

# **GEGS Field trials Results**

**Quasi-experimental research**

**Report 1**

**Case Study Training Framework**



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	2
The GeGS Project	2
	2
Structure of the Case Study Training	2
	4
Implementation of the Case Study Training	4
	6
Outcomes and Results of the Case Study Training	6
	11
Conclusions	11

## The GeGS Project

GeGS (Good E-Guidance Stories) is an ERASMUS+ funded policy innovation project. It aims at testing innovative approaches to modernise European information, advice & guidance (IAG) service provision with regard to vocational and educational training (VET).

The specific objectives of the project are to improve IAG services by

- a) enhancing the culture shift in IAG for VET modernisation by co-creation of a comprehensive training measure for IAG practitioners leading to effective e-services;
- b) embedment of digital services: plan, test, adapt and introduce an AI based, digital IAG technology evaluate in the regions of Thessaly, Sardinia and Berlin.

The project thus supports the transition from in-person IAG counselling to blended or hybrid forms of counselling which combine e-services and in-person formats. The project design is based on the assumption that four prerequisites need to be fulfilled for this transition to happen:

1. The organisational structures and work processes support hybrid counselling and the use of e-services.
2. IAG practitioners are capable to use the tools (i.e., they are technically adept).
3. IAG practitioners are willing to use the tools (i.e., they have a digital mindset).
4. There exist digital tools which fit the specific tasks in IAG counselling they are meant to support.

In order to realise these requirements for digital shift and hybrid counselling in IAG, GeGS implements two components: (i) a training framework on aspects of e-services for IAG practitioners and managers, and (ii) an AI-based, digital IAG technology adapted to the region-specific circumstances and needs. Moreover, the implementation of GeGS obtains support from high-level authorities in some of the regions involved. The reasoning is that the culture shift intended in the project can be enhanced through a top-down sponsorship.

This report presents the results of monitoring and evaluation activities with respect to the first component of GeGS, the case study training framework for IAG practitioners.<sup>1</sup>

## Structure of the Case Study Training

The case study training builds on a framework developed in three previous EU-funded projects.<sup>2</sup> In those projects, 15 case studies were developed based on the CEDEFOP competence framework for IAG practitioners<sup>3</sup> and turned into digital training modules. Within GeGS, these case studies have been digitally enhanced and transformed into interactive learning tools. Moreover, the existing set of 15 training modules was complemented by adding three modules, which align to the remaining four CEDEFOP competences, but also refer to key digital competences as defined in the Digital Competences Framework (DigComp)<sup>4</sup>.

As a result, located on an interactive online learning platform (Moodle), there was a suite of the following four modules

<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of the evaluation methodology can be found in the document Methodology and Protocol description.

<sup>2</sup> Good Guidance Stories (<https://goodguidancestories.org>), Good Guidance Stories+, Good Guidance Stories 2.0.

<sup>3</sup> This framework defines 19 competences IAG practitioners need to successfully deliver IAG counselling ([https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5193\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5193_en.pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp/digital-competence-framework>

comprising 19 digitalised and digitally enhanced case study learning resources:

- Module 0: IAG & Coproduction (introduction to cooperative learning)
- Module 1: Discover the potential benefits of digital IAG transformation
- Module 2: The impact of digitization on relationships, collaboration, communication and work culture
- Module 3: Digital Story telling

These modules were compulsory. In addition, each learner group could choose a suite of modules / case studies to work on. In order to facilitate this choice, each participant conducted an online self-assessment at the beginning of the course from which recommendations for the learner group as a whole were derived.

The training was carried out using a hybrid / blended learning approach: individual learning and action learning sets, i. e. small, self-organized study groups of a few practitioners were combined with national coordination meetings which gave the opportunity to exchange about progress, get feedback, answer questions and stay in contact with all participants. Moreover, a total of four transnational exchange seminar sessions within the transnational and digital Community of Practice were planned.

The design of the training framework was based on the following hypotheses<sup>5</sup>:

1. The Guide curriculum and the Case studies are a flexible, accessible, motivating, productive and immediately usable method for the continuous training of IAG professionals, across the whole range of competences defined in literature and practices, in particular the 19 CEDEFOP competences addressed the need of IAG practitioners and staff for continuous training.
2. They are an excellent tool for transnational transfer of practices, ideas and experiences through the Digital Community of Practices they are embedded in. In fact, an effective shift towards digitalisation needs to be accompanied by interpersonal exchange.
3. Implementation of digital tools within IAG counselling need to be adapted to country- or region-specific needs, circumstances, legal frameworks and governance models, but also contain some features which are common in all settings – common challenges for cultural resistances, lack of digital competences, limitations imposed by legal and security regulations.

Thus, the training framework was expected to produce outcomes on two levels:

**On the micro level**, i.e., the level of each individual practitioner, practitioners participating in the training enhance their CEDEFOP as well as digital competences and to broaden their digital mindset. The underlying logic chain reads as follows: Since the 15 existing case studies have been digitally enhanced and transformed into interactive learning tools, they are more accessible and attractive for users, thus improving the learning experience and outcomes with respect to CEDEFOP competences. Participating in the online training also improves digital competences. Moreover, the digitally enhanced case studies serve as an example of what digital tools can look like and how they work, thus stimulating a change in the digital mindsets of the IAG practitioners. The success criterion for this aspect of GeGS is the number of IAG practitioners across the six regions involved who participate in the training and improve their competences within the CEDEFOP competence framework, with specific focus on digital competences applied to IAG provision. The project aimed at training a total of 180 practitioners (30 per region).

**On the meso level**, i. e. the organisational level of the institutions providing IAG, the training was to stimulate organisational change towards e-services and blended counselling. The major vehicle for this effect are the four new

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. project proposal p. 77.

case studies which address managers of IAG institutions rather than practitioners. Sponsorship from high-level authorities can further accelerate this change process. The success criterion for this aspect of the GeGS training is the change in managers' perceptions regarding digital change which is reflected through a before and after comparison of self-reported positions towards digitalisation.

The outcomes on both the micro and the meso level were to be fostered by inter-organisational and international exchange in the national and transnational Communities of Practice the learning platform is embedded in. These provide an opportunity for interpersonal exchange on all aspects of digital change intended in the project (organisational change as well as change in competences, skills and mindset), thus supporting these changes. Moreover, they provide an occasion to reflect on country- or region-specific settings as well as common features that need to be taken into account when it comes to digitalisation. The success criteria for this aspect of the GeGS training are the number of discussions with international participation on the online platform and the number of contacts or cooperations initiated via the online platform.

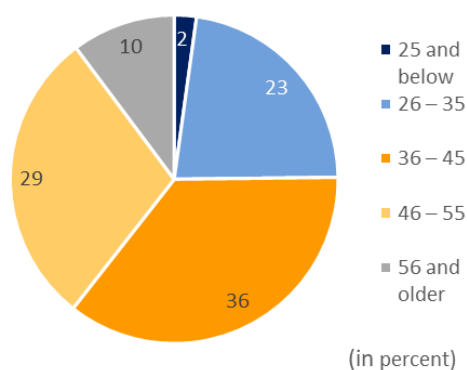
## Implementation of the Case Study Training

Case study training was implemented starting in December 2021 in 6 countries in a blended learning framework: participants were supposed to prepare the online material on certain modules or case studies individually and / or in smaller groups, so called action learning sets. They could also consult the online community set up in discord. After that, the national community of practice met in a workshop (either online or in person) and further discussed the case studies and their implications.

Beyond this general structure, implementation varied across regions: In some regions, the training was carried out with a single large group of participants over a longer period of time (up to 7 months); in other countries, several smaller groups were formed which took the training successively and often with reduced intensity. This way, participating in the training became more flexible and less time-consuming – an aspect highly relevant for attracting IAG practitioners into the training since they all report severe time constraints when it comes to any kind of training. This was especially true in regions where no high-level authorities were involved in the project so that high-level support for a redistribution of working hours in favour of participation in the training was missing.

As of December 2022, a total of 176 IAG practitioners had participated in the training, most of which described their professional position as “IAG practitioner” or “career guidance counsellor”. About 20% of participants (also) had managerial responsibilities (e.g., senior manager, project management, head of a team of career guidance counsellors). 78 % of participants, i.e., more than three participants in four, were female – a picture which closely mirrors the gender distribution in IAG in general. Most participants were between 35 and 55 years old, but there was also a relevant fraction of practitioners 55 years and older who participated in the training (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: age distribution of participants



Number of cases: n=136

Participants' feedback on the training was positive overall, with a few critical comments. The mix of different work formats from individual studies to video sequences to cooperative tasks was found to be pleasantly varied by the practitioners. Given the high work load and consequently the strict time constraints with respect to any kind of training IAG practitioners face in all regions, the blended learning approach was considered very useful, since it allowed for self-directed learning according to each participants' individual schedule.

Almost all participants stated that they benefitted a lot from the discussions with their peers, be it in action learning sets, online discussions or the national community of practice. Comments included:

*"The direct workshops with the Tutor were the most rewarding aspect of the course." (IAG practitioner)*

*"Found the online sessions very enjoyable and a great opportunity to discuss and share best practice with others working in the sector." (IAG practitioner)*

*"What was really useful from this in my view was exploring current practice within our own organisation and reflecting on this with colleagues." (IAG practitioner)*

Some also would have liked to have these discussions on an inter-regional or international level, thus expanding their perspective even further. The transnational exchange seminars which had been planned in order to initiate this kind of exchange had not been implemented as of December 2022.

Feedback on the training material provided in moodle was mixed. While most participants praised the case study approach and the fit of the chosen cases, many considered the amount of material to be too voluminous:

*"The sheer amount of case studies and additional things to read is pretty exhausting sometimes." (IAG practitioner)*

Participants propose to clearly differentiate between compulsory and additional material, or to focus on specific case studies in order to discuss these in depth rather than cursorily cover all topics.

Feedback on different aspects of the training varied among the participating practitioners, depending on their personal tastes and learning type. While some found the case study videos quite useful and time-saving, others – with a preference for written texts – found them too long and simplified to really get into the essence of the underlying messages:

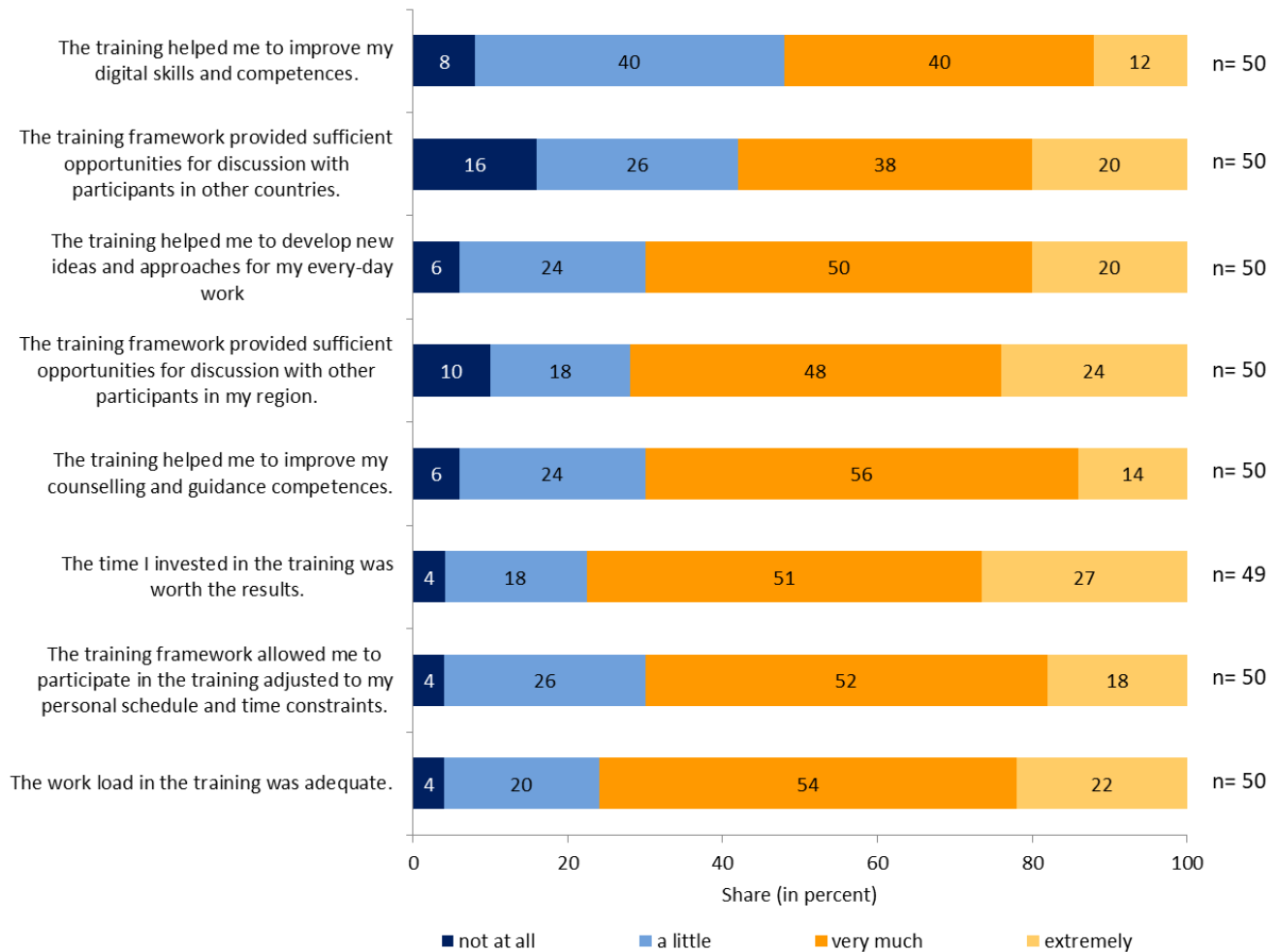
*"Educational material using video is very helpful for independent learning and makes education not boring." (IAG practitioner)*

*"I am an adult. I don't need to learn through play." (IAG practitioner)*

The platform itself was deemed somewhat cluttered. Participants would have liked a clearer structure, including a directory.

Figure 2 provides a summary of participants' assessment of the training:

*Figure 2: Participants' overall assessment of training*

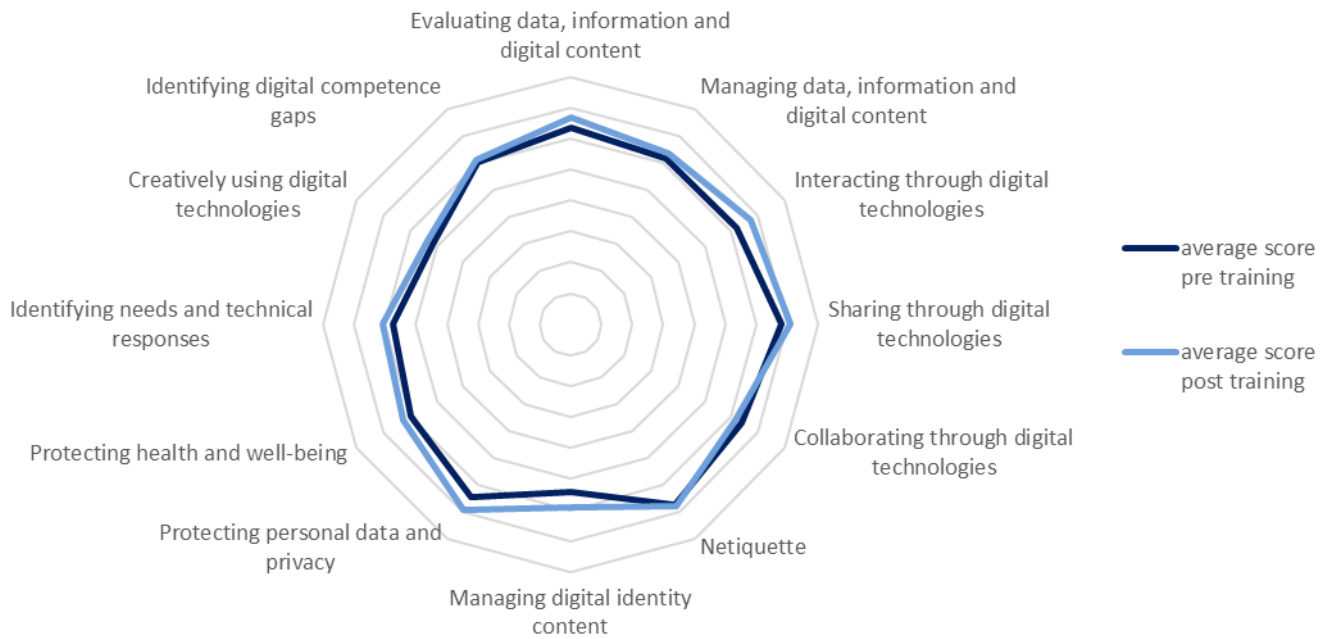


## Outcomes and Results of the Case Study Training

As explained above, the case study training was expected to produce outcomes on two levels: On the micro level, i.e., the level of the individual practitioner participating in the training, and on the meso level, i.e., the organisational level of the IAG institutions involved. Outcomes on both levels were evaluated through a quasi-experimental research design: The status before participating in the training was compared to the status after participating in the training, thus deriving insights into whether competences have improved or changes have been initiated.

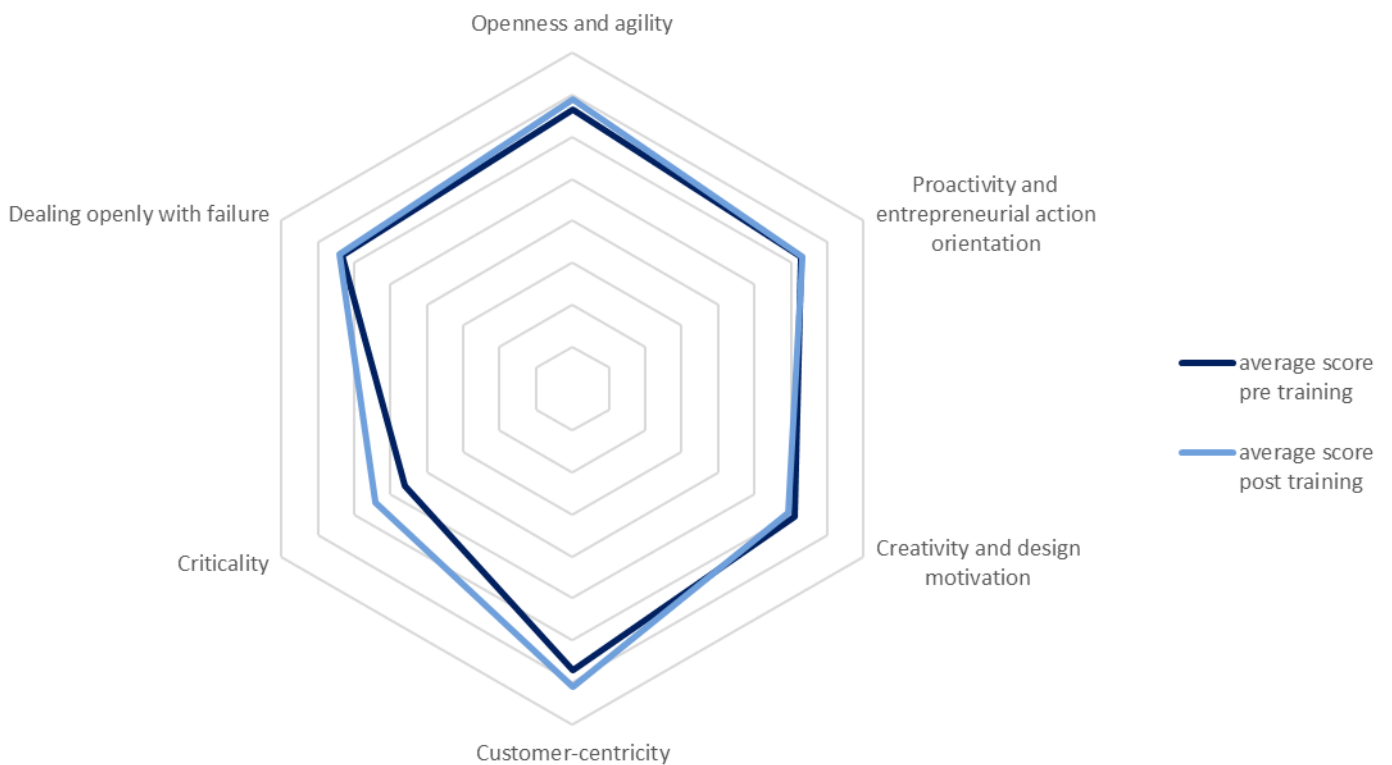
Intended outcomes **on the micro level** were for the practitioners to enhance their CEDEFOP as well as digital competences and to broaden their digital mindset. Improving digital skills was a highly relevant aspect of the training for many practitioners, since both the Covid pandemic and public demand have made e-service provision and digital skills among professionals in IAG absolutely necessary. Participants welcomed the opportunity to learn about and discuss new forms of consultancy work, in order to become more confident and proficient in a more digitalised work environment. **Figure 2** provided above already shows that in terms of an overall assessment, more than half of the participants believe that the training helped them to improve their digital skills and competences. A more detailed picture on the changes in digital competences over the course of the training is provided in the radar charts in **Figure 3** and **Figure 4** below. They show the change in digital competences and the digital mindset, with the dark blue lines depicting the average level of competency before the training according to practitioners' self-assessment and the light blue lines giving the average level of competency after the training.

*Figure 3: DigComp competences (pre and post training)*



Number of cases: pre training: n=138; post training: n=50

Figure 4: digital mindset (pre and post training)



Number of cases: pre training: n=138; post training: n=50

The radar charts show a slight increase in self-assessed competency in almost all dimensions of digital competences and digital mindset. While self-reported measures of competences need to be interpreted cautiously, as they are based

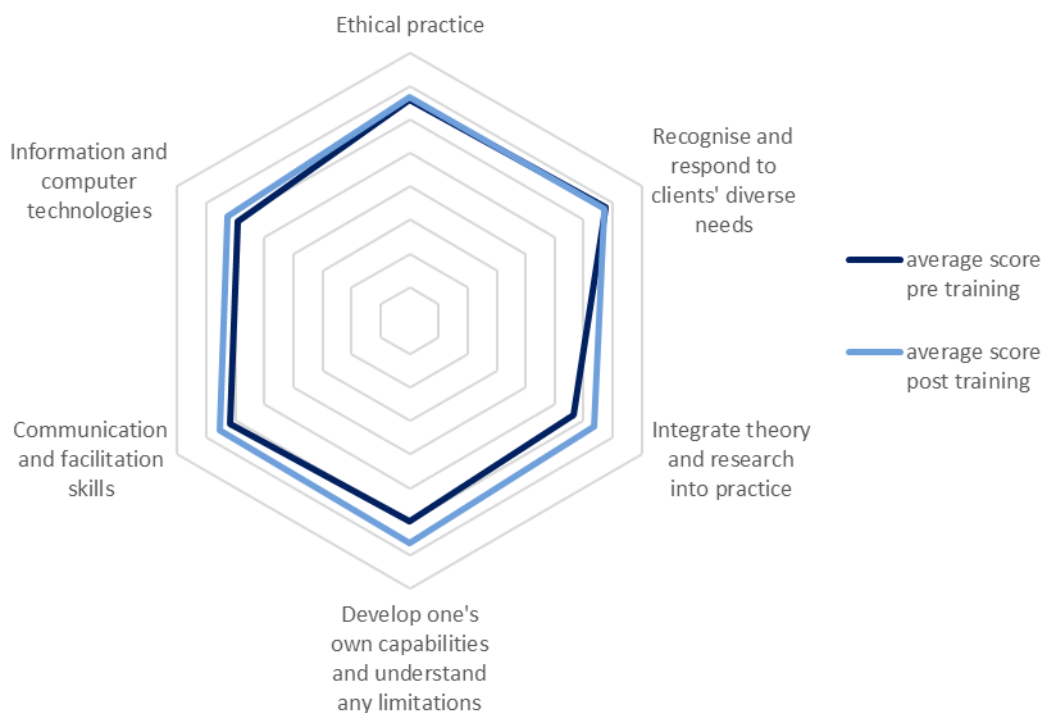


on a subjective perception at two discretionary points of time, the consistent increase allows for the conclusion that in fact, practitioners' digital competences have increased.

Similar results can be found with respect to the three sections of CEDEFOP competences: foundation competences, client-interaction competences, and supporting competences (cf. Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7). In the training, the interconnection between general competences in IAG (i.e., CEDEFOP competences) and digital competences were frequently discussed and examined. On practitioner put it the following way:

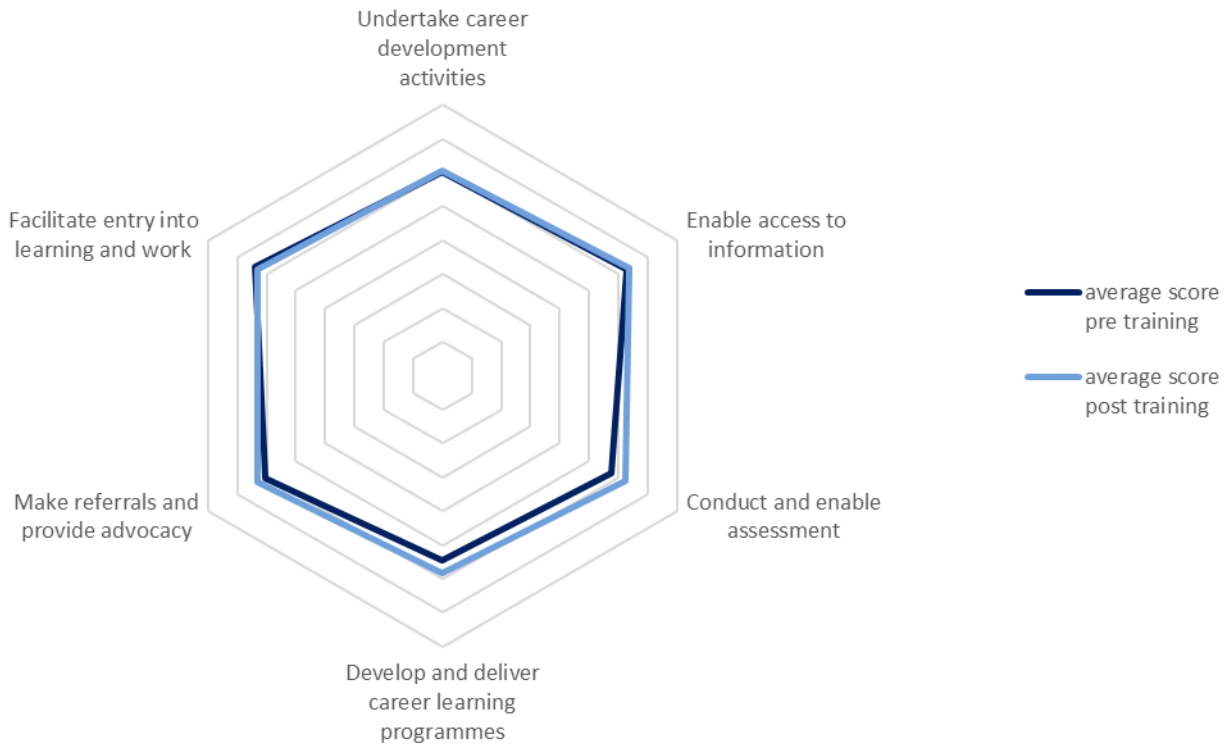
*“Connecting to or forging a bond with a client via online communication tools is learnable and should be a focal topic of counsellors' training.” (IAG practitioner)*

Figure 5: CEDEFOP foundation competences (pre and post training)



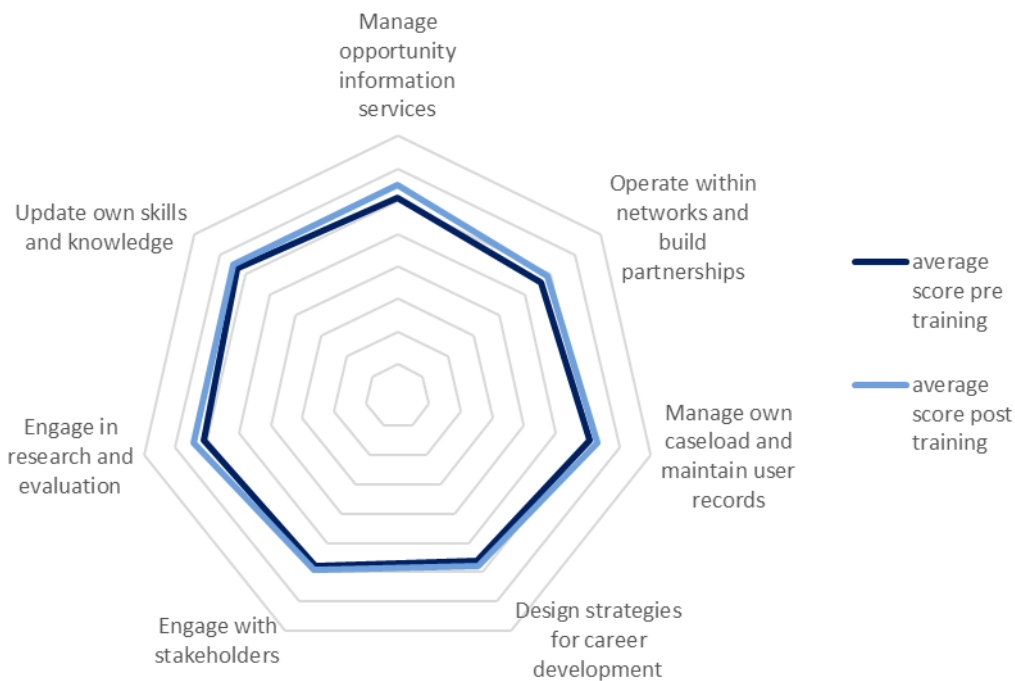
Number of cases: pre training: n=138; post training: n=50

Figure 6: CEDEFOP client-interaction competences (pre and post training)



Number of cases: pre training: n=138; post training: n=50

Figure 7: CEDEFOP supporting competences (pre and post training)



Number of cases: pre training: n=138; post training: n=50

The intended outcome **on the meso level**, i.e., the level of IAG organisations was to stimulate organisational change towards e-services and blended counselling. The reasoning of GeGS was that this outcome needed to be rooted on the managerial level of IAG organizations: Persons with managerial responsibilities needed to gain clarity on the contexts (e.g., specific counselling activities and / or target groups) in which e-services can generate an added value; suitable digital tools; technical foundations (both in terms of equipment and technical know-how) which are necessary to use digital tools; and adaptations in the work processes necessary to enable blended counselling. Subsequently, they were to define (and later to initiate) a change process which can lead towards implementing e-services. However, the course of the training showed that clarity on these issues was not only to be gained by staff with managerial tasks. Rather, practitioners on all levels benefitted from considering and discussing opportunities and obstacles connected with digitization. One practitioner put it the following way:

*“Undergoing the GeGS training has [...] introduced me to thinking about the possibilities which may lie in the provision of e-services in counselling for the first time.” (IAG practitioner)*

The GeGS training came timely in that a shift toward digitization and e-service was induced through the Covid pandemic and its related restrictions. Even before these extreme external circumstances forced institutions to rethink and at least partially shift their services into the digital space, some partner countries had government initiatives and requirements that made the provision of digital services a mandatory prerequisite for participation in publicly funded support or implementation programmes. However, external support for IAG institutions with respect to digitisation was and is scarce:

*“GeGS so far is the only source of information and support for IAG organisations in the process of digital transformation.” (IAG manager)*

Given this context, the GeGS training provided a good setting for the participating IAG institutions to evaluate and define their future (e-)service orientation. Participants reported that the GeGS project offered a framework to think about digitisation strategically, in exchange with other experts: The shift toward digitization and e-services – further accelerated due to the Covid pandemic – was reflected upon within the GeGS training and participants explored in what form and to what extent e-services can and will play a role in the guidance process in the future and which concrete needs for support organizations have. The pivotal insight was that digitisation needs to be considered on a strategic level, i.e., as a factor that influences almost all activities and processes in IAG. All institutions involved in GeGS stated that they needed more and more structured support in this process than currently available.

The GeGS training also helped starting a discussion on e-services' suitability to the multi-faceted target groups of IAG. There were general concerns about additionally reinforcing exclusion mechanisms by means of digital consultation and cooperation formats, but also lots of appreciation for the potential that lies within the much broader scope of digital communication means. Participants also pointed out that for certain target groups e-services might even be better suited than in-person services (e.g., clients with social anxiety, or clients from remote places of residence). Determining the optimal means of communication, or rather the optimal blended approach of communicating digitally and in person for each client will be a major challenge when shifting towards e-services.

Other, more practical issues with respect to digitisation discussed in the training were:

- Establish necessary work conditions in IAG institutions. This includes access to technical equipment and a stable internet connection, but also digital skills of practitioners.
- Avoid / reduce scepticism and human resistance to change in IAG institutions.
- Make sure the basic requirements for using e-services are met. These are digital competences, access to technical equipment and a stable internet connection.

Given these issues, participants pointed out that IAG institutions need more support in shaping and carrying out the change process towards digitisation. This includes financial resources, but also consulting and strategic support from **10**

stakeholders.

## Conclusions

The GeGS training is a comprehensive and highly flexible training suite for IAG practitioners. Its major strength is that it allows for individualized, self-directed learning in various intensities and styles, thus accommodating for different personal preferences and constraints:

- The training can be carried out as a comprehensive course covering all topics identified as relevant in IAG, or it can be designed as a selective training suite based on the specific training needs of the participants.
- The training can be adapted to the participants' workload and workflow in terms of scope and timing.
- The training can cater to different learning types by providing analogue as well as digitally enhanced and more gamified learning materials and by allowing for individual as well as cooperative tasks.

The pivotal characteristic of the training is its blended-learning design. While self-directed learning based on digital material allows participation despite high workloads and tight schedules, it became clear that in-person exchange is crucial in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the topics covered and to fully benefit from the training. Participants welcomed all types of interpersonal exchange implemented in the experimentation (action learning sets, online discussions, national community of practice). Moreover, they underlined that they would have appreciated a more intense inter-regional exchange in order to learn from other countries and settings.

The training made use of several digital tools: The material was provided on a moodle platform, the online discussions were set up on discord. This meant that some participants had to get familiar with tools they had not been using before, which could be time-consuming. In some regions, the group of participants therefore decided to use different tools, e.g., group chats on messengers. This shows that there is a trade-off between custom-fit tools and tools which users are already familiar with which needs to be taken into account when designing digital or blended approaches.

Within GeGS, a lot of material has been developed. The abundance of material requires a very clear structure of the material. This is an aspect where room of improvement has been identified over the course of the experimentation. Suggestions made by participants were to include a directory, and to distinguish between must-reads and additional information. Also, trainers need to be very familiar with the material and its structure in order to choose the appropriate parts and design a course best suited for the specific needs and preferences of the participants. If the training material is to be disseminated more widely, some material for training the trainers might be necessary.

A challenge all regions involved in the experimentation had to deal with was to convince IAG practitioners to participate in the training. All countries report that practitioners face a workload which effectively prohibits any activities beyond their core tasks. In regions in which high-level authorities are involved in GeGS, this issue could be resolved with their support. In the other regions, the local project partners had to put a lot of effort into defining the benefits of the training and / or had to reduce its scope in order to attract practitioners.

# CONTACT

## CONTACT

Silke Kriwoluzky  
SÖSTRA GmbH  
kriwoluzky@soestra.de

