

# Reading and young people

Prepared by the [Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature Office](#)

## *Snapshot*

Our own Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature highlights the discussion among the Cities of Literature on the declining rates of reading among young people around the world, the possible causes, and some of the programming being created to address this decline.

The Norwegian Festival of Literature is the biggest non-commercial literary festival in the Nordic countries, and is held annually in Lillehammer during May/June. This year, on a Wednesday panel, three representatives from different literary organizations met with three politicians: one deputy minister from the Department of Culture, and two members of the opposition to discuss the changing landscape of literature in Norway, as well as the barriers to reading, particularly in young people.

A little over a decade ago, Norway received evidence that Norwegian students had far worse reading skills than anyone had imagined. To counter this, several national programs were rolled out – to great success, seemingly. Now, Norway is experiencing a widening gender gap when it comes to education as many male students in the 16-19 age group drop out of school completely, and the majority of students in Norwegian universities are women.

Norway's former Minister of Culture, Trond Giske suggests that Lillehammer define the same kind of ambition as one finds in the National Transport Plan (zero fatal accidents among under-18s on Norwegian roads and motorways) for literature (a "Zero Vision" when it comes to school drop-outs).

The recent Norwegian Festival of Literature panel raised the question; why is it only in culture politics that words are not followed by actual money? It seems that the (likely) incoming administration is willing to formulate a national reading policy that is filled with actual goals and tools (in concrete terms: setting aside 1% of the annual budget for culture, and developing a national reading strategy to follow) and not just the usual well-crafted words about the importance of reading in light of democracy.

Published in late [2019, the international PISA study](#) showed concerning rates for young readers in the Netherlands. Research demonstrated that almost 50% of young people think reading is a waste of time and 60% only read when they have to. The risk of having a low literacy rate for kids from the age of 15 has more than doubled in 15 years up to almost 25% percent now.

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The topic of young readers and reading for pleasure is something that the UNESCO Nottingham City of Literature, among other UNESCO Cities of Literature, have been looking at a fair bit. In this [overview](#) Nottingham-based researcher Josh Krook looks at the challenges Nottingham faces in terms of poor literacy rates, and what is being done to meet these challenges.

One of the increasing challenges, Cities of Literature found in readership among young people, is the privilege and accessibility of books. Nottingham addresses this issue with two distinct projects, [World Book Night](#) and [Dolly Parton Imagination Library](#), both initiatives which try to make books as widely available as possible by giving books to those who don't have easy access, and don't read regularly for pleasure.

But is a decline in readership purely an issue of accessibility?

The Norwegian Festival of Literature in Lillehammer proposes that it isn't Discussed in their panel was the idea of competition; what are the competing demands of young people's attention that books and reading are currently losing to? Is it all TikTok, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram's fault, or is the literary content itself just not competitive?

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While it's easy to jump to the conclusion that playing computer games correlates with young people not being motivated enough to read, the UNESCO Cities of Literature tend to agree that it is more useful to look at how technology can be used alongside literature to make books more widely available and accessible, rather than replacing it altogether.

Ways in which the Cities of Literature are using technology to enhance literacy are wide and varied, and include investing in the relationship between reading and podcasts. The Dutch national foundation as a part of the Dutch national campaign on reading has launched a [project](#) in collaboration with two authors and the game developer Ubisoft which combines stories with the game Assassin's Creed via an app in order to make reading a more integrated experience. Elsewhere, students in the Manchester Art Academy are doing a virtual tour of [the city](#) and [their campus](#), showcasing the unique ways technology can be used to enhance literature.

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In these times of confinement and limited connection, escaping the cacophony of the outside world to the quiet beauty of words may not be quite what young people need. While books (and reading for that matter) are hardly going away, dealing with a decline in readership is a common problem among the Cities in the



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UNESCO Literature Network, and something they are addressing, and should continue to address, jointly – scientifically, politically, actively.

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