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# Professionals in Managing Flows of Information: Youth Information and Counselling in the 2020s



**Koordinaatti**  
National Youth Work Centre of Expertise

**report**

Finnish Youth Research Society  
Koordinaatti – National Youth Work Centre of Expertise  
Professionals in Managing Flows of Information: Youth  
Information and Counselling in the 2020s  
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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Truths and Flows of Information

It is typical that each era labels itself as a particularly significant “time of change”.<sup>1</sup> We often imagine that before the world was moving at a peaceful pace and now there are great transformations that are shaking the world order we know to the core.

However, the 2010s have brought about a disruption that will undoubtedly have a significant impact on our lives. We have witnessed the spreading of disinformation on social media, electoral influence, information warfare connected to the crisis in Ukraine, the US President’s imaginative accusations of “fake news” by journalists, WikiLeaks’ information leaks, and debates on bubbles created by social media where people reach out to like-minded and reinforce each other’s views without indulging in critical discussion.<sup>2</sup> We live and act as citizens in an environment that constantly requires an ability to recognize true and necessary information amid a flood of information. Without these skills and accessible information, living and/or decision-making in the information society becomes difficult.

The phenomena mentioned above may be far

apart, but there’s a connecting factor between them: they are all, in their own way, a struggle for knowledge and truth. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year was post-truth. So it doesn’t seem far-fetched to claim that information – and whoever holds it – is subject to discussion in the 2010s to the extent that it will remain in history as one of the hallmarks of this time. Although perceiving our time as a historical watershed carries the risk of clichés and exaggeration, our information landscape is, in fact, in many ways undergoing a profound change. Although the number of smart devices in our daily lives has increased exponentially and all information is, at least basically, just a few clicks away, it has not made our relationship with information any easier than before. Sometimes it seems to be quite the contrary: the changing landscape of information makes our relationship to knowledge even more challenging.<sup>3</sup>

However, in addition to threats, social media is also subject to many wishes and aspirations. The democratization of information and social media as a platform can enable a culture of participation, a new creative force. It is not yet clear, however, how well-founded these wishes are.<sup>4</sup> What

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Åberg 2000, 18–19.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Garbus 2018; Seppänen & Väliverronen 2013; Jantunen 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Karim & Widén 2018a, 7, 22–23.

<sup>4</sup> Seppänen & Väliverronen 2013, 191–208.

is instead clear is that the media landscape requires new skills and abilities of the people navigating in it, and these are not self-evident.<sup>5</sup>

Although Finns start using the Internet at an early age, many of them have shortcomings in their information retrieval skills and in critical assessment of information sources.<sup>6</sup> The skills and the ability to navigate smoothly in a more digital landscape is not the same among young people. Instead, they are a rather heterogeneous group.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the excitement about digital natives might sometimes hide the fact that even young people may lack the skills that are so much needed in the modern information landscape.<sup>8</sup> Such skills include the ability to navigate in a digital environment, critically assess the reliability of various sources and combine sources, understand, absorb as well as produce and spread information – not to mention basic IT skills. These skills play such a central role that it is not an exaggeration to talk about social survival skills. As the information landscape becomes more digital and global, the conditions for participation also change. If citizenship is defined as being a member of a political community, we can besides survival skills also talk about the above-mentioned capabilities as civic competences: they are part of a social competence, a possibility of critical and independent thinking and action, which is needed in each democratic society.<sup>9</sup> The ability and opportunity to operate in a digital environment is a source of inclusion, well-being and knowledge for many young people, and failure to do so may increase exclusion and marginalization.<sup>10</sup>

The importance of knowledge doesn't seem to be diminishing by any accounts. According to Antti Rinne's Government Programme, social inclusion and participation of children and young people

will be promoted with digital means, and efforts will be made to improve their media literacy.<sup>11</sup>

The basic idea of youth information and counselling is that all young people should have access to information. This kind of work has a long history in Finland: the first pioneers of youth counselling services were established already in the 1950s. At that time, the aim was to provide young immigrants counselling in their new life situation.<sup>12</sup> In the 2000s, the work was coordinated on a national level, and National Coordination and Development Centre of Youth Information and Counselling Services, currently known as Koordinaatti, was launched in 2006.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 Research Project

Koordinaatti has been working on defining youth information and counselling work and related services since autumn 2017. To this end, a working group has been organised in which the participants have been reflecting on information and counselling for young people. The working group have had meetings for example in Turku on 6 October 2017, in Helsinki on 15 September 2017 and on 3 November 2017 as well as in Oulu on 1 August 2018. In addition, web conferences have been held. The participants of the working group have noted that the professionals of youth information and counselling work have "a need to talk about the same thing, [find] a common language and terms, various interfaces with other information, counselling and guidance services in order to bring the services up-to-date".<sup>14</sup> The definition work is one of the tasks of Koordinaatti designated by the Ministry of Education and Culture in its performance management document. The purpose of the definition work is to express what

<sup>5</sup> Kaarakainen & Saikkonen 2015; Karim & Widén 2018a, 22–23; Kaarakainen & Kaarakainen 2018, 235–254.

<sup>6</sup> Kaarakainen & Saikkonen 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Kaarakainen & Saikkonen 2015; Karim & Widén 2018a, 23; Kaarakainen & Kaarakainen 2018, 235–254.

<sup>8</sup> Merikivi, Myllyniemi & Salasuo 2016, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Kiilakoski, Gretscher & Nivala 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Kaarakainen & Kaarakainen 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Government Programme, 79, 197.

<sup>12</sup> Heikkinen, 127–151.

<sup>13</sup> History, Koordinaatti's webpage. <http://www.koordinaatti.fi/fi/historia> Reference 3 June, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Working group summary, 30 October 2017.

youth information and counselling work is about both in real life and as part of a multidisciplinary service for young people, as well as to bring clarity to the work goals, actions and methods. The definition work aims at supporting youth workers in understanding information and counselling work and in structuring their work. At its simplest, it's about finding out what youth information and counselling work is today.

An outside body was also requested to assist in the definition work. It would help to structure the work already done and analyze the material produced. Finnish Youth Research Society carried out a research project in spring 2019 (March–June 2019) supporting the objectives of the definition work.

The research questions were as follows.

- What is the relationship between youth information and counselling work and 1) other youth work 2) other youth services?
- What are the characteristic features of youth information and counselling work?
- What kind of recommendations/minimum criteria can be set based on the above?

The project material included notes and summaries of working groups responsible for the definition work, literature on the subject, additional four interviews with stakeholders and representatives of Koordinaatti as well as a workshop organized in May 2019.<sup>15</sup>

This report contributes to the debate on the definition of youth information and counselling work. It will serve as one contribution that tries to give

its interpretation of the strengths, characteristics and roles of youth information and counselling work in a changing information landscape. First, I will take a look at the history of youth information and counselling work. Then I will analyse the identity of youth information and counselling work in the light of our current information landscape. Thirdly, I will look at the strengths of youth information and counselling work. After that, I will briefly discuss the question of national recommendations. And finally, I will try to summarize all of the above and, based on them, come up with some possible future scenarios and my own proposal on the national recommendations for youth information and counselling work.

<sup>15</sup> In the workshop, I presented participants with my preliminary research findings and asked the participants to evaluate in small groups what they thought about my interpretations on the professionals' perspective and whether they could recognize their job from my descriptions. All participants went to all three smaller groups with about half an hour time for reflections in each group. Each group selected one member who was to write down notes and ideas on a cardboard and present them to others at the end of the day. Each group always set off and started its work on a new piece of cardboard, and they were told briefly about the previous group's important findings and ideas. The intention was that, if they wished to do so, the participants could follow the remarks made by the previous participants while avoiding too much control and maneuvering so that the contributions would stay as open as possible. The workshop group questions can be found in the appendices. The role of the workshop was twofold: on one hand, it served as a test audience for professionals for research findings and gave an opportunity to challenge researcher's interpretations, on the other hand, it produced more material that was included in the project.

## 2 A brief look back into the history of youth information and counselling work

In Finland, the youth information and counselling work dates back to the 1950s when young people who were moving in cities needed information and counselling concerning their life, work and hobbies. This approach had its roots in a concern about the young people's adaptation to urban life as well as the Act on Vagrancy. The service was voluntary for young people.<sup>16</sup>

Even elsewhere in Europe – in France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Germany – the youth information and counselling work developed in the times of great societal changes, for example in the aftermath of the French protests in 1968, which resulted in the establishment of CIDJ (Centre Information et Documentation Jeunesse). France has played an important role in the development of European youth information and counselling work. However, CIDJ was not the first organization with the German Informationszentrum IFO oper-

ating already in 1967 and the Belgian Info jeugd in 1966.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the history, the work has aimed at providing a meeting place for young people and professionals as well as giving answers to young people's information needs. The idea of information being emphasized in particular in times of great societal changes is supported by the history of youth information and counselling work. Often, the social context of a development has been a great turning point in the society, for example rapid urbanization or the social turbulence in 1968. This is stated by Marc Boes in his article on youth information and counselling work. Boes has worked a long time with youth information and counselling and chaired the European Umbrella Organization ERYICA (European Youth Information and Counselling Agency) in 2006–2013. This was also the case in Finland:

<sup>16</sup> Fedotoff & Leppäkari 2016, 190; Boes 2012, 192–193; Heikkinen 2006, 127–151.

<sup>17</sup> Fedotoff & Leppäkari 2016, 189–191; Boes 2012, 192–193.

The Turku Youth Information and Counselling Centre tried to help the young people who arrived in the city and provide them with necessary information in a situation where the new and complex environment required a completely new orientation and skills.<sup>18</sup> Today, the European youth information and counselling field is united by principles defined by the European umbrella organization ERYICA and accepted by its member organizations. These principles include independence, accessibility, coverage, needs-based, empowerment, inclusion, ethics, professionalism and anticipation.

In Finland, not only the European reference framework but also the Finnish characteristics have influenced the development of youth information and counselling work. The interviewees for this research project recognized, for example, that the work in Finland is clearly part of the field of youth work, one form of youth work. This is also reflected in the previous Youth Act according to which "municipal youth work and policies include educational guidance, facilities and activities for young people, information and counselling services, support from youth associations and other youth groups, physical, cultural, international and multi-cultural youth activities, environmental education as well as youth workshop services or other activities adapted to local circumstances and needs." In this way, youth information and counselling work was institutionalized as a form of youth work. The government bill (HE 111/2016) also mentions that youth information and counselling services are municipal responsibilities.<sup>19</sup>

This is the basis on which current youth information and counselling work is built. One way to approach the definition work – that this report is also part of – is to look at the work from a historical perspective and ask what has led to the current situation. Based on this literature review, it seems that it is precisely the great changes or transfor-

mations in a society that have created new information needs that the work method has tried to find answers to.<sup>20</sup> So what are the great changes or transformations of our time?

I stated above that we live in a changing landscape of information with repeated struggles of truth and true information. In addition, the cycle in information search has changed: media content is digitalized, and smartphones and the Internet guarantee that nearly everyone is constantly online. We're present in both physical and virtual spaces at the same time. We live our lives, maintain our friendships and create a perception of ourselves in a media environment.<sup>21</sup> Changes shape our relationship to information, personal relationships, presence and mass communication – in other words almost everything. These changes are also reflected in youth information and counselling work.

In the early years, youth information and counselling work was even in Finland called youth information. In some contexts, the term is still used; for example in situations where the work focuses on publishing information aimed at young people through various channels. However, when the work consists of encounters between young people and professionals, it may be more appropriate to use the term information work or knowledge work, in which counselling, guidance and information skills play an important role.

The change from informing into information work reflects a change that is not only semantic but also shows something significant about the change concerning the content of the work. Looking at the information needs of different generations and the tasks of youth information and counselling Marc Boes points out that rapid information retrieval has been replaced in youth information and counselling services with new kinds of needs.<sup>22</sup> This is an issue that was also

<sup>18</sup> Boes 2012, 193.

<sup>19</sup> HE 111/2016.

<sup>20</sup> Fedotoff & Leppäkari 2016, 189–191; Boes 2012, 192–193; Heikkinen 2006, 127–151.

<sup>21</sup> Sumiala, Suurpää & Honkatukia 2019, 10–15.

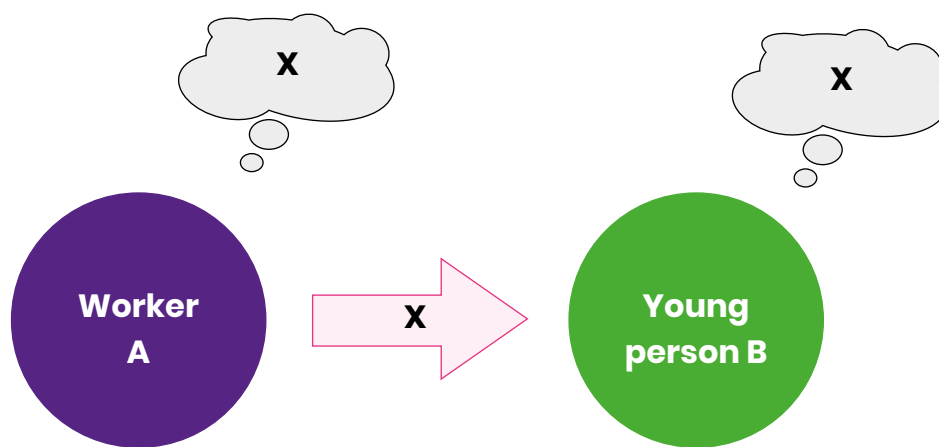
<sup>22</sup> Boes 2012, 192–193; Karim & Widén 2018a, 22.



raised in interviews made for this project: in an online society we live in, rapid and easily accessible information is just a few clicks away. Young people seek, discover, create and recycle information in digital environments. Indeed, in the eyes of young people, friends and family members are often most trusted sources of information.<sup>23</sup> Peer relations are of great importance for young people and are emphasized, for instance, when it comes to sharing intimate information. In most cases, young people need support in their information search when the process of searching, evaluating and critically weighing information proves to be challenging and they feel their readiness to do it is insufficient.

Earlier ways of describing communication were based on the notion of a linear process in which the sender encodes and “transmits” his or her message to the receiver. The communication process is successful when A’s original idea is cloned as closely and identically as possible to the recipient’s mind. This description, however, overlooks many aspects of communication and, as such, fails to do justice to reality: thoughts and ideas are rarely cloned as such, and the interpretations and images they produce depend on the recipient, sender and the communication situation itself. In the following figure, I have described how a linear communication model might look like applied to youth information and counselling work.

**Figure 1: Linear communication model in youth information and counselling work**



<sup>23</sup> Karim & Widén 2018b, 23, 27, 34, 38.

In the figure, the youth information and counselling professional thinks about information X, "passes it on" to a young person, after which the young person also thinks about it – and exactly as it was in the mind of the professional. This linear model overlooks the fact that communication is always about interaction, not a one-way process.<sup>24</sup> There is no description of a process where the professional puts his thoughts into words and, already at this stage, makes decisive choices regarding language, medium and message. The situation and context in which the parties communicate equally affect.

The perception of information as a means of transferring information or data evokes images where the recipient is just a passive receiver of information. Although the recipient has in the past interpreted the message just as much from his or her own situation as today, the role of the recipient is further emphasized today. For example, communicating information to young people through letters and brochures puts the young person in a very different role as a recipient compared to a situation where the young person is in interaction, and one of the guiding objectives of professionals is to try to provide tools so that the young person can learn to think critically and find information. To quote

one interviewee in this project: "The young person decides what (s)he does with the information that has been provided".

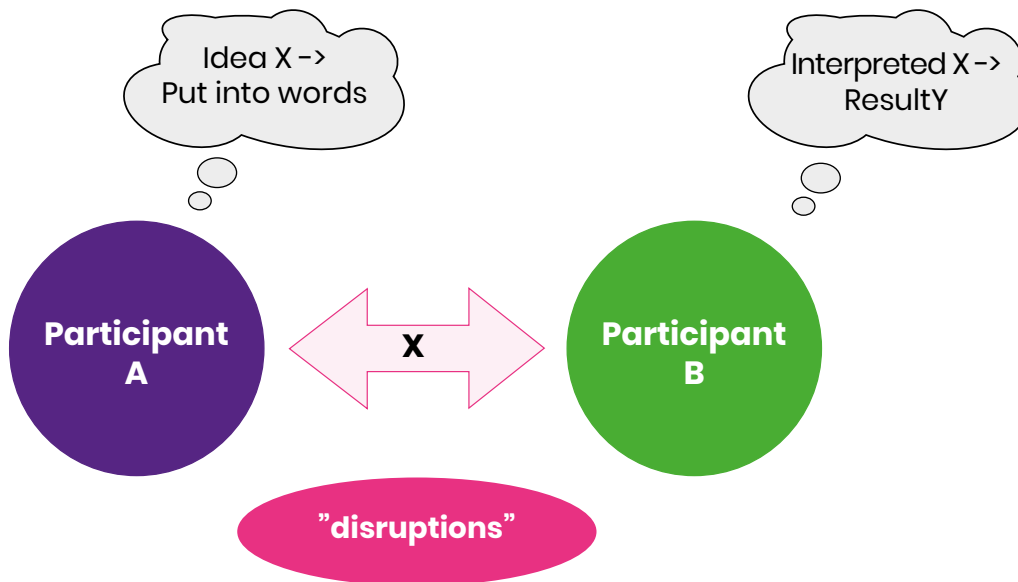
Thus, the process is anything but a linear transfer of information; in my view, it would be more appropriate to say that successful youth information and counselling work is about "knowing together". Therefore, it is not self-evident that the young person is a recipient and the worker a sender in the process. If we take seriously the claim that youth information and counselling work is about knowing together, the process must also be reversed: it is about interaction, and when this interaction is successful, the amount of knowledge increases. It should also be noted that peer groups play an important role in sharing information, especially among young people.<sup>25</sup> Adults may not always have better and more credible information at their disposal. As Meri-Tuulia Kaarakainen and Loretta Saikkonen point out, the adult monopoly on information has ended.<sup>26</sup> In particular, given the importance of peer groups, the process of communication may appear completely different than stated before.

<sup>24</sup> Åberg 2000, 26–45.

<sup>25</sup> Karim & Widén 2018a; Karim & Widén 2018b.

<sup>26</sup> Kaarakainen & Saikkonen 2015, 2.

**Figure 2: Nonlinear, interactive communication model in youth information and counselling work**



The figure above describes in which way the information X inside the head of person A is converted into a message that A tries to transmit to another party. The other party B interprets the “sent” message X from his or her own situation and context and picks the bits and pieces that (s)he finds relevant. Thus, the information X might turn into Y in the head of person B. Calling those involved in the interaction “participants” instead of “young person” or “professional” tries to convey a situation where information is not necessarily in the hands of an adult or a professional: instead it is created through joint interaction.

The breakdown of information monopolies is not only related to bilateral relations and the associated authority status, but is also transforming society at large. One of these changes is the position of traditional gatekeepers, such as media professionals. Young people, in particular, are searching for information instead of traditional newspapers online where information is pro-

duced – not only by professional journalists – but also “citizen journalists”, associations, various organizations and enterprises. Being a gatekeeper is no longer an exclusive right of traditional media companies and journalism.<sup>27</sup> As I said above, some see this change enabling a new way of participating in culture, a stronger democracy.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the weakening position of traditional media raises concern about professional journalism’s lower prestige as well as actors on the Internet who replace journalism and do not need to commit themselves to the ethical guidelines of journalism, e.g. check sources or report commercial content.<sup>29</sup> In the 2010s, we have witnessed websites in Finland that have published so called news, but is actually based on totally false information or stolen content.

These discussions are also reflected in the environment in which youth information and counselling work operates in. When we talk about the breakdown of information monopolies, we’re

<sup>27</sup> Seppänen & Väli-verronen 2013, 211.

<sup>28</sup> Seppänen & Väli-verronen 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Seppänen & Väli-verronen 2013.

faced with the question of what this means for youth information and counselling work. With the digitalization of media content, smartphones and social media, information – or false information that looks like real information – is everywhere, at the same time and all at once. What does a young person's right to information look like in a world where access to information is characterized by proliferation rather than scarcity?

A certain analogy can be drawn between mass communication and youth information and counselling work. Before, people looked for information from newspapers: the media that possessed the information and had therefore in a way a gatekeeper role. Similarly, youth information and counselling services has a gatekeeper's role in relation to young people who needed information. The duties of both gatekeepers are strongly associated with professional competence and responsibility, but in the modern society neither one has the exclusive right to information. The change is taking place despite professional skills.

And as the 2020s approaches, there is no reason to believe that the trend would be slowing down. Information and media will have to redefine themselves as social media and digital environments challenge their role in the media.

Youth information and counselling work operates in a changing environment. According to Marc Boes, youth information and counselling work does not suffer from an identity crisis as do many other forms of youth work.<sup>30</sup> Still, I dare to argue that reflecting on one's identity is closely linked to the work of defining, even when there's no crisis. As the world around us changes, defining competence clarifies the goals and tasks of the work form – both for outsiders and for stakeholders. The realities of resource sharing also call for a definition of competence.<sup>31</sup> What are the critical success factors for youth information and counselling work before and now? Next, I will look at the identity of youth information and counselling work in a society where we are constantly surrounded by information.

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<sup>30</sup> Boes 2012, 191.

<sup>31</sup> Karim & Widén 2018a, 24; Kilakoski & Honkatukia 2018, 17–18.

# 3 Youth information and counselling work in information society

## 3.1 Work form, method and actor

At the beginning of the project that supported the definition work, an important starting point was the question of whether youth information and counselling work was a work form or a work method. This may seem like a play with words, but it is actually an important question: clarifying the identity of youth information and counselling work in a society where there's information everywhere calls for an answer to the question on how youth information and counselling becomes part of a larger whole, services provided to young people, and youth work. What is youth information and counselling work's relation to other services, what does it represent? In the current situation, where youth information and counselling work in many cases is part of multi-disciplinary services, this kind of question is inevitably an important part of self-identification of work.

Tomi Kiilakoski, Viljami Kinnunen and Ronnie Djupsund describe the sometimes difficult na-

ture of youth work and try to make it easier to grasp by dividing the work in three categories: work form, work method and tools. According to their analysis, work form answers the question what is being done. A work form is *"an entity for which multiple persons are responsible and which is implemented through various working methods"* and *"its objectives are wide-ranging and cannot be achieved with a single method"*. A working method is instead *"a repeatable and systematic way to do it"* – i.e. it describes *how* something is done.<sup>32</sup> According to this definition, for example targeted youth work is a work form whose methods include small group activities. The tools used are even smaller units, such as grouping exercises and focused discussions – i.e. the tools and instruments by which to act. So it is simply a matter of what is done, how to do it and what tools are used.

This is the set-up I raised with my interviewees.

<sup>32</sup> Kiilakoski, Kinnunen & Djupsund 2015, 83–86.

I asked what kind of thoughts they had about youth information and counselling as a work form or working method and how they saw such division. The question divided the interviewees. Although everybody agreed that youth information and counselling is a work form, various views were expressed on whether youth information and counselling can be a working method. For some, it was definitely both, while others rejected the idea of youth information and counselling as a method. One interviewee quite rightly wondered what youth information and counselling methods would be in this kind of set-up. As a researcher, I also had to think about this and what I really wanted to find out with the question. Was I asking the right question? After all, was it a question of what is done, how it is done and what tools are used?

When I analysed my interviews, it turned out that the question of work form and working methods could be solved quite satisfactorily – and in a way that for many who work with youth information and counselling is very familiar. Based on these interviews and a workshop held in May, it seems justified and meaningful to perceive youth information and counselling as a work form that include certain working methods, such as informing, counselling and guidance.

But this is not yet enough to answer to the way in which youth information and counselling is integrated into youth services. The structure has helped to make the relationship between the work form and the working methods visible, and at the same time, it has led us to a new question.

**Table 1: Work form, working method, tools and worker**

<b>Work form</b> What is done?	Youth information and counselling  Goal: "offer young people reliable information on their needs and life", "to ensure equal access to these services"
<b>Working method</b> How it is done?	"Youth information and counselling include especially informing, counselling and guidance"
<b>Tool</b> What tools are used?	<p>"Information search, classification and even meeting the young person's needs of information and in that way being aware of what's going on in a young person's life"</p> <p>"Well, we too have been thinking about what it's about. Is it online, is it here, is it about meeting them face-to-face or teaching about economics and how to use money... (--) What are the methods used for spreading information or civic competences and others? There are a number of ways."</p> <p>The method is much more suited for this time and place. The work form is good too, but especially through those methods. So the basic idea and concept is the need of youth information and counselling. Everything has to be based on that. The whole method can then be whatever someone comes up with or what the world brings your way."<sup>33</sup></p>
<b>Worker</b> Who does? Where?	<i>Information service counsellor? Youth leader? Young person? Youth worker? Outreach youth work? Public Employment and Business Services?</i>

<sup>33</sup> Although I have under 'tools' listed things that the interviewees called methods, my interpretation is that they are, in fact, tools for youth work that are used to implement information, counselling and guidance methods.

In the table, I describe the answers I have found – and some new questions. Who does youth information and counselling work? Where is it done?

When I asked the interviewees' views on the work form and working method, they brought up situations in which youth information and counselling worked as part of other youth work or, rather, the competence it carries is needed even in other youth services. And this is exactly how the question did what it was supposed to do: it made the interviewees and the researcher to think about who does youth information and counselling, where it is done, and in which cases we are talking about youth information and counselling. One interviewee was thinking that if others who work with young people could also do the same things that youth information and counselling is currently responsible for. The question is extremely bold and makes one think of the definitions from a very fundamental point of view: what kind of expertise do I represent in the field of youth services and what value do I bring in the services? Do other actors do the same or could they do the same?

### 3.2 “Doctors” and “specialist doctors” in youth information and counselling

In the information society, we are constantly in contact with information, both young people and youth workers. In youth work – in any form of it – there will inevitably be situations in which a youth worker, either on his or her or the young person's initiative, has to provide the young person with information, counselling and guidance. In other words, the worker has to enter, at least with one foot, into the field of youth information and counselling, whether it is conscious or not.<sup>34</sup> This is also recognized in the field of youth information and counselling.

*Youth information and counselling can pass through various fields of youth work as a work approach. Therefore, I cannot start putting limits to which things are youth information and counselling and which are not. (--) Even if it happens in the evenings or while playing the pool. (--) So the actual thing, meeting young people and informing them, is based on correct sources of information while paying attention to certain principles. (Interview)*

*So kind of wondering if it is the information and counselling worker who has to take care of all the other things or can it be done by the Ohjaamo expert within his or her role and assignment according to which is considered reasonable in each unit. (Interview)*

The first interviewee thinks that youth information and counselling can be an approach that runs through services, and therefore (s)he is reluctant to exclude places outside the work form – as long as the principles of youth information and counselling are applied. The interviewee also refers to the European umbrella organization ERYICA's principles, which can be found in the appendices.

On the other hand, the first interviewee wants to limit the cross-sectional approach in the field of youth work. The second interviewee is ready to extend it a bit wider: (s)he is wondering if youth information and counselling work could also be carried out by an Ohjaamo expert. It could be, for example, an employee in the Public Employment and Business Services.

The question of whether an employee in the Public Employment and Business Services can be involved in youth information and counselling for example in Ohjaamo, is not just a theoretical one. In all Ohjaamo units, information and counselling work is not only limited to youth workers; it can be carried out by others too, including TE Services

<sup>34</sup> Also Gretschesel 2018, 14, 20, 26–27.

employees. But is it then youth information and counselling work? And at what stage does youth information and counselling work stop being youth information and counselling work? There is no simple answer to these questions, as the discussions have shown.

One participant in a workshop concluded that even a Public Employment and Business Services employee works with youth information and counselling when (s)he participates in it “wearing another hat than in the employment office”. So the content and the principles in it determine when it is actually a question of youth information and counselling work. For example, obligations and sanctions are by no means part of youth information and counselling, which is always voluntary and, if the young person wishes so, anonymous.<sup>35</sup> Others in the workshop, however, criticized the idea that an Public Employment and Business Services employee is involved in youth information and counselling work. It was precisely the different frame of reference and the objectives and tasks that stem from employment policy instead of ethos of youth work that were considered problematic. In practice, the discrepancy is illustrated for example in the fact that Public Employment and Business Services are based on the public authority obligation, whereas voluntary participation is a central principle in youth work. Others stressed that in Ohjaamo units, each employee should put the young person at the centre and work with the needs of the young person in mind – this goal should not create conflicts in multi-disciplinary services between different professional groups.

However, it is not easy to “change the hat” just like that, and some of the workshop participants and interviewees were critical of the idea that youth information and counselling could be applied as a cross-sectoral principle.

*Everybody wants to do it, but who knows what their competence are or motives or needs. (Interview)*

Lack of appreciation of specific knowledge was considered as a risk for a cross-sectional approach; the fact that the importance of education or professional skills is not understood, which leads to a weakening of a profession. Another practical problem was rigid administrative boundaries and the fact that objectives behind youth services can vary a lot. In addition, it was feared that the cross-sectoral approach leads to lack of planning, concrete measures (e.g. recording work form, working methods and tools as part of organization strategy and employees’ job descriptions) and resourcing, which makes implementation arbitrary or leads to a complete loss of services.

Unfortunately, the concerns expressed by the participants are not entirely unfounded. Youth information and counselling work and its principles are unlikely to be realized automatically “just like that” as part of multi-disciplinary entities unless enough effort is put to it. The fulfillment of any task requires necessary resources, for example time and competence.<sup>36</sup> We have examples from the school world where a similar loss of services has happened, despite good intentions. The grounds of the curriculum in 1994 stand out compared to its predecessors: instead of a thick volume, the 1990s introduced a thin booklet with the aim to give schools much greater decision-making power and launch a flexible system instead of a centrally-steered and very detailed curriculum that was used before. While family education did include sexuality and relationships, the change meant in practice that sex education was radically reduced in our schools. Instead of a cross-sectoral approach, the consequence was a reduced learning content fuelled by the austerity measures in the 1990s’ economic recession.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See ERYICA’s principles, which can be found in the appendices.

<sup>36</sup> Hästbacka 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Malm 2017.



However, threats do not mean that the question of who is doing youth information and counselling work and where it is done should be totally rejected. As I stated earlier, breaking the monopolies of information is an essential trend that challenges the idea of cross-sectoral approach in one way or another.<sup>38</sup>

So participants were somewhat cautious towards the idea of a cross-sectoral approach in youth information and counselling services. Instead, they expressed the idea in their own discussions from the point of view that youth information and counselling is a work form, but the same approach can extend to other services for young people. Youth information and counselling work can thus be carried out at different levels, as if it was a question of specialist doctors and doctors". According to this view, there are professionals who specialize in information and counselling – as if they were specialist doctors. In addition, there are other professionals working with young people who need the same skills in their own work, although that is not their specialty. In other words, they are doctors.

It is important that the youth information and counselling skills are recognized in a time where we are surrounded by information. Competence doesn't come for free, and one of the workshops' main messages was the importance of training. Many hoped for more training in youth information and counselling for those working with young people. In addition, it was noted that training alone is not enough as a solution, if the skills acquired in training are not passed on as part of professionals' professional activities.

But what are youth information and counselling skills that "specialist doctors" have specialized in, and what are the skills that "all doctors" should know? How do those who work with youth information and counselling analyze their own skills?

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<sup>38</sup> Seppänen & Välvirronen 2013; Kaarakainen & Saikkonen 2015.

# 4 Strengths in youth information and counselling work

## 4.1 Skills in meeting the young person

What are the skills needed in youth information and counselling? What is done especially well in the work? I posed this question to youth information and counselling professionals and important stakeholders in the workshop. They raised “information management skills, ability to meet and ability to listen to young people” as important themes. An important feature was that the youth information and counselling professional “knows where the information is” and has “the sensitivity to interact, can read between the lines and let go, if needed.” The participants described their own strengths as “a generalist’s” skills: general competence that covers life management, socials relations, family and hobbies. The participants emphasized that it is essential that an employee is able to identify and recognize phenomena among young people. One participant said during the day that a youth information and counselling worker doesn’t need to know every-

thing – but (s)he needs to know where to find information. Indeed, generalism is a really good description of the skills needed.

In addition, participants drew attention to the preventive nature of information and counselling work. Youth information and counselling work is not problem-driven. Through youth information and counselling, a young person can look for information on hobby opportunities in his or her area, or, for example, how to arrange an art exhibition, find an apartment or fill in an application on income support.

Gretschel has analysed regional coordination of youth information and counselling work and put the promotion of well-being in the centre.<sup>39</sup> This view was confirmed by observations made by the participants. Avoiding problem-orientation and emphasizing meetings and encounters re-

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<sup>39</sup> Gretschel 2018.

mind us of positive identification and supporting well-being rather than focusing on corrective actions and early intervention.<sup>40</sup> The importance of situational sensitivity as well as positive identification are themes that are very typical to the ethos of youth work emphasizing the well-being. They may even sound self-evident. However, this is not always the case. Talk about concerns, especially when linked to young people, challenges positive identification.<sup>41</sup> Workshop participants also raised concerns about declining preventive services for young people and the resources being focused on corrective measures instead.

For example, writing a CV together with a young person in youth information and counselling is a good example of positive identification.

*Writing this CV and open applications show for example what strengths and knowledge they have; it is also about raising your self-esteem and writing down what you can, what you're good at and what you have to offer to your employer. It is a tool for us in our work with young people, and this is what we try to highlight now as most of our employees come from the Public Employment and Business Services: we are not experts in job search, but we use it as a tool in youth work. (Interview)*

The interviewee points out that when writing a résumé, it is not primarily a labour market measure, but supporting the young person's self-esteem and putting down what are his or her strengths, i.e. positive growth that happens in positive identification, which is essentially linked to a young person's well-being and possibility to find meaningful things to do in life.

Another key feature of positive identification is that youth information and counselling is aimed at all young people.

*We too are now part of a unit that includes*

*youth workshops and a start-up workshop. Well, it includes outreach youth work. But that is not necessarily youth work that is open for everybody. Of course it's open for the young people in the target group, but we are open for everybody, in the same way youth centres should be open. So if we talk about open youth work, youth information and counselling should also be part of it. That would raise its profile and show that we are for everybody, for real. (Interview)*

Here the interviewee clearly places youth information and counselling as part of preventive and open youth work that is "for everybody, for real".

Thus, the youth information and counselling work is defined, among other things, by a positive identification approach in meetings, an aim to strengthen young people's well-being, universality and being open and accessible for all. There is also a desire to guarantee equal access to services for young people.

In my opinion, the role [of youth information and counselling] is to ensure equal access to these services. Because not all young people have support groups or close family ties or mothers and fathers who give help and guidance. Today's parents take a lot of care of their children and help and guide them, but not all parents do this. So our job is to enable equal access for those young people so that nobody falls behind, and do this in a preventive manner so that there's a person who in a timely manner gives you information or guidance or something. Young people may not be able to think critically and wonder what they should do in a certain situation and what it might lead to, in particular what it can lead to and what is your dream. It sounds a bit like a cliché when we talk about equality, but I would say it's really important. Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. (Interview)

<sup>40</sup> Kallio, Korkiamäki & Häkli 2015, 9–35.

<sup>41</sup> Kallio, Korkiamäki & Häkli 2015, 9–35.

This can be seen in the light of youth information and counselling bridging the gaps that can exist between a young person and services. This, too, strengthens the well-being of a young person and increases chances to have a meaningful life. When we look at youth information and counselling from the perspective of such reinforcing goals, what happens in the encounters between young people and professionals is of great importance. At their best, these encounters support a positive self-image and self-esteem, and enable a young person to act in various situations and strengthen a young person's confidence in his or her opportunities.

However, it is legitimate to ask whether such an approach to youth information and counselling differ from other types of youth work. Isn't the work at youth centres just as much about meeting young people and supporting their well-being? Shouldn't youth work always, in one way or another, aim at supporting a young person's well-being and focus on him or her? "Meeting a young person as a human being and whole-heartedly, "the ability to notice when something needs to be brought up" as well as "a dialogical approach" may actually describe youth work, the ethos of it.<sup>42</sup> If this idea is developed a bit further, putting the focus on the young person would serve common goals in all services aimed at young people. This is something that should be put at the centre in recommendations concerning youth information and counselling work, which I am going to present at the end of this report.

## 4.2 Professionals Managing Information

Taking the importance of encounters into account emphasizes the value base and common goals that emerge from the ethos of youth work. But what makes youth information and counselling work what it is? How do the professionals who work with these issues perceive their work and what is characteristic in it?

*Young people are already able to search the Internet for certain basic information. But when we are talking about more complicated stuff, like when (--) information search becomes more complicated or when it is no longer easy, then you are usually in touch with information and counselling services. So this has to do, for instance, with a situation where you have to apply information to your own life in more complicated situations, then you are usually in touch with information and counselling services for the first time. (Interview)*

*Well, you can see it already now, the world is changing at a fast pace, this digital world of information. I think it's the fact that we're like a bridge or something (--) between the young person and the flood of information. That digital world and whether information is in a bookshelf or on a computer or stored in apps on your smartphone or whether you get it through AI or whatever, it is the youth worker or an information worker who in a way manages the environment and helps young people to control it. So I think it could be someone (--) who is genuinely a professional in information flow management and can therefore better manage it. (Interview)*

The increased amount of information, breaking down monopolies of information, and information-intense society – these themes have been widely discussed in this report already. They are changing the society we live in, and are also topics mentioned by the interviewees in our discussions. When interviewees described the environment they operate in, one thing in particular was obvious. And that was a significant increase in the amount of information. Sometimes it was even described as "information flood". Young people's information needs were described as largely similar in terms of themes, but many found that the explosively increasing quantity of information had changed the point in which young people sought support their information

<sup>42</sup> Nieminen 2014, 23–41.

search. In an online society, information can be just a few clicks away, but that doesn't guarantee that it would be easy to search information, evaluate it critically or apply it on one's own life. For that, we need *media and information literacy*.<sup>43</sup> In the table below, I have described various concepts of literacy. This report speaks about media and information literacy, because the concept is based on the very phenomena (increasing amount of information, society, opportunities for action) that are so important in youth information and counselling work.<sup>44</sup> Media and information literacy is a critical factor in global digital citizenship, and the user of information is no longer just a consumer or a recipient, but also a producer and an active participant. This is especially true of young people who often perceive themselves as media users, not audience.<sup>45</sup>

This becomes evident when we analyse the interviewees' and workshop participants' views on skills within youth information and counselling. In an ideal encounter, the young person is not only provided with information, but (s)he is collaborating in getting to know the principles of information search and evaluation. The young person's information needs are the starting point, but just as important as the answer is the path that leads there. When talking about meeting objectives, it is not enough that the young person is given an answer to his or her question. Instead, (s)he needs to understand what the answer was based on and how this information was retrieved, as well as to evaluate it from her point of view. After that, (s)he decides what to do with the information. This kind of information processing is part of building up agency and creates conditions for action and critical thinking, acting as a community member and citizenship.<sup>46</sup>

When youth information and counselling work is described as these kind of encounters, the media

and information literacy becomes a characteristic feature that defines youth information and counselling. As the interviewee points out above, the skills needed to access and process information are important prerequisites in a society that is so full of information.

However, information skills do not happen automatically. Instead of being a homogenous group of digital natives, young people are actually a heterogenous group with very different capacities to navigate in digital environments.<sup>47</sup> Capacities with respect to media strongly influences citizenship and opportunities to participate. Basically anyone can start a blog or a YouTube channel and thus engage in public discussion, but it is up to the individual and his or her skills to use such means of communication. In today's networked society, power is closely linked to communication.<sup>48</sup> As highlighted in the interviews, applying for income support on the Internet may prove to be a very challenging process for a young person. In those cases, it is hardly realistic to think that belonging to a particular generation would through social media guarantee him or her unlimited opportunities to participate.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Karim & Widén 2018b; Boes 2012.

<sup>44</sup> See also Karim & Widén 2018a.

<sup>45</sup> Seppänen & Väliaverronen 2013, 206; Hakala & Lehtinen 2014, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Eskelinen ym. 2012, 35–40.

<sup>47</sup> Kaarakainen & Saikkonen 2015 ; Kaarakainen & Kaarakainen 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Seppänen & Väliaverronen 2013, 190–194.

<sup>49</sup> Kaarakainen & Kaarakainen 2018.

Table 2: Literacies

<b>Multiple literacy</b>	Multiple literacy is a term used in the curriculum of primary education. It refers to "the skills of interpreting, producing and valuing different texts, which help students to understand the diverse forms of cultural communication and build their own identities". The concept of multiple literacy seeks to express the width of a text: literacy does not only refer to writing, but also to information expressed through various verbal, visual, auditive, numerical and kinesthetic symbolic systems and their combinations. The curriculum states that multiple literacy is needed in order to interpret and understand the world around us and its cultural diversity. It means <i>"the ability to acquire, combine, modify, produce, present and evaluate information in different forms, environments and situations as well as with various instruments"</i> . <sup>50</sup>
<b>Information literacy</b>	According to Hellevi Hakala and Hanna Lahtinen, the concept of <i>information literacy</i> was born in the 1970s out of an experience that the amount of information has increased, and therefore also the burden it poses. Paul Zurkowski was the first to speak about information literacy. He felt that the diversification of information sources (phones, newspapers, databases, political campaigns, direct mail and micro recordings) had led to a situation where skills needed in information search and evaluation needed to be emphasized. Zurkowski has since stated that in the 2010s, we are going through a similar era of explosive growth in both tools and information volumes. Hakala and Lahtinen believe that current efforts in broadening the concept of information literacy are primarily linked to changes in our operational environment: the role of the information user is no longer just to consume information, but also to produce it. <sup>51</sup>
<b>Media literacy</b>	Media literacy is closely related to the concept of information literacy. The Ministry of Education and Culture's guidelines for Good Media Literacy for 2013–2016 outline that promoting media literacy "links the issues of media, pedagogy and the life management of children and young people". The guidelines were based on Jyrki Katainen's government programme (2011–2014) and on the Child and Youth Policy Development Programme (2012–2015), which emphasized the involvement of children and young people in information society through strengthening media competences. Involvement in information society was defined as part of active citizenship. <sup>52</sup>
<b>Media and information literacy</b>	Sometimes, the former is combined into a concept of media and information literacy. The Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy (2012) underlined the changing nature of the media landscape and the growing volume of information, and stated that people's ability to seek, critically evaluate and create new information in various forms as well as the opportunity to share it are indispensable preconditions for functioning in a society. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has stated that media and information literacy is a human right, which is linked to social inclusion and global citizenship in a digitalizing and interdependent world. <sup>53</sup>
<b>Visual literacy</b>	The importance of visual literacy is further emphasized in the current media landscape: today's texts are often hybrids containing both visual elements and written language. <sup>54</sup> Janne Seppänen has stated that visual literacy has two dimensions: on one hand, "reading" pictures is learnt naturally, but on the other hand, special skills are needed in order to be able to interpret a visual image "as a cultural performance, representation and as part of a visual order". According to Seppänen, visual literacy is "understanding visual orders and making fully argued interpretations of them". <sup>55</sup>

50 OPS 2014.

51 Hakala &amp; Lahtinen 2014.

52 OKM 2012.

53 Hakala &amp; Lahtinen 2014; IFLA: Media and Information Literacy Recommendations.

54 Hakala &amp; Lahtinen 2014.

55 Seppänen 2001, 15–16.

Equality for young people requires that young people have access to information – now and in the future. By this, I mean that equal access to information not only requires support in the face of an acute issue, but also reinforcing a young person's media and information literacy. Skills related to information search and processing are increasingly important civic skills. Information is a necessity for subjectivity, and related skills are part of "social capacity to act".<sup>56</sup> In the traditional terms of youth work, one could talk about the function of socialization: person as a member of society and conveying necessary information, skills, values and modes of operation. Socialization also includes the possibility of doing things differently: the aim is not to adapt young people to the prevailing order and just copy the present situation, but to offer them skills that enable development, renewal and challenge.<sup>57</sup> In a political community, the possibilities of participation are strongly linked to growing into citizenship.<sup>58</sup>

The following figure illustrates what happens in youth information and counselling work and how encounters between young people and professionals are linked with goals. In my view, youth information and counselling work is therefore about supporting everyday activities and information search skills, which are aimed at providing good conditions for a young person to act. Support in finding an apartment or a job, or in starting a new hobby is something that facilitates a young person's everyday life. It also supports his or her learning and competence in information search and its critical evaluation. Key issues include positive identification, media and information literacy, equal access to services and information, reinforcing young people's different capacities and through that an improved scope of action in a global and digitalized world. When the encounter is successful, the young person's agency is strengthened. To put it a bit bluntly, an approach aiming at positive iden-

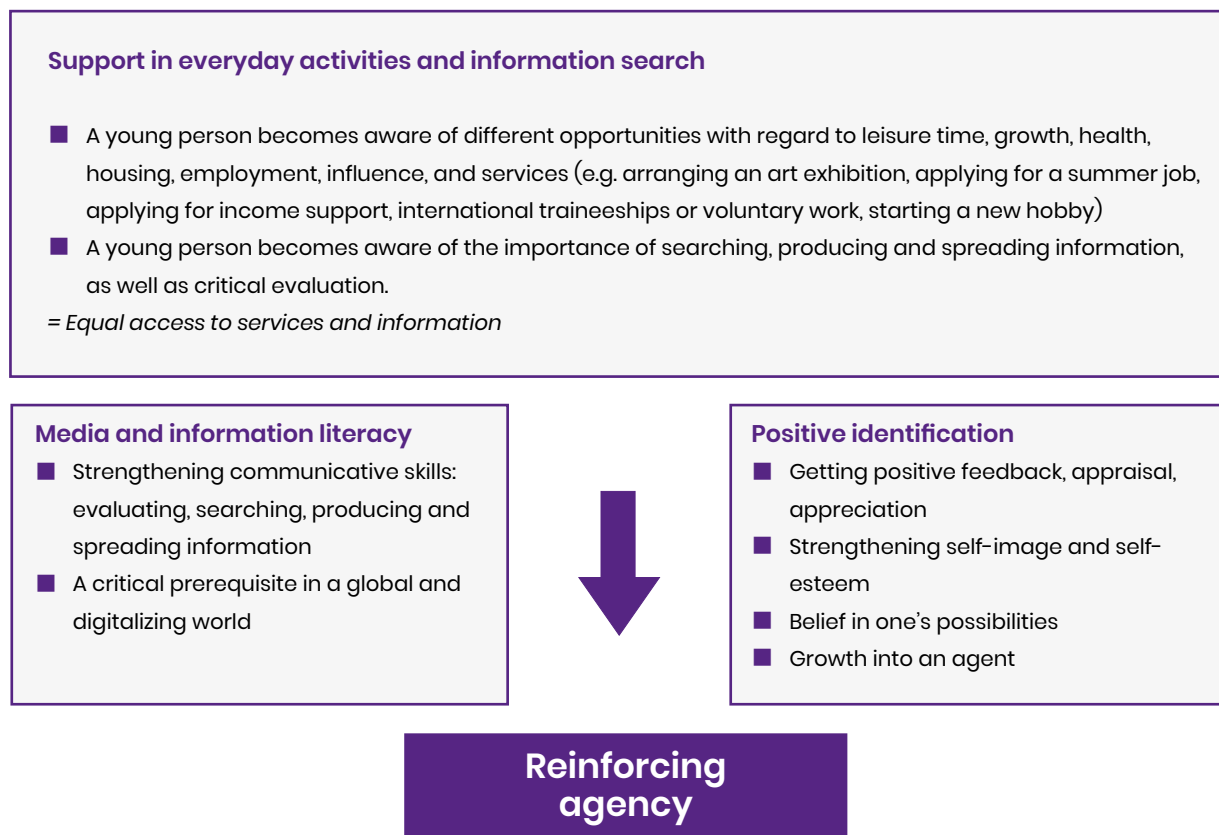
tification and putting the young person in the centre make youth information and counselling youth work, whereas emphasizing media and information literacy and information make it information work. It is a valuable combination: without successful encounters, the prerequisites to support young people's media and information literacy are weak, which means that it becomes ever so difficult for young people to act as subjects in a global and digitalized world. This is another observation that needs to be highlighted in the recommendations proposed at the end.

<sup>56</sup> Kiilakoski, Gretscher & Nivala 2012, 18–24; Eskelinen ym. 2012, 35–40.

<sup>57</sup> Nieminen 2014, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Kiilakoski, Gretscher & Nivala 2012, 18.

**Figure 3: Competence and objectives of youth information and counselling work**





## 5 Do we need national recommendations for youth information and counselling?

ERYICA's (European Youth Information and Counselling Agency) principles form the framework for youth information and counselling. According to them, youth information and counselling is independent, accessible, comprehensive, needs-based, affirmative, inclusive, ethical, professional and preventive. A more detailed description of the principles can be found in the appendices to the report. In addition to ERYICA principles, youth information and counselling work in Finland is influenced by the Youth Act, The Council of Europe's Recommendation on Youth Information and Counselling to Member States (2010), the EU's Youth Strategy, the UN International Declaration on Human Rights as well as the Convention on Children's Rights.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the principles governing the work form are already quite comprehensively described. However, we're from time to time confronted with the question of whether we apart from the youth in-

formation and counselling principles should apply some kind of minimum criteria or recommendations on a national level. The need for national recommendations was also identified as one aspect of this project.

*Yes, I think there should be some [minimum criteria], because it is pretty wild right now. (--) Some twenty years ago you could have for example brochures on a rack in a library next to a youth service and call it a youth information and counselling service point. (Interview)*

*No, it's probably not a bad idea [to have minimum criteria]. It probably gives more precise frames and structures for the activities. It's probably a bit difficult to keep these apart, so then it would show that if you work with information work, it includes these and these things. I don't think it's a bad idea. (Interview)*

<sup>59</sup> See more information on <http://www.koordinaatti.fi/fi/periaatteet-ja-suositukset>

The interviewees and workshop participants were cautiously positive about the idea of minimum criteria or recommendations that would set “more precise frames” for youth information and counselling on a national level. National criteria were needed to solve national challenges, such as a cross-municipal and cross-professional approach and emphasis on professional skills. It was seen important that the criteria was regularly reviewed and agile enough to react to changes. In addition, the criteria should provide a meaningful guideline both in rural communities and in cities where professionals operate in completely different environments and respond to partly different needs. It is clear that the role of youth information and counselling is completely different when there’s one person responsible for it, as opposed to a team of professionals, for example as part of Ohjaamo. As the participants pointed out “the criteria is useful only when they are being used”.

Workshop participants were asked to consider recommendations and criteria in relation to the themes of other workshops, such as competence and who is involved in youth information and counselling. This probably contributed to the increased emphasis on education and training. Many participants supported the idea that youth information and counselling should be part of the employees’ job description and the organization’s strategy – writing it down would raise awareness of the work and enable its evaluation.

The criteria for content is largely based on principles and skills, as was described in the previous chapter. The importance of encounters between young people and professionals; improving young people’s capacity and activities through positive encounters and media and information literacy; special competence within youth information and counselling offers an opportunity to express the strengths of professionals in written form, but also contentual guidelines from which criteria can be formulated, if needed.

*The criterium could be that somebody should take the training out of the people who work there, either online or otherwise in order for it to be called youth information and counselling service. At least it should be a recommendation. (Interview)*

The recommendations should include a reference to education or training in connection with youth information and counselling, which would ensure needed skills and competence. There are two sets of essential skills. Firstly, skills in meeting and positive recognition were considered important in youth information and counselling. They were especially important in counselling. Secondly, media and information literacy was seen valuable counselling in order to “manage the abundance of information”. In a time of occasional “information overload”, the ability to control all the information is probably more important than ever.

Thus, formal requirements for the criteria came to play a key role: adequate resources, competence and skills through training, job descriptions and strategy, the role in relation to other youth work and services. In the light of the participants’ comments, it seems that the criteria should clarify the role of the youth information and counselling, i.e. to try to answer the question of what is the ultimate goal of youth information and counselling work, who does it and where is it done. I have tried to take this into account in my proposals concerning the recommendations. I am going to present them in the next chapter.

# 6 Conclusion

## 6.1 Research results and future reflections

In this report, I have presented the results of a project that took a closer look at youth information and counselling work. The report is part of centre of expertise Koordinaatti's process of defining youth information and counselling work, which started in the autumn of 2017. The research focused on the relationship between youth information and counselling and other youth work or other services aimed at young people, as well as special skills and characteristics in youth information and counselling. It seems that in order to be meaningful, the criteria should be based on the previous two. In this way, they would serve professionals in understanding their work and in clarifying the status of the work.

According to my interpretation, the key competences are face-to-face encounters based on positive recognition as well as a work approach that emphasizes media and information literacy. Together these strengthen a young person's capacities, well-being and prerequisites for participation.

Who is involved in youth information and counselling and where - these turned out to be tricky questions. Who gets to, can and must do the work? The changing environment and increased amount of information challenge us to think

about the identity and task of youth information and counselling in a changing time. There are more sources of information, and they are more diverse, and with smartphones the chronological cycle of information search is much faster than before. On the other hand, these very same changes actually underline the importance of information handling skills. Information may be available, but finding and evaluating it critically, not to mention producing and spreading it, is not equal to all young people.

These questions on who is the author and what is professionalism raised concern in a workshop held in May 2019. Threat scenarios included a weaker profession, lack of identification and recognition linked to skills and competence, and decreased resources and methods which, in the worst case, could lead to the weakening or even disappearance of the whole profession.

Below, I have described two possible future scenarios and possible opportunities and threats linked to them. Scenario A illustrated a future where youth information and counselling is carried out within youth work and services aimed at young people. Scenario B illustrates a situation where youth information and counselling is carried out in designated independent centres and service points.

**Figure 3: Scenarios within youth information and counselling work**

	<b>Scenario A: Youth information and counselling work is largely carried out within youth work and services aimed at young people.</b>	<b>Scenario B: Youth information and counselling work is carried out as independent service at centres, service points, and in various service concepts.</b>
<b>Possibilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More and more young people are involved in youth information and counselling work</li> <li>• Media and information literacy is a natural part of youth services.</li> <li>• Youth information and counselling work is carried out in various environments and contexts, also as an integrated part of various jobs (see "doctors").</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time work (see "specialist doctors") enables full concentration on youth information and counselling.</li> <li>• Extensive development and application of professional strengths.</li> <li>• Main focus is on media and information literacy.</li> </ul>
<b>Threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The strengths of youth information and counselling work are not identified or recognized, and no emphasis is placed on professional skills and competence.</li> <li>• No extra focus on media and information literacy.</li> <li>• Youth information and counselling work is not adequately resourced or planned, and its implementation is either arbitrary or incomplete.</li> <li>• Youth information and counselling cannot justify its own place in the field of youth work and services, and as a consequence, the work form disappears.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth information and counselling is beyond the reach of many young people.</li> <li>• Information sharing, guidance and counselling is provided in youth work and/or services aimed at young people, but without the skills and competence of youth information and counselling.</li> <li>• Media and information literacy will have a secondary role in services aimed at young people.</li> <li>• Youth information and counselling is not able to react flexibly to changes in the environment, thus it is isolated and disappears as a work form.</li> </ul>

In this case, these scenarios are applications of a SWOT analysis<sup>60</sup>, and neither one of them are intended to predict the future as such, but as a tool to identify opportunities and threats. Although both threat scenarios repeat the gloomy prognosis on services disappearing, it is unlikely that the development will be this grim. After all, we are talking about a traditional work form that has been driven by social change. However, including such opportunity in future scenarios serves its purpose in the sense that it makes the purpose of the work form visible and shows what the field of youth work and services would be left without if there was no youth information and counselling. The most likely – and most desirable – scenario is probably a combination of the two, combining the possibilities of both. Thus, a comprehensive approach and independence both have their value and they defend their place even in the future.

A change in the operating environment is an essential part of both scenarios. In scenario A, the

main threat is that the skills and competence in youth information and counselling will "disappear" due to a lack of identification and recognition. In scenario B, the work form remains isolated and is not able to broaden its knowledge more widely to young people in the new environment. For the former, the best cure is probably to express, publish and assure skills and competence, as well as to ensure sufficient resourcing and planning. For the latter, the best cure is probably flexibility and agility in new situations.

Young people's perspective will also play a key role in the future. As Hellevi Hakala and Hanna Lahtinen put it "*the user of information is no longer just a consumer, but also very much a content producer*".<sup>61</sup> This is particularly important in youth work, and ERYICA principles emphasize inclusion and involvement, which require that young people participate in "*producing, spreading and valuing information on all levels and in all forms*". From this perspective, it is increasingly important to know more about the needs of young people

<sup>60</sup> E.g. Åberg 2000, 80–82.

<sup>61</sup> Hakala & Lahtinen 2014, 11.

from the perspective of youth information and counselling. They do not just consume information or services. They also produce and spread it. Of course, the interaction takes place in peer groups that are important for young people, but information is also produced in interaction between young people and adults. In the future, the competences of young people in producing and spreading information will play an even more crucial role, and the skills involved in managing huge amounts of information can become really important.

This report focused on looking at the youth information and counselling work from a professional's perspective. An interesting topic for future research would be to look at tasks within youth information and counselling from a youth perspective. What use do young people make of it? How do they see its competence and role in their life? Are the areas mentioned in this report emphasized or does something new come up? Do young people's experiences match with how the professionals define their work? In relation to the above scenarios, one could ask how full-time and part-time youth information and counselling work (see "*specialist doctors*" and "*doctors*") differ from each other. What kind of things does full-time work enable? How do young people see this difference?

## 6.2 Proposal for national youth information and counselling recommendations aiming at a safe and equal information landscape

I stated above that competence and the relationship with other youth work and services are closely linked to recommendations. In addition to the views of professionals, I have tried to consider changes in the operating environment and threats and opportunities in the scenarios presented above. Based on this, I have made the fol-

lowing proposal on youth information and counselling recommendations. It is therefore worth seeing the proposal primarily as a contribution that aims at supporting the whole process of definition.

**1. Youth information and counselling work strengthens young people's capacity to function in a society.** In an online society, information is accessible for all, but analysing it critically, finding the right information and producing and spreading it requires knowledge and skills. Media and information literacy and critical thinking is emphasized in youth information and counselling work. Young people's opportunities to produce and spread information is supported. All this contributes to empowerment and citizenship.

**2. The aim of youth information and counselling work is to provide a safe and equal information landscape to all.** Youth information and counselling work is, according to ERYICA principles, independent, accessible, comprehensive, needs-based, empowering, inclusive, ethical, professional and proactive. The Finnish context currently emphasizes inclusion, accessibility, and ethics, which are reflected, for example, in the Government Programme (2019). According to the Government Programme, the society should promote children's and young people's involvement and empowerment, for example by digital means and by supporting media literacy. The development of media and information literacy will increase the capacity for creativity in digital environments as well as accessibility by lowering the threshold for action. Phenomena such as sexual harassment, hate speech and cyber-bullying highlight the importance of ethics. Young people and women belonging to minorities are faced with a lot of hate speech in digital environments, which makes it more unsafe for some to navigate in the information environment. The aim of youth information and counselling work is to work for a safe and equal information landscape.

**3. Youth information and counselling work is not problem-driven.** Encounters between young people and professionals play a key role. These encounters are based on positive recognition, they strengthen the young person's self-esteem, capacity to express himself and belief in his or her ability to act.

**4. Youth information and counselling professionals know how to encounter a young person, they are media and information literate and apply these skills in their daily work.** Professional competence is ensured, for example, through training.

**5. Professional youth information and counselling work can be done either as full-time work or as part of a job description.** In both cases, youth information and counselling work is recorded as duties. Professional competence – positive identification, media and information literacy – are encounters between a young person and a professional in youth work and/or in services aimed at young people. In these, youth information and counselling is either a full-time job or as part of a job description.

**6. Youth information and counselling is not bound to a certain place or person.** When professional competence – positive identification, media and information literacy – is part of encounters, it doesn't matter whether youth information and counselling is carried out in a physical place, online, in a service point or as part of multiple services.

**7. Youth information and counselling is about joint knowledge.** Adults or professionals do not have monopoly on information. Instead, information and knowledge is a result of interaction. A young person is someone who produces information. Youth information and counselling work is based on encounters and reinforces young people's skills in producing and spreading information.

## 6.3 Summary

My research questions focused on the relationship of youth information and counselling and other youth work and services, special skills and competence in youth information and counselling, and what kind of recommendations can be set based on the above. My suggestions for recommendations, based on my observations of what is typical and what are the strengths of youth information and counselling, are outlined above.

Above, I claim that youth information and counselling is a work form that works well both as an independent service and as part of multiple services. On the other hand, it works in situations where its traditional tasks are extended to new areas, which means that there could be a wider demand for youth information and counselling competence: many interviewees said that the work is already done as independent service, but also as part of other tasks and services. Conventional ways in which work is understood do not necessarily recognize and capture all the situations where youth information and counselling work operates in or where there's a need for it. In this report, I have tried to clarify the picture of the current situation as well as the future by summing up the threats and opportunities into various scenarios. Their purpose is not to reinforce any threats or shackle our thoughts. Instead, they try to open up and direct our minds into new territories. The definition work describes the current situation, but at the same time, it also adopts a position on the future. What do we want the youth information and counselling work to be like in the future?

In my view, the strengths of youth information and counselling work are two-fold: positive recognition in encounters and information skills. Especially in multidisciplinary services, the attempt to put the focus on the young person, which is based on the ethos of youth work, is actually a really important competence that needs to be

made visible. It is precisely the skills and competence that youth information and counselling workers have in their encounters with young people that differentiate them from other information workers and make it possible to reach out to the young people. The emphasis on media and information literacy is a characteristic feature of youth information and counselling work that makes it stand out compared to other forms of youth work. The focus of this work form is information and knowledge and young people's equal chances to use it, which is a really important prerequisite in a global and digital world and in an era with fake news and information warfare. Without media and information literacy it is not possible to navigate in an information landscape.

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# APPENDIX 1:

## European principles for youth information and counselling work (ERYICA, 27.4.2018)

### 1. INDEPENDENT

- 1.1 The information provided is comprehensive, provides an overview of available options, and is based on pluralistic and reliable sources.
- 1.2 The information provided is independent of all religious, political, idealistic and commercial influences.
- 1.3 Funding sources do not affect the application of these principles in youth information and counselling services.

### 2. ACCESSIBLE

- 2.1 Equal access to youth information and counselling services should be ensured for all.
- 2.2 Youth information and counselling services are easily accessible, interesting and visible for young people.
- 2.3 Information aimed at young people is understandable to them.

### 3. COMPREHENSIVE

- 3.1 Youth information and counselling services are open for all young people without discrimination.
- 3.2 Youth information and counselling services are free of charge for all young people.
- 3.3 Youth information and counselling services strive to reach all young people in ways that are effective and relevant for different groups and different information needs.

### 4. NEEDS-BASED

- 4.1 Youth information and counselling services are based on the needs of young people.
- 4.2 The information available covers all topics relevant to young people.
- 4.3 Each and every young person must be respected as an individual and all responses must be individualized in a way that is effective and appropriate.
- 4.4 Adequate human resources should be provided for youth information and

counselling work so that individual support and services can be ensured.

## 5. EMPOWERING

- 5.1 Youth information and counselling services strengthen young people socially and promote their independence.
- 5.2 Youth information and counselling services support young people's media and information literacy so that they can act safely and responsibly.
- 5.3 Youth information and counselling services promote young people's active citizenship and involvement.

## 6. INCLUSIVE

- 6.1 Young people participate in the production, distribution and evaluation of information aimed at young people on all levels and in all forms.
- 6.2 Youth information and counselling services provide opportunities for peer-to-peer activities.
- 6.3 Young people are encouraged to give feedback as part of continuous development of youth information and counselling services.

## 7. ETHICAL

- 7.1 Youth information and counselling services respect young people's right to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. The services provide a safe environment for young people.
- 7.2 The criteria for selecting information are made visible and understandable. The producer and purpose of information is clear and visible.
- 7.3 All information that is produced or distributed is

accurate, comprehensible, timely and reliable.

## 8. PROFESSIONAL

- 8.1 Youth information and counselling services are provided by trained staff in a professional manner.
- 8.2 Youth information and counselling workers are media and information literate.
- 8.3 Youth information and counselling services work together with key stakeholders in order to identify young people's information needs and opportunities for collaboration, to share expertise and to make information aimed at young people more visible.
- 8.4 Youth information and counselling workers collaborate at local, regional, national, European and international level and share best practices and know-how.
- 8.5 The role of youth information and counselling workers is to ensure that young people have appropriate knowledge and skills to use and take advantage of the digital services aimed at them.

## 9. PROACTIVE

- 9.1 Youth information and counselling services are innovative when choosing strategies, methods and tools to reach out to the young people.
- 9.2 Youth information and counselling workers are aware of the new development concerning the work form as well as essential laws, and they keep themselves up-to-date on youth trends.
- 9.3 Youth information and counselling workers work actively and proactively in the field of media and information making sure that high quality information for young people is visible.

# APPENDIX 2:

## Questions of working groups 21.5.2019

### 1) The core of youth information and counselling – expressing one's own competence

- What is competence in youth information and counselling?
- What to do when communicating with a young person – what do I do when I communicate with young people?
- What kind of skills are needed in the job?
- What needs do the job meet?
- What has youth information and counselling to offer with respect to services aimed at young people?

### 2) Youth information and counselling as a work form and an approach – who does and where?

- In this working group, I would like to focus on the question of who does youth information and counselling work.
- In what ways can the work be cross-sectoral – or can it be?
- What does it require? What kind of resources are needed?
- Can the approach of youth information and counselling work be implemented in individual centres, in Ohjaamo, in other youth

work or in employment services (Public Employment and Business Services)?

- Discuss threats and opportunities associated with a cross-sectoral approach.

### 3) Recommendations of youth information and counselling work

- Can minimum criteria and/or recommendations be set at national level for youth information and counselling work?
- What kind of recommendations work in a time that is changing?
- Can, for example, recording training/youth information and counselling work as part of job profile/strategy be a recommendation?
- Think about the question of recommendations/minimum criteria in relation to the principle of cross-sectional approach and your special skills and competence.



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