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## Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment Report

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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It results from the close collaboration between Digitaal Vlaanderen's AI Expertise Centre and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

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## Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment Report

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| **AI** | Artificial Intelligence |
| **AGO** | Government Personnel Agency |
| **AIEC** | AI Expertise Centre |
| **BIPT** | Belgian Institute for Postal and Telecommunications |
| **COC** | Supervisory Body for Police Information |
| **DSA** | Digital Services Act |
| **ECHR** | European Convention on Human Rights |
| **FIO** | Innovation and Entrepreneurship Fund |
| **GBA** | Data Protection Authority |
| **GDPR** | General Data Protection Regulation |
| **ICT** | Information and Communication Technology |
| **Imec** | Interuniversity Microelectronics Centre |
| **KDM** | Knowledge Centre Data and Society |
| **KCVS** | Knowledge Centre of Flemish Cities |
| **ODIN** | Open Data Inventory |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **PIO** | Programme for Innovation Procurement |
| **RAM** | Readiness Assessment Methodology |
| **R&D** | Research and Development |
| **Scivil** | Flanders Knowledge Centre for Citizen Science |
| **TSI** | Technical Support Instrument |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| **VAIA** | Flanders AI Academy |
| **VAIOP/FAIR** | Flanders AI Research Program |
| **VDAB** | Flemish Employment and Training Service |
| **VMRI** | Flanders Human Rights Institute |
| **VLAIO** | Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship |
| **VGTC** | Flemish Sign Language Centre |
| **VRM** | Flanders Regulator for the Media |
| **VRT** | Flanders News |
| **VSC** | Flemish Supercomputer Centre |
| **VTC** | Flanders Supervisory Committee |
| **VVSG** | Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities |
| **WEWIS** | Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy |

# FOREWORD

We have officially entered the Age of Artificial Intelligence. The world is now set to change at a pace not seen in decades, even centuries. AI-based tools and applications make our lives easier, smoother, and richer. They help us move efficiently, get informed, get credit, get a job, and get our taxes done.

But in its current form, AI reproduces and amplifies many of the social challenges we face. It is not acceptable that around a third of the world's population still lacks adequate internet access. Upstream, the AI industry is highly concentrated, with just two countries – the United States and China – and a dozen companies accounting for a major share of the sector. This can lead only to greater inequality of outcomes – including gender disparities – downstream. Non-diverse AI teams, unrepresentative datasets, and opaque and biased algorithms can cause harm, particularly to those who are already vulnerable, whether companies or individuals, children and young people, women, or entire democracies.

That is why UNESCO drafted the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, which was adopted in 2021 by 193 countries to make sure AI delivers fair, sustainable, and inclusive outcomes. The Recommendation is based on the protection and promotion of human rights, human dignity, and environmental sustainability, and these values are then translated into principles such as accountability, transparency, and privacy. The Recommendation also sets out concrete policy actions that governments can draw on to steer technological developments in a responsible direction, premised on the belief that light-touch regulation, which has until now remained the norm, is insufficient. We need capable governments that are well equipped, in terms of competencies, institutions and laws, to frame responsible AI development and protect the rule of law online, and public and private developers who are accountable for putting human rights and fundamental freedoms – not profits or geopolitical considerations – first.

The Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM) is a diagnostic tool intended to assist Member States in upholding their commitment to the Recommendation by helping them understand how prepared they are to implement AI ethically and responsibly for all their citizens. By highlighting any institutional, regulatory, or data gaps and obstacles, it enables UNESCO to tailor support for governments to fill those gaps to ensure an ethical AI ecosystem aligned with the Recommendation.

Flanders pioneers the world's first sub-national RAM, paving the way for ethical AI governance assessment for regions globally. At the same time, Flanders is a European RAM, and there is full alignment with the EU AI Act, whose timelines have coincided. As a result, the Flanders RAM is testament to how developing AI readiness in line with the Recommendation can work in tandem with and guide EU AI Act implementation. This report stands firmly at the cutting edge of AI governance debates in practice.

The Flanders RAM is also one of the first conducted after the rapid uptake of generative AI in the last few years, which catapulted AI into public awareness, shifted labour market dynamics, and continues to challenge our ways of communication. The impact has been so vast, that transformation is systemic. Sector-specific initiatives for developing a strategic response are emerging across the board. Here, the breadth of the RAM is its strength, and it can identify patterns and strategic priorities for inclusive governance.

In Flanders, there is a clear coordinated commitment to AI innovation, with investments of over 35 million euros annually through the Flanders AI Policy Plan, which enables a rich, collaborative ecosystem across innovation, research and engagement. At the same time, the diversity of bottom-up initiatives energised by AI innovation and presented across the RAM dimensions is staggering. Flanders has clearly been quite successful in its readiness assessment, demonstrating formidable capacities in AI innovation, research, and public engagement, as well as leadership in sector-specific actionable strategies.

The exercise has been ambitious, and the work continues. Key governance recommendations and actions from the Flanders RAM include strengthening ethical oversight mechanisms, embedding equal opportunities and inclusion at the core of AI policies, and coordinating a response to the growing challenge of AI literacy and upskilling, in order to mitigate the risk that AI could deepen and broaden existing digital divides.

Overall, this report presents a fundamentally optimistic vision that we at UNESCO share: that ethical governance and responsible regulation of AI is entirely consistent with innovation and economic growth and is essential for ensuring a technological ecosystem that benefits the public good.

It was a pleasure working with Digitaal Vlaanderen's AI Expertise Centre. We are grateful for their engagement in the RAM, and for facilitating the integration with the vibrant AI community in Flanders.

We are especially grateful to the European Commission's Directorate-General for Secretariat-General (DG SG), whose generous financial support through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) of the Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM) made this ambitious project possible.

I am sure that by following the priorities laid out in this report, Flanders has the tools to build the path going forward, to reap the benefits of AI while making sure that AI technologies deliver fair, sustainable, and inclusive outcomes.

**Lidia Brito**
Assistant Director-General ad interim
for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Flanders presents the world's first subnational Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM) in line with UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

In 2021, UNESCO's 193 Member States unanimously adopted the Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, establishing the first global normative standard to guide countries in ensuring that AI serves humanity, protects human rights and dignity, and contributes to peace and sustainable development.

To operationalize these principles, UNESCO created, back in early 2023, the RAM to set the foundation for designing national AI strategies rooted in ethical and inclusive values. The RAM maps the AI policy and governance landscape, as well as identifies priority areas for ethical AI governance across the five RAM dimensions: legal and regulatory, socio-cultural, scientific and educational, economic and technical and infrastructure.

Since 2023, UNESCO has successfully conducted the RAM exercise in over 75 countries worldwide. The present RAM is the second RAM in Europe[1], and the first-ever subnational RAM. The standard methodology was adjusted as necessary to reflect Flemish data, experiences and institutional competences.

UNESCO is now reviewing the RAM structure and questions, based on the experiences of conducting the exercise in over 75 countries worldwide. The so-called RAM 2.0 is about to be finalised, and Flanders is one of the first regions globally to pilot the RAM 2.0.

Flanders is a small region with a mighty ambition for AI. Governance and innovation are shaped by the Flanders AI Policy Plan, with over 35 million euros of investment per year and a network of knowledge centres and sector-specific approaches. There is also a strong focus on AI innovation and development within the public administration.

Flanders operates in a paradox. As a region within the federal state of Belgium, Flanders faces a multi-faceted governance context. The Belgian governance structure, which is shaped by the layered institutional complexity of Belgium as a federal state, is notoriously fragmented and hard to navigate. Yet beneath that complexity lies in Flanders a tightly knit network of public organizations and civil society actors who know each other well and can mobilize quickly. The result: effective collaboration despite institutional complexity.

Flanders as a region is interconnected, with a strong civil society, a decentralized approach in public administration, and a strong presence of small-and-medium-enterprises within the private sector. At the same time, Flanders is situated within Europe, and heavily involved in EU funding opportunities and legislative developments.

The Flanders RAM is the product of a collaboration between UNESCO and Digitaal Vlaanderen's AI Expertise Centre, as part of the broader *AI-Ready Flemish Public Administration* project. It is generously supported financially under the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) by the Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM) under the European Commission's Directorate-General for Secretariat-General.

While the RAM began within the public administration, it analyses the Flanders region as whole, and engages with a diversity of actors to do so. This move mirrors how the challenges society faces with AI increasingly cross existing organisational boundaries and require collaboration and coordination to respond.

For this Flanders RAM process in 2026, research brought together key findings from major monitoring initiatives across Flanders. The desk research was complemented by a series of rich stakeholder consultations with expert interviews across the policy areas. This was followed by extensive feedback iterations to ensure accuracy and methodological coherence.

As a result, the Flanders RAM makes visible the richness and diversity of AI adoption initiatives across the Flemish AI ecosystem. It shows the readiness across the five dimensions of the RAM, highlighting strengths in ambitious policy plans and monitoring

1 See UNESCO. (2025). The Netherlands: artificial intelligence readiness assessment report. https://www.unesco.org/ethics-ai/en/netherlands

initiatives and identifying gaps in policy, institutional coordination, and capacity development. The result of the RAM is a set of actionable governance recommendations covering the policy action areas of the Recommendation.

In the Legal and Regulatory dimension, the governance of AI is divided between the European legal regime and areas of federal competences on the one hand, and Flanders' regional authority over its own digital agenda on the other. AI is shaped by the Flemish Digital Strategy, and governance evidences a strong commitment to fundamental rights.

In the Social and Cultural dimension, Flanders is especially strong in its cultural, heritage and linguistic diversity readiness. It demonstrates a broad gender, diversity and inclusion policy framework, which can now be strengthened with harmonized action to respond to emerging patterns of AI-related exclusion. In particular, evidence shows urgent demand for AI literacy training to mitigate digital divides and reduce barriers to AI adoption.

In the Scientific and Educational dimension, Flanders invests substantially in AI research, spending over 153 million euros in R&D for AI in 2024. The Education sector is considered a pioneer in terms of professionalisation and responsible AI strategy development. Importantly, the RAM brings together evidence highlighting the demand for reskilling and upskilling.

In the Economic dimension, Flanders boasts a diverse and growing domestic AI industry, which is reinforced by renewed emphases on valorisation efforts. In terms of use, AI adoption is on the rise, with 58% of companies using at least one AI technology in 2025, though this growth is largely being driven by ready made AI solutions like generative AI platforms. Public sector AI adoption is actively being supported by Digitaal Vlaanderen's AIEC, which also delivered the ambitious roll-out of 10,000 Microsoft Copilot licences.

Finally, in the Technology and Infrastructure dimension of the RAM, Flanders demonstrates robust infrastructural connectivity and a deep connection to European interoperability initiatives. Governance frameworks for data and cloud storage are mature and entering their next generations, offering opportunities to articulate systemic approaches to cross-sector issues such as data governance, cybersecurity and digital sovereignty.

Overall, Flanders demonstrates a commitment to safe and responsible AI, particularly in the second wave of evaluations of the Flanders AI Policy Plan and the emergence of sectoral approaches for developing value frameworks. While Flanders has not yet established a formal regional AI Ethics Commission specifically dedicated to implementing the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, the mechanisms described and suggested by the recommendations in the Flanders RAM will continue to develop an ethical and inclusive future for all people in Flanders.

| GOVERNANCE RECOMMENDATIONS | |
|---|---|
| 1.1 | Strengthen AI supervision at Flemish regional level. |
| 2.1 | Incentivise interdisciplinary collaboration in AI across the Flanders AI Policy Plan. |
| 2.2 | Build on the Flemish AI Strategy for Government, further developing a shared value framework, governance bodies and new roles. |
| 3.1 | Consider how to synchronize data policy with AI developments in the EU AI Act, cybersecurity and digital sovereignty domains. |
| 3.2 | Explore possibilities to improve data quality by strengthening lifecycle monitoring and feedback mechanisms. |
| 4.1 | Develop capacities to coordinate with different levels of Belgian and European governance. |
| 5.1 | Establish a coordination mechanism for AI and environment. |
| 5.2 | Develop structured evaluation of the environmental impact of AI. |
| 6.1 | Embed inclusion as a core pillar and guiding principle in the development of AI-related policies. |
| 7.1 | Continue supporting Flemish AI models and benchmarking. |
| 8.1 | Prioritise investment in a coordinated approach to inclusive AI literacy and reskilling trainings for all levels of society |
| 8.2 | Continue supporting responsible AI in education and fundamental research |
| 9.1 | Explore the possibilities for a coordinated response to AI generated mis- and dis-information. |
| 10.1 | Support inclusive economic development by addressing both labour market impacts and AI sector needs |
| 10.2 | Promote sector-specific value frameworks for AI |
| 11.1 | Safeguard health, wellbeing, and the interests of young people in an AI-driven society |

# AI GOVERNANCE LANDSCAPE

This section identifies the governance structures and supervision bodies for AI in Flanders. It provides an introduction to the governance of Flanders as a subnational region within the Belgian federal state.

Positioned within the European AI governance regime, Flanders boasts a broad supervision regime on AI and fundamental rights. Flanders has also affirmed its commitment to strengthening AI development and adoption with the Flanders AI Policy Plan, a leading governance instrument shaping the AI ecosystem and building a rich network of collaborations.

## FEDERAL STATE

Belgium is a federal state composed of three communities (Flemish, French, and German-speaking) and three regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region, and Brussels-Capital Region). The Belgian system is based on a distribution of powers among the federal, regional, and community levels, each exercising its competences autonomously within its respective domain.

The division of powers is done along linguistic, cultural and economic interests.[2] The federal government retains authority over matters such as foreign affairs, defence, justice, finance, and social security. Communities are responsible for matters related to individuals, such as culture, education, and certain aspects of health policy, while regions handle territorially based matters such as economy, employment, agriculture, water policy, housing, public works, energy, transport (excluding Belgian Railways), environment, town and country planning, and supervision of provinces and municipalities.[3]

## FLEMISH PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

The Flemish Community and the Flemish Region have undergone a de facto merger of their institutions, resulting in a single Flemish governance system composed of three main bodies: the Flemish Government, the Flemish public administration, and the Flemish Parliament.[4] Together, these institutions form a coherent system responsible for both community and regional competences within Flanders.

### FLEMISH GOVERNMENT

The Flemish Government is the executive branch and is composed of nine ministers, one of whom serves as a Minister-President.[5] It sets the political direction and is responsible for developing and executing policy. Each minister is responsible for a set of specific policy areas, which together cover the full range of Flemish competences.

Each year, the Flemish Government prepares the annual budget, outlining the expected income and spending of the Flemish administration for the coming year.

2 Government of Belgium. Belgium, a federal state. https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federale_staatc
3 Government of Belgium. The powers of the Regions. https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/regions/competence
4 Flemish Government. Overheid, regering en parlement. https://www.vlaanderen.be/overheid-regering-en-parlement
5 Flemish Government. Vlaamse Regering. https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaamse-regering

### FLEMISH PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The Flemish public administration forms the administrative body responsible for implementing the policies set out by the Government, and is comparable to national ministries. Each policy domain is overseen by one or more ministers who hold political responsibility for the corresponding areas. Each domain consists of several entities, including departments, agencies, and other public bodies, responsible for the development and implementation of policies within their respective competences.

The Steering Body for Flemish Information and ICT Policy functions as the central coordination mechanism for digital policy across Flemish public administrations. This inter-administrative body provides strategic advice to the Flemish Government on information management and ICT. Once adopted, its recommendations are binding for Flemish public administrations.

Within the Flemish Government, the Digitaal Vlaanderen agency fosters digital transformation for Flemish public administrations. In particular, the AI Expertise Centre (AIEC), situated within Digitaal Vlaanderen, is responsible for fostering the responsible adoption of AI throughout Flemish public administrations.[6] As the AIEC is a leader in building institutional capacity for AI governance across several dimensions, their work will feature prominently in the Legal & Regulatory section.

### FLEMISH PARLIAMENT

The Flemish Parliament consists of 124 representatives across 8 political parties and is responsible for approving policy, legislation and providing democratic oversight of the Flemish Government.[7] While it does not have a dedicated committee for digital affairs, AI-related topics are typically addressed within the Commission for Economy, Work, Social Economy, Science, and Innovation (WEWIS). This includes special hearings, such as one on the risks AI technologies pose to human rights and the rule of law.[8] Parliamentarians can also submit questions on AI, which are answered by the minister responsible for that particular competency during committee sessions. In the case of AI, the minister responsible is also the current Minister-President. This evidences a dynamic dialogue; for example, in February 2025, members questioned the Minister-President about Flanders' role in the 2025 Global AI Summit in Paris and the implementation of the Flanders AI Policy Plan.[9]

## FLEMISH CITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES

Flanders is divided into five provinces and 285 cities and municipalities. Provinces primarily deal with spatial and territorial matters such as water management, regional planning, and nature and heritage protection. Cities and municipalities form the level of government closest to citizens and are responsible for delivering essential local services and implementing policies within their territories. Their competences include local education and childcare, social assistance, sports facilities, and the maintenance of local roads and public spaces.

The Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) is the entity that represents all Flemish cities and municipalities. It provides policy advice, training, and knowledge-sharing platforms, and advocates for strong local governance. The Knowledge Centre of Flemish Cities (KCVS) is an intermunicipal association established by the 13 Flemish central cities and VVSG. It serves as a knowledge exchange hub and a source of inspiration for the organization, service delivery, and policies of the central Flemish cities.[10]

6 Digitaal Vlaanderen. AI Expertisecentrum. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/onze-diensten-en-platformen/ai-expertisecentrum
7 Flemish Government. Hoe werkt het Vlaams Parlement? https://www.vlaanderen.be/hoe-werkt-het-vlaams-parlement
8 Council of Europe. (4 July 2023). Flemish Parliament examines the Council of Europe approach to Artificial Intelligence. https://www.coe.int/en/web/artificial-intelligence/-/flemish-parliament-examines-the-council-of-europe-approach-to-artificial-intelligence
9 Flemish Parliament. (20 February 2025). Verslag vergadering Commissie voor Economie, Werk, Sociale Economie, Wetenschap en Innovatie. https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/nl/parlementair-werk/commissies/commissievergaderingen/1869876/verslag/1873246
10 Kenniscentrum Vlaamse Steden. https://www.kenniscentrumvlaamsesteden.be/

# MONITORING AND SUPERVISORY AUTHORITIES

Where European laws and policies relating to AI, such as the AI Act, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Data Governance Act (DGA), and the Digital Services Act (DSA) apply in Flanders, most competent authorities as required in these European regulations are situated at the federal level. Each European regulation assigns specific supervisory responsibilities to Belgium as a European member state, and these responsibilities are typically assumed at the federal level. However, for certain thematic areas, Flemish institutions also hold competence, particularly where the application of these European regulations intersects with regional matters. This is particularly relevant for the application of the EU AI Act, which touches on many regional and community competencies. In the 'Declaration of Belgium' in the Treaty of Lisbon, it is clarified that when it comes to executing European legislation, all different Belgian parliaments are to be seen as chambers of a national parliament, meaning that in order to sign a treaty, all parliaments have to agree.[11] As a result, regional parliaments have an equal stake in European matters.

## BELGIUM

The Belgian Data Protection Authority (GBA) is responsible for monitoring compliance with the GDPR, though has no competence over Flemish public bodies. For the Digital Services Act, the Belgian Institute for Postal and Telecommunications Regulation (BIPT) has been designated as the competent authority at federal level. The Ministry of the Economy oversees compliance with the Data Governance Act. The Centre for Cybersecurity Belgium is the national authority for cybersecurity in Belgium. Regarding the AI Act, Belgium has assigned 30 entities as competent authorities responsible for the protection of fundamental rights in accordance with Article 77 of the EU AI Act.[12] However, at the time of writing, the formal designation of the market surveillance authority is still pending.

Lastly, the Federal Ombudsman is an independent authority that investigates complaints about federal administrative services and promotes fair, lawful, and transparent public administration, which may play a role in the implementation of the AI Act with regards to public services.

## FLANDERS

At the Flemish level, there are 6 competent authorities for fundamental rights under Article 77 of the EU AI Act: Children's Rights Commissioner, Flanders Human Rights Institute (VMRI), Flanders Ombudsman service, Flemish Regulator for the Media (VRM), Flemish Social Inspection, and the Flemish Supervisory Commission (VTC).[13] The VTC also supervises the application of the GDPR by Flemish public authorities. For the Digital Services Act, there is an interfederal cooperation agreement that designates three regional bodies under the BIPT as competent authorities. For Flanders this is the Flemish Regulator for the Media (VRM).[14]

Additionally, the Flanders Human Rights Institute (VMRI) serves as an independent monitoring body. Citizens can submit complaints to the Institute in cases of discrimination or alleged infringements of human rights. Although it does not exercise formal supervisory powers, the Institute plays an important role in safeguarding fundamental rights in the Flemish context. VRM is the supervisory authority for Flemish audiovisual media. The Children's Rights Commissioner is an independent institution that monitors, protects, and promotes children's rights. Lastly, the Flemish Ombudsman is an independent body that handles complaints about Flemish public services and helps ensure accountable administrative practices.

11 European Union. (17 December 2007). Declaration No. 51 by the Kingdom of Belgium on National Parliaments. In Treaty of Lisbon, OJ C 306, p. 267. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12007L%2FAFI%2FDCL%2F51

12 Ministry of the Economy. Overzicht van de Belgische autoriteiten voor de bescherming van de grondrechten. https://economie.fgov.be/sites/default/files/Files/Online/Overzicht-van-de-Belgische-autoriteiten-voor-de-bescherming-van-de-grondrechten.pdf

13 Ibid.

14 Belgian Institute for Postal Services and Telecommunications. (24 May 2024). Digital Services Act: Belgium has designated its four competent authorities to enforce the provisions of the European regulation. https://www.bipt.be/consumers/publication/digital-services-act-belgium-has-designated-its-four-competent-authorities-to-enforce-the-provisions-of-the-european-regulation-brussels

# FLANDERS AI POLICY PLAN

The Flanders AI Policy Plan, launched in 2019, is the leading policy instrument governing AI in Flanders, investing 35.61 million EUR per year. It provides an overarching framework for how AI is developed, funded and implemented across the region. It sets strategic goals and allocates resources across three complementary pillars covering research, business implementation, and societal aspects of AI. In so doing, the Flanders AI Policy Plan enables a fast-growing research and innovation ecosystem, both through funding but also by creating an ecosystem of collaboration within each of the three primary pillars.

The three Policy Plan pillars are allocated as follows:

- AI Research pillar: 14,185 million
- Implementation pillar: 17,5 million
  - Stimulating AI development and adoption: 9,5 million
  - Digital transformation programme: 8,02 million
- Flanking pillar: 3,925 million
  - Awareness, training and ethics: 2,925 million
  - Education: 1 million

The AI Steering Group is led by an independent chair. Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS) is responsible for the organisation and support of the AI Steering Group. The AI Steering Group consists of 14 members, including representatives from universities and university colleges, research centres, industry, and additional experts from across the Flanders AI Policy Plan.[15]

## Pillar 1: Strengthening AI research in Flanders

This pillar aims to reinforce Flanders' position as a centre of AI excellence by funding high-quality research across universities and strategic research centres. It's coordinated by Interuniversity Microelectronics Centre (imec) and involves Flemish universities and research centres.

Approximately €14 million is allocated annually for research in two research "grand challenges": AI-driven data science and Situated AI, with 25 use cases in four domains: health, industry, society, planet & energy. The goal is to promote innovation and collaboration across disciplines and sectors.

Progress is monitored through key performance indicators, and the research programme is monitored annually through a process of self-assessment. In depth external evaluation by an International Advisory Board is done every five years. The goal is to keep the programme aligned with emerging trends and industrial needs.

## Pillar 2: AI implementation in Flemish businesses

The second pillar focuses on translating research into practice by supporting the adoption of AI technologies in the private sector. The Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (VLAIO) acts as the lead coordinator for this pillar.

With an annual budget of €17,5 million, the programme provides funding and tailored advisory support to help Flemish companies accelerate the integration of AI technologies into their operations. The approach follows a funnel model, beginning with broad awareness and capacity building, and moving toward targeted financial instruments for innovation projects.

Within this framework, three main actions guide AI implementation efforts:

1. Supporting companies in setting up and executing AI innovation and implementation trials;
2. Supporting industry-relevant AI research and R&D projects; and
3. Supporting communities, including companies in incubator and accelerator programmes, to speed up AI adoption.

15 Flanders AI Policy Plan. Organisational Structure and Management. https://www.flandersai.be/en/organisational-structure-and-management

These activities are accompanied by the development of key performance indicators (KPIs) and annual progress reports are submitted to the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Fund (FIO) Decision Committee, which reviews implementation, ensures coordination with other digital policy domains, and provides recommendations for adjustment or reallocation of resources.

### Pillar 3: Raising awareness, education, and ethics

The third pillar highlights the social and ethical dimensions of AI. It aims to ensure that the development and use of AI in Flanders are guided by ethical principles, social inclusion, and a broad understanding of the impact of AI across society.

With an annual budget of around €4 million, three key institutions were established as implementation mechanisms under this pillar: the Knowledge Centre Data & Society (KDM), the Flanders AI Academy (VAIA) and the public awareness programme 'amai!'.[16]

KDM provides guidance on ethical, legal, and societal aspects of AI, supporting policymakers, researchers, and businesses in applying responsible AI practices. It is the only actor in the Flanders AI Policy Plan focusing on legal and ethical aspects of AI governance and providing policy support.

VAIA is a joint initiative between Flemish universities and business federations, to coordinate and promote AI education and trainings for professionals and organizations. It aims to strengthen AI skills and awareness across the Flemish workforce. The activities of VAIA include encouraging the creation of more training opportunities which are better oriented towards the needs of target audiences, as well as making existing trainings more easily findable, thus increasing the efficiency of trainings in Flanders.

Amai! is a project run by two non-profit organisations: Scivil, the Flanders Knowledge Centre for Citizen Science in Flanders and KDM. This programme is also part of the third pillar, although it will in the nearby future become part of the Flemish FTI initiative. While raising public awareness of AI's impact used to be the task of amai!, since 2026 it is no longer.

As a result, while awareness raising is a common and important cascade effect of ongoing initiatives within the flanking pillar of the Flanders AI Policy plan, none of the organisations currently have the mandate to strengthen public awareness of the impact of AI.

## EVALUATIONS

The Flanders AI Policy Plan was evaluated and the research and flanking pillar received evaluations to continue their mandate and refine their approach. Results of the evaluation include longer term changes such as a re-focus on market valorisation, and a stronger focus on responsible AI within the research pillar, where responsible AI is now a cross-working package focus within the research pillar, more focus on sustainability of AI and trustworthiness.[17]

The Flanders AI Policy Plan has clearly created a rich ecosystem of cooperation, where within each of the three pillars there is significant interaction and collaboration. For instance, the yearly Flanders AI Forum attracts over 1000 participants.[18]

Upon inception of the Plan there was an assumption that collaboration across pillars would happen almost naturally, though accounts vary as to whether that has materialised sufficiently in practice. Still, there are many bilateral initiatives and examples of cross-pillar collaboration, and actors across pillars actively promote one another. For example, VAIA in collaboration with the Research programme organises a series of Highway sessions, explicitly connecting industry actors with the state of the art in Flemish AI research.[19] KDM and VAIA have organised several events and publications together and collaborate on topics of AI literacy, and KDM are collaborating on the frameworks for responsible AI in the research pillar.

16 KDM. https://data-en-maatschappij.ai/; VAIA. https://www.vaia.be; amai! https://amai.vlaanderen/

17 WEWIS. (2023). Evaluatie AI-managementsamenvatting. https://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2024-03/Evaluatie%20-%20AI-%20managementsamenvatting%20-%202023.pdf

18 Flanders AI Forum. https://www.flandersaiforum.be/

19 VAIA. (2026). Highway: bedrijven ontdekken de state of the art van het Vlaamse AI-onderzoek. https://www.vaia.be/nl/series/highway-connecting-industry-with-state-of-the-art-in-ai-research

# LEGAL AND REGULATORY

This section will examine the legal and regulatory aspects of AI in Flanders. Establishing a robust regulatory framework is essential for ensuring the ethical use of AI systems. Such a framework must provide mechanisms to protect citizens' rights, address unforeseen negative consequences, and offer remedies where necessary. Key components of this framework include laws on AI governance, data protection and privacy, data sharing and accessibility, and freedom of information, among others.

In Flanders, AI policy and regulation sit at the intersection of European, federal / Belgian, and regional / Flemish frameworks. European instruments such as the AI Act and the GDPR establish binding obligations that apply across all levels of governance, while certain federal and regional laws may also be relevant depending on the subject matter. At the same time, Flanders holds regional authority over its own digitalisation agenda, allowing it to design complementary strategies that reflect local priorities and public sector innovation. Therefore, this section will take a layered approach, beginning with European, then federal and regional frameworks.

## AI POLICY AND REGULATION

### EUROPE

The EU Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) is the most important and comprehensive piece of legislation governing AI in Europe. As a directly applicable EU regulation, it is binding in its entirety across all Member States, including Belgium and its regions, and therefore directly applies to Flanders.

It establishes a risk-based regulatory framework that sets out different requirements for providers, deployers, and other operators of AI systems, depending on the potential impact of those systems on health, safety, and fundamental rights. The Act came into force on 1 August 2024 and uses a phased implementation approach, meaning that its provisions will gradually take effect, coming into full force in 2027.

The AI Act exists alongside a wider set of European strategies and legislative instruments that together shape the EU's digital governance framework. These include the European AI Strategy (2018), the Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence (2021), the 2030 Digital Compass (2021), and the AI Continent Action Plan (2025).

### FLANDERS

Flanders has developed several complementary strategies and policies that address AI in different areas. Together, these policies form a layered policy framework for how AI is researched, implemented, and governed within the region. The table below provides an overview of the key Flemish policy documents relevant to AI governance.

**TABLE 1. KEY FLEMISH AI GOVERNANCE POLICIES**

| | POLICY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|---|
| 2019 | Flemish Digital Strategy | A comprehensive strategy that includes the Flemish Data Strategy, the Flemish Cloud Strategy, the Flemish Information Security Strategy, the Digital Service Strategy, and the Flemish AI Strategy. |
| 2025 | Flemish Digital Strategy | Approved by the Flemish government, the strategy has two goals: making citizens, businesses and associations digitally future-proof, and enabling the Flemish government to fulfil its societal role more efficiently and effectively through digitalization, data and innovative technology. |
| 2019 | Flanders AI Policy Plan | A funding and governance coordination mechanism consisting of three pillars: strengthening AI research in Flanders, implementing AI in Flemish businesses, and raising awareness, education and ethics. |
| 2024 | Principles Document Flemish AI Strategy | A policy document that includes six guiding principles to ensure the responsible use of AI within Flemish and local public administrations. |
| 2025 | Guidelines on Generative AI | Guidelines that offer practical guidance for public administrations in Flanders on the responsible use of publicly accessible generative AI tools. |

There is currently no single, unified AI strategy for the Flemish public administration. Instead, there are two dedicated policies that govern the use of AI by Flemish public administrations and public servants. The Principles Document Flemish AI Strategy sets out six guiding principles to ensure that AI is used responsibly, ethically, and transparently across Flemish and local administrations. Complementing this, the Guidelines for the Responsible Use of Publicly Accessible Generative AI provide practical direction for officials on the safe and appropriate use of generative AI tools. According to interviews, these documents are often referred to as best practice examples even in the private sector. Together, these frameworks translate Flanders' broader AI ambitions into concrete principles and practices for responsible AI governance within the public sector.

# DATA PROTECTION AND PRIVACY LAWS

## EUROPE

The European data protection framework is built on a set of complementary legal instruments rather than a single overarching law. At its core lies the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which applies directly across all EU Member States and governs the processing of personal data in both the public and private sectors. The GDPR establishes key principles such as lawfulness, fairness, and transparency, grants data subjects enforceable rights—including access, rectification, and erasure—and imposes obligations on controllers and processors, notably in relation to accountability, data minimisation, and security.

Alongside the GDPR, the Law Enforcement Directive provides a distinct legal framework for the processing of personal data by competent authorities for purposes related to the prevention, investigation, detection, and prosecution of criminal offences. This directive ensures that such processing is subject to specific safeguards adapted to the law enforcement context.

These instruments are anchored in primary EU law, in particular Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which explicitly recognises the right to the protection of personal data as a fundamental right.

Taken together, these legal frameworks establish a coherent and layered system in which data protection is not merely a regulatory requirement, but a fundamental right that must be respected across different domains of EU law.

### BELGIUM

In Belgium, the GDPR the LED have been implemented through the Belgian Data Protection Act (*Wet van 30 juli 2018 betreffende de bescherming van natuurlijke personen met betrekking tot de verwerking van persoonsgegevens*). This act complements the GDPR by laying down national procedural rules and enforcement mechanisms, and implements the LED by establishing a specific regime for the processing of personal data by law enforcement authorities for law enforcement purposes.

Supervision is divided between different authorities. The GBA acts as the general supervisory authority responsible for monitoring compliance with the GDPR, handling complaints, and adopting corrective measures or administrative sanctions in cases of non-compliance. In parallel, the Supervisory Body for Police Information (COC) exercises oversight over the processing of personal data by police authorities in the context of law enforcement, in line with the Belgian Data Protection Act.

Belgium is also recognised as a leading country in the field of cybersecurity. While there is no specific regional score for Flanders, the 2024 Global Cybersecurity Index Report classifies Belgium as a Tier 1 – Role Modelling country, indicating that it is among the global leaders in cybersecurity commitment.[20] This tier-based approach, which replaced the previous numerical ranking system, reflects Belgium's advanced institutional framework, strong legal measures, and proactive engagement in international cybersecurity cooperation.

### FLANDERS

At the regional level, data protection within the Flemish public administration is further governed by several decrees. The Flemish Public Administration Decree (*Bestuursdecreet*) sets rules for the management and accessibility of administrative documents , providing citizens with the right to access and correct information held about them. The E-Government Decree (*Decreet van 18 juli 2008 betreffende het elektronische bestuurlijke gegevensverkeer*) establishes obligations for electronic data exchange between public bodies. It also defines the mandate of the Flemish Supervisory (VTC), the regional supervisory authority for public sector data processing, as well as the creation of several databases, such as the associations register. This is the Flemish regional counterpart to the federal Data Protection Authority. Finally, the Flemish GDPR Decree (*Decreet van 8 juni 2018*) is an amending decree that ensures that Flemish legislation is consistent with the GDPR, embedding and replacing its principles across existing decrees.

## DATA SHARING AND ACCESSIBILITY

### EUROPE

At the European level, data sharing and accessibility are governed by a coherent set of legislative frameworks that together form the foundation for a single data market. The Data Governance Act promotes trusted cross-sector and cross-border data exchange by creating mechanisms for data intermediaries and voluntary data altruism. The Data Act ensures fair access to and sharing of data, particularly between businesses (B2B) and between businesses and governments (B2G), with a focus on data generated by connected devices. The Open Data Directive establishes the principle of re-use of public sector information, requiring that high-value datasets, such as geospatial, environmental, and mobility data, be made available in machine-readable formats and free of charge. In parallel, the European Commission is developing Common European Data Spaces, which will create interoperable frameworks for data exchange in key sectors, including public administration, health, and research.

### BELGIUM

According to the Open Data Inventory (ODIN) 2024, which assesses the coverage and openness of official statistics worldwide, Belgium scored 54, placing it below the European average.[21] On the ODIN scale, Belgium was the only European country categorised in the "yellow" tier, indicating moderate progress in data openness compared to neighbouring countries. While

20 International Telecommunication Union. (2024). Global Cybersecurity Index, 5th Edition. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/GCIv5/2401416_1b_Global-Cybersecurity-Index-E.pdf

21 Open Data Watch. (2024). Belgium Country Profile. https://odin.opendatawatch.com/country-profiles/BEL?year=2024

the score highlights that Belgium's statistical data is broadly available, it also suggests potential for improvement in accessibility and the proactive release of high-value datasets. Across the RAM indicators, there are several data accessibility and visualisation platforms which address key RAM question at federal level in very user-friendly manners, such as GenderStat. This suggests a nuance to the evaluation rankings.

### FLANDERS

The Flanders Statistical Authority (VSA) is the organisation tasked with the development, production and communication of public Flemish statistics.[22] They are the core of the network Statistics Flanders, and also serves as key data for the RAM indicators. The Flemish Decree on Public Statistics highlights public statistics track those which are required for public policy.[23]

In Flanders, the framework for data sharing and open data is primarily embedded in the Flemish Public Administration Decree. The decree contains a dedicated chapter on open data and the re-use of public information, implementing the Open Data Directive and related European frameworks such as the Environmental Information Directive and the Web Accessibility Directive. It obliges public administrations to make data available for re-use, both for commercial and non-commercial purposes, in machine-readable formats, accompanied by metadata, and to promote accessibility through central data portals.

Complementing this legal framework, the Flemish Data Strategy sets out a comprehensive administrative policy for responsible and effective data use within the Flemish government. It is accompanied by an action plan outlining more than 200 measures across four domains: establishing a general framework, strengthening data literacy, enhancing data accessibility and availability, and formalising data governance. The strategy aligns with the European Data Strategy and emphasises collaboration within the Flemish government, with local authorities, academia, the private sector, and international partners.

Several non-binding initiatives further encourage data openness and standardisation. The Open Data Charter, developed under the Smart Flanders Project, outlines 20 principles for opening up city data and provides practical tools for municipalities to integrate open data into decision-making. The Open Standards for Linking Organisations (OSLO) initiative promotes semantic and technical standardisation of data exchange across entities in Flanders and is now coordinated by the Steering Committee for Flemish Information and ICT Policy.

## PROCUREMENT LAWS AND POLICIES

In Flanders, public procurement follows the federal legal framework that applies to all levels of governments in Belgium. Key European rules, such as the EU Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement, have been transposed into Belgian law, such as the Law on Public Procurement (*Wet inzake overheidsopdrachten van 17 juni 2016*). This means that Flemish entities are bound by the same national procedures and principles as other public administrations in Belgium.

The Agency for Facility Operations (*Het Facilitaire Bedrijf*) is the agency responsible for facility management and procurement within the Flemish public administration. It is the sole central purchasing body of the Flemish public administration, and is therefore the main authority overseeing procurement processes, including those related to AI systems.

There are currently no procurement procedures specific to AI, though at the time of writing these are under development. The acquisition of AI systems or AI-enabled services takes place under the general rules for ICT procurement. Before launching a tender, contracting authorities often carry out a market consultation or needs assessment to understand available solutions and to prevent the unintentional purchase of AI components without clear awareness of their presence or impact.

Depending on the size and type of the contract, different procurement procedures are used, including open, restricted, negotiated procedures or innovation partnerships. During the evaluation phase, contracting authorities assess both price and quality. Quality criteria include functionality, performance, security, innovation, and sustainability. In practice, the agency

22 Flemish Government. Vlaamse Statistische Autoriteit. https://www.vlaanderen.be/organisaties/administratieve-diensten-van-de-vlaamse-overheid/beleidsdomein-kanselarij-bestuur-buitenlandse-zaken-en-justitie/departement-kanselarij-en-buitenlandse-zaken/afdeling-kanselarij/vlaamse-statistische-autoriteit

23 Flemish Government. (22 April 2016). Besluit Vlaamse openbare statistieken. Codex Vlaanderen. https://codex.vlaanderen.be/PrintDocument.ashx?id=1026825&datum=&geannoteerd=false&print=false

for facility operations does not apply overly stringent requirements, in order to avoid reducing competition or excluding smaller suppliers.

Currently, there is no formal approval mechanism or supplier certification specific to AI. However, the Agency for Facility Operations is developing model clauses and practical guidance to support contracting authorities in addressing AI-related risks and ensuring alignment with European and Flemish policy frameworks.

Furthermore, public procurement is increasingly guided by ethical and transparency considerations. Flemish authorities are encouraged to integrate the principles outlined in the Flemish Principles Document on AI and the Guidelines on Generative AI when procuring or deploying AI systems. These frameworks promote responsible, transparent, and human-centred use of AI in public service delivery.

# FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACTS

## EUROPE

At the European level, freedom of expression is protected under Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Both frameworks enshrine the right to hold opinions, receive, and impart information and ideas without interference by public authorities.

In practice, these articles form the foundation for EU and Member State laws concerning media pluralism, freedom of information, and access to knowledge. The European Court of Human Rights has clarified that, while Article 10 of the ECHR does not establish a general right of access to information, such a right can arise where access is essential for the exercise of freedom of expression, especially in relation to information of public interest held by public authorities.[24]

## BELGIUM

The Belgian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression and the freedom of the press. In practice, Belgian authorities cannot censor and restrict publication or broadcasting in advance. However, post-publication accountability does apply. Individuals or publishers can be held liable for unlawful expressions, such as defamation, hate speech, or incitement to violence.

## FLANDERS

At the Flemish level, the freedom on information aspect is covered by the Public Administration Decree, which incorporates the right to openness and transparency, supporting the broader constitutional right to freedom of expression by ensuring access to government documents.

While Flemish legislation does not introduce a separate right to freedom of expression beyond the federal and European framework, the regional decrees operationalize these rights by regulating access to administrative data and supporting public participation in governance.

24 European Court of Human Rights. (8 November 2016). Magyar Helsinki Bizottság v. Hungary (Application No. 18030/11). HUDOC. https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-167828

## DUE PROCESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

### EUROPE

The European Convention on Human Rights guarantees due process under Article 6 (right to a fair trial) and Article 5 (right to liberty and security). These provisions ensure a fair and public hearing before an independent tribunal, protection against arbitrary detention, and access to legal remedy.

Through Belgium's ratification, these rights apply directly to citizens in Flanders. Their interpretation and effectiveness are continually reviewed by the European Court of Human Rights.

### BELGIUM

The Belgian Constitution protects core due process guarantees, including the right to a fair hearing before a competent judge, and the prohibition of arbitrary detention.

### FLANDERS

Justice is governed at the federal level; therefore, these constitutional and ECHR guarantees apply equally to citizens in Flanders. However, VMRI plays a monitoring role in ensuring that Flemish administrations and institutions respect fundamental rights, including procedural fairness. The Institute can receive individual complaints and issues periodic reports on the human rights situation in Flanders.

## ONLINE SAFETY AND INTEGRITY OF SPEECH

### EUROPE

The Digital Services Act (DSA) establishes the main EU framework for addressing illegal and, in certain cases, harmful online content. It applies directly to Belgium and Flanders and sets out notice-and-takedown procedures for illegal material such as incitement to terrorism, illegal hate speech, child sexual abuse material, and infringements of intellectual property rights.

The DSA also introduces obligations for Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) to assess and mitigate systemic risks linked to harmful content, including disinformation. While misinformation itself is not explicitly regulated, given its often unintentional nature, the DSA strengthens transparency and accountability requirements to limit the spread of false or misleading information.

Although the DSA does not explicitly regulate AI, it covers automated tools used for content moderation and recommender systems. Platforms must inform users when such tools are used, explain how recommender systems prioritize content, and allow users to adjust their settings. Automated actions must remain subject to human oversight.

The EU AI Act complements the DSA by setting transparency obligations for AI systems themselves, including chatbots and generative AI. Together, the two frameworks address both platform responsibilities and AI system risks.

### BELGIUM

At the federal level, Belgium addresses online hate speech through three laws: the Antiracism Act, the Antidiscrimination Act, and the Gender Act, all of which contain provisions against discrimination and criminal hate speech.

There is no dedicated law on misinformation or disinformation, although a 2021 Belgian Senate report called for stronger cooperation between the federal government and regional communities, including Flanders, to counter fake news.

The Belgian Institute for Postal Services and Telecommunications (BIPT) serves as the national coordinator for the DSA, responsible for enforcement and coordination with regional regulators.

### FLANDERS

At the regional level, Flanders has no decree equivalent to the DSA for notice-and-takedown procedures. However, the Flemish Regulator for the Media (VRM) is designated as the regional authority responsible for monitoring DSA compliance in Flanders. The VRM oversees content-related matters, including moderation and removal of illegal or harmful content under the DSA framework.

## PUBLIC SECTOR CAPACITY

### FLANDERS

In Flanders, there is no overarching government strategy yet to strengthen digital skills in the public sector. Existing policy documents, such as the Principles Document Flemish AI Strategy and the Flemish Data Strategy, recognise the need for a competency-based approach. They call for entity-specific training plans, a competency model for AI, and clear roles and responsibilities for AI oversight within administrations.

Together with the Government Personnel Agency AGO, Digitaal Vlaanderen is working closely on a digital skills framework based on the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 3). The aim is to foster a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace and to strengthen the digital competencies of employees within the Flemish administration.

In addition, UNESCO and Digitaal Vlaanderen are carrying out the AI-Ready Flemish Public Administration project, funded by the European Commission's SG REFORM under the Technical Support Instrument (TSI).[25] The project strengthens the Flemish government's capacity for AI governance and ethical adoption by supporting legal, policy, human, and technical readiness.

The project develops governance tools and systemic capacity building across three pillars:

1. Institutional capacity for AI governance, to help civil servants navigate the complex legal and ethical landscape.
2. Technical infrastructure for AI, to establish current technical needs and future architecture strategies.
3. AI literacy training for responsible use, to provide a baseline AI literacy for all and identify profile-specific competencies.

Of these, one of the major capacity initiatives of the SG REFORM project includes developing the AI literacy trajectory for the Flemish public administration, creating the UNESCO Ethical AI Literacy Framework and the resulting AI literacy framework of Digitaal Vlaanderen.[26] The mapping of available trainings will be further developed by VAIA and AGO as an AI literacy platform for Flemish public administrations.

25 UNESCO. AI-Ready Flemish Public Administration. https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics/flemish-government

26 Digitaal Vlaanderen. AI-geletterdheid voor overheden in Vlaanderen. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/onze-diensten-en-platformen/ai-expertisecentrum/pijler-4-mens-organisatie/ai-geletterdheid-voor-overheden-in-vlaanderen

# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

This section will examine the sociocultural dimensions of AI in Flanders. The Recommendation pays special attention to the potential impact of AI on human dignity, fundamental rights and freedoms, ensuring diversity and inclusiveness, and the flourishing of the environment and ecosystems. Importantly, for this and all remaining dimensions, the analysis will focus specifically on the Flemish regional level as a priority, and not on federal or European levels.

To support the assessment, much reference in the Flanders RAM is made to two key monitoring initiatives in Flanders. First is the AI Barometer, which is an annual study commissioned by the Flemish Government to assess the implementation of AI in Flemish companies.[27] Second is the Digimeter, which is an annual survey run by Imec-MICT, evaluating the relationship to technology in Flanders since 2009.[28] The AI Barometer tracks the professional use of AI, while the Digimeter tracks the personal. The results of both reports serve as an important monitoring tool for AI policy, and several of the RAM indicators reference the recently published 2025 findings.

Flanders is especially strong in its culture, heritage and linguistic diversity readiness. It demonstrates a broad gender, diversity and inclusion policy, which can now be strengthened with harmonized action to respond to emerging patterns of AI-related exclusion. In particular, evidence shows a growing need for AI literacy training to mitigate digital divides and reduce barriers to AI adoption.

## DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND INEQUALITY

Flanders has strong digital inclusion infrastructure and boasts a broad inclusion policy program, prioritizing equal rights and accessibility across gender, digital inclusion, LGBTQ+, disability, accessibility, background and social cohesion.[29] It ensures every local government has a local digital inclusion policy.

For almost two decades, the equal opportunities approach has been enshrined in law as part of a horizontal and transversal approach to equity, alongside similar horizontal approaches to children's rights and the fight against poverty. The most recent iteration is the Equal Opportunities Policy Plan 2025-2029, anchored in a human rights approach and explicitly broadening the application of equal opportunities.[30] The Equal Opportunities Policy Plan fights against all forms of discrimination. It also explicitly aims for a digitally inclusive Flanders, addressing digital competencies, a support network and accessibility of digital information and services.

In Flanders, there are several initiatives focusing on AI inclusion. One cluster of examples emerge from the project Amai!, which is a collaboration between the non-profit organisations KDM and Scivil and part of the third pillar of the Flanders AI Policy Plan. Amai! inspires, advises and engages citizens around AI innovation, creating the conditions for "more inclusive innovation and wonder" in Flanders.[31] It utilises cascade funding, enabling consortia to work on a series of projects around societally relevant

27 Standaert, T., Lecocq, C., & Andries, P. (2026). AI-Barometer: Adoptie en gebruik van Artificiële Intelligentie bij Vlaamse bedrijven, Situatie 2025. WEWIS. https://www.ecoom.be/nodes/aibarometer/en. Hereafter: AI Barometer, 2025.

28 De Marez, L., Georges, A., & Sevenhant, R. (2026). Imec.digimeter.2025. Digitale trends in Vlaanderen. Imec. https://www.imec.be/nl/kennisuitwisseling/techmeters/digimeter/imecdigimeter-2025. Hereafter: Digimeter, 2025.

29 Flemish Government. Inclusie. https://www.vlaanderen.be/inclusie

30 Flemish Government. (2025). Doelstellingenkader en Omgevingsanalyse Horizontaal Gelijkekansenbeleidsplan 2025-2029. https://themis.vlaanderen.be/files/b0ea05f0-0568-11f0-aa09-bb2fd0f284bf/download

31 amai! Wat doet amai? https://amai.vlaanderen/over-amai

AI applications. This includes a variety of inclusive projects, such as a chatbot for non-native immigrants, translation for Flemish Sign Language, and a route-finder for people in wheelchairs.[32]

Another notable example is Digital for Youth, which prepares youth to engage with AI in a critical and conscious manner.[33] AI and coding for children is becoming increasingly accessible, such as with the CodeFever initiative providing coding camps for children across 28 cities in Flanders, now with AI modules.[34]

A major initiative for digital inclusion is the Digibanks project, a structural initiative to create local information points for citizens to get free coaching and information on Flemish digital services, located within public libraries and community canters.[35] The initiative supported local coaching and information points across Flanders where citizens could get support and information on all Flemish digital services. Offering a one-stop-shop for digital services and widespread across the region, the Digibanks are widely referred to as great successes for digital inclusion and accessibility. There are disparities in regional coverage, where especially rural areas like the Kempen are not as well covered. This points to how the rural/urban gap also plays a role within Flanders, where although access is high, rural communities still rely heavily on local policy implementation capacity.

Overall, stakeholders confirm there is a trend to shift away from structural support for digital inclusion around AI in Flanders. The funding of citizen engagement efforts around AI specifically has recently shifted in focus away from digital inclusion more broadly to be reframed for facilitating access to market goals, as well as emphasizing groups who are already engaged in AI and technology. By end of July 2026, the funding for Digibanks ends, and there is a pronounced risk that local municipalities will not have the structural capacity to take over the initiatives and continue the support at local level, potentially exacerbating inequalities in areas without existing structural capacity.

Several other digital inclusion projects from Amai! rely on the Digibanks infrastructure to connect to, which signals a retreat from digital inclusion more generally. Similarly, after 5 successful years, the mandate of the Amai! project is shifting, likely to focus more on those who are already engaged in technology rather than a broad inclusion mandate.

Throughout interviews, stakeholders call for more visibility in how digital inclusion policies will continue. Together, these developments indicate a reduced structural investment in inclusive AI engagement, precisely when the impacts of AI risk multiplying with the sharp increases in usage and access.

## DIGITAL DIVIDES

Flanders shows very strong baseline digital access, with 96% of 16–74 -year-olds using the internet at least weekly (up from 62% in 2006), and only 2% have never used the internet at all.[36] Usage drops significantly with older adults, where just 58% of 75–89 year-olds use the internet weekly, and 32% have never used it. In the Digimeter, almost all Flemish people have access to at least one smart device (99%) or some form of connectivity (99%), and 84% of households have 3 or 4 smart devices at home.[37]

However, within this near-total connectivity there are still accessibility challenges, where for 21% of Flemish people it is not financially feasible to purchase a faster internet connection when they perceive to need it. 5% of Flemish leave the home at least weekly to use free internet elsewhere, where for those aged 18-24 this is 14%.[38] At Flemish level, digital accessibility statistics are not usually available in gender-disaggregated formats. The notable exception is the percentage of people who never use the internet; this is slightly higher for women than men, by a few percentage points. Gaps in internet use also persist by education and income, where weekly usage is 99% among the highly educated vs. 88% among the low-educated, and slightly lower among lower-income groups and those born outside Belgium.[39]

32 amai! Projecten. https://amai.vlaanderen/projecten
33 Digital for Youth. AI for Youth. https://digitalforyouth.be/ai-for-youth/
34 CodeFever, https://codefever.be/en
35 Flemish Government, Digibanken, https://digibanken.vlaanderen.be/
36 Statistics Flanders. (24 March 2026). Internetgebruik naar gebruiksfrequentie. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/digitale-economie/internetgebruik-naar-gebruiksfrequentie
37 Digimeter, 2025, p. 11.
38 Ibid.
39 Statistics Flanders. (24 March 2026). Internetgebruik naar gebruiksfrequentie. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/digitale-economie/internetgebruik-naar-gebruiksfrequentie

With the socioeconomic shifts towards online-first services, accessibility is also increasingly about access to software and services, above and beyond the hardware of internet connectivity and digital devices. The Digimeter 2025 clearly emphasises the 'perfect storm' of generative AI as a technology; never before has there been a technology with faster market penetration, shifting societal practices across the board with implications for studies, work and news consumption. Active use has grown substantially, with 43% now active users, clearly crossing into mass-market territory. Some 64% have used or experimented with generative AI in 2025, and 15% pay for premium access, nearly double the previous year.[40] In tandem, there is a growing accessibility divide in terms of whether or not people have access to paid premium-versions of generative AI platforms (15%, +7 increase in percentage points), and those who cannot afford to (14%).[41]

The Digimeter concludes that the rise of generative AI risks deepening and broadening existing inequalities, especially around digital skills, age, and socioeconomic differences. For example, basic digital skills to use online services such as purchasing a public transport ticket online or searching for information on government websites remains a problem for around 1 in 10 Flemish people, and the number is higher for people from lower income groups.[42]

## GENDER PATTERNS IN STEM

37% of men in higher education focus on STEM, where 10% of women in higher education focus on STEM.[43] STEM enrolment in Flemish secondary schools has fallen to its lowest level in ten years, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of the region's technology and AI workforce. Although the share of girls in STEM increased to around 15%, this remains far below the 2030 target of 25%.[44]

In terms of science performance, results from the 2023 TIMSS survey (which occurs every four years) show that in Flanders, boys score an average of 19 points better than girls in mathematics and 12 points better in science. The gap between boys and girls is also increasing compared to 2019.[45] At federal level, there is a strong gender inequality in STEM programs, where 4 out of 5 STEM graduates are men. There is also a strong inequality within the digital sector, where only 22.4% of employees are women. For entrepreneurship, this divide is even stronger, with only 13% of women.[46]

There are several outreach programs to enhance gender diversity in STEM. There are multiple outreach programs in Flanders & Belgium aimed at improving recruitment, retention and experience of under-represented groups in STEM (girls/women, first-generation students, etc.). Many of these are run by universities, government initiatives (including education and science ministries), NGOs and industry networks. For example, in 2021 WEWIS identified the STEM-agenda 2023 as a strategic action plan to focus on STEM-competencies, highlighting the need for an inclusive approach and explicitly mentioning gender.[47]

The Academic Compass is a monitoring initiative on the academic landscape in Flanders, and its gender sub-theme addresses monitors the gender balance in academia, as well as linking to key gender policy documents across the Flemish academic universities. In 2024, over 77% of the full professors were male, and 62% of administrative and technical staff female. The Academic Compass affirms that gender inequality increases with rank.[48]

While not explicitly mandated by law, universities do publish gender and diversity statistics, and maintain gender equality plans. As but one example within the Flemish university community, KU Leuven has published extensive inclusion data statistics, including that a third of senior staff and management organisations are female, while the relative and absolute number of students with a disability have doubled in the past decade, from 1,972 in the 2014-2015 academic year to 4,676 in the 2023-2024 academic year.[49]

40 Digimeter, 2025.
41 Ibid., pg 92.
42 Ibid.
43 Statistics Flanders. (11 September 2025). Diploma's in wiskunde, wetenschappen en technologische richtingen in het hoger onderwijs. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/wetenschap-en-innovatie/diplomas-in-wiskunde-wetenschappen-en-technologische-richtingen-in-het-hoger-onderwijs
44 Lefèvre, L. (7 October 2025). STEM-inschrijvingen dalen naar laagste peil in 10 jaar: "Cruciaal voor toekomst van economie en samenleving." VRT. https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2025/10/06/aantal-vlaamse-leerlingen-in-stem-opleidingen-daalt-naar-tienjar
45 Vlaams TIMSS onderzoekscentrum. (2023). Trends in International Mathematics & Science Study 2023. https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/documenten/bestanden/timss-2023-brochure.pdf
46 GenderStat. Digitale Beroepen. https://www.genderstat.be/nl/themas/digitale-technologie/digitale-beroepen
47 WEWIS. (2021). STEM-agenda 2030: STEM-competenties voor een toekomst- en missiegericht beleid. https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/stem-agenda-2030-stem-competenties-voor-een-toekomst-en-missiegericht-beleid
48 Academic Compass. Gender. https://academic-compass.be/en/topic/gender/
49 KU Leuven. (27 November 2025). Diversity and inclusion: Figures and actions. https://www.kuleuven.be/engage/english/diversity/figures-actions/facts-figures-2

## GENDER AND AI

There are no broad policies to address gender equity in AI at the Flemish level. What is required is that companies above 50 employees are required to report any gender pay gap. The Flemish Roadmap for the Digital Decade mentions addressing digital gender gaps.[50] These topics are covered in federal and EU gender-equality-in-AI strategies, including the Belgian national strategy (2021–2026) supported by the EU Women in Digital Initiative aimed at reducing the gender gap in digital participation and careers.[51] At federal level, where gender policy is mandated, gender disaggregated data is available via GenderStat, a user-friendly platform which brings together different federal data sources in gender-disaggregated visuals to support evidence-based gender equality policy.[52] At the time of writing, a new Women in Digital strategy is being developed.

While the gender pay gap in Belgium is 5% and amongst the lowest in Europe, gendered discrimination in hiring decisions is still present in the form of the "motherhood penalty", where mothers are treated significantly lower in hiring decisions than fathers.[53] [54]

As AI reshapes the labour market, the AI gender gap creates a structural vulnerability for women. Administrative and support staff roles, which are predominantly held by woman in Flanders (63% according to the Academic Compass[55]), are among the jobs most at risk from AI-driven automation, while the advanced IT and AI roles being created are predominantly held by men. These roles at risk of displacement are also at risk of remaining unaddressed by gender-in-STEM initiatives.

The two primary monitoring initiatives around AI impacts, the AI Barometer and the Digimeter, do not systematically disaggregate findings by gender across indicators, which could be a missed opportunity for monitoring gender-related risks.

There is, however, considered effort in terms of gender diversity in AI. In the context of AI literacy, women often lack the time to follow trainings, even when they are motivated learners.[56] In response, VAIA pays special attention to the variety of AI literacy training formats, as well as ensuring the inclusion of women trainers.

Regarding AI gender-related harms specifically, the primary mechanism of identification is VMRI's role as a 'trusted flagger' under the EU Digital Services Act. In this role, flags reported by the trusted flagger to a platform must be prioritized and addressed. Based on this role, VMRI receives and flags reports of AI-generated non-consensual intimate images disproportionately affecting young women. Platforms vary in their compliance, and no proactive monitoring mechanism exists to identify AI gender-related harms before they are reported.

## DIVERSITY IN AI WORKFORCE

Flanders has no AI-specific diversity regulation or policy. Diversity efforts rely on general federal anti-discrimination laws and the 2019 Royal Decree on positive action measures in employment.[57]

Diversity efforts in AI fields tend to focus on gender balance, leaving intersectional and structural inclusion approaches less systematically addressed and monitored. Because characteristics such as ethnic background, disability, and socioeconomic status fall under "special categories" of personal data under Belgian GDPR implementation, organizations face strict limits in collecting them, contributing to fragmented or absent monitoring beyond gender.

The diversity in AI is not only a data problem: implicit selection criteria in AI workforce recruitment (e.g. prioritizing soft skills, communication, and motivation to learn) structurally disadvantage non-native speakers and people with psychosocial challenges, even when formal criteria appear neutral.

50 Laroy, R., Flemish Government. (21 December 2023). EU Digital Decade /// Flemish Roadmap, p. 55. https://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/pfile?id=2084173

51 European Commission. (25 April 2025). Women in Digital. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/women-digital

52 GenderStat. Over ons. https://www.genderstat.be/nl/over-ons

53 Trusaic. Belgium Pay Transparency Reporting Law Guide. https://trusaic.com/resources/global-pay-transparency-center/belgium/

54 El Haj, M., Dalle, A., Lippens, L., & Baert, S. (2026). How do employers view applicants with and without children? Journal of Marriage and Family, 88(1), 192–212. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.70008

55 Academic Compass. Gender. https://academic-compass.be/en/topic/gender/

56 OECD. (2026). The many faces of adult learners: Who learns, why, and who is left behind. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2026/02/the-many-faces-of-adult-learners_273aa3a3/a5a1893a-en.pdf

57 Webster, F., & Rosseau, S., Mercer. (22 March 2019). Belgium sets out criteria for 'positive action' discrimination. https://www.mercer.com/en-us/insights/law-and-policy/belgium-sets-out-criteria-for-positive-action-discrimination

On algorithmic discrimination more specifically, while the Flemish Digital Strategy states it will combat algorithmic discrimination together with VMRI, actions remain pending. Allocating capacity still remains unclear. While Flemish procurement rules include social and non-discrimination clauses, these are not linked to AI-specific workforce diversity expectations. As a result, while gender-focused initiatives are relatively mature, broader patterns of exclusion risk remain unaddressed. This creates a fragmented landscape where inclusion in the AI workforce is encouraged but not structurally monitored or incentivized.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND TRUST

Several of the RAM indices are only available for Belgium. For example, in 2024, Belgium scored 0.72 on the Online Services Index. This is considered a Very High score. Similarly, in 2024, Belgium scored 0.81212 on the E-Participation Index. This is considered a Very High score. In 2022, Belgium ranked 24th worldwide in the Inclusive Government Index.[58]

In terms of trust in government digital services, 87% of the representative sample of citizens in the 2025 Digimeter have used a government application, and 53% are active users. 37% find Flemish Government websites clear and accessible. 59% trust the Flemish government with personal data; 58% trust federal and local government. 78% want a central platform for all government data.[59] 19% still prefer offline government services (e.g., physical counters), though this number is declining. The hybrid model (digital + physical) is the preferred approach. In early 2025, studies from Statistics Flanders show that there were no significant differences in trust in government based on gender, age, education level or household composition.[60]

In relation to AI, public awareness of AI is near-universal at 95%. 74% say they can explain what it is, mostly in terms of generative AI. Despite growing use, attitudes remain cautious and have not returned to pre-ChatGPT levels of positivity towards AI. In fact, the Digimeter frames the challenge around a 'truth paradox', where there is both an increased reliance on digital information and increasing concerns about its trustworthiness, especially around misinformation, cybersecurity risks and authenticity. The historical trend shows a significant shift: in 2019, 44% held positive attitudes toward AI, compared to just 34% in 2025, with negative attitudes stabilizing at 23%. Concern is particularly high around misinformation, with 85% worried that AI can spread false information. The sharpest single-year increase relates to content authenticity: 80% (up 6 percentage points) report they can no longer reliably distinguish AI-generated from human content, with even higher rates among younger age groups (75% of 18–24-year-olds, up 9 percentage points; 78% of 25–34-year-olds, up 11 percentage points). Further concerns include AI's general negative impact (74%), its effect on privacy (62%), its ecological footprint (53%), and its implications for employment.[61]

## ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY POLICIES

All stakeholder consultations emphasized that Flanders is quite passionate about promoting sustainability, and 53% of Flemish people are concerned about AI's ecological footprint.[62] This pattern matches the trend at federal level more broadly: the recently published 6th annual 'Public Survey on Climate Change' found that 72% of respondents were concerned by climate change, and many believed that the current rate of climate change policy should continue or even speed up (44% and 39% respectively). [63]

Several key initiatives promote sustainability as a core principle. The Flanders AI Research Program embeds sustainability within its strategic principles, encouraging both energy efficient AI as well as AI used to advance environmental and climate goals. Digitaal Vlaanderen's AI Strategy includes a sustainability principle aligned with SDGs, promoting "Green AI," energy-efficient algorithms, and ethical labour practices.[64] At the time of writing, the AI Expertise Centre is also developing terms of reference to adapt UNESCO's AI, Environment and Ecosystems Toolkit for Flemish public sector projects.

58 Economist Impact. (2022). Inclusive Internet Index. https://impact.economist.com/projects/inclusive-internet-index/2022
59 Digimeter, 2025.
60 Statistics Flanders. (11 September 2025). Vertrouwen in de overheid. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/relatie-overheid-en-burger/vertrouwen-in-de-overheid#geen-significante-verschillen-in-vertrouwen-in-de-vlaamse-overheid
61 Ibid.
62 Digimeter, 2025, page 77.
63 FOD Volksgezondheid, Veiligheid van de voedselketen en Leefmilieu. (2026). Publieksenquête over klimaatverandering. https://klimaat.be/doc/260420-6de-klimaatenquete.pdf
64 Digitaal Vlaanderen. Vlaamse AI-strategie. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/vlaamse-digitale-strategie/vlaamse-ai-strategie

However, sustainability is largely voluntary rather than systematic. There are no mandatory environmental impact assessments for AI, no policies addressing land and water use in computing centres, and no standard requirements for energy or carbon reporting for AI deployments. No Flemish or Belgian-level indicators or reporting mechanisms exist for AI infrastructure's environmental footprint, nor for data centre reporting on the use of energy and water for computational facilities. Structured evaluation of the environment and ecological impacts of AI or second-order AI is missing. What exists is CSRD at the EU level, which drives voluntary sustainability reporting. However, whatever data exists from companies like Google is aggregated at European level and not usable for regional policy purposes.

There is also a governance gap around sustainability and AI. There is no single agency or working group mandated with the responsibility to lead on sustainable AI strategy, and no strong civil society leading on this matter. There is no institutional link between AI governance structures and environmental or climate policy bodies in Flanders. While the AI innovation sector does have quite some work on strategies, and strategies or policies on the use of AI to advance climate action, environmental sustainability, or biodiversity goals are also not yet developed.

The major challenge with the environmental dimension of AI is that larger hyperscalers are not transparent about resource use, and addressing transparency is a broader governance challenge that often gets lost in the policy framing. Smaller companies, by contrast, are largely not thinking about sustainability at all. There are exceptions, notably small companies who make (AI) sustainability their unique selling point.

## CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Flanders has a very strong heritage sector, including cultural, immovable, immaterial and living heritage. Over the past two decades, there has been strong professionalisation of the cultural heritage sector, along with concrete movements for digital transformation. The Strategic Vision on Cultural Heritage (2021) prioritized strengthening the digital transformation of the heritage field, including committing funding for digitization and heritage databases.[65] It built on analyses for digital transformation which prioritised heritage databases and the digitization of collections.[66]

There is no general standalone AI policy for culture or heritage yet. AI is framed as part of the broader digital vision. In some cases, AI is mentioned, but as an ongoing part of digital transformation of the sector. There has been some funding for AI based projects, though these are isolated cases rather than an integrated approach. For example, the AI4Culture-platform, funded by the Europeana and part of the cultural heritage dataspace, was a project to support cultural heritage organisations interested in AI use cases in their work.[67] For example, the *ErfgoedApp* ("HeritageApp") makes use of augmented reality on smartphones to promote heritage texts and films within Flanders and along heritage walking routes.[68] Overall, the strength of the sector is its interconnection and the majority of cultural organisations do not have the capacity to respond specifically to AI above and beyond digital transformation.

There is a growing use of AI by public cultural institutions and cultural actors. For example, the Virtual Museum of Flanders is a digital platform that promotes the wealth of Flemish cultural heritage, building on the arsenal of cultural data.[69] Flemish artists using AI are also gaining international renown, such as the viral tongue-in-cheek art piece the Flemish Scrollers, using AI to automatically tag parliamentarians on their phones during sessions. [70]

Three key actors have recently been identified as managing the digital transformation of the cultural sector. [71] Cultuurconnect plays a strong support role for digital innovation collaboration, bridging culture houses, libraries, artists and governments.[72]

65 Flemish Government. (31 March 2021). Strategische Visienota Cultureel Erfgoed. https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/sites/default/files/2021-04/strategische_visienota_cultureel_erfgoed.pdf

66 Digitaal Vlaanderen. (2 February 2021). Pre-analyse: Digitale transformatie van het culturele ecosysteem. https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/sites/default/files/2021-03/20210226_eindrapport_Pre_analyse_digitale%20transformatie%20van%20het%20culturele%20ecosysteem.pdf

67 FARO. (2024) Cultureel erfgoed versterken met behulp van AI. https://faro.be/blogs/jelena-dobbels/cultureel-erfgoed-versterken-met-behulp-van-ai

68 FARO. Erfgoedapp. https://faro.be/ontdek-meer-met-de-erfgoedapp

69 FAAM. FAAM.be

70 Depoorter, D. The Flemish Scrollers. https://driesdepoorter.be/theflemishscrollers/

71 Flemish Government. (19 December 2025). Beheersovereenkomsten 2026-2030 digitale kernorganisaties die digitale transformatie cultuursector aansturen: Cultuurconnect vzw, meemoo vzw en publiq vzw. https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaamse-regering/beslissingen-van-de-vlaamse-regering/beheersovereenkomsten-2026-2030-digitale-kernorganisaties-die-digitale-transformatie-cultuursector-aansturen-cultuurconnect-vzw-meemoo-vzw-en-publiq-vzw

72 Cultuurconnect. https://www.cultuurconnect.be

meemo is the Flemish Institute for Archives, presenting the past in a digital form.[73] publiq works in the field of the entertainment sector and free time activities.[74]

There is a lot of possibility, though the recurring concerns are larger structural issues around transparency of large AI systems and resource use. The explosion of generative AI has had a particularly disruptive force on the cultural and art sectors, especially in global value chains and the production of cultural goods. Flemish artists and cultural workers increasingly have to compete on the global market, and there are explicit calls to promote Flemish artists on the international stage through international cultural policy.[75] In Flanders, the risks to cultural workers' rights due to intellectual property and authorship challenges are primarily addressed through European legislation and IP law, and many of the structural changes affecting Flemish artists and cultural workers go beyond Flemish jurisdiction.

In response, the Culture sector is also an area that is moving towards a governance of values. In 2024, the Department of Youth, Culture and Media published a call to develop a value framework for the digital transformation of the Culture sector, which at the time of writing is ongoing.

## DUTCH LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

As Flanders uses the Dutch language, several initiatives to promote the Dutch language have been cross-border collaborations with the Netherlands. The Dutch Language Union (TaalUnie) is the joint initiative to promote the Dutch language between the Netherlands, Flanders and Suriname, founded in the 1980s. It promotes the Standard Dutch and support digitisation and coordination initiatives. Since 2025, it has announced a joint action plan between Flanders and the Netherlands to develop a shared policy vision and a strategic agenda on AI and language.[76]

In the Strategic Plan 2025-2029, TaalUnie highlights that its role is not to build AI itself, but to coordinate with the many partners in Flanders and the Netherlands working in the language field to develop a joint strategic plan, as well as stimulating the development of large language models that are representative of the whole language community. They are also lobbying partners to make more language data available for language models.[77] While there is no specific policy yet on the use of AI to preserve the Dutch language and the development of representative corpuses of data, the development of a strategic vision is a valuable initiative in this direction.

Flemish is not a language, but a collection of regional variants of standard Dutch. In order to develop Flemish specific large language models, there are two approaches: either to start from scratch, such as the GPT-NL[78], or to use English models and finetune them to Dutch. The first approach of language models from scratch requires significant corpus of Dutch-language or Flemish data, and the availability of training data is a significant challenge in the development of inclusive AI. Still, together with the Flemish media VRT, there are ongoing initiatives to develop a Flemish-language model, as part of the thematic ENT.A cluster in the entertainment sector which creates experimental innovations.[79]

There are also significant moves to create datasets representing the Dutch language, and have been ongoing with the push for digital transformation in the last decade. For example, the Digital Library of Dutch Lettering (DBNL) has collected over 5 million digitised texts from literature, linguistics, and cultural history from the Dutch linguistic area.[80] In some of the most used corpuses, there is also a representationally balanced Dutch data, where in the that is most common, there is 2/3 Dutch data and 1/3 Flemish data, as that is proportional representation of the language area. There is also a push for more engagement with the European Dataspace on language, especially to avoid the copyright theft issues around existing models. The challenge here is governance to connect data deliverers and takers; while the space exists, there remains limited Flemish data contributed,

73 Meemo. meemoo.be/en
74 Publiq. https://www.publiq.be/nl/wat-we-doen
75 Janssens, J., & Boogaarts, I. (2024). Field Drawing of the International Cultural Policy from Flanders. https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/sites/default/files/2024-06/Field_Drawing_ICP_Flanders_DEF_ENG.pdf
76 Belga News Agency. (3 June 2025). Flanders and the Netherlands develop joint action plan on AI and language. https://www.belganewsagency.eu/flanders-and-the-netherlands-develop-joint-action-plan-on-ai-and-language
77 Taalunie. (2025). Meerjarenbeleidsplan 2025-2029. https://taalunie.org/publicaties/228/meerjarenbeleidsplan-2025-2029
78 GPT-NL. https://gpt-nl.nl/
79 VLAIO. (7 November 2025). Nieuwe speerpuntcluster ENT.A versnelt innovatie in entertainmentsector. https://www.vlaio.be/nl/nieuws/nieuwe-speerpuntcluster-enta-versnelt-innovatie-entertainmentsector
80 Digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren, www.dbnl.org/

and local companies and publishers demonstrate a hesitance to release their data. The incentive structure for data contribution is still being explored.

Specifically on Flemish Sign Language, the Flemish Sign Language Centre (VGTC) and Ghent University (IDLab – imec), under the amai! Initiative developed search based on gesture in the Flemish Sign Language Dictionary. The VGT dictionary is the first worldwide that can search entirely on gesture, reducing the communication barriers with the hard-of-hearing community.[81]

Still, the accessing sufficiently high-quality data for Flemish language models remains a challenge, and the fine-tuning approach of using English-language models and adapting them is much more prevalent. This reduces the requirement for Flemish data but increases the dependence on benchmarking to ensure reliability and quality. There is always a balance to be decided between having enough data available and cultural specificity.

In Flanders, the risk of linguistic and cultural erosion is felt as particularly strong with the rising dominance of LLMs. The vast majority of training data is English and North American, presenting an Anglo-Saxon worldview. Fine-tuned models may reproduce an anglicised version of Flemish, leading to a risk of linguistic erosion, particularly as this output gets re-used as input in training models. Similar effects may be reproduced by translating English-language benchmarks. The second layer of cultural nuance is that while Flanders uses the Dutch language, shared with the neighbours in the Netherlands, there are distinct cultures, and as such representation in AI can have differences which are cultural, and not only linguistic. To combat this challenge, there is a re-emphasis on the Flemish cultural sector and its connection with AI. For example, a recently financed project includes the 'Vlambench', a Flemish benchmark currently under development to evaluate to what extent a language model can represent and integrate Flemish cultural references, in terms of its cultural icons but also the cultural specificities of emotions and humour.

Finally, Flanders also has a series of regional dialects as well as the 'inbetween language' (*Tussentaal)* between Standard Dutch and the dialects, which also represents accessibility and inclusions challenges in AI. If the spoken dialects are not recognised, there is a risk of social exclusion when AI and speech recognition becomes increasingly embedded in access to social services. The challenge is in part that the dialects are often spoken and not written, and the diversity of dialects and their variation means data is extremely limited. One citizen science project of Scivil is the crowdsourced audio sample collecting app for speech-recognition *Maarallee*, which gathers speech data in a variety of Flemish dialects and pronunciations.[82]

There is also the Spoken Corpus of Dutch Dialects (GCND). The additional challenge is intergenerational, in that increasingly youth are speaking hybrids of the dialects, and many dialect words are falling out of use.

81 Universiteit Gent. (2025). Wereldprimeur: AI maakt onbeperkt zoeken op basis van een gebaar mogelijk in het Woordenboek Vlaamse Gebarentaal. https://www.ugent.be/ea/nl/actueel/nieuws/ai-gebaar-woordenboek-vlaamse-gebarentaal

82 Maarallee. www.maarallee.be/

# SCIENTIFIC AND EDUCATIONAL

This section addresses the level of research and development related to AI in Flanders, as well as the strategic transformation of the education sector.

Flanders invests substantially in AI research: in 2024, R&D for AI was just over 153 million euros, including the Flander AI Policy Flan as well as scientific and innovation funds. There is a rich collaboration ecosystem enabled by the Flanders AI Research programme. For the Education sector, Flanders is considered a global pioneer in developing sector-specific Responsible AI strategy to address impact and professionalisation.

Overall, AI literacy and the increased need for trainings have emerged as an increasingly strong need across sectors, to facilitate adoption in a responsible manner and to mitigate growing digital divides.

## RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

### R&D EXPENDITURE

Over the last two decades, the Flemish government has stated its ambition to reach a 3% R&D intensity, which is aligned with the Europe 2020 3% target (Pact 2020, Flanders in Action, Vision 2050). Investments in R&D have been significant.

In 2023, gross expenditure on R&D (GERD) as a proportion of GDP reached 3.52%.[83] This trend has been increasing over the years, with the intensity of R&D spending was at 2.57% in 2013. In terms of spending on engineering and technology and natural sciences, whilst GERD data disaggregated by area of research is unavailable, 69.4% of public research institutes R&D expenditure (GOVERD) was spent on engineering and technology; and Higher Education institutes total R&D expenditure (HERD) had a roughly even split between engineering & technology at 17.9% and the natural sciences at 17.4%.[84] To contextualize this, Flanders' total GOVERD and HERD were 0.4% and 0.54% of GDP, above the respective EU27 averages of 0.25% and 0.42%.[85]

Publicly financed R&D intensity is measured with the Government Budget Appropriations for R&D (GBARD), which reached 0.84% of GDP in 2021, above the EU27 average of 0.73%.[86] Calculating the intensity of R&D expenditure within the Belgian context must be done cautiously, as this should include the efforts of the Flemish government in the strict sense, then the Flemish share of federal government R&D funding, and possibly also the Flemish return from EU Framework funds. The Department EWI estimates are visible in the table below.

83 WEWIS & ECOOM. (2025). Vlaams indicatorenboek. https://www.vlaamsindicatorenboek.be/2.1.2/oo-intensiteit-gerd-als-percentage-van-het-bbpr

84 WEWIS. (January 2024). STI in Flanders: Policy and key figures 2024, pp. 128-134. https://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2024-01/STI%20in%20Flanders%202024%20-%20Policy%20%26%20key%20figures_1.pdf

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

**TABLE 2. PUBLIC R&D INTENSITY AS % OF GDP[87]**

| PUBLIC R&D INTENSITY AS % OF GDP | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|
| Flemish Government | 0.64% | 0.63% |
| Flemish Gov + Flemish share of federal government R&D funds | 0.74% | 0.73% |
| Flemish Gov + federal share + EU-FP framework program | 0.83% | 0.78% |

Flanders is also a significant participant in EU research funding programs like Horizon Europe, and in 2023 accounted for over 935 million euros and 3.28% of total funding from the European Commission for Horizon Europe.[88]

The Flemish funding specific to AI for R&D is channelled through the Flemish AI Policy Plan, where the AI Research pillar receives 14,185 million euros per year, complementing the R&I funding for AI by regular FWO and VLAIO funding instruments. In 2024, the combined funding amount was about 153,5 million euros.[89]

## RESEARCH OUTPUT

The Flemish community ranks highly alongside leading European countries for scientific publications, and they exceed world standards in cited scientific works across subjects, and their proportion of total publications on Neuroscience, Biomedical and Experimental Medicine.[90] In 2023, Flanders had 32 scientific and conference publications per 10,000 inhabitants, which has been on a general upward trend since 2010. International collaborations are common, where in 2023, 75% of Flemish publications listed a foreign co-author. In 2010, that figure was 59%.[91]

## AI TALENT AND COMMUNITY

Flanders has a vibrant , well-funded and well-connected academic community, in science broadly and in AI specifically.

The Flanders AI Research Program (FAIR/VAIOP) is funded with the first pillar of the Flanders AI Policy Plan, and brings together 40 research groups ,11 partners, 300 researchers, 90 professors and more than 100 PhD candidates, to work together across one research program and over 27 use cases.[92] Within FAIR/ VAIOP, there is a strong emphasis on AI for a sustainable future, with a lot of attention on the use cases for sustainability and resource-efficient AI. Key areas of expertise include neurosymbolic AI, multimodal AI, multi-agent AI and hardware-software co-optimization.

FAIR/VAIOP does not include all AI or AI-related researchers based in Flanders. The Flanders Research Information Space collects information on all publicly funded research in Flanders. Their database shows 3886 researchers in the 'Computer Engineering, Information Technology, and Mathematical Engineering' sectors.[93] Identifying who is an AI-researcher is challenging, especially as the definition of AI is expanding, and much of AI research happens within industry.

FAIR/VAIOP created a lot of collaboration between research groups as each initiative has to include a minimum of two research groups across the various universities and knowledge centres in Flanders. The flagship event Flanders AI Research Day in October 2025 brought together over 650 attendants. The increased collaboration is also evidenced in the share of collaborative

87 On 1 January 2025, the Department of Labor and Social Economy (WSE) and the Department of Economics, Science, and Innovation (EWI) merged to form the Department of Labor, Economics, Science, Innovation, and Social Economy (WEWIS). See WEWIS. (January 2025). Departement WEWIS. https://www.vlaanderen.be/departement-wewis

88 WEWIS, January 2024, *STI in Flanders*, https://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2024-01/STI%20in%20Flanders%202024%20-%20Policy%20%26%20key%20figures_1.pdf, pg 128-134

89 Flanders AI Policy Plan. (2026). Vlaams Beleidsplan Artificiële Intelligentie 2.0. https://flandersai.be/sites/default/files/2026-01/VBAI2_ENG.pdf

90 WEWIS. (January 2024). STI in Flanders: Policy and key figures 2024, pp. 155-157. https://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2024-01/STI%20in%20Flanders%202024%20-%20Policy%20%26%20key%20figures_1.pdf

91 Statistics Flanders. (25 September 2025). Wetenschappelijke publicaties. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/wetenschap-en-innovatie/wetenschappelijke-publicaties

92 Flanders AI Research Program. https://www.flandersairesearch.be/en

93 WEWIS. (2023). Evaluatie AI-managementsamenvatting. https://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2024-03/Evaluatie%20-%20AI-%20managementsamenvatting%20-%202023.pdf

publications, as seen in collaboration between higher education institutions and other public organisations has increased compared to 2016.[94]

After an evaluation of its first successful four years, the VAIOP built a renewed structure, focusing efforts on two primary 'grand challenges': AI-driven data science, and situated AI. Another key change was the introduction of a cross-thematic focus on responsible AI, to bring more attention to trustworthiness and fairness in machine learning. Responsible AI approaches are represented in all of the work packages of the plan. Based on stakeholder consultations, in order to build awareness and make trustworthiness a reflex, all use cases use the short list of the ALTAI Principles on Trustworthy AI.

The other outcome of the evaluation was to emphasise valorisation, that is to facilitate successful AI adoption by businesses.[95] This is considered challenging, as the pipeline from fundamental AI research to getting a return on investment in business is not straightforward. There are specific initiatives to promote the valorisation of research output towards research professionals run by VAIA. By organising trainings about the lessons learned in a research project, professionals learn to integrate these new findings into their companies, as well as contributing to ongoing training programs for long term impact of research findings.

## ETHICAL AI RESEARCH

The Knowledge Centre Data and Society (KDM) is the main ethical AI consortium within the Flanders AI Policy Plan.[96] It is the central reference point for the legal, social, and ethical aspects of data-driven and AI applications in Flanders. KDM is a project collaboration between 3 academic research groups: imec-SMIT, VUB, CiTiP (KU Leuven) and imec-MICT-UGent.

KDM valorises academic knowledge on responsible AI for policy makers, industry and civil society. It promotes structural initiatives to strengthen vision development, stimulates public debate, and contributes to the development of legal frameworks and policy guidelines. Throughout the ecosystem, KDM is considered to be the primary centre for ethical reflection around AI governance. KDM does not offer ready-made guidelines but instead can facilitate governance structures and sector specific visions while working in an inclusive and context sensitive manner. For instance, it was the key partner in developing the vision for responsible AI in the education sector with Digisprong.[97]

Beyond KDM, there are research areas clearly dedicated to ethical AI research, including the KU Leuven Chair for Ethics & AI, a group of six researchers based in the KU Leuven Philosophy department and UAntwerpen's Centre on Responsible AI (ACRAI). UGent's Media, Innovation and Contemporary Technologies research group focuses on human perspectives and societal issues, while the Law and Technology centre adopts a fundamental rights-based approach to technology regulation with special attention to vulnerable groups. Finally, KU Leuven's Institute for Artificial Intelligence covers many technical and applied AI projects, but it also collaborates with the Centre for IT & IP Law, which has a dedicated research focus toward AI Law, Ethics & Governance.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

### EDUCATION STRATEGY

The vision paper "Responsible AI in Flemish Education" is a value framework for the education sector, led by the Knowledge Centre Digisprong in collaboration with the KDM. Developed in a multistakeholder inclusive process, the vision paper is one of the first globally focusing specifically on AI for the education sector, with Digisprong being considered a pioneer in Europe and

94 Statistics Flanders. Wetenschappelijke publicaties. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/wetenschap-en-innovatie/wetenschappelijke-publicaties

95 WEWIS. (2023). Evaluatie AI-managementsamenvatting. https://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/2024-03/Evaluatie%20-%20AI-%20managementsamenvatting%20-%202023.pdf

96 Kenniscentrum Data en Maatschappij. https://data-en-maatschappij.ai/en

97 Flemish Government. Responsible AI in Flemish education: A collaborative process from development to use. https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/responsible-ai-in-flemish-education-a-collaborative-process-from-development-to-use

a best practice of inclusive policy design. The demand for the vision paper was so great internationally it was even published in English.[98]

The vision statement was drafted in a multi-stakeholder fashion, aiming for an inclusive process. As a result, the majority of education partners support the policy, which is a major advantage and distinguishes AI from other areas of education policy. Further development of the strategy includes non-binding AI procurement guidelines for education applications, launched in March 2026.[99]

AI and Digitalisation strategies are structural and scaled within the education sector. In the wake of Covid-19, when working from home radically challenged the education sector, Digisprong was originally established to support teachers and students with infrastructure for digitization. The idea was that Flemish schools were behind in digitization and needed a digital *sprong*, or 'leap' forward, with a heavy investment in infrastructure. As this gap was closed, the focus of the most recent concept note of the Flemish Government is now the Digiplan, a strategy where digitalization is instrumental to improving the quality of education.[100] The Digiplan emphasizes that schools who are traditionally fiercely independent can maintain their autonomy in adapting policy for their contexts. Notably, the funds for the current Digiplan are dependent on having an ICT policy for the school. While the ICT policy itself is not evaluated as a requirement for funding, some schools are wary. To support schools in this process, Pictos, an initiative to support schools in the step-by-step process of setting up an ICT policy, was launched in December 2025.[101] Digisprong also presents an Action Plan for cybersecurity at school level.[102] Digisprong was evaluated for impact in 2024, and has begun a project with UNESCO on Future-proofing Education funded by SG REFORM's Technical Support Instrument.[103]

Otherwise, there are no binding instruments for ethical development of AI in education. Education in Flanders is structured where schools have full autonomy, a specific governance structure cannot be mandated. The legislation is education-focused, not AI-specific.

### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Belgium sits at 11th in the world for data science skills, and 24th in the world for AI Maturity on the 2025 Coursera Global Skills Report .[104] In 2023, Belgian graduates from tertiary education were made up of 19.4% from STEM programs and 3% from ICT programs.[105] At Flemish level, Flemish graduates from tertiary education were made up of 20.8% in mathematics, science and technology programs as compared to the EU average of 25.2%. [106]

## IMPACT AND PROFESSIONALISATION

Measuring the impact of AI on education is challenging. There is very little evidence-based research internationally on the impact of AI on education, how the AI in education ecosystem is evolving, and what the implications are for vulnerable populations or students with special needs. To respond to this need, at the time of writing Digisprong is currently carrying out

98 Ibid.
99 Kenniscentrum Digisprong. Contractuele vereisten voor educatieve applicaties gepubliceerd. https://www.vlaanderen.be/kenniscentrum-digisprong/nieuws/contractuele-vereisten-voor-educatieve-applicaties-gepubliceerd
100 Flemish Government. (2025). Digiplan: VR 2025 0205 MED. https://themis.vlaanderen.be/files/c097fa50-2739-11f0-bb32-33d47c9156ac/download?name=VR%202025%200205%20MED.0137-1%20Digiplan%20-%20mededeling%20QUATER.pdf&content-disposition=inline
101 Kenniscentrum Digisprong. ICT-beleid van je school: lanceer jouw ICT-beleid met PICTOS. https://www.vlaanderen.be/kenniscentrum-digisprong/themas/ict-beleid-van-je-school/lanceer-jouw-ict-beleid-met-pictos
102 Kenniscentrum Digisprong. Cyberveilig op school. https://www.vlaanderen.be/kenniscentrum-digisprong/cyberveilig-op-school
103 Kenniscentrum Digisprong. De impact van het Kenniscentrum Digisprong. https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/de-impact-van-het-kenniscentrum-digisprong; UNESCO. (2025). FutureProof Education: Supporting schools in the AI evolution. https://www.unesco.org/en/digital-education/future-proof
104 Coursera. (2025). Global Skills Report. https://www.coursera.org/skills-reports/global/
105 UNESCO Institute for Statistics. UIS Data Browser. https://uis.unesco.org/bdds
106 Statistics Flanders. Diploma's in wiskunde, wetenschappen en technologische richtingen in het hoger onderwijs. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/wetenschap-en-innovatie/diplomas-in-wiskunde-wetenschappen-en-technologische-richtingen-in-het-hoger-onderwijs

monitoring research to further understand this impact, focusing primarily on perceptions and use.[107] Similarly, the UNESCO-TSI project on Future-proofing Education will also add to the credible knowledge base of the Flanders education community.

Flanders teachers are proving to be pioneers in the use of AI in education. The Teaching and Learning Survey (TALIS) is an internationally comparative survey organised by the OECD monitoring trends in the Education sector in order to improve the quality of education and teaching. In 2024, Flanders participated for the first time in the full survey, across secondary, middle and primary education, surveying teachers across 200 schools. It evidenced a significant increase in AI adoption, where 25.4% of teachers use AI, which is comparable to the average of 5 EU countries whose data is available (24.6%). This number increases in secondary education, where almost half of the Flemish teachers surveyed use AI (49.4%), which is higher than in comparable European countries (40.8%). Interestingly, when adoption statistics are nuanced with the intentions, Flemish middle school teachers use generative AI for communication purposes significantly more than their comparable European colleagues (43.5% vs 25%), but actually use AI for more complex use cases, such as generative lesson plans or tailored learning, significantly less than their comparable European colleagues (55.6% vs 62.9%).[108]

Flemish teachers also demonstrate a largely positive, albeit nuanced, perception of AI. For example, in higher secondary education, teachers surveyed see AI as bringing positive support to the improvement of lesson plans (56.7%) and supporting students with special needs (57.6%), though are concerned about the risks for plagiarism (76.9%) and misinformation (64.7%). A significant proportion (33%) abstain for AI adoption in the classroom due to principled objections.

Taken together, the TALIS 2024 findings indicate that the primary barrier to further adoption is a lack of knowledge and skills and a feeling of overwhelm regarding the integration of new technologies. These barriers are felt most keenly in lower education, where 89.5% of teachers feel that a lack of knowledge and skills, dropping to 77.3% and 71.0% in middle and secondary education. 58.5% of elementary teachers feel overwhelmed by implementing new technologies, which is significantly more than European comparable colleagues (38.0%). Interestingly, external barriers such as a lack of infrastructure, are perceived as barriers to adoption by secondary teachers significantly less often than international colleagues (12.9% vs 38.5%). This identifies that the barrier is not a lack of technology, but rather a question of professionalisation, competencies and reducing ideological objection.[109]

In other areas, there are several ongoing initiatives to address ethical and societal aspects of AI, such as privacy, fairness and digital wellbeing, are many, but not coordinated by the government. For example, the Flemish broadcaster VRT also make EduBoxes, boxes of teaching materials to support teachers, where there is also attention to the ethics of AI. There are several private initiatives, such as BrightLab, which also attend to ethics as part of broader digital inspiration initiatives.[110] Similarly, initiatives specific on inclusion and access, such as the potential for AI to support dyslexic students, exist, but are not coordinated or centralised.

## AI LITERACY

AI literacy and skills are consistently cited across Flemish AI policy research as the most important barrier to AI adoption, including on private sector AI adoption,[111] public sector AI adoption,[112] work contexts,[113] small and medium sized enterprises,[114]

107 Departement Onderwijs en Vorming. Onderwijsonderzoek project 2542. https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/onderwijsonderzoek/project/2542

108 V Van Droogenbroeck, F., Simon, R., Almey, K., Faddar, J., Kavadias, D., Siongers, J., Spruyt, B., Te Braak, P., & Thomas, V. (2025). TALIS 2024 Vlaanderen. Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

109 Flemish Government. (2025). TALIS 2024: Starting strong. https://www.vlaanderen.be/onderwijsprofessionals/nieuwsberichten/talis-2024-starting-strong. See also: https://talis2024.be/

110 Brightlab. https://brightlab.be/

111 AI Barometer, 2025

112 UNESCO. AI-Ready Flemish Public Administration. https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics/flemish-government; Mazzocchi, G., Martens, M., & De Wolf, R. (2025). AI Monitor 2024: Generatieve AI bij lokale en Vlaamse overheden: Een studie rond gebruik, perceptie en vaardigheden. https://data-en-maatschappij.ai/uploads/publications-downloads/AI-Monitor-2025-Kenniscentrum-Data-Maatschappij.pdf

113 Vermeir, W., Martens, M., & De Wolf, R. (2026). AI-geletterdheid in de werkcontext: bouwstenen, definities en meetkaders. Kenniscentrum Data en Maatschappij. https://data-en-maatschappij.ai/publicaties/ai-geletterdheid-in-de-werkcontext-bouwstenen-definities-en-meetkaders

114 VLAIO. (2025). Generatieve AI voor kmo's. https://www.vaia.be/nl/series/generatieve-ai-voor-kmos

federal employment,[115] education,[116] and in society at large, where it mitigates growing inequalities based on socioeconomic differences or age.[117] The explosion of generative AI in recent years has skyrocketed the breadth of impact of AI and increased the demand for AI literacy and education across all sectors. AI literacy also builds on top of basic digital skills, which in Belgium are considered low, with youths scoring even below the European average.[118]

Specifically in private sector adoption, the two most commonly cited barriers by Flemish companies, a lack of relevant knowledge, skills and experience (raised by 72.5% of adopters and 62.5% of non-adopters) and an inability to assess what AI could realistically offer their organisation (63.7% and 59.3% respectively), are both fundamentally literacy problems. What is striking is that, although there is some spread present, these barriers are felt almost as acutely by companies already using AI as by those that have not yet adopted it, suggesting that the knowledge gap does not simply disappear once a company takes its first steps.

This gap can be linked to broader barriers to continuous learning, including a lack of time in the workplace, insufficient encouragement or investment from management, and the limited recognition of informal learning opportunities such as peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. Educational inequalities further reinforce this trend, as higher-educated individuals are more likely to pursue additional training than those with lower levels of formal education. Financial constraints also play a role: participation in more expensive training programmes is unlikely unless employers are willing to cover the costs.

Access to external guidance adds to this picture: nearly half of non-adopters (47.2%) cite a lack of knowledge partners and support, compared to 37.9% of adopters. This points to a structural dependency among non-adopters on external guidance to overcome the initial threshold, and underscores that improving access to neutral, accessible AI guidance is as important as building internal capacity.[119] This search for external guidance is also reflected in VAIA's helpdesk activity. In 2025, VAIA answered 596 questions related to AI training (2024: 96 questions), a volume that stretched the organisation's limited resources and small team, and one that continues to grow in 2026.[120]

The data of the AI barometer points out that in-depth knowledge of AI technologies appears to be largely lacking among the vast majority of both non-adopters (76.5%) and adopters (71.0%) with knowledge gaps. Among non-adopters, these deficiencies are particularly pronounced and span multiple dimensions: from a lack of understanding of the legislative and ethical frameworks governing AI (73.9%), to limited awareness of key actors in the AI ecosystem (70.5%). Even foundational competences, such as basic data analytics (63.8%) and general knowledge of AI technologies (56.7%), remain insufficiently developed. While adopters report similar types of gaps, the shares are consistently 15 to 20 percent lower, indicating that practical engagement with AI may partially mitigate (but not eliminate) these deficits. Further, it is worth noting that the lack of knowledge regarding the regulatory framework runs deeper than simply being unaware of certain legal implications. Fewer than half of AI adopters are aware of the AI Act, and even fewer understand its implications, with numbers being lowest among smaller companies.[121]

A number of structural and cultural factors could help explain the shortcomings regarding AI literacy within the Flemish labour force. First, the general willingness to engage in lifelong learning remains limited, as the concept itself has not fully taken root. As part of the Action Plan on Lifelong Learning (2021), the first Flagship priority was to develop a strategic roadmap of strengths and gaps. As a result, the Lifelong Learning Dashboard developed an ambitious indicator framework to support evidence-based policy making around continuous education, which is likely the first of its kind globally. The Dashboard demonstrates that motivation for lifelong learning is low, especially with regards to cost and time availability. In 2022, almost half of citizens had not taken part in either formal or informal education programmes, nor did they wish to.[122] This is reflected in data from the Digimeter, which shows that while around 40% of respondents express interest in following AI-related training, only 14% actually take concrete steps, suggesting a significant gap between intentions and actions.[123]

115 Hoge Raad voor de Werkgelegenheid. (2026). Artificiële Intelligentie op de Belgische Arbeidsmarkt. https://hrw.belgie.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2026_hrw_ai_verslag.pdf

116 Van Droogenbroeck, F., Simon, R., Almey, K., Faddar, J., Kavadias, D., Siongers, J., Spruyt, B., Te Braak, P., & Thomas, V. (2025). TALIS 2024 Vlaanderen. Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

117 Digimeter, 2025.

118 Hoge Raad voor de Werkgelegenheid. (2026). Artificiële Intelligentie op de Belgische Arbeidsmarkt. https://hrw.belgie.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2026_hrw_ai_verslag.pdf

119 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 27-31.

120 VAIA. 665 vragen, lessen en levenslang leren in Vlaanderen. https://www.vaia.be/nl/blog/665-vragen-lessen-levenslang-leren-vlaanderen-2025

121 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 27-32; 43-44.

122 WEWIS. (2023). Dashboard Levenslang leren. https://opendata.wewis.vlaanderen.be/pages/levenslanglerendashboard/; https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/dashboard-levenslang-leren

123 Digimeter, 2025.

Finally, the policy landscape surrounding digital skills development is highly fragmented. Responsibilities are dispersed across initiatives such as Ligo for basic ICT skills, the (soon disappearing) Digibanken, VAIA (working people) and VDAB (people without a job or looking to reorient), as well as sector-specific initiatives such as Digisprong for education. At the same time, efforts for improved coordination within the Flemish government remain largely limited to exploratory working groups. Taken together, these factors contribute to a gap between the AI skills that companies need, and what the labour market can offer.

## PUBLIC ACCESS TO AI TRAINING

The Flanders AI Academy (VAIA) was established as part of the third pillar of the AI Policy Plan. Its goal is to support professional reskilling around AI, gathering the different trainings available and matching them to emerging needs.[124] By collecting trainings and courses (online and in-person) from more than 500 providers, VAIA makes technical, job-specific, ethics focused and general AI knowledge accessible to those with a range of skill levels, time commitments, financial means and languages. Flanders has been conscious of the need for lifelong learning around AI, and this is coordinated centrally by VAIA. VAIA focuses primarily on professionals and they training they need, valorises the most recent on recent to identify training needs, and evaluates the quality of trainings.

VAIA is collecting and boosting training for all professionals in Flanders, also for professionals in education. Towards full school attendance, this involves providing input on content, format and teachers for established teacher training institutes such as UAntwerpen CNO. They also provide insights in research initiatives in education, such as the research projects into AI for the use of learning foreign languages conducted by Katrien Dewaele of UCLL. VAIA also collects information about AI in education in several blogs.[125] For higher education & research staff, VAIA has curated a list of 12 different trainings that all Flemish institutions in higher education can book in their own organisations.[126] Provided by mainly private training organisations (one by KDM), this list of training provides the essential (generative) AI training that professionals in higher education need, covering both AI in research and education. It has been booked 49 times between fall 2024 and spring 2026, reaching 810 professionals in higher education (and counting). This training is provided by private training providers. Also, VAIA and the interuniversitary board "VLIR" organised well-liked monthly webinars for knowledge exchange between professionals in higher education called "Peers & Prompts". This concept will be repeated in 2026 for *leerplichtonderwijs*, in collaboration with Digisprong.[127]

Another concern is the gap between technical usage and critical, contextual understanding of AI. Training demand, as observed in programmes offered by VDAB, is heavily tilted toward basic AI literacy and practical skills such as prompting. These skills are also often sought after in a job-search context (for example: how to use AI tools in applications) rather than as part of broader professional upskilling. At the same time, more reflective competences, such as critically assessing AI outputs, understanding privacy implications, or recognising bias, are not explicitly demanded by learners, even though training providers observe clear shortcomings in these areas. This suggests a lack of awareness or interest by individuals regarding their ability to evaluate and responsibly use AI systems. As a result, such topics are usually indirectly integrated into existing trainings, rather than addressed through dedicated programmes.

124 VAIA, https://www.vaia.be/en/

125 VAIA. AI education blogs. https://www.vaia.be/nl/blog/ai-voor-kansengelijkheid; https://www.vaia.be/nl/blog/willen-leerlingen-door-ai-geen-vreemde-taal-meer-leren; https://www.vaia.be/nl/blog/taalmeesters-taaltechneuten-een-digitale-romance

126 VAIA. Leertraject Generatieve AI voor professionals in het hoger onderwijs. https://www.vaia.be/nl/series/leertraject-generatieve-ai-voor-professionals-in-het-hoger-onderwijs-blueprint

127 VAIA. (2026). Peers and Prompts: AI Inspiration for Higher Education. https://www.vaia.be/en/series/peers-prompts-ai-inspiration-for-higher-education

# ECONOMIC

This section addresses the economic factors shaping where and how AI is made and used, and the ecosystem of entrepreneurship which can lead to endogenous economic growth. These include adoption of AI systems in both private and public sectors, labour market transformations and investments.

In Flanders, it is challenging to estimate the contribution of AI to the economy, and none of the expert stakeholders would identify a meaningful proxy to do so. Similarly, estimating the size of the AI sector and AI companies is difficult, particularly with the rapid increase in the use of generative AI.

Nevertheless, the AI sector in Flanders is growing, and this growing digital entrepreneurship is crucial to enabling adoption and contributing to ongoing safety and sovereignty questions. Within organisations more broadly, adoption of AI in Flanders is relatively low, for now. There is widespread agreement that the largest barrier to adoption is a lack of AI literacy and a lack of trainings that are easy to find and access.

## AI SECTOR

Agoria is a member organization of 2100 companies across the Belgian technology sectors. It is building a guide that provides an overview of the companies providing AI services of building digital software products based on AI in fields as diverse as advanced manufacturing, resilient logistics and smart healthcare.[128] While this presents the Belgian market rather than Flanders alone, it gives insight into the diversity of companies in the AI sector. The guide creates a typology of different AI system types, from computer vision to advanced robotics, and 16 different stages of the AI value chain where AI services are being developed.

## PRIVATE SECTOR AI ADOPTION

Flanders' private sector AI landscape is fast growing, and especially with the explosion of generative AI, the share of Flemish companies using AI has increased strongly. The share of companies using at least one AI technology increased from 23.2% in 2021 to 58.8% in 2025.[129] Of those not using AI, about one third plans to start doing so in the next year.

Large language models are the predominant form of AI being used by Flemish companies with over half (47.6%) of all Flemish companies now using at least one generative AI tool.[130] Text analysis (41.2%), natural language generation (37.8%), and image or audio generation (33.3%) are by far the most widely used technologies. Other technologies such as process automation (11.0%), machine learning (10.6%), speech recognition (18.9%) and image recognition (12.5%), remain significantly less common. Autonomous machines such as robots or drones are still very much the exception at just 3.8%. That said, process automation and machine learning are expected to pick up pace, with roughly one in five companies planning to adopt them in the near term (see Figure).

The way companies are using AI reflects this language-based dominance. The most prevalent applications are those where text-generating or text-analysing tools add immediate value with relatively low implementation barriers: streamlining administrative workflows (47.4%), supporting marketing and sales efforts (45.5%), and enhancing customer service (26.3%). IT security (32.4%)

128 Agoria. Business Guide: Belgian AI Tech & Services. https://ebooks.agoria.be/businessguide_ai/full-view.html
129 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 4-6, 12; WEWIS & ECOOM. (2025). Vlaams indicatorenboek 4.6.1. https://www.vlaamsindicatorenboek.be
130 AI Barometer, 2025, p. 15-16.

and product and technology development (31.5%) are also common. More operationally complex uses, such as managing logistics (6.6%), overseeing production processes (11.9%), or informing purchasing decisions (10.7%), remain on the margins for now. When comparing current data to 2023, applications that lend themselves naturally to language-based AI have grown the most. This trend aligns closely with the rapid mainstreaming of tools like ChatGPT and Copilot.[131]

There are three major categories of how AI gets used in Flanders. Approximately 58% use ready-made, plug-and-play solutions, around 17% use customised solutions, where they adapt commercial or open -source solutions, and a final 16% develop their own solutions in -house. The implication for governance is that the more customised solutions a company uses, the more the company is dependent on a strong organisational AI strategy, because tailored systems often require ongoing maintenance, integration, and oversight that generic solutions do not. Considering the explosion of generative AI, organisations like VLAIO are trying to encourage innovation in the direction of tailormade solutions, above and beyond readymade AI solutions like generative AI platforms.

AI adoption varies significantly across sectors. It is highest in ICT and professional services, while food services, transport and construction are low to uptake. Similarly, larger companies are more likely to have adopted AI across a range of steps in the value chain, though small companies are not entirely lagging, especially in areas such as marketing, sales, and customer management. Across all sectors and sizes, administrative process organisation is the most common AI application.[132]

Interestingly, AI adoption in Flemish companies is largely bottom-up: in nearly half of AI-adopting firms, the initiative comes primarily from individual employees rather than management or IT departments. A significant share (in nearly 20% of adopting firms) involves so-called "shadow AI", where tools are used without the knowledge or explicit consent of management or IT, carrying risks around data security and regulatory compliance. This relatively passive role of management is notable, as active leadership is considered essential to align AI use with broader strategic and ethical governance.[133]

AI adoption in Flanders has had a strong positive impact on business competitiveness, with nearly two-thirds of AI adopters bringing new or improved products to market, improving processes, or reducing costs. Productivity gains are evident across skill levels, though the effect is far more pronounced for high-skilled workers: over half of adopters reported increased productivity among this group, compared to just over one-fifth for low-skilled workers. Sector and company size both shape these outcomes, with information and communication firms consistently among the highest beneficiaries, while accommodation and food services lag behind.[134]

Across Flemish and Federal levels, the resounding consensus is that the primary barrier to further AI adoption in Flanders is a lack of AI literacy. While not the only reason, nearly two-thirds or more of both AI-adopters and non-adopters cite insufficient knowledge, skills, and experience, as well as an inability to assess what AI could do for them, as factors holding back increased AI adoption.

Non-adopters face additional structural disadvantages, being more dependent on external knowledge partners, public funding, and physical infrastructure. This suggests that the gap between adopters and non-adopters' risks widening without targeted external support. Ethical concerns are also a growing factor, flagged by roughly a third of both groups. Legal literacy compounds this picture: fewer than half of Flemish AI adopters are even aware of the EU AI Act, and among those who are, understanding of its practical implications drops further still, pointing to a significant knowledge gap that cuts across both technical and regulatory dimensions.[135]

## PUBLIC SECTOR AI ADOPTION

The Flemish government is increasingly adopting AI across its network of entities. The adoption of AI is actively promoted through the AI Expertise Centre (AIEC) of the Digitaal Vlaanderen Agency, which prioritises inspiration and knowledge sharing to improve public sector efficiency and innovation.

131 Ibid.
132 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 12-19, 34-36; Hoge Raad voor de Werkgelegenheid. (2026). Artificiële Intelligentie op de Belgische Arbeidsmarkt. https://hrw.belgie.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2026_hrw_ai_verslag.pdf
133 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 19-22.
134 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 38-39.
135 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 27-31, 43-44.

According to the AI Expertise Centre's 2024 Quickscan AI, which researched AI use cases in the public sector, the Flemish government has 240 AI tools that are either in use, being experimented with or in the 'idea-phase'.[136] The majority of implementations are within the agencies rather than the departments. The majority of reported AI use cases (57) are found in the policy domain of Science, Social Economy and Innovation. The majority of AI applications (108) are focused on process optimisation, and there is not yet a single example of AI to support the furthering of the democratic process. As in the private sector, the use of generative AI has also surpassed that of other machine learning modalities. For example, the AI Monitor is a research collaboration between KDM, Digitaal Vlaanderen, and VVSG, and the 2024 edition studied the use, perception and competences around generative AI within public administrations. It found that 53.1% respondents stated they use generative AI systems at least once weekly for their work.[137]

Based on stakeholder engagement sessions throughout the *AI Ready Flemish Public Administration* project, it is understood that AI experimentation is more widespread than is represented in the Quickscan data, as an ongoing challenge remains to map existing use cases and how to scale knowledge sharing networks between projects across entities.[138] That said, there are flagship initiatives which demonstrate the cutting edge of AI applications in the public sector. For instance, since February 2026, the Agency for Facility Operations is using agentic AI in the public procurement process.[139]

A major initiative of the Flemish Government is the financing of 10,000 Microsoft Copilot licences for the public sector over 2025-2026.[140] Financed through the Vlaamse Radicaal Digitaal III, the roll-out is a collaboration between Digitaal Vlaanderen, KPMG, Cegeka and Microsoft to enable public sector officials to use generative AI in their daily operations. The roll-out is supported by a specific AI-literacy initiative around Microsoft Copilot. The much-publicised initiative catapulted AI to the headlines, and Digitaal Vlaanderen has also promoted conscious consumption and sustainable use.[141] Overall, the initiative has also prompted calls to focus on the sustainability of AI usage and transparency in the value chains.[142]

Another important initiative is the Programme for Innovation Procurement (PIO), which leverages the power of public procurement and co-financing to support innovations for the public sector across all themes.[143] Most recent examples include a smart assistant for citizen reports, a hospital-specific CO2 monitoring tool, and smart tracking of patients for emergency wards. While not exclusively focused on AI, the PIO program is a key innovation lever for AI in the public sector.

## POLICIES

Flanders invests heavily in incentivising AI. Overall, the total available subsidies for AI in 2024 surpassed 153,5 million EUR, comprising three main sources:[144]

- Flanders AI Policy Plan: 35+ million EUR
- Funds for Scientific Research: 21,7 million EUR
- Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (VLAIO): 96,8 million EUR

136 Digitaal Vlaanderen. Quickscan AI biedt overzicht van inzet AI binnen de Vlaamse overheid. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/onze-diensten-en-platformen/ai-expertisecentrum/quickscan-ai-biedt-overzicht-van-inzet-ai-binnen-de-vlaamse-overheid

137 Mazzocchi, G., Martens, M., & De Wolf, R. (2025). AI Monitor 2024: Generatieve AI bij lokale en Vlaamse overheden: Een studie rond gebruik, perceptie en vaardigheden. https://data-en-maatschappij.ai/uploads/publications-downloads/AI-Monitor-2025-Kenniscentrum-Data-Maatschappij.pdf

138 UNESCO. AI-Ready Flemish Public Administration. https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics/flemish-government

139 Digitaal Vlaanderen. (2026). Even voorstellen: EMPTOR, de toekomstig AI-toepassing voor overheidsopdrachten. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/nieuws/even-voorstellen-emptor-de-toekomstig-ai-toepassing-voor-overheidsopdrachten

140 Digitaal Vlaanderen. Uitrol M365 Copilot binnen de Vlaamse overheid. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/onze-diensten-en-platformen/uitrol-m365-copilot-binnen-de-vlaamse-overheid

141 Digitaal Vlaanderen. Zorgzaam omgaan met energie: Copilot en duurzaamheid. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitale-werkplek/zorgzaam-omgaan-met-energie-copilot-en-duurzaamheid

142 Knack. Copilot en duurzaamheid: Vlaamse overheid legt verantwoordelijkheid bij de verkeerde partij. https://www.knack.be/nieuws/technologie-ai-sociale-media-digitaal/copilot-en-duurzaamheid-vlaamse-overheid-legt-verantwoordelijkheid-bij-de-verkeerde-partij/

143 VLAIO. Programma Innovatieve Overheidsopdrachten (PIO). https://www.vlaio.be/nl/vlaio-netwerk/programma-innovatieve-overheidsopdrachten-pio

144 Flanders AI Policy Plan. Vlaams Beleidsplan Artificiële Intelligentie. https://www.flandersai.be

Within the Flanders AI Policy Plan, the implementation pillar is the primary instrument to enhance productivity, competitiveness and economic development, including the Flemish Innovation Agency (VLAIO) and Sirris, the knowledge centre to push innovation forward in small businesses.

While the public sector is not represented in the pillars of the Flanders AI Policy Plan , in 2025 a representative of Digitaal Vlaanderen was chosen to join the Steering Committee of the AI Policy Plan, in order to increase the collaboration for AI innovation across the ecosystem. There are, however, specific use cases for the public sector funded by the FAIR/VAIOP.[145]

# LABOR MARKETS

## AI TALENT

To provide comprehensive data on employment across different professions in Flanders, Steunpunt Werk has developed an interactive 'Professions Monitor' tool, utilising data from the Flemish Employment and Training Service (VDAB). Whilst data was unavailable for those working as 'actuaries and statisticians', in 2023 VDAB reported 95,600 people working as 'Software and Applications developers and analysts', and 14,900 people working as Database and network professionals.[146] Flanders thereby makes up 64.2% of these professions in Belgium.[147]

Despite this, in 2024 almost 17% of companies in the Flemish Region with at least 10 employees indicated about 10% of the companies saying these vacancies were difficult to fill.[148] Additionally, the inability to find employees with the right knowledge, skills and experience related to AI is also mentioned as a hurdle by over a third of companies. Similarly, 39% of employees at the federal level identify they need to further develop their knowledge or skills around AI tools and systems for their job. This shows that the labour market is currently not equipped to tackle the growing need for AI literacy in Flemish companies.[149]

## AI IMPACT ON THE LABOUR MARKET

The impact of AI on the labour market in Flanders is currently more a story of task shifts than job losses. Across the economic landscape, full process automation remains the exception, and most companies are still at a stage where AI is reshaping what workers do rather than replacing them outright. This shift in tasks is most visible in the IT sector. Stakeholder consultations show how technology companies now expect their staff not merely to use AI to support their work, but to leverage it to replace entire tasks, while retaining the technical depth to verify the output. This is driving calls for a fundamental rethink of how IT training is organised.

At the same time, AI-related skills are increasingly embedded in the requirements for all sorts of jobs, often implicitly rather than explicitly. The share of vacancies formally requiring AI skills remains low in absolute terms: OECD data shows that only 0.14% of job vacancies in Belgium explicitly mentioned AI skills in 2024.[150] However, a candidate expected to work with standard Office tools, for instance, is today frequently also expected to be comfortable with AI-assisted equivalents such as Copilot. In administrative functions especially, a baseline level of AI literacy has become a standard expectation.

The overall impact of AI on the labour market is currently limited, but some groups are affected more than others, leading to potential inequalities if trends are left unchecked, especially considering the current adoption rate is quite low but expected to grow. At the aggregate level, the employment impact of AI adoption in Flanders has so far been relatively limited. The vast majority of AI-adopting companies report no change in employment levels for either low- or high-skilled workers over the past year. For low-skilled workers, only 1.5% of adopters reported a decline in employment, while 1.2% reported an increase, resulting in a near-neutral picture at the aggregate level. The effects that do exist are most pronounced at the extremes of the company size spectrum. Among large and micro companies, the divergence between those reporting increases and those

145 Flanders AI Research Program. (2024-2028). Use cases: Society. https://www.flandersairesearch.be/en/research/use-cases?period=2024-2028&domain=society

146 VDAB. Beroepenmonitor. https://www.vdab.be/beroepenmonitor

147 Statistics Flanders. Bevolking naar socio-economische positie (op basis van administratieve data). https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen

148 Statistics Flanders. Ondernemingen op zoek naar ICT-specialisten. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/digitale-economie/ondernemingen-op-zoek-naar-ict-specialisten

149 Hoge Raad voor de Werkgelegenheid. (2026). Artificiële Intelligentie op de Belgische Arbeidsmarkt. https://hrw.belgie.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2026_hrw_ai_verslag.pdf; As part of the Flemish Policy Plan on AI, there is significant investment in AI literacy and skills education; these initiatives are addressed in the 'Education' dimension of the RAM.

150 OECD. (2023). Emerging trends in AI skill demand across 14 OECD countries. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/10/emerging-trends-in-ai-skill-demand-across-14-oecd-countries_faabbb45/7c691b9a-en.pdf

reporting declines in labour size is more visible than among small and medium-sized firms, where the two tend to balance out. At the sector level, the net effect on low-skilled employment is most negative in accommodation and food services, information and communication, and professional and scientific services, where the share reporting a decline exceeds the share reporting an increase by a wider margin than in other sectors. Conversely, in administrative and support services and construction, the balance tilts slightly in the other direction, with the share reporting an increase in low-skilled employment outpacing or matching those reporting a decline.[151]

For high-skilled workers, the picture is somewhat more dynamic. While 88.6% of adopters still report no employment change, the gap between those reporting growth and those reporting decline is more pronounced. Among those that have adopted AI, 7.4% of saw an increase in high-skilled employment against 4.0% reporting a decline. This net positive effect is most visible in larger and medium-sized companies and is particularly marked in information and communication and financial services. This points to AI augmenting and expanding skilled work rather than simply replacing it. In accommodation and food services and manufacturing, the difference is smaller, reflecting a different relationship between AI deployment and workforce composition in those sectors.[152]

It is important to note that these figures likely understate the longer-term trajectory. Companies that have moved beyond experimentation and fully integrated or scaled AI solutions show both higher rates of employment growth and higher rates of employment decline than those still in early adoption phases. As more companies mature in their AI use, the overall employment impact, in both directions, is thus expected to grow.[153]

Beyond headline employment figures, the distributional question of who bears the impact matters greatly. AI is not only displacing tasks and functions but also creating new ones, and so far, there is no significant net effect on total employment. However, the burden and the opportunity are not evenly spread. Women are disproportionately represented in administrative roles that carry a higher risk of automation. Young workers face a more subtle but significant challenge: entry-level positions in AI-exposed occupations are becoming harder to access, raising the barrier to getting a first foothold on the career ladder. Those with weaker digital skills are also particularly vulnerable. Although lower-educated workers are on average less exposed to AI-intensive jobs, their lower baseline digital literacy leaves them less equipped to adapt.[154]

## INTERMEDIATE CONSUMPTION

Investment in AI is on an upward trajectory among Flemish companies. While budgets have held steady for around half of AI adopters in 2025, roughly a third report a slight increase and over one in ten a significant one, with only a negligible share cutting back on AI expenses. Compared to 2023, a growing proportion of firms are increasing their AI budgets, pointing to a strengthening trend toward greater investment.[155]

## INVESTMENTS AND OUTPUT

Flanders does not collect data by Standard Industrial Classification codes, making it difficult to calculate the exact GDP contribution of the computer programming, and related activities sector. An effective proxy is the Production Houses /Telecom /ICT /Engineers/ Technical Testing sectors, as designated by Nomenclature of Economic Activities, accounting for 35.68% of business internal R&D, so approximately 2.8 billion euros annually given a total BERD of7.896 billion.[156]

Reporting from 2024 shows 13% of Flemish exports were high-tech, accounting for roughly 6.7% of total trade, though this is dominated by the pharmaceutical sector. This compares against Belgian and the European averages of high tech-exports as a percentage of exports of 15% and 17%, and percentages of trade at roughly 7.5% and 8.9% respectively.[157]

151 AI barometer 2025, p. 39-41
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.
154 Hoge Raad voor de Werkgelegenheid. (February 2026). Rapport AI op de Belgische Arbeidsmarkt. https://hrw.belgie.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2026_hrw_ai_verslag.pdf
155 AI Barometer, 2025, pp. 29-30.
156 WEWIS & ECOOM. (2025). Vlaams indicatorenboek: 2.2 Enterprise R&D expenditure (BERD). https://www.vlaamsindicatorenboek.be
157 Statistics Flanders. Export van high-techgoederen. https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen

# TECHNICAL AND INFRASTRUCTURE

This section addresses the infrastructural and technical dimensions of AI. These dimensions pertain to a region's capacity for developing and deploying AI solutions, including computing power, data centre availability, connectivity, and internet access. These elements are critical enablers for AI development as they shape a region's ability to process information and support the necessary infrastructure for AI systems.

Flanders boasts substantial infrastructure and connectivity of AI. Flanders is also deeply connected to European initiatives, both in terms of building supercomputing capacity as well as interoperability and standardisation.

## INFRASTRUCTURE & CONNECTIVITY

Belgian statistics provide a foundation for digital infrastructure, with 100% access to electricity and substantial connectivity. Based on data from 2023, Belgium has 103.5 mobile telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants (exceeds 100% because individuals can hold multiple mobile subscriptions). Fixed broadband subscriptions stand at 43.7 per 100 people in Belgium.[158] In 2026, Belgium's nationwide average is 140 Mbs average fixed broadband speed, and Flanders has historically performed above national average.[159]

At Flemish level, there is extensive connectivity and strong digital infrastructure, positioning Flanders as an advanced region within Europe. The region has widespread high-speed internet access (96% of households, rising from 69% in 2008).[160] Flanders has the necessary infrastructure for AI development and deployment. The challenge now is reducing inequalities in access.

In terms of energy consumption, 9.9% of all energy consumption in Flanders comes from renewable energy sources. The Flemish Energy and Climate Plan 2021-2030 set goals for domestic renewable energy production, and by end of 2024, 92% of these goals had been reached.[161]

## DATA GOVERNANCE AND STATISTICAL PERFORMANCE

Flanders has a mature governance and policy frameworks for data, where several leading policies have been evaluated and entered a second phase. The Flemish Data Strategy was originally developed in 2021 for consistent data management in the public administration.[162] In its first phase, it prioritized actions for the Flemish government, focusing on data literacy and management practices.

158 International Telecommunication Union. World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?locations=BE

159 Ookla. Speedtest Global Index. https://www.speedtest.net/global-index

160 Statistics Flanders. Households with internet connection. https://www.vlaanderen.be/en/statistics-flanders/digital-economy/households-with-internet-connection#nav-96percent-van-de-huishoudens-heeft-internettoegang

161 Flemish Energy and Climate Agency (VEKA). EnergyMap. https://apps.energiesparen.be/energiekaart/vlaanderen#groene-energie

162 Flemish Government. (2023). Vlaamse Datastrategie. https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/vlaamse-datastrategie

The Flanders Cloud Strategy, approved by the ICT Steering Committee in February 2019, presented a public cloud-first strategy, prioritised a multi-cloud offering within the Flemish government, and articulated entity-specific action plans to concretise the cloud strategy, along with continuity guarantees to support cloud migration and risk management measures and maximum use of software and platform services from the cloud. The strategy highlights that the "cloud-first" approach is nuanced rather than mandatory, and implementation must remain financially feasible. The efficacy of the cloud strategy is being assessed through independent evaluations to consider the changing geopolitical landscape. Calls have been made to ensure the revised Cloud strategy addresses data sovereignty, transparency and data protection.[163]

Flanders maintains extensive open data policies that facilitate access to government data for research and innovation purposes. Open data forms a significant strand of the Data Strategy, where the 2020-2024 Open Data Action Plan sought to 'make more open data useable'.[164] The Flemish Open Data Portal contains numerous open datasets from the Flemish government and local authorities. In 2021, the Action Plan was evaluated for progress by the ICT Steering Committee and concrete actions to increase the open data maturity were prioritised, including facilitating the awareness and findability of Open Data portals.[165]

Finally, the Flemish Data Strategy was re-developed in late 2025, articulating a systemic approach with updated priorities for government entities to build organizational systems to respond to the realities of a data society and economy.[166] The strategy explores what it means for governments to have a state and some control, including future-proof infrastructure, data-driven services and policy-making, data literacy and accessibility, cybersecurity and responsible use.

To evaluate the readiness of statistical performance, data is only available on Belgian level. Belgium demonstrates strong statistical performance, with a Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI) overall score of 90.5. This performance is built on four pillars: Data Use 100, Data Services 87, Data Products (score: 84), Data Sources (score: 79), and Data Infrastructure (score: 100).

## APPLIED STANDARDS

Flanders was a pioneer in that it accepted the semantic standards quite early. The region has several processes in place to help share metadata and improve data quality via the DCAT-AP Flanders validation system. Building on the DCAT standard for public sector data sets, authorities in Flanders use the DCAT-AP Flanders application profile and validator for assessing the quality of open data metadata, ensuring consistency with DCAT-AP specifications developed for the European Commission. Flanders adds two fields to the standard DCAT metadata for DCAT-AP-VL.[167] The Flemish Information and ICT Policy Steering Committee approved the DCAT-AP Flanders application profile as the Flemish OSLO standard in 2019, establishing it as the official metadata standard for open data publication within the public administration. This facilitates interoperability between information systems to strengthen the data ecosystem.[168]

The strong standards ecosystem also translates into sectoral specificities. There is strong work on standards for the protection of cultural heritage, notably through the Cultural Heritage Standards Toolbox (CEST).[169]

Metadata Vlaanderen functions as a metadata hub/approach for publishing and exchanging dataset descriptions across platforms, and it aligns open data metadata with recognized profiles so metadata can be reused across discovery services. The experienced teams are now shifting the focus from creating as many standards as possible to prioritize standards as adoptable and useable as possible. Some work on standards is still required, especially around refining interoperability between government entities and how that reflects the role of government in the digital society.

163 Voka. Waarom Vlaanderen nu een technologiestrategie nodig heeft. https://www.voka.be/vlaanderen/nieuws/waarom-vlaanderen-nu-een-technologiestrategie-nodig-heeft

164 Flemish Government. (2020). Actieplan Open Data 2020-2024. https://assets.vlaanderen.be/image/upload/v1637332328/Actieplan_Open_Data_2020_2024_v1.0_dbqmle.pdf

165 Flemish Government. (2021). Overzicht open data acties. https://assets.vlaanderen.be/image/upload/v1637332330/overzicht_open_data_acties_voor_2021_h93zdl.pdf

166 Digitaal Vlaanderen. Vlaamse Datastrategie. https://www.vlaanderen.be/digitaal-vlaanderen/vlaamse-digitale-strategie/vlaamse-datastrategie/vlaamse-datastrategie

167 Digitaal Vlaanderen. DCAT-AP-VL applicatieprofiel. https://data.vlaanderen.be/doc/applicatieprofiel/DCAT-AP-VL/

168 Digitaal Vlaanderen. Open Data Portaal. https://data.vlaanderen.be/

169 FARO. Welke standaarden volgt u? https://faro.be/kennis/informatiebeheer/welke-standaarden-volgt-u

Flanders actively participates in standardisation of AI and digital technologies. The participation is coordinated by Agoria, the technology company federation, which organizes multiple technical committees. For AI, several ISO/IEC standards are being developed, including those developed through the Joint Technical Committee (JTC 1), specifically ISO/IEC JTC1/SC 42 and CEN/CLC/JTC 21.[170] While Flanders has participated in the development of ISO42001, the emphasis is on the CEN/CLC/JTC21, and that is where harmonized standards for the AI Act are being developed.
Some experts are also engaged at the ISO/IEC level, specifically on the functional Safety on AI.[171]

While standard setting is quite decentralized, there is also representation within European networks, which is primarily coordinated with the Belgian Bureau de Normalisation (NBN), who is a member of the European Committee for Standardization (CEN) as well as at world level, as a member of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

Data Spaces and Interoperability

Flanders is an active contributor to several European Data Spaces as a core of the European Data Strategy, including in Agri-food, Health, and Energy, and new sectors continue to explore the possibilities of expanding AI research possibilities by engaging in data spaces, notably around low resource languages.

Flanders has been a pioneer in personal data pods and in investing in Europe's first data utility company Athumi, which creates personal data spaces and functions as a broker-like organization. It emerged from the SolidLab Flanders project to implement the Solid standard and is a member of the Belgian Data Spaces Alliance. It is an operator of MyData Global and an expression of the EU Data Governance Act and the models therein of data intermediary services, to make shared data use by companies more accessible.[172] It is particularly successful in case studies where data sharing is advantageous. For example, one disaster occurred when people started digging and accidentally hit a gas pipe where many people died, and now Athumi manages a database of where all the underground pipelines are, against which any new digging requests must be cleared.

A concrete and fully developed example in this context is the Flemish Health Data Space (VHDS), which is an operationally elaborated data space use case in Flanders and is organised and coordinated by the Department of Care of the Flemish Government (Departement Zorg). This initiative is developed in collaboration with several partners, including among others IMEC, CiTiP, Data4PHM, Farmaflux. It was the implementation of a population health use case on type2 diabetes, where a federated diabetes dashboard supports population health management by combining aggregated health data from multiple sources, while preserving data sovereignty at the level of the original data holders. Through this use case, VHDS demonstrates how European Health Data Space principles—such as federated access, shared governance, and interoperable standards—can be applied in practice within a regional public administration setting.[173]

## COMPUTING CAPABILITIES

Flanders has significant access to compute. The Flemish Supercomputer Centre (VSC) is the main compute capacity actor in Flanders. The current estimated total GPU, provided by the Flemish Supercomputer Center, is 829 GPUs or 5,809,696 GPU hours (yearly basis).[174] The VSC hosts or has access to AI capacity (GPUs) on three different infrastructural levels: Tier-2 (local, across four universities; total 259 GPUs), Tier-1 (national; here Flanders, total of 328 GPUs at Ghent and Vrije Universiteit Brussel site), and Tier-0 (international, equivalent of 242 GPUs running for one year).[175]

Flemish access to computer capacity is increasing.[176] A new supercomputer joined last year, and more budget has been allocated for computing capacity, but how much that actual compute that will purchase is uncertain due to currently highly volatile RAM prices.

170 Academisch Centrum voor Normalisatie en Digitalisering (ACDN). Technische commissies. https://acdn.be/_projects/website/normalisatie/files/Technische%20commissies_NLv3.pdf
171 Flanders Make. https://www.flandersmake.be/en
172 Athumi. Europees kader. https://athumi.eu/ecosystemen/europees-kader
173 Departement Zorg. (2025). Vlaamse Health Data Space project: Eindrapport. https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/vlaamse-health-data-space-project-eindrapport
174 Vlaams Supercomputer Centrum. Jaarverslag. https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/75950
175 This does not include any compute capacity that may be managed by the private sector or research organisations for internal use.
176 Ibid.

Compute in Flanders is also interconnected, both across regions and with Europe. Flanders hosts 36 data centres which translates into 5.277 colocation data canters for every million people .[177] Of these, 9 are in Flanders but marketed as a 'Brussels Data Center', located in the communes just across the border from the greater Brussels area, or in Zaventem, the same Flemish commune hosting Brussels International Airport. To date, data centres are not yet required to disclose energy or water usage statistics.

Flanders also accesses compute as part of EU initiatives. As of 1st April 2026, Flanders is part of the EU AI Factor Antennae, an initiative which supports EU member states who decided not to build superinfrastructure themselves but rather create services to offer businesses the opportunity for AI methods to train on this infrastructure.[178] For Belgium, the AI Factory antennae is linked to the infrastructure in Germany and Finland. As the request was one per member state, the AI Factor Antennae presented an opportunity for collaboration across the Communities. Coordinated by imec, across 4 entities, 7 ministers and 23 partners, the AI Factory Antennae has been an example of where Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels and Federal came together in a layered governance approach to bridge across ecosystems. Each community can purchase GPUs and will receive proportional capacity. It is anticipated that lessons learned from this initiative may support an expected future call from the EU on AI Gigafactories, though this is as yet uncertain.

Awareness remains a bottleneck to implementing the value of compute. Many companies, especially SMEs, are unaware that the Flemish Supercomputer Centre exists, and much less that there are options to access small packages of compute for free.

177 Datacenters.com. Belgium. https://www.datacenters.com/locations/belgium

178 EuroHPC Joint Undertaking. (13 October 2025). EuroHPC JU selects AI Factory antennas to broaden AI Factories initiative. Note: while the selection was completed in October 2025, the initiative formally opened in April 2026. https://www.eurohpc-ju.europa.eu/eurohpc-ju-selects-ai-factory-antennas-broaden-ai-factories-initiative-2025-10-13_en . While the selection was completed in October 2025, the initiative formally opened in April 2026.

# METHOD AND APPROACH

## APPROACH

Flanders' approach to the implementation of the RAM followed three key phases:

- desk research and drafting, from October-December 2025,
- stakeholder consultations and interviews, from January – March 2026, and
- iterative feedback rounds and drafting, from April – May 2026.

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The following individuals and organisations formed part of the stakeholder engagement process. Substantive and detailed feedback on the RAM report and governance recommendations was received from the organisations marked with an asterisk:

Agoria,* AP Hogeschool, Department of Health, Digisprong, Digitaal Vlaanderen,* Expertisecentre Research and Development Monitoring (ECOOM),* FAIR/VAIOP,* Flanders AI Policy Plan,* Flanders Supercomputer Centre, Karus, KDM,* KU Leuven, Scivil,* UAntwerpen, UCLL Hogeschool,* UGent, UNESCO,* VAIA,* VDAB, VLAIO, VMRI, Werkplaats Immaterieel Erfgoed, WEWIS.*

## ADAPTING THE RAM

The Flanders RAM is the world's first sub-national RAM, marking a significant milestone in the global roll-out of UNESCO's AI Readiness Assessment framework. While the RAM was designed for application at national level, the Flanders project offered a unique opportunity to explore what adaptation to a regional government context requires in practice.

One of the most significant adaptations concerned the legal and governance dimension. Unlike a national government, Flanders operates within a layered constitutional and regulatory environment. To capture this complexity accurately, the assessment was conducted three times across levels: regional (Flemish), federal (Belgian), and supra-national (EU). This approach required additional analytical work but produced a richer and more actionable result than a single-level assessment would have allowed.

**TABLE 3. DATA AVAILABILITY TO ANSWER THE RAM QUESTIONS**

| DATA AVAILABILITY | N | |
|---|---|---|
| All data | 155 | 57% |
| Some data | 66 | 25% |
| Not found | 49 | 18% |
| **Total** | **270** | |

A further challenge was data availability. Not all indicators could be populated: in some cases, relevant data does not exist at regional level; in others, data exists but is aggregated at national level in ways that make sub-national disaggregation impossible. For example, estimating the contribution of AI to the Flemish economy proved impossible. These gaps are reflected in the table, and should be read not as absences of policy ambition, but as an evidence gap that itself points to the need for improved sub-national indicators.

Some of these challenges are discussed in UNESCO's 2026 publication *Context Matters: Localising UNESCO's Readiness Assessment Methodology*, where Flanders is one of the four case studies.[179]

Flanders has a robust evidence-based policy monitoring culture, where there are significant initiatives to develop indicators, spur research and inform policy direction. These reports, like the Digimeter or the Lifelong Learning Dashboard, are often highly detailed. The RAM has drawn heavily on these initiatives, and as a result, when particular questions were unanswerable, there are often complementary indicators which provide nuance to the essence of the RAM questions.

Finally, the Flanders RAM serves as a pilot of the RAM 2.0. During 2025–2026, UNESCO's Ethics of AI team undertook a comprehensive revision of the RAM methodology, resulting in an updated RAM 2.0 framework to be officially launched at the Global Forum on the Ethics of AI 2026, currently being piloted by a select group of countries. Because the primary RAM consultant on the project was embedded within the HQ team and in close dialogue with the RAM revision process, it was possible to pilot the RAM 2.0 questions in parallel and develop a mapping from the new questions onto the existing RAM 1.0 structure. This approach allows the Flanders assessment to serve a dual function: it is a substantive assessment in its own right, and it establishes a replicable methodology for countries that have already completed a RAM 1.0 and wish to transition to RAM 2.0.

Key differences between the RAM 1.0 and RAM 2.0 are a broader thematic focus, covering topics which were not originally included, or not in nearly as much depth, for example on cybersecurity, emerging technologies, and gender-related harms. The actionable Governance Recommendations are also given the RAM 2.0 structure, which maps directly onto the Policy Action Areas of UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI.

179 UNESCO. (2026). Context matters: localising UNESCO's Readiness Assessment Methodology/ Danaditya, A., Guridi, J. A., Jameson, S., and Martinez Pinto, C. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000397306

# GOVERNANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the RAM were formulated by bringing together the assessment findings, stakeholder consultations, and the policy actions outlined in the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI.

The table below presents a summary of the RAM governance recommendations per policy area. Each is categorised by type (regulatory, institutional or capacity building) and a time frame for prioritisation (short, medium, or long term).

| RECOMMENDATIONS | TYPE | TIME FRAME |
|---|---|---|
| **1: Ethical Impact Assessment** | | |
| 1.1 Strengthen AI supervision at Flemish regional level. | Regulatory | Medium |
| **2: Ethical Governance and Stewardship** | | |
| 2.1 Incentivise interdisciplinary collaboration in AI across the Flanders AI Policy Plan. | Institutional | Medium |
| 2.2 Build on the Flemish AI Strategy for Government, further developing a shared value framework, governance bodies and new roles. | Institutional | Short |
| **3: Data Policy** | | |
| 3.1 Consider how to synchronize data policy with AI developments in the EU AI Act, cybersecurity and digital sovereignty domains. | Regulatory | Short |
| 3.2 Explore possibilities to improve data quality by strengthening lifecycle monitoring and feedback mechanisms. | Capacity | Long |
| **4: Development and International Cooperation** | | |
| 4.1 Develop capacities to coordinate with different levels of Belgian and European governance. | Institutional | Medium |
| **5: Environment and Ecosystems** | | |
| 5.1 Establish a coordination mechanism for AI and environment. | Institutional | Medium |
| 5.2 Develop structured evaluation of the environmental impact of AI. | Capacity | Medium |
| **6: Gender, inclusion and diversity** | | |
| 6.1 Embed inclusion as a core pillar and guiding principle in the development of AI-related policies. | Institutional | Short |
| **7: Culture and Language** | | |
| 7.1 Continue supporting Flemish AI models and benchmarking. | Capacity | Medium |
| **8: Education and Research** | | |
| 8.1 Prioritise investment in a coordinated approach to inclusive AI literacy and reskilling trainings for all levels of society | Capacity | Short |
| 8.2 Continue supporting responsible AI in education and fundamental research | Capacity | Medium |

| RECOMMENDATIONS | TYPE | TIME FRAME |
|---|---|---|
| **9: Communication and Information** | | |
| 9.1 Explore the possibilities for a coordinated response to AI generated mis- and dis-information. | Institutional | Long |
| **10: Economy and Labour** | | |
| 10.1 Support inclusive economic development by addressing both labour market impacts and AI sector needs | Capacity | Medium |
| 10.2 Promote sector-specific value frameworks for AI | Institutional | Medium |
| **11: Health and Social Wellbeing** | | |
| 11.1 Safeguard health, wellbeing, and the interests of young people in an AI-driven society | Institutional | Medium |

# POLICY AREA 1: ETHICAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

## 1.1 Strengthen AI supervision at Flemish regional level.

Flanders should establish an independent market supervisor for AI systems that fall under Flemish competences. Flanders should consider integrating this market supervision with the anticipated Flemish Data Authority, by extending the planned remit beyond privacy to encompass wider human rights concerns, market surveillance, and enforcement. Such a body would reaffirm the centrality of human rights and dignity in AI governance, and would strengthen the institutional capacity to investigate and redress AI-related harms, as well as coordinating AI-related fundamental right supervision across the Flemish AI ecosystem. Consideration should also be given to the need to monitor AI developments beyond the scope of the EU AI Act, which could be the role of another advisory body. It is also encouraged that Flemish AI supervisory authorities join the UNESCO Global Network of AI Supervisory Authorities.

Ensuring practical AI Act compliance across the ecosystem requires strengthening the technical capacities of supervisory bodies and the judiciary, including through dedicated staffing and training at fundamental rights organisations to address AI and algorithmic discrimination. This should be complemented by adapting the growing suite of AI supervision instruments, including ethical impact assessments, benchmarking, and algorithmic audits, to the Flemish context, alongside investment in impact monitoring tools that provide evidence of intended effects and justify the safeguards accompanying AI applications. The UNESCO Ethical Impact Assessment can be specifically tailored.

# POLICY AREA 2: ETHICAL GOVERNANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

## 2.1 Incentivise interdisciplinary collaboration in AI across the Flanders AI Policy Plan.

The Flanders AI Policy Plan should extend its rich collaboration ecosystem with collaboration structures that proactively incentivise cross-fertilisation across its three pillars. This could mean building a flexible project funding mechanism that systematically invites KDM, VAIA, amai! and public administration entities to apply jointly, fostering bottom-up collaborative initiatives addressing transversal topics. A more structural approach to collaboration could help ethical innovation significantly and encourage a harmonized approach.

Flanders should also consider reaffirming its commitment to ethical AI governance by strengthening the third pillar's advisory role, especially in developing governance bodies that can operationalize value-driven innovation in such a manner that public and human values are proactively embedded in projects and retroactively discussed if necessary.

### 2.2 Build on the Flemish AI Strategy for Government, further developing a shared value framework, governance bodies and new AI roles.

Flanders should develop a Government Shared Vision for AI through an inclusive, facilitated process across its network of public administration entities, addressing transparency, algorithmic discrimination and cybersecurity as priority concerns. The goal is to align public sector entities around a common vision and roadmap for AI innovation to support standardized understanding across the ecosystem.

To translate vision into practice, the Flemish Government should establish governance bodies capable of supporting reliable, trustworthy, and ethical AI across public administration. This includes creating an independent, interdisciplinary Ethical Impact Committee to advise AI projects, as well as a dedicated algorithm auditing unit available as a service to entities across Flanders.

Finally, to complement these structures, individual roles should be mandated, including AI Compliance Officers who can engage with technical teams early in the life cycle. Alongside this, a network of AI Impact Officers can be developed across the public administration, to support the process of involving different stakeholders in AI governance.

## POLICY AREA 3: DATA POLICY

### 3.1 Consider how to synchronize data policy with AI developments in the EU AI Act, cybersecurity and digital sovereignty domains.

Flemish AI policy should be actively synchronised with related policy digital domains, including data, cybersecurity, and emerging technologies such as robotics and quantum computing. In particular, the revised Cloud Strategy should explicitly address data sovereignty, transparency, and data protection, while also accounting for the cybersecurity implications of AI systems.

Flanders should also explore what data governance frameworks are needed to support responsible AI usage and ongoing EU AI Act developments, including emerging digital sovereignty concerns, data lineage, AI-generated data, data governance compliance roles, purpose compatibility assessments and human oversight across the full AI and data lifecycle.

### 3.2 Explore possibilities to improve data quality by strengthening lifecycle monitoring and feedback mechanisms.

Existing data governance strategies should be extended to include structured feedback mechanisms that allow AI actors to learn from mistakes and share best practices. A practical step would be advocating for a Flemish AI Incident and Mistakes repository, designed to surface recurring failure patterns such as model drift, data gaps, and vendor opacity.

Complementing this, Flanders should develop lifecycle monitoring tools including an AI incident taxonomy and proportionate reporting templates that define what must be logged when an AI or data incident occurs. Mechanisms should also be put in place to require AI actors to actively disclose and address stereotyping in AI outputs and underlying datasets.

## POLICY AREA 4: DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

### 4.1 Develop capacities to coordinate with different levels of Belgian federal and European governance.

As a regional government with strong innovation funding leverage but regulatory dependence on Belgian federal and European institutions, Flanders must treat multilevel coordination not merely as a prerequisite but as an opportunity for greater policy harmonisation. Best practices developed in Flanders should be shared under open licences to enable re-use by other national and international entities.

To institutionalise this exchange, Flanders should explore establishing an intergovernmental hub for sharing initiatives and lessons learned across federal and regional levels. Consider exploring models which structurally incentivise genuine co-ownership, including a clear scope and funded positions. Beyond the Belgian context, Flanders could also strengthen its representation in international peer learning networks, such as UNESCO's AI Ethics Experts without Borders and the Global Network on Supervisory Authorities.

# POLICY AREA 5: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOSYSTEMS

## 5.1 Establish a coordination mechanism for AI and environmental impact.

The environmental sustainability of AI is attracting growing attention, yet concrete governance responses remain limited. This gap represents both a structural challenge and a significant opportunity for Flanders to lead on governance innovation. Flanders should establish a formal coordination mechanism that bridges its AI governance structures with environmental and climate policy bodies, such as a cross-portfolio advisory committee with a clear mandate to bridge policy domains.

## 5.2 Develop structured evaluation of the environmental impact of AI.

Flanders should mandate structured environmental impact evaluation across the full AI system lifecycle, covering land, energy, and water use, and extending beyond research to encompass both public and private sectors. This could include dedicated policy to assess and address the ecological footprint of AI, mandatory monitoring of data centre energy usage, and active advocacy at European level for greater transparency on the energy and water consumption of large model providers.

Public procurement offers a practical lever for driving resource efficiency. Flanders should develop standardised information requirements for public tenders covering the energy footprint of AI models in both development and operation, as well as the energy sources, cooling techniques, and equipment circularity of cloud and data infrastructure. Ecological impact should also be embedded as a formal scoring criterion in procurement processes, with preference given to low-energy, low-tech solutions in local settings.

# POLICY AREA 6: GENDER, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

## 6.1 Embed inclusion as a core pillar and guiding principle in the development of AI-related policies.

Inclusion should be treated as a structural commitment rather than an add-on, with both dedicated policy and sustained financing. AI initiatives and policies can be explicitly addressed in ongoing digital inclusion policy development. For example, Flanders should clearly articulate its own role in the Women in Digital agenda, translating European and federal initiatives more fully into the Flemish context. AI-related policies should reflect the diversity of the Flemish population and ensure equal access to AI technologies and their benefits, particularly for marginalised groups across rural and urban areas. Structural funding for digital inclusion infrastructure must be maintained to prevent geographic gaps from deepening, particularly where local administrations have struggled to mainstream inclusion approaches. Mandatory diversity and inclusion KPIs should be defined for publicly subsidised AI projects, and inclusion-by-design principles should be systematically integrated from the outset of AI projects, including mechanisms to ensure broad participation of all stakeholders.

Gender equity deserves particular attention across several dimensions. Gender-disaggregated statistics should be mandated to track progress on parity in STEM and AI fields, as well as to monitor the impact of AI on job sectors with high female representation. Gender bias in HR-related AI systems should be treated as a technical risk control issue rather than a compliance formality, with recruitment AI systems required to undergo bias audits prior to deployment. Flanders should actively consider the gendered consequences of AI, such as gender-related harms on digital platforms in the short term and labour displacement in the long term. To facilitate these developments, consider joining and collaborating with UNESCO's Women4Ethical AI network.

## POLICY AREA 7: CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

### 7.1 Continue supporting Flemish AI models and benchmarking.

Flanders should continue investing in AI models that reflect its linguistic and cultural specificity, including targeted projects to improve speech recognition of Flemish accents and dialects. AI systems should also be thoughtfully incorporated into the preservation, enrichment, and accessibility of tangible, documentary, and intangible cultural heritage, with the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI explicitly embedded in policy instruments governing heritage institutions. Flanders may consider joining UNESCO's Coalition for Linguistic Diversity.

Flemish benchmarking initiatives and governance mechanisms should be supported to ensure that AI systems and their underlying datasets do not entrench cultural, economic, or social inequalities, facilitate the spread of disinformation, or undermine freedom of expression and access to information.

## POLICY AREA 8: EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

### 8.1 Prioritise investment in a coordinated approach to inclusive AI literacy and reskilling trainings for all levels of society

AI literacy is the primary barrier to AI adoption and for society to reap the benefits of responsible AI innovation. AI literacy is at the same time a structural lever to prevent the deepening of existing digital divides, emerging cybersecurity threats, and long-term socioeconomic sustainability. Inclusive AI literacy should be embedded as a policy priority across all levels, with a human-centred approach that makes inclusion a reflex.

Flanders should develop a harmonised approach to AI skills training, in coordination with priorities in digital skills, digital inclusion and labour market adaptability. Wide-reaching AI literacy training should be emphasised for the general public to empower people and reduce digital divides exacerbated by the growing adoption of AI systems. This is to be complemented by actively promoting the participation and leadership of underrepresented groups, including girls and women, diverse ethnicities and cultures, persons with disabilities, and those not yet fully benefiting from digital inclusion. At the same time, upskilling trainings for the private sector should address not only users but also frontline innovators and management, to ensure more structural innovation capacity, with mechanisms to support employees through transitions and safety nets for those who cannot be retrained.

### 8.1 Continue to support responsible AI in education and fundamental research

Ongoing monitoring of AI's impact on education should be supported, feeding into the shared vision process to ensure responsible and ethical use of AI in teaching, teacher training, and e-learning.

Sufficient attention should also be maintained for fundamental AI research alongside valorisation efforts, with the scientific community playing an active role in policy contribution and in building public awareness of both the strengths and limitations of AI technologies.

## POLICY AREA 9: COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

### 9.1 Explore the possibilities for a coordinated response to AI generated mis- and dis-information.

A coordinated Flemish policy response to AI-generated mis- and disinformation should be developed, building on existing initiatives and extending their reach across civil society and the public sector.

# POLICY AREA 10: ECONOMY AND LABOUR

## 10.1 Support inclusive economic development by addressing both labour market impacts and AI sector needs

Meso-level monitoring of AI's impact on the labour market should be improved, moving beyond macro-level indicators to sector- and occupation-level insights that enable proactive workforce preparation. Businesses should receive clearer communication about the pace of AI-driven change and its workforce implications, including labour market impacts and ethical aspects of AI systems. This could be connected to a harmonised approach to AI literacy trainings.

To strengthen the impact of trustworthy AI, the domestic AI sector should also be supported. Its visibility and contribution to the economy can be highlighted as part of innovation monitoring. The evolving needs of smaller and medium sized enterprises should continue to be monitored and addressed, including through neutral guidance in making informed and appropriate AI adoption choices. The visibility and accessibility of existing resources can be strengthened, for example with the opportunities to access compute capacity, including through the Flemish Supercomputer Centre and its regional antennae.

## 10.2 Promote sector-specific value frameworks for AI

Flanders should encourage the development of sector-wide visions and value frameworks for AI, promoting structural integration of AI into workflows rather than relying on ad hoc individual adoption. AI adoption should not be confined to IT departments, but rather workers and non-technical profiles must be involved from the outset as primary users and frontrunners enabling innovation. Management and boards must be brought along with sufficient AI literacy to provide strategic leadership.

# POLICY AREA 11: HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELLBEING

## 11.1 Safeguard health, wellbeing, and the interests of young people in an AI-driven society

Flanders should establish and fund research into the mental health effects of AI systems, including risks around depression, anxiety, social isolation, addiction, and exposure to radicalisation and misinformation, with findings translated into enforceable guidelines for consumer-facing, social service, and educational contexts. Meaningful mechanisms should be put in place to engage children and young people in conversations and decision-making about AI's impact on their lives. Health and social sector professionals should be equipped to critically evaluate AI-assisted diagnostic and decision-support tools, with particular attention to guarding against automation bias in high-stakes decisions.

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