With Young People, Not For Them

International Lessons for Youth Digital Wellbeing and Online Safety in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Winston Churchill Fellowship Report



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Opening Reflection

During my Winston Churchill Fellowship in 2025, debates around young people, social media, online harm, and digital wellbeing were rapidly intensifying internationally.

Across many of the countries I visited, there was growing pressure for stronger regulation, age restrictions, and platform accountability.

Researchers, practitioners, youth organisations, and young people themselves were often asking a different question:

What happens if our solutions oversimplify the realities of young people's digital lives?

Following my Fellowship travels, Australia introduced world-first legislation in December 2025 restricting social media access for under-16s.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, similar conversations accelerated significantly.
The Social Media (Age-Restricted Users) Bill was introduced to Parliament in October 2025, proposing mandatory age verification measures and restrictions preventing under-16s from accessing social media platforms.

Alongside this, a parliamentary select committee inquiry into the harms of social media for young people received extensive public submissions and ultimately recommended:

- age restrictions for social media platforms
- stronger online safety regulation
- algorithm transparency
- regulation of recommendation systems
- restrictions on harmful advertising
- and the establishment of an independent online safety regulator

The committee described online harm affecting young people as severe and requiring urgent action.

Opening Reflection

Disagreement remained around:

- privacy implications
- age verification systems
- unintended consequences
- displacement toward less regulated platforms
- and whether restriction alone meaningfully addresses the environments young people are being asked to navigate online

These tensions reflected many of the same conversations emerging throughout my Fellowship.

How do we create safer digital environments for young people without reducing their lives to fear, restriction, and worst-case scenarios?

This report reflects on learning gathered across three connected phases:

- self-funded international learning prior to the Fellowship
- the Winston Churchill Fellowship travel and conversations throughout 2025
- and the practical application of that learning through national youth workshops in Aotearoa New Zealand following the Fellowship

Many of the public conversations about young people and technology simply do not reflect the realities young people are trying to navigate every day.

Young people's lives online are far more complicated, contradictory, social, emotional, and human than the headlines, panic, and policy decisions increasingly shaping their lives without them.

Executive Summary

This report reflects on learning gathered across three connected phases:

- self-funded international travel and learning in late 2024
- Winston Churchill Fellowship travel undertaken in June 2025
- practical application of that learning through national youth workshops across Aotearoa New Zealand following the Fellowship

The Fellowship explored how researchers, educators, youth organisations, practitioners, and policymakers are responding to growing concerns around online harm, digital wellbeing, bullying, youth participation, and platform accountability. The learning took place during a period of rapidly intensifying international debate about young people and digital life.

Throughout the Fellowship and the months that followed, conversations around social media bans, age restrictions, online safety regulation, algorithmic accountability, and youth mental health were accelerating internationally and in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Across nearly every country and conversation, similar concerns kept surfacing.

Young people are still too often excluded from decisions directly affecting their digital lives. Many adults misunderstand the social, relational, and emotional role digital spaces play for young people. Online safety responses continue to focus heavily on restriction and access while giving far less attention to relationships, participation, capability, platform design, and practical support.

The Fellowship also reinforced how varied young people's digital experiences really are. The same platforms can create:

- belonging and friendship
- creativity and humour
- pressure and exclusion
- anxiety and harm

Often all at once.

Executive Summary

Researchers and practitioners repeatedly raised concerns about simplistic public narratives and the unintended consequences that can emerge when policy responses move faster than young people's lived realities, evidence, or participation.

The approaches that left the biggest impression on me were rarely driven by panic or quick fixes.

Instead, they focused on:

- trust
- participation
- relationships
- adaptability
- and practical support grounded in young people's actual experiences

Following the Fellowship, this learning informed a national series of workshops with 176 young people across Aotearoa New Zealand undertaken in partnership with Te Ara Tīrama and supported by the Spark Foundation.
Those conversations later became the foundation for *'Beyond a Single Story: Understanding Young People's Digital Experiences'.*

Young people spoke clearly about wanting:

- safer digital environments
- better platform accountability
- more honest conversations
- adults who better understand the realities of their lives online

The learning throughout this Fellowship consistently pointed toward the same conclusion: young people need more than restriction and protection alone.

Young people need to be involved in shaping the systems, environments, and decisions that increasingly shape their lives.

INTERNATIONAL LEARNING JOURNEY

Questions, tensions and ideas that shaped this Fellowship

This Fellowship was about more than where I went—
it was about how my thinking evolved through conversations
with researchers, practitioners, educators, policymakers,
and most importantly, young people.



The same questions kept resurfacing across every country and conversation.

PRE-FELLOWSHIP LEARNING

Late 2024 / Early 2025

SELF-FUNDED



WASHINGTON DC

Family Online Safety Institute Annual Conference

- → What happens when protection becomes restriction?
- → Why are young people still missing from decisions about their digital lives?
- → What if online safety focused more on design, relationships and support?



BOSTON

Harvard Center for Digital Thriving

- → How does technology impact mental health—differently, depending on who you are and what you're experiencing?
- → What are we missing when the most vulnerable young people are missing from research?
- → How do we build young people's confidence, capability and agency in digital life?

These early conversations shaped the questions I carried into the Fellowship.

WINSTON CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP TRAVEL

June 2025



LONDON

Ditch the Label

- → What does it look like when youth voice is at the heart of everything, not just invited in?
- → How do we build movements that challenge stigma, create belonging and drive real change?



DUBLIN

Dublin City University

- → What changes when young people and teachers help shape the work from the beginning?
- → Can prevention be embedded into everyday school life rather than added on separately?



AMSTERDAM

Family Online Safety Institute European Forum

- → Are we designing digital environments that are actually fit for young people?
- → What unintended consequences emerge when policy moves faster than evidence or participation?



STAVANGER

World Anti-Bullying Forum

- → How can we better understand and prevent harm without oversimplifying or blaming young people?
- → What does it take to create cultures of respect, inclusion and connection—online and offline?



FLORENCE

University of Florence (No Trap!)

- → What can we learn from programmes willing to adapt when things do not work?
- → Why does lasting change require flexibility rather than fixed models?



BATH

5Rights Foundation

- → What gets lost when public debate collapses into panic and simple answers?
- → Why are young people's actual experiences still so poorly reflected in public conversations?

RETURNING HOME

Post-Fellowship



AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

- → What happens when young people are finally asked directly?
- → What if there is no single story of young people's digital lives?

BEYOND A SINGLE STORY

National workshops with **176** young people aged 13–15 from **19** schools across **8** locations in Aotearoa.



These workshops gave young people the space to share what they do, what they experience and what matters to them.



"This Fellowship reinforced that meaningful responses to online harm cannot rely on restriction alone. Young people need to be involved in shaping the systems, environments and decisions that shape their lives."

With young people, not for them.

Part One
Before the Fellowship Officially Began

Self-Funded Learning and the Questions Taking Shape

December 2024

One of the most important experiences connected to this work actually happened before the official Fellowship travel began.

In December 2024, I attended the Family Online Safety Institute Annual Conference in Washington DC through self-funded travel.

Looking back now, that conference became a significant starting point for many of the ideas that shaped the Fellowship itself.

The conference theme, 'From Protection to Empowerment', captured a tension that would continue appearing throughout nearly every conversation I had over the following months.

How do we move beyond approaches focused only on protection and restriction toward approaches that genuinely help young people navigate digital life with confidence, support, capability, and agency?

One comment from Stephen Balkam, CEO of FOSI, stayed with me throughout the Fellowship:

"Our aim is to protect children ON the internet, not FROM the internet."

That distinction mattered.

Because so many public conversations still frame young people's digital lives as something they simply need to be removed from.

Self-Funded Learning and the Questions Taking Shape

December 2024

But the conversations throughout the conference kept returning to a harder question:

What if the goal is not disconnection, but better digital environments and better support?

The Moment Things Started Clicking Into Place

One of the strongest sessions focused on the launch of Promoting Wellbeing in the Digital World, a major international research project exploring how young people and parents perceive digital wellbeing.

Several insights from the Google supported KANTAR research stayed with me long after the conference.

Sleep quality continued to be one of the biggest concerns raised by both parents and teenagers. The pressure to constantly check notifications was also linked to feelings of anxiety, stress, and worry.

Another finding that really stood out was the gap between how much responsibility parents thought teenagers took for their own digital wellbeing compared with how much responsibility teenagers believed they were already carrying themselves.

So much of the public conversation assumes young people are passive or reckless online.

But the research suggested many teenagers are already actively thinking about balance, wellbeing, pressure, and self-management in ways adults may not fully recognise.

The panel included Dr Emily Weinstein from Harvard's Center for Digital Thriving and Amanda Ferguson from the University of Cambridge.



The Moment Things Started Clicking Into Place

Amanda challenged the audience to stop asking whether technology impacts mental health. Instead, she pushed us to ask:
"How does technology impact mental health?"

That shift landed hard for me.

Because the young people I had worked alongside for years were already showing us that no two digital experiences are the same.

Some young people described connection, belonging, humour, identity, and support.

Others described pressure, comparison, anxiety, exclusion, or exhaustion.
Often on the very same platform.

Amanda also spoke about the unintended consequences of design.

Something as small as a "Read" notification can quietly shape social pressure, anxiety, expectations, and behaviour in ways adults may never fully notice.

We cannot fully understand the impact of digital environments without involving the young people living inside them every day.

Amanda also highlighted that many of the young people most vulnerable to negative mental health outcomes often sit at the edges of datasets and research samples. In a University of Cambridge systematic review of research into social media and mental health, only 6% of studies included clinically depressed or anxious teenagers.

That has enormous implications for both research and design.

Because if the most vulnerable young people are missing from the evidence base, there is a real risk that systems, policies, and platforms will continue being designed without fully understanding their needs.

Harvard Center for Digital Thriving

The Washington DC conference also created an opportunity to connect with Dr Emily Weinstein from Harvard's Center for Digital Thriving.

I had followed Emily's work with interest because of the way it challenged many of the assumptions that often dominate conversations about young people and technology. At a time when public debate increasingly seemed to be searching for simple explanations and straightforward solutions, her research consistently highlighted the importance of context, relationships, identity, and the highly varied ways young people experience digital life.

Our conversation was a valuable way to begin the journey. Many of the questions we discussed around participation, wellbeing, complexity, and the limitations of one-size-fits-all responses would continue surfacing throughout the Fellowship in different countries, disciplines, and contexts.

Given the influence Emily's work had already had on my thinking, it felt like a fitting way to conclude the self-funded portion of the journey before the Fellowship formally began.



Part Two

The Fellowship Journey

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

London

Ditch the Label

One of the first Fellowship meetings took place in London with Sue Jones, COO of Ditch the Label.

Originally started by Dr Liam Hackett as a MySpace profile in 2006, Ditch the Label has grown into a globally recognised anti-bullying and youth support charity reaching more than 180 million young people through research, campaigns, education, and direct digital support.

The organisation is widely regarded as a leader in digital youth support and online wellbeing, particularly for its ability to combine:

- evidence-informed practice
- real-time data insights
- digital mentoring
- and youth-centred support design

What stood out immediately was how intentionally their support model had been built around the realities of how young people actually seek support online. Their direct support model uses clinically trained digital mentors rather than volunteers and allows young people to access support asynchronously through an online platform.

The approach felt practical, thoughtful, and deeply grounded in young people's actual behaviours rather than adult assumptions about how support "should" look.

Another area that left a strong impression was how Ditch the Label used data from support interactions to identify emerging themes, shape campaigns, and strengthen funding proposals without losing sight of the humans behind the data itself.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Dublin

Dublin City University Anti-Bullying Centre

Dublin City University became one of the most practically useful and influential stops of the Fellowship.

I met with Darran Heaney and Dylan to learn more about FUSE, the Anti-Bullying Centre's school-based anti-bullying and online safety programme, alongside broader work happening across the Centre focused on participation, digital wellbeing, and prevention.

FUSE was initially funded by Meta, with further long-term support from Rethink Ireland, and developed in response to growing recognition that schools needed more than reactive responses after incidents had already occurred.

The programme now supports students from 3rd class through to 3rd year, roughly New Zealand Year 4 through to age 15 or 16. Each year level has a themed unit of learning with five lessons, and the programme includes around 178 individual assets including lesson plans, activity sheets, videos, classroom presentations, posters, and supporting resources.

Darran spoke openly about wanting to move away from the familiar cycle where schools experience an incident, request support, receive a one-off talk or intervention, and then feel they have "dealt with it." FUSE was designed to embed prevention into everyday school life rather than positioning online safety and bullying prevention as something separate or reactive.

Another strength of the programme was that teacher confidence and capability developed through the delivery process itself. Rather than expecting schools to complete extensive professional development before beginning, teachers were learning in context as they taught the material over time. That feels especially relevant when schools are already stretched and when one-off external interventions rarely lead to sustained change.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Dublin

Dublin City University Anti-Bullying Centre

An important insight was the role credibility plays in uptake. The backing of Ireland's Department of Education significantly strengthened trust in the programme, while the platform itself was intentionally designed with low barriers to access for schools and teachers.

Darran also reflected honestly that if they were starting the programme again, they would spend far longer co-designing with both students and teachers before development began. That reflection strongly reinforced the participatory approaches underpinning much of my own work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Alongside FUSE, I learned more about:

- Tozi, a strengths-based digital citizenship and wellbeing app developed with Childline Ireland and the Vodafone Foundation
- PARTICIPATE, a Horizon Europe-funded research programme exploring how parents recognise and respond to online harm
- PHD projects exploring bullying, gender, school culture, and student involvement in shaping research itself

Conversations and PHD candidate presentations at DCU and later at the World Anti-Bullying Forum explored how young people can contribute not just as participants, but as co-researchers helping shape questions, interpret findings, and challenge adult assumptions.

That work strongly connected with many of the ideas already shaping my own practice and research in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Across the different conversations at DCU, there was a consistent recognition that prevention work needs to reflect the complexity of young people's actual lives rather than simplified adult assumptions about them.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Amsterdam

Family Online Safety Institute European Forum

The Family Online Safety Institute European Forum in Amsterdam focused heavily on online regulation, platform responsibility, and the unintended consequences of simplistic policy responses.

The timing of the forum felt especially significant given how rapidly conversations around social media bans, age restrictions, and youth mental health were intensifying internationally.

A standout session explored whether Europe currently has the answers to online safety regulation. Manon Baert from 5Rights challenged participants to think beyond age assurance and restriction alone.

One of the strongest ideas from the session was that age assurance should not simply function as a gatekeeping tool. Instead, it should create pressure for platforms to build environments that are genuinely safer and more developmentally appropriate for children and young people from the outset. The discussion repeatedly returned to the role of design.

A strong thread throughout the discussions was the idea that many of the risks young people face online are not accidental or inevitable. They are shaped by design decisions. Default settings, recommender systems, reporting tools, privacy protections, and platform architecture all influence the kinds of experiences young people have online and the pressures they are expected to navigate.

That shifts the conversation away from expecting young people and families to carry all the responsibility themselves and back toward the environments being built around them.

Another standout session was Panic or Proof: The State of Online Safety Research, and honestly, it cut through a lot of the noise that currently dominates public conversations about young people and technology.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Amsterdam

Family Online Safety Institute European Forum

Researchers including Pete Etchells, Sandra Cortesi, Julia Davidson, and Jessica Piotrowski pushed back on how quickly complex issues are often reduced to simple narratives, particularly when fear, media pressure, and political momentum begin shaping responses faster than evidence can keep up.

What made the session so compelling was the willingness to openly acknowledge uncertainty and complexity rather than forcing neat conclusions. Several speakers challenged the idea that blanket restrictions or bans are straightforward solutions, particularly when young people's experiences online are so varied and shaped by far more than access alone.

The discussion kept returning to the gap between the way adults often talk about young people's digital lives and the realities young people themselves are navigating every day.

Online spaces can create connection, humour, creativity, support, pressure, exclusion, anxiety, and belonging, sometimes within the same platform, group chat, or even conversation. Trying to flatten those experiences into a single story about harm or safety misses the complexity young people are already managing.



A Conversation Across Time Zones

Voice of Online Youth

One unexpected advantage of being in the Northern Hemisphere during the Fellowship was how much easier it became to connect with organisations working across Europe and the UK.

While travelling between Amsterdam and Stavanger, I joined an early morning video call with Maisy Jeffrey and Rani Govender from the NSPCC to learn more about Voice of Online Youth in the UK.

I left the conversation genuinely energised by what they had built. The level of care behind the work was obvious straight away, as was the intention to create something that was not tokenistic or performative. The young people involved were clearly shaping conversations and contributing in meaningful ways rather than simply being asked for feedback after decisions had already been made.

Their manifesto, the support surrounding the group, and the impact they were already having showed a practical and genuine application of meaningful participation. At a time when so many conversations about young people still happen without them, Voice of Online Youth felt like a strong example of what becomes possible when organisations are willing to genuinely listen and share space.

The conversation connected strongly with many of the tensions surfacing throughout the Fellowship, particularly as debates around restrictions, bans, and regulation continued accelerating internationally.

The same question kept resurfacing:

What changes when young people are involved not just as recipients of support, but as contributors helping shape the environments, policies, and systems affecting their lives?



Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Stavanger

World Anti Bullying Forum

The World Anti-Bullying Forum in Stavanger was one of the most energising and intellectually challenging parts of the Fellowship.

I presented twice during the conference, including an interactive workshop and a poster presentation based on my Masters research exploring co-designed bullying prevention with New Zealand students. Presenting in a space largely dominated by academics and researchers felt uncomfortable at times, but also deeply worthwhile. There was something important about practitioners contributing alongside researchers, particularly in conversations centred on participation, relationships, and prevention.

Across the conference there was a strong focus on student participation, co-research, and participatory action research. What interested me most was not participation as a buzzword, but the practical ways researchers were genuinely involving young people in shaping questions, interpreting findings, and challenging adult assumptions.

Several presentations explored how differently young people and adults can understand the same survey questions, wellbeing concepts, or experiences of bullying. That reminder felt important because adults often assume shared understanding when, in reality, young people may be interpreting language, intent, and meaning very differently.

One session from Oslo Metropolitan University explored how student councils were involved as co-researchers in anti-bullying research through the ETOS Project. Students were invited to critique and prioritise questions from national wellbeing surveys, leading to discussions about which questions actually felt meaningful or relevant to them and which did not.

The conversations that followed revealed how differently students often interpreted the intent behind adult-designed questions.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Stavanger

World Anti Bullying Forum

The researchers also used low-pressure creative activities that allowed students to contribute ideas without worrying about getting things “right.” What stood out was the thoughtful and practical way participation had been built into the research process itself rather than added as a token gesture after key decisions had already been made.

That session reinforced something that kept surfacing throughout the Fellowship: participation is not simply about asking young people for answers. Sometimes it means questioning whether adults are even asking the right questions in the first place.

Another presentation that genuinely shifted my thinking was Dr Ben Lohmeyer’s co-designed research exploring loneliness. Young people were involved throughout the research process, contributing not just as participants but as co-researchers helping shape and interpret the work itself.

One finding in particular stayed with me: loneliness was not simply described as the absence of positive relationships, but often as the presence of undesirable ones. That distinction raises important questions about how adults understand belonging, connection, and emotional wellbeing.

The conference also created opportunities for informal conversations that ended up being just as valuable as the formal presentations. Discussions over dinner, in hotel foyers, between sessions, and during poster presentations often became the spaces where people spoke most honestly about:

- what is not working
- where participation becomes tokenistic
- the tensions between research and policy
- and the challenges of translating complex evidence into public conversations that increasingly demand simple answers

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

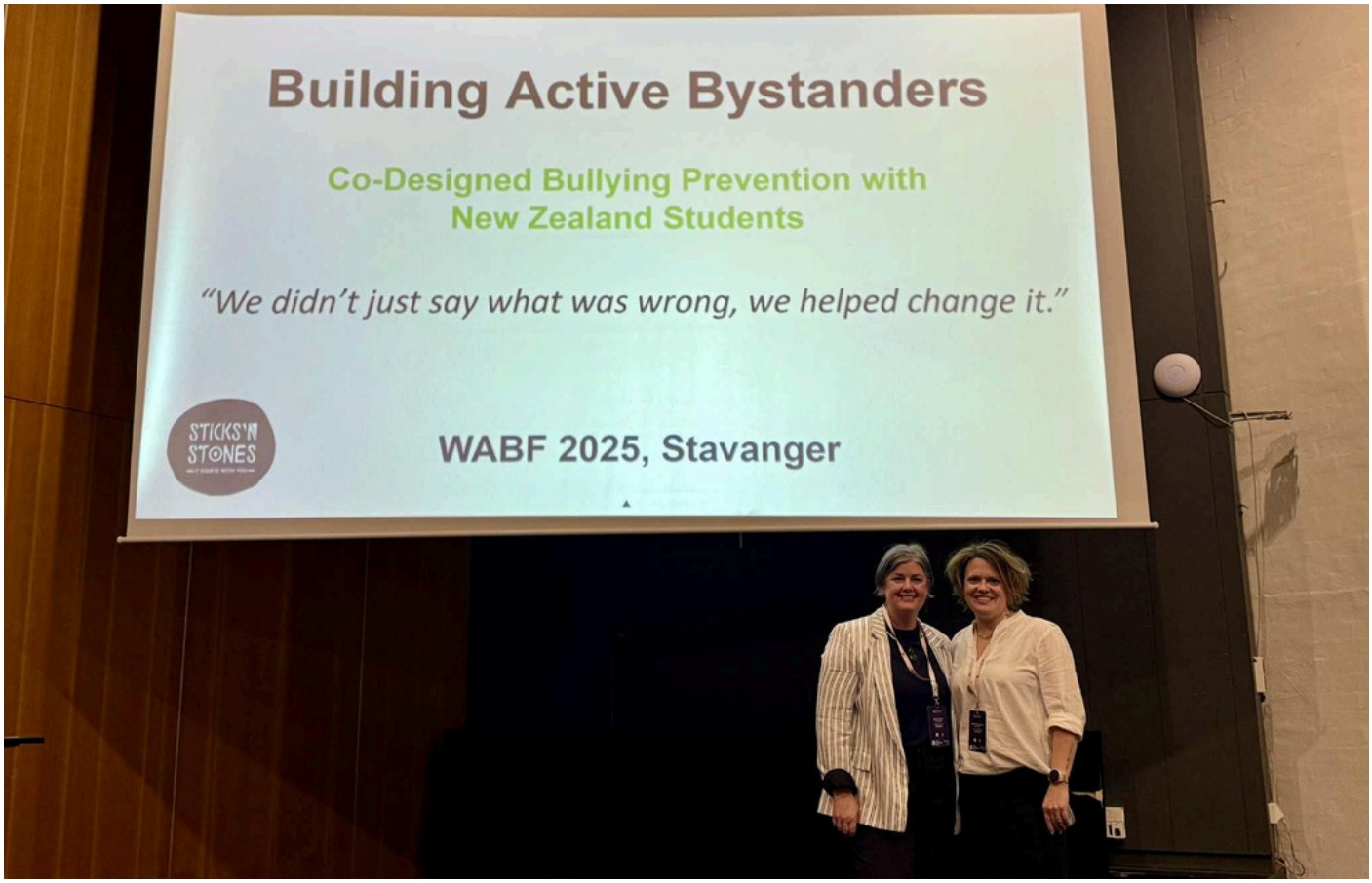
Stavanger

World Anti Bullying Forum

What I appreciated most about Stavanger was the willingness of many researchers and practitioners to sit with uncertainty rather than rush toward certainty.

At a time when public conversations around young people and technology are becoming increasingly polarised, that openness felt both refreshing and necessary.

Click HERE to see the Academic poster, presentations and Masters reports shared with those that came along to my workshop.



Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Florence

Università di Firenze

I had wanted to meet Professor Ersilia Menesini for a long time.as I'd followed her work for years and had always admired the No Trap! programme. Time with Ersilia gave me a much clearer understanding of how the programme had changed over time and why those changes mattered.

No Trap! originally began as a peer-led whole-school approach where selected or volunteer students took on leadership roles within the school as peer educators.

Over time, however, the programme moved away from relying primarily on peer educators to influence culture across an entire school and instead focused more heavily on stable class-based groups working together over longer periods of time.

The reasoning behind that shift was practical. Within a single class, where relationships are more consistent and ongoing, peer support became more sustainable and more effective. I found that evolution especially interesting because it reflected a willingness to respond to changing needs and evidence rather than staying attached to the original model.

We also discussed how the work later expanded through stronger teacher involvement and significant backing from the Italian Ministry of Education through Platform ELISA. That Ministry support changed the scale of the work considerably, moving bullying prevention beyond individual schools and into a coordinated national framework that provides teacher training, prevention and intervention protocols, annual monitoring, and practical guidance for schools across Italy.

Schools with even one trained teacher involved in ELISA reported lower levels of bullying and victimisation. In a field that can often feel overwhelmed by large-scale problems, there was something reassuring about the reminder that one informed and supported adult can still influence the environment around young people in measurable ways.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Florence
Università di Firenze

I also appreciated how honest Ersilia was about the realities of adapting programmes over time. The conversation never felt defensive or overly polished. It felt like someone genuinely committed to continuing to refine the work as young people's lives and needs continue changing.

Revisiting Florence and eating excellent pasta was also a pretty great bonus.



Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Bath Spa University

Professor Pete Etchells

By the time I made it to Bath, I had already briefly met Pete Etchells and embarrassingly fangirled a little over him in Amsterdam after the FOSI European Forum.

I had first come across Pete's work through Stephen Balkam and had since read and recommended his books repeatedly, particularly Lost in a Good Game and Unlocked. His work consistently challenges simplistic narratives around screen time, gaming, and technology while still taking concerns around young people's wellbeing seriously.

What I appreciated most about the conversation was how calmly Pete navigates a space that often becomes emotionally charged very quickly. Rather than getting pulled into debates about whether technology is entirely good or entirely harmful, he kept returning to more useful questions about what young people are actually experiencing, what adults are reacting to, and what kind of digital environments we are trying to create in the first place.

We spoke quite a bit about language, particularly the increasing use of the word "addiction" in public conversations about technology use. Pete was careful to distinguish between clinically recognised addiction and habits or coping behaviours, pointing out how casually using clinical language can flatten much more complicated experiences.

What adults often interpret as "screen overuse" can sometimes be young people self-soothing, managing stress, escaping pressure, or filling gaps where other forms of connection, regulation, or support may be missing. That framing shifts the conversation considerably because it moves us away from simply asking how much time young people are spending online and toward asking what role those spaces are playing in their lives.

The discussion also kept returning to the gap between the realities young people are navigating online and the way those realities are often represented publicly through headlines, panic, and oversimplified narratives.

Conversations That Shifted My Thinking

Bath Spa University

Professor Pete Etchells

Pete was realistic about the fact that restrictions and bans are likely to continue internationally, but he also questioned what follows after restriction.

If access is limited, what support comes next?

How are young people being prepared to navigate digital environments long term?

What conversations are happening with young people themselves rather than simply about them?

Those questions connected strongly with many of the tensions surfacing throughout the Fellowship.

Pete's work does not promise easy answers, and I think that is exactly why it resonates so strongly. It creates space for more honest conversations about complexity, uncertainty, and what young people actually need from the adults and systems surrounding them.



Leaving Europe

By the end of the Fellowship, I was carrying far more questions home than answers. Across London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Stavanger, Florence, and Bath, the conversations were often very different in focus, but several tensions kept surfacing.

Young people's digital lives are deeply varied and shaped by far more than screen time or access alone. Platform design matters. Relationships matter. Participation matters. Context matters. Simplistic narratives rarely hold up for long once you start listening properly to young people or spending time with the people working most closely alongside them.

What also became increasingly obvious was how often adults are still trying to solve problems involving young people without meaningfully involving young people themselves.

Some of the strongest work I encountered throughout the Fellowship was not driven by panic or certainty. It was collaborative, reflective, adaptable, and willing to sit with complexity rather than immediately rushing toward simple solutions.

By the time I returned to Aotearoa New Zealand, I was much less interested in asking what young people should be protected from and far more interested in understanding what they actually needed from the adults, systems, schools, policies, and digital environments surrounding them.

That question became the starting point for the next phase of the work.

Part Three
Bringing the learning Home

Returning to Aotearoa New Zealand, I found myself thinking more deeply about patterns and concerns that had already been shaping my work for years.

Before the Fellowship, I had spent more than a decade working alongside young people, schools, educators, and communities through co-design, facilitation, research, and bullying prevention work.

My Masters research with Sticks ‘n Stones had also reinforced the importance of participation and the limitations of approaches that position young people primarily as passive recipients of adult-designed solutions.

What the Fellowship added was not a sudden shift in thinking, but a much broader international perspective on issues already emerging here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Across multiple countries, I kept hearing similar concerns about:

- simplistic narratives around young people and technology
- reactive responses driven by fear or political pressure
- and decisions being made about young people’s digital lives without meaningfully involving them

The Fellowship also reinforced how often young people’s online experiences are discussed in ways that flatten or oversimplify what they are actually navigating every day.

That made the next phase of the work feel even more important.

Beyond a Single Story

UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

176 YOUNG PEOPLE

13–15 YEARS OLD

19 SCHOOLS

8 WORKSHOP LOCATIONS

HALF-DAY WORKSHOPS WERE HOSTED IN:

- Whangārei
- Auckland
- Wellington
- Nelson
- Christchurch
- Dunedin
- Invercargill
- Cromwell



PURPOSE

To build an accurate, grounded understanding of young people's online lives by hearing directly from them about:

- **WHAT THEY DO** online
- **WHAT THEY EXPERIENCE**
- **WHAT MATTERS TO THEM**

WHY IT MATTERED

The workshops challenged the idea that there is one single "teen online experience."

Young people described digital life as varied, social, creative, complicated, and deeply connected to friendship, identity, learning, entertainment, and support.

There is no single story of young people's digital lives.

Part Three

Beyond a Single Story

National Youth Workshops and Report

As debates around online safety, social media restrictions, and proposed legislation intensified in Aotearoa New Zealand following the Fellowship,
I became increasingly concerned by how rarely young people's actual experiences were present within those conversations.

Public discussion was becoming louder, more certain, and increasingly focused on restriction, harm, and protection, often without much space for the complexity young people themselves were describing.

Following the Fellowship, Netsafe partnered with Te Ara Tīrama and the Spark Foundation to facilitate a national series of youth workshops exploring young people's digital lives and experiences online.

The workshops later became the foundation for the report *'Beyond a Single Story: Understanding Young People's Digital Experiences'.*

The Fellowship strongly influenced both the structure and direction of this work. Conversations throughout Amsterdam, Stavanger, London, and through Voice of Online Youth repeatedly reinforced how often adults speak about young people's online experiences from a distance rather than involving young people meaningfully in conversations about policy, prevention, and solutions.

The workshop design was also shaped by participatory approaches encountered throughout the Fellowship alongside practices I had already been developing through years of co-design and facilitation work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Young people were invited to map online spaces, challenge adult assumptions, discuss contradictions and pressures, and reflect honestly on the role digital environments play in their everyday lives.

Part Three

Beyond a Single Story

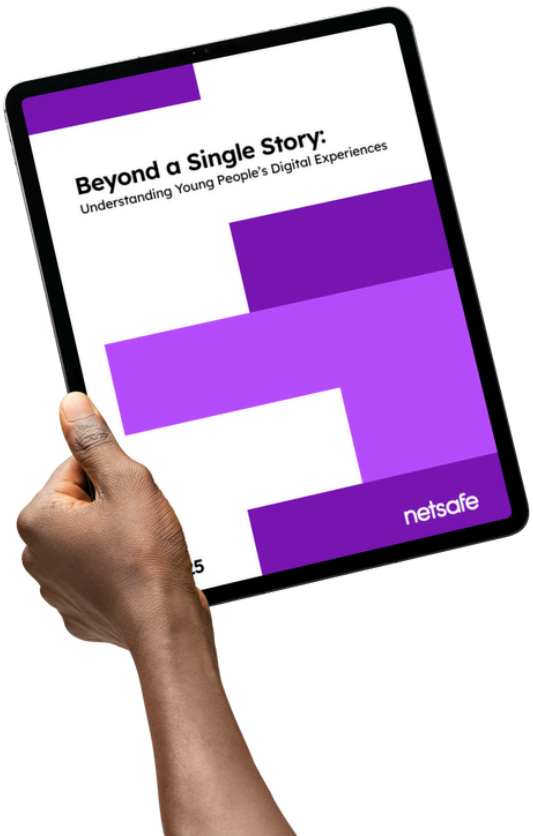
National Youth Workshops and Report

What emerged was not a single narrative about harm or safety, but a far more complicated picture of connection, belonging, humour, creativity, exhaustion, pressure, anxiety, entertainment, and social expectation all existing alongside each other.

Many students spoke openly about the disconnect between how adults often talk about technology and what digital life actually feels like for them. Several described feeling that public conversations focus heavily on restriction and screen time while paying far less attention to friendships, social pressure, boredom, belonging, algorithms, and the emotional realities of staying socially connected online.

The title Beyond a Single Story ultimately reflected one of the clearest lessons reinforced throughout the Fellowship itself: attempts to reduce young people's digital experiences into simplified narratives rarely reflect the realities they are actually navigating every day.

That made the next phase of the work feel even more important.



Part Three

National Teacher Research

Understanding What Schools Were Navigating

Alongside the Fellowship travel, I was also leading national teacher research exploring schools' experiences of online bullying, misinformation, digital wellbeing, and emerging online harms.

The findings captured a growing sense of pressure across schools. Educators described dealing with increasingly complex online social dynamics while often feeling underprepared for the level of responsibility they were carrying. Secondary teachers in particular spoke about managing incidents involving large peer groups, rapidly shifting online behaviour, emotional escalation, and situations where it was often unclear what the right next step should be.

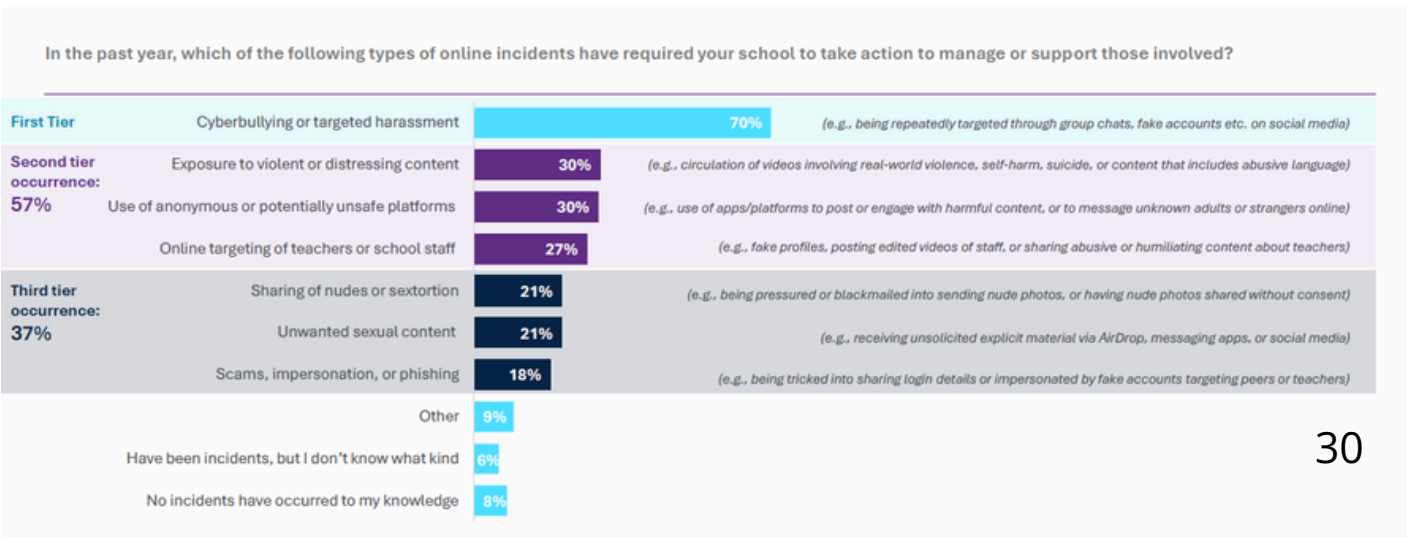
Many educators described uncertainty around:

- how different platforms and features worked
- what digital information schools could reliably check
- when issues should be escalated outside the school
- and how to respond as online behaviour and platforms changed so quickly

As one school leader described:

"I think we are ill-equipped to deal with what is out there."

Another recurring theme was the sense that schools were often building responses in real time without consistent guidane or shared approaches across the sector.



Part Three

Netsafe's Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit

Embedding Prevention Into Everyday School Life

The national teacher research became an important foundation for the development of Netsafe's Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit, launched in Term One 2026.

Educators had consistently described feeling underprepared for the complexity of the online issues they were managing, particularly as friendship conflict, rumours, harassment, exclusion, and social pressure increasingly moved fluidly between online and offline environments. Many also spoke about wanting practical support that could be embedded into everyday classroom practice rather than reactive responses after harm had already occurred.

Those findings aligned strongly with several key conversations throughout the Fellowship, particularly the work at Dublin City University around the FUSE programme and its emphasis on sustained, relationship-based prevention embedded into school culture over time.

A couple of months after returning from the Fellowship, I became the subject matter expert for the development of Netsafe's Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit. The role drew heavily on both the Fellowship learning and more than 12 years of facilitation, co-design, and bullying prevention work with Sticks 'n Stones, alongside my Masters research exploring co-designed approaches to bullying prevention with young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

That combination of practice experience, research, teacher insight, and international learning strongly shaped the direction of the toolkit.

The Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit provides ready-to-use classroom resources for Years 5-13 focused on:

- prevention
- empathy
- relationships
- digital wellbeing
- and practical responses to online bullying

Part Three

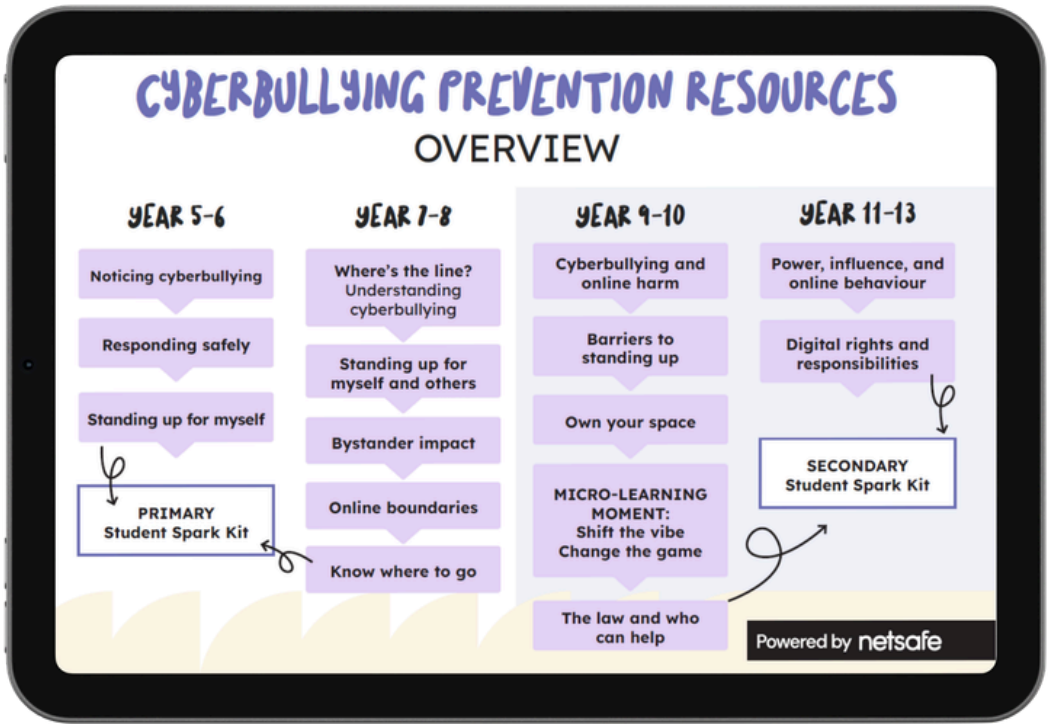
Netsafe's Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit

Embedding Prevention Into Everyday School Life

Importantly, the toolkit was designed to support ongoing classroom conversations and relational learning rather than positioning online safety as a standalone topic disconnected from students' everyday experiences.

The Fellowship also reinforced the importance of approaches that move beyond isolated online safety messaging and instead focus more broadly on relationships, communication, empathy, and the wider social dynamics surrounding online conflict.

That thinking influenced the direction of the toolkit, particularly its emphasis on ongoing classroom conversations and practical prevention approaches that could be embedded into everyday school life.



Part Three

What this reinforced

What the Fellowship and the work that followed reinforced most strongly was how thoughtful, reflective, and insightful young people can be when they are genuinely invited into conversations about digital life rather than spoken about from a distance.

Across the workshops, teacher research, Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit work and the co-design of Headspace Invaders, young people consistently demonstrated nuance, self-awareness, humour, critical thinking, and a strong understanding of the pressures and contradictions shaping online spaces.

Teachers also demonstrated enormous commitment to supporting young people through increasingly complicated digital environments, often while navigating rapid change and limited guidance themselves.

What became increasingly clear was that meaningful prevention work is rarely built through fear or certainty alone. The strongest approaches encountered throughout the Fellowship created space for participation, reflection, relationships, adaptability, and ongoing conversation.

That does not remove the very real challenges surrounding young people's digital lives, but it does create more realistic and constructive ways of responding to them.

Part Four
Final Reflections

Before beginning the Fellowship, I had already spent many years working alongside young people, schools, educators, and communities through co-design, facilitation, bullying prevention, and research.

The Fellowship did not fundamentally change those beliefs or suddenly introduce new concerns, but it did provide the opportunity to explore how similar conversations were unfolding internationally and how different organisations, researchers, and communities were responding.

What I found most valuable was not discovering a single “best” approach, but seeing how many people across different countries were actively grappling with similar questions around participation, prevention, digital wellbeing, platform responsibility, and the realities young people are navigating online.

The Fellowship also reinforced something I had already seen repeatedly through my work in Aotearoa New Zealand: young people are often far more thoughtful, reflective, and capable than public conversations about them sometimes suggest.

Across the Fellowship, I encountered young people contributing to research, shaping programmes, challenging assumptions, leading conversations, and offering nuanced perspectives about digital life, relationships, identity, belonging, and online culture. That was reflected again through the work that followed back in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly through the Beyond a Single Story workshops, the teacher research, the Cyberbullying Prevention Toolkit work, and later the co-design of Headspace Invaders.

Young people consistently demonstrated humour, insight, self-awareness, creativity, and a strong ability to reflect critically on the online environments they are navigating every day.

The Fellowship also reinforced the importance of building responses that young people, educators, and communities can realistically engage with over time.

Part Four
Final Reflections

Many of the strongest approaches I encountered internationally were not built around perfect solutions or absolute certainty. They created space for participation, relationships, reflection, adaptability, and ongoing learning as technology and online culture continued changing.

That felt especially important at a time when public conversations around young people and technology are often becoming increasingly polarised.

Throughout the Fellowship, I kept returning to the idea that meaningful online safety work cannot rely only on restriction, fear, or simplified narratives about harm.

Young people's digital lives are shaped by relationships, identity, humour, belonging, learning, creativity, pressure, conflict, and connection all at once. Any meaningful response needs to be able to hold that complexity rather than flatten it.

The Fellowship ultimately reinforced the importance of continuing to build work that is participatory, practical, relationship-based, and grounded in the realities young people and educators are actually describing.

That work will continue evolving, just as young people's digital environments continue evolving alongside it.





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