

Youth employability:  
**PINNING DOWN THE FUTURE  
OF DIGITAL BADGES**

The Mix & Centre for Digital Youth Care (CDPK)  
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Center for Digital Pædagogik

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following report concludes the final stage of a two-year project funded by the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme and conducted by The Mix and the Centre for Digital Youth Care (CDYC). Our intention was to improve youth employability in the UK and Denmark by developing informal learning options online that could be recognised with the awarding of a digital badge that could be transferable across Europe.

### **Digital badging today**

The concept of badging is not new. Young people have been collecting badges to show their achievements or involvements similarly for generations, be it with the traditional gold star or with the Girl Guides badge sash. A digital badge demonstrates the acquisition of a new skill or achievement that has been completed digitally, and any organisation is technically capable of developing a digital badge.

However, all digital badging must meet the same requirements of the digital badging specification in order to ensure the quality and validity of the courses available. Each digital badge is created with an Issuer Profile, which includes information such as the name, description and contact details of the issuer, which appears in the metadata of all the badges. Metadata is a term used to describe a set of data that provides information about other data. Digital badges are designed to be displayed digitally but can also be included on a CV through either an image or a brief explanation of the skills acquired through a digital badge course.

The availability of digital badges gives younger age groups the opportunity to find out what they are interested in, whilst receiving recognition for their effort. The older age groups can use digital badging as a fast route to accreditation. A digital badge allows them to differentiate themselves from other candidates in job and university applications.

The increase in online learning and training has made badging easier, more versatile and an effective way of developing skills, such as those needed for finding employment and, with technology improving all the time, digital badges are likely to become even more adaptable.

The Mix and CDYC work with young people through digital platforms and we can offer a wide range of volunteer opportunities to young people. Digital badging is an important way to train volunteers and support their skills and career development. We also identified the opportunity to lower the barriers of entry to training with online learning, and to enable those who do not yet have the confidence or skills to participate in more intensive roles to get involved.

This project identified two areas of particular benefit digital badging offers young people. The development of a digital badge addresses the need to support young people in their ability to communicate the skills they have to employers. Digital badging is also an informal and accessible form of online training and learning for young people as an alternative to formal education. This follows recent trends that show a shift in the acceptance by employers of informal and alternative training methods.

### **Insights**

The initial stage of the project involved holding co-creation sessions with young people and employers in both the UK and Denmark. These sessions were a way of “connecting the dots” between young people and employers and provided insight into what skills young people are lacking and what employers find difficult about employing young people.<sup>1</sup>

These sessions were also an opportunity to identify differences and similarities between young people in the UK and Denmark, and how digital badging can help to improve their employability. For example, there is a difference in job markets for young people in Denmark compared to the UK, where the employment pathway is much more structured. Whereas in the UK, young people are often looking for skills to help them get temporary and informal employment to accompany their studies or provide a bridge between a permanent career.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/research/connecting-the-dots>

The key findings from these co-creations helped to develop the purpose and intended outcomes of the digital badge. These were:

- Young people told us that their primary motivation to take part in a digital badge course would be to improve their employability
- For both young people and employers the credibility of the badge is vital for its success – this could be communicated through sponsorship from a credible brand and relevant information about the badge's properties
- Both young people and employers agreed that if more young people were involved in working towards digital badges, its credibility would increase.

The result of these co-creation sessions was the development of a Problem Solver digital badge. The course takes an hour to complete and is broken into 3 modules, using workplace scenarios to develop problem solving skills by empowering users to use their initiative when faced with a problem.

We have undertaken activities in order to encourage its use and recognition among young people and employers. This has involved blogging about the insights of the project and the benefits of online learning and digital badges. We have also worked to develop relationships with external organisations in order to increase awareness of the Problem Solver badge and to enhance its credibility.

#### **UK**

"I loved how the course took me through the stages of finding out what a problem is, how to identify solutions, action and manage arguments. I also loved the self-reflection aspect too and thought this was helpful when thinking about jobs and interview questions. I think an activity that took us through a problem with different solutions and different outcomes would've been a fun addition, but otherwise it was good!"

#### **Denmark**

"I think it is a very good course. It focusses on different issues, meaning you can learn how to avoid or solve issues by, for example, showing appreciation, simply listening or giving concrete advice."

### **Recommendations & best practice**

The project has identified four key practices required to develop a successful digital badge ecosystem. These are:

#### ➤ Effective design of the product

The design of the product involves identifying and understanding its intended audience. This forms the intended outcomes and achievements of the digital badge. Its technology must be functional and adaptable to an ongoing process of improvement to ensure a quality product.

#### ➤ Developing a badge with value

The value of a digital badge lies in the experts that have been involved in its design and the organisations who are on board to ensure the badge has value for its intended audience.

#### ➤ Developing confidence in online learning

The confidence in online learning must be developed by raising awareness of its value through promotion and the development of partnerships with organisations that will encourage its use. The participation of young people is essential to increasing confidence in its value.

#### ➤ Establishing badge sponsorship

The digital badging ecosystem relies on the contribution of relevant corporate sponsors to endorse the use of digital badges that are created by the issuer, in this case The Mix and CDYC.

### **The future of digital badging**

This project has been successful in revealing the possibilities of digital badging. As a result, CDYC has become a leader in introducing Denmark to digital badging as an online form of learning. CDYC will continue to self-fund the development of digital badging with young people in the future. The digital badges have also become a core part of the digital offering of The Mix, which will be working to develop more digital badges in the future.

However, this project is only the beginning. The key challenge we face in securing a future for digital badging to enhance the employability of young people is increasing the credibility of digital badges, including the Problem Solver badge. Although online learning is on the rise, it is still competing with the longer tradition of formal qualifications needed to gain employment.

In order to promote the credibility of the badge, we require sponsorship to increase recognition of this new and accessible model of training that has been established through this project.

Through partnerships and sponsorship, we will be able to develop new digital badging courses that address other important soft skills required in the workplace. Whilst we are experts in working with young people to understand the difficulties that they face in the search for employment, the future of digital badging requires continued collaboration with the HR departments of companies to understand what new skills are needed for the workplace.

The approach of this project has been to develop a standardised solution for cross-cultural youth employability. Yet, this project has revealed a variation in the job markets of the UK and Denmark. The challenge of increasing international recognition of online qualifications like digital badging requires the input of companies to recognise its value as well as understand the differences that are inevitable between countries across Europe.

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## DIGITAL BADGING TODAY

This report summarises the successful work The Mix and the Centre for Digital Youth Care (CDYC) have done in the UK and Denmark in sowing the seeds necessary for the future success of online learning for young people.

The Mix and CDYC are coming to the end of a two-year project funded by the European Union. The project sought to support young people's employability, whilst continuing to support young people in the challenges they face in both the UK and Denmark. In order to do this, both organisations worked together to develop a digital badge in each country, informed by co-creation sessions held with young people and employers across sectors.

### **The participating organisations**

The Mix (formerly YouthNet and Get Connected) is a multi-channel advice service designed to support the physical and mental wellbeing of under 25s across the UK. The Mix provides free, confidential support by phone, text, online, social media and with counselling. It connects young people to experts and their peers to talk about everything from homelessness to finding a job, from money to mental health and from break-ups to drugs. The Mix reaches 2 million young people every year through the technology of their choice. The Mix has experience of working with young people in designing support that is relevant and youth-led.

CDYC is one of Denmark's leading organisations for online counselling for young people, working with a large network of volunteers. In addition, CDYC's pedagogical consultants educate other organisations in this line of work, while being associated with a variety of national socio-educational initiatives regarding vulnerable children and young people. Counselling children and young people on their use of online technologies and frightening experiences remains of primary concern to the organisation. CDYC has run a helpline and counselled at-risk children and teens since 2004. In 2015, the helpline held almost 8,000 counselling sessions with children, young people and professionals, and had almost 500,000 unique visitors to its website from 460 towns in Denmark. It is recognised for its work and has been running the Danish helpline in the Safer Internet Programme since 2009.

We decided to cooperate on this project due to our existing working relationship, which was developed whilst working on the previous digital project *Online Self-Harm Support for Youth*, also funded by the European Council in 2014.

### **Youth employability**

As The Mix and CDYC are both organisations working to support young people, we have extensive experience understanding the difficulties that young people face in the search for employment.

According to figures released in the UK last year, 11.8% of 16-24 year olds not in full-time education are unemployed.<sup>2</sup> Although this rate has decreased compared to a year ago, this figure highlights the difficulties faced by a still significant proportion of young people seeking to secure employment.

In 2015, the unemployment rate for working-age non-graduates was double that of working age graduates.<sup>3</sup> This demonstrates a clear disparity between the employability of young people who enter further education and those who do not. This makes a clear case for the need for more informal qualifications to be made available to those young people who are non-graduates.

In Denmark, youth unemployment steadily increased from 11% to 13.1%.<sup>4</sup> That said, CDYC has a younger user group and has been able to focus on early intervention and support for this age group, who are not yet fully aware of their career opportunities and possibilities.

There has been a noticeable shift in the need for applicants to hold formal qualifications for many employers. Companies like Ernst & Young have decided that candidates no longer require a 2:1 degree pass or three B grades at A-level. Instead they feel that their in-house assessment is a better

<sup>2</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN05871>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/518654/bis-16-232-graduate-labour-market-statistics-2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518654/bis-16-232-graduate-labour-market-statistics-2015.pdf), p.8.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/denmark/youth-unemployment-rate>

way to consider the capability of candidates.<sup>5</sup> The use of online learning is becoming a more accepted way for young people to gain skills and qualifications, with the hope of removing social barriers to applicants.

Young people in the UK have misplaced confidence in their ability to communicate with potential employers. A survey conducted by YouGov and commissioned by YouthNet (now The Mix) showed that two-thirds of unemployed British young people feel confident in their abilities to express their skills when applying for a job. However, two-thirds of employers reject young candidates because they are unable to articulate their skills.<sup>6</sup>

Participation in a digital badge course is a way to not only develop skills in a specific area but to also increase soft-skills such as confidence. The skills that employers most wanted to see improved was problem solving which was the key rationale behind the development of the Problem Solver digital badge in the UK and Denmark.

### **What is a digital badge?**

The concept of badging is not new. Young people have been similarly collecting badges to show their achievements or involvements for generations, be it with the traditional gold star or with the Girl Guides badge sash. A digital badge demonstrates the acquisition of a new skill or achievement that has been completed digitally, and any organisation is technically capable of developing a digital badge.

However, all digital badging must meet the same requirements of the digital badging specification in order to ensure quality and validity of the courses available.<sup>7</sup> Each digital badge is created with an Issuer Profile, which includes information such as the name, description and contact details of the issuer, which appears in the metadata of all the badges. Metadata is a term used to describe a set of data that provides information about other data. Digital badges are designed to be displayed digitally but can also be included on a CV through either an image or a brief explanation of the skills acquired through a digital badge course.

The relationship between the organisations that issue digital badging and those that accept their relevance is central to the online learning ecosystem. The functionality of digital badges that are being developed by leaders in the industry such as Digital Me, The Tech Partnership and Makewav.es is enhanced through the partnerships they have been able to develop with leading brands. Such partnerships strengthen the validity of the badges and in turn encourage their use.

For example, at *The Tech Partnership Badge Academy*, each digital badge has been developed in conjunction with a sponsor, such as O2 Telefonica, where a student can take a series of courses in “wearable technology devices” in order to eventually learn how to build their own. With O2 as a sponsor, the student can be sure that they are learning from the experts.

### **Why develop a digital badge?**

The Mix and CDYC identified the opportunity to lower the barriers of entry to training with online learning, to enable those who do not yet have the confidence or skills to participate in more intensive roles to get involved.

Furthermore, young people are looking to develop skills to improve their employability. High quality training and ongoing support gives young people not only skills but increased confidence and self-esteem. There is also evidence that volunteering improves young people’s sense of belonging, emotional wellbeing, educational outcomes and career prospects.<sup>8</sup> It is important to understand that 70% of The Mix’s young volunteers get involved specifically to develop soft skills that will boost their

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/ey-firm-says-it-will-not-longer-consider-degrees-or-a-level-results-when-assessing-employees-10436355.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/news/two-thirds-of-employers-reject-young-candidates-because-they-are-unable-to-articulate-their-skills>

<sup>7</sup> <https://openbadges.org/developers/#verification> Accessed 6/01/2017.

<sup>8</sup> [http://thirdsectorimpact.eu/site/assets/uploads/page/documents-for-researchers/TSI\\_impact-report\\_sports-leaders-literature-review-dec-2014.pdf](http://thirdsectorimpact.eu/site/assets/uploads/page/documents-for-researchers/TSI_impact-report_sports-leaders-literature-review-dec-2014.pdf)

employability and 84% of our volunteers surveyed said that they agreed that it had improved their workplace skills or that they had acquired new workplace skills.<sup>9</sup>

Different age groups use digital badges for different reasons. Younger age groups gain motivation from taking part in a digital badge course. The free and accessible nature of digital badging also means that they have the opportunity to find out what they are interested in whilst receiving recognition for their effort. The older age groups can use digital badging as a fast route to accreditation. A digital badge allows them to differentiate themselves from other candidates in job and university applications. They are ultimately able to contribute to their employability.

When it was YouthNet in 2014, The Mix conducted a three month, collaborative research project with employers, sector colleagues working on employability and young people to explore the role that digital support can play in supporting a young person's journey to work. It was an opportunity for the participants to communicate with one another. This research resulted in a youth-led digital tool being developed called "Define Me". This tool allows a young person to input the activities that they may be involved in at school or as extra-curricular activities and translate this into appropriate phrases that can be used as part of a CV. A key finding was that young people aged 16-18 found it prohibitively difficult to understand the relevant skills and experience required and the ways in which such skills must be communicated to prospective employers when job seeking.<sup>10</sup>

As Ronan Dunne, CEO of O2 in the UK, passionately writes,

"I have been banging the drum for young people to fill this need for many years, channelled in part through the efforts of our O2ThinkBig programme. Young people possess the native digital skills that our economy so desperately needs, but we're still somewhat failing to connect the dots between the needs of employers and the talents of our nation's young people."<sup>11</sup>

Our expertise in the provision of digital services for young people means that we are aware of the need to go even further than developing the "native digital skills" of young people. There is a wide availability of technology-related digital badging, owing to the digital nature of badges. This has opened up the opportunity for non-technology specific digital badge courses to be developed. Hence, The Mix and CDYC have been pioneers in "connecting the dots" between employers and young people in order to develop a digital badge that enhances soft skills required for employment.

Moving into a digital age has made badging easier, more versatile and an effective way of developing skills, such as those needed for finding employment. Furthermore, it is fair to assume that digitising learning is the most relevant way to engage young people who are the most digitally literate in society in developing their skills and learning more about themselves.

With digital badging, organisations can reach more young people than with face to face courses. The tiered training that forms the structure of a digital badge provides a supportive and motivating programme for young people to follow, allowing them to build their skills gradually.

The accessibility of digital badging also encourages young people to explore their interests and identify their strengths. The result of investment in digital badging is that the skills acquired can then be transferred to employment and other aspects of a young person's life.

### **The project**

Over the course of two years, The Mix and CDYC have supported each other in the process of researching and developing a Problem Solver digital badge course in each country, which has then been disseminated into our respective networks of young people.

The project involved frequent contact between our two organisations, meeting in both the UK and Denmark. Thanks to this collaboration we have successfully developed a digital badge that is aimed

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<sup>9</sup> The Mix Volunteer Impact Survey 2016

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/research/connecting-the-dots>

<sup>11</sup> <http://news.o2.co.uk/2015/11/04/no-sewing-required-young-people-to-earn-badges-for-digital-skills/> Accessed 5/01/2017

at providing training that will directly impact the employability of young people. This course has been made available on a dedicated e-learning portal that has been optimised for mobile phones.

The learning objectives of this badge are for young person to:

- Improve their ability to identify problems
- Improve their ability to respond to problems positively and pro-actively
- Improve their understanding of different problem-solving techniques
- Understand how to apply problem-solving skills in the workplace
- Understand general workplace procedures – when to take initiative and when to escalate

The Problem Solving course takes an hour to complete and is divided into 3 modules. It uses workplace scenarios to develop problem solving skills by empowering users to use their initiative when faced with a problem. Young people generally start to lose attention after 15 minutes of e-learning, so the course was designed to maximise the attention span of the user. The aim was to overcome the problem of lack of direct engagement with the student that results from independent online learning, especially in demographics such as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), where they will likely be disengaged from learning in general. This online course also has the benefit of fitting around a busy schedule, with the ability to take breaks. The learner is required to complete a test on the course which has limited reattempt allowances.

The course has been informed by the Impetus Framework, a research study commissioned by the Impetus Private Equity Foundation titled “Ready for Work: The capabilities young people need to find and keep work – and the programmes proven to help develop these”.<sup>12</sup> This research identifies “Six vital capabilities to be ready for work” which are:

- Being self-aware
- Being receptive
- Being driven
- Being self-assured
- Being resilient
- Being informed

This research was useful in informing the objectives of the Problem Solver course, although as it was developed in the UK it did not always relate culturally to Denmark.

### **Cultural differences between the UK and Denmark**

The project uncovered several cultural differences between the UK and Denmark.

In Denmark, young people are less likely to be looking for informal employment as employment pathways are much more structured. Most jobs in Denmark require formal qualifications, such as a degree, and informal online learning is much less recognised and accepted among employers.

As a result, CDYC developed a second digital badge called “Super Helper” which was designed to help young people to identify their transferable skills, thereby building confidence. This badge was very popular and had the most completions. This can be explained by its ability to help young people notice and identify skills in known contexts.

Prior to this project The Mix had designed an app that performs a similar function, called Define Me, helping young people to communicate the skills they have to employers.

In contrast, the project shed light on the employment market for young people in the UK showing that young people are often looking for temporary employment to accompany their studies or provide a bridge to a permanent career.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/2014\\_09-Ready-for-Work.pdf](http://www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/2014_09-Ready-for-Work.pdf)

## INSIGHTS

### **The Co-Creation Sessions**

An essential element of the project involved holding co-creation sessions with young people and employers in the UK and Denmark, creating the much-needed space to “connect the dots” in order to understand the barriers to youth employability and ways to overcome them.

The Problem Solver course was designed to provide young people with the tools to feel more confident solving problems in the workplace, a skill that employers said they were looking for in young applicants.

In the UK, representatives from Accenture, Ernst & Young, Universal Music and UBS joined young people for a co-creation session aimed at providing insights that would form the outline of a digital badge.

In Denmark, representatives from municipal job placement services and the company Jensen Kurser participated in a co-creation session with a group of young people. The session provided insights that would form the Problem Solver and Super Helper digital badges.

The following are key insights from these co-creation sessions, which have informed the development of the Problem Solver digital badge:

#### **1. Improving employability is the main motivation for young people to take part in a digital badge**

The young people asked in the UK and Denmark felt that digital badges were an opportunity to develop soft skills that would be attractive to employers. One young person in the UK said that a digital badge “gives something tangible from completing online training”. Recognition by employers of the badge’s credibility would indicate that employability was a core outcome of the digital badge.

#### **2. Young people and employers agreed that digital badging would be an appropriate platform for developing soft skills**

Both young people and employers were open to the idea of informal online learning as an alternative to formal education. In the UK, the representative from Ernst & Young outlined its removal of the A-Level requirement from positions in order to encourage social mobility and to remove academic barriers that might disadvantage otherwise eligible candidates.

#### **3. Young people and employers felt that digital badges would help communicate skills**

For the young people present, one concern with improving their employability involved their ability to effectively identify and communicate their skills. One young person said that “badges would make it easier to talk about the skills that I have” and another that “this is a digital age, [and Digital badges are a] good way of demonstrating skills online”.

In Denmark, some of the young people present had been struggling to find a job and felt, as a result, that the way they expressed their skills felt overused and unsubstantiated. One young person explained, “I am very structured, and very independent in work situations, [but] it just sounds like empty words when I haven’t got any real experience yet...”

#### **4. The credibility of digital badging would increase if more young people were involved in its use**

Young people said they would display their digital badges on a credible site, such as LinkedIn, to encourage its use, and in Denmark the young people said they would display their badges on social media and even in their email signatures.

## **5. Young people and employers shared concerns over understanding the credibility and quality of digital badges**

Employers offered a practical perspective on the simplicity of the badge, which is necessary for organisations to quickly and easily understand the badge's value. This would be a way of building confidence in the quality of the digital badge. The validity of a digital badge might be communicated through the use of a logo pertaining to credible branding.

The result of the UK co-creation session was a series of digital badge ideas, which were Problem Solver, Guru Planner, Tech Savvy and Creative Space. In Denmark, the young people designed the Empathy and Social Skills badges.

The Problem Solver badge was selected and developed into a digital badge that is now being used in the UK and Denmark. The initial rationale was that the Problem Solver badge would show an employer that a young person had the ability to adapt to a situation, identify a problem and its cause, work under pressure, in an efficient manner. After completing the badge, young people would be able to use examples in an interview setting to demonstrate their understanding of what was involved in problem solving, particularly when they lacked the experience.<sup>13</sup>

### **Promoting digital badging to young people and the sector**

One objective of the project was to not only develop the badge but to promote its use among the networks of young people and employers in the UK and Denmark. The Mix and CDYC have worked to ensure that the insights found as a result of consulting with young people and employers were being communicated widely to other stakeholders. Both organisations have worked to encourage the use of the newly developed digital badge by writing blogs which have been shared among corporations, sector workers and young people.

### **Workshops**

The Mix and CDYC have gone out into the sector to work face to face with young people and organisations and to talk about the benefits of the digital badges that have been created as a result of this project. We have pursued strategies to encourage the use of digital badging through workshops and building partnerships with other organisations.

In Denmark, CDYC has delivered a workshop course specifically tailored for Black or Minority Ethnic young people. The workshop aimed to introduce the concept of e-learning in a supportive environment, particularly to young people who may not have had easy access to e-learning facilities.

In the UK, The Mix has developed a partnership with Think Forward, which works with young people at risk of dropping out of education, employment or training. In the near future, Think Forward is looking to arrange a workshop, particularly focussing on this group of young people.

### **Digital badging as a core service for young people**

The Problem Solving digital badge has been promoted across existing services in both organisations. Volunteers with The Mix are encouraged to take the course to help them with their roles. The Mix has also linked the Problem Solver badge to its existing services, promoting it through communication channels such as social media, advertising and newsletters. There is a dedicated page on The Mix's website called Skill Up, which directs young people to the Problem Solver badge and additional online courses.

The progress that has been achieved so far has demonstrated the need for more accredited digital badging for young people, so that they can bridge the gap between what they have to offer and what an employer is looking for. Accreditation through the sponsorship of digital badging by recognised

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<sup>13</sup> The badge can be found here: <http://www.themix.org.uk/get-involved/skill-up>

organisations would be the most effective way of encouraging young people to get involved with digital badging.

## WHAT THE USERS SAY

We have collected feedback throughout the project from young people using the badge to understand its impact. The following statements are from young people in both the UK and Denmark who have attained the digital badge. These testimonials show that young people enjoy the course, and also feel that they gained experience from the scenarios included in the course. Furthermore, these testimonials demonstrate the effectiveness of maintaining a feedback loop with young people in order to understand the impact of the course.

### UK

“I loved how the course took me through the stages of finding out what the problem is, how to identify solutions, take action and how to manage arguments. I also loved the self-reflection aspect too, and thought this was helpful when thinking about jobs and interview questions. I think an activity that took us through a problem with different solutions and different outcomes would've been a fun addition, but otherwise, it was good!”

“This was incredibly informative, it will empower people who read it and give them the impetus to learn more and discover their potential in all of these different scenarios. Personally, I wish I'd know this information at a younger age, rather than having to search for this information now.”

“I really like the interactivity and some of the metaphors that were used (like Lego bricks being the foundation of how you should structure problem solving).”

“It was really good and it covered a wide range of issues - from personal life to work life. Really helpful!”

The development of the digital badge opened up the opportunity to develop an additional volunteer option for young people to assist with the testing of the Problem-Solver course. Moreover, 100% of these beta-tester volunteers reported that they felt their problem-solving skills were improved as a result of the course. A third of the volunteers surveyed were classified as NEETs, so their feedback was particularly poignant. Volunteer feedback included:

“The content of the modules is also very beneficial. In particular, the modules about problem-solving. I have personally learnt some new information and techniques while completing the modules during the e-testing.”

“I feel I have strengthened my critiquing skills by looking into areas of the course that could be improved.”

“My self-confidence has improved as a result of this volunteer role.”

A recent blog from The Mix outlines how important online learning has been for one volunteer from The Mix, Mary-Ellen. Mary-Ellen discusses the initial reservations she had with regards to online learning but said that using online badges has made it easier to “condense and articulate the relevant skills and experience whilst standing out.” Mary-Ellen goes on to say that “The badge itself gives away the focus of the course, but you learn so much alongside this. For example, the Problem-Solving course taught me communication and teamwork skills too. When applying for jobs, it is important to discuss and demonstrate transferable skills, and the badge helps with this.”

### Denmark

Testimonials from the co-creation session with companies and organisations:

“Voluntary work is important – it shows that young people are prepared to make an extra effort!”

"Non-academic skills that are weighted [in our business] are persistence, social skills, resilience, diversity and commitment."

"Gaming skills such as persistence, teamwork, organization / structure, strategies, a badge could help to turn leisure activities, such as computer games, into a skill."

"[To have] a logo on the badge (copyright notice) will validate and make it more believable. Badge value increases the more knowledge we have about the originator of the badge."

"Simplicity is important."

"Symbols that make it easy to recognize the skill the badge covers are important."

#### Testimonials from users:

"It [the course] was good. It was easy to figure out. I was guided in a nice way The platform was user friendly and it was interesting to take the course."

"The course made me think about the different ways to help someone. And how to use online platforms to help other young people, for example, by giving a like or sharing stories and experiences. "

"Do you feel better suited to solving problems? Yes I do. Especially because you get insight into the different personality types and how they react. And the fact that I myself am a type – given an explanation as to why I do what I do, and how I can act in a different way, which might be better."

"I think it is a very good course. It focuses on different issues, and you can learn how to avoid or solve the issues by, for example, showing appreciation, simply listening or giving concrete advice."

#### Testimonial from work done with the external organisation, Youth4Youth:

"Our experience of the workshop was both positive and educational. We had some trouble with the technical part, but there was good variation between the online modules and the physical group assignments. It was planned effectively, and the game with spaghetti and marshmallows was especially genius – it enabled the participants to use the knowledge from the online modules and to be more aware of when someone was being an "ostrich" or "rhino", which was quite fun to observe. "

"We know that young people find completing the digital badge course useful. However, we also know that wider recognition of these and other digital badge courses is also key to further improving young people's employability. We know that we can help young people understand the skills they have gained, and give them the tools to demonstrate this to employers in a valuable way.

## RECOMMENDATIONS & BEST PRACTICE: HOW DIGITAL BADGES CAN IMPROVE THE EMPLOYABILITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

From our findings, we have identified four key components that are required for a digital badge to be effective:

### **Effective design of the product**

The design of the product involves identifying and understanding its intended audience. This forms the intended outcomes and achievements of the digital badge. The co-creation sessions with young people and employers were, therefore, crucial to its design. The digital badge course also needs to be motivating in its form to ensure its completion.

The project found that technological difficulties led to the loss of momentum and commitment among users. In order for a digital badge to be successful, its technology needs to be functional and adaptable to an ongoing process of improvement.

### **Developing a badge with value**

Whilst CDYC and The Mix are experts in developing and providing support for young people and are becoming experts in the provision of e-learning, developing the course with experts from the wider sector is key to the credibility and reach of a digital badge. Collaboration with the experts ensures the digital badge has the credibility within not only their affiliated organisation but also across organisations.

By collaborating with experts, young people are better able to understand the value of completing a digital badge course and the real-life application of the skills they are developing. In effect, the digital badge course is an opportunity for young people to be mentored by expert organisations.

### **Developing confidence in online learning**

Online learning and digital badging are still not widely recognised as a method of learning. To develop awareness and confidence, we have found that using a combination of e-learning and offline facilitation is effective in communicating its value. An online learning community can be nurtured with:

- Workshops to deliver e-learning
- Online workshops
- Chat sessions to support learning

This learning community becomes valuable to engagement with, and consolidation of learning. Furthermore, it must be communicated that completing an online course demonstrates not only the intended skills but also initiative and discipline to engage in self-learning.

### **Establishing badge sponsorship**

The sponsorship of a digital badge is vital to its continued success. Partnering with sponsors is needed to enhance the brand of a digital badge and hence its credibility among young people and employers. The sponsorship of a digital badge is needed to increase its use, which then acts as a feedback loop to further increase credibility.

## THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL BADGING

As our project comes to a close, we are looking to the future of the digital badging we have developed. We know that digital badges are an effective way of supporting young people to improve their chance of securing employment. An issue that impacts not only young people in the UK and Denmark, but across Europe.

This is an issue, however, that we cannot solve alone.

Through this project, we have learnt how to create an online digital badge ecosystem. Now we need to expand beyond our internal network in order to make digital badging valuable across organisations and to young people.

In order to do this, the digital badge ecosystem requires validation through the support and sponsorship of corporate businesses, employment specialists and policy makers.

In the UK, The Mix has already engaged the organisations Think Forward, The Challenge (National Citizenship Service) and vInspired in the Problem Solver digital badge and its aims.

In addition to seeking the engagement of more organisations such as this, The Mix is looking to work with high-profile companies and leaders in digital badging, such as O2, Digital Me, The Duke of York Award and Makewav.es.

In Denmark, CDYC has engaged in the widespread dissemination of the work they have done on this project, and of the benefits of the Problem Solver and Super Helper digital badge with organisations, projects and the wider industry in Denmark. They are also using the digital badge to train and develop the skills of their own volunteers.

Further to this work, CDYC is continuing to explore the possibility of developing its digital badging into Open College Network (OCN) approved courses, which will mean that the student gains an accredited qualification when they complete the digital badge course requirements.

In addition to this, CDYC is also thinking about incorporating digital badging into other projects, such as Young Economy, in which CDYC, together with YMCA DK's Social Work, offers online financial counselling. Making digital badges for different financial aspects, such as budgeting, taxes or quick loans could be an effective supplement to the existing counselling options.

The future of providing accessible and effective online training to improve the employability of young people, not only in the UK and Denmark, but across Europe, requires the support of all those who can see its potential.

### **A post-Brexit approach to digital badges**

The changes to cross-continental employment opportunities are unknown, and yet imminent. It is hard not to contemplate the consequences Brexit may have on the future of digital badges and online learning. Time will tell, but more research is needed to fully understand the constraints and opportunities for the employment of young people.

The approach of this project has been to develop a standardised solution to cross-continental youth employability. Yet, with states like the USA and the UK growing increasingly protectionist in their approach to employment in a world that has grown unprecedentedly globalised, perhaps a uniform approach to online learning, and digital badging specifically, will be more difficult.

## APPENDIX

### Blogs

*"What kind of problem solver are you?"* presents the benefits of taking the Problem Solver digital badge course and encourages readers to take part and share in the networks.

<http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/blogs/what-kind-of-problem-solver-are-you>

*"We have a problem. Can you be the solution?"* presents the rationale behind the Problem Solver digital badge course. The blog also seeks to encourage young people to get involved and to try the course. <http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/blogs/we-have-a-problemcan-you-be-the-solution>

*"Can short-term volunteering have an impact?"* looks at how a new short-term role has impacted young volunteers, as well as the digital badge and online learning courses available from The Mix. A specific volunteer option was made available, so that young people could be involved in testing the functionality and content of the course. <http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/blogs/can-short-term-volunteering-have-an-impact>

*"Can digital badges help young people talk to employers?"* outlines the insights that were gained from conducting the co-creation sessions with young people and employers.

<http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/blogs/can-digital-badges-help-young-people-talk-to-employers>

*"Letters from Denmark"* is written by the team in Denmark to share the experience of a young person named Sanne who talks about her experience of taking the Super Helper digital badge course.

<http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/blogs/letters-from-denmark-skill-development>

*"Standing out from the crowd with digital badges"* outlines the experience of The Mix volunteer, Mary-Ellen, who feels that Digital badging has had a positive impact on her ability to communicate the relevant skills she has to an employer. <http://www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/blogs/standing-out-from-the-crowd-with-digital-badges>

*"Skills Connect"* was a presentation of the project and some of our first thoughts on the challenges to youth employability. <http://cfdp.dk/skills-connect-2/>

*"Are you Emphatic? Prove it!"* summarises the co-creation workshop and what we discovered when we invited young people and organisations to attend.

*"Learning and reflection"* is the Danish version of the blog: "Letters from Denmark".

<http://cfdp.dk/learning-and-reflection/>

*"Free E-courses for vulnerable young people"* An in-depth description of the two courses available on the Danish e-learning platform. <http://cfdp.dk/free-e-courses-for-vulnerable-young-people/>

*"Young people are articulating their skills!"* is about our experience of lining the Problem Solver course with a workshop. The workshop was directed at a young volunteer group from the organisation, Youth4Youth, which works with young people from Black and Ethnic minorities. <http://cfdp.dk/young-people-are-articulating-their-skills/>



For further information about digital badging, youth employability and other insights, into the lives of young people in the UK please visit **[themix.org.uk](http://themix.org.uk)** or contact us at **[media@themix.org.uk](mailto:media@themix.org.uk)**



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