



KEY YOU Local Study Report – Germany as part of an ERASMUS+ Project

Analysis of civic knowledge and perceived barriers among youth in Potsdam and Brandenburg and resulting recommendations for serious games for youth participation

Project Title: Creative Knowledge & Diversity-oriented Engagement for Youth UNLOCKED Participation

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Section I: Introduction and Summary

1.1. Objectives: The KEY-YOU Project Framework and Local Goals

This local study was conducted by project team Researcher Vu Dinh Dang at HochVier e.V. within the framework of the European project KEY-YOU: Creative Knowledge and Diversity-oriented Engagement for Youth UNLOCKED Participation. KEY-YOU is a two-year EU-funded initiative formed by a consortium of 5 partner organisations inside the EU. It intends to strengthen civic participation, equality and inclusion among young people, especially under-represented groups. More information can be accessed under: www.key-you.eu

While this report focuses specifically on the current state in the city Potsdam and the federal state Brandenburg in Germany, parallel studies have been carried out by partner organizations in other European countries, such as Greece and Portugal. Collectively, these national studies will be synthesized into a comprehensive international report, outlining cross-border conclusions and policy recommendations for youth engagement across Europe.

At the regional level, the insights gathered serve the purpose of shaping the design and mechanics of educational digital escape game and a physical companion flashcard deck, which are two core deliverables of the KEY-YOU project. To ensure these educational tools are grounded in the needs of the target demographic, this study has clear objectives: To analyse the current state of civic knowledge, perceived barriers, and youth participation among young people in Potsdam and Brandenburg, and to translate these findings into actionable design recommendations for serious games.

To this end, the study is structured into the following sections:

- **Section II** outlines the research design, methodology, and demographic parameters of the study.
- **Section III** analyses the baseline levels of civic knowledge and legal rights awareness among Potsdam's youth.
- **Section IV** explores the primary structural and psychological barriers that limit youth participation.
- **Section V** evaluates local gaming habits and preferences to inform Game based Learning (GBL) tool design.
- **Section VI** outlines actionable, strategic design recommendations for developing effective Game-Based Learning tools.

1.2 Abstract: Overview of Key Regional Findings & Proposal for GBL Recommendations

This report examines data from a mixed-methods regional study carried out by HochVier in Potsdam, pairing a quantitative survey with qualitative co-creation sessions. The quantitative data combines primary survey metrics, qualitative insights from local co-creation workshops, and regional time-series data. The consolidated data exposes a real knowledge-action gap within the target demographic. 80.7% of primary survey respondents believe they have a theoretical right to voice opinions on local municipal regulations, but 53.8% of the total sample say they lack the procedural knowledge to actually exercise it. That gap suggests youth inactivity isn't a matter of apathy, but of

failing to navigate the system. The same pattern shows up in the legislative process itself: 46.2% of local youth report no understanding at all of how a citizen's proposal becomes an official municipal ordinance, and a further 42.3% have only a vague sense of it.

The primary barriers driving this civic disconnection are both structural and psychological:

- **Procedural Paralysis:** 53.8% of youth say a lack of clear entry points and instructions on where or how to begin directly keeps them from participating in local decision-making.
- **Time Poverty:** Time constraints and post-school exhaustion are major obstacles, with 50.0% of respondents reporting they simply don't have the energy left to participate after long school days, university lectures, or vocational training.
- **Institutional Alienation:** Perceived bureaucratic complexity (26.9%) and institutional skepticism (34.6%), rooted in the belief that individual voices are routinely ignored, suppress motivation further.

To work around these friction points, the strategic design parameters align directly with the verified gameplay habits of local youth. The data shows a strong preference for analog-digital hybrid solutions: 69.2% of respondents regularly play board games, 65.4% play card games, and 61.5% play digital video games.

Key recommended features to lower existing barriers include a plain-language interface with interactive jargon tooltips, high optimization for low-bandwidth mobile networks and direct, integrated links to real-world local youth organizations to help transition virtual play into actual community involvement.

Section II: Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Target Audience and Sampling Parameters

The target cohort for this study is young people aged 18 to 30, with a sub-focus on marginalized, rural, and lower-socioeconomic youth across Brandenburg. The primary quantitative survey gathered insights from a localized sample of 39 unique respondents.

The demographic breakdown of this primary sample is as follows:

- **Age Distribution:** The sample concentrates around young adults in transition phases: 19.2% of respondents are 22, another 19.2% are 19, 15.4% are 23, and 11.5% are 20. Smaller cohorts fall at age 30 (7.7%) and age 18 (7.7%), with single respondents (3.8% each) at ages 16, 17, 21, 28, and 67.
- **Gender Identity Balance:** Male respondents dominate this sample: 61.5% identify as male, 34.6% as female, and 3.8% decline to specify. No respondents identified as non-binary or diverse in this primary sample.
- **Geographic Distribution:** The primary dataset skews heavily urban. 80.8% of participants live in city centers or urbanized areas, 15.4% live in rural villages or the countryside, and 3.8% are unsure of their designation.
- **Vulnerable and Underrepresented Layers:** The primary cohort reflects structural marginalization directly: 7.7% of respondents identify as members of an ethnic or cultural minority, 7.7% have direct migrant or refugee backgrounds, and 3.8% manage acute financial difficulty day to day.

- Perceptions of Exclusion: This distinction matters: 34.6% of these young people report feeling actively excluded from social or political spaces "sometimes" because of their background, and another 3.8% experience this exclusion "frequently."

To ensure academic reliability and regional relevance, the study follows a triangulation method set out in the broader project framework. A primary sample of 39 respondents gives a localized snapshot, but it carries limited statistical weight on its own, so the analysis draws in two secondary datasets as well.

The first is the Babelsberg Youth Survey (n = 281), which supplies localized data on urban space use and neighborhood-level conflicts in Brandenburg. The second is the "Jugend in Brandenburg" time-series study (n = 3,142), which offers a representative baseline of youth values and sociological trends across the state. Cross-referencing the primary survey against these two larger datasets builds a fuller regional picture.

2.2 Data Collection Mix

Quantitative Methodology	Qualitative Methodology
Standardized Questionnaires (n=39)	Two-Day Co-Creation Lab
Babelsberg Youth Survey (n=281)	Structural Brainstorming
Brandenburg State Time-Series (n=3,140)	Focus Groups on Friction

The research design pairs quantitative and qualitative tools to get statistical clarity and narrative depth at the same time.

2.2.1. Quantitative Standardized Tools

The quantitative phase used a standardized questionnaire, distributed through physical handouts and local digital platforms. It measured three things: baseline knowledge of legal rights, structural friction points within local governance, and gaming preferences around mechanics and session length. This survey grounds the primary sample's gaming habits and rights awareness in verifiable statistics. The study also draws on two prior, independent surveys that carry far more statistical weight thanks to their larger sample sizes.

2.2.2. Qualitative Local Think Tank Integration

The qualitative strand came from a two-day local Idea Lab and Think Tank hosted by HochVier in Potsdam on April 14, 2026, and May 18, 2026. The event brought together a mix of stakeholders: young people from migrant families, youth workers, and local project facilitators. Rather than treating participants as passive research subjects, the lab ran on a participatory model, with youth acting as structural co-designers.

The program was built to produce clear, usable data:

- Day One (Barriers and Systemic Needs): Opened with ten rapid three-minute speed-dating rounds to break the ice and get everyone to talk early. Participants then split into small focus groups to map out regional structural deficiencies, focusing on the lack of non-commercial spaces and information overload on social networks.

- Day Two (Solution Drafting and GBL Specification): Focused on turning identified barriers into concrete recommendations for the city of Potsdam. The co-design teams outlined clear parameters for youth-responsive communication.

Section III: Analysis of Baseline Knowledge

3.1 Legal Rights Awareness and the Regional Confidence Gap

Quantitative data from the Potsdam target group shows a clear split between abstract rights awareness and operational civic literacy. Asked to self-assess their understanding of their legal rights as young people in Europe on a 1-to-5 scale, respondents gave a scattered set of answers. The largest single group sits at a moderate 3 out of 5 (34.6%), while a combined 30.8% put themselves at a low 1 or 2 out of 5. Only 7.7% of youth surveyed feel fully confident, picking the maximum 5 out of 5. Youth rights as a concept are widely recognized, but functional clarity about what those rights mean in practice is missing for most local youth.

This deficit turns into a clear Confidence Gap once the question shifts to participation in local governance. Asked whether they have a right to voice an opinion when the municipality passes new rules affecting young people, a thin majority, 53.8%, choose the response "Yes, but I do not know how to do it." Only 26.9% of respondents say they both acknowledge the right and understand the practical steps to use it.

This is a real barrier to participation, not a symptom of apathy or a lack of interest in regional development. The data points to something else: a structural barrier. Young people recognize their theoretical entitlement to a political voice, but they lack the practical know-how to use it. That gap locks over half of local youth out of civic spaces, for no reason beyond missing procedural knowledge.

3.2 Systemic Opacity and the Legislative Black Box

The gap in practical knowledge becomes even clearer when it comes to understanding formal legislative and administrative structures. Asked whether they know how a citizen's initial idea becomes an official law or local municipal ordinance, nearly half the primary sample (46.2%) admit they have no idea how the process works. Another 42.3% say they have only a vague, approximate sense of the sequence, and just 11.5% claim to understand the exact administrative steps involved.

This opacity turns local government into a complete black box for nearly 90% of local youth. From a sociological standpoint, when the channels of formal power seem unreachable, young citizens are unlikely to even try influencing institutional outcomes. If submitting a proposal, petitioning a council, or influencing a municipal budget is treated like a specialized bureaucratic secret, the system discourages youth-led initiatives by default. This widespread lack of understanding reinforces the sense of institutional distance, making formal local government feel entirely out of reach for the average young citizen.

3.3 Institutional Communication Clarity and Information Noise

This institutional distance ties directly into how young people read official political information. Only 11.5% of primary survey respondents find official political communications easy to understand. The rest split: 50.0% say clarity depends heavily on the specific topic, and 38.5% say official information is usually far too complicated and dense to process.

Qualitative insights from the Potsdam Idea Lab help explain these numbers, pointing to two problems reinforcing each other: institutional confusion and digital information noise. Think tank participants noted that local government platforms often use overly formal, academic language that acts as an

initial gatekeeper, while social media channels create a real information overload at the same time. Uncurated, sensationalized, and conflicting updates clutter youth communication feeds, making it hard to isolate reliable facts about local funding, youth rights, or participation opportunities.

Official channels fail to present information in clear, youth-accessible formats, so young people must sift through a wall of digital noise instead. This information gap excludes anyone without specialized education or high civic literacy, and it points to a real need for Game-Based Learning tools built around plain language and interactive, visual translations of complex administrative realities.

Section IV: Analysis of Perceived Barriers

4.1 Primary Civic Friction Points: Structural and Psychological Obstacles

What holds back youth participation comes down to a mix of practical, structural limits and psychological barriers that run deep. Respondents were asked to pick their top three reasons for avoiding local decision-making, and the answers pointed to several overlapping issues.

Structural Obstacles

The top structural obstacle local youth identify is time poverty. Exactly 50.0% of survey respondents say a lack of time directly keeps them from engaging with local politics. Local youth workers explain why: long school days, rigid university schedules, and intensive vocational training blocks leave young citizens with nothing left in the tank by evening. Scheduling formal municipal meetings for that time of day works against the very people it's meant to reach.

This time poverty gets worse because of local infrastructure gaps:

- **Transit Limitations:** Public transportation frequency drops sharply during evening and night hours, according to regional data. That's a real barrier for youth living outside the urban core who want to attend civic events.
- **Bureaucratic Complications:** 26.9% of youth point to complex bureaucratic procedures and formal language as a primary barrier.
- **Technological Disadvantages:** Local think tank data shows that many marginalized or low-income youth rely on older, low-tier smartphones and unstable mobile data, which locks them out of high-bandwidth digital participation platforms.

Psychological Obstacles

These practical barriers are reinforced by psychological ones. 34.6% of youth say that they choose not to participate because they don't believe their voice can change real-world outcomes.

This skepticism comes from real-world experiences of friction within Brandenburg. Local reporting from Babelsberg shows young citizens feel like they're sometimes not welcome in public spaces: unprovoked police checks, aggressive neighbor complaints about noise, and a steady shrinking of non-commercial social spaces. Treated as disturbances rather than community members, young people start to develop a sense of distrust of local institutions. That led to some youth protecting themselves by withdrawing from civic life altogether.

4.2 Vulnerable Group Insights: Lived Experiences of Exclusion

34.6% of primary respondents feel excluded from social or political spaces due to their background or identity at least sometimes, however only another 3.8% deal with this isolation frequently.

For youth with migrant or refugee backgrounds, the primary barrier is often the formal language local government platforms use. Idea Lab participants noted that official flyers and administrative processes often rely on a specific language, that feels foreign and demands specialized cultural capital to interpret. That linguistic barrier leaves these young people sometimes feeling like temporary guests in public forums rather than citizens with the power to shape their city.

This perceived exclusion also takes on a distinct class dimension in urban centers like Potsdam. Because there are so few indoor, non-commercial spaces where youth can spend their time in winter without spending money, lower-income youth end up meeting up on places such as streets or bus stops.

Rural youth on the outskirts of Brandenburg face a different kind, a geographic of isolation. Reduced evening bus schedules cut them off from centrally located youth clubs and municipal forums. And when digital options get proposed as a workaround, unstable broadband and older mobile devices may sometimes rule those out as well.

Taken together, these factors add up to a disconnect across vulnerable demographics. Confused by administrative language, priced out by slow yet steady gentrification, or cut off by failing infrastructure, vulnerable youth may end up as passive onlookers rather than active participants in local democracy.

Section V: Analysis of Gaming and GBL Preferences

5.1 Hardware Accessibility, Media Formats, and Gaming Frequency

An effective Game-Based Learning (GBL) tool for Brandenburg has to be built around the target group's actual hardware access and entertainment habits, not assumptions. The data shows a real balance between digital consumption and analog play. Within the primary sample, regular engagement with video games on PCs, consoles, or mobile devices stands at 61.5%.

That digital engagement is outpaced by traditional, face-to-face gaming formats, though. 69.2% of surveyed youth regularly play board or parlor games, and 65.4% play card games. That affinity for analog formats suggests regional youth value social interaction and tangible gaming components just as much as anything digital.

Local Media and Game Format Affinity (*multiple choice allowed*)

Format	Participation Rate
Board and Parlor Games	69.2%
Card Games	65.4%
Digital Video Games	61.5%
Pen-and-Paper Roleplaying (D&D)	15.4%

Digital gaming frequency tells a similar story: this audience isn't made up of hardcore gamers. The largest single group is young people who play digital games rarely or never, at 34.6% of the sample.

The remaining digital players split across different levels of engagement:

- Weekly Players: 30.8% play digital games several times a week.
- Monthly Players: 23.1% play several times a month.

- Daily Players: Just 11.5% play daily.

This spread carries real implications for tool design. More than a third of the primary target audience doesn't play digital games regularly, which means the digital escape room has to avoid complex controller schemes, advanced gameplay systems, or steep learning curves.

The tool can't assume high digital gaming literacy. It needs intuitive, clean interfaces that feel welcoming to non-gamers, so the software stays accessible to every participant regardless of gaming background.

5.2 Core Mechanic Assessment: Problem-Solving over Raw Competition

On what makes gameplay enjoyable, the local data shows a clear preference for intellectual challenges and collective action over simply winning.

Asked to pick the design elements that give them the most satisfaction, youth responses showed a clear pattern:

- Complex Logical Challenges: Solving intricate riddles, cognitive puzzles, and logical problems scored highest, at 53.8%.
- Collaborative Gameplay: Working with other players toward a shared goal came in second, at 42.3%.
- Competitive Performance: Testing personal skills against others in a direct contest was selected by 34.6% of respondents.
- Narrative Immersion: Following an immersive story, plotline, or rich mythology was valued by 30.8% of the sample.

This data lays out a clear direction for the GBL mechanics. Brandenburg's youth are driven by problem-solving and team cooperation. They would rather work through a complex situation together than fight for the top spot on a competitive leaderboard.

The escape room puzzles, then, need to require information sharing and collaborative deduction. Prioritizing logic puzzles over twitch reflexes or individual speed runs means the game mechanics directly mirror the cooperative, deliberative process real-world civic organizing actually requires.

5.3 Preferred Game Duration: Designing for the Post-School Fatigue Window

The time data from the regional survey shows that short, focused microlearning formats are essential. Asked how much time they would willingly spend in a single session with an educational learning game, respondents clustered heavily around shorter playtimes.

Preferred Educational GBL Playtime

Session Length	Respondents
None	2 (7.7%)
Under 20 Minutes	8 (30.8%)
20 to 45 Minutes	10 (38.5%)
Up to 60 Minutes	2 (7.7%)

Session Length Respondents

Longer than One Hour 4 (15.4%)

A clear majority of youth prefer a gameplay experience under 45 minutes. The largest cohort chose a window of 20 to 45 minutes (38.5%), and 30.8% wanted something even shorter, under 20 minutes. Only a small share of the target population is willing to engage for an hour (7.7%) or longer (15.4%) in a single sitting.

This preference matches the qualitative findings on post-school exhaustion and time poverty. Young people are drained after long school days or vocational training blocks, and they don't have the capacity left for long, multi-hour simulation games.

The GBL modules need to be designed as self-contained, modular chapters running 20 to 45 minutes. That duration makes the tools easy to fit directly into local youth center schedules or standard 45-minute high school political education classes, working within the daily time constraints regional youth actually face.

Section VI: Strategic Design Recommendations

6.1 The GBL Tool Blueprint

To match local requirements, the project sets out a two-part, analog-digital hybrid GBL blueprint built around the regional data.

1. The Digital Escape Room Architecture

The digital build needs to run as an asset-light, web-first application. It should focus on the target group's top preferences for complex logic puzzles (53.8%) and cooperative mechanics (42.3%). Instead of resource-heavy 3D engines, the game should use a clean, responsive 2D layout built with open-source frameworks.

One way for the game to directly challenge the structural opacity of local government could be by implementing a targeted role-reversal mechanic. The concept behind it is as follows:

Players step into the shoes of a local mayor or a municipal administrator, balancing limited public budgets, managing competing neighborhood interests, and navigating real legal rules to get a youth center approved. This shift in perspective cuts through the usual institutional frustration by showing youth how administrative decisions actually get made.

2. The Physical Card Tool Integration

The project pairs a high-quality physical flashcard deck with the digital app. These cards act as a bridge between virtual play and real-world group work.

6.2 Recommended Actionable Features for Lowering Structural and Linguistic Barriers

Given our findings, the following features are recommended to be implemented:

Plain Language Interface

To counter bureaucratic exclusion and help the 38.5% of youth who find political language too complicated, it's recommended that the game implement a clean, jargon-free text system. The interface can then strip out formal legal or political terms and replace them with youth-friendly language, co-designed by young people.

If an administrative concept like "municipal ordinance" or "thematic committee" were to be necessary for a puzzle, the UI needs to include easily accessible and understandable explanations. One possibility to implement this could be an interactive, hover-over tooltips window that instantly translates jargon into clear, simple language. This feature would remove linguistic barriers and give migrant and lower-literacy youth uncomplicated access to political information.

Mobile-First Optimization for Low-Bandwidth Areas

To support rural youth dealing with poor internet infrastructure and low-income youth with older smartphones, the digital escape room needs a highly optimized, resource-light backend. The game has to be fully playable on a standard mobile browser, without large downloads or high-speed internet connections.

Using compressed vector graphics, local data caching, and clean code, the app runs smoothly even on a weak mobile network in remote villages outside Potsdam, so infrastructure gaps don't cause further exclusion.

Safe-to-Fail Environment

To counter the widespread belief that individual action changes nothing, the game loop needs a safe-to-fail progression system. The game avoids punishing "game over" screens that increase feelings of failure.

When players make an incorrect choice or misallocate a budget, the system should show immediate visual feedback on the local impact that choice would have, so they can adjust their strategy right away. By showing visible results for every choice in a risk-free simulation, the tool builds the confidence and sense of agency young people need for real-world participation.

Real-World Translation Links

To help the 53.8% of youth who feel they have rights but don't know how or where to start, the game needs clear exit points that lead somewhere real. The final stage of every digital puzzle chapter connects directly to the real-world community.

For example, after a group solves a puzzle about municipal project budgets, the application interface instantly displays direct, low-barrier contact links to local Brandenburg youth organizations, regional streetworkers, or active municipal youth councils like the Stadtjugendring. This feature could turn short-term digital engagement into long-term community involvement, giving youth a clear map from a virtual game directly into real-world local democracy.

Sources:

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