

WP 3: Quasi- experimental research design, data collection and analysis

Final Report

Results of the

Quasi-Experimental Field Trial



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The GeGS Project

GeGS (Good e-Guidance Stories) was an ERASMUS+ funded policy innovation project that took place from March 2021 to June 2024. It aimed at testing innovative approaches to modernise European information, advice & guidance (IAG) service provision with regard to vocational and educational training (VET). GeGS tested the following hypothesis:

The IAG digitalisation process is not only about new technology, but needs to be flanked by systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences to ensure that effective IAG e-services will be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering. (proposal, p. 72)

In order to test this hypothesis, GeGS implemented two components in a quasi-experimental field trial setting: (i) a training framework for improving counselling as well as digital competences in e-service provision for IAG practitioners and managers, and (ii) an AI-based, digital IAG technology adapted to region-specific circumstances and needs. The full course of the field trials took place in three European regions: region of Berlin (Germany), region of Thessaly (Greece), and region of Sardinia (Italy). In these regions, the implementation of GeGS obtained support from high-level authorities. The reasoning was that the culture shift intended in the project could be enhanced through a top-down sponsorship. Partners from three other European countries (France, Ireland, and UK) were involved in the first part of the field trials as a control group regarding the effects of involving high-level authorities.¹

This final report tests the GeGS hypothesis against the evidence from the quasi-experimental research activities. It thus draws a conclusion on whether and to what extend the hypothesis holds.² It does so by answering the following three questions derived from the hypothesis:

1. Was GeGS designed and implemented according to the hypothesis, i.e.
 - a. did it offer systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences?
 - b. did the IAG e-services used in the experimentation have the potential to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering?
2. Were the IAG e-services designed in GeGS
 - a. client-centered, holistic and empowering?
 - b. effective?
3. Did the training opportunities ensure the design of client-centered, holistic and empowering IAG e-services?

The hypothesis and the experimentation design

In a first step, we check whether GeGS was designed and implemented such that it could test the hypothesis. This means that (a) it had to offer systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences (which then had the potential to ensure that effective IAG e-services will be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering) and (b) the new technology used in the experimentation provided the opportunity to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering.

¹ For findings on this comparison, see Evaluation Report 1: Case Study Training Framework.

² Details on the results of the quasi-experimental research activities with respect to the specific field trials can be found in report 1 and 2 of WP 3.

Systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences

For the training, GeGS built on a case study training framework which had been developed in three previous EU-funded projects.³ It consisted of 19 digitalised and digitally enhanced case study learning resources, located on an interactive online learning platform (moodle), which reflected the IAG competences as defined in the CEDEFOP competence framework for IAG practitioners⁴, but also referred to key digital competences as defined in the Digital Competences Framework (DigComp)⁵. The training was carried out in a participatory way, using a hybrid/blended learning approach: individual learning and action learning sets, i. e. small, self-organised study groups of a few practitioners were combined with national coordination meetings which gave participants the opportunity to exchange about progress, get feedback, answer questions and stay in contact.

Participants praised the mix of different work formats from individual studies to video sequences to cooperative tasks to be pleasantly varied. Given the high workload and consequently the strict time constraints with respect to any kind of training faced by IAG practitioners in all regions involved, the blended learning approach was considered very useful, since it allowed for self-directed learning according to each participant's individual schedule. At the same time, almost all participants stated that they benefitted a lot from direct discussions with their peers, be it in action learning sets, online discussions or the national community of practice.

It can thus be concluded that the training developed and carried out within GeGS provided systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences.

The IAG e-services and their potential to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering

For the IAG e-services to have the potential to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering both, the digital tool and counselling process used to deliver the e-services had to have the potential to have these characteristics.

Prerequisite 1: The digital tool used in the e-services had the potential to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering.

The digital tool the IAG e-services tested in GeGS were based on was Jobiri⁶, an innovative AI-driven online career counselling tool developed by an Italian company. Jobiri provides information and support for the three main stakeholders in the matching process on the labour market: job-seekers, companies, and IAG practitioners. For job-seekers, the platform compiles job offers from different sources, provides support on writing a CV or a cover letter, and offers video lessons on employability skills, training and feedback for job interviews. Companies can post job offers as well as search and select potential candidates from the talent database. For IAG practitioners, the platform offers tools to collect and manage information and training material and to manage the matching process between job-seekers and companies. Moreover, Jobiri analyses information on the labour market and derives insights regarding required skills and competences. All these functionalities make Jobiri a powerful tool to support matching and job placement and to give hints at the direction of further professional development, whereas it is less suitable for supporting IAG counselling pertaining general professional orientation or in contexts where counselling needs go well beyond labour-market related issues, e.g., including topics such as housing, residence or work permits, care responsibilities, or language acquisition.

Within GeGS, the tool was adapted for use in each of the three regions involved in its testing (Berlin, Thessaly, and Sardinia). The adaptation process involved translating the platform and its tools into German and Greek and implementing web scraping for job opportunities in the regional markets (including technical revisions such as deduplication of data and training of the dataset). Due to financial and time constraints, adjustments with respect to the structure or content of the tool were not feasible within the scope of the project. Jobiri therefore remained a client-centered, holistic and empowering tool in the range of job search and matching. For other purposes in the context of

³ Good Guidance Stories (<https://goodguidancestories.org>), Good Guidance Stories+, Good Guidance Stories 2.0.

⁴ This framework defines 19 competences IAG practitioners need to successfully deliver IAG counselling (https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5193_en.pdf).

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp/digital-competence-framework>

⁶ <https://www.jobiri.com>

IAG counselling, e.g., with regard to client-centricity, comprehensiveness and potential for empowerment, the fit was limited. This became especially clear when the tool was tested with young clients at the verge of leaving school and with immigrants.

It thus has to be concluded that the extent to which the technology used in the experimentation could be adapted in a client-centered, holistic and empowering way was limited due to constraints on both financial and time resources within the project. Instead, the experimentation tested an existing tool which is client-centered, holistic and empowering towards a specific group of clients for IAG counselling, namely for job-seekers with a rather clear vision of their future professional development.

Prerequisite 2: The counselling process applied to deliver the e-services had the potential to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering.

Shaping the counselling processes for delivering the e-services was not an explicit component of the experimentation. Rather, practitioners were expected to adjust their individual counselling processes in order to incorporate the digital tool. These existing, tried-and-tested counselling processes usually were client-centered, holistic and empowering. Moreover, several of the CEDEFOP competences covered in the GeGS training are related to the development of a well-designed counselling process. It can thus be concluded that the counselling process applied to deliver the e-services had the potential to be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering.

The e-Services

The first aspect to test with respect to the GeGS hypothesis concerns the nature of the IAG e-services designed in GeGS: We analyse whether they were (a) client-centered, holistic and empowering, and (b) effective.

Client-centered, holistic and empowering e-services

Client-centered e-services: As explained above, the scope for adjusting the digital tool used in the experimentation to specific target groups of IAG counselling was limited due to strict time constraints within the project. Therefore, the e-services which were designed based on this tool were highly client-centered for certain target groups, but less so for others. Specifically, practitioners stated that the tool was well suited for reaching people who have difficulties visiting the counselling office, be it due to a long commute, little time resources or other reasons. In other counselling contexts, e.g., when counselling required a strong personal relationship between the practitioner and the client, or when clients' language skills were limited, most practitioners considered the tool to be less suitable. Also, the lack of necessary technical equipment posed a barrier for certain clients or target groups.⁷ Due to these restrictions, the majority of the clients the e-service was tested with were young adults entering the job market for the first time after compulsory schooling or initial VET/university training who tended to be digitally savvy. For this target group, the e-services were client-centered in that they tied in with the existing interests, needs and workflows of the clients.

Holistic e-services: Jobiri, the tool used within the experimentation, is a comprehensive platform with multiple functionalities that support job search and matching as well as the application process. The field trials showed that in counselling contexts where these are the relevant issues, this digital tool can contribute greatly to designing services where certain tasks and steps are supported through the digital tool, while others are guided and accompanied by the IAG practitioners. The blending of both approaches – digital and personal guidance – then provides holistic IAG services to the client.

Empowering e-services: Using a digital tool in a counselling process passes more responsibility to the client. The digital tool tested in GeGS not only provided information, but also comprised self-learning tools and tools for preparing application documents. This made it possible to shift responsibility for the job orientation or search process from the practitioner to the client, thus fostering empowerment. Also, for the tool to reach its full potential in facilitating and

⁷ For details see Evaluation Report 2: e-Services in IAG counselling.

speeding up the counselling process, it was necessary that clients worked with it independently in between counselling appointments. The field trials showed that, while some clients embraced this opportunity, others exhibited a high level of service mentality, expecting the IAG practitioners to take action such as selecting suitable job offers for them or even compiling their applications documents. These experiences underline that providing e-services in IAG requires the practitioners to further develop their roles as facilitators rather than knowledge providers in the counselling process.

Effective e-Services

Ultimately, the implementation of e-services was expected to result in more effective service provision in IAG, where effectiveness referred to (a) higher quality of the IAG provided, (b) a faster/less time-consuming counselling process on the part of the clients and (c) a faster/less time-consuming service provision on the part of the practitioners. We therefore test the results of the field trials against these three aspects.⁸

Higher quality of the IAG provided: Feedback from the clients who were involved in the experimentation was positive overall: 76% of them stated that the digital tool employed in the field trials had provided them with useful information for their job search and/or career planning. Regarding the specific tools that were tested most (CV builder and cover letter builder), most clients stated that the results they obtained from these tools were achieved faster than without the technical support. Also, more than half of the clients were positive that they would not have been able to obtain results in a comparable quality without the tool. Practitioners' feedback, on the other hand, was mixed: While about half of them indeed found the tool to improve their counselling process, for example by providing much of the information needed in one single place, the other half saw little added value. The assessment seemed to correlate with the target groups the practitioners typically worked with, indicating that a digital tool has the potential to improve the quality of IAG only if it is geared towards the clients' specific needs.

Faster/less time-consuming counselling process on the part of the clients: 70% of the clients involved in the testing stated that using the digital tool had accelerated their job search and/or career planning. However, it has to be noted that this result is only of limited significance, since most clients did not have a lot of experience regarding an IAG process, thus lacking a point of reference for their assessment. Among the practitioners, who were able to draw a benchmark from their counselling experience, only a minority assumed that on average, their clients invested less time in the digitally supported counselling process compared to a counselling process without this digital tool. The field trials thus do not provide conclusive evidence for an accelerated process on the part of the clients.

Faster/less time-consuming counselling process on the part of the practitioners: Regarding their own effort in the counselling process, only a minority of practitioners stated that counselling involving e-services took less time than counselling without a digital supporting tool. About half of them assessed that counselling took more time with the digital tool than without it. Here, it has to be taken into account that the testing period was rather short and probably ended at the moment or even before the practitioners had fully familiarized themselves with the tool and integrated it into their counselling processes. Their assessment of the tool might have turned out differently if they had had more time to actually use it in a well-established counselling process.

Enabling e-Services through Training

The second assumption the GeGS hypothesis refers to is the significance of training opportunities for digital and IAG competences in the context of a digitalisation process in IAG. Therefore, the key question to be examined in this section is whether the training opportunities provided in GeGS indeed did ensure the design of client-centered, holistic and empowering IAG e-services.

The training developed and delivered within GeGS aimed at enhancing practitioners' counselling as well as digital competences and at broadening their digital mindset. Participants welcomed the opportunity to learn about and discuss

⁸ For details see Evaluation Report 2: e-Services in IAG counselling.

new forms of consultancy work, in order to become more confident and proficient in a more digitalised work environment. More than half of the participants assessed that the training in fact helped them to improve their digital skills and competences. This subjective overall assessment has been confirmed based on a pre-post-comparison of the average levels of CEDEFOP and digital competences, which slightly improved for almost all competences.⁹ The GeGS training thus proved to be successful in improving practitioners' counselling and digital skills and competences, which is a precondition for designing client-centered, holistic and empowering IAG services in general.

However, the GeGS field trials showed that using digital tools in IAG counselling not only requires factual competences in the counselling and digital field. What is indispensable are skills with respect to process design: The challenge IAG practitioners faced was to adjust their individual, tried-and-tested counselling processes such that they incorporated the digital tool in a useful and meaningful way. It has to be noted, though, that learning about how to adjust a counselling process to new needs or circumstances was not an explicit part of the GeGS training, nor was there a specific instrument in the experimentation that aimed at supporting this adjustment. Ultimately, practitioners carried out the adjustment individually, while getting familiar with and testing the tool, and made use of the regional meetings that were held on a regular basis over the entire testing period in order to share their experiences and obtain feedback from their peers. The lack of specific support for the change in counselling processes can be considered a shortcoming of the experimentation design which made the implementation of the field trials difficult: Since the counselling processes were not well adapted to incorporating the digital tool, some IAG practitioners could not be convinced that using it was of actual use for them, and also made it hard to convince clients that it was useful for them.

It can thus be concluded that the training opportunities developed and carried out within GeGS were only partly suitable for ensuring the design of client-centered, holistic and empowering IAG e-services. While they comprehensively covered factual competences and skills with regard to IAG counselling and digitalisation, they went short on how to adjust a counselling process in such a way that it incorporates a new tool. This could include general information as well as practical tools on process analysis and process design both for IAG practitioners and managers. Supported with this kind of material, the process of readjustment, albeit taking time and effort, could be perceived and seized as an opportunity for IAG practitioners to critically examine their usual way of structuring and organizing their work. At its best, this could result in a gradual transition to a new technology, complementing secure and reliable familiar tools.

Conclusions

The ERASMUS+ funded policy innovation project GeGS tested the following hypothesis:

The IAG digitalisation process is not only about new technology, but needs to be flanked by systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences to ensure that effective IAG e-services will be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering. (proposal, p. 72)

The conclusions that can be drawn from the quasi-experimental field trials carried out within the project are:

1. **There is no one-size-fits-all tool in IAG.** New technologies that are to support the design and delivery of effective IAG e-services need to be chosen or developed with a specific target group in mind. Aspects to be taken into account are: access to digital hardware, level of digital competences, and specific counselling needs. Also, the tools must be so close to the realities of the client's life that they represent immediately usable and low-threshold means for self-empowerment and independent progress, thus motivating the clients to actively involve themselves.
2. **Designing e-services in IAG requires additional competences on the part of IAG practitioners.** Practitioners have to critically assess their established counselling process and determine how to adjust it in order to incorporate digital tools in a meaningful and useful way. To this end, they need knowledge of and tools for process analysis and process design.

⁹ For details see Evaluation Report 1: Case Study Training Framework.

3. **Using e-services in IAG requires a shift in IAG culture and roles.** Blended counselling using both digital and in-person tools requires new roles for both clients and IAG practitioners. Clients gain a more active role in the counselling process. While this can be perceived as empowering, it also passes a greater share of responsibility to clients, which might be a demanding task. Therefore, IAG practitioners' role moves from being knowledge providers to acting as facilitators in the counselling process.

Based on these conclusions, we formulate a new, adjusted hypothesis, which reads:

*The IAG digitalisation process is not only about new, **target group-specific** technology, but needs to be flanked by systemic and participatory training opportunities on digital and IAG competences **with a focus on process-design competences, and a well-structured change process** to ensure that effective IAG e-services will be designed client-centered, holistic and empowering. (proposal, p. 72)*

This new hypothesis underscores the relevance of training opportunities for IAG practitioners which helps them to develop the competences they need in a digital counselling setting. However, in all countries and regions involved in GeGS, time resources for training were scarce. In order to enable practitioners to take full advantage of the potential of digitalisation, they need assigned time quotas for further and advanced training, which must be granted either by the individual employer or preferably by law.

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