

# Artificial Intelligence in Youth Work: Policy Lessons and Strategic Directions from the AI4YouthWork Project

Evidence-Based Recommendations for the Ethical,  
Inclusive, and Sustainable Integration of Artificial  
Intelligence in European Youth Work Systems



## *Artificial Intelligence in Youth Work: Policy Lessons and Strategic Directions from the AI4YouthWork Project*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer a peripheral or future-oriented issue for the youth sector. It already shapes how young people access information, participate in digital environments, learn, and form opinions. Recommendation systems, generative tools, automated moderation, and data-driven platforms increasingly mediate young people's social, educational, and civic experiences. While European policy frameworks have begun to address AI governance in formal education, labour markets, and public administration, youth work remains largely absent from these strategic discussions.

Youth work plays a distinct and complementary role within European education and social inclusion systems. It reaches young people who are often underrepresented in formal education, supports civic participation, and provides non-formal learning environments grounded in trust, relational work, and voluntary engagement. As AI becomes embedded in everyday life, youth workers are increasingly expected - by young people themselves, by families, and by public authorities - to help interpret, contextualise, and critically assess these technologies. However, evidence indicates that most youth workers have not received structured preparation to fulfil this role.

The AI4YouthWork project was established to address this gap. Implemented as an Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership in the Youth Field, the project brought together organisations from Italy, Romania, Greece, and Portugal to generate empirical evidence on youth workers' AI-related competence needs and to develop tested, transferable instruments for capacity building. The project combined a systematic review of international literature, transnational focus groups and surveys with youth work professionals and piloting cycles of newly developed training resources.

The findings point to a clear structural problem: while youth workers recognise the growing relevance of AI, they currently lack systematic access to training, guidance, and institutional support. Participants consistently expressed curiosity about AI's potential to support learning design, inclusion, participation, and administrative efficiency. At the same time, they reported low confidence, legal uncertainty, and ethical concerns, particularly regarding data protection, algorithmic bias, surveillance, and the risk of excluding young people with fewer digital resources.

These challenges are not the result of individual resistance or lack of motivation. They are structural. AI-related competence development for youth workers is currently fragmented, voluntary and project-based. In most countries, it is not integrated into professional standards, continuous professional development systems, or national youth strategies. As a result, access to AI learning opportunities depends on geography,

organisational capacity, and short-term funding cycles. This unevenness risks reproducing existing digital and social inequalities among young people.

In response, the AI4YouthWork project developed and empirically validated **the first AI Competence Framework for Youth Workers**, structured around six competence areas, 17 competences, and six proficiency levels. The framework defines AI competence not as technical mastery, but as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable reflective, ethical and context-sensitive practice.

To operationalise the framework, the project created a Digital Catalogue of 48 Open Educational Resources in five languages and an AI Training Toolkit comprising a curated map of trustworthy AI tools and 15 multilingual workshop designs for use with young people. These resources were piloted with youth workers from diverse professional backgrounds, including those working in low-resource and marginalised contexts. Evaluation data from the piloting cycles shows that participants rated the materials as relevant, accessible and directly applicable to everyday youth work practice, while also highlighting the importance of ethical guidance and contextual adaptation.

Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that AI integration in youth work cannot be left to individual experimentation or isolated innovation projects. Without strategic policy intervention, three risks are likely to materialise:

- **Unequal access to AI competences** among youth workers, leading to fragmented practice and reinforcing territorial and socioeconomic divides.
- **Ethical and legal vulnerability**, as practitioners navigate AI tools without clear guidance on data protection, accountability, and safeguarding.
- **Loss of relevance of youth work** in digitally mediated environments, weakening its capacity to engage young people meaningfully.

At the same time, the evidence also shows that youth work is well positioned to contribute positively to Europe's digital transformation, if properly supported. Youth workers already possess strong competences in critical pedagogy, participation, and inclusion. With targeted AI competence development, they can become key intermediaries between young people and increasingly complex digital infrastructures.

This policy paper translates the empirical results of the AI4YouthWork project into actionable recommendations for European institutions, national authorities, Erasmus+ National Agencies, and other public actors. It argues that AI competences for youth workers should be recognised as a matter of public interest rather than optional innovation. Specifically, it proposes:

The integration of AI competences into national youth worker qualification standards and continuous professional development systems;

- The establishment of inclusive and differentiated training pathways reflecting diverse starting points;
- The alignment of youth work practice with European principles for trustworthy AI;
- The creation of sustainable funding mechanisms beyond project cycles;
- The institutionalisation of cross-sector cooperation between youth work, education, and AI governance bodies;
- The scaling of validated competence frameworks and training resources;
- The strengthening of professional networks and communities of practice.

Coordinated action can ensure that AI strengthens - rather than undermines - the human-centred foundations of European youth work.

This paper therefore calls for immediate and coordinated policy responses at European, national and regional levels. **The question is no longer whether AI will shape young people's lives, but whether public institutions will equip youth workers with the competences needed to guide, support, and empower them within these changing environments.**

## Intended Audience

This policy paper is addressed to European Union institutions, national and regional authorities responsible for youth, education, and digital policy, Erasmus+ National Agencies, and public bodies overseeing non-formal education, skills development, and social inclusion. It is also relevant for youth work umbrella organisations, public and private training providers, and stakeholders involved in AI governance, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning. The paper is designed to support decision-makers in translating emerging evidence into concrete governance, funding, and regulatory measures that ensure the ethical, inclusive, and sustainable integration of artificial intelligence in youth work systems.

## 1. POLICY CONTEXT AND PROBLEM DEFINITION

### 2.1 Why Artificial Intelligence Matters for Youth Work

Artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in the digital environments where young people learn, socialise, and participate. Algorithmic curation, automated content moderation, generative systems, and data-driven recommendation tools influence what information young people encounter, which voices they hear, and how opportunities are presented. These systems are not neutral: they encode values, reproduce biases, and shape behavioural patterns.

European policy frameworks have begun to address these dynamics through initiatives such as the AI Act, the Digital Education Action Plan, and the European Skills Agenda. However, these instruments focus primarily on formal education, labour markets, and high-risk AI systems. The youth sector - particularly non-formal education and youth work - remains largely outside these policy conversations.

This omission is consequential. Youth work plays a distinctive role in European education and inclusion ecosystems. It reaches young people who may not be well served by formal institutions, supports democratic participation, and provides relational, voluntary, and community-based learning environments. In many regions, youth workers are among the few professionals who engage consistently with young people in informal digital spaces, online communities, and hybrid learning environments.

Evidence from the AI4YouthWork project<sup>1</sup> indicates that youth workers are already encountering AI-mediated challenges in their daily practice: from young people using generative AI tools for learning and content creation, to navigating algorithmic moderation in online communities, to addressing misinformation and digital manipulation. Yet most youth workers report that they have not received systematic preparation for these developments

The issue, therefore, is not whether AI is relevant to youth work - it already is. The question is whether public policy will recognise this relevance and provide the structural conditions necessary for responsible, equitable, and effective engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Lanzetta, M., Abbruzzese, G., ACOMI, O., Acomi, N., Machado, J., & Maravelaki, S. A. (2024). Artificial Intelligence Competence Needs for Youth Workers (Version 1). Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11525357>

## 2.2 Current Policy Gaps

Despite strong political attention to digital transformation, several structural gaps currently affect the youth work sector.

### **Absence from AI Governance Frameworks**

European AI governance frameworks focus on product safety, risk classification and compliance obligations for developers and deployers. They rarely address the role of intermediaries such as youth workers, who shape how technologies are understood, used, and contextualised by young people. This creates a regulatory blind spot: youth workers are expected to support young people in navigating AI-driven environments without being explicitly recognised in AI governance ecosystems.

### **Fragmentation of Digital Competence Policies**

Digital competence frameworks such as DigComp and DigCompEdu provide valuable reference points, but they were not designed to address the specific realities of non-formal learning, community-based youth work, or participatory education. As a result, youth workers often struggle to translate these frameworks into their own practice contexts.

The AI4YouthWork project addressed this gap by developing a dedicated AI Competence Framework for Youth Workers, explicitly tailored to non-formal education, participatory methodologies, and inclusion-oriented practice

### **Projectification of Capacity Building**

Most AI-related learning opportunities for youth workers currently emerge through short-term, project-based initiatives. These are valuable, but structurally unstable. They do not provide predictable access, are not integrated into national qualification systems, and often disappear once funding ends.

Focus group participants in the AI4YouthWork project consistently reported that their engagement with AI training depended on chance - availability of projects, local networks, or individual initiative - rather than systematic policy provision

## 2.3 Why This Is a Structural Problem

The lack of coherent policy frameworks produces three systemic effects.

- 1. Unequal Access:** When AI competence development depends on project participation, geographical location, or organisational capacity, inequalities emerge. Youth workers in well-resourced urban centres are more likely to access

innovation opportunities than those in rural or marginalised contexts. This inequality is then transmitted to young people.

2. **Ethical and Legal Exposure:** Youth workers are increasingly encountering AI tools without clear guidance on data protection, accountability, or safeguarding. This exposes them - and the young people they work with - to potential harm. Ethical concerns were among the most frequently raised themes in focus groups, including fears about surveillance, bias, and erosion of autonomy.
3. **Erosion of Relevance:** If youth work does not evolve alongside the digital environments young people inhabit, it risks losing its capacity to engage meaningfully. This is not a technological issue - it is a pedagogical and social one. Youth workers themselves expressed concern about becoming disconnected from young people's digital realities

## 2.4 Why Policy Intervention Is Necessary

These challenges cannot be resolved through individual initiative alone. They require coordinated public action for four reasons:

- **Equity:** Public systems must guarantee equal access to competence development, not leave it to market dynamics or project availability.
- **Safeguarding:** Youth workers require clear ethical and legal guidance when engaging with AI-mediated environments.
- **Quality Assurance:** Without standards, practices remain inconsistent and difficult to evaluate.
- **Sustainability:** One-off projects do not produce systemic change.

The AI4YouthWork project demonstrates that youth workers are willing to engage when provided with context-sensitive, ethically grounded, and practically relevant learning opportunities. What is currently missing is not motivation, but infrastructure.

## 2. EVIDENCE BASE: WHAT AI4YOUTHWORK CONTRIBUTES

This policy paper is informed by a comprehensive mixed-methods research process implemented throughout the AI4YouthWork project, aimed at identifying and addressing the competence needs of youth workers in relation to artificial intelligence. The evidence base combines desk research, qualitative inquiry, expert consultation, and real-life piloting, ensuring that the findings reflect both conceptual developments in AI and the practical realities of youth work across Europe.

The consortium conducted a systematic review of existing literature and competence frameworks related to AI, digital skills, and youth work. Searches were carried out across major international and European repositories, including UNESCO, OECD, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, and the Erasmus+ Projects Results Platform, with a focus on sources published from 2019 onwards. From an initial pool of 145 publications, 48 key sources were selected for in-depth analysis in order to identify common competence areas, structural gaps, and emerging trends. This desk-based research was complemented by qualitative data collected through focus groups with 72 youth work professionals from several European countries. These focus groups, conducted both online and face-to-face, captured a wide range of perspectives on practical needs, challenges, and attitudes towards AI, ensuring representation across levels of professional experience, digital confidence, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews with experts in AI, youth work, and digital education further enriched the analysis and supported the validation and contextualisation of the emerging competence areas. Finally, the proposed AI Competence Framework for Youth Workers was validated through a survey involving 100 youth workers, youth organisations, training providers, and policy stakeholders from across the EU. Quantitative ratings and qualitative feedback from this phase were used to refine the framework and enhance its relevance, clarity, and usability.

To assess real-world applicability, the project piloted its training resources - including a multilingual digital catalogue of 48 Open Educational Resources and a dedicated AI Training Toolkit - with a diverse group of youth workers. The piloting cycles examined usability, relevance, accessibility, inclusion, and perceived learning impact. Results indicate that participants found the resources applicable to daily practice and valued the combination of practical guidance and ethical reflection.

The outcomes of this multi-layered research process directly shaped the content and recommendations of this policy paper. Insights from the systematic review provided a strong evidence base and highlighted structural gaps in existing competence frameworks, while the focus groups ensured that both the framework and the resulting policy recommendations were grounded in the lived realities of youth work practice.

Expert interviews supported the translation of these findings into forward-looking perspectives aligned with developments in non-formal education and AI governance. Collectively, these inputs informed the policy paper by linking empirical evidence to actionable recommendations, ensuring that the proposed measures respond to real needs in the youth work sector and support the coherent, ethical, and inclusive integration of AI into youth work practice and policy.

In addition to these research activities, the project partners systematically collected policy-oriented input during the national Multiplier Events organised in each participating country. While presenting the project outputs to relevant stakeholders - including youth work professionals, educators, decision-makers, and policymakers - partners facilitated structured discussions on policy implications, challenges, and opportunities related to the integration of artificial intelligence in youth work. The policy recommendations emerging from these country-level consultations were consolidated at transnational level and used to further refine the policy directions proposed in this paper, ensuring that they reflect both evidence-based analysis and stakeholder-driven perspectives.

### 3. KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE AI4YOUTHWORK PROJECT

Across the partner countries involved in the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership, youth workers from diverse professional and cultural contexts expressed remarkably convergent views on artificial intelligence and its growing presence in youth work.

Their reflections revealed a strong interest in AI and its potential to support youth work practice, particularly in areas such as learning facilitation, programme development, communication, and youth participation. However, this interest was frequently accompanied by low levels of confidence and perceived preparedness. Many youth workers reported feelings of uncertainty, hesitation, or anxiety about using AI tools, often linked to limited access to structured training and concerns about misusing technologies they do not fully understand. This highlights a systemic gap between openness to innovation and practical readiness for implementation.

Rather than calling for highly technical or abstract training, youth workers consistently emphasised the need for practical, context-specific guidance that reflects the realities of their everyday work. They stressed that AI learning opportunities should be clearly connected to concrete youth work scenarios, enabling them to understand how AI can be applied ethically, responsibly, and meaningfully in real-life settings.

Ethical concerns were central to their reflections, with particular emphasis on data protection, privacy, surveillance, algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, and the risk of excluding young people with fewer digital resources or lower levels of digital literacy. Importantly, these concerns were not expressed as resistance to innovation, but rather as an extension of core youth work values, including care, trust, inclusion, empowerment, and the safeguarding of young people's autonomy.

Overall, youth workers widely agreed that AI can strengthen youth work if it is introduced intentionally, with appropriate safeguards, and in alignment with the profession's normative foundations—namely inclusion, participation, empowerment, and respect for young people's rights.

In response to these insights, the project developed an AI Competence Framework for Youth Workers that redefines competence not as technical expertise, but as a balanced combination of knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes. The framework is structured around six interconnected competence areas: Professional Engagement, AI-Powered Resources, AI for Training and Learning, Assessment and Evaluation, Empowering Young People, and Facilitating Young People's AI Competences.



By emphasising progression, continuous reflection, and ethical awareness, the framework supports youth workers in critically assessing when and why AI tools should be used, how they influence learning environments, and what implications they may have for power relations, inclusion, and agency.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that AI competence in youth work involves moving beyond instrumental tool use towards reflective, value-based, and rights-aware professional practice. By modelling transparent, inclusive, and critical AI engagement, youth workers can help ensure that AI contributes positively to youth development and supports young people in becoming informed, autonomous, and critically engaged digital citizens.

## 4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the AI4YouthWork project demonstrate that the effective, inclusive, and ethical integration of artificial intelligence into youth work cannot be achieved through isolated initiatives or voluntary uptake alone, but requires coordinated, long-term, and system-level policy action. The following recommendations translate empirical evidence into concrete, implementable policy directions, aligned with Erasmus+ priorities, European youth strategies, and emerging digital governance frameworks.

### 4.1 Inclusive Training Opportunities

Policymakers should prioritise the development and support of inclusive, accessible, and differentiated AI training opportunities for youth workers. Evidence from the project shows that youth workers begin from highly diverse levels of digital confidence, access, and AI readiness, ranging from enthusiasm and advanced use to alienation, scepticism, and digital fatigue. Uniform or standardised training approaches are therefore likely to reinforce existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

Training initiatives should be designed to explicitly accommodate this diversity, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model.

Inclusive training should:

- Address varying entry levels by offering progressive learning pathways, ranging from introductory awareness-raising to advanced application, reflection, and peer mentoring;
- Use practice-oriented and experiential learning approaches, such as hands-on workshops, scenario-based exercises, simulations, case studies, and game-based learning, explicitly linked to real youth work contexts;
- Be accessible in terms of language, format, time commitment, and cost, including blended and online options that reduce geographic, organisational, and financial barriers;
- Integrate accessibility principles and inclusive design, ensuring that training formats are usable by participants with different learning needs and digital capacities.

By ensuring that AI training is inclusive, policymakers can prevent the emergence of new digital and AI-related divides within the youth work sector and enable all youth workers - not only early adopters - to engage meaningfully, safely, and critically with AI.

## 4.2 Lifelong Learning and Continuous Professional Development

AI competences cannot be developed through isolated, one-off interventions. Given the rapid pace of technological change, regulatory evolution, and social adoption, AI competence must be treated as a dynamic and evolving professional requirement, rather than a fixed skill set.

Policies should therefore embed AI competence development within lifelong learning and continuous professional development (CPD) systems, rather than relegating it to optional or project-based formats.

Specifically, policy frameworks should support:

- The systematic integration of AI competences into national and regional CPD structures for youth workers;
- The formal recognition of AI-related competences within professional standards, qualification frameworks, and accreditation systems in youth work;
- The creation of ongoing learning opportunities, including modular training, micro-credentials, peer learning communities, mentoring schemes, and transnational exchanges focused on AI and digital transformation;
- Time allocation and institutional support for professional learning, recognising that competence development requires protected learning time and organisational commitment.

Promoting a culture of lifelong learning within youth organisations is essential to ensuring that youth workers remain adaptable, confident, and professionally resilient in the face of evolving technological, social, and regulatory environments.

## 4.3 Ethical and Trustworthy AI in Youth Work

Ethical and responsible AI use must constitute a non-negotiable foundation of any policy approach to AI in youth work. Youth workers participating in the AI4YouthWork project expressed strong and consistent concerns regarding data protection, algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, surveillance, commercial exploitation, and the potential erosion of human relationships and critical thinking.

These concerns reflect not resistance to technology, but a professional and ethical responsibility towards young people - particularly those who are already vulnerable or marginalised.

Policy frameworks should therefore:

- Explicitly align youth work practice with European principles for trustworthy AI, including those articulated in the EU AI Act, GDPR, and related human-rights-based digital governance frameworks;
- Provide clear, operational guidance for youth workers on how to assess the ethical implications of AI tools, including decision-support checklists, risk assessment templates, and safeguarding protocols;
- Support youth workers in developing and delivering AI literacy activities that foster critical thinking, informed consent, and awareness of rights among young people;
- Ensure that ethical considerations are embedded into training curricula, rather than treated as optional or supplementary modules.

Ethical governance ensures that AI is used to augment, not replace, the relational, dialogical, and reflective dimensions that are foundational to youth work. Without such safeguards, AI adoption risks undermining the very values youth work is meant to uphold.

## 4.4 Sustainable Funding and Resource Development

Sustainable funding is essential to move beyond fragmented, short-term, and pilot-oriented experimentation with AI in youth work. While project-based innovation plays a valuable role, it cannot substitute for long-term capacity-building and institutionalisation. Dedicated and predictable financial support is required to ensure that AI competence development in youth work is scalable, transferable, and structurally embedded.

Policymakers and funding bodies should:

- Allocate ring-fenced and multiannual funding for AI-related capacity-building, pilot initiatives, and the ethical integration of AI into youth work practice;
- Support the development of open, modular, and adaptable educational resources, toolkits, and training materials that can be reused, localised, and updated over time;
- Reduce financial barriers by promoting access to affordable, open-source, or publicly governed AI tools, particularly for small organisations with limited technological and administrative capacity;
- Avoid over-reliance on competitive project funding alone, which risks privileging larger organisations and reinforcing existing inequalities.

Sustainable funding mechanisms help ensure that AI integration strengthens the long-term quality, resilience, and equity of youth work systems, rather than creating cycles of temporary innovation followed by discontinuation.

## 4.5 Cross-Sector Cooperation and Knowledge Exchange

The integration of AI into youth work requires engagement with technical, ethical, pedagogical, and legal dimensions that cannot be addressed by the youth sector in isolation. Youth workers consistently emphasised the need for external expertise, peer support, and institutional partnerships.

Policy measures should encourage:

- Structured cooperation between youth organisations, educational institutions, AI researchers, civil society actors, and public authorities;
- The co-development of AI tools, learning resources, and guidelines tailored specifically to the needs and values of youth work;
- Formalised knowledge exchange mechanisms between the youth sector and related fields such as education, digital governance, research, and innovation;
- The creation of interdisciplinary advisory structures at national or European level to support ethical and pedagogical alignment.

Cross-sector cooperation increases the relevance, quality and legitimacy of AI-related interventions, while ensuring that technological solutions remain grounded in youth work values, rather than driven by market logics alone.

## 4.6 Scaling and Sustainability

To maximise impact, successful frameworks, tools, and practices developed through Erasmus+ and other innovation programmes must be systematically scaled and mainstreamed.

Policymakers should:

- Integrate AI competence frameworks for youth workers into national and European youth strategies, digital strategies, and skills agendas;
- Encourage the adoption of validated project outputs by training providers, youth agencies, and professional associations;
- Support mechanisms for the transfer, localisation, and contextual adaptation of good practices across regions and countries;

- Establish quality assurance processes to ensure that scaling does not compromise ethical standards or pedagogical integrity.

Mainstreaming ensures that AI competence development becomes a structural feature of youth work systems, rather than a temporary innovation dependent on isolated funding cycles.

## 4.7 Strengthening Collaboration Networks and Communities of Practice

Finally, policies should actively support the development of professional networks and communities of practice focused on AI and digital transformation in youth work. The project evidence indicates that peer learning, mutual support, and shared reflection are critical enablers of confidence, competence, and innovation.

Policy actions should:

- Support European and national platforms that facilitate peer exchange, mentoring, and collaborative problem-solving;
- Encourage participation in conferences, workshops, and transnational learning events focused on AI and youth work;
- Promote the systematic sharing of best practices, resources, failures, and lessons learned;
- Recognise communities of practice as legitimate learning environments within professional development systems.

Strong professional networks enhance collective capacity, reduce isolation, and support the long-term sustainability of AI integration in youth work.

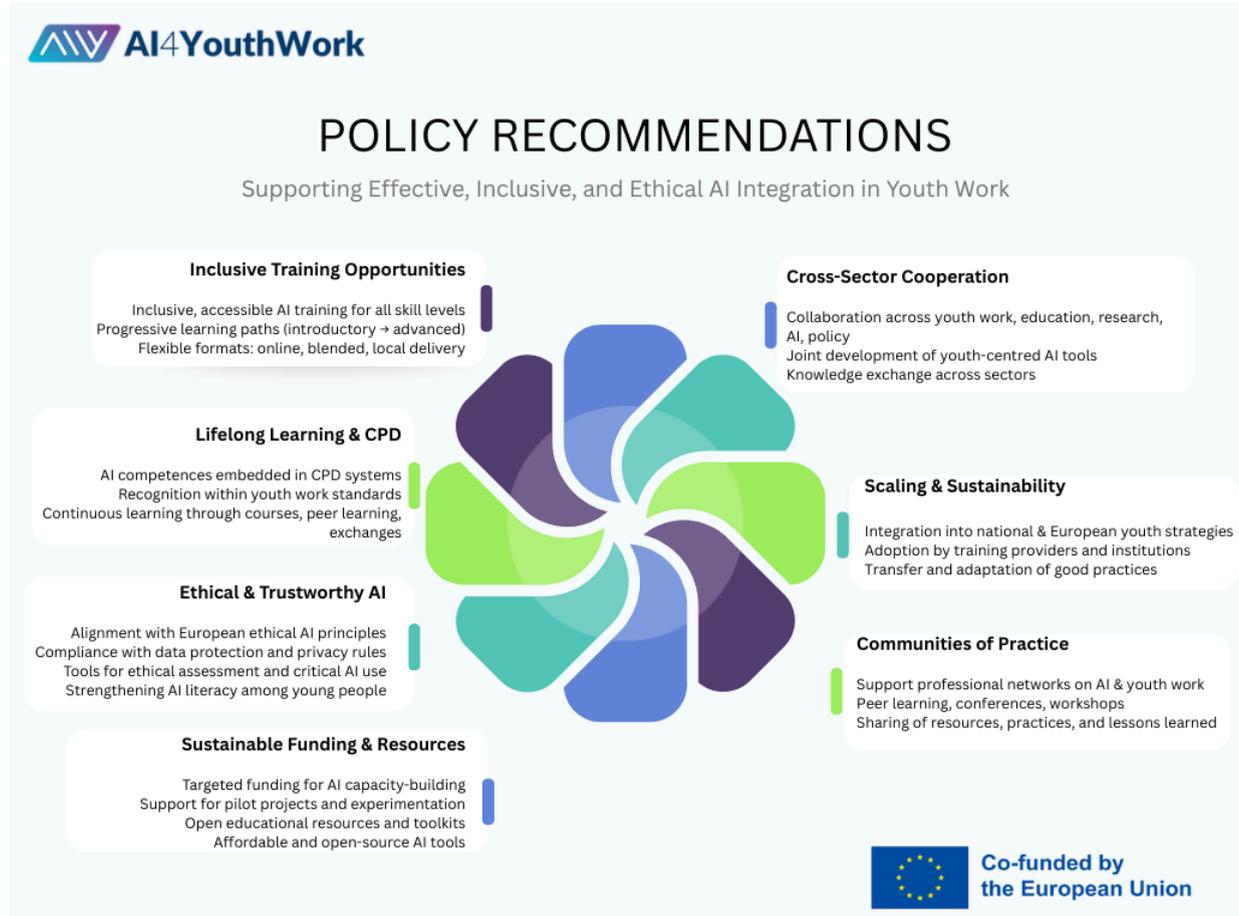


Figure 1: Policy Recommendations Overview

## 5. IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The effective implementation of AI-related policies in youth work requires a coordinated, multi-level, and long-term governance approach. Clear policy ownership is essential to ensure alignment between European, national, and local frameworks, thereby preventing fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and uneven implementation. Without explicit coordination mechanisms, AI-related initiatives risk remaining isolated, short-lived, and dependent on individual organisational capacity rather than systemic support.

Strong coordination structures can foster coherence between youth policy, digital transformation strategies, and education and training agendas, ensuring that AI competence development for youth workers is embedded within existing institutional systems, rather than treated as a standalone or temporary innovation. Equally important are robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning mechanisms that enable policymakers to systematically assess the impact of AI-related measures, identify emerging gaps or unintended effects, and adjust policy responses over time in line with evidence and practice-based learning.

A key condition for successful implementation is the active and meaningful involvement of youth workers in both policy design and execution. As frontline practitioners, youth workers possess critical insights into the practical realities, learning needs, and ethical challenges associated with the use of AI in youth work settings. Participatory policy processes increase relevance, foster professional ownership, and strengthen trust, while ensuring that policy frameworks remain grounded in lived practice rather than driven solely by technological or market-oriented agendas.

At the same time, implementation frameworks must remain adaptive and future-oriented, recognising the rapid pace of technological development and the continuously evolving ways in which AI shapes young people's experiences, opportunities, and risks. Static regulatory or training models are unlikely to remain effective over time. Adaptive policy approaches that can respond to emerging ethical concerns, social implications, and public debates are therefore critical to long-term effectiveness and legitimacy.

To translate policy ambition into practice, implementation efforts should be guided by a set of operational priorities. These include the provision of inclusive and accessible AI training opportunities tailored to the diverse roles, responsibilities, and contexts of youth workers, as well as the systematic integration of AI competence development into lifelong learning and continuous professional development systems.

Youth work policies must also align with European principles for ethical and trustworthy AI, offering clear and practical guidance on data protection, bias mitigation, transparency, and responsible use in non-formal learning environments. This includes the development of sector-specific guidance, templates, and decision-support tools, rather than relying on general-purpose AI governance instruments alone.

Dedicated and sustainable funding mechanisms are essential to support training, experimentation, and the development of open educational resources, ensuring that innovation is not limited to isolated or short-term projects. Successful competence frameworks and tested approaches should be scaled and mainstreamed into national and European youth strategies to ensure sustainability beyond individual funding cycles.

Moreover, cross-sector cooperation can be a decisive factor in ensuring relevance, quality, and long-term impact. Stronger collaboration between youth organisations, educational institutions, research bodies, and AI experts can help bridge the gap between technological innovation and social practice. To this end, European and national collaboration platforms should be institutionally supported, enabling peer learning, structured knowledge exchange, and the development of professional communities of practice among youth workers.

Looking ahead, AI will continue to reshape learning, participation, communication, and social interaction, bringing both new opportunities and complex challenges for youth work. Reactive or technology-driven policy responses will be insufficient. Proactive, value-driven approaches are required to ensure that youth work remains relevant, inclusive, and empowering in increasingly AI-mediated societies. By investing in continuous competence development, strong ethical safeguards, and cross-sector collaboration, policymakers can reinforce youth work as a space where young people not only use AI tools, but also learn to critically interrogate, shape, and govern them as informed citizens and autonomous learners.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Artificial intelligence is no longer a future concern; it is a present and structuring reality shaping young people's opportunities, risks, and modes of participation across Europe. Youth workers are key actors in supporting young people to navigate AI-driven environments critically, ethically, and confidently - particularly those at risk of exclusion from formal education or digital innovation pathways.

Evidence from the AI4YouthWork project demonstrates a strong willingness among youth workers to engage with AI, alongside a clear need for structured support, recognised competence frameworks, and sustained institutional investment. The challenge is therefore not one of motivation, but of infrastructure, governance, and policy design.

Without coordinated policy action, AI integration in youth work risks remaining fragmented, uneven, and exclusionary, potentially reinforcing existing digital, territorial, and social inequalities. In such a scenario, the burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on individual practitioners and organisations, rather than being shared through public systems.

Conversely, a strategic European approach can ensure that AI strengthens - rather than undermines - core youth work principles such as inclusion, participation, empowerment, and human-centred practice. When adequately supported, youth work can function as a critical intermediary space, helping young people interpret, question, and shape the digital systems that increasingly govern their lives.

Immediate and coordinated action is therefore required at European, national, and local levels. European institutions, national authorities, Erasmus+ National Agencies, youth organisations, and funding bodies are called upon to recognise AI competences for youth workers as a strategic public policy priority, to invest in capacity-building and innovation, and to support the mainstreaming of ethical and inclusive AI practices across the youth sector.

**Investing in AI competences for youth workers is a structural investment in democratic participation, social inclusion and Europe's capacity to shape its digital future in line with fundamental rights and human dignity.**