

# Innovation Hive

## Concept Note

**Project Title:** Balancing Digital Engagement and Youth Outcomes: Evidence-Based Policies for Learning and Well-being

**Project Acronym:** EQUILIBRIUM

**Programme:** HORIZON-CL2-2026-01-TRANSFO-04

**Deadline for Submission:** 23/9/2026

**Duration:** 3 years

**Budget:** around €3,000,000.00 to €4,000,000.00

### Background (Aims, objectives & needs)

Digital technologies have become an integral part of young people's daily lives, fundamentally reshaping how they communicate, learn, and spend their leisure time. Smartphones, social media platforms, online gaming, and messaging applications are now deeply embedded in both school and home environments. While these tools provide opportunities for social connection, creativity, and skill development, they have also raised increasing concerns among educators and policymakers regarding their potential negative effects on attention, learning processes, and mental health.

Across Europe, schools and governments are increasingly debating how to respond to the growing presence of digital devices in educational settings. Measures such as smartphone bans or restricted use policies are being introduced in several countries, often in the absence of robust causal evidence about their effectiveness. At the same time, concerns persist about the broader impact of digital leisure activities outside school, including excessive screen time, social media use, and gaming, particularly in relation to anxiety, reduced concentration, sleep disruption, and declining academic engagement.

Despite a rapidly growing body of research, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing evidence is correlational and does not allow for causal inference. Furthermore, studies often focus narrowly on well-being outcomes, without fully addressing educational dimensions such as motivation, study habits, cognitive functioning, and academic achievement. There is also limited understanding of how different types of digital activities, contexts of use, and individual characteristics interact to produce either risks or benefits. Importantly, European-specific evidence remains scarce, limiting the relevance of existing findings for EU education systems and policy frameworks.

EQUILIBRIUM addresses these gaps by developing a comprehensive, multi-method, and interdisciplinary research programme that combines experimental, quasi-experimental, longitudinal, and qualitative approaches. The project will generate robust causal evidence on how different forms of digital leisure use affect educational outcomes and mental health, while also identifying mechanisms, risk factors, and protective conditions. It will explicitly consider diversity across age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities.

A key feature of the project is its strong policy orientation and co-creation approach. By

working closely with schools, parents, students, and policymakers, EQUILIBRIUM will evaluate existing interventions and test new strategies aimed at promoting balanced and healthy digital engagement. The project will ultimately translate its findings into actionable policy recommendations and practical tools for education systems across Europe.

### **Core Objectives**

The project pursues the following objectives:

#### **O1 – Map digital leisure behaviours of young people across Europe**

Identify and classify patterns of digital tool use (social media, gaming, messaging, streaming) across school and non-school contexts.

#### **O2 – Establish causal effects on educational outcomes and mental health**

Quantify how different types of digital engagement affect attention, concentration, motivation, study habits, academic performance, and well-being.

#### **O3 – Identify mechanisms and heterogeneity of effects**

Analyse how effects vary depending on duration, timing, platform design, and individual or contextual factors (age, socio-economic status, parental mediation, school rules).

#### **O4 – Evaluate and test policy interventions**

Assess existing regulations (e.g., smartphone bans) and implement experimental interventions promoting healthy digital use in schools and at home.

#### **O5 – Identify both risks and benefits of digital engagement**

Examine not only negative outcomes (distraction, addiction risks) but also positive effects (digital skills, problem-solving, social connectivity).

#### **O6 – Co-develop actionable policy and practice recommendations**

Translate evidence into concrete tools and guidelines for policymakers, schools, and families across EU contexts.

## **2. Work Package Structure**

WP1 – Mapping Digital Practices and Contexts in Europe

WP2 – Causal Effects on Learning and Well-being

WP3 – Mechanisms, Risks and Protective Factors

WP4 – Experimental Interventions

WP5 – Synthesis and Policy Translation

WP6 – Dissemination, Communication and Exploitation

WP7 – Project Management (PM)