North-South Centre Youth Universities 2025: concept note

''Empowering youth for digital safety''

Digital safety refers to the practices, skills, and protections that ensure individuals can use digital technologies and online platforms safely, responsibly, and ethically. It includes protecting one's privacy and personal data, recognizing and responding to cyberbullying, avoiding harmful or illegal content, and understanding legal rights and responsibilities in digital spaces.

In today's hyper-connected world, young people are among the most active users of digital technologies and, as a result, are increasingly vulnerable to the risks and dangers of the digital space. As of February 2025, there were 5.56 billion internet users globally, which amounted to 67.9% of the global population. Young people aged 15 to 24 years represent the majority of users, accounting for 79%. This percentage varies by the region with, for example, 98 % of young people aged 16 to 29 years report using the internet every day in Europe, as compared to 78% in the Arab states.[1] .

As a European regional organisation for the protection of human rights in Europe, with the European Convention on Human Rights as its main reference, the Council of Europe has been at the forefront of setting legal standards for the protection of human rights online. For 40 years, the [Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data](#) - Convention 108 – has been the only international legally binding instrument on the protection of privacy and personal data. Furthermore, the [Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law](#) and [Budapest Convention on Cybercrime](#) are the first-ever international legally binding treaties in their respective fields, open to third States for accession as well.

Other regional organisations have also contributed significantly to advancing digital safety. For example, the [African Union's Malabo Convention](#) focuses on cybersecurity and personal data protection, complemented by its [Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa](#), which emphasizes youth empowerment and digital safety. The League of Arab States adopted the Arab Convention on Combating Information Technology Offences, which seeks to strengthen regional efforts against cybercrime.

These efforts are further reinforced by interregional collaboration initiatives. [The Luxor declaration on Youth and Intercultural Dialogue in the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#)[2] highlights the urgency of addressing misinformation and social inequalities in the era of AI, emphasising the importance of

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[1] ITU, [Youth internet use](#), accessed 17 March 2025.

[2] One of the outcomes of the 8th Arab-European Youth Forum in October 2024, co-organised by the Council of Europe and the League of Arab States.

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global collaboration, youth empowerment and regulating the usage of AI in education to tackle these challenges. Similarly, the Kotor declaration by the North-South Centre (NSC) contains a set of recommendations for youth initiatives to combat racist and xenophobic acts through computer systems.[3]

In light of this context, the 2025 edition of the University on Youth and Development (UYD) will focus on empowering youth for digital safety. Building on the need for stronger digital rights and protections, the UYD will integrate dedicated activities, training sessions, and thematic workshops that aim to raise awareness, strengthen legal literacy, and develop the competences young people need to navigate and shape the digital world.

Through interactive learning and intercultural exchange, the UYD will equip youth with tools to protect their rights online, promote responsible digital citizenship, and reinforce their capacity to act as multipliers within their communities. The theme of the NSC Youth Universities in 2025 also aligns fully with the purpose and objectives of the European Year of Digital Citizenship of the Council of Europe. Both aim to increase people's understanding of the importance of competences for a democratic culture, and how they can be developed online among young people. [4]

The 2025 edition will also be the first ever to host the first in-person training course for participants of the HEY Programme (Human Rights Education for Youth), which in 2025, has a strong focus on youth digital safety by developing and implementing courses on media information and literacy, data protection, artificial intelligence (AI) and combatting hate speech online.

The activities taking place at the Universities will address the following questions:

- What role can young people play in promoting digital literacy and countering online hate speech and disinformation?
- How can interregional youth cooperation contribute to strengthening the work of governments and international organisations when it comes to digital safety and privacy and digital skills?
- How to raise awareness among young people on the international legal standards and frameworks in the field of digital privacy and safety and AI?

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[3] The Kotor declaration was endorsed by experts and representatives from law enforcement, youth organisations, member states, African Union, Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and others.

[4] Digital Citizenship Education (DCE) is the **empowerment of learners of all ages** through education or the acquisition of competences for learning and active participation in a digital society to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities online, and to promote and protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law in cyberspace. Thus, DCE seeks to address issues such as disinformation, cyberbullying, online hate speech and the misuse of personal data.

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