Ethical guidelines for AI

and competence framework for AI literacy in youth work



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Summary

This document provides ethical guidelines for AI in youth work and a competence framework for youth workers' AI literacy. Its aim is to support organisations and staff in the youth sector in using AI in a way that is appropriate, safe, lawful and in the best interests of young people. The document is based on the premise that AI is not merely a single tool, but rather a far-reaching social and cultural transformation that is affecting young people's everyday lives, learning, media environments, participation and wellbeing and the realisation of their rights.

The first part of the document sets out ethical principles for the use of AI in youth work. The guidelines emphasise that AI is always used to support human work, not as a substitute for human interaction, professional judgement or responsibility. The use of AI should be assessed based on needs: it must provide clear added value for young people, youth workers or services, and the benefits must outweigh any harm it might cause. At the same time, it is important to recognise the environmental impacts of AI, the risks relating to information security and data protection, copyright issues and the potential for the generation of inaccurate, biased or discriminatory content.

The ethical guidelines are structured around four categories: needs-based use of AI in youth work; AI literacy of youth workers; use of AI in services aimed at young people; and data collected in youth work and its processing using AI. These categories place particular emphasis on young people's digital rights, critical AI and media literacy, transparent communication, maintaining human contact, recognising risky situations, equality, accessibility, data minimisation and the protection of personal data. The guidelines also contribute to the objectives of the EU AI Act by strengthening the youth sector's capacity to assess the risks posed by AI systems and operate responsibly in a changing regulatory environment.

The second part of the document supplements the ethical guidelines by describing what kind of AI literacy is needed in youth work. The competence framework structures AI literacy as consisting of ten competence areas: understanding the basics of AI; critical thinking and media literacy; communication and interaction; content creation and creative use; security, data protection and rights; wellbeing and ethical conduct; problem-solving and judgement; equality and accessibility; agency and participation; and development and continuous learning. Competence in these areas is examined at three levels: understanding, application in guidance work and organisational development.

The competence framework is not intended to be used for comparing individual workers or making value judgments about their competence, but rather to support shared

learning, self-assessment, the identification of training needs and the development of operations in working communities. The document emphasises that no one is expected to possess a high level of AI competence from the get-go; instead, it should be developed collectively, with employer support and as part of everyday work. All in all, this document provides the youth sector with both an ethical framework and a model for developing practical competence, with the help of which AI can be used in youth work in a responsible and transparent manner that strengthens young people's rights, wellbeing and participation.

Authors of the guidelines and the steering group

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1

Ethical guidelines for AI in youth work





Why do we need ethical guidelines for AI in youth work?

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally changing young people's everyday lives, learning and interactions. This is why we need clear ethical guidelines for AI in youth work. They will help youth workers to protect young people's rights, foster critical thinking and ensure that the technology supports young people's wellbeing instead of harming it.

AI is already a part of young people's lives through social media, games, schoolwork and everyday services, with algorithms influencing what young people see, hear and perceive as important. Without adequate guidance, AI may reinforce pressures to conform to certain standards of appearance, promote one-sided models of identity or increase dependence on digital services. The ethical guidelines will help youth work professionals to support young people safely and transparently while prioritising their best interests.

AI is affecting education, the future of work and opportunities for participation in the society in which young people live. If the use of AI is not guided by ethical principles, it may exacerbate inequality: those with better digital skills or access to the technology will benefit more than the rest. The role of youth work is to bridge these gaps and ensure that all young people acquire the skills to understand and use AI responsibly.

The media consumed by young people is increasingly filtered and generated by AI. Such media content can be manipulative, commercial or deliberately misleading, and AI can also personalise media in such a way that differing views are hidden from view. The ethical guidelines will help youth workers to address the impacts of media, promote media literacy and work with young people to prevent the spread of disinformation and hate speech.

Information quality has become a key issue as generative AI continues to proliferate. AI is capable of generating information that appears credible, but is actually incorrect or biased. Young people can use AI to support their learning, but without guidance, they

cannot always reliably distinguish reliable information from misinformation or disinformation. The ethical guidelines for AI in youth work will help youth workers to teach young people to adopt a critical approach and ask who produced the information, for what purpose, whom does it serve and how the reliability of the information can be verified.

From the perspective of democratic development, AI can both strengthen and weaken young people's participation. It can offer new ways to get involved, engage in active citizenship and make your voice heard. On the other hand, AI can also be used to manipulate public opinion, influence elections and increase polarisation. The ethical guidelines for AI in youth work will support youth workers in fostering young people's democratic skills and helping them understand their own role as active citizens, not just people to be influenced by others.

Another reason why ethical guidelines for the use of AI systems in areas directly relevant to youth work are needed is because youth work operates in a particularly sensitive area: a relationship of trust with young people. When AI is used in e.g. communication, guidance, assessment, documentation or operational planning, it can have a direct impact on how young people are treated and how data about them is processed. Without clear ethical principles, there is a risk that the use of AI may begin to steer interaction in a more mechanical, inhuman or distorted direction. The guidelines will help to ensure that responsibility always remains with a human being, that young people understand when AI is being used and that the technology supports genuine human interaction instead of replacing it. The guidelines also establish common boundaries for the protection of privacy and the processing and analysis of data, so that youth work remains safe, confidential and genuinely in the best interests of young people, even in the age of AI.

These ethical guidelines for AI in youth work set the boundaries for how this technology is used with young people and what kinds of services are provided to young people while always respecting their human dignity and rights.

These guidelines also support the objectives of the Finnish Youth Act, such as young people's participation, development, independence and equality, as well as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.

How to use these guidelines in youth work

The use of AI in youth work must be examined from a number of different perspectives. Youth workers must also understand that AI is not merely a single tool, but rather a technological transformation with a major impact on society. In these guidelines, we have divided the use of AI into four different categories (needs-based use of AI, AI literacy of youth workers, use of AI in services aimed at young

people, and collection and analysis of data on young people using AI), each of which requires a slightly different approach to examining the use of AI. The categories have some overlap, and some of the ethical guidelines provided under them apply to all uses of AI.

It should also be noted that AI affects young people's lives regardless of whether it is used in youth work or not. Because of this, it is essential for youth workers to have a sufficient understanding of AI so that they can educate and guide young people to operate in an ethically sustainable manner. To this end, young people need to be provided with e.g. ongoing media education and an understanding of how AI systems and algorithms work.

AI, like all new technologies, presents both challenges and opportunities. Recognising this, these guidelines do not take a stance either for or against the use of AI. Instead, the aim of these guidelines is to encourage youth workers to consider when and in what situations the use of AI is ethically sound, which is influenced by factors such as the nature of the system in question, how it works, the principles on which its operation is based, who owns the system and the type of data it has been trained on. That being said, the fact is that it is almost impossible to draw up clear-cut guidelines for this. What we can do, however, is encourage youth workers to continually develop their own AI literacy and provide support to help them engage in ethical reflection.

These guidelines were drawn up to support the existing Professional Ethics Guidelines for Youth Work. The guidelines are intended to help youth workers take a practical approach to examining the laws and regulations relevant to their work. The guidelines can be applied to all work in the field of education and guidance.

These ethical guidelines also set the boundary conditions for developing AI literacy, as required by the EU AI Act. Employers should support the development of their employees' AI literacy, taking into account their roles, technical skills, experience, education and training, the context in which AI is used and the individuals and groups who may be affected by the use of AI systems. Alongside the ethical guidelines, a competence framework for AI literacy in youth work was also drawn up, which places particular emphasis on ensuring that those working in the youth sector are able to carry out their work in an ethically sound manner and critically evaluate the use of various AI systems.

Structure of the guidelines

In this document, AI is examined from four different perspectives, or categories: needs-based use of AI in youth work; AI literacy of youth workers; use of AI in services aimed at young people; and data collected in youth work and its processing using AI.

Each category contains a number of specific guidelines. The guidelines are accompanied by brief explanatory notes describing various example scenarios in which the guidelines should be considered. The aim of these explanatory notes is to make it easier to apply the guidelines and support youth workers' competence in the use of AI.

The goal is that, having read these guidelines, youth workers will have an understanding of what constitutes adequate AI literacy. For youth workers, AI literacy means having a sufficient understanding to consider the use of AI to support your profession and client-facing work, develop new working methods that utilise AI and process data in an ethically sound manner.

Definition of AI

'AI system' means a machine-based system that is designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment, and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments.

(EU AI Act)

First of all, everyone should understand that when we talk about AI, we do not only mean large language models or other forms of generative AI that can be used to generate images, video or audio. AI systems are also used on a continuous basis in areas such as central government, logistics, social media recommendation algorithms, forecasting and data processing. The impacts of AI thus extend into all our lives, whether we like it or not.

When discussing AI, it is important to understand that not all AI systems work in the same way. It would, in fact, be useful to learn to distinguish between the different types of AI-based systems that exist, so that we can approach them with a critical eye. Some AI systems aim to be all-knowing automated response systems, while others are highly specialised and perform only one specific task. The first category encompasses various large language models and other generative AI tools.

The latter category can include e.g. machine-vision-based systems designed for quality control in factories, which are capable of identifying any defective items on the production line. Such smaller-scale AI-based tools can also be found in smart devices; examples include algorithms in smartwatches designed to recognise different types of exercise, camera features that can focus on a person's face and the route planners used in map apps.

AI is also widely used in data processing. AI systems can process large datasets to identify patterns, which can then be utilised

to support decision-making, for example. Such systems can be found in the supply chains of retail outlets, for example. These systems are capable of independently monitoring things such as customers' purchasing habits and product sales in relation to the time of year, comparing this with stock levels and suggesting when to order more stock. By doing so, systems like these can reduce wastage and provide a better service to customers.

These descriptions of AI systems are merely a glimpse into how AI affects everyone's daily lives, sometimes even without us realising it.

All this is to say that AI is an umbrella term for various computer programs that are capable of human-like reasoning on a large or small scale. Because of this, it is a good idea to use specific terms when discussing AI, such as 'generative AI', to ensure the discussion stays on topic.

The AI Act

The relevance of the EU AI Act to young people's lives

The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) will enter into force in stages between 2025 and 2028. The AI Act is particularly relevant to young people, as they are among the most active users of generative AI tools and the most vulnerable to their effects. The aim of the AI Act is to create a safer digital environment and strengthen citizens' rights, although its practical implementation raises some questions, particularly regarding data processing.

There is a paradox associated with the use of data: although there is an awareness of the risks, practical understanding of the consequences is often lacking. If generative AI tools are used without organisational guidance, the seriousness of the associated problems may end up going unrecognised. The risk is that principles will not be put into practice if users feel that they are acting solely 'for their own sake'.

The issue lies not just in the use of AI tools, but in the fact that the data provided to them may be used to train AI models. Generative AI tools analyse and combine data in ways that can identify an individual in an unpredictable manner. In accordance with the GDPR, individuals must be able to correct inaccurate data and delete their own data, which has proved to be technically challenging in AI services.

At present, there is little control over the data that AI models are trained on and provided with, which often leads to two extremes: either AI tools are avoided altogether, or they are used uncritically, with blind faith in their security. In practice, there is often no clear middle ground. All data processing should, in fact, be approached in the same way: data that infringes on young people's privacy should not be posted on social media or left lying on a desk at work, nor should it be provided to AI systems.

Risk classification and protection of young people

The EU AI Act classifies systems into four risk categories based on their potential harm:

Prohibited AI systems: Systems that directly threaten fundamental rights are strictly prohibited. These includes manipulative technologies that exploit vulnerabilities, such as game mechanics designed to encourage addictive behaviour in young people. Prohibited AI systems also include facial recognition in public spaces without specific grounds, as well as social scoring.

High-risk AI systems: These include, in particular, AI systems used in education, such as systems designed to assess academic performance or determine student admission. They are permitted, but require strict oversight, documentation and ongoing risk assessment. Effective regulation helps organisations choose reliable tools for automated decision-making.

Limited-risk AI systems: These include chatbots and digital assistants. If generative AI is used to generate content (text, images, videos or audio), this must be clearly indicated.

Low- or minimal-risk AI systems: These can include conventional digital games or other functions that utilise AI when they do not have any significant impact on the user's rights, safety or opportunities. However, the level of risk should not be determined solely based on the type of system; instead, the context of use, the target group and the impacts must always be assessed on a case-by-case basis. For example, the impact of recommendation algorithms can be significant for young people, depending on the type of content that they bring to the fore and how they affect young people's behaviour, wellbeing or sense of inclusion.

Responsibility and AI literacy

Although the AI Act primarily imposes requirements on the manufacturers and sellers of AI technologies, those working with young people also need to be aware of it. In youth work, responsibility lies with organisations, which must identify the high-risk AI systems that they use, train their staff on their use and ensure appropriate oversight.

The obligation of the AI Act regarding AI literacy does not mean that employers must ensure a specific individual level of competence for every employee. Instead, employers must take appropriate measures to support the development of AI literacy among employees and other individuals who use AI systems on behalf of the organisation. These measures must be proportionate to employees' roles, prior skills, education and training, the context of use, the risks posed by the AI system and the young people or other groups affected by the use of the system. It is the employee's responsibility to take part in competence development and apply what they have learned responsibly in their own work.

The role of people and transparency

The AI Act requires AI systems to be designed to be subject to human oversight. The person overseeing an AI system must have the understanding, competence and authority to override the decisions of the AI system or suspend its operation where necessary. When it comes to generative AI, the emphasis is on transparency: the user must understand how the content has been generated.

Service providers must label all text, image, audio and video content generated by AI as artificial in a way that is also readable by screen-reading software. On social media platforms and in chatbots, young people need to be able to tell when they are interacting with a machine.



1. Needs-based use of AI in youth work



This category explores when and in what situations the use of AI is justified or even recommended.

Using AI in youth work requires making a judgement as to when the benefits outweigh the identified harm

- Youth work should always emphasise personal interaction, the promotion of equality, non-discrimination, accessibility of services and working together. AI should never be used in a way that ignores these principles.
- Using AI systems is recommended if it helps to promote the values of youth work, provide services that could not otherwise be delivered or promote young people's AI literacy and critical media education. If the aim of using AI is to save time, it must be ensured that the time saved is used in the best interests of young people.
- AI can be utilised to support the equal development of young people, their individual needs and minority groups by providing e.g. different language versions, subtitles and other formats that improve accessibility, thereby enhancing equal access to services.
- When considering the use of AI systems, youth workers should always pause to consider the ethical implications of such systems in accordance with these guidelines and only use them if the benefits outweigh any potential harm.

Youth workers understand the potential environmental impacts of using AI

- The use of AI consumes a considerable amount of energy and natural resources, particularly when generating audio, video or images.
- Organisations should take into account the carbon footprint of AI systems and use AI only where justified.

Youth work emphasises human values, personal judgement and critical AI and media literacy

- When using AI tools, we must ensure that we do not outsource our own thinking or decision-making to technology.
- The personal competence, subjective experience and perception of youth workers should be valued above AI. AI should be used as a tool, not to replace humans.

The rapid development of AI and the need for continuous competence development, ethical assessment and monitoring must be recognised in youth work

- Organisations in the youth sector should ensure that all youth workers have an understanding of AI in line with the EU AI Act and are provided with adequate training on the subject.
- Youth sector organisations should have internal guidelines on AI, setting out what and how AI systems are used in the workplace.
- The impacts of AI on society and young people and its implications for youth work should be continuously monitored and assessed as the technology develops.
- Youth sector organisations should actively monitor legislative and regulatory changes concerning AI and take these changes into account in their activities.

Youth work safeguards the digital rights of children and young people

- Children's and young people's digital rights (PDF in Finnish) are part of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and their significance and content are understood in youth work.

2. AI literacy of youth workers



This category focuses on the AI competence, i.e. the AI literacy, of youth workers. A youth worker with adequate AI literacy is able to consider issues of responsibility relating to AI and critically evaluate the use of AI tools and the material that they generate.

Youth work strengthens young people's AI and media literacy skills

- Youth workers should teach young people to view content generated by AI critically, as it may contain errors, biases or misinformation.
- Youth workers should help young people to recognise how AI-based systems affect their everyday lives and society.
- Social media communication relating to youth work should use genuine photographs instead of AI-generated images. AI-generated content must always be clearly labelled as such.
- Youth workers should strengthen young people's critical thinking so that they learn to recognise AI-generated material and misinformation and prevent the spread of false information.
- Youth workers' own AI literacy should also be developed on a regular basis.
- Youth workers should support young people in using various services that utilise AI safely and ethically and in a way that fosters their own critical thinking and creative expression.

Intellectual property rights are respected in youth work

- Material protected by copyright or content created by others must not be provided to AI systems without permission.
- It is also important to bear in mind that material generated by AI is often not protected by copyright. Do not present AI-generated content as your own work.

The accuracy of information is verified using several different sources and source references are clearly indicated in youth work

- All information generated by or with the aid of AI should be checked against reliable sources to avoid incorrect claims, biases or hallucinations.
- In fact-based content, the original source references should always be retained and cited, even if the text has been edited using AI. Always check the sources suggested by AI yourself.
- AI-generated content should always be clearly labelled as such in accordance with the EU's Code of Practice on Transparency of AI-generated Content.

3. Use of AI in services aimed at young people



This category focuses on ethical principles in situations relating to youth work where a young person is directly interacting with an AI application or material generated by AI.

Youth work is human-centred and young people should always be offered the opportunity for human contact

- AI should complement and support youth work, not replace human interaction or the exploration of issues and phenomena together with young people.
- AI should be used in situations where it provides clear added value, such as by offering support when human assistance is not immediately available due to queues.
- Youth workers are responsible for the content that they generate using AI and are able to apply the suggestions provided by AI in a manner consistent with professional ethics.

There is always a human responsible for the services used in youth work

- AI solutions should have a clearly identified person responsible who is able to oversee and intervene in the operation of the system. The person responsible should be named in the organisation's internal AI guidelines.
- AI must not make automated decisions affecting citizens without an assessment by a professional.

AI systems used in youth work should identify high-risk situations and always direct young people to human support where necessary

- If automated systems, such as AI-based chatbots, are used, the system should be able to identify high-risk situations, such as a young person's suicidal tendencies or violent behaviour, and immediately refer the user to human support when they arise.
- AI should have a low threshold for suggesting talking to a professional.

Care must be taken to ensure that the AI systems used in youth work treat everyone fairly, equally and without discrimination

- The AI systems used in youth work should not replicate or reinforce societal prejudices or discriminate against groups of people.
- When developing algorithms and AI models for use in youth work, consideration should be given to diversity, equality and cultural representation.

Services utilising AI in youth work should adhere to the principle of transparency

- Young people should be able to have a say in the development of services that affect them in youth work.
- The responses generated by the AI systems used in youth work should always be explainable, and it should always be possible to demonstrate what the responses are based on.
- The way that AI works and the logic behind its decision-making should be understandable to young people and youth workers.
- Communication regarding the use of AI must be in plain language and transparent, and materials produced with the aid of AI must be clearly labelled as such.
- Youth workers should ensure that young people can distinguish between humans and AI and uphold their right to know when they are interacting with an AI system and when the material available to them has been generated by AI.

4. Data collected in youth work and its processing using AI



This category focuses on ethical principles in situations where data concerning young people is collected and/or processed using systems that utilise AI.

Youth work respects young people's right to privacy and data security

- The processing of personal data must comply with the GDPR and national legislation.
- Personal data or other sensitive information (images, audio, video) must not be provided to AI services, and care must be taken to ensure that collected data is used only for its original purpose.
- Youth workers should understand the operating principles of the AI systems and AI agents that they use and ensure that no data is leaked and that the data provided to AI systems is not used to train AI models.
- Data provided to AI systems should always be anonymised.
- Youth workers should only use services and equipment approved by their employer in youth work and follow the employer's guidelines when using them. Risk assessment should be carried out in accordance with the AI Act, for example.

No unnecessary data is collected from young people in youth work

- Only data that is strictly necessary for the purposes of youth work may be collected and processed from young people (data minimisation).
- All written material, such as meeting minutes stored in the organisation's cloud services, should also be regarded as data. Consideration should be given to what data is stored, how produced material is processed and who and/or which service has access to produced data.

- The data collected in youth work should be used in accordance with the best interests of young people. The purposes for which the data will be used and the conclusions that can be drawn from it should be understood before data collection.



2. Competence framework for AI literacy in youth work



Introduction

This competence framework describes the AI literacy of youth workers and the associated key competence areas that are needed in the age of AI. The rapid development of AI has transformed young people's everyday lives, learning and ways of participating, as a result of which the operating environment of youth work has also changed drastically. Recognising this, the aim of this competence framework is to make visible the knowledge, skills and attitudes that youth workers need in order to use AI appropriately, ethically and in a way that promotes young people's wellbeing.

The competence framework structures AI literacy as consisting of ten competence areas: understanding the basics of AI; critical thinking and media literacy; communication and interaction; content creation and creative use; security, data protection and rights; wellbeing and ethical conduct; problem-solving and judgement; equality and accessibility; agency and participation; and development and continuous learning. These competence areas can be used to describe both an individual youth worker's competence and an organisation's ability to utilise AI responsibly.

The competence framework is based on the view that AI literacy is a broad-based ability to understand how AI works, assess its impacts and use it responsibly in various situations. It leans on the EU's DigComp framework and the Ministry of Education and Culture's AI Competence Framework for Citizens, which defines digital competence as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and its principles of critical thinking, security, communication and responsible agency. At the same time, the competence framework complements these general frameworks in the context of youth work.

The competence framework is also aligned with the ethical guidelines for AI in youth work. The ethical principles of the guidelines, such as human-centricity, transparency, fairness, privacy protection and the best interests of young people, form the basis for how AI is used with young people and in services for young people. In practice, the realisation of these principles requires adequate AI literacy across all the competence areas of the framework.

The competence framework also addresses the development of AI literacy as required by the EU AI Act. The AI Act does not require organisations to ensure a specific level of competence for individual employees;

rather, it requires organisations to support the development of AI literacy in relation to employees' roles, skills, education and training, the context in which AI is used and the individuals or groups who may be affected by the use of AI systems. The framework structures the competence required in youth work into different competence areas and levels of competence and supports organisations and youth workers in evaluating and developing their own operations in a safe, lawful and ethically sustainable manner.

The competence framework serves as a tool for developing competence, planning education and training and evaluating activities. It can be used to build a shared understanding of what AI literacy means in youth work and to support a safe and equal operating environment that promotes inclusion for young people.

- No one is expected to have a natural grasp of AI, and you can take your time to develop your competence at your own pace
- It is not the responsibility of an individual youth worker to maintain an adequate level of AI literacy on their own; instead, employers must support the development of youth workers' AI literacy through training, guidance and structures for everyday learning.
- Working communities should encourage, support and help youth workers to deploy AI services safely.
- AI should not be deployed for the sake of it; instead, working communities should develop working methods that allow AI to provide added value and streamline work tasks. At the same time, youth workers' AI competence and capabilities should be consistently maintained.

Justification

The operating environment of youth work has changed rapidly in recent years as a result of digitalisation, globalisation and, in particular, advancements in AI. This change affects not only the tools used in youth work, but also the ways in which young people construct their identities, operate in society and encounter various risks and opportunities. Responding to this change necessitates the creation of a competence framework for AI literacy in youth work, which structures, makes visible and develops the specialised expertise of this professional field based on harmonised terminology and competence areas.

Youth work is a specialised professional field that centres on a relationship of trust with young people. This relationship requires competence especially in the areas of communication and interaction, wellbeing and ethical conduct, as well as agency and participation. Youth workers must understand the impact of AI on young people's everyday lives and be able to take a human-centred approach in situations where the ways in which young people are engaged with and data concerning them is processed is directly influenced by technology. This specialised expertise required in youth work is not described to a sufficient degree in general competence frameworks, necessitating the creation of a sector-specific framework.

The changes in the operating environment of young people highlight the need for competence in critical AI and media literacy in particular. Youth workers must be able to evaluate information generated by AI, recognise misinformation and disinformation and guide young people to understand the impacts of algorithms and social media. These requirements also highlight the need for competence in content creation and creative use, as well as the ability to utilise AI appropriately as part of guidance work.

The competence areas of security, data protection and rights, along with equality and accessibility, are essential due to the fact that AI can exacerbate existing inequalities. A common framework helps to ensure that the protection of personal data, the ethical processing of data and the realisation of young people's rights are systematically taken into account in all activities and that services are accessible to everyone.

The competence framework also strengthens the professional identity of youth workers and supports development and continuous learning. The rapid development of AI means that youth workers must be able to continuously update their competence, develop their methods and establish common practices and operating models in their organisations.

The EU AI Act and the ethical guidelines for AI in youth work both emphasise the need to clearly define what AI literacy means in practice. Compliance with the ethical guidelines for AI require competence in all the competence areas of the framework: youth workers must understand how AI

works, operate critically, protect data, assess impacts on young people's wellbeing and make informed decisions regarding the use of AI. In this way, AI literacy acts as a bridge between ethical principles and practical work, facilitating their realisation in youth work.

How to interpret the competence framework

The competence framework is presented in the form of a table, in which competence is structured based on two perspectives: competence areas and competence levels. The rows of the table describe ten competence areas which together constitute AI literacy in youth work. The columns, in turn, illustrate the development of competence at three levels: from an individual's basic understanding and ethical use (level 1) to application in guidance work (level 2) and broader operational and organisational development (level 3).

The matrix should be interpreted as a whole, with no single competence area providing a sufficient picture of AI literacy; instead, AI literacy is built through a combination of all the areas. AI literacy is multidisciplinary in nature, with the different competence areas complementing one another: for example, critical thinking and media literacy contribute to understanding of data and AI, while security, data protection and rights are directly linked to wellbeing and ethical conduct.

The competence levels are not linear, nor do they imply that the same level of competence must be achieved in all the areas. Instead, the levels reflect the deepening and broadening of competence: at level 1, the emphasis is on understanding and acting responsibly in one's own work; at level 2, competence is actively applied to guiding young people and interacting with them; and at level 3, competence is reflected in the development of operations, the creation of structures and organisational-level practices.

The competence levels complement one another and should not be seen as mutually exclusive. In other words, an individual youth worker may operate at different levels across different competence areas, and the competence of a youth work organisation is often distributed across individual youth workers. As a result, the matrix supports both the assessment of individual competence and development at the community and organisational levels.

The table can be used flexibly for a variety of purposes: for competence self-assessment, to identify training needs, to map the competence of a working community and to plan operational development. Its main purpose is not to categorise competent individuals, but to support continuous learning and to highlight how AI literacy is developed in youth work through the interaction of different competence areas and levels of competence.

Competence framework

Competence area	Level 1: Understanding and ethical use	Level 2: Application of AI in guidance work	Level 3: Organisational development
1. Understanding the basics of AI	Understand the principles, limitations and impacts of AI on young people's everyday lives	Guide young people to understand algorithms, social media echo chambers and the impacts of AI on everyday life	Promote an organisation's shared understanding of AI and its role in services
2. Critical thinking and media literacy	Evaluate information generated by AI critically; check sources	Teach young people to recognise misinformation and disinformation, as well as their impact on society and on individuals' opinions	Develop an organisation's media education practices and operating models
3. Communication and interaction	Use AI responsibly in communication and label its use in accordance with the EU code of practice	Use AI in guidance in a transparent manner and explain its role to young people	Develop an organisation's policies on AI communication and transparency
4. Content creation and creative use	Create content ethically (intellectual property rights, transparency, fact-checking)	Guide young people on responsible use of AI and recognise the potential of AI to support creativity	Develop new AI-based methods and services
5. Security, data protection and rights	Anonymise all data, comply with the GDPR and collect only data necessary for the task at hand	Teach young people to protect their own data, be mindful of the data they share and understand their rights	Participate in developing an organisation's data protection policies and risk management in the use of AI

Competence area	Level 1: Understanding and ethical use	Level 2: Application of AI in guidance work	Level 3: Organisational development
6. Wellbeing and ethical conduct	Recognise the impacts and risks of AI on young people's wellbeing and operate in a human-centred manner	Engage in discussion with young people on the impact of AI on identity, wellbeing and inclusion and take a preventative approach to minimise harm	Develop ethical principles and support practices that promote wellbeing
7. Problem-solving and judgement	Assess when it is worth using AI (benefits versus harm)	Use AI appropriately as part of guidance processes	Develop processes in which AI supports operations strategically
8. Equality and accessibility	Understand that AI is always biased and its impact on inequality	Use AI to improve accessibility (language, learning)	Develop services that promote equality using AI
9. Agency and participation	Understand the role of AI in young people's lives, media and education	Strengthen young people's agency as AI users and influencers	Facilitate young people's participation in the development of services and AI
10. Development and continuous learning	Continuously update your own AI competence	Share your competence with young people, foster discussion on the subject and develop new guidance methods	Foster a culture of continuous learning and development in an organisation

How to use the competence framework in a working community

The use of the competence framework in a working community is a shared process of learning and development. Its aim is not to assess individual youth workers or compare their competence, but rather to identify strengths, areas for development and common approaches to the responsible use of AI in youth work. The process can be carried out in four stages.

1. Preparation and establishing a common basis

Before a joint discussion, set aside sufficient time for the process and for every member of the working community to familiarises themselves with the competence framework and the organisation's guidelines on AI, data protection and digital operations. While doing so, also agree on the objectives for the discussion and create a safe environment in which different experiences, questions and competence levels can be raised in a constructive manner.

2. Assessment of the current situation and joint discussion

Have each member of the working community assess their own and the working community's competence with the help of the competence areas and competence levels, e.g. through self-assessment, small-group discussions, workshops or anonymous surveys. The aim is not to define a single 'correct' level of competence, but to establish a shared understanding of strengths, areas for development and existing good practices.

3. Agreeing on areas for development and measures

On the basis of the assessment, identify the key areas for competence development and agree on specific measures. The associated decisions may specify e.g. the necessary training, methods of peer learning, common rules, pilots, the division of responsibilities and how the use of AI is to be implemented transparently.

4. Recording, monitoring and continuous improvement

Record the results of the process as part of the organisation's normal development, training or operational planning. The details that need to be recorded are the current situation, identified strengths and areas for improvement, agreed objectives, measures, responsibilities, timetables, resources and monitoring indicators. Assess progress regularly and update the working community's practices as AI, work requirements and regulations change.

Using the competence framework is not a one-off exercise, but rather part of a process of continuous learning and organisational development.

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Glossary

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Technology capable of performing tasks that normally require human thought, such as decision-making, content creation or image and speech recognition. In youth work, AI can help with tasks such as translation, content creation or improving the accessibility of services.

AI system

An application or device that utilises AI in its operation. AI systems can generate content, analyse data, make recommendations or identify risks. Examples in youth work include chatbot services, subtitling tools and analytics systems.

Algorithm

A set of rules and computational functions based on which an AI system operates. Algorithms may be biased, which is why it is important to assess them from an ethical perspective, particularly in services aimed at young people.

AI literacy

The ability to understand how AI works, the opportunities and risks associated with it and how to use it safely and critically. In youth work, this applies both to the competence of youth workers and to the guidance provided to young people.

Media education and critical media literacy

The ability to evaluate and understand media – particularly digital content and content generated by AI. It enables young people to recognise manipulated images, deepfake videos or misleading information, for example.

EU Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act)

A European Union regulation that regulates the use of AI in a risk-based manner. In youth work, it emphasises, among other things, supporting the development of AI literacy, risk assessment, human oversight and transparency in the use of AI.

Data protection and the GDPR

The EU General Data Protection Regulation, which governs the collection, processing and protection of personal data. In youth work, this means, among other things, that young people's personal data must not be provided to open AI services.

Data minimisation

The principle that only data that is strictly necessary for the purposes of youth work is collected and processed from young people. This protects young people's privacy and reduces unnecessary monitoring.

Anonymisation

Modification of data in such a way that it cannot be used to identify individual young people. Anonymisation is particularly important when data is used for analytics or in AI systems.

Ethical conduct (ethical use of AI)

Values and principles that ensure that AI is used fairly, safely and in a human-centred way. In youth work, ethical conduct emphasises the primacy of human interaction and non-discrimination.

Equality and non-discrimination

Principles according to which all young people are to be treated equally, regardless of their background, language, identity or functional ability. AI must operate in a non-discriminatory manner and not reinforce social biases.

Accessibility

The aim that services should be accessible to all young people. AI can support accessibility by providing translations, plain language or alternative formats, for example.

Hallucinations

Incorrect AI-generated information that is not based on facts. The generation of incorrect information is influenced by the AI model used, the training data used to train it and the prompt entered by the user.

Disinformation

Information that is deliberately distorted or misleading. The role of youth work is to help young people recognise and deal with disinformation, including false content generated by AI.

Misinformation

Unintentionally published misleading information. This can easily happen e.g. if one accepts without critical scrutiny content generated by large language models, which may contain factual errors (AI hallucinations).