in which the aim is to move towards a continuous cycle of activity in which the divisions between work packages 4 to 8 will increasingly be elided.

## Project consortium

The consortium is made up of nine partners, and is very diverse, with partners from academic organisations that focus on research and others whose principal focus is youth work.

1	UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA (USAL)
2	OXFAM ITALIA ONLUS (OXFAM)
3	PYE GLOBAL (PYE)
4	ASİST ÖĞRETİM KURUMLARI A.S. (DOĞA SCHOOLS)
5	EARLY YEARS – THE ORGANISATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN LBG (EARLY YEARS)
6	YOUTH FOR EXCHANGE AND UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL AISBL (YEU)
7	MOVES (MOVES)
8	THE BOUNDARIES OBSERVATORY C.I.C. (BOUNDARIES)
9	TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY (TAU)

The diversity involved is of great value but also constitutes a challenge since the organisational cultures and ways of working among the different partners are diverse, as are the cultures in which they work.

### Purpose of Independent Ethical Review

This report is the result of an independent ethical review. For an ambitious, far-reaching project like WYRED, an ethical assessment allows for a thorough examination of the objectives, assumptions, methods, processes, and outputs, to be viewed from a fresh, external perspective.

This, in turn, should lead to any potentially delicate ethical issues being highlighted, and recommendations being made to help ensure the continued success of the project.

### Evaluation Methods

A systematic review of the available project documents was undertaken as well as interviews with key project personnel. The review examined the project outputs — especially all available project documents and the online platform — from the perspective of best practice in the fields of informal learning, youth engagement, co-created research, and citizen science.

## 2 Ethical Consideration of Project Objectives

The overarching objective of WYRED is to put young people at the centre of an exploration of digital society.

The project aims to empower young people themselves to determine the scope of the project by eliciting and supporting their decisions on the project themes, the key research questions, and the approaches through which they will try to answer them.

The end goal of the project is for those young people to then choose how they present their findings to wider society, and in particular, to policy makers.

The Participant Protection Policy shows how the WYRED project is focused on giving freedom to young people to interact and explore, while also ensuring that all issues of security, privacy, and participant protection are responsibly addressed.

The policy goes beyond merely protecting the data of the participants by striving to welcome diversity among the participants and sets up the young participants as experts for their future in a digital society. This demonstrates the ethical stance of the project itself and how generative research as a form of participative youth-led research can have profound benefits for participants and stakeholders alike.

The three key ethical issues for the WYRED project are: the changing data protection regulations, youth engagement, and participant-led (and co-created) research. Each of these issues are already central to the WYRED project and will become even more important as the project grows. These issues are dealt with individually below.

## GDPR

Coinciding with the project timeline was the unveiling and implementation of the new European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

This new regulation is the most significant change to data privacy for decades, and consequently, any project concerned with digital society — especially one with young people as its participants — needs to ensure that it is in compliance with the new regulations.

The new law requires organisations to be fully transparent about how they are using and safeguarding personal data, and to be able to demonstrate accountability for their data processing activities.

From what is evident of the WYRED processes and platform, best practice is already being adhered to, and with some small additions to the project website, WYRED could ensure that the project is seen as an example of responsible complicity with GDPR.

## Youth Engagement

Youth engagement in informal education is a growing area of interest both to researchers and practitioners, and finding ways to utilise digital solutions for more meaningful engagement is arguably the main challenge for everyone involved.

Although formal education has long had inclusion as a central value, informal education spaces — especially youth-led digital spaces — have lagged behind. The WYRED project demonstrates its strong ethical standpoint in this area by issuing regular inclusion reports during the project. This provides an explicit focus on inclusion by taking into account the key indicators of diversity across cultures and countries.

This is refreshing to see in a Horizon 2020 project as it converts the functionally tokenistic gestures of lesser projects into tangible outputs that can help steer the direction of the project in its own lifetime.

## Co-creation and Citizen Science

The European Commission has long touted “Open Science” as a key research/innovation priority, and the policy rhetoric in this area is increasingly highlighting “co-creation” as the gold-standard of making science more accessible and engaging.

The WYRED project demonstrates impressive potential in this area, and rather than being of ethical concern, the approaches taken by WYRED to empower young people and to support them throughout the research process could serve as an example for subsequent projects to follow.

There is a clear opportunity for WYRED to help shape the growing field of “citizen science”. As citizen science can be considered any research that is contributed to (and, ideally, led) by non-professionals, there have been large-scale investments in projects that find ways of ethically supporting citizen science activities. Many of the ethical concerns in this field stem from the challenge of supporting young people in the most fair and responsible ways — which is one of the great strengths of the WYRED project.

## 3 Evaluation of WYRED Processes

### The WYRED Processes Handbook

The WYRED Processes Handbook is an excellent demonstration of transparency in research. By having a deliverable that captures how the research cycle works, and provides space for reflection and discussion, it sets the ethical standards for the rest of the project and the communities it is building.

One of the most important ethical considerations when undertaking a project as complex and ambitious as WYRED, is the influence stakeholders and participant voices should have on decision-making and on steering the direction of the project.

WYRED set out to involve representatives of all potential stakeholders, not only during the research cycle stage, but even in the development of key project deliverables like the Processes Handbook.

Local focus groups and seminars were held to refine the content of the Handbook. Ethically, this ensures that the voices of the people and of the organisations that the project will be benefiting are captured at the outset where they can have the most significant input.

### The WYRED Research Cycle

The emphasis on “network building” is an ethically sound approach to initiating the research cycle. The Network Manifesto is a good example of this approach, and by having young people participate in its creation, WYRED gives control of steering the research agenda to the project participants. This is encouraging to see, especially as the project deals with issues relating to digital society, where young people’s opinions are often not gathered, and rarely in ways that grant them an active role.

The evolving Processes Handbook is a well thought out cornerstone of the research cycle, and the focus on an inclusion strategy is also commendable. As well as having an entire Work Package (WP2) dedicated to this goal, it is refreshing to see the strategy emerge at other points of the project, as with the “Inclusion Questionnaire” provided when participants first join the WYRED online platform.

Ensuring that sufficient social dialogue is conducted around the chosen research themes, and repeating the whole research cycle twice during the project lifetime is a well founded process. Coupled with the Delphi study, this should help map and identify young people's attitudes and expectations regarding digital society.

In the preparation for dialogue (Process No. 5.1) a range of themes are pre-empted as examples of topics that could emerge from the Delphi process. This could be deemed unnecessary, as the themes would ideally be allowed to emerge naturally with no risk of the participants being biased by expected themes. However, given the ubiquity of the digital challenges discussed it is acceptable to list likely topics that may emerge. The use of “dialogue sessions” (Process No. 5.2 and 5.3) is an added guard against biasing the topics by exploring them further with the participants themselves.

## 4 Evaluation of WYRED Platform

The WYRED online platform (García-Peñalvo, 2016a; García-Peñalvo & Durán-Escudero, 2017; García-Peñalvo, García-Holgado, Vázquez-Ingelmo, & Seoane-Pardo, 2018) is the critical space for the project participants to interact and will serve as the repository for artefacts from the research process.

It appears to an independent reviewer that the platform is thriving, with at least 26 visible communities and 89 separate projects ongoing. It is probable that there are more communities and projects that are currently visible only to their participants.

Most of the potential ethical issues for the platform have been foreseen by the project organisers, and appropriate steps have been taken to safeguard against any future problems. The training modules on ethical issues such as data protection and privacy are a welcome suggestion.

Perhaps the main challenge remaining will be in effectively evaluating the impact of the platform. Stakeholders, in particular, will want to be able judge the impact of the platform on participants in order to determine their level of support for the initiative. Again, the coordinators have foreseen this challenge, and have plans in place to put the young people once more at the centre of the issue by having them steer the evaluation process just as they are leading the overall research process.

## 5 Recommendations

From an examination of WYRED deliverables and outputs, including documents and the online platform, it is clear that the WYRED project is aiming to adhere to ethical guidelines that ensure the well-being, protection, and safety of participants. It is also clear that the respect and rights of the young people involved in the project have been given due consideration, and as such, the recommendations that follow below are meant merely as suggestions:

- The WYRED coordinators should not see the new EU regulation on data privacy (GDPR) as a stumbling block. Instead, the project platform could become an exemplar for other projects focusing on youth engagement at a time when many organisations are struggling to understand how GDPR affects their processes. As WYRED already seems to be adhering to best ethical practice in general, a small note being included on the platform to confirm that the entire project is GDPR-compliant could ease any potential worries from participants and policy makers alike. The key issues to resolve would be to confirm that the online database of participants is secure, and that the organisers are confident they could provide a participant with a copy all of their stored data within 30-days of a request being submitted.
- While the inclusion reports are an impressive and progressive part of the project, it was not entirely transparent how the “Inclusion Criteria” (Process No. 2.1) were determined. It seems like partner feedback might have been the main input into determining the criteria but that will likely be addressed in the corresponding project deliverable.
- Consent for the collection and re-use of activity artefacts (Process No. 6.4) is especially important. It is paramount that the young participants understand where and how their artefacts will be seen, and that permission will be granted them to to have their artefacts removed if they change their mind.
- While the WYRED project is already showcasing excellent methods of facilitating and capturing dialogue among young people, it could potentially show increased clarity around just how diverse the

participants themselves are. Any opportunities for the young people to reflect on their own cultural contexts, and to explore what diversity and different perspectives can bring to research, would be particularly interesting.

- The WYRED dissemination plans could ideally include conferences and networking events in the growing research field of “Citizen Science”, where delegates would benefit from hearing about the WYRED approach to supporting young people in research. The global Citizen Science Association (CSA) and the European Citizen Science Association (ECSA) have their biannual conferences on alternate years.
- Although this ethical review allowed insight into many aspects of the WYRED processes, if future reviews are planned it could be interesting for an independent evaluator to observe one of the focus groups or other dialogue sessions to see the interaction between the young people and the project team.
- A concern with Horizon 2020 funded projects is always their legacy at the conclusion of the project. There are ethical questions to be answered about how responsible it is to encourage young people to join and participate in a network/platform/community that might not exist past the few years that project is funded. Seeing the WYRED project predict this issue, and mitigate it with the idea of establishing a “WYRED Association” is very encouraging.

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