Insights Report on the 'My Digital Life' Project

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1 Background

In Dec 2017, I was asked by the Wales Co-operative to undertake a 'light touch series of interviews' for their 'My Digital Life' (MDL) project which was being delivered by the Wales Cooperative and three partner organisations in Wales: Gisda, Llamau and the YMCA Swansea. The project aimed to engage 375 of the hardest-to-reach young people across Wales through a series of workshops and by incorporating digital literacy into existing life skills programmes. MDL is also one of six National Projects funded by the Nominet Trust under their 'Digital Reach' programme [1].

The programme which launched in June 2017, aims to uncover **'***how to ensure everyone, regardless of background and circumstance, has access to the fundamental digital skills needed in today's 'digital-by-default' society – skills that shape the way we interact, transact, access opportunities and solve problems'* [1].

Through the 6 projects, the Nominet Trust also hope to '*deepen their collective understanding of the factors limiting digital skills development so that they can better democratise access to digital skills and provide a brighter future for all young people'.*

2 Introduction

In February and March 2018, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with staff and young people from the three partner organisations (Gisda, Llamau and YMCA Swansea). The aim of the interviews was **to gain insights into the opportunities and challenges in engaging young people to develop their digital skills and confidence** (as part of the MDL programme), and document these insights using illustrative quotes. For Gisda the interviews involved five staff and eight young people; for Llamau the interviews involved twelve staff (tutors, managers and a digital mentor) and five young people; for YMCA Swansea the interviews involved five staff (youth workers and digital mentors) and two young people. All the staff and young people participating in the interviews completed consent forms to participate in the interviews, with parental consent where necessary. In this report, the names of all the young people have been changed. First names are used throughout, for staff and young people, except in some of the Llamau staff interviews, where their Learning for Life tutors are just referred to as tutors. A list of the names of the staff from the three partner organisations who participated in these interviews is provided at the end of the report.

The following sections present the main insights uncovered from these interviews. **It must be noted that the insights gained are from interviewing this very specific demographic of 'hard to reach' young people aged 16-24 and the staff from organisations supporting them, and may not apply more generally to other organisations or young people.**

3 Approaches and formats that work

In the following sections I share some of the insights I gained from the three partner organisations and a selection of their young people beneficiaries - on the approaches and formats that worked effectively in their MDL projects.

3.1 Flexibility and adaptability

For their MDL project, Llamau's Learning for Life staff decided they wanted to adapt their 'Health and Safety in the Workplace' Agored paper-based module to become an online digital resource which would be more interactive and fun for their young people to use. It is also a compulsory module for the young people. Here Sian, Llamau's Head of Service explains how they made that decision:

> *Sian: "Lisa and I were having a chat, trying to look at what subject we have that is quite dry and what could benefit from being more interactive digitally. And the obvious answer was 'Health and Safety in the Workplace' Agored…because it is quite a dry subject anyway and the workbook isn't that scintillating."*
>
> *Lisa (Llamau's Learning for Life Team Leader): "It's the first proper piece of work they (young people) do with us so it sets the tone for how we're going to be."*

However, they encountered problems with Internet connectivity at their Learning for Life centres, and had to change their original plan:

> *Lisa: "Originally we wanted an all singing, all dancing online resource. There was going to be no paper, it was just going to be amazing… Then all the issues hit us. So we've gone back and forth, back and forth to try and make it work. So this morning, we finally got to a stage where something can be used no matter what the circumstance (i.e. doesn't require an Internet connection). It's based on PowerPoint now. The workbook still exists, so if all else fails we can just carry on with the workbook as usual. But now we can use these new resources instead of certain pages of the workbook and because it's for a qualification, you still got to print off evidence. But now we can print off a certificate to say they've passed a quiz, or a screenshot to say they've identified different hazards, rather than it all being in the workbook. So they can use digital tools and then we can still put it into the workbook cos that is still what we've got to submit to the exam board."*

Twm (Staff Lead for the MDL project, Gisda) explains how having the flexibility of offering different sessions benefitted Gisda:

> *"The flexibility to do what sessions we want and the ability to give a variety of sessions rather than it being the same session every week...sort of keep it fresh… get different people to host the sessions ..think that's worked quite well. The people who did come every week had something different to look forward to, or even to carry on from the week before. That's the best thing that has worked really."*

Gethin (Staff, Gisda):

> *"What's good is the Welsh Co-op have given us the freedom to deliver what we feel is best for our service users rather than... what often happens (which) is you're prescribed what you do with people and how to deliver it. That's been really good really - as a pilot should be."*

3.2 Being young person led

A key focus of the YMCA Swansea is that they are youth led, and always consult young people on what workshops and support they want. This was also how they approached their MDL project:

Tony (Staff, YMCA Swansea):

> *"Young people are more likely to engage if they have decided... (the session) is not being forced on them."*

Geraint, the MDL Lead from YMCA Swansea also affirms the importance of being youth led:

> *"..it is making a difference because it is upscaling young people in things they want to learn..."*

Stuart, a Digital Mentor (from Swansea MAD) supporting YMCA Swansea, answers my question on what has worked well:

> *"I think definitely the idea that things have got to be youth led... And for us it's giving somebody an idea of what they can do... what their capability is… stimulating their aspirations and then see where it takes them really."*

> *"You can't do anything else. People will just like walk out….they will vote with their feet if they don't like something… and just walk out."*

3.3 Meeting young people where they are

Here one of Llamau's Learning for Life tutors explains how they approach sessions for young people at their centres:

> *"There is a basic daily structure but whenever the learners come in, I always make it clear they're quite in control, like if you have somebody who's got anger management issues, obviously that's part of the risk assessment. But I put the onus on them to recognise when things (are difficult: 'If you need to leave, it's not like school. You're not going to get a detention or get into trouble - you just need to say "I need five" and go and take five and that's fine'. And it's giving them a bit of independence and freedom and responsibility. That's what works in this environment and you can't do that in mainstream... It's totally different (to school) and some of them find it quite hard to get their heads around (this)."*

Lisa, Llamau's Learning for Life Team Leader, echoes this sentiment:

> *"We treat them like adults and sometimes that unnerves them cos they've got nothing to fight against."*

3.4 Delivering personalised content

Mitchell, 16, one of the young people from YMCA Swansea who has attended both the group and one-to-one workshops delivered as part of their MDL project, particularly appreciates the one-to-one sessions, and explains why it has worked so well for him:

"I think a lot of people can find it hard working in a group…It could be fitting in.... A lot of people just want the time to talk to someone one-to-one rather than be shown in a group....Some people need that one-to-one....being shown (how to do something).

Describing what made the session most accessible to him:

"I would say the people in the sessions (referring to the Digital Mentors) because if you get someone who is not really engaging, not showing you hands on what to do.... you get it done but Taylor and Dave, all working hard and showing me this and that...I get it done easier."

Mitchell has just secured a place at college. He explained that he struggles with school and one of the things he appreciates is the flexibility in timings of the one-to-one support sessions offered as part of YMCA Swansea's MDL project:

"I come during school hours and that works.. gets me out of school.... I find it hard to cope with school…I'm ready for college."

Lisa (Staff, Llamau Learning for Life), explains how they approach the sessions they deliver for young people at their centres:

"It is individual to them - it is not 'you have to fit into this conveyor belt of qualifications'. We find out what they want and we make sure they get what they want….. it's not: 'You're going to come here for this period of time and you're going to X,Y,Z and then you go regardless of whether you're ready or not.'"

3.5 Offering what young people need - content and access

Here Taylor (Digital Mentor from Swansea MAD supporting YMCA Swansea), explains how they decided what content they would provide young people:

"Before doing the (MDL) project, we consulted with the three groups we mainly have and then from there, we had to figure out what areas we need to focus on in the sense of their needs and then compare that to what their wants were... ..We tried to have a combination of the both - like they needed basic digital safety skills, online banking, social media... they were very interested in things like game development and websites ….so as the project developed…..we tried to have the basic skills embedded in the more complex tasks... so subtly giving them the skills …"

Below, a Llamau Learning for Life tutor talks about the 'Job Clubs' they host once a week to provide extra help to their young people:

"So one afternoon a week, in one of our centres we may go right, 'Work away but lunchtime 1 o'clock is a job club'. So anyone that has access to Learning for Life or the project houses or ex-learners can come in for two hours a week. The laptops are out and ready to do their DWP things, do the job search plus evidence that they've been job searching. And we are on support (to answer questions) like 'What was my password again?', 'What's my number again?', 'What's my email?', 'How do I get in?' You have all these questions come up every week". (All the staff laugh).

3.6 Offering fresh, new and inspiring content

From the interviews with all the organisations, it was clear that they saw the MDL project as providing an opportunity to test new content, formats and approaches.

In Gisda, the approach was to provide essential knowledge mixed in with inspiring workshops on newer technologies like VR, music making, 3D printing, game design and more.

Sian (Staff, Gisda):

> *"In Gisda we've always wanted the opportunity to give young people the chance to develop their digital skills ... There are lots of projects that give you the skills for Word, Excel, how to use the computer… For this project it was an opportunity to be creative and to offer different expertise and programs....things that our young people would normally never get a chance to do."*

Twm, the lead staff member from Gisda in charge of delivering the MDL sessions, as well as organising for them to be delivered by external experts, said:

> *"The way I saw it from day one…was flooding (the young) people with different experiences, different workshops, from cooking using digital video, from writing music digitally, from recording using high-tech equipment to their own phones, to experiencing VR to absolutely anything I could get my hands on…Rather than it being walking into a classroom, learning how to use Excel. We can implement skills for that in a different way....."*

> *"There's more to it than sitting down and showing them how to use different applications on a computer - you need to get a spark there that you can work with…."*

Referring to one of their workshop sessions, Twm said:

> *"There was a guy who came in who had worked on a on a game called 'Project CARS' which was a big budget game which came out three or four years ago. This guy had worked on it. They (the young people) were fascinated….one of the young people who had played this game was over the moon to meet this guy….it was like meeting one of his heroes."*

Natasha (a young person from Gisda), 20, explained that she was not normally confident with things computer related or digital. Here she shares the confidence she has gained from attending the three workshops on music making, which was held at Gisda's café:

> *"Stefan was running the sessions and I was like 'I'm not going to be able to do this yeah, because I have learning difficulties…'. He's like 'Just try it' ... And I went 'Okay'. The fact that at the end of that session, I was teaching him how to use the app… and he was like: 'What, how is that possible?' He just gave me that look to say you've done it before, and I was like 'I've not done it before, before you say anything!' In that short period of time, it shows how much you can learn."*

Natasha was so inspired that she encouraged other young people she knew to attend the following sessions. She also taught the app she had learnt to her younger sibling.

Geraint, MDL lead at YMCA Swansea explained how MDL had given them the opportunity to offer fresh content:

> *"The ability to have mentors to come in to deliver (workshops), who know what they're talking about, know how to run a session freed up the staff time. So it makes a lot of sense and a lot easier for us as an organisation to have a member of staff with a mentor, rather than having a member of staff learn stuff first and then deliver. That's the luxury we have had."*

3.7 Offering content more creatively

Taylor (Digital Mentor, Swansea MAD), explained that they had originally offered standalone courses on topics like Copyright and Digital Safety. However the young people got disinterested, so they decided to offer content like that through more creative means. Stuart (Digital Mentor, Swansea MAD) expanded on this:

> *"So for example, they could be learning how to compose music, but they may have to select passwords, select files, rename things, and so on…so what they want is this amazing hip hop track, but the little skills that go with that are embedded in."*

Taylor also emphasised the need for immersive experiences and dividing things into technical and practical as well:

> *"Here's the technical side of making music - now let's go and do something with information we learnt."*

He explained that the workshops were divided into 2 parts:

> *"Learning and creating... two separate parts in one session. It's worked well. It has meant that we have kept their interest."*

Tony (Staff, YMCA Swansea):

> *"I think the way that it is youth led and having the practical element has left the young people going home and wanting to continue and wanting to learn more. It's kind of given them the energy to go in and learn more digital skills and really want to build their skills."*

3.8 Lowering barriers

Taylor (Digital Mentor, Swansea MAD) explains how they had an inclusive approach to cater for young people's quite varied digital skills:

> *"When we start a workshop session, no matter how complex it is, we always start with the basics so it doesn't feel like we're excluding people who don't have that much knowledge about the topic...Just to make it easier, in that sense, for them."*

Geraint (Staff, YMCA Swansea) explains how they used their existing programmes to offer young people new digital skills:

"A lot of the time the young people we work with, we are already engaging with, so they're not just coming off the street saying I want to learn about computers. They are coming to the groups or they're coming to do one-to-one sessions with the youth workers, then, they get offered the digital side... or they learn about the digital side - then they say 'can we learn some stuff about computers.'"

3.9 Offering bite size tasters

Twm (Staff, Gisda) highlighted the importance of offering short taster sessions for their young people:

"We also try and make it so that they can dip in and out because not a lot of people can commit to a series of workshops or sessions. So we try and make it something that they can dip in and out of, so they can get something from each session."

Matthew, one of the young people accessing support from Llamau's Learning for Life provision in Cardiff agrees on the importance of taster sessions, but also emphasises developing one area of work:

"I believe that that's a good thing (referring to young people having a taster selection of courses to try to get a sense of their interests) but (it's) also important to concentrate on the one thing - the main one that you want - once you've decided."

3.10 An opportunity to test things out

Here Gethin (Staff, Gisda) shares some insights that this pilot MDL project has given them as a charity:

"It's been worthwhile for us to think about digital inclusion provision as a charity. It's given some focus and attention on what our role is, in terms of what we do with our young people in terms of support - when it comes to digital. So that's a big thing really. Made me aware culturally how the charity delivers that. What we need to do with the culture of the organisation.....we need to promote a culture of thinking about digital inclusion while supporting young people. It's made me realise we need to focus on it - it needs attention."

YMCA Swansea, like the other partners, said that the MDL project has given them the opportunity to pilot a different model – of bringing in Digital Mentors who could offer more specialist workshops with a range of new content which the young people asked for.

Taylor (Digital Mentor, Swansea MAD):

"Yeah... one example we've done is an app design with them which is something we wouldn't have considered before, because of the time of planning it and preparing the actual doing it."

Tony (Staff, YMCA Swansea):

> *"…With the app design one we made games and the young people were really interested in that. A few of them came back the next week saying they'd gone home and continued to make those games, using those skills then."*

3.11 Engaging with other partners to reach more young people

Twm (Staff, Gisda) explained that they also had to work creatively to increase their reach (outside of their Café, supported housing and hostels) by engaging with other partners in the region.

> *"As well as these sessions, we have piggybacked on other sessions (where) we can reach people that we wouldn't normally draw into the café….Like there was a session a few weeks ago….we talked about it briefly (talking about a group working on a youth voice project). They were trying to solve problems...(around youth participation)...That was not necessarily something we planned....We came in (because) they wanted mentors to help the young people develop ideas - so we went in and talked about MDL and tried to implement that into their ideas….that worked really, really well."*

4 The importance of supportive environments

From the interviews, it was clear that all three organisations (Gisda, Llamau and YMCA Swansea) aimed to provide supportive and nurturing environments for their young people. The following sections describe the different aspects of these environments.

4.1 A welcoming space

For a number of years now, Gisda have had a café which is part of their provision for young people. This is also where their MDL structured sessions were run every Wednesday evening:

> *Twm (Staff, Gisda): "It's nice to have somewhere like that as well (the cafe), somewhere familiar, where we can hold the sessions...It's not walking into a meeting room to do technology. It's walking into a cafe in the middle of Caernarfon where your friends might be…There are staff (there) that they (young people) are familiar with…"*

In the interview, Gisda staff explained how important it was to have a welcoming atmosphere, and how the young people saw the café as 'their' space. There was no feeling of 'them and us'. Young people would often stay on to help at the café as well.

> *Lee (Staff, Gisda): "It's that mixture of giving them some food as well and the sort of social thing - so it's not going to a classroom…..also like you say - meeting exciting people with skills we don't have (referring to the fact that specialist workshops with experts were also being offered in the café)."*

Below, Gwyn, 19, one of Gisda's young people, shares his thoughts on the workshops run at the café in Gisda:

> *".. Like we can go there and we can learn how to cook with free food, do music sessions. There will be a load of stuff going on. It's really interesting to just pop in and see what is going on. Also they've a Facebook page that Twm has ...He will message us and he will put on the Facebook page what's going on and what's happening where and when...It keeps us in touch with what's going on....you know? We just know we can go down and do something different every time."*

A tutor from Llamau's Learning for Life programme highlights how they work with young people who come to their centres to attend structured support programmes:

> *"There is quite a lot of emotional trauma with a significant number of the students so they need to have to be able to come in and have a cup of tea and a chat.. so sometimes they may not start work for ages. You know don't you, that there is no point... (in trying to push them)… There's an awful lot of mental health stuff that goes on, so I don't think anybody else can be that flexible like we are."*

Mitchell, a 16 year old from YMCA Swansea highlights how important YMCA Swansea was to him:

> *"At 12 years old I was stuck in the house.. not doing anything, without any friends. I wish I had known about the YMCA to come to, cos I've had lots of opportunities through it, (met) a lot of new people.. it's been great."*

4.2 Skilled staff

Here a tutor from Llamau's Learning for Life programme explained how she had been working with a young person, Hazel, 17, who hadn't finished the 'Health and Safety' Agored in three months. She said that she could not keep Hazel in a seat long enough with a pen in her hand to finish it. She explained that Hazel lived in a children's home and had bounced around children's homes most of her teenage years. Two weeks ago, she (the tutor) decided to try a different Agored unit with Hazel, the one on cooking. She explained that half of the unit involved writing, whilst the other half involved physically cooking and taking photos of the food. Hazel was so engaged on this unit that she had nearly finished it in two weeks!

> *"So it's just keep trying....with different… And the more you get to know them, the more you get to know how much you can push them and when you can't."*

4.3 Not school

Lisa, Llamau's Learning for Life Team Leader, explains how important it is that their centres are not like school:

> *"They won't do anything that mimics school...so if they think we're asking them to do something they would do in school, they will fight against that. They don't want to be back in a school situation because that's negative."*

4.4 Safe spaces

Here Lisa, Llamau's Learning for Life Team Leader, shares how the young people who put up barriers finally make progress:

> *"It's trust and perseverance and that 'We're not going to give up on you' and 'We're not going anywhere' and 'It's a safe space.'"*

Below, Sophia, Volunteer Coordinator at YMCA Swansea also emphasises the importance of young people having a safe and supportive environment, with free materials:

> *"Providing them with the materials as lots of young people won't have laptops at home, they won't have computers, they won't have software, they won't have the skills, they won't have any mentors..... Sometimes it's a case of time. They will be in school, they will be in college. When they go home, then they may have parents to look after ... other responsibilities. Or they may have mental health problems. There are so many other things that young people deal with outside of what we see here... and outside of what school will see, so we give them that safe space and that time that they can dedicate to digital skills which otherwise they may not have the opportunity to do."*

4.5 Nurturing and supportive relationships

At YMCA Swansea, whilst the MDL Youth Club Group workshops were delivered by the Digital Mentors, the youth workers were also present to help the young people in the sessions.

Sophia (Staff, YMCA Swansea) highlights the importance of having youth workers present in the MDL sessions, providing additional support beyond digital skills:

> *"During the sessions, the youth workers and the support workers do a lot of work with the young people as individuals and tackling other needs that they have going on in their lives. So it's very important that that source of support is there for them alongside. Because sometimes, that can be a barrier to them doing MDL project in the first place...If we can't support them, they're never going to get to that stage in the first place."*

4.6 Non-judgemental and friendly spaces

Natasha (Gisda), 20, explained that only she and one other young person attended the first workshop on music making that Gisda ran as part of their MDL sessions. They were both so inspired that they spread the work and actively encouraged other young people to attend the next two sessions:

> *"Well the past two sessions I managed to get a good crowd. I've told them, don't matter, you won't get judged, come on, do it, it's a laugh. If I can do it, you lot can do it."*

She also encouraged young people from the local hostel, Hafan, to attend as well:

> *"We've started to encourage them slowly because as well as learning digital, it's also about the social aspects as well... you know? Living in the hostel is quite boring... lonely. If you go to*

a cafe, you can feel relaxed, you can play the Xbox, you don't even have to play with the digital things. But as long as there's something going on."

4.7 Free support, workshops and tools

Here Geraint, (Staff, YMCA Swansea) explains the importance of their provision being accessible to their young people:

"It's about it being free for a lot of the young people we work with - they haven't got money that is surplus to them....Having the opportunity for things to be free is a big incentive."

Taylor (Digital Mentor, Swansea MAD) reaffirms this point and explains that the software tools used in the MDL workshops were also open source or free:

"So this is accessible to anyone who can access the Internet or can come in and access their Internet (at the YMCA Swansea)."

5 Challenges

The sections below present some insights on the challenges in engaging young people to develop their digital skills and confidence, both for the young people and for the organisations seeking to engage them.

5.1 Young people's social/emotional barriers

From the interviews with the partner organisations, and some of their young people beneficiaries, it was clear that they (the young people) had many social and emotional challenges – some of which they were in the process of overcoming, and some of which they had overcome. Challenges like low confidence and self-esteem, difficult life circumstances, lack of motivation, peer pressure, drugs and substance misuse, social anxiety and other mental health issues. In the sections below, I share some of the insights I gained.

5.1.1 Difficult life circumstance

Natasha, 20, has accessed Gisda's services over the years, including the recent music-making workshop offered through MDL which had inspired her. Here she provides some insights into her teenage years. She explained that between the ages of 12 and 16, she had faced bad cyberbullying which she felt was because she had been in the care system. When she got to the age of 16, she confronted the bullies, and has not been bullied since. She wished she had done that earlier. Here she shares her thoughts:

"When you're in the care system you think oh, I deserve all that, when you get out, you're like nah… nobody deserves that."

5.1.2 Lack of motivation

Steve, 19, one of the young people in supported housing with Gisda, highlighted that a key challenge was to motivate himself:

> *(Haltingly) "I've been kicked out of college twice ….so… I seem to not find an interest in it anymore or like… effort to try and do it again."*

Mitchell, 16, who accesses both the group and one-to-one provision at YMCA Swansea shares the main areas he wanted support in:

> *"I think it's just motivation really. At the moment I know I'm doing this (college) course now so that's going to help. I think motivation helps people. Cos there is a teacher in my school and I know she kinda don't really like my videos - she says, 'This is childish...this is this, this is that…' which I think: 'You know you're a teacher, you're supposed to encourage people to do what they're doing, you know?'. With a teacher you don t expect that do you?"*

Referring to the support he is getting from YMCA Swansea which is helping him with motivation:

> *"With Liam now, he's really helping me... you know letting me have this room when I'm in group. He'll say 'Go on, film a video if you've got to'…. Really helps me because it's a lot of things with YouTube that I've got to do."*

Loretta, 20, from one of Gisda's hostels, shares that for her, motivation is an intrinsic quality:

> *"It's about the person wanting to do it for themselves…It's more about the people than about the services being offered I think…If you wanna do it, then it's there….If you don't wanna do it or can't be bothered, then it's not going to (make a difference)…. I think there's a lot of stuff in place already - a lot of stuff, but lots of (young) people just don't want to do it."*

5.1.3 Low self confidence

Here the Learning for Life tutors and Lisa, their Team Leader, explain how many of the young people they see haven't succeeded at school, and are afraid of failing:

> *Tutors: "Average reading age is of entry 3 - nine-years old."*
> *"About three quarters of the young people are at that level."*

> *Lisa: "Often they go up a level really quickly because (previously) they haven't (had) the confidence to do it. So as soon as they realise they can try and they're not going to get into trouble for getting it wrong, then you find out what they're actually capable of...A lot of them are resistant to it on the basis of 'If I kick up you're not going to make me do it, so I can't fail', so it's getting that trust."*

5.1.4 Mental health issues

When I asked Steve, 19, who lived in a hostel with Gisda, what he felt would help him most at this moment in his life, he said:

"Safety.....like (to have) a lot of mental safety... like relationships ....to like teach and learn about everyday life...."

I asked Twm (Staff, Gisda) subsequently if Gisda currently offered anything on mental health and well-being, and he explained that they used to do a lot more, but there had been cuts in funding.

"There is a lot of available stuff but it's in bits and quite spread out."

He felt that there needed to be more of a long term investment in this area.

Below, in a discussion on young people going to a library to access the Internet, a tutor from Llamau's Learning for Life programme highlights the challenge this can present to young people with mental health issues:

"A large number of them (young people) suffer with anxiety and mental health issues as well...Something like that (going into a library) is a huge deal.. it's too big a barrier for them to overcome."

5.1.5 Social media concerns

Below Sophia (Staff, YMCA Swansea) outlines her concerns that social media can sometimes be a barrier rather than a positive thing for their young people:

"Social media and digital have grown bigger now and there are so many negative aspects to it that it can be quite hard to overshadow those. A lot of our young people have quite negative relationships with social media with online bullying and things like that. And it can be very hard to overcome those. Obviously that's happening in their lives. So although for us it might be a topic, for them it's an actual issue that they're facing in their life, and that can make it extremely hard for them ....If they are already struggling with that, that in itself is a barrier…"

5.2 Young people's practical barriers

From the interviews I did, I also found that young people face many practical barriers. The following sections illustrate some of these barriers.

5.2.1 Lack of finance

Here a Llamau Learning for Life tutor highlights how a lack of funds resulted in a young person she worked with facing extra disadvantage:

"Gemma had to leave her phone in the taxi… cos she didn't have enough money for the taxi. She was going to jump out the other end and to stop getting into trouble, she gave the taxi driver her phone. So she had to go back in and get it and pay for it...She didn't have any way then to contact anyone… You know, they are so incredibly disadvantaged and then, they'll be penalised for not doing that job search all week, for not filling their form in."

5.2.2 Lack of connectivity

Here Paul, Llamau's lead staff member for their project houses (hostels and supported housing) highlights the challenges that they have in providing reliable Internet access in the project houses:

> *"….again just young people complaining that the speed ain't quick enough and that they all can't get on it at the same time because of where their bedroom or room position is in the house and how far (they're) away from the cabinet that sends the signal. So that's always ongoing. Our IT support company… they come down, they put routers and all sorts, but nothing really seems to resolve the problem."*

Here, a Llamau Learning for Life tutor talks about the issues that come up with young people in relation to having a phone:

> *"Physically losing their phone is a big one...they might have a phone but chances are they've lost the phone or sold their phone or somebody's borrowed their phone…might have a phone with an email that they may check but the amount of times they change their phone numbers is ... (lots)."*

Below, another Llamau Learning for Life tutor highlights the consequences when one young person did not have his phone for a few weeks:

> *"Jack didn't have a phone for a number of weeks and then when he finally got a phone and got back onto his Sim card, that was all fine (but) … he'd missed two voicemails for job interviews."*

5.2.3 Lack of basic skills

Here Matthew, 17, who accesses support from Llamau's Learning for Life centre explained how he had missed out on secondary education:

> *"I was in Primary school - I never went to secondary school..... it was one of them things with the community that I'm in (referring to the traveller community) ....They tend to take the kids out of school, if you know what I mean, at a young age."*

> *"When you're that age, you just go about with your friends, and whatever.. you know? You just do the usual thing at the age..."*

> *"I didn't really understand how important the education is to me now.... I thought 'Well it doesn't really matter'. That's what I thought at the time. I was only young. Now I understand how important that it is.....you need it these days don't you?"*

Edward, 23, an asylum seeker, accesses the courses offered by YMCA Swansea, including ones on MDL, counselling and English. He cannot afford a smart phone, so uses the YMCA's computers to keep in touch with his family. He is still not confident in English and here he uses Google Translate on a computer to explain why he wants to gain digital skills.

Using a mixture of speech and Google translate to convert French to English, he says:

> *"I want to have my (switches to typing into Google translate)...papers to stay in the UK."*

He went on to explain that if he got his ('right to stay') papers, he would next like: "to learn."

> *"I would like to learn English and be a mechanic..."*
> *"I would like to learn 'digital'…to make video montages... not as a job but just to have the knowledge and the experience to help others."*

He explains why 'digital' knowledge is important to him:

> *"I would like to be digitally literate because it's important because everything is digitalised and without knowledge in 'digital' you can't do anything."*

5.2.4 Lack of digital literacy

Twm (Staff, Gisda) shared how they brought in 'digital awareness themes' into a workshop they were running for a group which was planning a celebration event to showcase their youth voice project:

> *"..so we talked about using digital aspects - promoting it on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and all that."*

Twm explained that he did not think that the young people they worked with understood the power of social media, because of the different way they used it themselves:

> *"I think young people needed that push to realise the power of social cos I don't think they realise the power of using it day to day….they don't see the effects of it until you point it out to them really .... We work in a charity... We see the power of social media and 90-95% of our voice as a charity is heard through the Internet and social media. We see it day-to-day but they (the young people) don't realise it…. they just see it as a way to read news and communicate with their friends."*

5.2.5 Lack of life skills

Here, Callum, 24, who accessed Gisda's supported housing in North Wales, explains the gap in provision for young people in terms of life skills.

> *"I did this course in high school (GCSE) called life skills which wasn't any help at all, I wish I was joking but I'm not... In life skills, what we did was we played basketball and if we did do any work, it was nothing to do with actual life skills. It was to catch up on geography or any subject they choose."*

Loretta, 20, also supported by Gisda, highlights the shock she faced leaving home and lacking knowledge on many aspects of financial literacy:

> *"I think a lot of kids don't know much before they get into this position… They don't know what it actually entails with living on your own and there's all this other stuff like council tax…Like when I first moved out on my own, I was looking to private rent.. like.. it just blew my mind cos I had no information (about any of that stuff)… I don't know what a mortgage is - I don't know how to get a mortgage - I don't know anything like that."*

5.2.6 Lack of opportunities

Here Gwyn, 19, from Gisda explains the struggle young people from rural areas can face in seeking employment:

> *"I think they need help with like skills of getting them into work. There needs to be more stuff with that because it's all okay going out and doing the courses, but it's what happens after. It's like you'll struggle to get into work. Before I got into where I am now, I was really struggling."*

> *"There is basically nothing going on.....The government doesn't do enough to support (young) people. Like they'll say there's a load of apprenticeships going on...But trying to find an apprenticeship around here is an absolute nightmare."*

Twm (Staff, Gisda) explains that some of the challenges for young people seeking work in rural areas include a lack of opportunities outside seasonal work and zero hour contracts.

Below, a Llamau Learning for Life tutor highlights how it can be challenging to help young people to progress onwards:

> *"It's difficult to move them on until something becomes available...We'll never go 'Right, your 12 weeks is up now'. It is (a case of) trying to find something that is suitable for them to move on to.. and sometimes there's not a lot out there. Further training, a job, volunteering, vocational training - something that is bespoke and suitable for them."*

5.3 Organisational barriers in providing support for young people

The following sections provide insights into some of the barriers that organisations face when carrying out digital engagement/ skills development work with young people.

5.3.1 Poor kit, connectivity or setup

Here Lisa, Learning for Life Team Leader, emphasises the factors that make for successful engagement with young people at their centres:

> *"Reliable broadband, a decent speed ...and then either more people like us.. resource, people like us, so when they do decide to access it (support), they've got the equipment, they've got the staff who understand them….it's all in place ready."*

> *"We don't have waiting lists, because when they want to engage, they've got to engage now - you can't say 'Wait three weeks', they'll say 'Don't bother'.... If it was all set up to support them when they did decide to commit, you got to grab them and do it effectively because if you waste their time, they will walk."*

Here a Llamau Learning for Life tutor highlights the challenge of having older equipment:

> *"The equipment we have is not ideal is it? There is a laptop in Bridgend that will only work when connected to a power source. There's only one laptop that is connected to the printer in Bridgend...that is common throughout the centres."*

Below, Korina, the Digital Mentor for Llamau, highlights the challenges she faced in connectivity and set up as she delivered her workshops for young people in the living rooms of their project houses in Barry and Cardiff:

> *"I found it challenging to make them concentrate in the living room…I delivered once in the Llamau office in Cardiff. And it was much easier. I know it sounds very stereotypical but when they were sitting down with a table and they had the laptops in front of them, they would do some work."*

She explains that in some project houses, there were problems with Wi-Fi access, and this was an issue for the young people living there too.

Stuart (Digital Mentor, Swansea MAD) highlights the challenge of working with slower hardware for media projects:

> *"Hardware is a problem because things get slow very fast... especially if you want to do anything media.... once you are dragging big video files around, big sound files around...it's not so fine."*

5.3.2 Staff digital skills and confidence

An interview with young people from one of Llamau's project houses also highlighted the need to ensure that support workers who work with the young people are themselves empowered with knowledge and skills. In our discussions on online banking, the worker expresses his fears about online banking and asks the young people:

> *"Don't you worry about online banking and people being able to hack your things"?*

To which the young person replied:

> *"If it happens, there's not much I can do about it (to prevent it)."*

Separately, at Llamau, in a discussion on smart boards, a staff member highlights how sometimes there are very few staff who are fully digitally competent:

> *"We've had a smart board in the organisation for seven years and only one person I am aware of in the team has known how to use it."*

5.3.3 3rd sector challenges

Below I share two key insights shared by Gisda and Llamau staff on the sorts of challenges which face third sector organisations.

5.3.3.1 Long term funding

One of the issues highlighted by Gisda staff is the problem with the 'Start, Stop' model of funding that often faces the third sector. Gethin (Staff, Gisda) explains:

> *"Consistency (in funding)… need longer term (plans and funding). It's made me more aware about funding and ..we need consistency really for young people across the board."*

In discussing the potential of possible projects highlighted through offering the MDL pilot, Twm (Staff, Gisda) said:

> *"It's really hard you know… this project… because it's only five hours a week of my time .... but as Sian said, the potential is massive."*

Gisda staff discussed the fact that the MDL project had only really scratched the surface and there was a strong desire to take this work forward and develop it more fully after this pilot, but to have proper funding.

5.3.3.2 IT Support

Below, Llamau's Head of Service, Sian, highlights the challenges of cost and flexibility in IT Support:

> *"Across the organisation, as a third sector organisation… what we spend on IT and IT Support is quite significant really, and you want to keep that as low as possible because you want the money to go on direct delivery."*

> *"In general, we are getting a good price and we get a good service for what we pay in general. But one of the things that does bug me is that they will not support a laptop that is not ordered through them."*

She also expressed the frustration and challenge of keeping hardware kit and access up to date - across all their centres and supported provisions:

> *"Trying to keep up on the scale that we would need to is very, very difficult... well it's impossible."*

6 Main recommendations

When working with vulnerable and 'hard to reach' young people, understanding their varying circumstances and challenges is paramount, as is understanding the constraints that organisations face when seeking to engage them. In carrying out this work, my aim was to gather insights on these themes, through semi-structured interviews, listening to, and where possible, observing what worked well and what was challenging for young people and staff from the three organisations. Below I present some recommendations based on these insights.

- To develop the digital skills and confidence of 'hard to reach' young people, we need systems of support that do not resemble school and that are welcoming. An ideal setup would involve having a hub with good technology and skilled staff who have a good relationship with the young people and who can provide a safe space, non-judgemental space to listen to their needs, and provide personalised education and support. Such support will help them develop their skills and independence.

- In thinking about how we approach support for young people, it is important to be young person lead but young people may not always be able to articulate their needs or even know what is important, necessary or possible. Therefore it requires skilled staff to discern and bridge the gap between what young people say they want, and what they also need. It is also really important to meet young people where they are and this involves a more holistic

understanding of the individual, their desires but also the barriers that stop them from achieving and moving forward.

- Any initiative that seeks to improve the life outcomes for vulnerable young people must prioritise helping them develop their well-being. Many of the young people that these organisations are seeking to support, come from difficult life situations, often lack motivation and can have low confidence. They also often lack life skills. Thus helping young people through nurturing relationships with skilled and caring staff, is key, as is providing opportunities for them to develop their skills, their resilience and positive mental outlook.

- Perhaps more than any other group, our vulnerable young people need environments where they feel cared for and supported. Therefore organisations that want to help them also need to invest in creating nurturing environments and relationships, and take the time to actually listen to young people and co-create solutions with them. For many young people who come from difficult family lives and who do not have family support, this may be the first environment that provides them with care, stability and support.

- The rural landscape of Wales provides challenges for those seeking to provide support and employment opportunities for young people in rural areas. It is key that we take a long-term view to developing opportunities for industry and employment, with the necessary government investment and infrastructure needed in our rural communities. It is also important that we provide third sector organisations that support many of our vulnerable youth - with long term investment so that digital provision (skills and support) can be developed fully, and becomes embedded in their programmes of support.

- Being digitally connected and digitally skilled is not a luxury - it is an integral part of 21st-century living today and it is key that organisations that aim to provide support for vulnerable young people prioritise digital provision as they would access to basic utilities. This requires firstly that they have and provide good resources (laptops/ tablets) and connectivity, for example in their hostels, project houses and centres. But they also require staff who are compassionate, skilled, and themselves digitally literate, who can address young people's needs and provide guidance to support them in their use of digital technology and online services and prepare them for their digital future. This requires that organisations that support our vulnerable young people also invest in the professional development of staff to develop their digital competency and confidence.

- More widely, this is also about providing young people with opportunities to develop their independence and this requires that we provide and look forward to how we might provide pathways to jobs and self-reliance.

7 Limitations and adaptations

There are a number of limitations to this work, and adaptations that have been needed in the course of carrying out the interviews with partners and young people:

- Due to the limited time for these interviews and the 'light touch' scope of the work, these insights are presented as snapshots of issues observed, rather than being fully illustrative of the range of work and approaches used by all the partner organisations and their attendant beneficiaries. **It must be noted that the insights gained are from interviewing this very**

specific demographic of 'hard to reach' young people aged 16-24 and the staff from organisations supporting them, and may not apply more generally to other organisations or young people.

- Additionally, there were other factors that meant that the interviews did not all follow a strict format: young people would not always stay for the whole interview, and it was difficult to get more than three young people to attend a group interview. In some instances, the interviews were done with one young person, in others it was in groups of up to three young people.

- A lot of insights require that the young people share openly, and this requires trust and rapport, which was easier to establish with some groups than others.

- Another limitation was the timing of the interviews. As the earliest we could organise the interviews was for February 2018, most of the partner organisations had already begun developing and delivering their MDL resources and workshops sessions. Therefore the idea of recording insights at the start and end of the project was dismissed. The interviews are noted as simply reflecting the experience of the staff (from the organisations) or the young people, at whichever point in the MDL project they were.

8 Staff names

The following are the full names of the staff from the 3 different MDL projects. In this report, their first names are used.

Gisda Staff who participated in the interviews:

Twm Griffiths, Gethin Evans, Sian Elen Tomos, Lee Duggan, Mari Lewis Jones.

Llamau Staff and their Digital Mentor who participated in the interviews:

Lisa Gardiner, Sian Browne, Lorraine Davies, Nic Padford, Paula Harding, Laura Wheeler, Gareth Hankins, Hannah Hiddlestone, Claire Price, Sarah Lewis, Paul White.
Digital Mentor for Llamau: Korina Tsioni

YMCA Swansea Staff and their Digital Mentors who participated in the interviews:

Geraint Turner, Sofia Zahra, Tony Humphreys.
Digital Mentor for YMCA Swansea: Stuart Sumner-Smith (Swansea MAD)
Digital Mentor for YMCA Swansea: Taylor Roberts (Swansea MAD)

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10 References

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