

# Companion for Navigating Innovation and Futures Thinking in Youth Work

Insights and Guiding Questions  
Developed by the Field for the Field



# Editorial info

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# Companion for Navigating Innovation and Futures Thinking in Youth Work

**Insights and Guiding Questions  
Developed by the Field for the Field**

# Introduction to this Companion

## Where did it start?

Youth work is constantly evolving, shaped by internal developments in practice and by wider changes in society, policy, democracy, the environment, technology, and young people's lives, among others. In this context, the European Academy on Youth Work (EAYW or 'the Academy') was not created to provide ready-made answers, but to support future orientation in youth work.

Through structured learning experiences, collective reflection, and dialogue across practice, policy, and research, the Academy has functioned as a living environment for exploring how youth work understands and approaches change and innovation, and what role it plays in shaping the futures of its field. Over time, the Academy's discussions reframed innovation not as novelty or isolated projects, but as an ongoing learning process grounded in lived realities, values, and context. Young people have been active participants in all the Academy's learning cycles, and their perspectives and contributions have shaped the insights presented in this Companion.

Over the years, this exploration has taken multiple forms: EAYW events, reports, research and studies, resource material (toolboxes), webinars, podcasts, reflective diaries, and other learning outputs, which all contributed with perspectives and insights. The messages presented in this Companion result from gathering, connecting, and distilling learning from these diverse sources. It is therefore not meant as a summary of activities, but a synthesis of shared reflections developed across time, formats, and voices.

## **What is it?**

Building on this shared process, the Companion consolidates insights developed across the EAYW cycles (2018–2025). Its purpose is to stimulate reflection and support practitioners, organisations, and all parts of the youth work ecosystem in shaping their responses to current realities while developing a shared orientation and a collective positioning in times of complexity and uncertainty. It gathers the essence of what has been explored, questioned, shared, and learned, then reshapes it so it can serve as inspiration for further steps.

This Companion and its accompanying deck of cards marks and celebrates the continuous learning cycle of the EAYW. It is not a final word but an open invitation for dialogue, exploration, and collective contribution to what comes next.

## Who is it for?

The Companion is for everyone who works with young people, and especially for those who shape the conditions for youth work:

- **Youth workers, educators, and mentors:** to reflect on their practice, explore new perspectives, and connect everyday work with broader societal changes.
- **Youth work organisations and teams:** to support strategic conversations, organisational learning, and shared reflection about priorities, values, and innovation.
- **Trainers and facilitators:** to introduce reflection exercises, stimulate dialogue, and explore complex topics in training or learning environments.
- **Policy actors, networks, and institutions:** to reflect on the evolving role of youth work and how systems and policies can support its future development.

It invites a shift from individual answers to collective orientation, from quick solutions to deeper judgement, and from reacting to change to intentionally shaping futures together with young people.

## How to use it?

The Companion calls for an active engagement with its content, beyond a simple read through from beginning to end. It can be used in team meetings, training contexts, organisational reflection and development, and youth policy dialogue to open conversations, provoke debate, question assumptions, and explore whether there is a common understanding of the role, values, and future directions of youth work.

### Each entry follows a simple structure:

- **Chapter** - main thematic categories
- **Topics**
- **Message** – a clear statement that sets the tone and direction
- **Description** – a short narrative that connects the message to youth work realities
- **Question** – an invitation for reflection, dialogue, and collective sense-making

The messages are not meant to be ‘implemented’. They are meant to be used to stimulate thinking, support collective reflection, and help organisations and systems clarify what they want to strengthen, safeguard, transform, or let go.

# Two ways of using this resource

## 1. The Companion

It can be explored from beginning to end or by selecting specific chapters, topics or messages that resonate with your current questions. It can therefore become a valuable support for deeper reflection processes, thematic discussions, strategic conversations, and learning activities.

Take it with you into meetings, training, and quiet moments of reflection. Read a message and notice what it brings up, what resonates, what emerges. Write down your thoughts, underline what feels important, and question what feels uncomfortable. Use it to open conversations, to surface different perspectives, and to connect your everyday practice with bigger questions about direction, values, and the future.

The Companion works best when it is not approached as something to finish, but as something to return to and interact with, again and again, at different moments of your journey.

If you would like to dive deeper into the topics addressed in this Companion, we invite you to consult the resources developed in the frame of the EAYW. All are available for download at [www.eayw.net/resources](http://www.eayw.net/resources).

**INTRODUCTION TO THIS COMPANION**

## 2. The Cards

The messages can also be used in a card format to facilitate interactive sessions, group dialogue, and participatory reflection processes. Cards help to focus discussion, introduce new perspectives, and create shared entry points into complex topics.

Spread the cards. Let people pick one that speaks to them. Read the message aloud. Sit with the question. Notice where there is agreement, where there is tension, and where new ideas emerge. Use the cards to explore where you stand as a team, what you want to strengthen, what needs attention, and where you would like to go next.

The cards are not there to give answers; they are there to help navigate your own pathway. In times of complexity, the value lies less in fixed answers and more in the questions that open space for exploration, challenge assumptions, and spark innovation.

## **A note on terminology**

Some concepts used in this guide, such as innovation, futures thinking, future orientation, and youth work ecosystems, may have different meanings depending on context.

It is worth underlining that the Companion occasionally shifts between conversational and declarative tones, and some topics might require a certain level of comfort with abstract thinking. Where helpful, brief explanations of key terms are included throughout the Companion. A short glossary of core concepts is also provided below to support readers who wish to explore these ideas further.

## **Glossary of terms**

### **Innovation**

In this Companion, innovation is understood not simply as introducing something new, but as developing meaningful responses to changing realities in youth work. It often involves learning, experimentation, adaptation, and collaboration, and it is always shaped by the specific context in which youth work takes place.

### **Futures Thinking**

Futures thinking refers to the ability to explore possible futures, recognise emerging changes, and reflect on how present actions shape what may come next. Rather than predicting the future, it helps youth work to engage with uncertainty and imagine different pathways forward.

### **Youth Work Ecosystem**

The youth work ecosystem includes all stakeholders, structures, and environments that influence youth work. This includes youth workers, organisations, networks, institutions, policies, funding structures, and the broader social contexts in which youth work operates.

### **Future Orientation**

Future orientation refers to the ability to reflect on how present decisions and actions influence possible futures. It involves exploring different scenarios and considering long-term consequences rather than focusing only on immediate challenges.

### **Youth Work Field**

The youth work field refers to the broad community of those involved in youth work, including practitioners, organisations, networks, researchers, institutions, and policymakers.

### **Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking is an approach that considers how different elements of a system influence each other. In youth work, this means understanding how policies, organisations, communities, and young people's realities interact and change, eventually.

# Chapters and Topics

## 1 THE NATURE OF INNOVATION

### TOPICS:

- Creativity produces ideas, innovation puts them into action
- Innovation is about building on, including and outgrowing the old
- Context matters
- Innovation is a process, not a goal in itself
- Innovation is a learning process, not a problem-solving process
- Intentional vs. unintentional innovation
- Innovation and the emergence of the new
- Innovative mindset
- Self-perception of youth work as innovative: true or false?

## 2 PARTICIPATION AND CO-CREATION

### TOPICS:

- Co-development and cross-pollination
- Learning from young people about youth work
- Young people as co-creators, not 'just' beneficiaries
- Research and innovation
- Standardisation vs. flexibility
- Technology and innovation
- New areas of exploration
- Tools do not produce innovation, people do
- From I to WE

## 3 FUTURE ORIENTATION AND LITERACY

### TOPICS:

- Multiple futures (multiverse) and future literacy

- Future readiness: Be like water
- Crisis of perception
- Sense-making. It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.
- Working with young people, working with the future
- Rethinking the societal role
- Multiple drivers
- Young people as futurists
- Innovation, sustainability and transformation

## 4 VALUES AND AGENCY

### TOPICS:

- Value-based or adding value?
- Values and ethics
- Values as a stable core
- Hope and agency
- Acknowledging emotions
- Uncertainty as a permanent condition
- Inclusive innovation
- Inner and outer sides of change
- Reacting vs. shaping

## 5 ENABLERS AND CONDITIONS

### TOPICS:

- Innovation and crisis
- Organisational support for innovation
- Triggers and conditions for innovation
- The right timing for innovation
- Trust, safety and courage
- Systemic approaches and the right to fail
- Innovation and funding dependency
- Spaces for innovation

*Innovation  
creating  
value*

*Active  
role of young  
people in the  
process of  
innovation*

*Methodologies,  
practices,  
approaches,  
tools*

*Completely  
new, having  
new elements,  
or new in a  
given context*

*Supporting  
young people  
to make  
changes*

*Based  
on youth  
work  
values*

*Contributing  
to social  
change*

# 1

## THE NATURE OF INNOVATION



## TOPIC

# **Creativity produces ideas, innovation puts them into action**

## MESSAGE

Innovation is not just about having new ideas, but about turning ideas into practices.

## DESCRIPTION

It is about innovative services or approaches that actually work and last. It most often means developing, adapting, or reworking existing ideas, structures, and practices to respond better to changing needs.





## QUESTION

**What helps turn your ideas into practices that actually work and last, and what stands in the way?**



## TOPIC

# **Innovation is about building on, including and outgrowing the old**

## MESSAGE

Innovation means evolution, not deletion or removal.

## DESCRIPTION

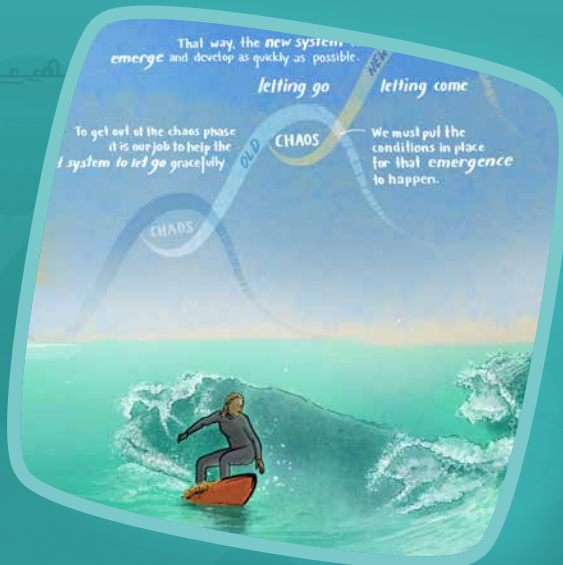
Innovation disturbs the present, but it does it respectfully. It is not about discarding and deleting but rather building on and outgrowing. What once served us well needs to be acknowledged. Allowing the former ways to leave gracefully creates the space for the new ways to emerge.





## QUESTION

**How can we let go of familiar ways of working respectfully (recognising what they gave us) and what makes this difficult when they no longer serve their purpose well?**



## TOPIC

### **Context matters**

## MESSAGE

What matters is not what works everywhere, but what works ‘here’ and ‘now’.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is context-specific and grows through local ownership and reinterpretation, not universal definitions or mechanical replication across contexts. What can be defined as innovative varies across countries, cultures, and realities. Attempts to define innovation universally or transfer it almost mechanically betray or at least misunderstand its nature.





## QUESTION

**How do you stay open to learning from other contexts and how do you ensure that what you adopt truly fits what needs to grow in your own context?**



## TOPIC

# **Innovation is a process, not a goal in itself**

## MESSAGE

Innovation is not the goal! Orientation is.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is not an end in itself. What the field needs most in times of complexity and uncertainty is not more initiatives, tools, or solutions, but shared orientation: ways to make sense of change, clarify direction, and decide what to strengthen, protect, or transform. Innovation becomes meaningful only when it serves this broader need for orientation.





## QUESTION

**In our practice and especially in times of uncertainty, are our innovation efforts driven more by the urge to act, or by a shared understanding of where we want to go?**



## TOPIC

# **Innovation is a learning process, not a problem-solving process**

## MESSAGE

Innovation in youth work is a learning process, not only a problem-solving process.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation involves exploration, experimentation, reflection, and adjustment over time. Its value lies not only in outcomes, but also in what individuals, organisations, and systems learn through the process. Treating innovation as learning strengthens future readiness and professional growth.





## QUESTION

**What have we learned through our innovation processes so far, looking beyond the results they produced?**



## TOPIC

# Intentional vs. unintentional innovation

## MESSAGE

Innovation happens both by design and by necessity, and both are valid.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work often emerges unplanned: under pressure, in response to crisis, or when institutions fail. It is reactive, unpredictable, and situation driven. But innovation can also be an intentional, everyday professional practice - sensing change, questioning routines, experimenting, learning, and adapting. Both paths lead to innovation, but they differ in agency, sustainability, and replicability.





## QUESTION

**Looking at your own context, when has innovation happened by necessity, and when by intention, and what would it take to be more proactive and structured in your approach to innovation?**



## TOPIC

# Innovation and the emergence of the new

## MESSAGE

The emergence of the new cannot be forced but can be enabled.

## DESCRIPTION

Rapid, and often unexpected changes in the external environment might require new ways of working to emerge, even though youth workers might not be aware of what those “new ways” could be at that moment. Creating space for the emergence of the new requires openness, embracing discomfort, experimentation and readiness to leave the old ways behind.





## QUESTION

**How do you create conditions that support the emergence of new ways of doing youth work in your organisation? What might be limiting in this process?**



## TOPIC

# Innovative mindset

## MESSAGE

An innovative mindset is necessary for any innovation to happen.

## DESCRIPTION

The most important condition for innovation is not having tools, competences, or structures, but attitude: openness, courage, curiosity, emotional intelligence, creativity, collaboration, and willingness to act when facing uncertainty. But attitude only becomes real in practice, in how you speak, listen, decide, and relate to young people day to day. An innovative mindset is not something you have, it is something you do.





## QUESTION

**How can we develop an innovative mindset, even in contexts that do not seem supportive of innovation?**



## TOPIC

# **Self-perception of youth work as innovative: true or false?**

## MESSAGE

Youth work and innovation are intrinsically interconnected.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation is already embedded in everyday youth work practice. Youth workers adapt continuously, very often informally and invisibly, to be able to attract, involve, and reach young people and marginalised groups, and react to sudden change. This adaptation is not abstract - it happens in how youth workers listen, respond, make judgements under pressure, and relate to young people in concrete situations.

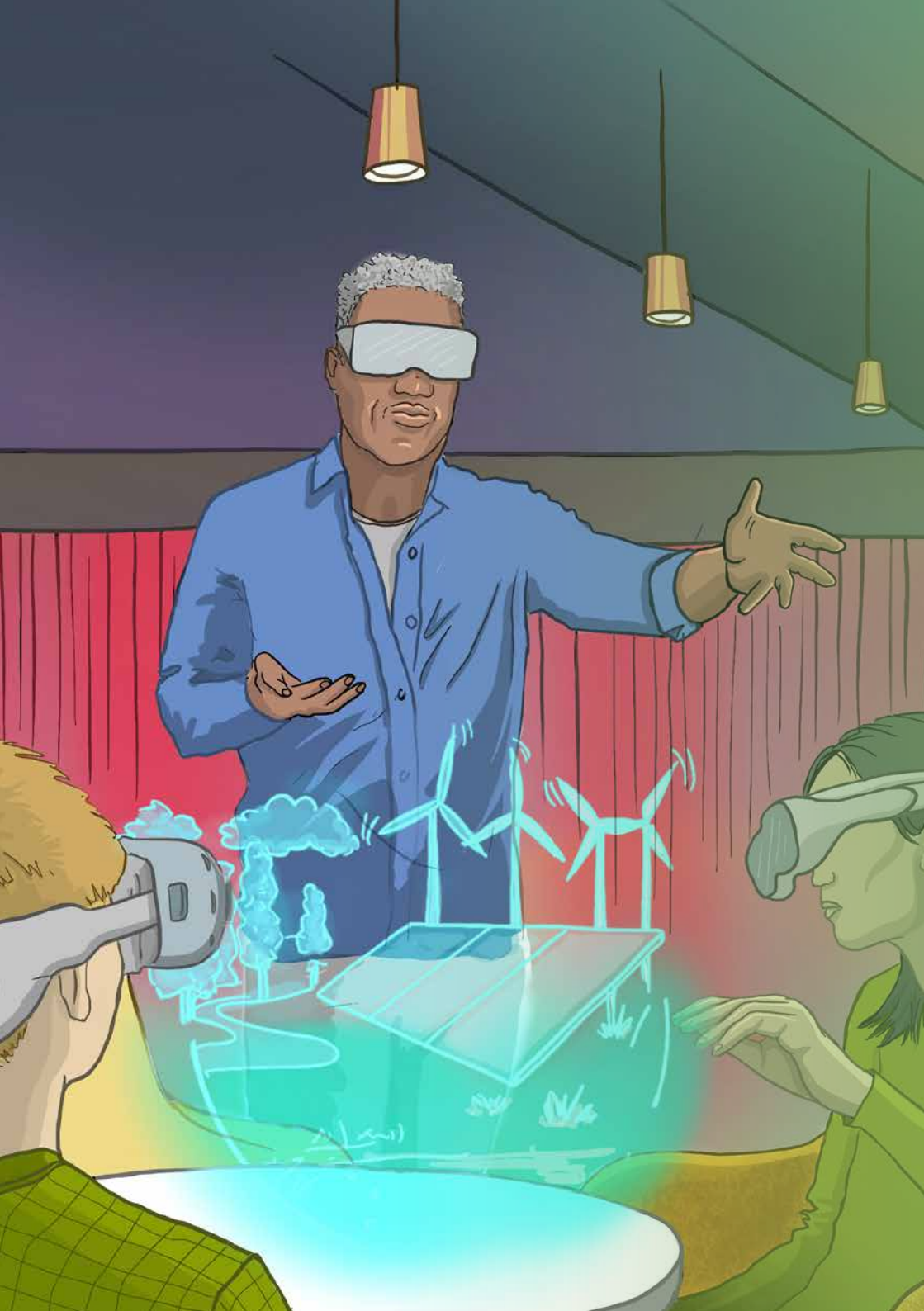




## QUESTION

**How innovative are we really in our organisation, including in our everyday informal practices, and how can we make this more visible and strengthen it?**





# 2

# PARTICIPATION AND CO-CREATION



## TOPIC

# Co-development and cross-pollination

## MESSAGE

Innovation is strengthened through collaboration and shared exploration.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation rarely happens in isolation; it usually involves teams, shared leadership, diverse perspectives, and collective reflection that help individuals and communities feel less alone when facing uncertainty. Without these interconnections and support networks, the innovative practices struggle to survive and expand.





## QUESTION

**How is collective intelligence strengthening innovation and change compared to working alone?**



## TOPIC

# Learning from young people about youth work

## MESSAGE

Without youth participation, innovation in youth work loses its legitimacy.

## DESCRIPTION

Young people are co-creators, initiators, and active agents in shaping the future of youth work. As experts of their own lives and lived realities, they can trigger, shape, and drive innovation in youth work.





## QUESTION

**What are we learning  
from young people about  
how youth work needs to  
develop in the future?**



## TOPIC

# Young people as co-creators, not 'just' beneficiaries

## MESSAGE

Young people are the co-creators, not just the beneficiaries. / Innovation without young people is not youth work innovation.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is grounded in the lived realities, experiences, and perspectives of young people. When young people are positioned only as recipients of services or outcomes, innovation risks reproducing existing power imbalances and missing what truly matters in their lives. Treating young people as co-creators means involving them meaningfully in shaping ideas, decisions, processes, and directions. This is not only a methodological choice, but a core principle that defines the legitimacy, relevance, and ethical foundation of innovation in youth work.





## QUESTION

**Where do young people genuinely shape ideas, decisions, and directions in your innovation processes, and what, in your organisation, limits their influence?**



## TOPIC

# Research and innovation

## MESSAGE

Evidence may encourage innovation, but it does not generate it.

## DESCRIPTION

Youth research plays a crucial role in identifying needs, supporting advocacy, and informing youth and youth work policy development. Nonetheless, innovation emerges from a regular interaction between research, practice, and lived experience, not from research alone.





## QUESTION

**How do you translate  
research insights into concrete  
action and improvement in  
youth work practice?**



## TOPIC

# Standardisation vs. flexibility

## MESSAGE

Professionalisation without adequate and wider reflection can, in fact, undermine innovation.

## DESCRIPTION

Professionalisation and standardisation are becoming more prominent in European youth work. These developments strengthen quality, visibility, and legitimacy, while also inviting reflection on how youth work can sustain flexibility, creativity, and bottom-up innovation.





## QUESTION

**In what situations do standards and professional requirements help your work with young people, and in what situations do they make it harder to respond to new or changing needs?**



## TOPIC

# Technology and innovation

## MESSAGE

Technology is a useful tool, but not a substitute for human connection and interaction.

## DESCRIPTION

Digital tools might enable continuity, creativity, and reach, especially in times of crisis. At the same time, digitalisation as a process also raises questions about inclusion, the quality of relationships, and the core values of youth work.





## QUESTION

**How do your values and principles guide the way you use technology in youth work, and how does this affect both its advantages and its risks?**



## TOPIC

# New areas of exploration

## MESSAGE

Innovation begins where there are new areas of exploration.

## DESCRIPTION

Reaching better and more young people requires youth workers to move further from their usual established spaces, develop out-of-the-box approaches, and meet young people where they are. It might also mean cooperating with ‘unconventional’ (unusual) partners.





## QUESTION

**Which young people are we currently not reaching and what new spaces, approaches, or partnerships might help us reach them?**



## TOPIC

# **Tools do not produce innovation, people do**

## MESSAGE

Tools support innovation processes, but they do not create innovation.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation tools can help structure reflection, exploration, and collaboration, but they cannot replace professional judgement, relationships, and favourable conditions. Without purpose, trust, and shared orientation, tools remain empty instruments rather than drivers of meaningful innovation.





## QUESTION

**How do you differentiate between using new tools and really changing your practice in a meaningful way, and which competences matter most for innovation in your context?**



## TOPIC

# From I to WE

## MESSAGE

Shifting from 'I' to 'we' is important when thinking about the future.

## DESCRIPTION

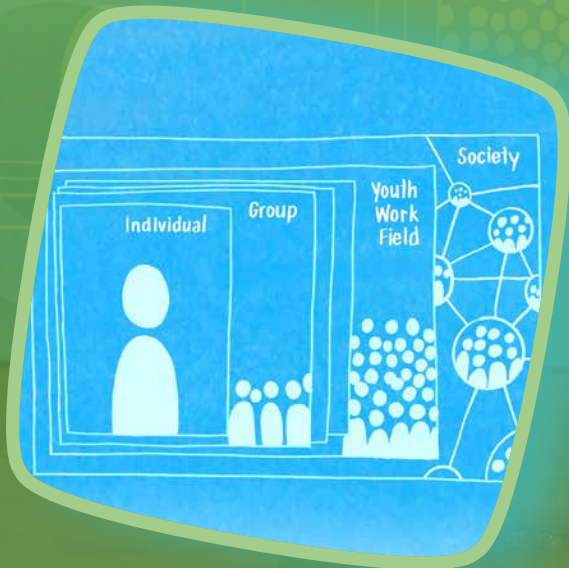
Futures thinking in youth work requires moving from individual questions and concerns to collective responsibility. The future is co-created, not faced alone, and because of that, it requires shared ownership, collaborative dialogue, and the recognition of interdependence across the youth work field.

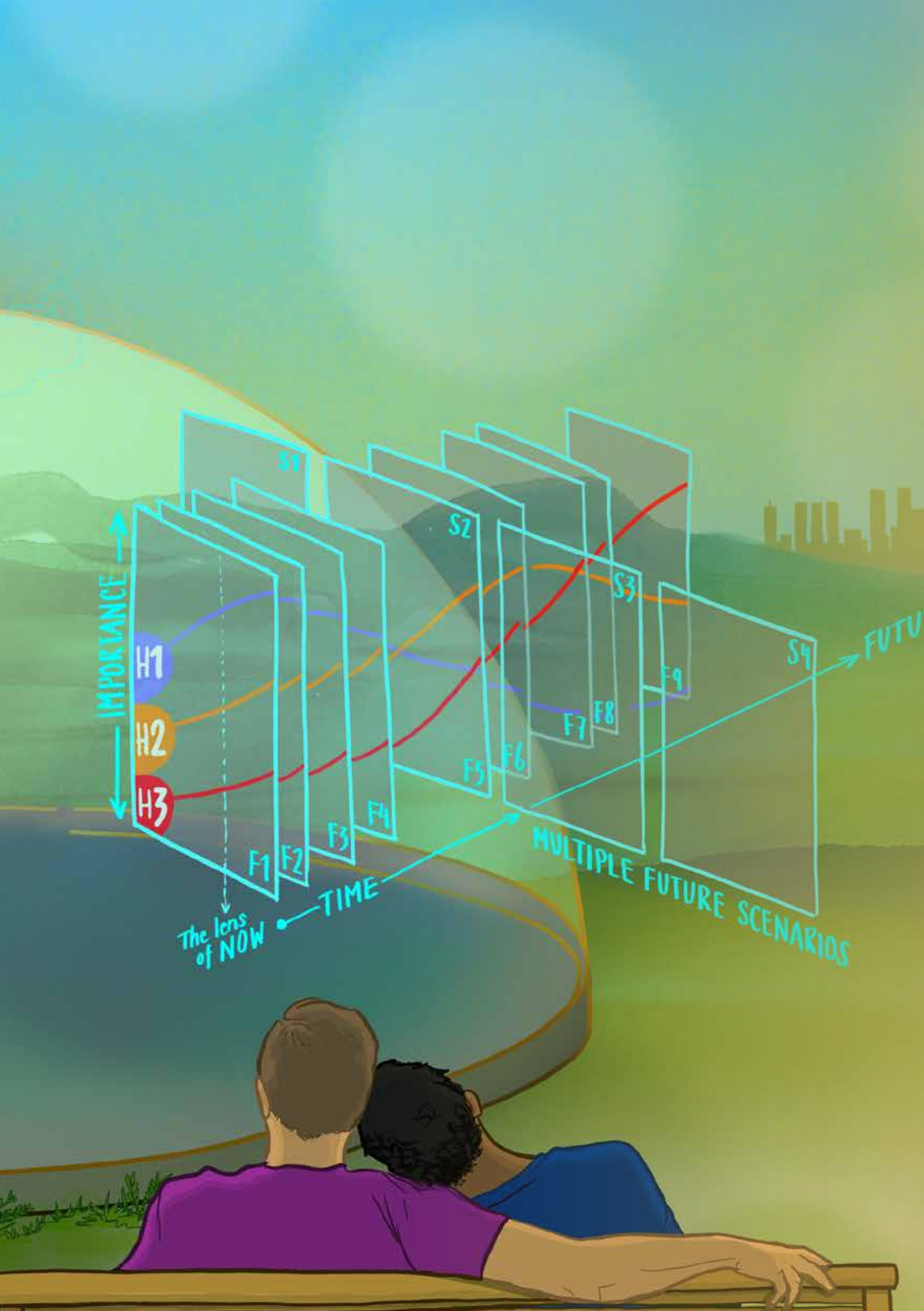




## QUESTION

**What would change in terms of the impact of youth work if future challenges were approached as shared responsibilities across the field rather than as separate organisational or individual issues?**





IMPORTANCE

H1  
H2  
H3

The lens of NOW

TIME

MULTIPLE FUTURE SCENARIOS

FUTU

S1

S2

S3

S4

F1

F2

F3

F4

F5

F6

F7

F8

F9

# 3 FUTURE ORIENTATION AND LITERACY



## TOPIC

# Multiple futures (multiverse) and future literacy

## MESSAGE

Future readiness starts with the capacity to imagine and engage with multiple possible futures.

## DESCRIPTION

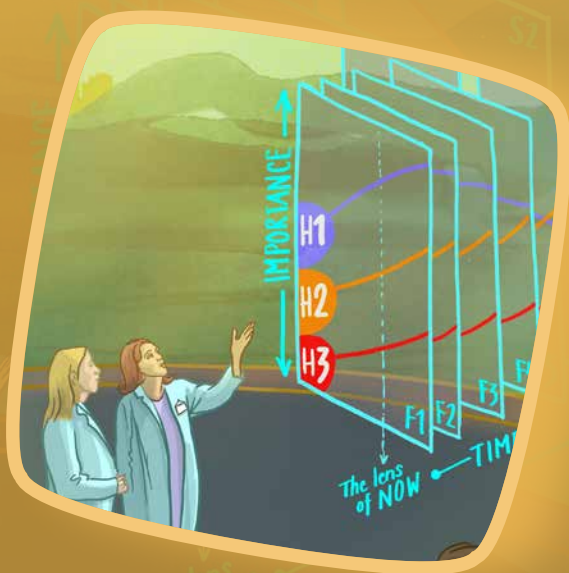
Youth work benefits from exploring multiple scenarios rather than trying to predict what will happen. Future literacy is the capacity to do this: knowing where to look, reading emerging signals, and shaping directions rather than waiting for the future to arrive. These futures unfold differently across contexts, depending on local conditions, values, and the choices made today by youth workers, young people, and communities.





## QUESTION

**How do you understand future literacy in your context, and how ready are you to explore multiple possible futures rather than focusing only on what seems most likely?**



## TOPIC

### **Future readiness: Be like water**

## MESSAGE

Future readiness is a mindset and ongoing practice, not a fixed state.

## DESCRIPTION

Future readiness means working with uncertainty, ambiguity, interconnectedness, and non-linearity instead of trying to control certainty. It requires moving from anxiety and risk-driven approaches towards a constructive orientation grounded in the firm belief that change is possible. This capacity is developed through ongoing reflection, dialogue, learning, and adaptation.





**QUESTION**

**How can you strengthen this future readiness capacity in your team or organisation?**



## TOPIC

# Crisis of perception

## MESSAGE

The deepest crisis is a crisis of perception, an inability to see complexity, interconnectedness, and long-term consequences.

## DESCRIPTION

The current challenges of youth work are not isolated problems but manifestations of complex, interconnected systems. One of the fundamental challenges youth work faces is developing the capacity to perceive these patterns, face the discomfort of complexity, and let go of old certainties, when necessary, even when this feels chaotic. Change is happening faster than systems, policies, and structures can respond, requiring systems thinking rather than isolated problem-solving.





## QUESTION

**How does seeing challenges as interconnected patterns rather than isolated problems change the way you understand what is happening and how you decide to respond?**



## TOPIC

**Sense-making. It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.**

## MESSAGE

Sense-making is a central task for youth work in times of uncertainty.

## DESCRIPTION

In times of rapid change and complexity, youth work must help young people (and youth workers themselves) to interpret, understand, and find meaning in confusing or contradictory information, experiences, and social developments.





## QUESTION

**What signals can you already see or sense that might grow and shape how youth work will look in the future?**



## TOPIC

# **Working with young people, working with the future**

## MESSAGE

Youth work is always shaping the future, through actions, narratives, decisions, and oversights, whether intentional or not.

## DESCRIPTION

Youth work is not about preparing for some distant future; it is already happening amid emerging changes that shape the future realities. The real question is therefore not whether youth work influences the future, but how aware we are of that influence. How youth workers see their own role - reacting to change or actively shaping it - affects their everyday practice and the related consequences.





## QUESTION

**Do you see yourselves as co-creators actively shaping future directions, or as passive recipients, reacting to external change? Why?**



## TOPIC

# Rethinking the societal role

## MESSAGE

The societal role of youth work cannot be fixed once and for all; it requires continuous (re)negotiation in changing contexts.

## DESCRIPTION

Youth work is strongly shaped by wider social, political, and global developments. The youth work field has never fully controlled its own future, and its societal role must be continuously renegotiated in dialogue with changing contexts and emerging needs.





## QUESTION

**What signals in your context suggest that the societal role of youth work needs to be rethought, and who do you need to engage with this process?**



for connecting with us.

## TOPIC

### **Multiple drivers**

## MESSAGE

Many drivers of change are already visible, even if their consequences are not yet fully understood.

## DESCRIPTION

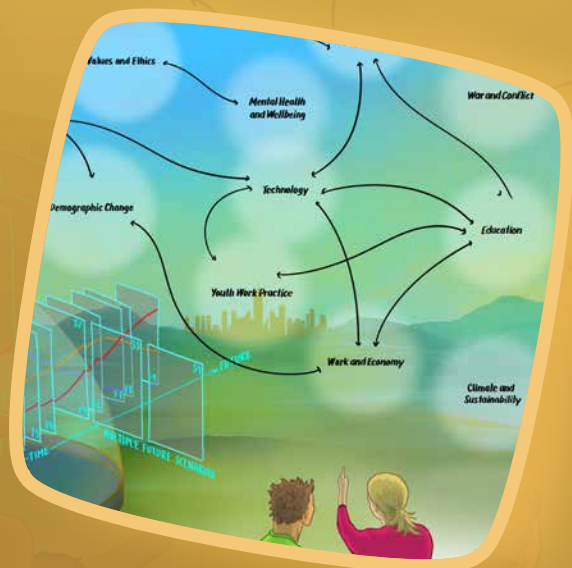
The future of youth work is shaped by multiple interconnected developments: technological, social, political, economic, and environmental. These cannot be understood or addressed in isolation; they require systems thinking and recognition of complex interdependencies.





## QUESTION

**What are the strongest societal trends and shifts that might impact the lives of young people and the role of youth work in your context?**



## TOPIC

# Young people as futurists

## MESSAGE

Young people's voices bring important perspectives to future discussions.

## DESCRIPTION

Students, young people, and newer generations of youth workers bring fresh perspectives, challenge established assumptions and often have more direct experience of contemporary youth realities, digital cultures, and emerging social issues that shape the future of youth work.





## QUESTION

**What stories about the future do young people share, and how do these perspectives challenge the ways we currently understand youth work and its future?**



## TOPIC

# Innovation, sustainability and transformation

## MESSAGE

Innovation keeps youth work relevant, but there are moments when deeper transformation is needed.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation is necessary for youth work to remain relevant, attractive, and legitimate – for young people and for future youth workers. But innovation alone is not always enough. There are moments when existing ways of working no longer serve emerging realities, and when what is needed is not a better version of the same thing, but something fundamentally different. Youth work must remain alert to those signals.

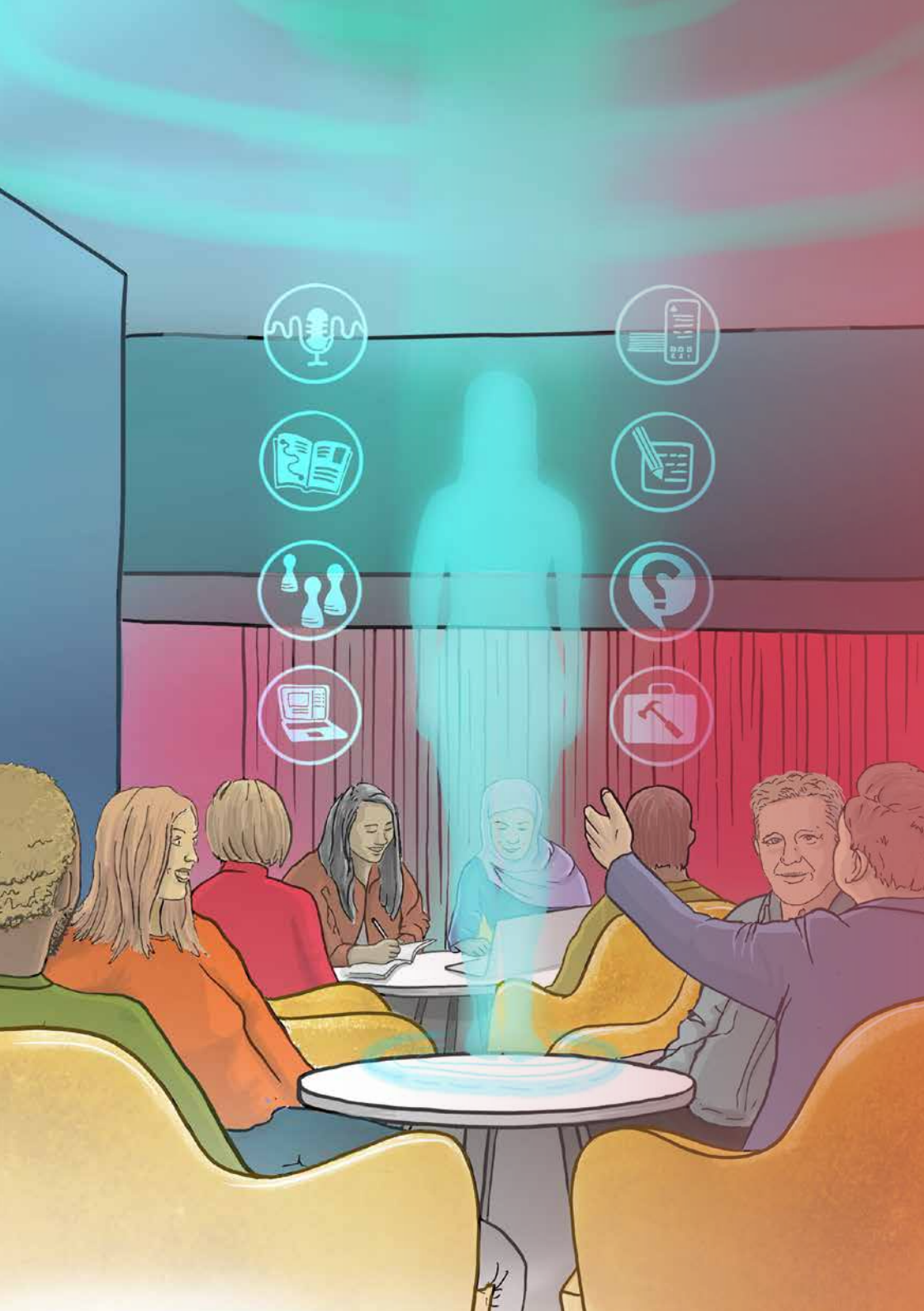




## QUESTION

**Looking 10 – 20 years ahead,  
how does your current approach  
to innovation support the  
long-term sustainability of youth  
work — and how do you  
recognise the moment when  
innovation is no longer enough?**





# 4 VALUES AND AGENCY



## TOPIC

# Value-based or adding value?

## MESSAGE

Innovation without value can become a mere distraction.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is not about novelty but about value and meaningful change. Innovation is defined by the realities it tries to respond to, shaped by young people's lived experiences, needs, dreams, and social contexts. It must strengthen inclusion, empowerment, participation, and social justice. Something is not innovative because it is new, but because it creates meaningful change in a specific context. If innovation undermines these core values, it is not innovation at all but distraction.





## QUESTION

**How do you recognise whether  
'innovation' in your context  
creates meaningful change  
rooted in youth work values,  
and is not just about introducing  
something new?**



## TOPIC

### **Values and ethics**

## MESSAGE

Values and ethics are core future-related issues, particularly in relation to technology, data, social cohesion, and democratic life.

## DESCRIPTION

As technology advances and societies become more polarised, youth work faces ethical questions about data privacy, how algorithms work, digital inclusion, and how to support democratic participation and social cohesion in increasingly fragmented public spheres.





## QUESTION

**How do your everyday decisions support the protection of values such as inclusion, trust and democratic participation, in times of rapid technological and social change?**



## TOPIC

### **Values as a stable core**

## MESSAGE

Values are non-negotiable anchors for youth work in times of change.

## DESCRIPTION

As youth work adapts to new realities, values such as inclusion, participation, empowerment, and social justice provide stability and direction. These values are not flexible variables to be adjusted to trends or funding priorities; they are anchors that guide decisions, partnerships, and responses to change.





## QUESTION

**When the pressure for adaptation is growing, how do you recognise the line between necessary change and drifting away from your core youth work values?**



## TOPIC

# Hope and agency

## MESSAGE

Hope and agency enable a meaningful engagement when facing uncertainty.

## DESCRIPTION

Hope is not the same as optimism (believing everything will work out), but the commitment to act meaningfully when the outcomes are uncertain. Agency involves a conscious awareness of the capacity to influence reality, together with the responsibility that comes with it.





## QUESTION

**How do you strengthen your sense of hope and agency when facing uncertainty, rather than withdrawing or waiting for certainty?**



## TOPIC

# Acknowledging emotions

## MESSAGE

All emotions linked to the future, such as fear, hope, or uncertainty, need to be acknowledged and addressed in safe and supportive spaces.

## DESCRIPTION

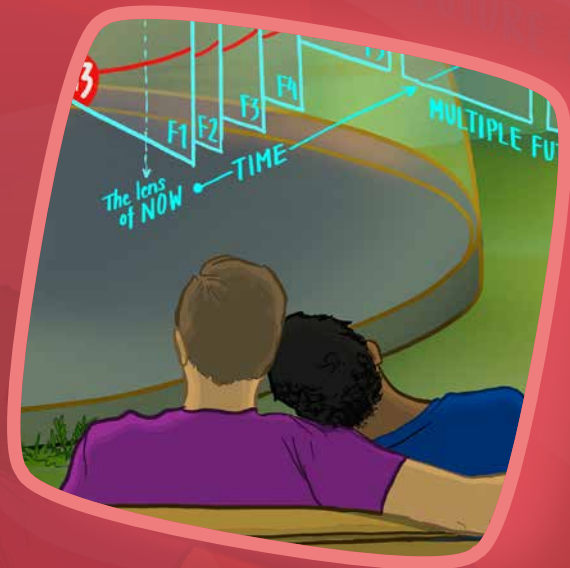
Talking about the future might bring up mixed emotions, such as fear, stress, hope, curiosity, or excitement. Instead of avoiding dealing with these feelings, youth work must create spaces where they can be acknowledged, explored, and worked through collectively as part of the practice.





## QUESTION

**How do you create spaces where emotions about the future can be acknowledged and worked through, and what happens when they are ignored in favour of plans and actions?**



## TOPIC

# Uncertainty as a permanent condition

## MESSAGE

Uncertainty is a permanent condition of youth work, not a temporary disruption.

## DESCRIPTION

Youth work does not operate in stable or predictable environments. Social, political, economic, and cultural change is ongoing and interconnected.

Rather than waiting for stability to return, youth work must develop the capacity to act, reflect, and make judgments within uncertainty as a normal condition of the field.





## QUESTION

**What strategies and competences help you to act and make judgements within ongoing uncertainty?**



## TOPIC

# Inclusive innovation

## MESSAGE

An innovation that excludes reproduces inequality.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work loses its purpose when the voices of marginalised young people are not heard. Participants identified inclusion, diversity, and visibility of youth work as core needs for the future. This calls for effective systemic solutions, which imply including all voices in the process.





## QUESTION

**Whose voices are missing  
'at the table' and what does this  
say about who may still be  
excluded or invisible?**



## TOPIC

# Inner and outer sides of change

## MESSAGE

Responding to future challenges requires a whole system change approach, and to address inner and outer dimensions simultaneously.

## DESCRIPTION

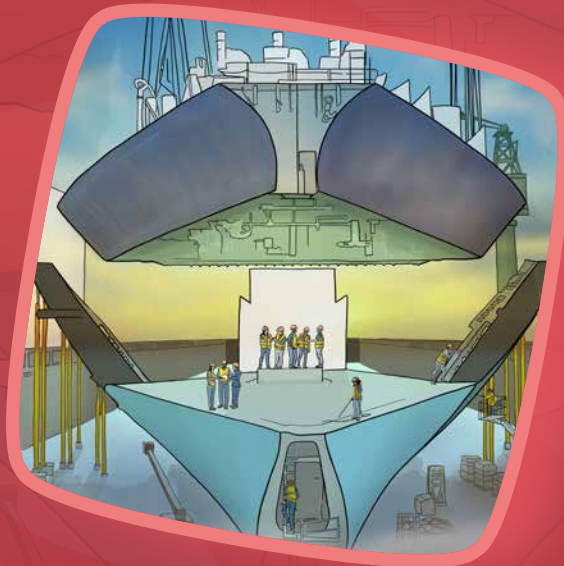
Inner work (mindset, values, emotions, perception, narratives, patterns) and outer work (structures, policies, funding, practices, skills, frameworks, strategies) are inseparable. Meaningful change requires paying attention to those two dimensions at once, recognising that shifts in consciousness and shifts in systems reinforce each other.





## QUESTION

**What happens when efforts to change structures and systems are not supported or backed up with changes in mindsets, values, and ways of thinking, and where do you notice this in your context?**



## TOPIC

# Reacting vs. shaping

## MESSAGE

Youth work must move from reacting to change towards shaping and creating futures.

## DESCRIPTION

If youth work only responds to emerging challenges, it risks remaining in a permanent state of reaction. Future-ready youth work requires intentional positioning: recognising agency, making choices, and actively shaping directions together with young people, rather than adapting only after change has already happened.





## QUESTION

**What supports a shift from reacting to change towards actively shaping future directions together with young people, and what tends to hold you back?**





A stylized illustration of a person with curly hair, wearing a brown jacket and blue pants, walking across a stream on stepping stones. The background is a soft, painterly landscape with green hills and a blue sky. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

# 5 ENABLERS AND CONDITIONS



## TOPIC

# Innovation and crisis

## MESSAGE

Crisis can trigger innovation, but innovation is not an automatic outcome of crisis.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation is often triggered by crisis, frustration, exclusion, or the failure of approaches. When existing ways of working are no longer effective, innovation is not just practical but becomes an ethical obligation. Therefore, youth work has to adapt to remain true to its values and accompany young people.





## QUESTION

**What are we learning from crises in our context and how does this learning shape our readiness to change and innovate?**



## TOPIC

# Organisational support for innovation

## MESSAGE

Innovation starts with people but requires systems to sustain it.

## DESCRIPTION

Although innovation happens within an ecosystem, it is initiated by youth workers and young people who are the closest to lived realities and emerging challenges. However, innovation cannot rely only on motivated individuals; it requires systemic conditions, organisational openness, shared governance, and cross-sectoral cooperation to sustain and spread.





## QUESTION

**Do you have an innovation framework or a shared approach in your organisation and if not, what would such a framework need to include to support and sustain innovation?**



## TOPIC

# Triggers and conditions for innovation

## MESSAGE

Innovation starts with people but requires systems to sustain it.

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation happens when disruptive or challenging forces - crisis, frustration, exclusion, or the failure of existing approaches - meet supportive environments. Without both, innovation either never starts or never lasts. Innovative ideas are common in youth work, but they only lead to change when the right conditions exist: time, trust, resources, space for experimentation, and tolerance of uncertainty. When these conditions are missing, innovation is constrained regardless of individual motivation or ideas.





## QUESTION

**What triggers innovation in your context, and which conditions currently enable it or limit it, even when good ideas are already there?**



## TOPIC

# The right timing for innovation

## MESSAGE

Innovation needs time, rhythm, and continuity to generate learning and change.

## DESCRIPTION

Meaningful innovation in youth work cannot be rushed or reduced to short-term cycles. Learning, trust-building, and experimentation require time and continuity. When innovation is driven by acceleration and constant urgency, reflection and quality are often lost.





## QUESTION

**How do we recognise when is the right moment to invest time and continuity in innovation, and not to rush from one urgent task to the next?**



## TOPIC

# Trust, safety and courage

## MESSAGE

Trust, psychological safety, courage, and a willingness to question the status quo are essential conditions for innovation.

## DESCRIPTION

These conditions create an environment where youth workers and young people feel safe to experiment, take risks, voice different opinions, and challenge 'established' ways of working without the fear of being judged.





## QUESTION

**In your context, where does it feel safe to speak up and take risks, and where does it not do so (and why)?**



## TOPIC

# Systemic approaches and the right to fail

## MESSAGE

Innovation is not possible if failure is not allowed.

## DESCRIPTION

By nature, innovation involves trial and error. Therefore, without organisational and policy-level safety nets, youth workers cannot embrace risk and creativity. Innovation is non-linear and, in fact, unpredictable. This is what makes it innovative by nature. Therefore, systems that require certainty, control, and/or guaranteed outcomes systematically prevent or suppress innovation.





## QUESTION

**How safe does it feel in your context to try out things that might not work, and to learn from them?**



## TOPIC

# Innovation and funding dependency

## MESSAGE

External conditions might lead to prioritising survival over innovation.

## DESCRIPTION

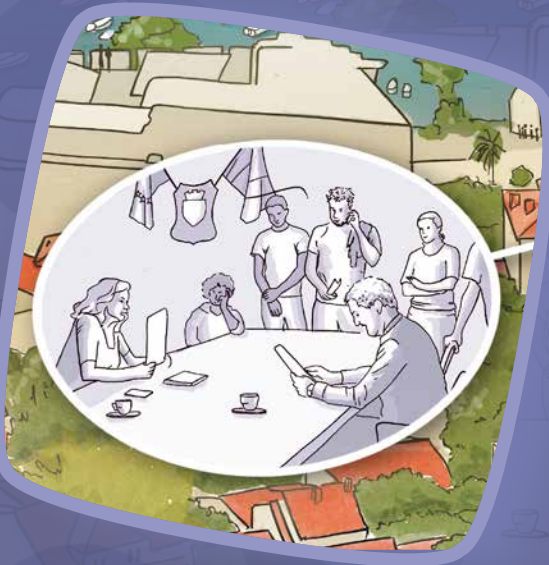
Innovation is deeply conditioned by financial dependence and funding mechanisms. Short-term or unpredictable funding, rigid project logic, and quantitative indicators mean prioritising ‘predictability’ over relevance. This very often pushes youth workers to repeat ‘what already works’ instead of responding to emerging needs, directing priorities away from young people towards funders’ interests.





## QUESTION

**How can you balance the need for survival with the need for further development and relevance for young people?**



## TOPIC

# Spaces for innovation

## MESSAGE

Innovation and futures thinking require creating intentional spaces for meaningful dialogue and collective exploration across the ecosystem(s).

## DESCRIPTION

Innovation does not thrive in overloaded agendas and fragmented discussions. Youth work needs fewer topics, deeper engagement, and more time for reflection and dialogue. These spaces are not only about methods or tools - they are spaces where youth workers and young people can slow down, think together, and question what genuinely matters.





## QUESTION

**How can you create intentional spaces across the ecosystem for meaningful dialogue and co-creation around issues that matter to young people, and who needs to be part of these conversations?**







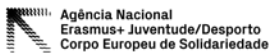
## Authors

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## EAYW Partners



## About this publication

This Companion for Navigating Innovation and Future Thinking in Youth Work consolidates the insights developed by the European Academy on Youth Work in the period 2018 - 2025.

Its purpose is to stimulate reflection and support everyone who works with young people, and especially those who shape the conditions for youth work, in creating their responses to current realities while developing a shared orientation and a collective positioning in times of complexity and uncertainty. It gathers the essence of what has been explored, questioned, shared, and learned, then reshapes it so it can serve as inspiration for further steps.

This Companion and its accompanying deck of cards marks and celebrates the continuous learning cycle of the EAYW.

It is not a final word but an open invitation for dialogue, exploration, and collective contribution to what comes next.



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