Utrecht University

Dynamics of Youth

DYNAMICS OF YOUTH

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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PREFACE

Prof. dr. Catrin Finkenauer,
Scientific director Dynamics of Youth

Welcome to Dynamics of Youth's 2025 annual report. This report invites you to look back at how far we have come together, and to look ahead with renewed energy and curiosity. Inside, you will find stories of what we achieved, what did not go as planned, and what we learned along the way. We share these stories because progress depends not only on results, but also on reflection, courage, and the willingness to try again as a team.

Our work is grounded in the belief that children and young people are catalysts of hope and change. From early childhood to young adulthood, they grow up in a world shaped by war, digitalisation, diversity, climate change, and polarization. While these developments open doors for some, they widen inequalities and deepen adversity for others. To build a healthy, inclusive, and resilient society, we must invest in youth and the systems surrounding them, including families, schools, care systems, cultural institutions, and communities.

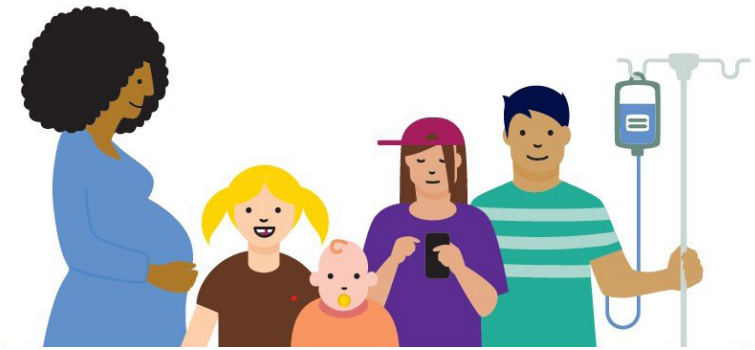
Over the past year, our communities and teams have pushed boundaries to create meaningful and lasting impact. For instance, our communities have expanded their interdisciplinary networks, strengthened their collaborations with societal partners, and supported new projects on topics such as early development, mental health, youth participation, and education and life skills. We have done so with a clear ambition: to "change the smell of the place." To us, this is a practical metaphor for shifting the daily culture of science and collaboration: how we listen, how we decide, how we handle disagreement, how we recognize contributions, and how we create space for learning. It is a shift from counting outputs to pursuing meaning, from hierarchy to teamwork, from isolation to connection, and from performance pressure to creativity and play.

This annual report details what we built, launched, strengthened, and connected. You will also learn about the projects that took longer than expected, the ones that did not work, and the ones that surprised us. In inter- and transdisciplinary work, "failure" often occurs when evidence must travel between disciplines, institutions, and lived realities. Identifying these milestones allows us to work more effectively toward Utrecht University's broader goals. By bridging disciplinary boundaries and engaging with societal partners, we advance the university's mission while specifically fulfilling the Dynamics of Youth (DoY) ambition: contributing to a better world for youth.

If you are reading this as a partner, colleague, or supporter: thank you. Your engagement makes this work possible.
If you are reading about Dynamics of Youth for the first time: Welcome! We hope these pages spark your curiosity, not only about our results, but about how we do things. Because what we are building is more than a portfolio of projects. We are building a way of working that enables science to meet society, and society to shape science, so that every young person can flourish.

Enjoy the read.

ABOUT DYNAMICS OF YOUTH



Dynamics of Youth brings together researchers, teachers, and partners in four communities: Early Childhood, Thriving & Healthy Youth, Becoming Adults in a Changing World, and Youth Education & Life Skills. Together, these communities explore how children and young people grow, learn, and find their place in a rapidly changing world—and how we can strengthen the environments around them so that more children and young people can grow up safely, with support, and with the opportunity to thrive. This work depends on partnerships across disciplines and sectors: within Utrecht University and UMC Utrecht, and with national and international collaborators, professionals, policymakers, educators, parents, and, most importantly, with young people themselves. We do not just study youth; we work with them and with the systems that shape their everyday lives.

Read more

DOY COMMUNITIES

The DoY communities inspire and strengthen one another. Each community encourages learning together, social engagement, and creative collaboration between young people, researchers, and society, but each also looks at youth from its own unique angle.

In this annual report, you'll see small icons that act as signposts for our communities. They help you find what matters most, highlight the different stories and projects, and make the content easier to navigate. By breaking up long sections of text, they also make reading a bit more playful and enjoyable.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Focuses on early development from conception to around six years of age.

THRIVING & HEALTHY YOUTH

Focuses on strengthening health and resilience in children and young people.

BECOMING ADULTS IN A CHANGING WORLD

Focuses on navigating the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

YOUTH EDUCATION & LIFE SKILLS

Focuses on the broader role of education and learning, through which children and young people acquire not only knowledge but also the skills they need to find their way in the adult world.

YEAR THEME: HEALTHY PLANET

Healthy Planet was Utrecht University's annual theme for 2025. Our planet is under pressure, facing complex challenges in areas such as sustainability, health, and climate change. Utrecht University and Dynamics of Youth collaborate with numerous partners to develop sustainable solutions that promote the health of both the planet and all living beings. In this context, we published our *magazine Our Planet, Our Youth, Our Future* last year. The magazine showcases some of our interdisciplinary collaborations around the world that are making a difference for and with children and youth. The Healthy Planet theme is also a common thread throughout this report.

READING GUIDE

At Dynamics of Youth, we believe in the power of collaboration and recognise the value of every individual. This annual report is more than a collection of facts and figures; it showcases the impact we've achieved together over the past year.

Why read this report? If you are interested in how we fulfil our promises, you will find specific examples of how our activities support the work of the seven UU faculties involved in DoY. Through our Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (PMEL) cycle, we ensure that our efforts are visible and meaningful within the university and beyond.

Each section showcases the contributions of our vibrant, multidisciplinary community of junior and senior researchers, our dedicated support staff, and our societal partners to our impact areas. This report provides a snapshot of our work in 2025, offering a clear illustration of our commitment to making a difference for all children and young people, rather than an exhaustive catalogue. So, please think of these pages as a curated gallery of highlights, a snapshot of how we are bringing Utrecht University's Strategic Plan 2030 to life for youth.

ELEVATING RELEVANCE AND EXPANDING VISIBILITY

Dynamics of Youth (DoY) is gaining importance at Utrecht University (UU) and beyond. DoY examines the many factors that influence the development of young people, connecting research, education, and real-world impact across disciplines and sectors. Our four communities bridge fields by collaborating with experts from different areas to share clear narratives and start joint projects that align with UU's guiding principles.

In 2025, we have made significant progress, including increased collaboration across disciplines, a great number of published work, and stronger public outreach through blogs, podcasts, and talks. These efforts helped build a solid research pipeline, reaching education, healthcare, and, for example, urban design partners, while including young people through the Youth Participation in Research Network. However, there were challenges too. Some activities were delayed due to budget constraints and heavy workloads, reminding us to streamline processes and secure steadier funding. Although feedback from events was positive, it also revealed a desire for ongoing engagement beyond one-time meetings, reflecting participants' wish for a more stable platform for peer exchange, learning, and mutual support over time. Overall, all four communities became more visible and effective, balancing big ideas with practical steps.

Looking ahead, DoY will be deeply integrated into UU's communications strategy, featuring clear messages and strong highlights that demonstrate societal impact and relevance. By collaborating closely with the other Strategic Themes and focusing on audience-friendly storytelling, DoY will raise its profile among academics and external partners. Partnerships with Child Health (UMCU) and other organisations will support shared goals regarding well-being, resilience, and sustainability. Open Science and youth participation will continue to keep research relevant, accessible, and co-created with young people. This approach strengthens interdisciplinary projects, builds capacity, and boosts policy-relevant impact.

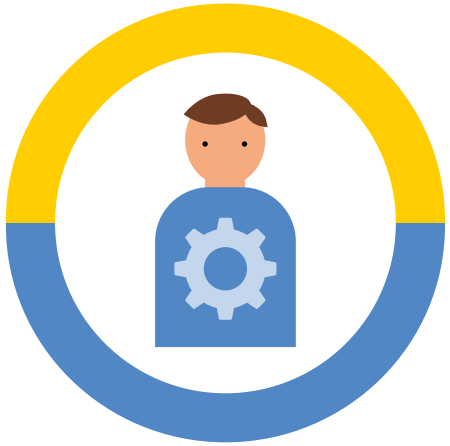
IMPACT AREAS

To identify areas of improvement and determine where we need to increase our efforts to maximise the impact and mattering of our activities, DoY uses an annual Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (PMEL) cycle. Rather than serving as a rigid reporting tool, the PMEL cycle helps us identify successes, areas for improvement, and priorities for future action. This reflective approach ensures that our activities contribute meaningfully to both scientific knowledge and societal change.

Within our PMEL framework, we focus on four key impact areas:

RESEARCH IMPACT
Advancing knowledge and methods in youth development through high-quality, FAIR research.

SOCIETAL IMPACT
Addressing societal challenges related to youth development.



CAPACITY BUILDING
Strengthening the skills of students, researchers, and professionals, while supporting a sector that values diverse contributions.

SUSTAINABILITY
Ensuring long-term impact through strong networks, sustainable practices, and increased visibility.

Every year, we reflect on our contributions to these areas. On the following pages, you will find a selection of highlights from 2025 that illustrate our progress towards these goals.

RESEARCH IMPACT

Working across borders requires courage and commitment: stepping out of comfort zones, setting aside competition, and embracing the complexity of societal issues. But we can only understand 'the child' and 'the young person' by looking at the bigger picture: we take a life-course perspective to deepen our understanding of how early experiences affect later outcomes and why no two life journeys are the same. This approach requires doing interdisciplinarity to capture the full complexity of how young people's lives unfold over time. And when interdisciplinarity succeeds, the results are inspiring, innovative, and make a difference. Below are some wonderful examples of how DoY contributes to relevant research in concrete terms. The examples illustrate the diverse range of initiatives and projects.

Luzia Heu

"We found that human beings experience loneliness quite similarly, irrespective of where they live: definitions of loneliness varied more between individuals than between cultures."

LONELINESS ACROSS THE WORLD: DO YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES FEEL THE SAME?

Is loneliness a universal experience, or does culture shape how young people feel and understand it? Researcher Luzia Heu explored how cultural contexts influence experiences of loneliness among young people across the globe.
This article was previously published in the magazine Our planet, Our youth, Our future! , a joint publication by DoY, UGlobe, and Child Health (UMC Utrecht).
Read more

Carlijn van den Boomen

"Parents and policymakers need to know what effects the policies in place at the time had on these young children"

COVID-19 AND EARLY EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Early Childhood has yielded a continuous stream of high-impact research, including studies on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on early development using data from the YOUth cohort. Researchers discovered that babies and toddlers who grew up during the COVID-19 pandemic showed no difference in brain responses to happy and scared faces, whereas typically, babies react very differently. These surprising findings raise important questions about how social restrictions may have shaped early emotional development - and what this means for parents, educators, and policymakers. Furthermore, these findings also underscore how early developmental processes are embedded in broader societal conditions, reinforcing DoY's life-course perspective on youth research.
Read more

SECURING THE FUTURE OF LONGITUDINAL YOUTH RESEARCH: 10 YEARS UP

Becoming Adults in a Changing World supported the continuation of 10 Years Up, a longitudinal study on youth goals, self-regulation, and well-being. Their financial contribution secured the cohort study for an additional six years, preserving its ten-year design. By supporting 10 Years Up, the community ensured that this valuable dataset remains available for future interdisciplinary research and collaboration.
Read more

CONNECTING RESEARCH, LEARNING, AND SOCIETY THROUGH FUNDING

Through its recurring funding activities, Youth Education & Life Skills supports a diverse range of interdisciplinary research projects. These projects address topics related to youth, language, learning, and society, and reflect the broad expertise and collaborative nature of the community.
The impact of this funding is visible in concrete research outputs. For example, laureate Jaqui Goldin turned her funded project into the publication "In the Minor Key: The Minuscular Mycelium and its Implications for Citizen Science" in the journal Citizen Science. The article explores innovative ways of fostering connection and learning within citizen science, demonstrating how small-scale projects can lead to internationally visible scholarships and strengthen Utrecht University's academic profile in citizen science and participatory research.

Elena Tribushinina and colleagues

SYMPOSIUM BUILDING A NEW LIFE IN A NEW LANGUAGE

Youth Education & Life Skills also contributes to knowledge exchange by supporting and co-organising events. One highlight was the symposium "Building a New Life in a New Language", organised by laureate Elena Tribushinina. The symposium brought together researchers and professionals to share perspectives and experiences on language, integration, and new beginnings. It was a day full of dialogue, curiosity, and connection, illustrating how Youth Education & Life Skills supports not only projects, but also the people and networks behind the laureates.

STRENGTHENING RESEARCH IMPACT THROUGH THE EWUU ALLIANCE

Alongside these grants, the collaboration between Thriving & Healthy Youth and the EWUU Alliance (Eindhoven University of Technology, Wageningen University & Research, Utrecht University and University Medical Centre Utrecht) was further strengthened. They work together within the Institute 4 Preventive Health. Thriving & Healthy Youth took a leading role in developing a conceptual framework for the research line, laying the groundwork for a position paper and future interdisciplinary initiatives.

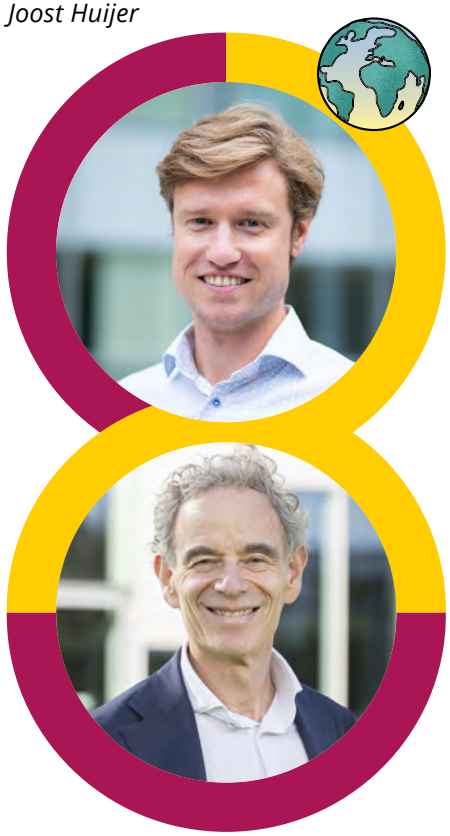
STRENGTHENING RESEARCH IMPACT THROUGH NWO-FUNDED PROJECTS

Last year, within Thriving & Healthy Youth two important NWO grants were awarded that strengthened both academic research and societal impact. An NWO XS Grant was awarded to the project "Toward gender-sensitive care in youth personality pathology: An AI-driven approach," enabling a PhD trajectory for a clinical practitioner and fostering collaboration with Eindhoven University of Technology. In addition, an NWO KIC Grant was approved to the project "SPACES: Supporting participation and accessibility for children with a disability or a chronic disease through empowering infrastructure solutions in urban physical space." The project brings together a broad consortium of academic, societal, and public partners (e.g., architects, playground developers, rehabilitation clinics) to improve inclusive urban environments for young people. Together, these grants demonstrate how interdisciplinary collaboration translates into external funding and tangible societal innovation.

SOCIETAL IMPACT

DoY aims to generate societal impact by translating interdisciplinary research into tangible outcomes that address the complex challenges of youth development beyond academia. We foster reciprocal collaborations with policymakers, societal partners, and young people themselves to ensure our work is grounded in real-world needs and lived experiences. Ultimately, we aim to make our research both relevant and practically applicable, moving beyond mere knowledge production toward meaningful social change. The examples below demonstrate the practical and tangible ways in which DoY contributes to societal impact. They showcase the wide range of initiatives and projects we pursue to benefit communities and everyday life.

Joost Huijer



Louis Bont

GLOBAL HEALTH IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Paediatric infectious disease specialist Louis Bont and legal scholar Joost Huijer explored how medical innovation, children's rights and social responsibility intersect in the global fight against respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). While vaccination programmes can largely prevent severe illness in high-income countries, RSV remains one of the leading causes of infant mortality worldwide. Their work raises fundamental moral and legal questions: Who benefits from scientific progress? What responsibilities do academic hospitals have beyond national borders? By bringing together medical science and legal scholarship, this collaboration reframes global child health as both a biomedical and a moral responsibility. It exemplifies how DoY connects disciplines to address systemic inequality in access to innovation.

Read more

HOW TO GIVE MORE ROOM TO CLIMATE EMOTIONS

Climate change isn't just a matter of facts - CO_2 levels, melting ice caps, or extreme weather. It's also about feelings and emotional responses to climate change. Researchers Michiel van Harskamp and Andrik Becht explored how these emotions shape young people's engagement with issues related to climate change and examined why acknowledging them in the classroom is essential. Their work offers practical guidance for educators on creating safe spaces where students' feelings are recognised and discussed. Their work contributes to a growing educational approach that recognises emotions as drivers of engagement and agency. In doing so, it equips schools to better support young people navigating their future.

Read more

Even though much remains uncertain, sooner or later everyone will be affected by the consequences of climate change. For children and young people, this will have a major impact on their future. That is why there is a need for an educational perspective on climate change. As this perspective has been lacking until now, the Netherlands Youth Institute (NJI) set out to gather knowledge and insights. Together with DoY, UNICEF Netherlands, and the Young Climate Movement, the NJI published this important report.

Andrik Becht

Michiel van Harskamp

EARLY YEARS BLOG: BRIDGING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The societal impact of Early Childhood is reflected in the Early Years Blog, a platform for professionals working with children that highlights topics such as diversity, inclusion, equal opportunities, and developmental support. Recent posts explore, for example, how children can co-design outdoor spaces, and how language mixing by parents in multilingual families affects children's language development. By sharing research-based insights in a format that is accessible to professionals working with children and young people, the blog supports educators, parents, and professionals in creating inclusive and developmentally supportive environments and strengthens the bridge between academia and everyday practice, ensuring that scientific insights directly inform professional decision-making.

Caroline Junge

Anika van der Klis

COVID-19 INSIGHTS FOR YOUTH POLICY

Early Childhood also strengthened collaboration with societal partners through practice-oriented initiatives. Together with the municipality of Utrecht, and researchers Caroline Junge and Anika van der Klis, the community conducted research on the effects of COVID-19 on child and youth development. The findings informed new municipal youth policy. Insights from this work were also shared with a broader audience through the Kraamkunde podcast and a publicly available factsheet, ensuring that research findings reached practitioners and the public.

Read more

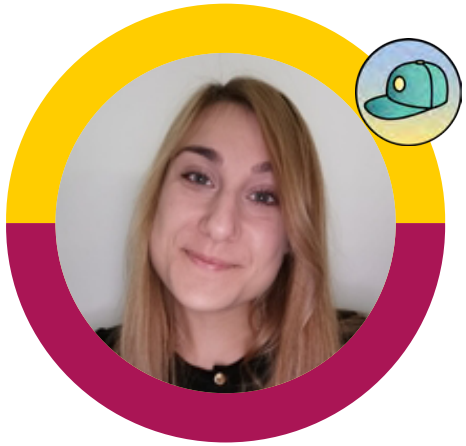
Alessandra Seggi

Ari Purnama

ENGAGING YOUTH AND THE PUBLIC IN SCIENCE

Becoming Adults in a Changing World fostered dialogue between researchers, students, and the wider public through a variety of events. A highlight was an event on youth mental health in on-screen media, organised with Ari Purnama and with a keynote lecture from Alessandra Seggi. Young people were actively involved throughout the event, including in a panel discussion alongside researchers. Student volunteers produced a video capturing the discussions, taking ownership of both the content and the narrative. The event demonstrated that youth participation is not symbolic, but substantive: young people shaped the dialogue and influenced the framing of the issue itself.

Alexandra Masciantonio



PINT OF SCIENCE FESTIVAL

Becoming Adults in a Changing World also contributed to public science communication through the Pint of Science festival, with Alexandra Masciantonio curating an evening on “Sustainability: A Balancing Act - Policy, People & Planet.” The session united diverse perspectives, from corporate discourse to individual well-being and environmental conservation. By engaging the public in informal settings, these activities help make science more accessible and foster dialogue between academia and society.

CO-CREATING INCLUSIVE IMAGINARIES FOR YOUTH WELLBEING AND LIFE SKILLS

Through several funded projects, Youth Education & Life Skills actively fosters collaboration with societal and educational partners, both locally and internationally. These projects aim to connect academic knowledge with practice and to promote inclusive, participatory approaches to youth-related challenges. An example is the project “Co-creating Inclusive Imaginaries for Youth Wellbeing and Life Skills in Curaçao”. This project organised a seminar on international perspectives on childhood, youth, life skills, and participatory methods. The seminar brought together researchers and school leaders and educators, strengthening dialogue and collaboration between academia and educational practice.

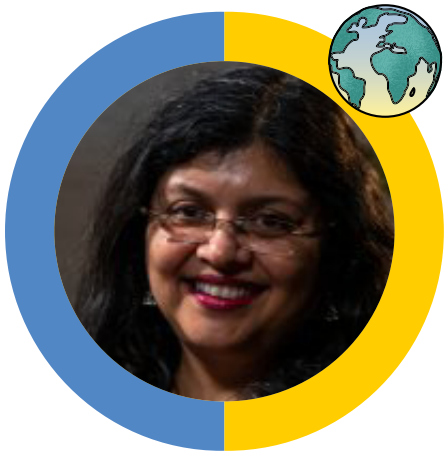
POST-COVID EXPERTISE CLINICS FOR YOUTH

In 2025, Post-COVID Expertise Clinics for Youth were launched at UMC Utrecht, providing tailored, interdisciplinary care for children and adolescents with long-term post-COVID symptoms. The clinics combine treatment and research, generating new knowledge that is shared with healthcare providers to improve care nationally. Children and adolescents with symptoms such as brain fog, fatigue, and reduced physical capacity receive coordinated support, helping them regain quality of life and participate in school and social activities. The clinics represent a structural integration of care and research, ensuring that clinical practice continuously informs scientific inquiry and vice versa. This model strengthens expertise and positions Utrecht as a leading centre in post-COVID youth care. The clinic at UMC Utrecht is closely embedded within Thriving & Healthy Youth.

CAPACITY BUILDING

At Dynamics of Youth, we believe that to truly support children and young people, we must empower the people who work with them. Our focus on capacity building is all about strengthening the skills of our students, researchers, and partners.

Working across different disciplines requires more than just traditional teaching; it calls for creative new ways to learn, evaluate, and grow together. We are especially dedicated to 'Lifelong Learning,' ensuring that professionals in the field have access to the latest insights and continuing education. The examples featured in the following are representative of our work in 2025: projects and initiatives that illustrate the breadth and quality of our capacity-building activities. While they demonstrate the kinds of activities we pursued, they are snapshots of our ongoing efforts.



Harini Nagendra

"Through her commitment to empowering youth in and through sustainability education, Harini Nagendra creates real-world impact."

Prof. dr. Catrin Finkenauer

HONORARY DOCTORATE FOR HARINI NAGENDRA

Harini Nagendra (Azim Premji University, India) received an honorary doctorate this year in recognition of her scientific and social contributions to a healthier planet. She was jointly nominated by DoY and the strategic theme Pathways to Sustainability. Her pioneering research on reconnecting people and nature in urban environments has advanced knowledge on sustainability, resilience, and livability, and serves as an inspiration for students, researchers, and practitioners working in youth development. Her recognition reflects DoY's commitment to global, socially engaged scholarship and reinforces Utrecht University's position within international sustainability and youth networks.

In addition to her scientific work, Professor Nagendra actively contributes to capacity building by exploring how scientists can engage wider and more diverse audiences through popular writing and storytelling. In a workshop, participants practiced using sensory perceptions in their own narratives - what they see, hear, feel, sense, taste, and smell - thereby strengthening their communication skills and ability to translate research into societal impact.

Read more and more

SUMMER SCHOOL EARLY CHILDHOOD

In 2025, Early Childhood organised their second summer school, focused on interdisciplinary learning and active engagement. Participants worked in interdisciplinary teams, visited research facilities such as the BabyLab, and engaged with content through creative formats, including an escape room.

REACH CONFERENCE

Early Childhood organised the Reaching New Heights in Early Childhood Research (REACH) conference, bringing together researchers in the field of Early Childhood and sharing experiences and knowledge, taking research to a higher level. Over two days, more than fifty researchers presented their work to colleagues from all seven faculties of Utrecht University and UMC Utrecht. The programme not only transferred knowledge, but actively trained participants in the mindset and skills required for sustained interdisciplinary collaboration. The community also invited researchers to contribute to a special issue on Early Development from a Multidisciplinary Perspective in the journal of Infant and Child Development (Wiley), further amplifying the impact of the conference and fostering ongoing scholarly exchange.

TRAINING RESEARCHERS AND STUDENTS TO MAKE SCIENCE ACCESSIBLE

The Becoming Adults in a Changing World workshop contributed to capacity building in science communication and education. Through exploration of diverse formats and discussion of challenges such as audience engagement and institutional support, the workshop provided researchers with practical tools to make their work more accessible and impactful.

INTEGRATING EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND SOCIETAL APPLICATION

Becoming Adults in a Changing World was also actively involved in the course 'Youth Challenges: Engage, Research and Act' within the Youth Development and Social Change master programme. Two student groups conducted research on the Manosphere and storytelling for depolarisation, while also developing concrete end products for the community. This integration of education, research, and societal application illustrates how students can contribute directly to real-world youth-related challenges and exemplifies how DoY embeds its mission directly into educational programmes, shaping the next generation of scholars and professionals.

CONFERENCE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR LIFE SKILLS

Youth Education & Life Skills hosted the conference 'Global Partnerships for Life Skills' in collaboration with the Center for Global Challenges at Utrecht University and the department of Education and Pedagogy. The conference aimed to foster collaboration between UU and partners in the Global South, building on the Action for Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE). By strengthening global partnerships, the conference contributed to shared learning on youth education and life skills across diverse cultural and educational contexts. By building long-term academic partnerships, the conference also contributed to a more globally connected and context-sensitive approach to life skills education.

BRIDGING CONTINENTS: AFRICAN-EUROPEAN YOUTH COLLABORATION

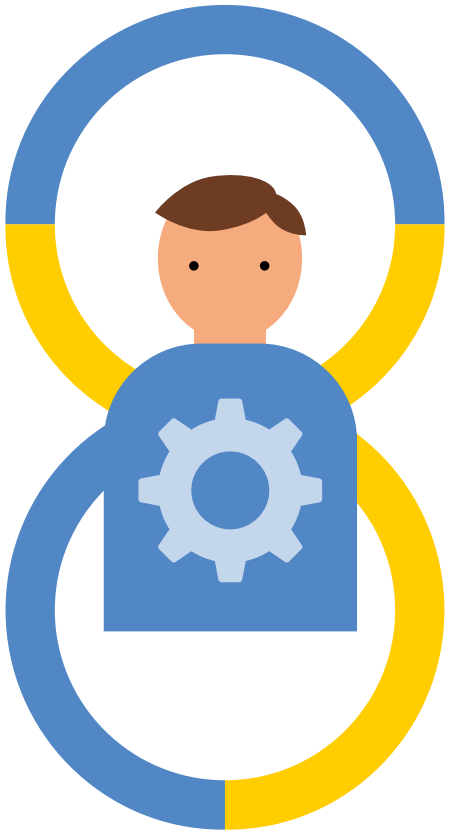
Youth Education & Life Skills also funded the three-year project 'Bridging Continents: African–European Youth Collaboration for Diverse and Digital Futures'. The project brings together students and experts from the Netherlands, Uganda, Kenya, and Italy through an international exchange programme. By facilitating cross-continental collaboration, the project supports mutual learning and capacity building across diverse educational and cultural contexts. During a summer school, participants engaged in workshops, field research and cultural exchange that fed into an interdisciplinary podcast project on key challenges related to digital (il)literacy and misinformation as experienced by different groups of young people across continents.
Foto & video summer school Bridging Continents

COLLABORATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARY EXCHANGE

Thriving & Healthy Youth strengthened their collaboration with clinical and societal partners by co-organising the symposium "Relaties als basis" together with GGz Centraal. The symposium connected researchers and clinicians from a wide range of organisations, fostering interdisciplinary exchange between research and practice.
The symposium deepened the partnership with GGz Centraal, and attracted new collaborators, such as In je bol. (In je bol is the place to go for mental health, especially for young people aged 16 to 27. Young people can find reliable information, stories from others, and practical tips and tools to get started themselves.)

DOY OVERARCHING ACTIVITY: OECD WEBINAR ON TRUST AND EDUCATION

In October 2025, prof. dr. Catrin Finkenauer participated in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) webinar "How can education build trust in a polarised world?". The session explored the role of education in strengthening trust in times of increasing polarisation and declining confidence in democratic institutions. Speakers discussed how education systems, teachers, and school leaders can foster critical thinking, support students in understanding their rights, and help them make informed decisions about trust in others and in institutions. The webinar contributed to capacity building by strengthening expertise and networks around trust, education policy, and evidence-informed approaches to fostering social cohesion.



SUSTAINABILITY

At Dynamics of Youth, sustainability means building foundations that last. We don't just focus on individual projects, but work to establish the structures, partnerships, and networks that ensure our impact is sustained and grows, even after a funding cycle ends. We have learned that children and young people are often the most creative problem solvers in their own lives. That is why we are shifting our focus from research about and for youth to research with youth. To support this shift and sustainability, we work to make our data and expertise FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable), ensuring that the knowledge we generate remains a shared resource.

The following examples offer a glimpse into our work in building lasting structures, partnerships, and practices. They showcase our dedication to sustainability and collaboration. However, they only reflect a subset of our work, as there are many additional initiatives and outcomes.

THE IMPROVA PROJECT: BOOSTING ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS EUROPE

Strengthening knowledge and skills among young people and adults who support them is essential for promoting mental wellbeing. Adolescence is a crucial developmental phase and a major and exciting turning point in life. Yet around half of all adult mental health problems begin during, or even before, these years, and recently increased. The IMPROVA Project (Intervention Enhancing Mental Health in Adolescents: Horizon 2023-2027) responds to this challenge by developing a sustainable, innovative online platform that strengthens mental wellbeing in secondary schools across Europe. The IMPROVA online platform emphasizes prevention and skill-building. The platform was co-created with teenagers, parents, teachers, school health professionals, and policymakers in four European countries. Researchers from DoY and Interdisciplinary Social Science at Utrecht University are among the consortium members.

ENHANCING VISIBILITY AND COLLABORATIVE WORKFLOWS

Over the past year, Becoming Adults in a Changing World has increased their visibility by becoming more active on LinkedIn and by developing a “Workflow for Responding to News”. This workflow allows them to respond more effectively to relevant news items by providing expertise, debunking myths, depolarizing conflicts, and sharing positive messages. These efforts ensure that expertise does not remain within academic circles, but actively contributes to informed public discourse and societal dialogue.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Last year, the Youth Participation in Research Network was launched. By fostering a community of practice, the network supports co-creation between researchers and youth, enabling the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and practical tools. Through learning by doing and peer-to-peer inspiration, the network contributes to capacity building for both researchers and young people, enhancing the relevance, quality, and societal impact of youth research. The network marks an important shift: from consulting youth to structurally partnering with them. It lays the foundation for sustained co-creation across DoY communities. An active Microsoft Teams channel supports ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing, making the community a sustainable structure. Youth Education & Life Skills has taken a key role in initiating and facilitating this network, together with representatives from Thriving & Healthy Youth and Becoming Adults in a Changing World.

STRENGTHENING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH AMBASSADORS AND NETWORK MAPPING

To strengthen their sustainability, Early Childhood welcomed 20 dedicated ambassadors. These individuals act as vital bridges, staying at the heart of new developments and providing strategic input. They also ensure that opportunities, from events to funding calls, reach every corner of our network. In addition, the community is developing a Network Map that visualises the expertise and connections of our researchers. This tool will make it easier for colleagues to find one another across faculties, sparking new collaborations and making interdisciplinary collaboration more accessible and sustainable over time.

SUSTAINABLE COLLABORATION BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

Becoming Adults in a Changing World intensified the collaboration with Youth Education & Life Skills. This included joint planning of future events and exploring the possibility of sharing a postdoctoral position. These steps were taken both in response to budget constraints and to meet a growing demand within our communities for better integration of research and activities in a sustainable and functional manner, increasing coherence and long-term sustainability across DoY.

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS AND EXPANDING COMMUNITY REACH

Within the broader landscape of Utrecht University organisations, Youth Education & Life Skills actively strengthened its collaboration with initiatives such as the University Museum Utrecht and the Centre for Science and Culture. These efforts focused on building sustainable partnerships that enable recurring activities and long-term contributions.

In parallel, the community increased its visibility through internal and external communication channels, particularly LinkedIn and Microsoft Teams. By restructuring their posting strategy and actively seeking advice from communication professionals, they improved both the quality of content and its reach.

DIVERSEMINDS NETWORK

Thriving & Healthy Youth supported the establishment and further development of several interdisciplinary research networks, including the DiverseMinds network. They contributed by exploring ideas and possibilities together, co-organizing the kick-off event, and providing small-scale seed funding via lottery to stimulate new interdisciplinary collaborations.

DOY OVERARCHING: OUR GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE HELPS TO DRIVE CHANGE

At Dynamics of Youth, we believe that meaningful research on societal challenges begins with the way we work, learn, and collaborate, not only with formal policies or mission statements. That's why we work to transform our organisational culture into one rooted in openness and curiosity, gradually changing the "smell of the place." Our governance and way of working are the driving forces behind this change. Most of our governance processes are participatory: our Programme Board brings together members from all seven faculties, our annual meeting is facilitated in a participatory way, and DoY is supported by the Board of Deans of all seven faculties, ensuring a strong institutional foundation.

Our Programme Board members are not just administrators, they are ambassadors who turn departmental networks into collaborative ones. A great example is the EVENING Project, led by Programme Board member Thomas van Huizen. This project illustrates what DoY strives for: translating scientific knowledge on preschool education into tangible societal impact. Its results offer valuable insights for policies aimed at reducing inequality, a clear example of interdisciplinary research making a real-world difference. We therefore nominated this project for the Agnites Vrolikprijs 2025.

By collaborating across Utrecht University's Strategic Themes, we aim to encourage collaborative efforts. We promote a unique space to bring play back into science. We believe that everyone benefits when researchers experience the freedom to explore and experiment. Even when projects take unexpected turns, the lessons learned make our research more robust and relevant.

Collaboration lies at the heart of DoY. In 2025, we continued to build bridges across disciplines, institutions, and borders to address complex challenges facing children and youth. The stories that follow offer a glimpse into our collaborative work and partnerships. While they illustrate our approach, they capture only part of the collaborations and teamwork happening throughout the DoY community.

DOY'S COLLABORATIONS

GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

UU Global Engagement is a part of Utrecht University's strategic plan. It demonstrates Utrecht University's commitment to fostering an academic community that is globally engaged and collaborates across borders to address today's challenges and build a sustainable future. In 2025, DoY has continued to connect global engagement to our science, education, insights, and practices focused on children and youth. Our 2025 publication Our Planet, Our Youth, Our Future showcases some of the interdisciplinary collaborations that are making a difference for children and youth around the world. We look forward to continuing and further building on these initiatives in 2026. Together with the other three Strategic themes of Utrecht University, we have also taken the first steps toward further aligning, strengthening, and coordinating Global Engagement initiatives.

PRINCE CLAUS CHAIR SHAZLY SAVAHL

On May 26, 2025, Prof. Shazly Savahl (University of Cape Town, South Africa) formally accepted his appointment to the Prince Claus Chair in Equity and Development at Utrecht University, hosted by Dynamics of Youth. The ceremony was held at the University Hall and attended by members of the academic community, international guests, and youth engagement advocates.

In his inaugural lecture, titled "The 10th Shift in Child and Youth Well-Being Research: A Global Social Justice Perspective towards a Child-Conscious Society," Prof. Savahl explored the need to move beyond traditional indicators of child well-being. His work combines subjective well-being data with objective quality-of-life metrics, advocating for authentic child participation and more inclusive policy development. As the Prince Claus Chair holder, Prof. Savahl brings a strong commitment to social justice and equity, with a research agenda that centers children's rights, voices, and lived experiences. His work contributes to building a child-conscious society, where children are not only protected but actively shape the world they live in.
Read more and more

DOY AND CHILD HEALTH: TOGETHER FOR WELL-BEING

DoY has a strong, long-standing partnership with Child Health at University Medical Center Utrecht (UMCU). We believe that healthy, resilient youth today will shape a healthier, more sustainable tomorrow. The success of our youth depends on the broader systems we're building, including policies, ecosystems, and research commitments. Our guiding questions are clear: How can we boost the well-being and resilience of children and adolescents for future generations? What challenges do young people face? And how can science spark practical innovations? DoY and Child Health combine interdisciplinary research with a life-course perspective to address physical and mental health needs, while keeping the voices of young people at the center of our decision-making.

We believe that impactful science should not be buried in paperwork. That is why, as a signature event of our collaboration, we hosted the third "Booster Borrel" on 28 October 2025, a lively meeting of colleagues from UU, UMCU, and societal partners. As always, the highlight of the evening was the Booster Grant Lottery.

Why a lottery? Open to researchers from all faculties, this lottery-based grant is built on a foundation of trust. We know our researchers are already doing high-quality, impactful work; we simply provide the boost. Therefore, we keep the application requirements light and accessible, so interdisciplinary teams can focus on what matters most: creating research with real societal impact. The pitches from previous laureates once again showed the strength of this approach. What begins as a lottery quickly becomes something more: a vibrant forum for bold, new connections, and collaborations that continue well beyond the funding itself.

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH TRIAL AND ERROR

Up till now, this annual report has highlighted examples of our achievements and successes from 2025. But a complete picture of our year must also include the challenges we faced. We have learned that growth often happens at the intersection of bold ambition and real-world constraints. These experiences reminded us that progress depends on honestly reflecting on what worked, what didn't, and where we can improve. By reducing the stigma around failure and setbacks and treating them as a source of learning, we strengthen not only our science, but also our training, collaboration, and impact.

Less is more

This year made it clear that time and energy are not unlimited. Due to many reasons, including staffing changes, high workloads, and budget constraints, we could not accomplish all that we had hoped for. However, rather than viewing this as a shortcoming, we learned the value of making conscious choices. For example, we focus more on what is feasible, meaningful, and sustainable for the people involved. This shift was at the heart of our DoY annual meeting in November, where we used our participatory muscle to align our efforts to increase our visibility and strengthen our internal and external partnerships.

From inspiration to continuity

Many activities sparked enthusiasm and new connections, which was encouraging to see. At the same time, turning that initial energy into longer-term collaboration proved more difficult. This reminded us that impact grows over time, and that continuity, follow-up, and simple recurring formats are just as important as good ideas and inspiring meetings. To support this shift from inspiration to continuity, we initiated the development of a sustainable archive that enhances the usability and accessibility of our existing knowledge. By making past initiatives, materials, and connections easier to trace and retrieve, we strengthen internal visibility and invest in continuity, institutional memory, and long-term collaboration.

Engaging society and participants in ways that fit

Engaging societal stakeholders and involving participants, especially young people, provided valuable insights and perspectives. At the same time, we learned that enthusiasm for participation does not automatically translate into sustained engagement. In some cases, one-off events generated rich dialogue but did not lead to continued collaboration, simply because the format did not align with participants' time, expectations, or need for follow-up. This insight prompted us to be more intentional about how and when we engage. Rather than pursuing multiple forms of participation simultaneously, we prioritised formats that matched our organisational capacity and allowed for reciprocity and continuity. A concrete example of this approach is the Youth Participation in Research Network. This network fosters an ongoing community of practice where researchers and youth can share experiences, discuss methods, and develop expertise together. By aligning ambition with structure, we strengthened trust, maintained meaningful connections, and laid the foundation for more sustained and in-depth collaboration in the future.

Visibility and support make collaboration easier

At Dynamics of Youth, we've learned that the best science often occurs in the spaces between the formal structures. While good ideas are everywhere, they can only flourish when the right people can find one another. Limited visibility and fragmented communication can be silent barriers to collaboration and innovation. We learned that clear positioning, active facilitation, and supportive structures can make a real difference in connecting people and transform ideas into shared initiatives. Central to this shift is our commitment to making the invisible visible. Behind every formal project lies invisible ecosystem of informal conversations, emerging communities, and shared goals. Highlighting these ecosystems, ongoing activities and informal connections which are not always apparent, is crucial for building collaboration and impact. By making this invisible work visible, we are doing more than reporting on output, we are investing in the very relationships that drive our future impact and ensure that our partnerships are built to last.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

2025 was another strong year for DoY funding, with 23 projects approved totaling €205,000, underscoring our commitment to innovative, interdisciplinary research.

INVIGORATION GRANT AND OPEN CALL

We funded six projects via the Invigoration Grant (€106,000) and thirteen projects through the Open Call (€59,000), spanning researchers from all seven faculties and a broad array of topics. A full overview of approved projects is available on our website.

BOOSTER GRANTS LOTTERY

In collaboration with the Child Health Programme (UMCU), DoY hosted the third Booster Grant on 28 October 2025. This lottery-based approach promotes fair and rapid funding, as well as collaboration, by accelerating team formation and idea generation. Up to 50 participants attended the event.

Overall, the year highlighted our inclusive, forward-looking research ecosystem that brings together diverse disciplines and societal partners to advance youth health, resilience, and well-being.

The visual overview on the next page presents the financial realisation for 2025. All amounts are presented in thousands of euros. Beyond the numbers, these investments reflect deliberate choices: prioritising interdisciplinary collaboration, safeguarding research infrastructures, and enabling innovative funding mechanisms such as the lottery-based Booster Grants. Together, they demonstrate how relatively modest resources can catalyse substantial impact.

€2,01 MILLION

IN TOTAL FOR 2025
(€ IN THOUSANDS)

€537
DOY CORE TEAM PERSONNEL

€67
DOY CORE TEAM MATERIALS

€551
DOY COMMUNITIES PERSONNEL

€42
DOY ICT AND DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

€205
DOY FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

€90
EARLY CHILDHOOD

€227
THRIVING & HEALTHY YOUTH

€124
BECOMING ADULTS IN A CHANGING WORLD

€169
YOUTH EDUCATION & LIFE SKILLS

€106
INVIGORATION GRANTS

€59
OPEN CALL GRANTS

€40
OPEN CALL GRANTS

MEET THE TEAMS

DoY Programme board
members of all UU faculties

DoY Education board
members of all UU faculties

Boards

UU Supporting Domains
Such as Communications & Marketing, Research Support Office, and Finance & Control
UU Education Domains
Such as graduate and research schools, and teaching staff

UNIVERSITY BOARD

Board of deans – 7 Faculties

- Scientific director
- Managing Director
- Senior Science Communications Advisor
- (Inter)national partnership developer
- Project coordinator
- Postdoc Youth empowerment
- Management and office assistant
- FAIR specialist

Core team

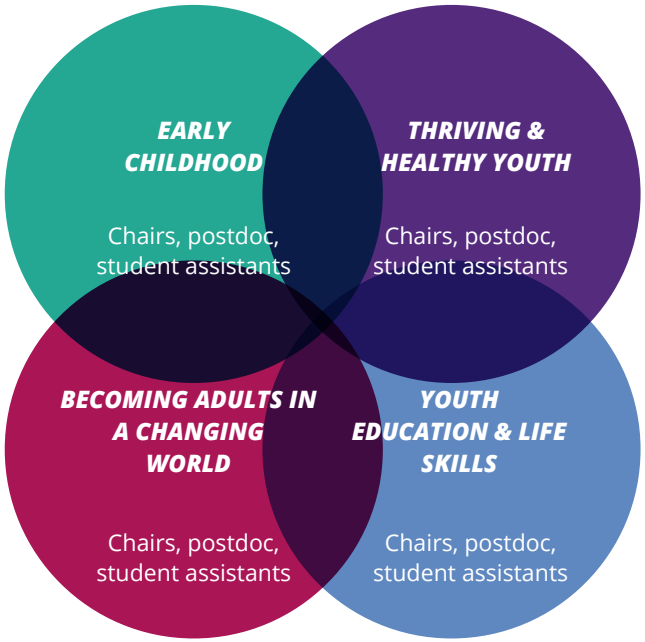
UMC UTRECHT

Research themes

Child Health Programme

Cooperation partner

DOY COMMUNITIES



BOARD OF DEANS

- Elaine Mak (Law, Economics and Governance)
- Isabel Arends (Science)
- Debbie Jaarsma (Veterinary Medicine)
- Annemarie van Wezel/Steven de Jong a.i. (Geosciences)
- Leoniek Wijngaards – de Meij (Social and Behavioural Sciences)
- Thomas Vaessens (Humanities)
- Arno Hoes/Louis Bont (Medicine)

DOY PROGRAMME BOARD

- Catrin Finkenauer (SBS)
- Jan van Tartwijk (SBS)
- Tamara van Gog (SBS)
- Jan Willem Gorter (MED)
- Kors van der Ent (MED)
- Manon Benders (MED)
- Kirsten Visser (GEO)
- Harold Bok (VET)
- Merel Jonker (LEG)
- Anja Volk (SCI)
- Els Stronks (HUM)
- Thomas van Huizen (LEG)

DOY CORE TEAM

- Catrin Finkenauer – Scientific director
- Jacobine Buizer-Voskamp – Managing director
- Diederik van Iwaarden – Partnership advisor
- Janneke Voskamp – Senior science communications advisor
- Femke Everaarts – Project coordinator
- Iris Bleeker-Beers – Management and office assistant
- Francesca Ranalli – Postdoc Youth Empowerment
- Neha Moopen – FAIR specialist
- Maria van der Harst – Postdoc Prince Claus Chair

DOY EDUCATION BOARD

- Jan van Tartwijk (chair; SBS)
- Hylko Tas (secretary; SBS)
- Madelijn Strick (OvP; SBS)
- Jorg Huijding (SBS)
- Femke van Esch (LEG)
- Frans Adriaans (HUM)
- Geert Ramakers (MED)
- Gery Nijenhuis (GEO)
- Sigal Rotem (SCI)

DOY COMMUNITIES

EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Jeroen Dudink (MED), Pauline Slot (SBS), Ora Oudgenoeg-Paz (SBS), Aoju Chen (HUM), Eline de Groot (HUM), and student assistants

BECOMING ADULTS IN A CHANGING WORLD

- Jaap Denissen (SBS), Marije van Braak (HUM), Alexandra Masciantonio (SBS), Tara Smeenk (SBS), Jikke Bowles, and Jill Borsboom

YOUTH EDUCATION & LIFE SKILLS

- Veronique Schutjens (GEO), Sanne Akkerman (SBS), Tjitske de Groot (SBS), Pascale van Zantvliet (SBS), Viviënne de Wolff (HUM), and Bob Jeurgens (GEO)

THRIVING & HEALTHY YOUTH

- Heidi Lesscher (VET), Sanne Nijhof (MED), Odilia Laceulle (SBS), Anne Margit Reitsema (SBS), Anouk Aleva (SBS), and student assistants

COLOPHON

This annual report was written by Catrin Finkenauer, Jacobine Buizer-Voskamp, Diederik van Iwaarden, Francesca Ranalli, Iris Bleeker-Beers, Maria van der Harst, Janneke Voskamp, and Femke Everaarts, with input from the DoY Communities, the Programme Board, and our team of enthusiastic researchers. This annual report covers the period from January 1, 2025, to December 31, 2025.

If you want to join our DoY Teams, please send an email to DoY-Secr@uu.nl