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Motion

Youth Agency in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Ensuring young people have a meaningful say in the development, governance and deployment of artificial intelligence in Europe

Signed by: European Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA Europe)

Co-signed by: Council of the German-speaking Youth of Belgium (RdJ), Portuguese National Youth Council (CNJ)

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping how young people learn, work, access information, participate in public life and relate to one another. At the same time, European institutions are increasingly positioning AI as a strategic pillar of competitiveness, innovation and public-sector transformation. However, the speed of AI adoption has outpaced the development of democratic and youth-centred governance mechanisms that would ensure young people are not just subjects of AI-driven change, but recognised as stakeholders with rights, expertise and legitimate claims to influence how these technologies are designed, deployed and regulated.

This matters because young people are among the groups most immediately and deeply affected by AI systems. AI is already entering education, employment pathways, digital platforms, public services, health and mental health tools, and youth work practice in ways that shape opportunity, autonomy and exposure to risk. At the same time, access to the benefits of digital transformation remains deeply unequal, with persistent gaps in devices, connectivity, digital literacy and access to quality learning environments meaning that the expansion of AI can reproduce and deepen existing social inequalities unless inclusion is treated as a core policy concern.

Young people's relationship to AI therefore must be approached not only as a question of innovation, but also as a question of rights, wellbeing, participation, intergenerational fairness and justice. This includes the impact of AI and AI-mediated digital environments on mental health, the environmental implications of rapid technological expansion, and the risk that already marginalized young people, including those facing digital exclusion, are left with the highest exposure to harm and the least influence over decision-making. This motion is grounded in the principle that young people must be systematically consulted in the design, adoption and governance of AI, particularly in sectors that directly affect their lives, including education, youth work, training, employment, health, democratic participation and online safety.

Why Action Is Needed

A first challenge is the speed and scale of AI adoption without equivalent democratic participation. Across Europe, AI is being integrated into education systems, workplaces, public administration and online environments at a pace that often exceeds the development of inclusive consultation and accountability mechanisms. Where governance debates are dominated by states, industry and technical actors, young people risk being treated primarily as users, data sources or target groups rather than as political stakeholders in decisions that shape their futures.[1] While significant advances are being made in terms of policy at the European level in the field of AI, through landmark frameworks such as the EU AI Act and the EU Kids Act, youth input on these initiatives has been limited, despite their overall high prominence in the text of both policies. Such an approach serves only to reproduce the existing understanding of young people as receivers of policy rather than co-designers.

Second is the unequal impact of AI and digital transformation on young people. Young people are not affected by AI in the same way: those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, rural areas or otherwise excluded communities are more likely to face barriers in access to devices, reliable internet, quality digital education and opportunities to develop AI literacy. As AI becomes embedded in education, work and services, these pre-existing inequalities risk being reproduced or amplified, creating a new layer of exclusion on top of the existing digital gap.[2]

A third significant issue to be considered concerns education and learning environments. Four in ten young people aged 16 to 24 in the EU used generative AI tools for formal education in 2025, showing that AI is already a practical reality in learning. However, evidence also shows that while AI can support performance, over-reliance may affect the development of critical thinking, and implementation across education systems remains uneven, with important gaps in teacher preparedness, school-level access and policy follow-through. Young people therefore have a direct stake in how AI is introduced in schools, higher education, vocational education and training, and non-formal learning contexts.[3]

Also to be noted is the impact of AI-mediated digital environments on mental health and well-being. European Parliamentary research warns that youth mental ill-health in the EU is high, rising and increasingly associated with digital environments, including persuasive design, harmful content and emerging AI-mediated interactions that can amplify existing vulnerabilities. Young people are also increasingly exposed to AI chatbots, recommendation systems and automated interactions in sensitive areas of life, sometimes without clear safeguards, age-appropriate design, transparent accountability or accessible support when harm occurs.[4]

Finally to be considered is the environmental and social footprint of AI expansion. The rapid scaling of AI infrastructure raises broader concerns about energy demand, resource use and the distribution of costs and benefits, which are especially relevant to younger generations who will live longest with the consequences of today's technological choices. AI governance cannot therefore be reduced to competitiveness alone; it must also take account of sustainability, fairness, social inclusion and intergenerational responsibility.[5]

For these reasons, AI policy must also be treated as a youth policy issue, because AI already shapes young people's rights, wellbeing, learning conditions, work opportunities, democratic participation and everyday digital environments. Ensuring that young people have a meaningful say in AI policy is

1 European Commission, 2026, "Friend or foe? Evidence from the use of generative artificial intelligence in learning and teaching', https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e1317635-b62b-11f1-81de-01aa75ed71a1/lang uage-en

2 Idem

3 Idem

4 European Parliament, 2026, "Mental Health of Young People in a Digital Era", https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2026/774672/EPRS_STU(2026)774672_EN.pdf

5 Noman Bashit et al., 2024, "The Climate and Sustainability Implications of Generative AI", https://mit-genai.pubpub.org/pub/8ulgrckc/release/2

therefore not an add-on to digital governance, but a democratic requirement for legitimate, inclusive and future-oriented policymaking.

Call to Action

AI policy must not be shaped solely through the lenses of competitiveness, security and innovation, but also through the lenses of rights, well-being, participation, inclusion and intergenerational justice. To this end, the European Youth Forum calls on decision-makers to:

- Recognise and study the specific impact of AI on young people, including in education, employment, mental health, social participation, online safety and access to public services, and ensure that these impacts are explicitly assessed in AI-related policymaking.

- Treat young people as legitimate stakeholders in AI governance, and establish permanent, diverse and adequately resourced mechanisms through which young people can influence AI policy, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at European, national and local level. Ensure these mechanisms have clear mandates, accessible information, transparent selection procedures and adequate resources, enabling young people to contribute before decisions are finalised.

- Ensure the meaningful consultation and co-creation of young people in the adoption of AI in sectors that directly affect their lives, including formal education, higher education, vocational education and training, youth work, employment services, health and mental health support, child and youth protection systems, and digital public services.

- Ensure that the deployment of AI in public services does not become a justification for withdrawing or downgrading physical service provision in rural and remote areas. Where AI-mediated services are introduced, young people in areas with limited connectivity, transport or service density must retain accessible human alternatives, in line with the objective of equal territorial development and the right of young people to stay in their communities.

- Ensure that young people can influence whether, as well as how, AI is used in services

affecting their lives, including by questioning its necessity, proportionality and suitability. Guarantee accessible review by a qualified person with authority to reconsider consequential decisions, and provide appropriate alternatives where reliance on AI would create barriers to essential services or undermine young people's rights.

- Address the digital and AI divide by guaranteeing equitable access to devices, connectivity, inclusive digital education and AI literacy, with targeted support for young people facing poverty, rural exclusion, disability, migration-related barriers and other forms of marginalisation.

- Protect young people's privacy and personal data, and prevent discriminatory outcomes from AI systems, particularly in education, recruitment, health and access to public services. Require appropriate data protection safeguards, testing for bias and discrimination, and effective measures to identify and correct unequal treatment, including where young people face multiple forms of disadvantage.

- Embed mental health, wellbeing and online safety safeguards into AI deployment, especially where young people interact with recommendation systems, AI companions, chatbots, automated assessment tools or digital mental health applications, ensuring age-appropriate design, human oversight, transparency and accessible redress.

- Safeguard human agency, critical thinking and pedagogical quality in the use of AI in education, ensuring that AI supports learning without undermining cognitive development, independent judgement, creativity or the professional role of educators and youth workers.

- Support teachers, youth workers and youth organisations with training, guidance, ethical frameworks and resources so they can engage with AI critically and use it in ways that strengthen rather than weaken inclusion, participation and youth wellbeing.

- Ensure that AI governance includes social and environmental accountability, including attention to sustainability, resource use, public-interest standards and the unequal distribution of harms and benefits across generations and social groups.

- Require transparency, explainability and accessible accountability mechanisms whenever AI systems are used in contexts affecting young people's rights, opportunities or access to services, so that decisions can be questioned, challenged and corrected.

- Promote evidence-based and participatory research on the impact of AI on young people, including long-term effects on learning, mental health, participation, inequality and youth work, and ensure that young people are involved in setting research priorities and interpreting findings.

- Protect young people's rights and opportunities as AI transforms recruitment and employment, including through safeguards against discriminatory automated selection, intrusive workplace monitoring and unfair algorithmic management. Ensure meaningful human review of consequential employment decisions, involve young workers and their representatives in decisions on workplace AI, and support access to quality entry-level jobs, paid training and fair transitions into employment.

- Safeguard young people's freedom to form opinions, access diverse information and participate in democratic life by addressing AI-enabled disinformation, deceptive deepfakes and manipulative political targeting. Require transparency about AI-generated political content and the role of recommendation systems in shaping public debate, and support media and AI literacy that enables young people to recognise manipulation and exercise their democratic rights.







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