2024

MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN 2024:

LESSONS FROM PRACTICAL HYBRID DELIVERY

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About UpRising

UpRising exists because our decision-makers don't reflect the society they serve. We are a national youth leadership development and employability organisation, recognised at Government level as a pioneering charity championing the critical issues surrounding diversity, social mobility, and equality. We support young people (18–25) from underrepresented and underserved communities to fulfil their potential, take on leadership roles and gain meaningful employment.

In 2023 we launched our Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP).

Currently in Year 2 of a 4-year delivery cycle. The programme is an evolution of our original ELP with an enhanced focus on nature connection and the impact that increased nature connection can have on pro environmental behaviour change. The programme delivers a 9-month hybrid learning and development experience to young people aged 18-25 across the West Midlands region.

Executive summary

Since 2020, youth programmes have undergone a fundamental transformation in how they deliver services to young people. This report examines how organisations have moved beyond emergency remote delivery during COVID-19 to develop sophisticated hybrid models that strategically combine digital and face-to-face elements for purposes of accessibility, retention rates and to improve the user experience.

Drawing on academic research, programme evaluations, and an in-depth case study of the Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP2), our first programme designed for hybrid delivery, our key findings demonstrate that well-designed hybrid delivery can:

- Significantly improve engagement for young people from diverse backgrounds
- Break down traditional barriers to participation including transport and scheduling challenges
- Maintain good completion rates
- Create more accessible and inclusive learning environments
- Foster meaningful connections through both online and in-person interactions

The ELP2 case study provides compelling evidence of successful hybrid implementation:

- Good retention with 31 of 68 participants completing all programme requirements
- Good recruitment and engagement with diverse groups of participants
- Significant improvements in key skills, with project management capabilities rising from 45% to 95% - gaining important transferable skills for an increasingly digital workforce
- Effective integration of three digital platforms with strategic face-to-face sessions.

Key recommendations for organisations developing hybrid programmes:

- Transform digital infrastructure - with straightforward digital access, user-friendly digital ecosystems, and robust technical support.
- Embed inclusion from the start - by designing for cultural safety and accessibility, offering multiple engagement pathways, and ensuring flexible support.
- Maintain strong support frameworks - by developing clear impact measurement, providing comprehensive pastoral care, and practising continuous learning, adapting and development.

The evidence suggests that hybrid delivery, when properly designed and implemented, represents not just an adaptation but an opportunity to enhance programme impact while increasing accessibility for young people. Organisations that can successfully blend online and face-to-face delivery while maintaining strong inclusion practices will be best positioned to deliver impactful programmes in an increasingly digital world and enhancing valuable skills and access to platform that participants will find useful outside of the programme e.g. in future job environments.

Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

Introduction

Since 2020, youth programmes have undergone substantial changes - evolving from rapid virtual solutions during lockdowns brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, into a more nuanced and purposeful approach that harnesses the strengths of both online and face-to-face programme delivery. By thoughtfully combining these approaches, since 2020 academics have explored the potential for the youth development sector to create richer, more inclusive experiences that meet young people where they are and support them to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

Building on academic research from 2020, this report explores the hybrid delivery of programmes in 2024, looking past the necessity of online learning

to explore how online and in-person work together for diverse groups of young participants looking to develop themselves. Through drawing on sources from academic research, programme evaluations and an in-depth look into the current programme case study of UpRising and Shropshire Wildlife Trust's Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP2), alongside broader research, we've found that blended delivery isn't just a compromise - it's an opportunity to enhance programme impact. Face-to-face sessions foster deep connections and hands-on learning, while digital elements add flexibility and reach. Together, they create a more robust and accessible programme that can work better for both participants and programme teams.

The evidence is encouraging: well-designed hybrid delivery can significantly improve engagement for young people from all backgrounds, breaking down traditional barriers such as transport constraints and scheduling challenges, while maintaining the vital personal connections that can make youth programmes so transformative.

1. Evolution of programme delivery: from emergency response to strategic design

1.1 The transformation of youth programme delivery
The landscape of youth programme delivery has undergone a fundamental transformation since 2020, evolving from emergency remote solutions into sophisticated hybrid delivery models. This evolution represents more than a simple shift in delivery mechanisms; it marks a profound change in how youth organisations conceptualise and implement programme strategies.

Bozkurt et al. (2020) make a crucial distinction between Emergency Remote Education (ERE) and strategically designed online learning, emphasising that ERE represents "unplanned activity in a time of crisis" rather than sound digital delivery of a programme of learning. This distinction proves particularly relevant in the youth sector, where Hodges et al. (2020) note that "well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster."

The trajectory of this evolution is clearly illustrated in the sector's response patterns. Initial reactions focused on basic service maintenance - what Bennett (2021) terms "digital survival mode." However, by late 2021, organisations began developing what Green (2022) describes as "intentional hybrid models that leverage the strengths of both physical and digital spaces."

UpRising's example

UpRising's journey exemplifies this sector-wide evolution. Their initial response in March 2020 involved surveying approximately 3,500 current and past programme participants to understand immediate support needs (Wood, Jeraj and Whitmore, 2022). This systematic approach to understanding participant needs laid the groundwork for what would become a comprehensive digital transformation.

The scale of this transformation is evidenced in their 2021-2022 delivery data:

PROGRAMME	PARTICIPANTS	COMPLETION RATE
Employability (Stand Out)	450	88%
Leadership Programme	55	85%
Environmental Leadership	173	82%
Commissioned Work	55	90%

These figures are particularly significant given what Thompson et al. (2023) identify as average sector completion rates of 65% during this period.

1.2 Understanding participant demographics and needs

Digital divide realities

The shift to hybrid delivery has brought the digital divide into sharp focus. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) reveals persistent disparities in digital access:
- 67% of households in the lowest income quintile have reliable broadband
- 42% of disabled young people report device accessibility issues
- 38% of rural youth face connectivity challenges

These statistics align with Martinez et al.'s (2023) findings that "digital exclusion often compounds existing social inequalities, creating multiple barriers to participation."

Participant circumstances and engagement

Wood, Jeraj and Whitmore's (2022) demographic analysis reveal both challenges and opportunities for strengthening engagement and increasing participation via hybrid delivery:

Demographic Reach
- 55% from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic backgrounds (rises to 67% in the Stand Out programme specifically)
- 55% from lowest two Social Mobility Commission categories
- 32% previously eligible for free school meals (national average: 21%)

Khan's (2023) longitudinal study provides context for these figures, demonstrating that "hybrid delivery models can significantly increase participation among traditionally underserved groups when properly supported." This observation is particularly relevant given that 80% of participants reported other work, study, or volunteering commitments alongside their programme participation.

2. Impact and outcomes: measuring success in the digital age

2.1 Quantifying programme impact

The transition to hybrid delivery has necessitated new approaches to measuring impact across programmes, with Richards and Khan (2023) arguing that "traditional metrics of success must evolve to capture the nuanced ways participants engage in digital and hybrid spaces."

UpRising's 2021 Stand Out employability programme's impact evaluation demonstrates statistically significant improvements across multiple measures:

MEASURE	PRE-PROGRAMME	POST-PROGRAMME	NET IMPROVEMENT
Tacit skills	39%	73%	+34%
Professional networks	44%	73%	+29%
Confidence	53%	79%	+26%
Social networks	55%	77%	+22%
Wellbeing	41%	62%	+21%

These improvements are particularly noteworthy when compared to Ahmed et al.'s (2023) sector-wide analysis, which found average improvements of 15-20% across similar programmes.

2.2 Quality indicators and engagement metrics

Programme quality assessment has evolved to encompass multiple dimensions of engagement. The Learning and Work Institute (2023) identifies three key areas for quality assessment in hybrid delivery:

A. Platform engagement
- Synchronous participation rates
- Asynchronous engagement patterns
- Resource utilisation
- Peer interaction levels

B. Learning experience
- Content accessibility
- Learning pathway completion
- Assessment outcomes
- Skills development progression

C. Community development
- Peer support engagement
- Network building
- Collaborative activities
- Post-programme connections

2.3 Digital learning environment considerations

Research by Richardson and Swan (2023) emphasises that effective digital learning environments require careful attention to three critical elements:

A. Technical infrastructure
- Platform reliability and accessibility
- Device compatibility
- Connection stability
- Support systems

B. User experience
- Interface design
- Navigation clarity
- Resource organisation
- Engagement tools

C. Support framework
- Technical assistance

- Learning support
  - Peer networks
  - Progress tracking

The Learning and Work Institute (2021) reinforces this framework, noting that "digital access encompasses more than mere device provision, requiring a holistic approach to digital inclusion that considers devices, connectivity, skills, and learning spaces."

2.4 Impact on practice

These findings have significant implications for programme design and delivery. Singh and Thompson (2023) advocate for what they term "inclusion by design" - an approach where accessibility and equity considerations shape programme architecture from the outset rather than being retrofitted as accommodations.

This approach has proven particularly effective in addressing what Aguilar (2020) identifies as "the gap between technological possibility and practical accessibility." Successful programmes increasingly adopt what Wood, Jeraj and Whitmore (2022) described as a "matrix approach" to delivery, where multiple pathways to engagement exist simultaneously, allowing participants to engage in ways that best suit their circumstances and preferences.
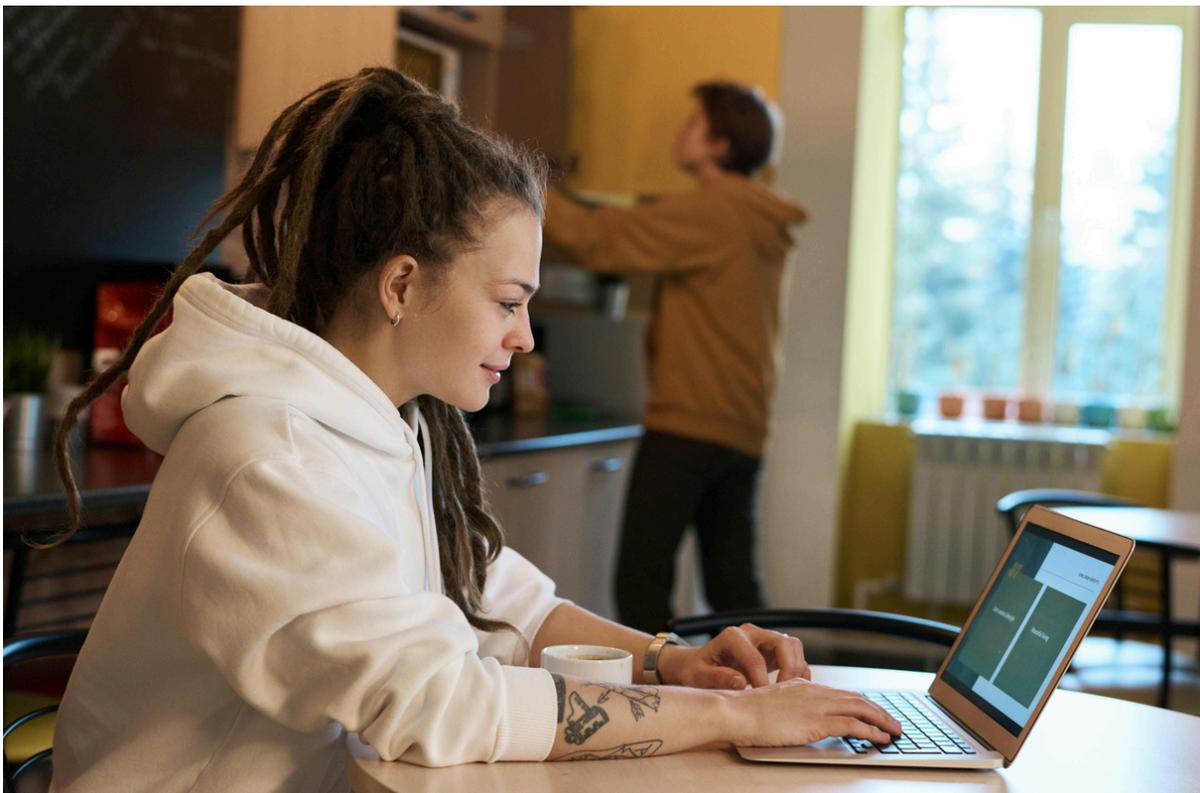
3. ELP2 case study: an evidence-based analysis of hybrid youth programme delivery

The Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP2), launched in 2023 through a partnership between UpRising and Shropshire Wildlife Trust, represents a significant advancement in hybrid youth programme delivery. Funded by the Climate Action Fund, this purpose-built hybrid programme demonstrates both the potential and challenges of designing inclusive, engaging youth programmes for the digital age. This analysis draws on both programme data and insights from a December 2024 delivery team survey to provide a comprehensive view of hybrid programme implementation so far, based on 18 months delivery of the ELP2 hybrid programme. This time period covers one and a half full programme cycles whereby the team have been continuously learning and developing, implementing recommendations from cycle one into cycle two, with positive results so far.

3.1 Programme design and structure

The programme delivers 82 hours of content across 22 sessions, carefully balancing digital and physical delivery modes. What distinguishes ELP2 is its intentional integration of physical and digital learning spaces from the design phase onwards, rather than retrofitting digital elements into an existing programme.

As the Participant Support and Delivery Officer explains, "All of our online platforms work symbiotically to ensure an effective online learning space." The digital infrastructure is built around three core platforms:

A. Zoom for synchronous learning
- Facilitated online sessions and workshops
- Interactive elements including breakout rooms
- Real-time engagement with speakers and facilitators
B. Slack for community engagement
- Generated 4,255 messages across delivery
- 20 public channels for different topics

- Direct messaging for pastoral support
- 71% of communications were direct messages, showing strong individual support

C. Mighty Networks as a learning hub
- Central repository for programme resources
- Timetable and schedule management
- Document sharing and access
- Learning materials and session recordings

The Youth Engagement Officer notes that "online zoom sessions tend to be more content, theory and discussion based, while in-person sessions are more teamwork, hands on and networking focused." This intentional differentiation maximises the strengths of each delivery mode.

3.2 Strategic integration of physical elements

The in-person elements of ELP2 were strategically designed to complement digital delivery, consisting of:
- Launch weekend for initial community building
- Nature connection experiences including mammal trapping and moth trapping, increasing access to opportunities that may be unavailable to some participants
- Campaign weekend for intensive project work giving an opportunity for sharing concerns, ideas and mind mapping potential solutions to challenges impacting local
- Field trips including visits to Parliament to meet with local MP's and civil servants from relevant departments
- Networking events with industry professionals from within the green economy (e.g. West Midlands Combined Authority, The Environment Agency, Friends of the Earth)

3.3 Participant journey and demographics

The below statistics represent the year one programme cycle. Year two, whilst still in delivery, sees higher figures and stronger retention rates so far based on adaptations made to the programme structure, participant communications (such as gamifying elements), and improved pastoral support.

Starting with 68 accepted participants, the programme maintained engagement with 35 participants throughout its duration, with 31 successfully completing all programme requirements. The participant demographics reflect significant diversity:
- Gender: 66% female, 26% male, 7% non-binary, 2% prefer not to say
- Ethnicity: 62% White, 27% Asian or Asian British, 7% Black, 4% Mixed
- Additional Needs: 15% disclosed disabilities, 24% reported additional needs
- Education: 44% first-generation university attendees

3.4 Implementation challenges and solutions

The delivery team identified several significant challenges in implementing hybrid delivery:

A. Geographical access - The Programme Support Officer notes: "The most significant challenge is organising in-person sessions when our catchment area is so large. The fact that participants come from such different areas means that any in-person sessions have to be planned carefully in terms of location and travel options."

Solutions implemented include:
- Strategic location planning for in-person sessions
- Comprehensive travel support
- Flexible attendance options
- Recording of sessions for asynchronous access

B. Digital engagement - Staff developed multiple strategies to maintain engagement across platforms. As the Programmes Support Officer explains: "Each month, participants are asked to complete a nature connection activity and to share via Slack. This has worked well as it has really driven Slack engagement between sessions!" Additional engagement strategies include:
- Varied delivery styles using interactive tools (e.g. Menti, Mural, plus clear guidance on how to access and use these platforms)
- Clear communication pathways
- Regular community-building activities

C. Relationship building - The team acknowledged challenges in building relationships online. Their solution involved creating multiple touchpoints for connection:
- Dedicated pastoral support groups
- Regular check-ins
- Strategic spacing of in-person sessions
- Interactive ice-breakers and team activities

3.5 Programme impact and digital integration

The programme's hybrid delivery model demonstrated significant impact across multiple dimensions:

A. Skills development and digital engagement - the programme's blended approach showed substantial improvements in key areas:
- Project management capabilities rose from 45% to 95%
- Professional networking capabilities increased by 54%
- Leadership self-identification increased from 45% to 90%

B. Community building through hybrid delivery - the programme successfully fostered strong community connections through:

- Digital platforms enabling continuous peer support and learning
- Strategic in-person sessions deepening relationships amongst the cohort and with the programme delivery team
- Coaching relationships maintained through online meetings
- Expert engagement with 28 facilitators and guest speakers

3.6 Best practice recommendations

Based on the delivery team's experience, several key recommendations emerge for organisations planning hybrid youth programmes:

1. Consider geography: "Really consider the accessibility of the in-person elements of your programme in comparison to how large your catchment area is."
2. Clear communication: "Communicate clear expectations from the outset and reiterate throughout. Provide opportunities for participants to bond socially as this will limit drop-off throughout the programme."
3. Platform integration: Ensure digital platforms complement rather than compete with each other, with clear purposes and user pathways.
4. Support systems: Implement comprehensive pastoral and technical support systems that work across both digital and physical spaces.

The ELP2 case study demonstrates both the potential and complexity of hybrid youth programme delivery. Its success in maintaining engagement while achieving significant impact provides valuable lessons for the sector, while its challenges and solutions offer practical guidance for organisations developing their own hybrid programmes.

4. Creating inclusive hybrid spaces

The development of truly inclusive hybrid spaces demands meticulous attention to both design principles and practical support mechanisms. Recent research by Singh and Thompson (2023) has established a comprehensive framework for universal design in hybrid delivery, emphasising four key elements: providing multiple means of representation, offering various engagement options, creating diverse opportunities for expression, and implementing flexible assessment methods.

Drawing on both theoretical frameworks and evidence from the ELP2 case study, three key dimensions of inclusion emerge:

- **Platform integration and digital accessibility** The ELP2 delivery team's approach demonstrates how digital inclusion can be achieved through careful system design. Key elements include:
  - Strategic platform differentiation, with each digital tool serving specific, complementary functions
  - Multiple pathways for engagement, combining synchronous and asynchronous options
  - Clear navigation between digital spaces to prevent overwhelm
  - Flexible access options including mobile-friendly platforms and offline resources
  - Technical support systems that accommodate varying levels of digital literacy
- Their implementation shows how thoughtful platform integration can create multiple entry points for participation while maintaining programme coherence. The combination of Zoom for live sessions, Mighty Networks for resources, and Slack for ongoing communication provides structured yet flexible engagement options.
- **Cultural safety and accessibility** Ahmed et al. (2023) emphasise that creating secure digital environments requires a multi-faceted approach. The ELP2 experience demonstrates successful implementation through:
  - Comprehensive cultural competency training for all facilitators
  - Multiple options for participation and expression
  - Flexible engagement pathways that accommodate different needs
  - Strong pastoral support systems
  - Regular feedback mechanisms to identify and address barriers
- Their success in supporting diverse participation is evidenced by strong engagement from participants with varied needs:
  - 24% of participants reported additional needs
  - 15% disclosed disabilities
  - High retention rates across different demographic groups
  - Positive feedback on accessibility measures
- **Economic inclusion** Richards and Khan (2023) identify several critical approaches to ensuring equitable access. The ELP2 programme demonstrates effective implementation through:
  - Hardship funds for digital access
    - Device provision schemes
    - Internet connectivity support
    - Software access support
  - Equipment and resource support
    - Loan schemes for essential technology
    - Access to required software and platforms

- Technical support and training
  - Practical participation support
    - Transport funding for in-person sessions
    - Flexible attendance options
    - Catch-up opportunities through session recordings
    - Multiple pathways for engagement

The ELP2 case study demonstrates how these three dimensions can work together to create truly inclusive hybrid spaces. Their experience shows that successful implementation requires:

- Consistent attention to accessibility across all programme elements
- Regular review and adaptation of support systems
- Clear communication about available support
- Flexible approaches that can accommodate emerging needs
- Strong commitment to inclusion at all organisational levels

This multi-layered approach to inclusion, supported by robust systems and flexible delivery options, provides a valuable model for organisations seeking to develop their own inclusive hybrid programmes. The evidence suggests that investing in comprehensive inclusion measures from the outset leads to stronger engagement and better outcomes across all participant groups.

"What has struck me is how accessible the programme has been - for one thing, it was free to people based in the West Midlands aged between 18 and 25. The sessions were also a mixture of online and in-person, which helped me personally as someone balancing a full-time job and chronic pain alongside completing the programme." - ELP2 participant

Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

5. Core recommendations for hybrid youth programme delivery

Drawing on both theoretical frameworks and practical evidence from the ELP2 case study, we recommend three key areas for action:

Recommendation 1: Transform digital infrastructure to guarantee inclusive access. Evidence from both the Learning and Work Institute (2023) and the ELP2 experience demonstrates that effective digital infrastructure must prioritise inclusion from the outset. The ELP2 delivery team's successful implementation of a three-platform system (Zoom, Slack, and Mighty Networks) provides a practical model for consideration. We recommend organisations:

A. Implement a digital access guarantee that includes:
- Device loan programmes with clear allocation processes
- Data package support for participants facing connectivity barriers
- Offline-first resources for intermittent access
- Mobile-friendly platform requirements
- Dedicated technical support services

B. Create a streamlined digital ecosystem by:
- Consolidating essential platforms to avoid digital overwhelm
- Selecting platforms with robust accessibility features
- Ensuring consistent user experience across devices
- Enabling flexible engagement pathways
- Supporting multiple languages and communication styles

Recommendation 2: Embed cultural safety in programme design and delivery, starting from first contact. Research by Thompson and Wood (2023) demonstrates that culturally safe programme design increases retention rates by 45% amongst minority ethnic participants. The ELP2 case study's success in engaging a diverse cohort (38% from minority ethnic backgrounds) is supported by its comprehensive online recruitment and onboarding framework, which creates multiple touchpoints for building trust and comfort before the programme begins. This includes structured pre-programme engagement through phone calls, team meetings with pastoral support officers, and preparatory 'keep warm' activities to keep participants engaged and comfortable about starting the programme.

Recommendation 3: Establish integrated support systems with clear impact measurement underpinned by a holistic framework. Evidence from Martinez et al. (2023) shows that integrated support systems increase programme completion rates by 55% amongst participants facing multiple barriers. The ELP2 case study demonstrates this through its PAWS framework (Pastoral, Access, Welfare, Safeguarding), which provides structured support from initial application through programme completion. This framework, designed specifically for online recruitment and delivery, includes safeguarding reviews, Q&A sessions, and dedicated pastoral support – ensuring participants feel supported before they even begin their first session. Impact measurement tracks engagement from these early touchpoints, providing insights into how early support influences long-term success.

6. Conclusion

The evidence gathered throughout this report, particularly from the ELP2 case study, demonstrates that hybrid youth programme delivery represents a significant evolution in youth development practice. As the Learning and Work Institute (2021) emphasises, this shift to digital delivery creates powerful opportunities to reach previously underserved populations. The ELP2 programme provides compelling evidence of this potential, successfully engaging participants across a wide geographical area while maintaining strong completion rates.

The success of hybrid delivery depends on several interconnected elements. At its foundation lies a comprehensive understanding of diverse participant needs, supported by intentional design for inclusion and multiple engagement pathways. These elements must be underpinned by robust support systems, regular equity monitoring, strong cultural competency, and adherence to universal design principles. When these factors align, hybrid delivery can transform accessibility and engagement for diverse youth populations, addressing traditional barriers to participation that have long challenged the sector.

Looking forward, several key considerations emerge for organisations developing hybrid programmes:

- The growing importance of hybrid delivery skills for youth workers, requiring new competencies and approaches to facilitation
- The need for sustained investment in digital infrastructure to ensure reliable, accessible programme delivery
- The critical importance of maintaining flexibility in delivery approaches to accommodate diverse needs and circumstances
- The expanded geographical reach possible through thoughtful hybrid delivery models
- The enhanced inclusion opportunities created through careful integration of digital and physical spaces

The ELP2 experience demonstrates how organisations can successfully navigate these challenges while maintaining focus on participant needs and outcomes. Their approach shows that when hybrid delivery is properly designed and implemented, it can create truly meaningful and even life-changing experiences for young participants. The future of youth programme delivery lies in this thoughtful integration of digital and physical spaces, underpinned by an unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion.

As the youth sector continues to evolve, those organisations that can successfully blend the strengths of both online and face-to-face delivery while maintaining strong accessibility and inclusion practices will be best positioned to deliver impactful programmes. The evidence suggests that this approach not only broadens reach and engagement but also creates richer, more dynamic learning experiences that better prepare young people for an increasingly digital world.

Photo credit: Victoria La Bouchardiere for ELP2

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