



## **Transnational Methodological Study**

### **WP2**

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## Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

This report has been produced by DISCO Erasmus+ Partnership, which consists of:



Further information about the project and the above partners is available at [www.disco-project.org](http://www.disco-project.org)



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## A. Executive summary

The DISCO project is EU-funded and seeks to support the training needs of guidance practitioners, including career and employment counsellors, who have had to undergo major changes in their daily work due to the Corona crisis. Therefore, a methodology concept should be produced from the partners across Europe within a transnational study.

A significant part of the DISCO project is the associated transnational research, which comprises several parts. First, this report, which was produced with the help of desk research and interviews with practitioners. The results and suggestions of the partners presented here will subsequently be developed into a modular learning programme. Finally, a method e-guide will be drafted, which will be available to practitioners in educational counselling and career guidance as an open educational resource.

The Corona crisis had a lasting impact on the guidance sector and changed the entire guidance industry abruptly at the beginning. Due to these changes worldwide and especially in Europe, it became clear that the needs of practitioners working in this field would change as well. For this reason, the DISCO project was launched to provide training for these practitioners with reference to the upheavals caused by the Corona pandemic.

The conditions and circumstances for counselling and especially for online counselling vary greatly in the different partner countries. Likewise, the Corona crisis was dealt with very differently in the individual countries and other or no restrictive measures were imposed on the population. For this reason, the following questions arise: How has the work of the counsellors changed in the individual countries? What are the similarities and differences in the partner countries regarding distance counselling? How have practitioners experienced the last few years?

Research in partner countries consistently identified the following factors and challenges in the areas of **Practitioner Skills & Values**, **Working with Clients** as well as **System & Networks** that should be considered regarding Distance Counselling in Europe:

### Practitioner Skills & Values

<b>ICT Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Problems with connection</li><li>• Lack of Basic digital Skills</li><li>• Mostly no digital training</li><li>• No access to/ Lack of - technical equipment</li></ul>
<b>Autodidactic Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Independent learning of digital skills (books, tutorials)</li><li>• "Learning by doing" (esp. with Tools)</li><li>• Independent participation in online courses (i.e. MOOCs)</li></ul>
<b>GDPR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Lack of knowledge about GDPR</li><li>•Often no prior information on handling personal data</li></ul>

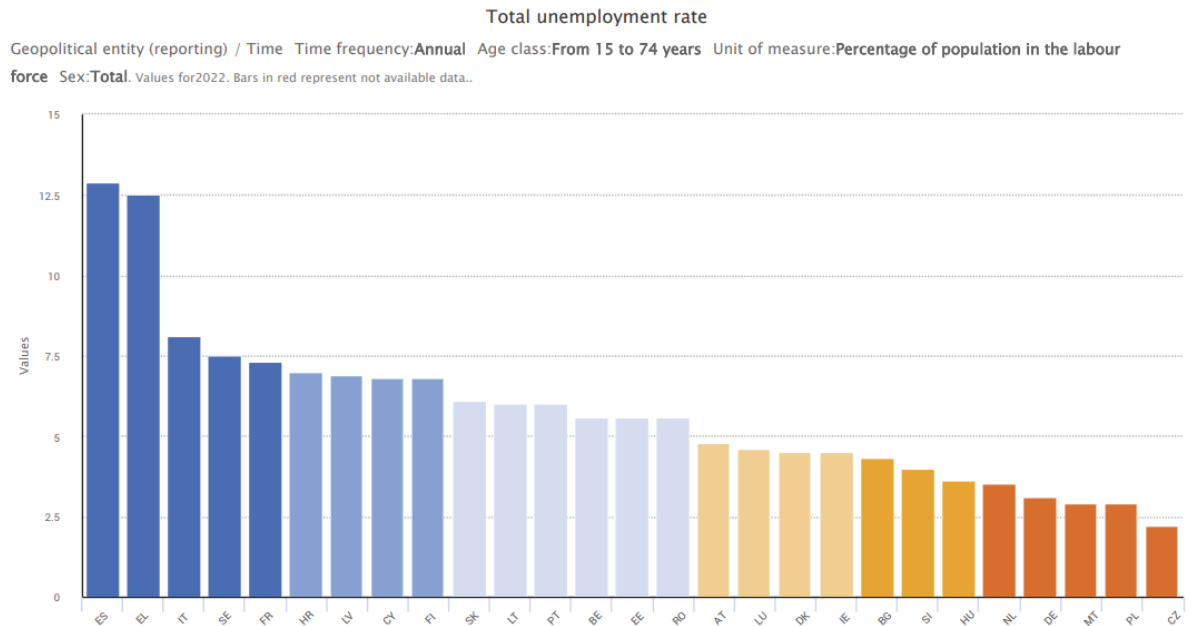
### Working with Clients

<b>Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communication harder online</li><li>• Para- and non-verbal communication significantly limited</li><li>• Counsellors have to listen more actively and adapt their way of speaking (i.e. slower)</li></ul>
<b>Relationship building</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relationship building considerably more difficult online</li><li>• Lower trust basis with clients than f2f</li></ul>
<b>Setting/ Online Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Digital Setting different than f2f</li><li>• Environment of clients have to be taken into account</li><li>• Online environment is socially more limited</li></ul>

### System & Networks

<b>Collegial Networking Online</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Networking easier and more often online</li><li>• Conferences and national events easier to access</li><li>• High quality intervention and peer counselling online</li></ul>
<b>Social Networks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social Networks often used to reach out</li></ul>

Unemployment rates in all EU countries are largely below the EU average of 6.2%. Above this average are nine of the 27 EU countries, with Spain and Estonia having particularly high rates above 12%. In relation to the partner countries, four of the countries are in the top third of unemployment rates (Spain, Sweden, Greece, Cyprus), Austria is in the middle and Bulgaria is in the bottom third. Due to these high figures, even after overcoming the Corona crisis, it is important to continue to strengthen and support the guidance sector for professions and education. The bar chart below depicts this status quo.



**Total unemployment rate**

Source of data: Eurostat (online data code: TPS00203)  
 Last update 26/04/2023 23:00

This graph has been created automatically by ESTAT/EC software according to external user specifications for which ESTAT/EC is not responsible. Graphic included.  
 General disclaimer of the EC website: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/legal-notice\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/info/legal-notice_en.html)



## **B. Background and Context**

### **1. The project**

The DISCO project supports the C-VET (Continuous Vocational Education and Training) needs of Guidance practitioners, including employment and careers counsellors, who face radical challenges and changes to their practice. It aims to improve their digital competences and support guidance and counselling services providers in planning implementing the needed digital transformation in IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance), as part of a cultural shift in VET (Vocational Education and Training), where the digital transformation of the labour market can be fully taken onboard in the daily work of guidance staff.

DISCO presents a response to the need for a step change in IAG and jobs/careers counselling practices. The project shall result in a Methods Concept for guidance practices and experiences in crisis contexts via distance and blended counselling after experiencing massive upheavals due to the pandemic. Furthermore, a Learning Matrix of competences is intended to be of support for practitioners. Lastly a Modular Blended Learning Programme for distance, blended and online guidance and counselling, as well as a 'Train the Trainer' Methods e-Guide shall be a useful instrument in working in a more digitalised environment in the future.

### **2. About DISCO**

The research has been undertaken specifically to, on the one hand, inform the needs of guidance practitioners in a new further digitalised environment and, on the other hand, evaluate the future situation of the counselling/ guidance field in 2023.

Under the term 'guidance practitioner' can be understood various occupational profiles as well as institutions and organisations of interest, of which some examples are:

- Career Counsellors
- Job Coaches
- Employment Counsellors
- Adult & Community Institutions
- Lifelong Learning Institutions
- Training Providers
- Youth Associations
- Community Organisations
- ...and the like.

### 3. The research

To achieve the goals of the DISCO project described earlier, an extensive and well-planned research component of each participating country was necessary. Partners were provided with a research framework, which provided guidance on the range and scope of the research to be undertaken and the type of sources to be examined. Partners were also provided with a report template, with accompanying editorial guidance, in order to ensure a common approach to the write-up of findings and a common format from which findings could be compared and analysed.

Qualitative data was gathered for the research purpose in order to provide:

- information on the current situation in guidance and counselling following changes in work routines due to restrictions for the containment of the Corona Virus in different countries,
- how specific practitioner skills and values have changed facing (technological and ethical) challenges in online counselling with clients and what kind of knowledge has to be provided in order to master these challenges,
- the changes in client work and communication due to the Corona crisis and differences in the building of relationship with clients respectively adjusting to their diverse needs,
- the difference in experiencing online counselling and guidance doing it compared to working face-to-face,
- an analysis of how different institutions/ organisations have planned and prepared the switch to online counselling as well as how networks can be maintained.

The research consisted of two types:

- Secondary data and desk research – each partner has identified relevant research studies, directories, statistical data from official and other publications, policy statements, programme guides and other material.
- Primary research – in the form of in-depth interviews and at least one focus group conducted face to face or with a videoconferencing tool.

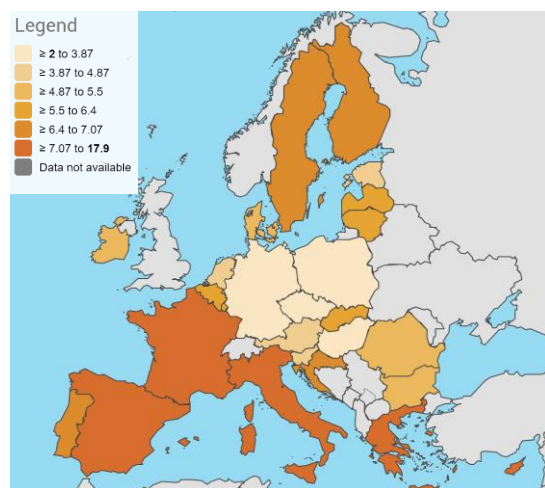
We set out in the section below an overall summary of the comparative situation and how variances in national contexts can be surmounted to properly elaborate the DISCO approach in a way that is commonly understood across the partners.



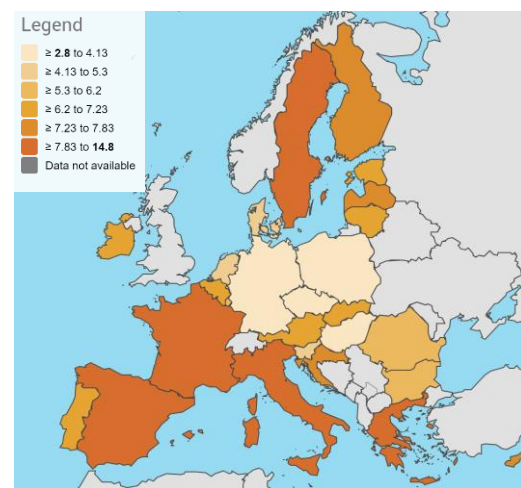
## C. Findings – Distance Counselling and Guidance in Europe

### Corona-crisis affecting different target groups

The corona crisis had a global impact and thus influenced both the world economy and the economic life of individual countries. The national economy in particular played a major role, as working life even came to a standstill in some sectors due to restrictive measures to contain the corona virus. Within the labour market, specific target groups quickly emerged that were particularly affected by these restrictions in their daily work and unemployment rose in some European countries over the period of the Corona crisis. This development can be seen in the map below, especially in EU countries in the North (Denmark, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia) and the West (UK, Portugal).

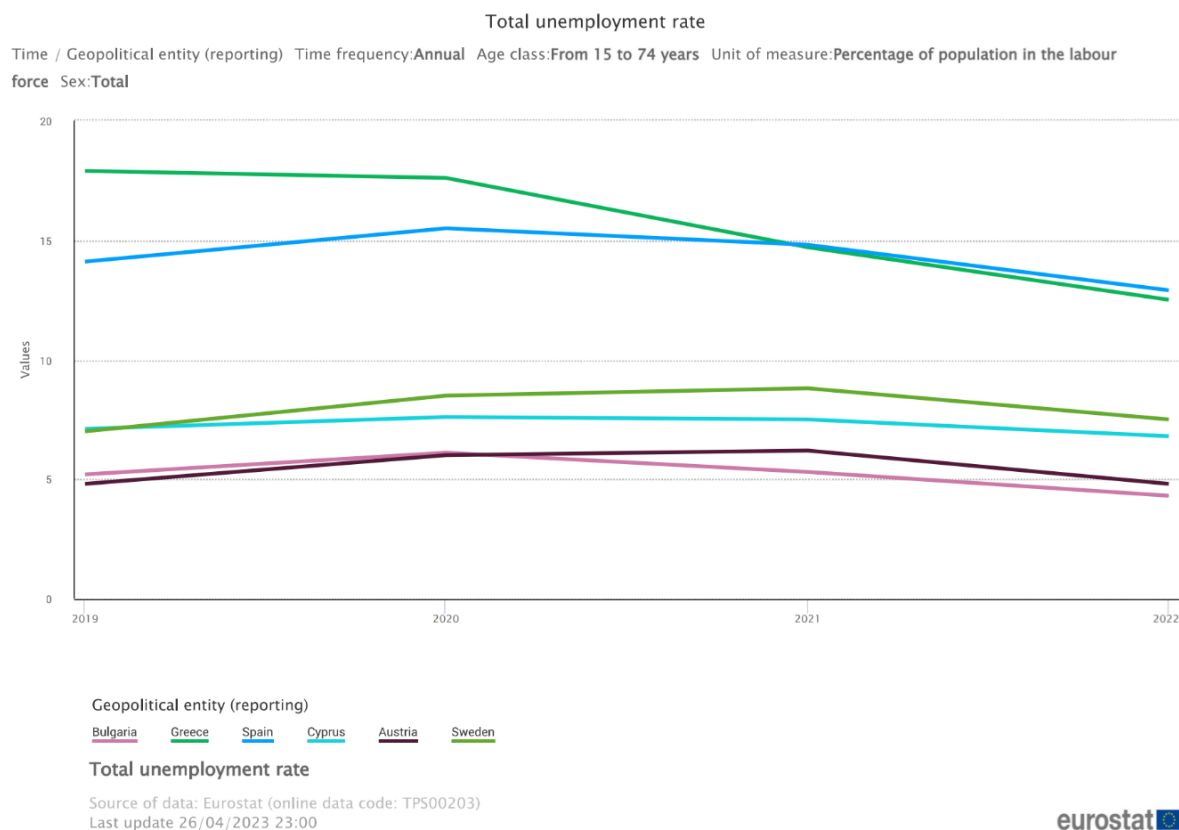


2019 [Eurostat]



2021 [Eurostat]

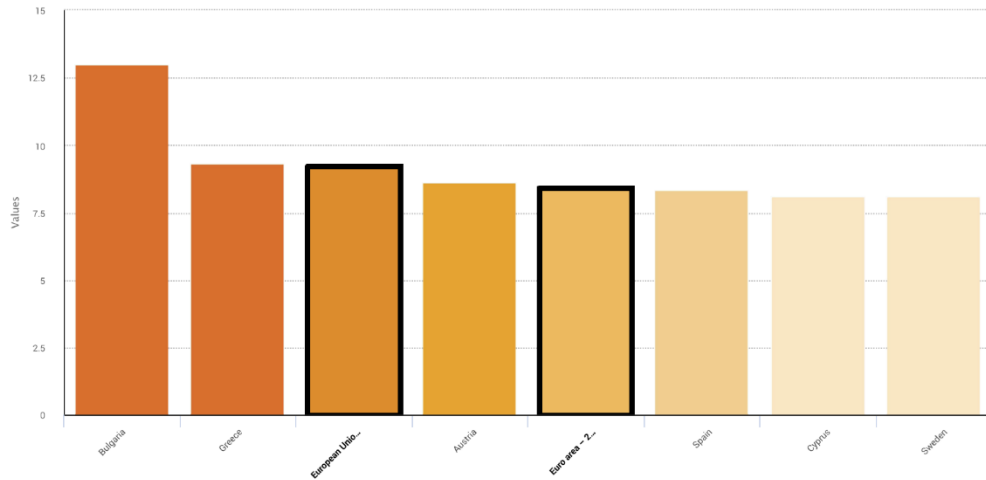
After the Corona crisis, unemployment rates started to fall again around 2021 and in some countries are even below pre-crisis levels. Of the partner countries, the unemployment rates of Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Bulgaria developed in this positive way. Austria's unemployment rate remained the same according to Eurostat calculations and Sweden currently has a higher number of unemployed than it did before the crisis. These developments can be seen well in the chart below. The chart shows the total unemployment rates of the partner countries (Austria, Sweden, Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Bulgaria) over a time span three years, from before the Corona Crisis in 2019 to after it 2022. In the Eurostat evaluation, all people between 15 and 74 years of age of each sex were taken into account.



The Corona crisis hit all partner countries hard and put their economies in a temporary state of shock. Individual groups were particularly affected, resulting in an increased need for guidance. In Austria, Sweden and Cyprus, young people in education can be highlighted as those affected, whose risk of being affected by unemployment increased significantly as a result of the Corona crisis. Spain, on the other hand, has to struggle with very high youth unemployment in general, which is the highest unemployment rate of people between 18 and 24 years in the Eurozone and which was exacerbated by the Corona crisis. Greece saw an additional steep rise from an already high level in youth unemployment as well. In Bulgaria, as in Austria, the psychosocial factors influenced by the crisis also played a major role for the overall population.

In the entire EU area, despite an economic recovery from the recession during the Corona period, inflation rates increased enormously. Thus, the average of inflation within the 27 EU countries in 2019 was 1.4%, and in the Eurozone even a low 1.2% - but these increased to an average value of 9.2% in the EU and 8.4% in the Eurozone. Among the partner countries, Bulgaria is particularly affected by the strong increase in inflation, with 13%, which is strongly above the average. This can be seen clearly in the following chart.

HICP – inflation rate  
 Geopolitical entity (reporting) / Time Time frequency:Annual Unit of measure:Annual average rate of change Classification of individual consumption by purpose (COICOP):All-items HICP. Values for2022. Bars in red represent not available data..



HICP – inflation rate

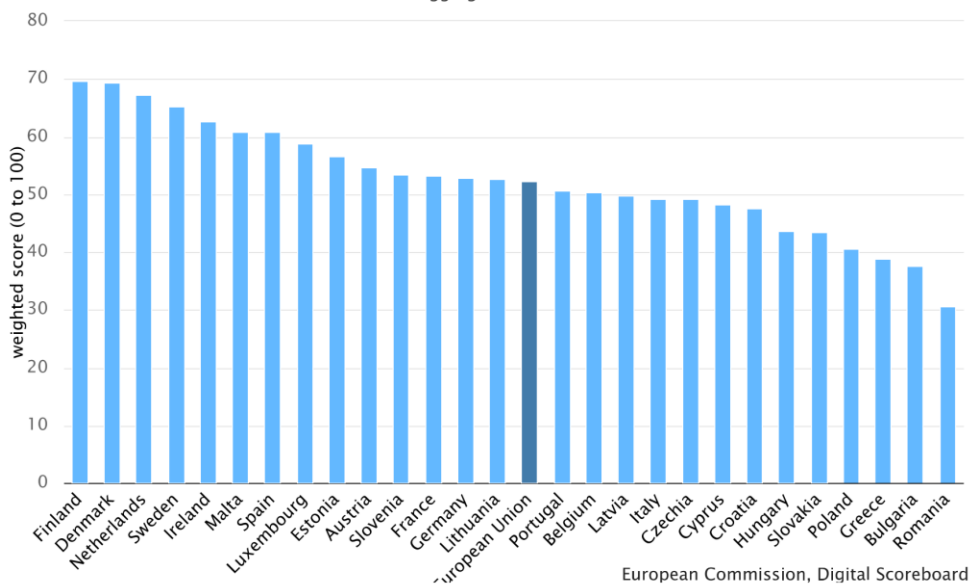
Source of data: Eurostat (online data code: TEC00118)  
 Last update 17/05/2023 11:00



With regard to the sectors affected within the partner countries, Spain, Bulgaria and Sweden in particular were affected by restrictions in cultural offerings. The Corona crisis also had a strong impact on the accommodation and catering industry in Bulgaria, Sweden and Austria, and on tourism in general in Spain, Cyprus and Greece. However, healthcare in Austria and Cyprus and transportation in Sweden and Austria were also affected by developments surrounding the Corona pandemic.

## Digitalisation – the current situation

Digital Economy and Society Index, by Aggregate scores  
 Aggregate score



European Commission, Digital Scoreboard

The chart above shows the Digital Economy and Society overall Index score per country for all EU countries. The chart above shows the Digital Economy and Society overall Index (DESI) score per country for all EU countries. While Finland is the best performer in this index for the EU as a whole, Sweden, Spain and Austria are all above the EU average of 52.3. Cyprus is in the bottom third of the ranking, while Greece and Bulgaria are in the bottom three in the EU. The European Commission describes the Index on their Data Visualisation Tool Website as: “a composite index that summarises relevant indicators on Europe’s digital performance and tracks the evolution of EU Member States, across five main dimensions: Connectivity, Human Capital, Use of Internet, Integration of Digital Technology, Digital Public Services”.

The status of progress in digitization in the individual partner countries is described in more detail below. As can be seen in the chart above, there are significant differences between the individual countries.

**Austria:** In the DESI Index Austria ranks number 10 and therefore lies above the EU average. Regarding the key areas looked at in the DESI Index, Austria ranks above EU average in Digital Public services, Integration of digital technologies as well as Human Capital, but when it comes to Connectivity the score is slightly below the average in the EU.

Looking at the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS), Austria performs well regarding the five dimensions building the state of digital transformation in the Scoreboard. In terms of digital public services, digital infrastructure and digital transformation at an enterprise level Austria performs relatively well, except when it comes to offering public services to businesses and the coverage of ultra-fast broadband internet. The roll-out of 5G mobile technology is comparatively advanced in Austria. Only midfield or lower is Austria’s performance in market-related aspects of digitisation as well as the share of ICT professionals in total employment.

Lastly, the Corona Crisis had a large effect on the acceleration of digitalisation in Austria, as people were forced to move into the online space, provided by video-conferencing tools. In this field, Zoom was one of the most used tools, despite concerns about data protection.

**Spain:** Spain is also rated under the top 10 of the DESI report and has reached the 7<sup>th</sup> place. It has outstanding students in the use of electronic systems for the exchange of information compared to the EU average, but still has to catch up in big data analytics and cloud usage.

During the Corona crisis Spain’s ICT sector has grown strongly, as well as the number of internet users. Also, Spain has been one of the top five countries regarding household internet access in the EU (2020) with a coverage of 95%. The Spanish digitalisation rating has risen in the last few years due to advances in connectivity and digital public services.

Although Spain is developing well in terms of digitalisation and also occupies good positions internationally, there are still aspects where there is a need to catch up.

- Human capital: in this aspect Spain performs below the EU average as only 55% of the people aged 16 to 74 have basic digital skills and the percentage of ICT specialists in the population is very low.
- Integration of digital technology in companies: Although Spain is ranked above EU average in the exchange of electronic data and use of social media in companies, it is far behind regarding cloud services.

**Cyprus:** In the DESI, Cyprus is ranked far below the EU average and only reaches the 21<sup>st</sup> place among the 27 EU countries. Since June 2002 a national digital strategy has been adapted to enhance digitalisation in Cyprus. It consists of the following objectives:

- Technology that works for people
- Vibrant, sustainable and resilient digital economy
- Open, democratic and inclusive digital society
- Green, digital transition

To reach the listed objectives, the government of Cyprus has set some aims to be achieved:

- Development and enhancement of basic and continuous digital skills
- Digitalisation among the business sector through the provision of equipment, training and support
- Enhancement of the STEM sector through the increase of STEM graduates
- Enhancement of skills especially for unemployed people

**Bulgaria:** Within the DESI Bulgaria ranks penultimate and thus 26<sup>th</sup> of 27 EU member states. At a score of only 32.6 Bulgaria is significantly below the EU average of 45.7 and so is the percentage of individuals with at least basic digital skills. On the share of ICT specialists Bulgaria also underperforms. In regards to businesses, Bulgaria is far below the average in the use of big data, clouds and AI's. Lastly, Bulgaria faces challenges regarding the digitalisation of public services.

Bulgaria is trying to support business digitalisation through the use of European Digital Innovation Hubs, of which four received a successful evaluation result. To reach the goal of contributing to the 2030 Digital Decade target, Bulgaria has launched a National Registry reform and designed a specific path to enhance digital transformation.

**Sweden:** Sweden, among the other partner countries, performs best at the DESI, ranked on the 4<sup>th</sup> place. Although Sweden is one of the best countries regarding Digitalisation in Europe, as well as among the most innovative countries in the EU (2020), it also had to face challenges due to the Corona crisis. The sectors mainly affected were culture, education and health as

they had to switch abruptly to a digital working environment. To support the public sector, Sweden's government has launched a specific four-year-plan to transform that sector.

**Greece:** In Greece, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a strong increase in public services offered online, which were very rare before. Nevertheless, the country is still lagging strongly behind the EU average, ranking among the bottom three on the DESI overall, and second to last in services offered. Greece is not lagging behind in all areas, as it scores above the EU average in individuals with basic overall digital skills, for example; yet these are made up for by other indicators: Greece is the EU country with the most households with no access to the Internet at home (14.5%), as well as the least companies providing opportunity for remote work (60.8%). Thus, despite many progresses since 2020, Greece still has a long way to go in terms of digitalization.

## Counselling and C-VET in the partner contexts

Since counselling and C-VET differ significantly in the individual partner countries, the systems are explained below on a country-specific basis. The counselling landscapes of the respective countries are discussed and the system of private and public counselling is explained.

**Austria:** The Austrian guidance landscape is extremely inhomogeneous and confusing. Guidance is mostly provided in educational institutions, by interest groups, labour market services, in company settings and in municipal, non-profit and private institutions. Adult education in Austria follows classical school education. In addition to educational guidance in initial education and in tertiary education, guidance is also solely offered in adult education.

The following **guidance providers** can be distinguished in Austria:

- Independent counselling centres (offer adult education independently)
- Adult education institutions
- Self-employed counsellors in the field of education (counselling on open market)
- The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (offers a virtual platform)

**Educational guidance in the field of labour market policy** provided by the Public Employment Service Austria is offered in the following facilities:

- Vocational Information Centres of the Public Employment Service Austria
- Career Information Service of the Public Employment Service Austria
- Educational Measures (orientation, qualification, active job search, training, work testing)

Also **educational guidance by advocacy organisations** are split into two providers:

- Vocational and educational counselling of the Economic Chambers and the “Knowledge is Forever” institutions (“WIFI”)
- Educational Guidance services of the Chamber of Labour

**Spain:** In Spain the main counselling service **Public State Employment Service (SEPE)** is an autonomous organisation attached to the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy. SEPE and the Public Employment Services of the Autonomous Communities form the National Employment System in Spain.

The body of the **decentralized system** consists of:

- Central Services
- 52 provincial addresses
- Network of on-site offices distributed throughout 50 provinces of the Spanish state, and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla (managing unemployment benefit procedures)

The **main roles of SEPE** are:

- Developing employment policies
- Coordination of labour counsellors
- Coordination of employment offices all over Spain
- Updating the data base
- Offering VET courses
- Supporting unemployed people

The **Organic Law (2002)** provides the legal framework for C-VET in Spain and includes university autonomy such as control over issuing diplomas/certificates and course/training specific to their university linked to studies without official titles but validation throughout the national country. Spain also offers a Dual VET System, where training at the educational centre is offered additional to practical training on the job. The program aims to increase job opportunities, reduce unemployment, increase permanent jobs and much more.

**Cyprus:** The VET system in Cyprus offers education on the secondary and tertiary levels, but the participation in VET programs is still low. VET programmes in the secondary level usually are settled in technical schools following a 3-year programme. For adults, VET programmes are easily accessible through private or public organisations, especially for vulnerable and unemployed individuals.

VET training for employees and unemployed individuals is provided by the **Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA)**, the ministry of education, the ministry of labour and other institutions. The HRDA also includes initiatives such as:

- Training programmes to registered unemployed individuals
- Employment and training to graduates
- Training to long term unemployed
- Training to companies
- VET training

In Cyprus there is no official definition of VET and a Cedefop report of 2018 shows a lack of familiarity of the Cypriot population with VET overall. That may explain the low numbers of participation in VET in Cyprus.

**Bulgaria:** Guidance can be divided into a public and a private level in Bulgaria. On state level the **National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET)**, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Employment Agency offer information, guidance and counselling.

The **ministry of Education and Sciences** offers guidance for students through a portal with 28 centres, providing individual or group services in:

- Information output and mediation
- Work on career guidance programs
- Advice on interests, attitudes and motivation for choice of education and profession
- Mediation between students, school and businesses

The **Employment Agency** provides services for employed, unemployed and students through 10 Career Centres of the Agency based in major cities offering:

- Support work of pedagogical advisors
- Professional Informing, consulting and guidance
- Instructions for self-informing through specialised information materials

**NAVET** licensed Centres for Information and Vocational Guidance (CIVG) offer:

- Counselling, Career guidance, coaching, competency assessment,...
- Implementation of various measures and programs
- Carrying out activities in accordance with different Acts and Codes referred to Labour and Education

**Sweden:** The Swedish VET is characterised by a strong connection to the labour market as it relies on it to indicate the need for a specific VET program. Sector representatives contribute to the development of the curricula including lectures and quality. Close collaborations ensure a high quality VET. Counselling is obligatory in school on any level though study and career counsellors, but it is not mandatory to offer formal career counselling with job coach organisations.



The main relevant policies in terms of C-VET and counselling in Sweden are:

- National Policy on Adult Learning and Education (APEL) (lifelong learning opportunities for adults)
- Education Act (opportunity to access education and training for all adults)
- Swedish Public Employment Service (career counselling, job matching, etc.)
- Municipal adult education (adult education and training, C-VET)
- Vocational education and training (VET)
- Regional development strategies (promotion of economic growth and development)

**Greece:** In Greece, several organisations are certified to provide counselling, under the supervision of different Ministries.

Supervised by the Ministry of Education, & Religious Affairs, guidance targeted at youth is provided at the following organisations:

- Centers of Educational and Counselling Support;
- Career Guidance Bureaus of Universities;
- Second Chance Schools of the Foundation for Youth and Lifelong Learning.

Furthermore, guidance is provided at Centers for Promotion to Employment, supervised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, with a focus on unemployed persons.

In the private sector, guidance is provided at the following kinds of organisations:

- at the Centers of Life Long Learning, licensed by the Ministry of Education;
- at Job Finding Bureaus and Temporary Employment Companies licensed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs;
- private practises.

There was a recent growth in private businesses (including private tutoring institutions) providing counselling, especially aimed at school students.

## Career Counsellors in the partner contexts

The training path to become a counsellor is also very specific across the partner countries. This formal training path is described in more detail below and the individual training institutions for each country are explained in more concrete terms.

**Austria:** In Austria the training in the field of educational counselling and career guidance is offered by various institutions, mostly in the form of courses, which are primarily aimed at people with initial experience in the field of VET. The courses can take place either as diploma

courses or as university respectively academic courses. They also are characterized by varying teaching units and durations of training.

These are **institutions in Austria offering training** in the field of C-VET:

- Federal Institute of Adult Education
- BFI Vienna
- WIFI Vienna
- Danube University Krems
- Sigmund Freud Private University
- Carinthia University of Applied Sciences

The offer of further education and training in this professional field is very limited in Austria, but a number of conferences aim to network and exchange experiences are held.

**Spain:** Career counsellors in Spain mostly work in public administrations/entities or in private companies/ entities. The largest number of jobs in professional counselling are offered by public administrations. The education for career counsellors in Andalucía is linked to a university degree either in social work, HR, psychology, sociology, law, business or related fields. Additionally, it requires specific training on the Andalusi Onorienta Network and 6 to 12 months of prior experience. Also there is a specific Selection Process including a two step preselection and a three step selection.

To become a career counsellor in the private sector you don't need a specific training or degree, but a **series of qualifications** are required for the position:

- University degree in social work, HR, psychology, sociology, law, business or related fields;
- Master's degree or technical course in employment guidance (recommended);
- Teaching or tutoring experience.

If one of the titles mentioned above is not present, there is the option to take a specialised course in career guidance. To have an university degree is just necessary if the desired position is the one of a labour or administrative manager.

**Cyprus:** To our knowledge there is no specific path that a career counsellor needs to take in order to get into this sector. However, this also highlights the need for more research to be implemented for the career counselling context.

**Bulgaria:** In Bulgaria **no state-accepted requirements** for the position of a career counsellor exist. The requirements for doing the job vary from a high school diploma to a specialised

higher education. For psychological testing and career guidance a psychological degree is required.

Career counsellors working in employment offices require an acquisition of Level 3 professional qualification in the profession of employment intermediate. Counsellors in the non-governmental sector and youth centres often are trained youth workers or trainers using methods of non-formal education. Their profiles vary and there is also no formal requirement for professional qualifications and education.

**Sweden:** In Sweden a graduation of the **Study and Vocational Guidance Programme** is necessary to become a career counsellor. For that you have to achieve 180 credits, equivalent to 3 years of full-time study. The programme is available at several colleges and universities around Sweden. An additional education for SYVs is offered by the National Agency for Education. There is no specific professional association or professional registration for career counselling in Sweden.

**Greece:** In Greece, EOPPEP, the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance, is the overseeing body responsible for upgrading and assuring the quality of career guidance provision in Greece.

Study programs in career guidance are offered by several Greek universities. These are accessible to graduates of the Departments of Psychopedagogy, Humanities and Social Sciences, and offer a master's degree. Continuous training programs in career guidance are also provided by Lifelong Learning Centers certified by EOPPEP, offering an alternative way to get the qualifications essential to counsellors.

Registration is mandatory for Career and Guidance Counsellors to practise their profession; there are two levels with different qualifications required and different scopes of activity.

## Conclusions

The DISCO project must take into account necessary aspects and identified factors related to Skills and Values of Practitioners, the Work with Clients as well as the System and Network of the respective partner countries. This will be done against the background of the planned design of learning modules, a learning matrix and a methodology e-guide for practitioners in Distance Counselling.

The key conclusions of this transnational report can be briefly summarised in the following points:

- ❖ Even though the employment rates across the EU shrank after the end of the crisis, they are still high, especially in some countries, which makes counselling still a necessity.
- ❖ The Corona crisis sped up the digitalisation of the counselling field and more digital counselling online/ from a distance is taking place.
- ❖ The level of digitisation varies greatly from country to country, which means that the conditions for digital work differ from country to country.
- ❖ The provision of C-VET varies just as much in the individual countries and is organised very differently by the state, as well as privately and legally.
- ❖ The training to become a career counsellor is very different in each partner country and also has different requirements; although there are variations of counsellors with no required training in every of the partner countries.
- ❖ In some of the partner countries VET is obligatory for schools and must be available for adults too at any time.

The learning modules planned following this report must address ICT Challenges, GDPR and autodidactic learning of counsellors within their skills and values. Also, when working with clients, the changes in communication, relationship building and setting/environment due to a move to online should be considered. Finally, in relation to the counsellor's network, collegial networking and social networks must be considered as an important factor for maintenance.

# Vienna, Austria

Completed by:

Alexandra Gössl, M.A.

abif



# 1. Introduction

The following report deals with digital educational counselling and career guidance and covers the whole of Austria. First, desk research was carried out, which includes facts and figures on the topic of digital guidance and the labour market. It also takes a closer look at digitisation in Austria and the training practice of educational counselling and career guidance in this country. However, the core of the report is formed by the results of a qualitative survey of practitioners who deal with specific groups as well as with general guidance on education and careers or coaching.

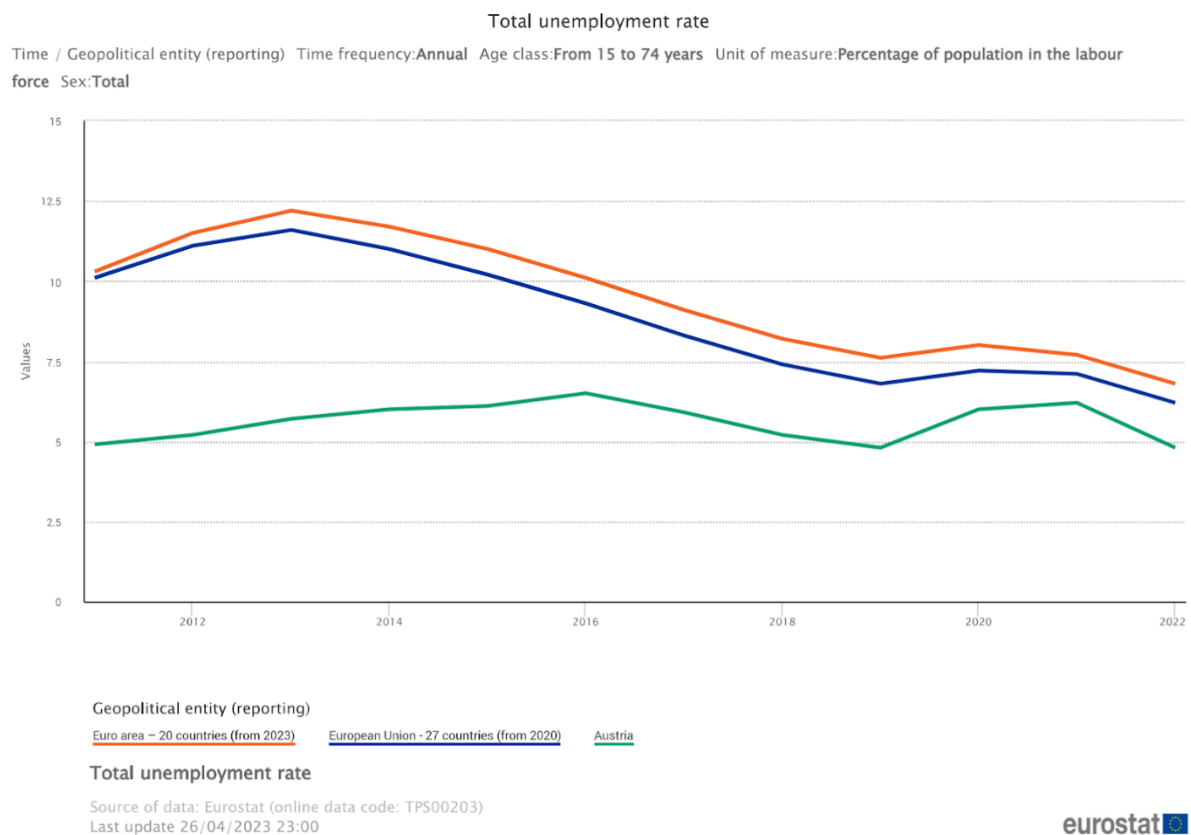
The approach of this report initially included a comprehensive literature search or desk research using relevant research reports and documents of the Public Employment Service, relevant websites on the topic of educational counselling and career guidance, as well as databases of the European Union. The further procedure consisted of conducting interviews with 5 practitioners in the field and holding an interactive workshop in which 10 other practitioners participated and shared their experiences on distance counselling.

Since online counselling plays an extremely important role in the field of educational counselling and career guidance in Austria and this has been further intensified by the Corona crisis, this report represents an important contribution to the topic. First, the labour market in Austria is discussed in more detail, with a focus on the specific target groups that were particularly affected by the Corona crisis. Subsequently, the state of digitisation in Austria in general and under the influence of the Corona pandemic will be discussed before different forms of guidance in Austria are explained. In a further chapter, the path to becoming an educational and career counsellor is explained in more detail and the educational institutions offering such training in Austria are described. Before a short conclusion at the end, the practitioners' views from the interviews and the workshop are thematically elaborated and described.

## 2. Corona-crisis affecting specific target groups in Austria

The Corona crisis had a significant impact on the labour market in Austria. According to EUROSTAT, the unemployment rate (ILO) was at a low of 4.8% in 2019 after a prolonged period of decline. Due to the legally imposed measures to contain the Corona pandemic, this value increased to 6.0% in 2020 and further to 6.2% in 2021. In comparison to the EU overall and the Euro area, Austria's rates of unemployment have been rather low – especially in the

early 2010s. Even though Austria's unemployment rate was also below the European average during Corona, the figures and thus graphs converged the most during this period. It should be noted that the international calculation of the unemployment rate differs from that of the Public Employment Service Austria, which makes the national reports different from the European ones. EUROSTAT describes unemployed persons as those who were not employed during the reference week, persons actively seeking employment and those persons who are immediately available for work. All persons who have worked at least one hour in the reference week are considered to be employed, as are those who have not worked but are employed. The unemployment rate according to EUROSTAT describes the share of unemployed persons defined in this way in relation to all employed persons.



The Austrian Public Employment Service, on the other hand, puts the number of unemployed persons in relation to the potential labor force, which is the sum of the number of unemployed persons and the number of employed persons (according to social insurance institutions).

According to the Austrian calculation, the unemployment rate (ALQ) was 7.6% in 2019. Following the outbreak of the Corona pandemic and the associated restrictions, the unemployment rate peaked at 10.1% in 2020, after falling back to a low of 6.5% by 2022, which is even lower than that in the year before the pandemic. The change in unemployment

rates was similar for different age groups, with the rate for young people under 25 rising the most between 2019 and 2020, before falling below the pre-crisis level in 2022. For older workers ( $\geq 45$  years), the unemployment rate recovered more slowly than that of youths under 25 and adults (25-44 years) between 2020 and 2022, but also declined to below pre-crisis levels in 2022.

At the beginning of the measures due to the Corona pandemic in 2020, sectors such as body-related services, tourism and the arts were particularly affected by high unemployment. While most sectors were able to recover after the measures were lifted, unemployment figures remained high in 2021, especially in accommodation and catering. In August 2022, five occupational areas were finally identified that have higher staffing needs due to the effects of the pandemic. In health and care, the need for nurses and doctors has increased even more, and the occupational field must be made more attractive. Trade and transport are also looking for employees, especially in the areas of warehousing and logistics. In education and teaching, especially elementary teachers and general teachers had to adapt to online teaching and were already struggling with staff shortages before the Corona pandemic, which means that there is also an increased need for personnel here. With the upswing in digitalisation due to the Corona pandemic, the IT sector is also increasingly looking for employees. Most recently, as mentioned above, the tourism and hospitality industry has been severely affected by Corona measures. As a result, the number of people employed in the sector has fallen sharply and, due to the return of strong travel, staff are urgently needed.

Regarding young people, the Corona crisis mainly had an impact on educational transitions. In Austria, for example, an increasing decrease in apprentices was discernible from 2020 onwards - in 2019, the number of apprentices in Austria was still increasing. Another indicator for the influence of Corona on educational transitions is the number of NEETs in Austria. Since 2016, a decrease in NEETs was discernible here, which reached its low point in 2017 at 6.5% and rose again in small steps in 2018 and 2019 to 7.1%. However, the largest increase within one year since 2016 was recorded in 2019 to 2020 with 0.9%. This means that the share of NEETs in Austria is above 7.9% again for the first time since 2009. It should be noted that the EU average of NEETs in 2021 was 13.1%, which means that Austria is still below the European average and below the EU target of 9.0% by 2030.

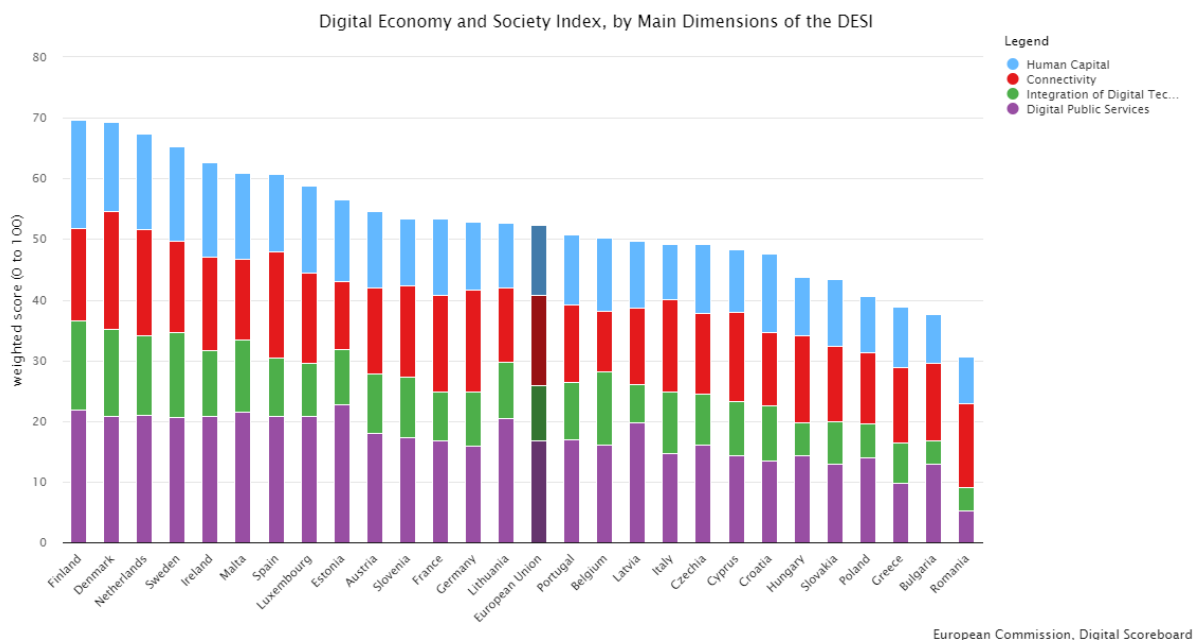
The relative frequency of psychopathological symptoms in the areas of anxiety, depression, stress, strain and sleep has increased both nationally and internationally since the beginning of the Corona crisis, although the psychosocial effects were somewhat lower in Austria. Particularly pronounced symptoms were reported by younger people, single people, women and people who were affected by poverty or unemployment. In Austria, depressive (21%) and anxiety-related symptoms (19%) were higher in the first quarter of 2020 compared to pre-epidemiological studies. Thus, 16% of the general population reported clinically relevant sleep



problems. Women, younger people (<35 years), the unemployed and low-income earners were particularly affected. A follow-up study in the fourth quarter of 2020 showed trend stability of symptomatology beyond the period of the lockdowns. There were temporal correlations between the general mental stress of the Austrian population in each case with subjective health risk perception, severity of government measures, and subjective assessment of incidence in the period from March 2020 to June 2021.

### 3. State of Digitalisation (due to Corona) in Austria

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) is a summary of indicators on digital performance and progress across Europe. The monitoring through the European Commission has been taking place since 2014 and the DESI reports shall help to identify areas requiring priority action as well as offering key digital areas for underpinning policy decisions. In 2022 DESI is looking at four key areas including Human capital, Connectivity, Integration of digital technology and Digital public services. The following chart shows the DESI by Main Dimensions for all EU states as well as the average of the European Union overall. Austria's scores of Digital Public services, Integration of digital technologies as well as Human Capital are slightly above European average. Whereas Austria's score of Connectivity is slightly below the EU average. In general, Austria is among the top 10 EU countries in terms of DESI score.



Nevertheless, especially in the years before the Corona pandemic, Austria always had a need to catch up in terms of digital skills, both on the part of the population and on the part of companies. With the measures to contain Corona, however, the importance of digital skills

and corresponding technological equipment suddenly became apparent and affected almost all areas of life. Whether for home office work or distance learning in educational institutions, whether for online events or video telephony as a substitute for face-to-face meetings, the importance of technology was unmistakable. This represents new opportunities for participation, but also poses great challenges in terms of increasing and further reproducing social inequality. The Austrian economic research institute (WIFO) presented a comparison between Austria and the average of all EU countries on the one hand and a comparison with the average of the innovation-leading countries of the EU on the other with regard to the progress of digitisation.

The European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) is used for this comparison, with Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden among the most innovative countries in the EU in 2020. The state of digital transformation is based on indicators in five different dimensions. In terms of digital public services (1) for citizens, Austria is already very far ahead. However, there is still catching up to do when it comes to offering these services to businesses. In terms of digital infrastructure (2), Austria performs moderately to well in terms of connectivity to fast internet and broadband prices are also comparatively low. However, the coverage of ultra-fast broadband internet in Austria is below the EU average with the last update in 2019. The roll-out of 5G mobile technology, on the other hand, is comparatively advanced. Digital transformation at the enterprise level (3) could already be promoted in Austria since 2018 by increasing the entrepreneurial use of cloud services, but is still far behind the innovation-leading countries. In social aspects of digitisation (4), Austria is only in the EU midfield when it comes to the actual use of fast internet by private households, despite the comparatively low prices of fixed-line and mobile services. With regard to labour market-related aspects of digitisation (5), the share of ICT professionals in total employment is significantly lower in Austria than in the innovation-leading EU countries. This is particularly surprising because at the same time there is a relatively high share of graduates in STEM subjects in Austria.

The Corona crisis contributed greatly to the acceleration of digitalisation in Austria, as people had to move out into the digital space due to contact restrictions. This online space was provided by various video conferencing systems. The software available on the market fastest, which could also be used well in counselling, was "Zoom". Despite a data protection issue that was quickly solved, Zoom remained at the top in Austria as one of the most used tools. This is mainly due to the function of creating virtual small group rooms, which was unique at the beginning of the pandemic. Another tool that is mainly used in the education sector and in companies is MS Teams. This system is embedded in a managing and file-sharing environment or, in the educational version, designed as a learning management system. However, due to the high training costs compared to Zoom, many users were initially deterred from using this software.

Three offers are important to mention when it comes to digital skills. On the one hand the NGO **Fit4Internet** was founded on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Finances to improve the digital competences in Austria. It refers to the Digital Competences Model (DigComp) and offers several services: several online tests for digital competences and a list of several further training offers to improve digital skills. Another initiative is the **EB-MOOC**, a massive open online course for people working in adult training. It was attended by more than 5.000 people working in this field and focuses on digital skills for trainers, career guidance staff and training managers. It was held for the first time in 2020, when the corona crisis started which was a lucky coincidence as the planning of the courses took more than a year. The online course was accompanied by several webinars, its attendance (plus certificate) is acknowledged by organisations that can issue quality certifications for institutions, training institutes and career guidance institutes.

Another initiative which aims at improving digital competencies is the so-called **Digi-Winner**. People living in Vienna can apply for a financial contribution (50% of the costs, up to € 5.000) when they want to attend a digital competencies course. The organisation one can apply for this financial support is the WAFF (Employees Promotion Fund Vienna). The only prerequisite for training offers is that the respective training institution has a quality certificate called WienCert. This ensures a certain quality of training offers.

## 4. Counselling and C-VET in Austria

The Austrian landscape of counselling, information and guidance services for education, career and employment is inhomogeneous and differentiated. Guidance services are mainly offered in educational institutions, in the context of the Public Employment Service in labour market policy measures, by interest groups, in company settings and in municipal, non-profit and private institutions. Due to the heterogeneity of the professional field of guidance, there are no concrete figures on the number of people working in this field in Austria. In addition to educational guidance in (vocational) initial education and training and in the tertiary sector, there is also solely educational guidance in adult education. In educational counselling and career guidance, a distinction is made between those in the field of labour market policy and those by interest groups.

Adult education in Austria follows school education and is intended to promote the development of the personalities of individuals, who subsequently also contribute to shaping society. The landscape of institutions offering information, guidance, and counselling regarding career and education has historically grown very diversely. Thus, guidance institutions are often organised in different legal-institutional ways and offer different

guidance approaches for specific target groups. Several guidance providers can be distinguished:

- *Independent counselling centres* are not located in adult education institutions and offer adult education, courses, and further training independently.
- *Adult education institutions* often focus on placing clients in their own training offers and course programmes as accurately as possible. However, there are also offers that call themselves provider-neutral and focus on the interests and needs of those seeking advice. Adult education institutions in Austria include various adult education centres, educational institutes of social partners as well as church institutions.
- *Self-employed counsellors in the field of education, career and employment* offer their counselling services on the open market and have increased with the rise of coaching and supervision services in Austria.
- *The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research* offers a virtual platform that supports educational decisions by providing information.

Educational guidance in the field of labour market policy is provided by the Public Employment Service Austria, which is considered the most important provider and financier of lifelong guidance in quantitative terms. The counselling services take place either directly in the regional offices or in their own career information centres. In addition, the Public Employment Service Austria also finances numerous labour market policy measures that include lifelong guidance offers. The focus of these facilities is on matching job requirements with personal competences.

- The *Vocational Information Centres of the Public Employment Service Austria* primarily fulfil the task of informing people about changes on the labour market and in the world of work and supporting them in educational and vocational matters. The information centres are represented both online for offers of self-information and at 72 locations throughout Austria. Events and workshops on relevant topics are also offered. The main focus is on the transition from school to work.
- The *Career Information Service of the Public Employment Service Austria* offers information on the labour market, careers, and education in print form as well as on

the internet. In addition, there is a separate platform that offers current research results online.

- Within the Public Employment Service Austria, the *educational measures* offered are divided into orientation, qualification, active job search, training, and work testing. Qualification is quantitatively of greatest importance, whereby mixed types of the above-mentioned forms are usually common.

Educational guidance by advocacy organisations can be considered split between two providers.

- The *vocational and educational counselling of the Economic Chambers and the "Knowledge is Forever" institutions ("WIFI")* offer different formats of counselling and information. This also includes psychological tests, talent checks, workshops, and an online portal.
- The *educational guidance services of the Chambers of Labour* are active in educational guidance in different ways depending on the province and often also participate in app offers for guidance.

## 5. Career Counsellors in Austria

In Austria there are two established systems of educational counselling and career guidance that are in exchange with each other: educational counselling and career guidance in educational and training institutions as well as information services on occupations and CET by the Public Employment Service and other counselling institutions. The active role of the social partners (career information centres and counselling services of the Economic Chambers, counselling services of the Chambers of Labour) in career guidance is an important feature of the Austrian guidance system.

Pupils and young people have many opportunities for career guidance within and outside the school system. In Austria there are six psychological counselling centres for prospective and enrolled students at universities, teacher training colleges and universities of applied sciences. The Public Employment Service (AMS) is an important provider for job-seeking adults. Adults can take advantage of free educational counselling services in each of the nine provinces.

Training in the field of educational counselling and career guidance in Austria is very inconsistent and is offered by different institutions. The training offers are mostly in the form

of courses, whereby these are primarily aimed at people who have already completed vocational training and have been able to gain initial experience in the field of activity of information, counselling and guidance for education and careers. The courses take place either as diploma courses or as university or academic courses. The following courses are currently offered in Austria.

- *Diploma Course in Educational and Vocational Guidance:*

This course is offered by the Federal Institute for Adult Education in St. Wolfgang and lasts 3 semesters (400 teaching units). The in-service course provides basic skills and competences for educational, vocational and career guidance. It provides a solid foundation for the development of professionalism and professional identity.

- *Diploma course in educational and vocational coaching:*

The course is offered by the BFI Vienna and lasts 2 semesters (200 teaching units). The course imparts methodological and content-related knowledge to professionally accompany and advise young and also older people in various phases of career search. The contents of the course are recognised by the public employment service and enable work as a coach/trainer in the field of labour market policy.

- *Diploma course for career and educational guidance with training competence:*

This course is offered by the WIFI Vienna and also lasts 2 semesters (245 teaching units). The course qualifies to conduct vocational orientation training and seminars as well as to offer counselling on education, employment and career.

- *University course in Educational, Vocational and Career Guidance (Master of Arts, Academic Expert, Certified Programme):*

The course is offered by Danube University Krems and comprises 2-5 semesters (30-120 teaching units). The aim of the university course is to enable professional access to the field of educational, vocational and career guidance through the development of guidance competences and the imparting of guidance-specific knowledge content. The course can be completed in three consecutive levels.

- *University Course in Educational Guidance, Career Guidance and Educational Management (Master of Arts):*

This course is offered by Sigmund Freud Private University Vienna in cooperation with ARGE Education management GmbH and lasts 3-4 semesters. The university course combines the fields of educational and career guidance (career guidance, career counselling, work-life balance) with the management of educational institutions. The training combines theoretical knowledge, counselling methodology, practical experience including reflection and self-reflection. The university course can be completed with the university title "Academic Educational and Career Counsellor and Educational Manager" or with the academic degree "Master of Arts - M.A. (Educational and Career Counselling and Educational Management).

- *Academic Course: Vocational Orientation and Labour Market Integration:*

This course is offered by Carinthia University of Applied Sciences and lasts 2 semesters. The FH course is designed as a train-the-trainer concept. Participants deal with the structures of the labour market and learn to understand the individual life situations of people looking for work.

- *University Course Academic Expert and University Course Master of Arts in Educational and Vocational Guidance:*

This Course is also offered by the Danube University Krems and lasts 3-4 semesters (60-90 ECTS). The university course is aimed at educational counsellors and career guidance officers with counselling experience who, in addition to their practical experience, have already completed specific, relevant further training courses or non-officially recognised training courses. Persons who have completed related training courses can be certified as educational counsellors and career guidance officers.

The offer of further education and training in this professional field is very limited in Austria. Many offers are provided within the educational guidance networks or in-house. In addition, a number of conferences are held annually with the aim of networking and exchanging experiences among educational guidance practitioners as well as transferring knowledge through expert lectures. These include the alternating biennial events " Future field of educational and vocational guidance " (bifeb/BMBWF) in St. Wolfgang and the "Supraregional

networking conference for educational counsellors and career guidance officers - 24h networking" (BMBWF). The expert conference "Euroguidance Austria" takes place once a year.

## 6. The view from the Practitioners

### (a) General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

The interviewed practitioners can be divided into three different groups in terms of their management.

- First, there were those who offer their guidance services as part of an European Social Fund project.
- Next to these, some were within networks of Educational Guidance Austria at the time of their interview.
- The last group to be distinguished from these institutionally or publicly funded guidance practitioners is that of self-employed guidance practitioners. These primarily operate in the train-the-trainer sector and, in addition to conventional guidance services, also offer training, coaching and supervision for guidance practitioners.

The majority of respondents offer at least a generalised form of counselling that includes all people between 15 and 65 years of age in educational counselling and career guidance. Thereby, in the group of adults, mainly low-skilled people, unemployed people, people with impairments as well as people who were not integrated into the education system make use of counselling services. The counsellors who work in a generalised way usually help this group with the choice of education and training, catching up on educational qualifications, exploring funding opportunities and much more. Those counsellors who also offer specialised services have a very differentiated focus. Among others, they focus on regionally disadvantaged people, such as those who do not have a driving licence or a car, who live in regions with a lack of public transport, or who are immobile due to care responsibilities. However, migrants and refugees, as well as adolescents and young adults, are often focal points of counselling.

Counselling services take place in very different formats across all respondents. For example, most counsellors offer their services via email, telephone, video conferencing system and also in person. In most cases, only information is provided via email and full counselling takes place within the other formats. Face-to-face counselling is mostly offered in both individual and group settings, while video counselling takes place predominantly in one-to-one sessions.



Rather rarely, chat or messenger services are used for written counselling. Since several formats are usually used in combination with each other for guidance, in most cases one can speak of blended guidance, but only a few counsellors indicated that they offer this format. Another format that is still very rarely used is the hybrid learning architecture, which can be helpful especially for training courses and workshops. Here, an expanded concept of space is used and elements in presence and digital are meaningfully connected with each other instead of being used separately next to each other.

At the beginning of the crisis, respondents report trying out several tools or video conferencing systems, such as Zoom, MS Teams, jitsi and others. In the selection process, criteria of data protection, usability and functionality were taken into account with regard to counselling. Most counsellors ultimately opted for Zoom, which initially came under heavy criticism because of data protection problems, but was able to remedy these problems quickly. Similarly, many of the counsellors interviewed emphasised that they would have a paid account, which would also offer more security. Zoom was highlighted in the interviews as the best software for counselling mainly for its ease of use and therefore easier for clients to use. The second option given was jitsi, among others, as this tool is considered extremely secure, but the usability was strongly criticised here.

## **(b) Practitioner Skills and Values**

Due to various restrictions and measures to contain the Corona pandemic, counsellors in the field of educational and career guidance also had to face various challenges in the practice of their profession. Based on the narratives of the practitioners in the interviews conducted, four challenges in particular could be identified that have arisen since the beginning of the Corona crisis.

### **Increase of mental stress among clients**

Some counsellors described an increase in clients' narratives of psychological distress. These stories were not asked for and are often the reason for professional changes or reorientation. Among adults, an increase of twice as much was perceived, and among young people, more than half were affected, according to the counsellors' documentation.

### **Switch to online counselling**

The necessary rapid switch to online formats in counselling was a challenge for many counsellors. It was necessary to acquire skills in the use of video conferencing systems and other software very quickly, although some were able to professionalise more quickly due to previous experience. The switch to online counselling for clients with limited mobility or who live far away was an advantage. However, some counsellors described themselves in an

additional role of technical support for clients, especially in the beginning, by actively guiding them and providing telephone support in advance.

### **Changes in the counselling setting**

Another challenge for counsellors was the change in the counselling setting, such as the difficulty in building trust with clients. Counselling services were also affected by changes in communication in the online space. In addition to these effects, there were also changes among customers, as they often did not want to be advised about a video function or the technical equipment was not suitable. According to the counsellors, the online counselling was mainly used by the more highly qualified or people with caring responsibilities.

### **Availability of technical equipment**

At the beginning, finding the right equipment was a challenge for many counsellors, as the range grew very quickly and was correspondingly confusing and large. Creating a technical basis to be able to work adequately was also seen as challenging, as the existing technology was not sufficient and often extensions were not available. In addition to the acquisition problems in the hardware, the application of different tools in the software was also seen as difficult at the beginning.

### **Preparation for distance counselling**

The counsellors themselves or the organisation in which they work have prepared for the change to online counselling in different ways. In the interviews, the following four ways were chosen for such preparation.

### **Training and further education**

Most counsellors attended various forms of education and training or tried to acquire certain skills themselves. Many were able to self-taught at Zoom, for example. MOOCs for adult education and webinars were also a popular form of training. Most recently, training was also offered by the Educational and Vocational Guidance Austria, in which some counsellors were able to participate.

### **Focus on the clients**

Another preparatory measure for the transition to online counselling was to determine the digital literacy level of the clients so that information could be prepared for them in advance. Special care was taken to work as client-centred as possible.

### **Exchange of information**

The exchange of information and the clarification of further procedures among colleagues were also important points in the preparation for online counselling. There were intervision

(= peer consulting) sessions via Zoom, meetings at various online training courses and a large networking meeting in online format.

### **Information available online**

In addition, information could also be accessed online on the adult education website commonly used in Austria, which was a great help for many counsellors.

### **Ethical considerations and challenges**

In the move to an online space for counselling, ethics also play a big role. All respondents said that they had given a lot of thought to ethical challenges and that this is a big responsibility for counsellors. The points described below describe these problems and the solutions proposed by the consultants interviewed.

#### **Choice of Tool**

Ethical aspects must also be taken into account when selecting the tool to be used, as not all tools handle data properly. Likewise, respondents noted that implementing platforms and tools specifically to facilitate data protection in online counselling would be useful.

#### **Coordination with other federal states**

Many counsellors or the organisations in which they work have also coordinated with other provinces in order to adopt a similar approach to data protection. For example, clients were often sent information in advance about the tool used and the general terms and conditions. It was also agreed that information about the GDPR by advisors is extremely important.

#### **General data protection provisions**

In addition to the measures already mentioned, general data protection precautions must also be taken, with particular emphasis on anonymisation, the proper handling of recordings, a password-protected server and consent forms in line with the GDPR.

#### **Exclusion tendencies**

Lastly, with regard to ethics, certain exclusion tendencies were also pointed out, as a pure online counselling offer would not be possible for certain groups of people. An example of this would be a restriction due to illiteracy.

### **ICT related challenges**

The ICT-related challenges mainly included internet and connection problems as well as insufficient data volume available on service laptops and mobile phones for outreach

counselling. In addition, counsellors often had to deal with a lack of basic ICT skills among clients and in some cases also among themselves. This can lead to excessive demands.

### **3 areas of further development**

The consultants were asked to describe the three areas in which they have had to develop the most since the beginning of the Corona pandemic. From a large number of different mentions, three areas could be clustered which, across the board, probably required the most further development on the part of the consultants. These are the following:

- **Methods** → A great learning opportunity emerged in the methodological area. This was mainly about the didactic implementation of content in the digital space, as well as different communication methods.
- **Tools** → Learning how to use specific tools for online counselling was also an important learning area. These include tools such as Padlet, Miro, Mentimeter, etc.
- **ICT/ digital competencies** → Regarding ICT and digital skills, there was also a great need for counsellors to develop further.

In addition to these broadly summarised areas mentioned by respondents, the areas of data protection and communication with stakeholders were also formulated as needing improvement since the beginning of the crisis.

## **(c) Working with Clients**

With the onset of the pandemic, various factors of communication with clients changed, in addition to the counsellors' services and ways of working. Due to the shift to online counselling, several of these changes in counsellors' communication were identified and described in more detail in the interviews.

### **Changes in Communication**

Changes in communication in online counselling compared to face-to-face counselling occurred on several levels. For this reason, most of the counsellors informed themselves in advance about the modes of operation in online communication and thus acquired theoretical knowledge. Particular emphasis was placed on the factors of perception and setting.

#### **Perception**

Communication also includes the perception of the other person, who in the case of online counselling is only visible on a screen. This makes it more difficult to grasp the person as a whole and aspects such as facial expressions, gestures and posture are less easily perceivable. This means that paraverbal communication also has an influence on the interpersonal relationship and thus also on counselling and its success. These limitations result in a greater need for explanation due to problems of understanding, as well as uncertainty about the intended communication of the counterpart. In this way, parts of the communication can also be lost, which has a strong impact on the relationship building.

### **Setting**

Another aspect of online counselling compared to face-to-face counselling is the environment in which the client is located. This environment is mostly unknown, private and it is often not clear how many people are in the room. The fact that this environment is shown is often also the reason for refusing video-based counselling, as many people do not want to show their environment at home. However, positive aspects of the online setting are the advantage for inhibited people, people with mobility problems and people with mental health problems. Furthermore, counsellors often mentioned that it is easier to show certain content via a screen-sharing function.

### **Relationship-Building**

The relationship between counsellor and client is also directly influenced by communication processes. As already mentioned, this becomes more difficult in an online environment, as communication in this format is often limited. Counsellors advice increased reflection and supervision. Due to the impediments in relationship building, the emotionality of clients online is also lower than in face-to-face counselling, which can lead to restrictions in trust towards counsellors. Increased problems of understanding and insecurities on the part of clients were also mentioned. Since the relationship building in online counselling only occurs with the image of the person and not with the person himself, special methods and more time are needed to ensure better relationship building, according to the interviewees. Likewise, due to the asynchronous communication, more personal formulation and interactive tools should be used.

### **Changing expectations of the clients**

Since the beginning of the Corona crisis, clients expect more flexibility in the offers, according to the respondents. This includes, above all, the expectation that there will be an online or blended offer in addition to the classic face-to-face counselling. However, the interviewees also emphasised that the expectations are very client-specific and thus also often differ greatly from one another.

### **Changes due to Corona**

The changes experienced by the counsellors due to the Corona pandemic are very diverse and affect several areas in their daily work. For example, some counsellors reported increased use of social media to reach the target group. In addition, an increase in online counselling as well as a general increase in counselling could be observed at some counselling centres. These developments also influenced the counsellors' work organisation and time management. Finally, most counsellors reported methodological changes in order to be able to guarantee adequate online counselling.

## **(d) The System and Networks**

Another change brought about by the onset of the Corona pandemic took place in the skills and networks of the counsellors. For one thing, counsellors had to prepare differently for online counselling than for face-to-face counselling. On the other hand, their network and the maintenance of it also changed. Apart from these changes, it is interesting to see how the interviewees continue to train and update their skills.

### **Preparation for Distance Counselling**

In preparation for online consultations, many interviewees reported having experienced a higher need for research in advance. Since many tools used in face-to-face counselling often cannot be transferred to the online space or only in a very resource-intensive way, many counsellors became creative and found solutions for such a transfer on their own. Much knowledge was also acquired according to the "learning by doing" principle and through collegial exchange. At the organisational level, the preparation for distance counselling took place through measures such as the acquisition of a video conferencing tool and clarifications regarding data protection.

### **Network/ Networking**

Networking and maintaining a network took place among the interviewees mainly through two main channels. On the one hand, various social media and newsletters were indispensable for knowledge distribution and networking. On the other hand, networking on a collegial level was considered a particularly important one. In this context, improved collegial networking and an increase in networking meetings since the Corona pandemic were praised by the consultants. These have led to a higher level of networking since the pandemic and also to better and faster quality development through the higher frequency of online collegial meetings.

### **Ongoing Training and Updating of Skills**

Ongoing training and updating of skills take place for counsellors in a combination of autodidactic, continuing education and collegial networking. The autodidactic learning mostly takes place online, as well as any further training, which is mostly attended in the form of MOOCs and webinars. Collegial networking takes place, as described above, through networking meetings, conferences and conventions. A few counsellors are also additionally engaged in the independent development of new methods for online counselling.

## **6. Conclusions**

This report includes important information and findings on the topic of distance counselling. Even though Austria suffered major economic losses in the short term due to the Corona crisis, unemployment after the crisis was still below pre-crisis levels. However, due to the increased job search through planned and unplanned job changes, counsellors were also particularly in demand during the Corona crisis. They had to adapt abruptly to online counselling and transfer their methods to the online space in the best possible way.

According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), Austria is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> among all 27 EU states and therefore is above the average of the EU. Nonetheless Austria is still behind in terms of labour market-related aspects of digitisation as the share of ICT professionals in total employment is significantly lower than in the innovation-leading EU countries. The basic prerequisites for well-functioning online counselling regarding digitalisation in Austria are thus in place, even if there are still improvements to be made in some areas.

In the context of the Austrian guidance system, many supports exist to enable online guidance when working in an appropriate institution. Initially there were problems with the hardware, but this has been improved over time. Self-employed counsellors have the advantage of being free to choose which hardware and software they want to work with. However, all counsellors must deal with the tools and corresponding methods on their own.

Based on these findings, some suggestions for potential learning modules could be drafted in relation to Distance Counselling, which will be briefly described below.

- **Designing Online/ Blended Guidance**

This learning module could include detailed instructions on how to design online or blended guidance. As contents and methods that were previously used in the face-to-face area cannot be transferred one-to-one to the online space and require specific know-how, this seems to represent an important learning potential. The following topics could be addressed:

- Introduction to Online Guidance (i.e., differences between online guidance and f2f, do's and don't's, etc.)
- Specific Target Groups (i.e., youngsters versus older clients)
- Preparation of the Workplace (planning of the session)
- Tools (collaborative tools and how to use them)
- Finishing a Session
- Documentation

- **Communication and Relationship building in Online Settings**

Communication and thus the necessary relationship-building with clients has changed greatly due to the Corona crisis, as this could largely only take place via written correspondence, telephone calls or video telephony. Although video conferencing systems made it possible to at least see the face of the other person, some communication channels were lost. However, to be able to organise communication ideally in distance counselling, some factors must be taken into account and new methods have to be learned. The following are examples of which would have to be considered:

- Perception (paraverbal and nonverbal communication)
- Setting (environment around client/counsellor online)
- Asynchronous communication (need of more personal formulations and collaborative tools)
- Relationship building online (special methods, need of more time)



- **Writing-based Counselling**

In this survey it became clear that while most counsellors offer written-based information outputs, written-based counselling per se is offered rather rarely. Furthermore, the knowledge about written counselling via chat, email or social media seems to be rather low. Therefore, there is a great potential for learning about this in distance counselling and it would be helpful as a learning module. The following could be included:

- Communication in Chats (do's and don't's)
- Reaching the target groups (i.e., young people)
- Guidance in Chats (how to use Links and Media to guide)

- **Data protection and Inclusion**

Regarding data protection, a learning module would also be very helpful. This topic is still new for many counsellors, and it is also becoming more and more extensive with the increasing complexity of the technologies. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of suitable training and further education for counsellors on this topic, which is why there is also learning potential here. Like data protection, inclusion also belongs to the field of online ethics and could find a place in this module. The following topics could be addressed:

- GDPR (how, when, and why to protect personal data)
- Choice of Tool (which Tools are safe and how can be found out if they are)
- Inclusion-Exclusion (i.e., assisting tools for disabled people)

## 7. Acknowledgements and references

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Jeanette Hammer	Educational Consultant	Educational Guidance Lower Austria
Margit Voglhofer	Consultant and Trainer	Self-employed
Barbara Klabischnig-Hörl	Educational Consultant	Educational Guidance Burgenland
Christine Bauer-Grechenig	Educational Consultant	Biber Salzburg
Patricia Geier	Educational and career counsellor	IR&C - Investigation, Research & Consulting Center
Sylvia Pölz	Career counsellor	B7 (Public Employment Service)
Dr. Rudolf Jenner	Career counsellor	Self-employed
Angelika Merz	Educational and career counsellor	IAB – Institute for educational and career counselling
Christa Sieder	Educational counsellor	Educational Guidance Lower Austria
Susanne Schuda	Life and social counselling	Self-employed
Anita Stix	Educational and career counsellor	abz*austria
Franz Artner	Educational and career counsellor	Self-employed
Karin Okonkwo-Klampfer	Educational counsellor	Vienna Adult Education Centre
Herbert Puhr	Supervisor and Coach	Self-employed

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# Malaga, Spain

Completed by:

Ana Huesa and Michele De Vito, Rinova Malaga

**RINOVA**  
innovar, crear & regenerar

**Rinova Malaga SL**  
**Av de Sor Teresa Prat, 15,**  
**29003 Málaga**

# 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to provide useful information about Spain and Andalusia region to understand the current situation in terms of unemployment, digitalization, VET and career counselling.

The economy of Spain is a highly developed social market economy. It is the world's sixteenth largest by nominal GDP and the sixth largest in Europe. Spain is a member of the European Union and the Eurozone, as well as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Trade Organization. In 2021, Spain was the twentieth-largest exporter in the world and the sixteenth-largest importer. The World Bank lists Spain 27th in the United Nations Human Development Index and 37th in GDP per capita.

After the economic crisis in 2008, Spain hit one of the highest peaks of unemployment in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and started to recover 2019, just before Covid-19. Andalusia had the highest unemployment rate in the entire EU in 2011. In 2013, this negative figure continued to increase until it reached 36.87% in the first quarter. For many years, Andalusia was the autonomous community with the highest poverty in Spain, one in three Andalusians was considered poor. Nearly 3.5 million Andalusians live on the threshold of poverty, which represents more than 40% of the population according to the Arope rate.

With all this in mind, the health crisis has had devastating effects on employment in Spain. It is estimated that the set of newly unemployed and workers subject to a Temporary Employment Regulation File (ERTE) exceeds, by far, the figure of one and a half million.

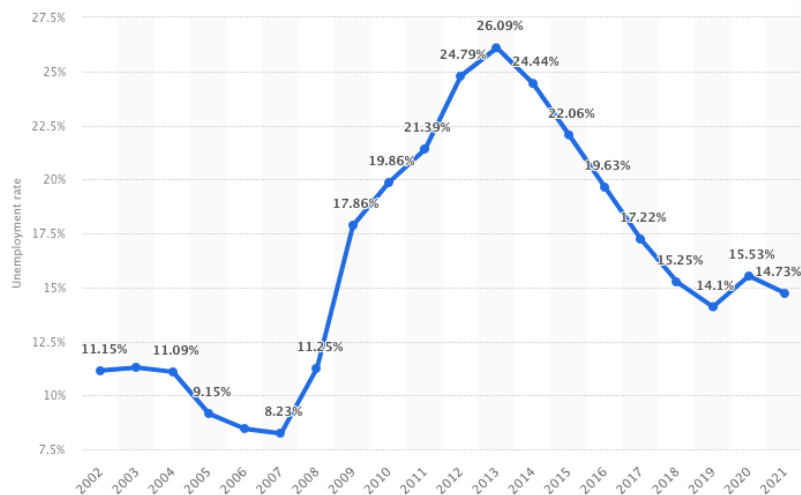
Slowly, unemployment has fallen by 60,284 people in the second month of 2023 in Andalusia, which represents a drop of 7.44% compared to the same month in 2022. Andalusia is the region in which the number of unemployed falls the most. Training centers and public bodies are trying to take advantage of this upturn to find job opportunities for students and the unemployed.

In this research, we have analyzed the Public State Employment Service (SEPE), the main counselling provider in Spain with 700 offices spread all over Spanish territory, and the Andalusian Employment Service (SAE). Those services support citizens, businesses and self-employed entrepreneurs through employment and training services. In addition, we have interviewed and surveyed professionals working in both the public and private sectors, providing formal and non-formal guidance and working with a variety of target groups, ranging from young people and students to adults and entrepreneurs.

## 2. Corona-crisis affecting specific target groups in Spain and Andalusia

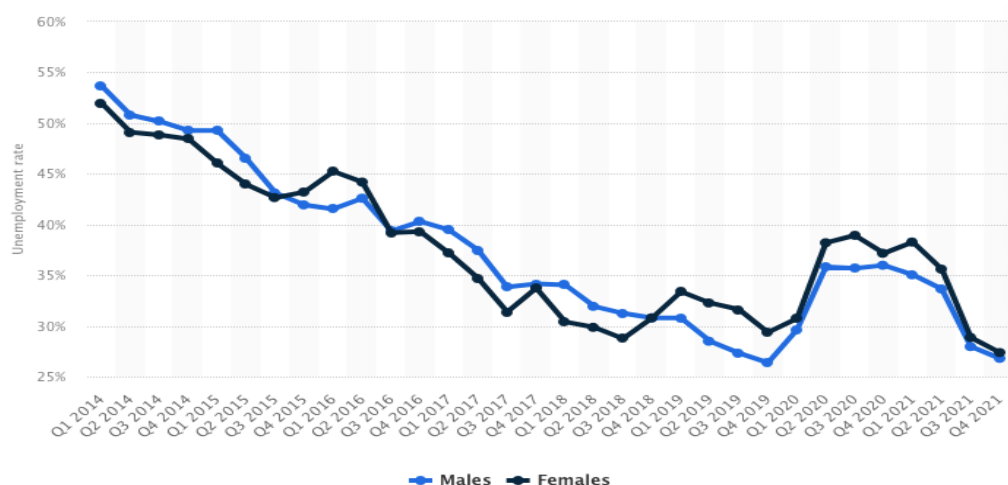
### Unemployment in Spain

Unemployment has always been a serious problem that affects the Spanish national economy. Spain has had one of the highest unemployment rates in the EU, before and after the pandemic. The unemployment rate rose to 12.87 percent in the fourth quarter of 2022 from 12.67 percent in the previous period, above market expectations of 12.5 percent. The number of unemployed people increased by 2.98 million to 3.02 million. In Q4 2021, the jobless rate was higher at 13.33 percent. These high percentages have been going on for at least the last 10 years.



After the economic crisis in 2008, Spain hit one of the highest peaks of unemployment in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and started to recover 2019, just before Covid-19.

Historically, unemployment has affected males and females almost equally however, Covid-19 changed this trend and women have now a considerably higher rate of unemployment.



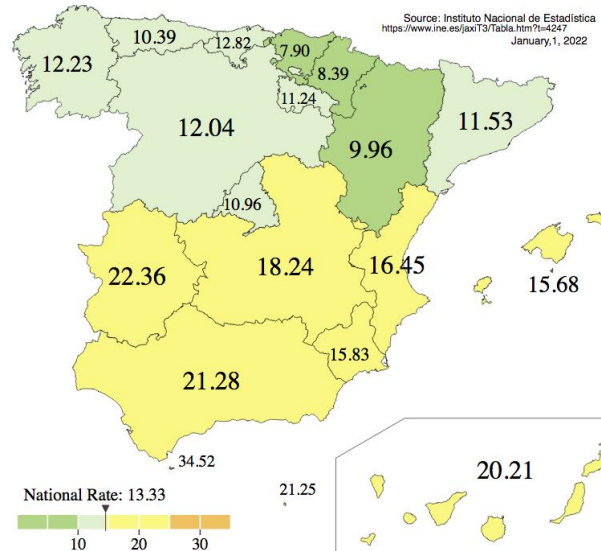
Statista 2023

Youth unemployment in Spain is the highest in the Eurozone: more than one in two (52%) young people between 18 and 24 who are looking for a job cannot find one. This is a terrible situation that affects the prosperity of the country and the future of young generations. In addition, Spain continues to be one of the European countries with the highest percentage of people between the ages of 18 and 24 who are neither in employment nor in education or training – a group known as NEETs. A total of 19.9% of youths fell into this category in 2020 just after Italy and Greece, according to the report ‘Education at a Glance 2021’.

The coronavirus pandemic and its impact on education and the labour market may have contributed to the reason why Spain has fallen so far behind other European countries, such as Germany, Norway and Sweden, where the percentage of NEETs is less than 10%.

## Unemployment in Andalusia

Andalusia has huge challenges trying to reduce the unemployment rate, one of the highest in Spain.



Due to tourism and high demand in the service sector, Andalusia tends to be a seasonal region having higher unemployment rates during winter than in the summer. On the other hand, in summer 2022 Andalusia was the only region of Spain in which unemployment went up, in contrast to Catalonia, where it reduced by 9,946 and Madrid by 7,443. Unemployment among foreigners also went up in Andalusia in June 2022, by 11.05% to 6,363 compared to May. The total is now 63,925, of whom 22,879 are from other EU countries.

The main industries affected in Andalusia and Spain by the pandemic crisis were the activities associated with tourism, small non-food retail business, automotive industrie, textile and leisure and cultural acitivities also had a strong impact cause by the strict lockdown in Spain for several months. The construction sectors, construction materials and activities as well as real estate companies had also a significant impact.








## Spain data compared to Europe

Spain's economy fell by 10.8% during the pandemic, more than any other economy. Bookings for the summer of 2022 are higher than the record year of 2019. However, even this will not be enough to return the country to pre-pandemic economic output. The lack of diversification in Spain's economy is causing the country to hurt.



Spain was the European economy hit the hardest by Covid-19, and its recovery has been slower than those of its continental neighbours. Unemployment remains stubbornly high at 14.9%, while youth joblessness, for those under age 24, is the worst in Europe at 30.6%. Inflation has soared to 5.5% compared to October 2020, the highest figure since 1992. Soaring energy costs, as well as the rising cost of summer holidays, pushed up inflation, analysts said. Core inflation stood at 1.4%.

On the other hand, according to El Diario, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has raised the economic growth forecast for Spain in 2023 by four tenths, up to 1.5%, compared to the estimations made in January. Despite the fact unemployment rate will remain around 12%, the Spanish economy is recovering from Covid-19 in the short term and will lead economic growth in the euro area. This year, Spain will have less inflation 4.3 % compared to 5.3% of the Eurozone. In contrast, the predictions for 2024 are less optimistic. The table below shows the economic growth forecasts in % of GDP compared to the previous year, and difference over January 2022 forecasts:

País	Dif. ene. 2022			
	2023	2024	2023	2024
Eurozona	+0,8%	+1,4%	+0,1	-0,2
 Alemania	-0,1%	+1,1%	-0,2	-0,3
 Francia	+0,7%	+1,3%	±0,0	-0,3
 Italia	+0,7%	+0,8%	+0,1	-0,1
 España	+1,5%	+2,0%	+0,4	-0,4
 EEUU	+1,6%	+1,1%	+0,2	+0,1
 China	+5,2%	+4,5%	±0,0	±0,0
 Rusia	+0,7%	+1,3%	+0,4	-0,8

Fuente: FMI • Creado con [Datawrapper](#)

## 3. State of Digitalisation (due to Corona) in Spain

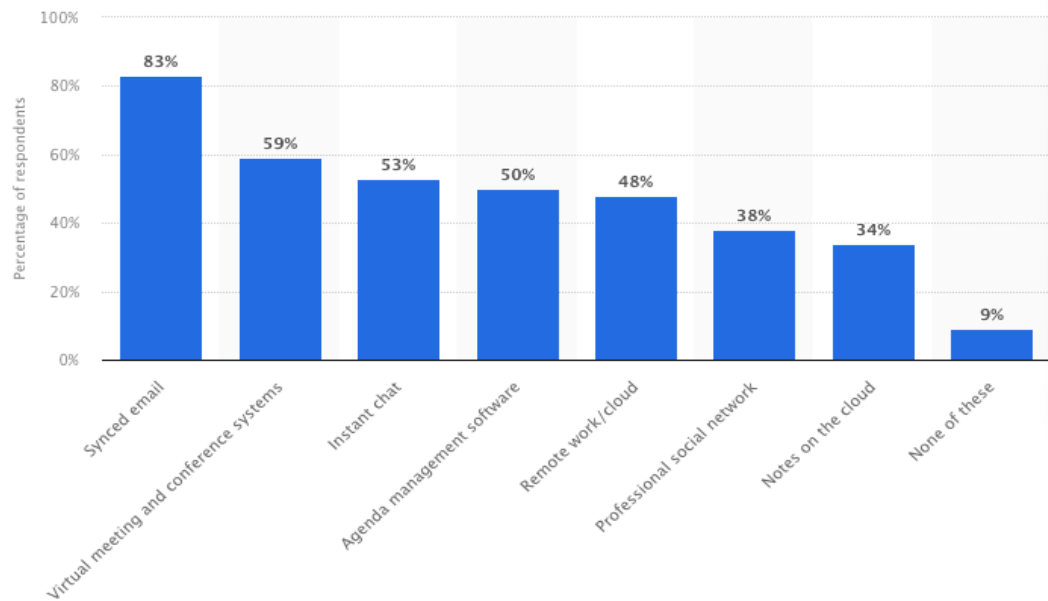
### Introduction

The health crisis has forced many companies to catch up at a forced march, but most are still not at an optimal level. This is what emerges from the Study of human resources trends: 55% of the companies believe that their digital development has progressed a lot these past years, but that there is still room for further progress and improvement; 28% say that they have implemented some changes, but still have a long way to go. Only 9% of companies consider themselves digitally advanced, at the forefront of cutting-edge technologies. On the opposite side, the same percentage have not incorporated important changes or do not believe that it is relevant to their performance.

### Digitalization data in Spain

Spain has a good level of digital equipment for companies, above the European average, although it is not among the ten most digitised countries according to the DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index). This could change soon due to the acceleration of the digital transformation of companies caused by the pandemic.

According to EY's Global Capital Confidence Barometer survey, conducted between February and March 2020 in 46 countries, 70% of respondents have embraced digital transformation in their internal processes. 36% also say they have accelerated their investment in automation. The DESI index places Spain in 13th place in the integration of digital technology in the company. We have outstanding students in the use of electronic systems for the exchange of information (43% compared to the European average of 34%); but we have homework to do in big data analytics (11% vs. 12%) and cloud usage (16% vs. 18%).



www.statista.com

### Situation of digitalization in Spain in the last 2-3 years

The ICT sector had a turnover of 120 billion euros in 2019, 3.8% of Spain's GDP. According to ICT Monitor, the sector grew by 18.8% between June 2020 and June 2021, recovering its pre-pandemic position. The number of Internet users has also risen by 3.7% since the pandemic began and Spain has been the EU country with the fourth largest growth in household Internet access over the last decade, with coverage of 95% in 2020.

In Spain, big part of the economy are small businesses, micro-SMEs and the self-employed accounts for 99% of all companies, according to government data shared in the Spain Digital 2025 Plan. For this reason, the digitization process of the Spanish economy will also necessarily fall on these kinds of small/micro companies.

In the last few years, the Spanish digitalization rating has risen from 49.1 to 56.1, attributing this progression to two fundamental aspects:

- Advances in connectivity. With a wide network of fixed broadband connections and coverage in fast and ultra-fast mobile connections;
- Digital public services. In this section, Spain ranks fourth, well above the average.

Despite the fact that Spain is at the top of in some important digital aspects, there are some dimensions that obstruct the digital integration process in our country. These are challenges that the strategic plans must address to remain at the forefront of the euro zone in the

integration of digital technology and not miss the boat of such an important transformation for the economy;

1. Human capital. This quantifies aspects related to the qualification of digital professionals and users and gives definitely a deficit in almost all indicators, below the European average, up to seventeenth place. In terms of the levels of basic digital skills, only 55% of the population between the ages of 16 and 74 have them, two points below the average. Similarly, ICT specialists within the active population are estimated at 2.9% compared to 3.7% on average in Europe, estimates the Commission.

2. Integration of digital technology in companies. Although Spain remains at the tenth place in this dimension, it has moved back one position. It stand out well above the average in the exchange of electronic data, with 46%, which has been sustained since 2018 and compared to the European average of 34%. Spain also does it in the use of social media companies, with 28% compared to 21%, according to the Commission. However, the country is far from taking advantage of the qualities of the cloud, with 16%, the most worrying aspect of this data being that we have dropped two points compared to 2018.

The Spanish Government has also launched the Digital Kit initiative aiming to fund the implementation of digital solutions available in the market to achieve significant digital improvements in small businesses with 50 employees or less. Kit Digital has a wide offer to make businesses more digital, create and improve websites, electronic management, social media management, customer management, BI and analytics, virtual office tools and services, process management, electronic bill, GDPR, cybersecurity, advanced internet presence and marketplace.

## 4. Counselling and C-VET in Spain and Andalusia

### Organizations providing counselling in Spain

The main counselling service is the Public State Employment Service (SEPE), an autonomous organizims attached to the Ministry of Labor and Social Economy. SEPE and the Public Employment Services of the Autonomous Communities form the National Employment System. This system has the functions of the extinct National Employment Institute (INEM) since 2003. The execution is decentralized and therefore measures and actions are adjusted to the different territories. The body is made up of:

- Its central services;
- 52 provincial addresses;

- A wide network of on-site offices distributed throughout the 50 provinces of the Spanish State and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, from which unemployment benefit procedures are managed.

The activity developed is focused on satisfying and investigating the needs of our public and understanding the real situation about: active workers, unemployed workers and long-term unemployed, entrepreneurs who have a business idea, youths and businesses.

SEPE's main role is:

- To develop employment policies;
- To coordinate the labour counsellors;
- To coordinate employment offices in all Spanish regions;
- To update the data base;
- To offer VET courses;
- To support unemployed people.

The most common procedure that involves SEPE administrations happens when someone becomes unemployed. In order to manage the unemployment benefit and the situation, it is essential to make an appointment (they start with a phone call and then an appointment in person).

Europe advises to give a boost to employment offices. From Europe it is recommended that employment offices are not mere benefits processing agents but that they become meeting places between job supply and demand. Sites where information on professional profiles and the needs to fill positions come together to improve the labor market through active employment policies.

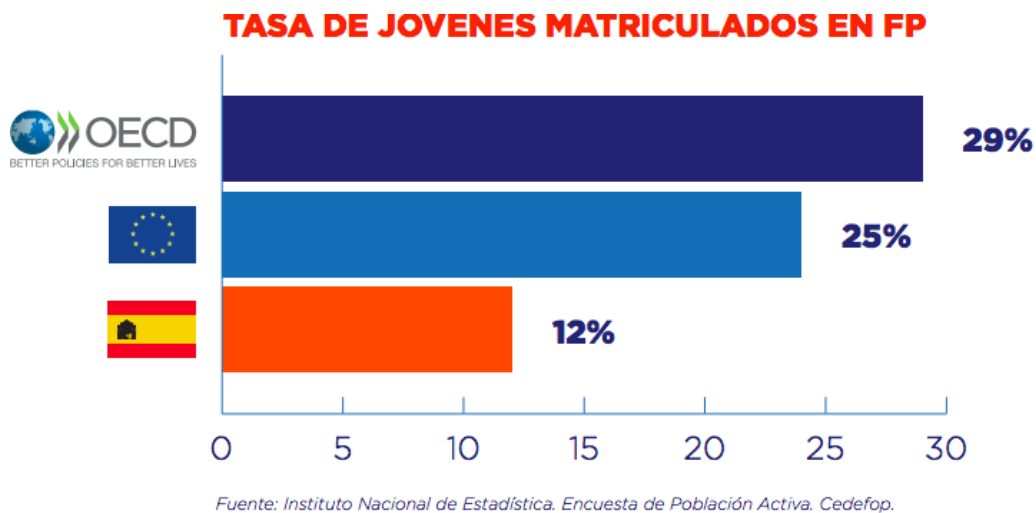
Integrating social services with employment services is something that is being worked on at the municipal level in various town halls and which is also part of the suggestions for optimizing public employment services. The employment offices of the city council are not usually found in the same headquarters as the regional and state offices, like in many cases in Spain. Last year only 1.8% of people who got a job did so through the public employment service.

## **Introduction to C-VET in Spain**

In 2021 the Spanish Council of Ministers analysed the draft of the future Organic Law on the Organisation and Integration of Vocational Training, which consolidates a single, creditable and flexible training offer aimed at students and workers, both employed and unemployed. The Minister for Education and Vocational Training stated that one of the main objectives is

to transform vocational training so that it is of the highest level, to adapt it to the demands of the labour market and to make sure that it meets people's interests and aspirations for professional qualifications.

The graph below shows the rate of young people currently coursing VET.



### C-VET and Universities in Spain

The legal framework for C-VET is provided by Organic Law 2002, modified in 2007 to include university autonomy such as control over issuing diplomas/certificates and courses/training specific to their university, linked to studies that do not lead to official titles but that are valid throughout the national territory. Giving universities this 'power' allows the development of this type of specialization courses or specific training activities in collaboration with other entities or persons. Based on this, universities have carried out to protect and promote 'Ongoing Training'. The Ongoing Training Commission of the Council of Universities prepared in 2010 agreed to regulate this permanent training at universities.

### Dual VET in Spain

In April 2022, the Government approved the Organic Law on Vocational Training, a modality of Vocational Training that is carried out alternately between the educational center and the company. This system allows the student to receive training at the educational center and, at the same time, put into practice what they have learned in a workplace, with training that meets the real needs of companies, paid internships and rapid job placement.

According to Consell de Treball, Econòmic i Social de Catalunya, 70% of dual VET students find a job in their sector, 1 out of 3 get a permanent contract, 3 out of 4 are full time.

With this program, the Government aims to:

- Increase job opportunities;
- Reduce unemployment rate;
- Increase permanent jobs;
- Increase demand from companies;
- Increase salaries;
- Increase academic results;
- Increase access to university degrees.

### **C-VET situation in Spain and 2030 Agenda**

Spain also needs to increase training opportunities for people already working to improve their permanent requalification and training: a professional support and guidance system within the Vocational Training system, which helps everyone to make training decisions (qualification and requalification) from before finishing mandatory school and throughout their working life. A powerful Vocational Training offer system and ambitious, that forms the profiles adjusted to the employment needs:

- From the educational system, converting Professional Training in a successful path that provides managers intermediate and skilled technicians;
- From the training system linked to the active population, overcoming the low participation of employed and unemployed workers in training activities.

These are the reasons why Spain is focusing now on the 2030 agenda which aims to:

- Adjust the levels of qualification of the population active to the needs of the productive sectors;
- Develop a system of Vocational Training to throughout flexible life, accessible, cumulative, creditable and capitalizable;
- Increase percentage of young people who choose Vocational training and increase the number of training places professional and adjust offer to the needs of the labor market;
- Develop a framework for Dual Vocational Training and expand the presence of the company in formation (mentioned above);
- Increase the number of hours of training they carry out workers and people in search of employment for equate with the countries more advanced incorporate innovation, entrepreneurship, digitization and sustainability in one offer updated, attractive training and flexible, that responds to the training needs of the citizenship and business;
- Establish a system of professional guidance that accompany the citizens in your decision making formative.

In 2017, the Ministry of Education allocated 392 million EUR to regional measures for new initial VET programmes. In 2017, the government added a new Royal Decree on accessing and admission to VET. This aims to establish a basic framework and harmonised criteria in all regional educational administrations for the admissions exams for the three VET levels (basic, intermediate and higher). The proposed Decree also sets out the criteria for assessment, competence requirements, learning standards and content and learning outcomes.

### **C-VET in Andalusia**

At a regional level, Andalusia Government launched 'Andalucía Orienta': the Andalusian Employment Service (SAE) that makes available to jobseekers a complete/wide network of units for professional guidance, job search advice, job placement and support, distributed throughout the territory. Ideally, the services are aimed at those people who are registered as unemployed jobseekers and, especially, at those groups that present greater difficulties for inclusion into the labor market, as is the case of long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities, young people, women and groups at risk of exclusion. SAE offers a wide number of actions that are carried out individually or in groups and considering the profile of the user and their needs:

- Development of your Personalized Insertion Itinerary Labor market information;
- Advice on job search techniques and job orientation;
- Advice for self-knowledge and positioning for the job market;
- Support in the search for employment;
- Detection of entrepreneurial and self-employment profiles and self-orientation;
- Management of individualized action plans for young people.

### **Spanish and European data**

Spain is behind the European average in terms of career guidance services through and after education. However, the majority of European citizens have positive views about how useful career guidance can be. In these images can see the perceptions of usefulness of career guidance services in 2014.





Career guidance services are available throughout education (School, VET, Higher):

EU 55%

SPAIN: 44% (joint lowest in the EU along with BG)



Career guidance services are available after completing education (School, VET, Higher):

EU 55%

SPAIN: 48%



The majority of EU citizens have positive views about the usefulness of career guidance services:



Useful for making the right choice of further studies:

EU 71% SPAIN 70%



Useful for finding a job:

EU 62% SPAIN: 55%



Useful for finding work or study opportunities in other Member States:

EU 53% SPAIN: 53%

[Euroguidance-spain.educationyfp.gob.es](http://Euroguidance-spain.educationyfp.gob.es)

## Go2Work program in Spain and Malaga

There is an innovative entrepreneurial programme, which is run in both locally in Malaga and in Spain that, despite of not being related to guidance for jobseekers, is a model of guidance for entrepreneur in Europe.

The Go2Work Entrepreneurship Program runs 22 projects in the Malaga City Council through the National Pole of Digital Content. The School of Industrial Organization (EOI) have also launched the eleventh edition of the Go2Work pre-incubation program specialized in the development of projects dedicated to the digital entertainment sector.

Since Go2Work started in 2016, the program has had over 20 mentors teaching in 158 workshops for more than 10.000 hours. Go2Work Malaga has received several awards and has been present in 20 national and international fairs.

## 5. Career Counsellors in Spain and Andalusia

### **Type of organizations where career counsellors work in Spain**

Career counsellors work in a wide variety of settings such as schools, public sector, private companies and employment agencies.

The labor market for the counselor figure is mainly made up of;

- Jobs in public administrations/entities, labor and educational administration, regional administration and local administration;
- Jobs in private companies / entities such as foundations, NGOs, employment agencies, employment agencies, mainly dependent on public-private collaboration agreements.

It is mainly the Public Administrations who, through their programs, calls and active employment policies, offer (directly or indirectly) the largest number of jobs to Professional Counselors.

### **How to become a career Counsellor for the Andalusia Government**

To become a career counsellor for Andalusia Government (Andalucía Orienta), you need to hold a university degree in social work, HR, psychology, sociology, law, business or related fields. In addition, you would have to also undertake 30 to 70 hours of specific training focused on the Andalusia Orienta network. This training is only provided by the Andalusia Employment Service through their guidance/training centers distributed all over Andalusia region.

Depending on your degrees and training, sometimes, experience is not required. However, in other fields of Andalusia Orienta it is required to have 6 to 12 months of experience.

As previously stated, Andalusia Orienta Network is formed by a serie of professional guidance units. Each one of these units is set up by collaborating entities (Associations, Councils, Unions) and is fully or partially co-financed by the Andalusian Employment Service:

1. Since the counselors are hired by these entities, they are the ones who make the selection, based on the established profiles.
2. Once the selection has been made, prior to the incorporation of the selected staff, the entities must send the technical file of the Unit along with the CVs of the selected people to the Provincial Directorate of the corresponding Andalusian Employment Service Agency, for its approval and validation.
3. Once the technical data sheet has been validated, the entity may start the activity in the Guidance Unit.

## **Selection process**

### *Preselection*

To be part of the selection process, you must meet one of the established professional profiles.

1. Remember that you must certify both training and experience: the required training must be accredited by corresponding titles or official certifications.
2. The professional experience must be accredited by an updated official certification of history of employments, a copy of previous contracts or companies certificates stating the tasks performed, and, in the case of self-employed workers, the registration and update of the Economic Activities Tax.

### *Selection*

The selection process is carried out by each entity, so they may differ from each other. However, they normally are:

1. Questionnaire of technical questions (short or multiple choice) about guidance services, programs, operation, etc. It is important to know the legislation and regulations in this regard.
2. Case study, about the functions of a job counselor.
3. Job interview.

In general, we can say that private job offers are valuing training and specific professional experience in Career Guidance more than public job offers.

One of the best options is to hold a university degree such as social work, sociology or psychology, law or economics, teaching among others. It is also highly recommended that the counsellor has a master's or postgraduate degree. On the other hand, there are courses for people who do not want or cannot take a university degree. There is a wide variety of online and face-to-face courses, from paid training in private institutions, to free courses organized by SEPE or City Councils.

## **Requirements to be career counsellor in the private sector**

There is no specific training/degree for career counselor, but there is a series of qualifications that may be required to apply for this position:

1. To hold a university degree in: social work, HR, psychology, sociology, law, business or related fields;
2. To hold a master's degree or a technical course in employment guidance (recommended);
3. To have teaching or tutoring experience.

If you do not have any of the titles mentioned above, you can choose to take a specialized course in career guidance. Keep in mind that the requirements to be an employment counselor will vary depending on the company you wish to apply for. In addition to this, many times they are asked to have some kind of teaching experience, such as having given some type of training, with special interest in those aimed at young people and adults.

To work as a career counsellor in the private sector it is not necessary to have a university degree unless you want to work as a labour or administrative manager. In any case, the best prepared employment advisors are those who have studies and training related to their professional performance.

### **Main tasks of career counsellors in Spain**

The main tasks of a career counsellor in Spain are to;

- Promote the process for self-knowledge that users must have, not overlooking their interests, abilities, aptitudes and motivations;
- Advise the beneficiaries of the various job placement programs until they enter the field of action. Follow up on the contracts in which he has participated as an intermediary;
- Develop special programs focused on certain groups that have difficulties for labor insertion;
- Create contact between profiles that share common interests. For example, a company that requires administrative personnel, the counselor will begin to grant vacancies to the right people for that job;
- Provide information regarding the possibilities of insertion that each candidate has. Improve the employment situation of people based on their profiles;
- Create informative itineraries, so that the profiles can improve their work efficiency, as well as the level of qualification required by the jobs;
- Perform administrative activities, such as report writing, after meetings between applicants and contractors are over;
- Manage information resources and employer careers. Investigate available employment niches and look for possibilities for self-employment, among other functions.

However, apart from the functions that they must fulfill, they have a variety of services that they can perform to help the unemployed.

In Spain, the Decree 7/2015, approves the common portfolio of services of the National Employment System, establishes four services: Professional Guidance Service, Placement and Advice Service for Companies, Training and Qualification Service for Employment, Counseling Service for Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship.

## 6. The view from the Practitioners

### (a) General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

Rinova has interviewed four practitioners from both the public and private sector working either in formal or non-formal guidance. They all have different target groups ranging from NEETs and long-term unemployed people to students, professionals and entrepreneurs.

The interviews have highlighted that the use of online tools does not depend only on the practitioners, but also on their target group. Some clients may have more difficulties managing or accessing devices and having online communication. It is very important that counsellors address their clients' needs and adapt accordingly.

All interviewees use chat, video-conferencing and e-mails. Some of the interviewees prefer f2f interaction and communication, while others prefer working online. However, they are all flexible and happy to combine the different possibilities.

All interviewees use tools such as Zoom, Google Meet and MS Teams for meetings and Google Drive or Dropbox for sharing resources and online collaboration.

### (b) Practitioner Skills and Values

One of the primary challenges of online counselling is the possibility of technical issues interrupting the counselling process, confirmed by both the interviews and the surveys. Counsellors and clients must be prepared to troubleshoot these issues before and during the sessions and have alternative plans in place in case of technical disruptions or difficulties. Online counselling reduces the ability of counsellors to read their clients' body language and facial expressions, which may impact the counselling process.

The main challenge when doing online counselling or guidance are issues related to the digital set up such as audio or camera, lack of clients' knowledge of the online tools or their willingness to learn. With some clients, the interviewees had to change from online to in person meetings or a combination of both to make sure they felt comfortable during the whole process and their needs were met.

The practitioners interviewed stated that they didn't have any particular digital training. They adapted to the new digital requirements along the way. One of them prefers face-to-face

interaction and he only went fully online during the lockdown period in Spain. Once it was over, he carried on with f2f guidance.

Unfortunately, Spain ranks below the European average in almost all digitalisation indicators, with only 55% of the population possessing basic digital skills and a lower percentage of ICT specialists within the active population. Secondly, in terms of the integration of digital technology in companies, Spain ranks in tenth place but has moved back one position.

The interviewees think that it is extremely important to address issues related to access to digital devices as well as digital competences of their client before establishing any communication channel. It is very important that the practitioners are flexible and always open to adapt to the different requests such as having online sessions as well as in person or blended communications methods.

All interviewees didn't have to develop any further technology skills or learn how to use online video conferencing tools, messaging platforms and other digital tools to provide online counselling services. In some cases, they had to learn about the ethical considerations related to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent or provide attendance evidence when required.

According to the interviewees, external consultants often handle personal information, GDPR and privacy issues. Organisations and companies often have consultants that deal with GDPR and privacy.

### **(c) Working with Clients**

According to our interviewees, communication with clients online differs from face-to-face communication in several ways. One of the most significant differences is the absence of non-verbal interaction, such as body language and facial expressions, which can make understanding clients' tone, mood and emotions more challenging. Additionally, online communication may take place in a more limited social environment, such as through email, messages or online meetings, which can impact the level of personal connection that can be established with a client.

The main difference between online and in person communication is the lack of face-to-face interaction which can prevent a smooth process of building and establishing trust with clients. In addition, there may be technological issues such as poor Internet connection, which can interrupt the counselling process and cause frustration for both the counsellor and the client.

In blended formats you can observe more closely clients' feelings, improvements, struggles and adapt your sessions or program accordingly.

One of the first adjustments to online and blended counselling is that practitioners have to also consider the technological tools that are available to their clients. This can include online meeting platforms, chats and other digital tools that can facilitate effective communication and collaboration between them. In some cases, they also need to see and perceive clients' concerns, aspirations, and strengths.

All professionals, both interviewed and surveyed, agreed that the main negative side is the lack of personal connection which may affect the process. In addition, they point out how practitioners supporting many clients in one session may be *talking to empty boxes*. They don't know if the person behind the screen is lost, bored, interested, sleeping. It is harder to address any potential difficulties.

The speed of the process has also changed. One interviewee points out how clients sometimes assume that because everything is done online, it will be faster. Despite the fact that we now get emails within seconds and we don't have to wait days for a letter to arrive, there are still some processes that require time: management, planning, assessments. On the other hand, many practitioners surveyed confirmed that it is easier for them to arrange sessions now, the preparation is somehow less demanding and they have now more freedom when deciding where to work from.

Our four interviewees are always willing to meet on site. In fact, one of our interviewees always prefers on site sessions while another one changed from online to blended sessions. The only consequences reported is that meeting onsite may take more time from both sides, but the results are more positive.

Communication was highly affected. Another aspect they to consider is how to acquire online skills to:

- have online interviews successfully;
- apply for jobs online;
- create and develop network online and
- how to contact companies/organizations online.

All these competences are now important for the client and counsellors should somehow cascade those down to them.



## **(d) The System and Networks**

Most of the interviewees were already using online tools and platforms before the pandemic started. Their adjustment wasn't necessarily due to the pandemic. Only in one case, there was the need to adapt to an online methodology during lockdown, using meeting tools to carry on with their task, without a clear plan. After lockdown, they decided to go back to on-site sessions.

The interviewees highlighted how the main difference is to make sure that all the digital tools are set up correctly and all the material can be visualised and works online. In terms of arranging meetings, they have to make use of tools that are known by everyone, free and easy to access.

LinkedIn is the most used tool to create and maintain networks and connections to stakeholders. One of the interviewees shared that while he was career counselling, he spent sessions doing some training about LinkedIn for his clients, including support on how to create professional profiles, how to choose the organisations to follow and how to establish communication with them.

The interviews have raised the importance of understanding how others are using their digital competences and how new digital tools can be integrated in each other's practice.

## **7. Conclusions**

This report aimed to provide useful information to understand the current situation in terms of the digitalisation of career guidance practices and its digital skills gap in Spain.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created new challenges for career guidance. Guidance practitioners need to develop new digital skills to deliver effective guidance services in a blended format. Our report recommends various measures to promote digital skills development among guidance practitioners that will feed into the DISCO e-learning programme.

According to recent studies, 55% of Spanish companies believe that their digital development has progressed a lot in recent years, but there is still room for further progress and improvement. 28% say that they have implemented some changes, but still have a long way to go. Only 9% of companies consider themselves digitally advanced, at the forefront of cutting-edge technologies.

Spain ranks 13th in the Digital Economy and Society Index and has a good level of digital equipment for companies, above the European average. However, the country faces challenges in terms of human capital, such as the qualification of digital professionals and users, and the integration of digital technology in companies, particularly in the use of cloud technology.

This situation is reflected in the Spanish counselling services, being delivered through public programmes, such as the main national counselling service SEPE (Public State Employment Service) and SAE (Andalusian Employment Service) or by private organisations and NGOs. The digital needs of career counsellors are wide and include the use of technology at different stages, from virtual counselling to digital content production or online safety.

Based on the results of our report, we have individuated four potential learning modules that could provide essential competences and useful tools for career counsellors to enhance their digital guidance abilities:

### **Virtual communication**

Counselling via digital platforms requires different communication skills than in-person counselling. This module could provide training in areas such as active listening, empathy, and non-verbal communication in a digital context. It can also focus on how to choose the right platform and tool for different purposes (emails, chats, calls, video-calls, etc) maintaining clients' engagement.

*Relevant DigComp competences: 2.1 Interacting Through Digital Technologies and 2.5 Netiquette*

### **Digital tools**

Career counsellors often use tools to help clients identify their strengths, interests, and values such as diagnostic exercises and SWOT analysis.

This module could cover collaboration, presentation and digital production tools (such as Miro, Genially, Animaker, Canva) as well as social media platforms (LinkedIn), royalty free resource banks and new Artificial Intelligence tools.

*Relevant DigComp competences: 1.1 Browsing, Searching and Filtering Data, Information and Digital Content and 5.3 Creatively Using Digital Technology*

## **Problem solving**

The module could be designed to help guidance practitioners identify and address their own digital competence gaps through self-assessment and the use of digital tools and practices.

Practitioners could learn strategies for developing their digital competence, such as practising with digital tools and seeking out feedback from peers and experts as well as supporting their clients' digital development.

It can also cover strategies for troubleshooting common digital issues and solving problems related to digital tools and practices and how to support clients facing the same issues.

*Relevant DigComp competences: 5.2 Identifying Needs and Technological Responses and 5.4 Identifying Digital Competence Gaps*

## **Online Safety & Well-being**

This module could help counsellors ensure that their digital counselling services are accessible to clients from diverse backgrounds, having different types of disadvantages or social and cultural barriers.

It could cover topics such as access to safe environments and digital equipment and boundary-setting in the context of digital communication.

It should also focus on topics such as GDPR and data protection principles, data retention and responding to data breaches.

*Relevant DigComp competences: 4.2 Protecting Personal Data and Privacy and 4.3 Protecting Health and Well-Being*

Some additional suggestions in terms of learning approach are the following:

### **Blended learning approach**

Combining online learning materials, virtual or in-person workshops, interactive and practical activities. This approach would allow practitioners to learn both theoretical and practical aspects of digital guidance skills as well as provide opportunities for reflection and feedback.

## **Peer to peer learning and self-assessment**

Incorporating peer-to-peer self-assessment tools can be helpful to evaluate progress and identify common areas for improvement. This could include self-reflection, action learning and peer feedback as well as self-assessment tools such as quizzes to help measure learning outcomes.

## **Empowering clients and supporting their digital gaps**

Practitioners often have to support their own clients to overcome challenges related to digital skills' gap and access to digital devices. Our programme may also consider how practitioners can cascade down their knowledge and empower their clients to develop digital skills to support online networking and job search, practising online interviews, preparing for smart working and remote jobs for instance. In relation to this matter, the new European Framework for Digital Competence of Educators is an interesting tool which includes two specific sections about 'Empowering Learners' and 'Facilitating Learner's Digital Competences'.

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Felipe Milano	CEO of Krilloud and Professor at Malaga University	Krilloud
David García	Learning and Technology Manager at Rinova Malaga, Founder of Krilloud, former Mentor for CLOCK	Rinova Malaga and Krilloud

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# Cyprus

Completed by:

**Emily Anna Mavridou**  
**EU Project Manager and Researcher**  
**15/05/2023**



## 1. Introduction

This report aims to provide information about the Republic of Cyprus in regards to online counselling and guidance services as well as information about the VET sector and its application in Cyprus. This report will include findings from both primary and secondary research.

Due to RESET's expertise in Education and Training, the participants gathered from the primary research consisted of VET trainers, teachers, researchers and adult educators with more experienced knowledge and interaction with online environments and digital tools. Specifically, 6 participants were interviewed consisting of VET trainers, adult educators and teachers in both public and private institutions. Based on the information gathered from the interviews and in combination to the gaps identified in the online research an online questionnaire was created mainly focusing on the technical context, organisation of sessions as well as GDPR which were also the key themes gathered from the interviews. The online questionnaires were sent mainly to VET trainers of private organisations gathering 15 responses. In regards to the secondary research taking place the majority of sources included governmental reports and reports developed at a European level especially from Cedefop in regards to VET information in Cyprus.

Based on both the material gathered from primary and secondary research a need is rising about digital education. One of the major shifts in COVID-19 was the shift to digitalised practices, however there is still much research and education that needs to be undertaken. In conclusion, this report will provide the information available in the context of online counselling and digitalisation as well as the gaps and needs found in that same context.

## 2. Corona-crisis affecting specific target groups in Cyprus

Similarly, to the rest of the globe, the COVID-19 can be characterised as a unique and profound experience in the Republic of Cyprus as well. In a 2020 report published by the Ministry of Finance in Cyprus the impact of COVID-19 in an economic, social and health context is outlined (Mallis & Matsi, 2020).

### Impact in an economic context:

The majority of the COVID-19 period is described by Mallis & Matsi (2020) as a 'profound supply shock' since everything was interlinked, affecting the majority of supplies in Cyprus. Examples of shortages experienced in Cyprus were: air transportation, ground transportation more specifically mass public transportation, shipping and tourism. Financial transactions were greatly affected as the impact on the above sectors reduced the financial flow due to the general decline in activity. The imposed lockdowns also affected and enhanced tremendously the economic impact in Cyprus, leaving the island in an 'economic paralysis and an inevitable demand shock'. The table below also depicts the decline in the GDP growth rate while also the recovery taking place in 2021 in Cyprus and other selected European countries (Mallis & Matsi, 2020).

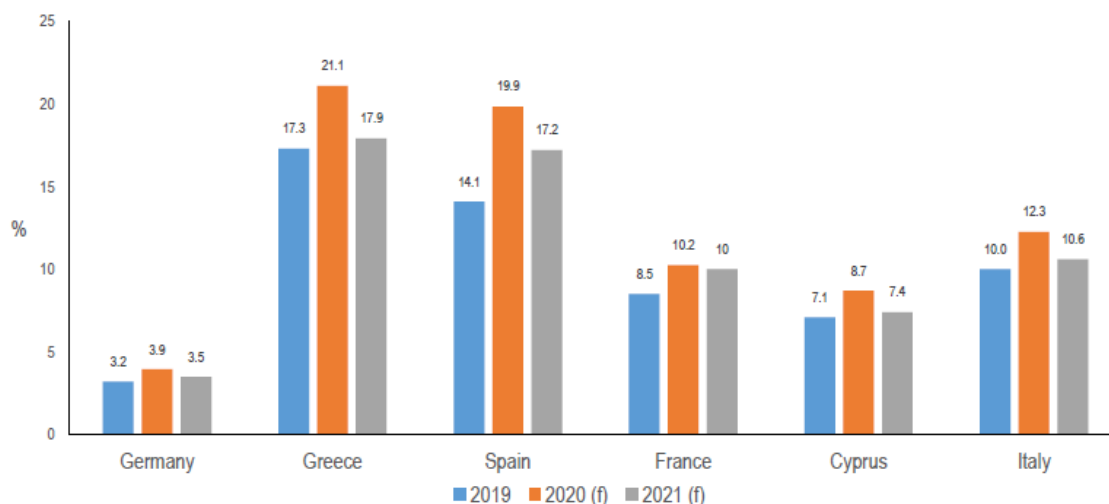
	2018	2019	2020 (f)	2021 (f)
Germany	1.5	0.6	-6.8	5.6
France	1.8	1.3	-7.7	6.0
Italy	0.8	0.3	-9.3	5.7
Spain	2.4	2.0	-8.7	5.7
Greece	1.9	1.9	-9.9	6.5
Cyprus	4.1	3.2	-7.0	5.9

*Mallis & Matsi (2020)*

Further explained by Mallis & Matsi (2020) the most significant impact of Cyprus was in regards to the combination of the health sector and tourism. Due to the restriction imposed on the health situations the tourist sector was affected accordingly especially in retail, shopping, trade, restaurants and hotels. The impact in the above sectors also included a number of people losing their jobs thus also affecting the labour market and unemployment rates. Further agreed by Kalosinatos & Antoniou (2022) Cyprus was undergoing important changes in regards to the structural contexts and keeping up with rising needs such as technology, demographics, green transition which were of course affected by the pandemic.

The table below shows the unemployment rate in Cyprus and Selected countries in 2019 and also the forecasted numbers in 2020 & 2021.

Chart 3: Consensus unemployment rate forecasts 2019-2021



*Mallis & Matsi (2020)*

Another important element raised in the report was that the increase in unemployment rate will also result in a decline in consumption of goods and services while also increasing costs for sterilisation of various spaces. Provision of support was given by the Cypriot government in the form of 3 different supporting programs in order to prevent unemployment and its increase while also providing a level of support to more vulnerable groups (Mallis & Matsi ,2020).

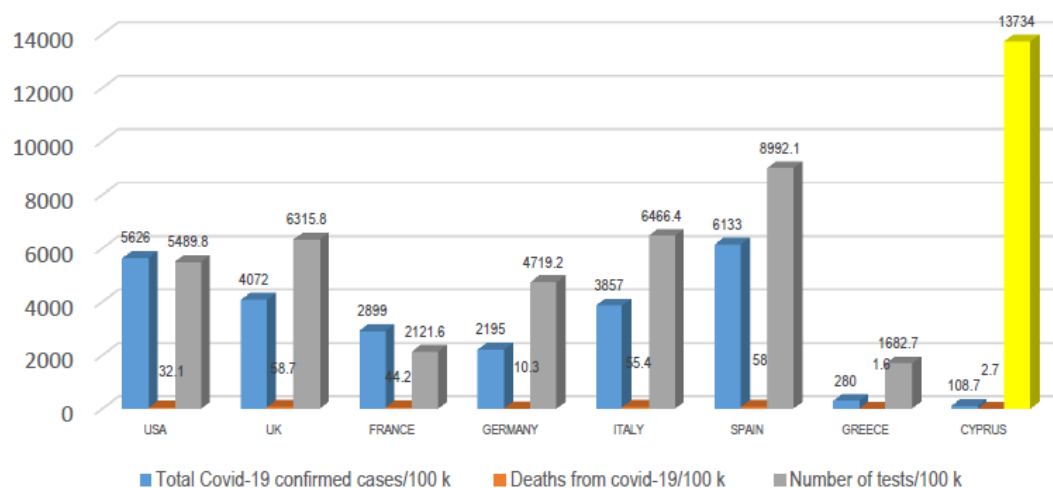
**Impact in a health context:**

The direct impact of COVID-19 can be considered as quite obvious both globally and in Cyprus. Mallis & Matsi (2020) express that it is at these times where the efficiency of the national health system and the importance of the organisation of public and private hospitals came to light. Further, it expresses how people considered as vulnerable face the most risk needing the support in any case. The table below, present the number of cases until **June 2020**, in Cyprus and selected European Countries:

	Total confirmed Covid-19 cases/1M	Total recovered/1M	Deaths from Covid-19/1M	Number of tests / 1M	Total deaths
Usa	5,626	1,861	323	54,898	106,990
Uk	4,072	N/A	575	63,158	39,045
France	2,899	1,049	442	21,216	28,883
Germany	2,195	1,987	103	47,192	8,624
Italy	3,857	2,619	554	64,664	33,475
Spain	6,133	N/A	580	89,921	27,127
Greece	280	132	17	17,496	179
Cyprus <sup>13</sup>	952	801	17	120,298	17

*Mallis & Matsi (2020)*

In addition, a more detailed description of COVID-19 cases is presented below:



*Mallis & Matsi (2020)*

A healthcare reform was undertaken in Cyprus in 2019 making the healthcare system and treatments more accessible through protocols, making also the COVID-19 treatments more affordable ([Cyprus GHS](#)). However, additional resources are also in need for the national healthcare system to enhance the effectiveness and support of the health system. Some identifications by Mallis & Matsi (2020) were the prevention of lack of medical personnel, sufficient medical supplies, further inclusion and attention of vulnerable groups in the health system.

## Impact in a social context:

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental social impact which can be linked to both the economic and health sector. The more profound affected areas based on the report are tourism and consumerism also burdening the issue of unemployment. A proposition of the use of technology in both terms of technology and other contexts is introduced for the reduction of costs and also the provision of solutions (Mallis & Matsi, 2020).

## Impact on education

A working group established by the Youth Board of Cyprus during the COVID-19 expressed the impact of the pandemic in the lives of youth and also on their training opportunities. The purpose of the group was to examine throughout the pandemic the experiences of young people, identify good practices, examine initiatives established by youth and examine beneficial digital tools. Through its survey, the group raised the issue of digital infrastructure and suitable resources in regards to online education and training. An issue at the beginning of the pandemic was the ability of students from all socio-economic backgrounds to have access to the appropriate equipment for their engagement in online learning or training (Cedefop,2021).

Kalosinatos & Antoniou (2022) raise the issue of a shortage of VET and STEM programs in regards to student enrolments and interest from adult learners as well. Kalamata (2022) in her work further states how informal adult learners were negatively affected by the pandemic and their experience. It is expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has also shed some light into other fields of education such as the one of VET and work-based learning as well. Some VET trainers who participated in the study expressed a slight lack of engagement however only a 4% ended up being unemployed and another 4% were able to find better opportunities based on the pandemic. Digital skills have been something that trainers were forced to enhance as well as the learners in order to engage in their new reality. Interestingly enough, some trainers also express the positive impact of the pandemic in their work due to the new skills and elements they were introduced mostly in the digital field creating a feeling of connection and solidarity among them.

Kalamata (2022) also provides information in regards to the involvement of Cyprus in the field of informal education, showing an active participation in informal activities despite the lockdowns that were taking place. Approximately 4000 participants engage with the non-formal sector through various European funded programs, training or other activities. Additionally, several NGOs and relevant stakeholders have successfully adjusted their practices especially in regards to digital skills with also the involvement of learners interested in enhancing their digital skills.

### 3. State of Digitalisation (due to Corona) in Cyprus

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the surface various needs in regards to digitalisation as also stated in the previous section (Cedefop,2021).

In a study conducted by Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al (2022) about the transition to online learning, it was expressed that even though students may have increased knowledge in the online medium and digital skills it is not the same as being a digital learner and thus were not able to fully benefit from an online learning environment. The majority of the participants stated that they owned their own digital device or were sharing with their family. Interestingly enough, the majority of students described themselves as advanced in regards to ICT skills while a minority described themselves as experts. Some of the students also expressed that their schools provided with the tools needed for online learning while lessons were taking place with platforms such as blackboard, Moodle, MS Teams and Google classrooms respectively while most of them did not find the platforms difficult in terms of usability.

Furthermore, the Secondary Voluntary National Review of the Republic of Cyprus stated the provision of students with equipment and/or internet access to 10% of students through the Ministry of Culture, Education, Sports and Youth. Online learning was adapted in order to avoid any educational disruptions through the use of distance education, TV programmes for pre- school children. Public schools were also forced to adapt to the creation of digital classrooms while also having the ability to provide support and using the necessary equipment. Unfortunately, Secondary Technical and Vocational education programs as well as Apprenticeships were not completed due to the restrictions of the pandemic (Second Voluntary National Review, 2021).

The teacher's lack of familiarity was considered as the main challenge expressed by the participants. Other challenges mentioned in relation to online learning were internet connection, lack of familiarity with the platform on behalf of the student, limited access to the platforms and limited access to a device (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2022). Except for the digital challenges some students experienced difficulties in regards to the workload, while also being with their family, difficulty in organising workload with their studies, lack of classroom management and organisation and teachers' attitude. Various students expressed their preference of face to face lessons due to the lack of socialisation, participation, concentration and lack needed interaction with the teacher such as lack of explanation, inability to ask questions or have a discussion.

- **National Initiatives:**

According to the [Cyprus Recovery and Resilience Plan \(2021-2026\)](#), Cyprus scored 24<sup>th</sup> out of the 28 EU member states in the 2020 edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index of the European Commission. Despite the improvement in elements of connectivity and internet connection there is still quite a bit of room for improvement since the score is still below the average. Furthermore, it is stated that one in two Cypriots lack basic digital skills.

A national [Digital strategy](#) has been adopted in Cyprus since June 2020 aiming to enhance the digital revolution in Cyprus supported by the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy (Jākobsone, 2022; Digital Cyprus,2020). The digital strategy consists of the following objectives:

- Technology that works for people
- Vibrant, sustainable and resilient digital economy
- Open, democratic and inclusive digital society
- Green, digital transition

(Digital Cyprus,2020)

Based on the above objectives, the government aims for an upskilling in order to keep up with the digital needs of today's context. Some of the aims that have been set to be achieved through the objectives of the Digital strategy are :

1. Development and enhancement of basic and continuous digital skills throughout meaning that all residents of the Republic of Cyprus need to be educated at least up to the level where they feel confident enough to interact with digital governmental services, basic digital skills, digital transactions as well as being aware of online safety
2. Digitalisation among the business sector through the provision of equipment, training and support
3. Enhancement of the STEM sector in Cyprus through the increase of STEM graduates
4. Enhancement of skills especially for unemployed people in order to increase their chances in the labour market.

(Jākobsone, 2022; Digital Cyprus,2020)

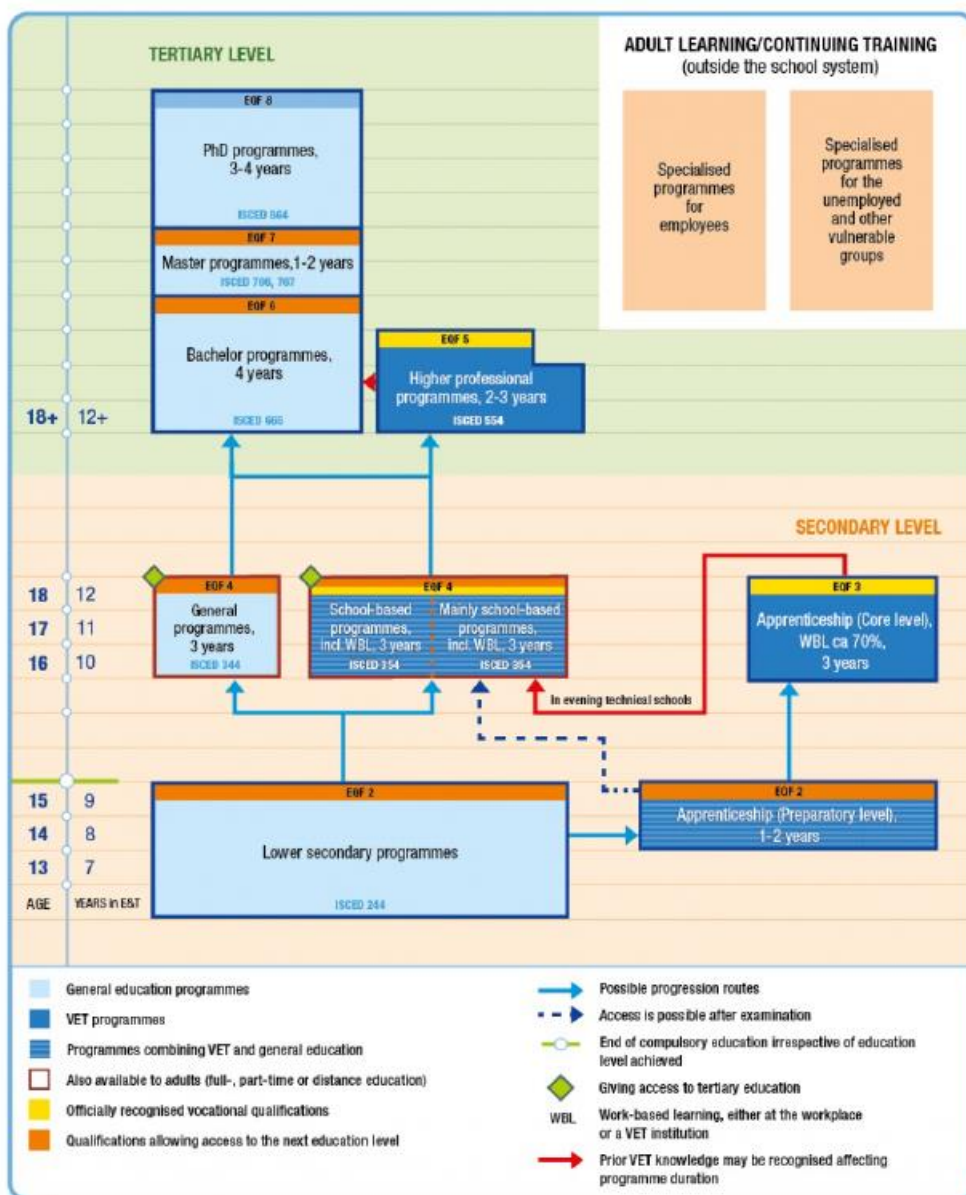


## 4. Counselling and C-VET in Cyprus

### The VET system in Cyprus

The Vocational education and training (VET) system in Cyprus is developed under the Ministry of Education, more specifically the Department of Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education and Training is appointed for the apprenticeship system while also the Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA) plays a significant role in the VET field in Cyprus (Cedefop,2022).

A general overview of the vocational education and training system can be seen below



(Cedefop,2022)

In Cyprus, the VET system and education is available at the secondary and tertiary levels, however in a 2018 report it was stated how the participation in VET programmes remains quite low in Cyprus despite the increase that has need monitored (Korelli, 2018). VET programmes undertaken in secondary level are usually under the technical schools, including the evening technical schools as well. Technical schools follow a 3-year programme including both theoretical and practical elements, leading to an EQF 4 school certificate which is considered as the same with the school certificates of the general education schools (Cedefop, 2022).

Students can engage with the VET sector in Cyprus through:

- Upper secondary level VET at technical schools for students at the ages of 15-18 years old
- Formal educational programmes provided by the Ministry of education through the evening technical schools where school leavers can attend to finish and acquire their school certificate while also promoting the integration and skills development of early high school leavers
- Lifelong VET programmes provided by the Department of Secondary Technical and Vocational Education and Training (STVET)

(Cedefop, 2022)

Apprenticeship systems are also available for VET students, more specifically for students within the age group of 14-18. The apprenticeship system is a 2-year IVET programme which offers to young people who have not completed their secondary compulsory education theoretical training, and also provides the opportunity for them to be trained and find a job in more technical fields. Preparatory apprenticeship involves young people between 14-16 years old that have not undergone any lower secondary programmes for 2 educational years. Following the completion of this program, the students can either move to a 'core' apprenticeship program or upper secondary program via the required examinations. The core apprenticeship program has a duration of 3 years and EQF level 2 as the preparatory apprenticeship program. In order to enrol to the core apprenticeship program students need to be under 18 years old and should have completed either a lower secondary programme or have not completed an upper secondary programme. Following, the students may then acquire their school certificate by attending evening technical school programmes (Cedefop, 2022). Higher education VET programmes of a university level can also be acquired via public or private institutions.

VET programmes are easily accessible to the adult populations of Cyprus as well, especially to vulnerable and unemployed individuals through either public or private organisations. One of the aims mentioned in the Cedefop report (Cedefop, 2022) is the promotion of VET

programmes as a form of enhancement of life-long learning. As expected, COVID-19 also impacted the field of VET education. Interestingly, based on information provided by the Ministry of education in the school year of 2019-20, the majority of VET learners and more specifically 83% at an upper secondary level were males, while similarly in public higher education programmes male students are still more prominent with a percentage of 60% (Cedefop,2022).

Aside from a student context, VET training is also available for employees and unemployed individuals. The training is usually provided by the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA), the ministry of education, the ministry of labour and other relevant institutions. The HDRA also undergoes several initiatives such as

- Provision of training programmes to registered unemployed individuals based on a specific sector following a consultation,
- provision of employment and training to graduates
- provision of training to long term unemployed individuals to corporations
- provision of training to companies
- VET training

There is not an official definition of VET in Cyprus (Korelli and Kyriacou-Liveri, 2022). Interestingly enough, a 2018 Cedefop report conducted by Korelli (2018) shows a lack of familiarity of the Cypriot population with the VET sector with 32% of the participants never hearing about VET and not being aware of what it actually is. The lack of familiarity with the VET sector might also explain the low participation levels in Cyprus. A contributing factor in regards to the low participation levels is also the prejudice in Cyprus in regards to the field of VET. However, VET students that attended technical schools are found to be more satisfied in all elements of their education rather than students undergoing general education. A contrast is apparent since even though VET students have a positive opinion about their education the VET levels in Cyprus still remain quite low (Korelli, 2018).

## 5. Career Counsellors in Cyprus

Cyprus aims to enhance the provision of guidance and counselling through its public services. As mentioned in the previous sections as well, one of the main public career providers in Cyprus is the Career Counselling and Educational Service (CCES) which is part of the Department of Secondary education. Counsellors need to have acquired an appropriate post-graduate education in the field of career guidance while also having a specialised degree in secondary education and the completion of a pre-service training program. Some post-graduate courses are also available at the University of Cyprus giving also the opportunity to carry out a placement at the Counselling and Career Education services of the Ministry of Education (Cedefop, 2020). However, it should be noted that the above information applies to the public sector.

The bodies providing counselling are:

- [Career counselling and educational services \(CCES\) of the ministry of education](#)
- [Public employment services \(PES\)](#)
- [Euroguidance centre Cyprus of the Labour ministry](#)
- [Human resource development authority \(HRDA\)](#)
- [Youth Board of Cyprus](#)
- Private organisations

Guidance through the public employment services includes support towards unemployed individuals through guidance, counselling, identifying their interests for a suitable job, career opportunities and possible employers. In addition, information on available training is provided and, in some cases, guidance based on more personalised needs is provided.

The main goals of the career counselling and educational services are to provide guidance on the development of an individual's personality as well as enhancement of problem-solving skills that can be applied to all aspects of their life (Cedefop, 2022).

Counsellors are also appointed in the education context adopting the position of the school counsellor. They usually work with either individual students or in small groups involving various elements such as educational or career guidance, personal issues or any issue that might be related to the student's wellbeing. School counsellors also cooperate with teachers, parents or other experts that might be needed to ensure the wellbeing of the students. In cases of students with special needs, the school counsellor has a crucial role in order to develop a personalised plan based on the needs of the students. Except from the direct involvement with the students, school counsellors also undertake more administrative roles such as preparation of records of references in regards to the students (Cedefop, 2022).

The above counselling and guidance services offer guidance to various groups in the population especially to (Cedefop, 2020):

- School students
- VET students
- Higher education students
- Employed
- Unemployed adults
- Older adults
- Early leavers
- Not in employment, education or training (NEET)
- Young people at risk
- People with various needs

Apart from the Educational Services the Youth Board of Cyprus provides career counselling services based on 4 elements with are:

- Individual guidance which is arranged by booking an appointment
- Career Aptitude Tests: provision of tools that help students make more informed decisions about their future especially in regards to their studies
- Soft skills development workshops: usually dedicated to young people looking for a job, helping them to get into the labour context while also teaching them the required skills that are needed
- Career academies: provision of information based on the specific path of choice through courses, workshops, lectures and other information that can give a more holistic view about the relevant professional context.

*Youth Board of Cyprus. (n.d.).*

As it can be observed based on the above information, it appears that there are various counselling services with a significant contribution to the student population and more vulnerable groups such as the unemployed, NEETs, early leavers, etc. Despite the useful information that has been provided, more research is in need to take place in order to provide more analytical information for both the public and private counselling and guidance sector in Cyprus.

## 6. The view from the Practitioners

### General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

The primary research in Cyprus was composed of 2 elements which were interviews and an online questionnaire. 7 practitioners were interviewed with the following backgrounds: VET trainers and educators. After the interviews were concluded the key themes were identified which were :

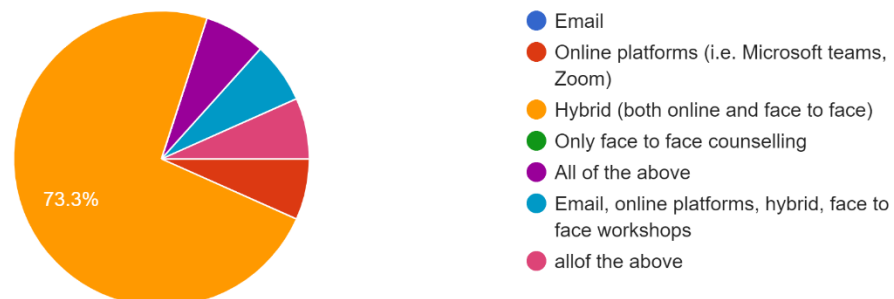
- Technical challenges and need for upskilling
- Differences between an online and face to face context
- Required preparation in an online medium
- Information on GDPR

Based on the above themes, a questionnaire was distributed gathering in a total of 15 responses. The expertise of the responders from the questionnaires included trainers, teachers, career counsellors, job coaches, lifelong learning institutions, youth and community organisations and training providers.

The Participants from both interviews and questionnaires gathered a vast variety of target groups with main focus on adult learners and youth. When asked about the online format and tools used in their professional context, the majority of participants indicated a hybrid mode of working. Other responses included: email, online platforms and some used all of the aforementioned tools. Some also expressed the significance of platforms such as zoom, Microsoft teams, google meet and skype when teaching online. Google and Microsoft were indicated as great for the creation of quizzes while google classroom was considered as extremely useful in regards to the creation of lesson plans.

What type of online tools do in your professional context

15 responses



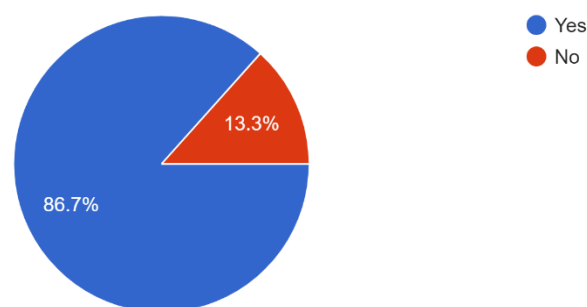
## (a) Working with Clients

A mixture of responses from the interviews were given in regards to the difference between an online and face to face medium. Some participants expressed that they felt closer to their team when they were participating in online training while others expressed that a better connection can be established from a physical aspect but again this is something that depends on each person, since If there is interest from both parties there should not be any issue. However, there were also some participants that expressed the loss of some important elements when conducting online training and calls. Especially VET educators expressed that their students often lose their attention in an online context so they need to ensure to keep their attention at all times, which is more challenging in comparison to face to face lessons.

As presented below in the case of the questionnaire responses the majority of expressed that there is a difference between an online and face to face context.

Do you believe that online communication differs from face to face communication in your professional context?

15 responses

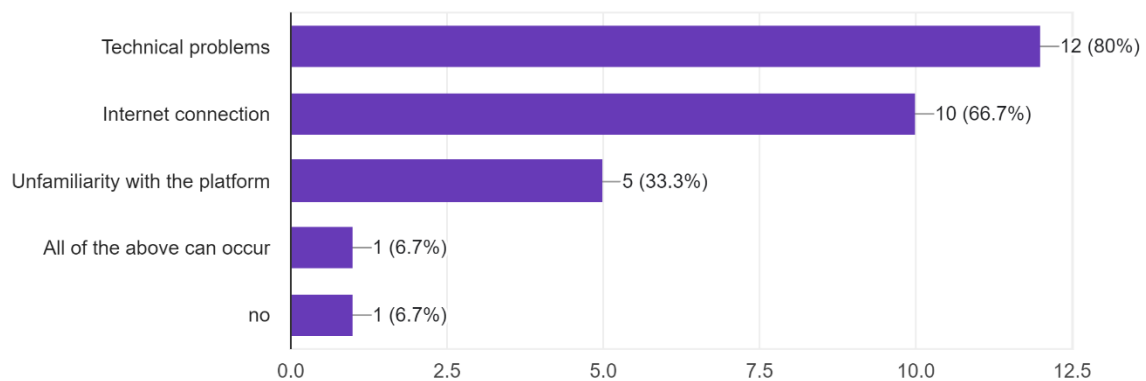


Respondents further justified their answers by expressing that in a physical context there is greater connection, understanding as well as communication between the participants. Also, if any confusion arises it is easier to resolve it. In order to achieve the same connection through an online medium careful use of wording and organisation is required, especially due to the fact that you need to keep your attention at all times. Non-linguistic elements such as body language, signs further help the establishment of a connection in a physical setting while in an online context the personal element is missing due to usually closed cameras, microphones, etc.

## (b) Practitioner Skills and Values

During the interview phases, the majority of interviewees and questionnaire respondents agreed that the majority of challenges were of a technological nature especially in regards to the internet connection, being familiar with the platform and specific tools that might be used during the call, as depicted below.

Do you face any challenges when using an online setting? (You can select more than one choice)  
15 responses



Both the students and instructors need to be prepared but a great aid to the instructors would be a reference guide or specialised training on the platforms and possible tools that might be useful for them due also the novelty of technological platforms in an education and development context. Interestingly enough, one of the participants mentioned that online training is not something that can take place only once before using a platform since the challenges when using the platform will take place when the actual online call is taking place and observe the actual needs.

The importance of guiding first the practitioners and then the students was highlighted for the required adjustment in an online medium as participants will be easier to adjust through appropriate guidance. The importance of knowledge on behalf of the participants was raised as well as conducting an online call was considered an effort from both sides. The interviews mentioned that in order to overcome any possible challenges that may rise from interaction with an unfamiliar platform, they first navigate through it before the call. Something that was also mentioned was that in terms of more practical guidance especially in the field of VET it is quite challenging to provide online calls due to the importance of physical involvement of both the students and the trainer.

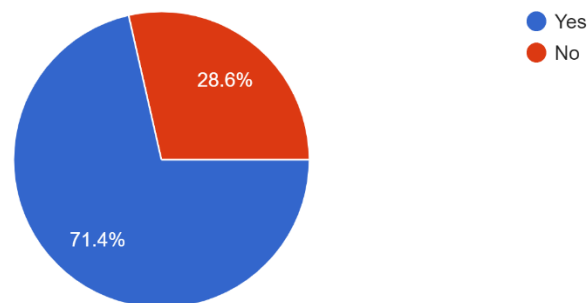
The GDPR context was also another element where interviewees agreed that more information should have been provided, which was also agreed by the majority of the questionnaire responders as indicated below. Since personal information is something



extremely sensitive everyone must be aware of the do's and don'ts especially in an online medium to avoid any violations. In order to ensure that all the needs of educators are fulfilled a participant expressed that a questionnaire should be given in order to identify the weaknesses and thus training needs of practitioners.

Do you believe more information is needed for handling personal information (GDPR) in an online context?

14 responses



When respondents were further asked about what they do when the challenges mentioned participants indicated using search engines and trying to figure out how to resolve the problem, troubleshooting, restarting the program or asking help from a relevant department or an expert. An interesting perspective was also given in regards to the attitude of practitioners when their students face similar challenges. Some respondents share that they record the lesson in order to avoid any gaps in cause of an issue with the internet connection and also do a walkthrough the platform and of the new tools if it is considered necessary. An essential element is to provide time to the participant to connect and in general being understanding since it is a new context for everyone.

### **(c ) Working with Clients**

When asked about the difference between face to face and online communication, the majority of participants expressed their belief that through online communication it is much more difficult to establish a connection as also mentioned above. Some participants also mentioned that for meetings of a shorter time period there was no issue but in case of long meetings or training physical presence is much better since it aids for the establishment of a

teamwork and community feeling between the participants. Furthermore, some VET trainers mentioned the difficulty and in some instances impossibility of carrying out their lessons in an online medium due to the need of presence and practical training, except in cases where a more theoretical context needs to be taught. Another trainer mentioned that she believes that in cases of advanced students, if there is adequate preparation from both the trainer and the students there is a possibility of carrying the lesson properly in an online medium with the appropriate guidance.

#### **(d) The System and Networks**

Similarly, some participants from the interviews had some differing options in regards to the preparation in an online context in comparison to a face to face one. Some interviews who were both in the position of a teacher and a student expressed that the only difference for them is just attending online and thus the provision of links. On the contrary, some interviewees expressed the more challenging nature of online lessons due to more preparation required on behalf of the educator. The text, images, tools and familiarity with the platform are needed prior to avoiding any delays rather than looking to find something during the online call.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, all of the participants involved in the primary research in Cyprus expressed the usefulness of the provision of GDPR and technologically oriented training, raising also the need of a more specialised training for the use of technical platforms while also the need to provide more training for the engagement of participants in online calls. As presented from the secondary research as well, in the context of Cyprus a more extensive research is required in both the field of VET as well as counselling.

From what arises in the secondary research a lack of information and knowledge in regards to the VET sector has been quite obvious in the case of Cyprus, and also cases of prejudice towards such a path in secondary education despite the benefits and quality provided to participants. In regards to the primary research, it is quite obvious how COVID-19 has also affected the field of guidance and counselling. Respondents undoubtedly faced some challenges in regards to the transformation into a digital medium but with the proper support and patience everything can be solved.

Thus, useful support and material provided should be:

- How to be prepared before an online meeting: How should both practitioners and students get prepared when having an online meeting i.e. checking the platform that is going to be used in order to be more familiar before the session. Tools that can help with the organisation of the lesson can also be included.
- Technical oriented training: Further to the above point some common technical issues can be explained and how to solve them or how to prevent them.
- GDPR training : Basic information of what is GDPR ,its importance and possible violations that may take place in an online context without realising it
- Engagement of participants : Tools or methods that can ensure the attention of the participants since in an online medium they can be more easily distracted.
- Introduction to VET: a basic description and elements about what is Vocational and Education Training, what does it mean and how it is applied.

## 7. Acknowledgements and references

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Marios Savva	Adult Trainer	Public Training Centers
Josephine Mavrides	Trainer	Freelnacer
Maria Petridou	English Language Teacher	Private Language Institution

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# Sofia, Bulgaria

Completed by: Znanie Association



# 1. Introduction

This research is driven by the needs of guidance practitioners to cope with digitisation and the changing format and structure of their work. The COVID 19 pandemic has led to changes in people's attitudes as well as in the structure and form of the work of many professional sectors. Although the restrictions in Bulgaria have not been the most severe compared to other European countries, there have been lasting trends in changing the style of work and digitisation of many of the processes of training, counselling and information. Within almost 3 years, all training institutions have gone from fully face-to-face training, to fully distance learning, to the point where you can talk about blended learning and consulting. However, the need for a rapid and timely response has highlighted the deficits of the different institutions and professionals to cope with the diverse format of work. Despite the return to the old way of life, blended learning and counselling practices remain relevant.

These changes bring their own challenges for guidance practitioners, which is the object of this study.

This study has 2 main lines:

- Desk research;
- Secondary research - guidance practitioners' interviews.

To implement the desk research, the Znanie Association reviewed national and European level policy documents, strategies and studies on the development of guidance and counselling, as well as the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic and digitalization on the work of guidance practitioners in Bulgaria.

In order to get a better insight into the challenges faced by the target group, Znanie Association interviewed various practitioners from different parts of Bulgaria ( Razlog, Lovech and Sofia) and in different focus areas, including guidance and counselling experts, HR specialists, youth workers, school psychologists and trainers. This approach offered us more colourful feedback on the real situation guidance practitioners are facing. However, the larger number of interviewees represented different structures of the Employment Agency as the government body for providing guidance, information and training.

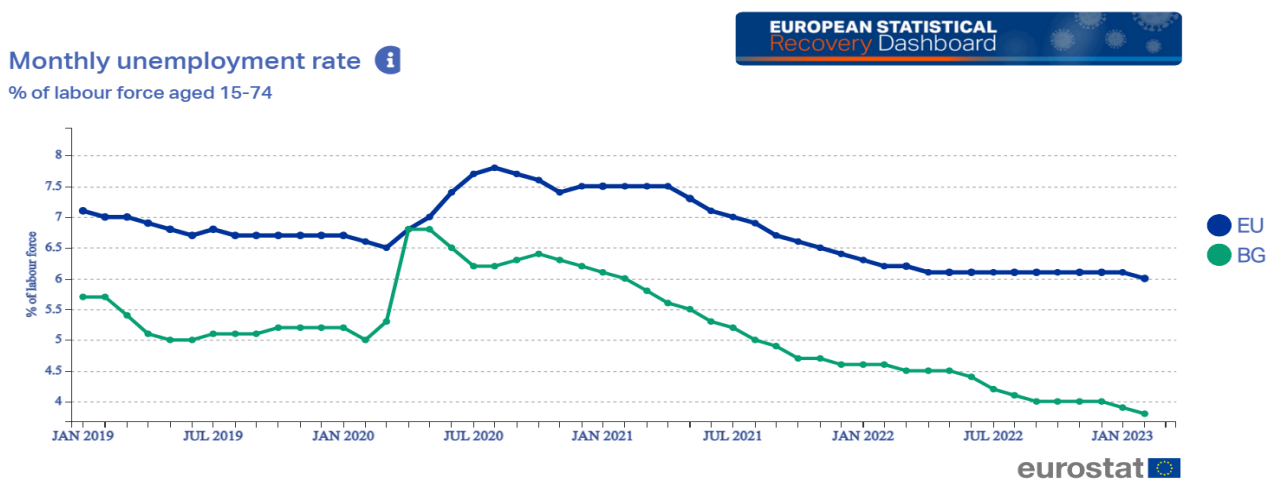


## 2. Corona-crisis affecting specific target groups in Bulgaria

The consequences of the pandemic COVID-19 had a strong negative impact on a large number of industries in Bulgaria. Some sectors were forced to close partially or completely. The most affected industries were culture, sport and entertainment as well with hotels and restaurants. These sectors reported a drastic decline in 2020, with most still unable to recover from the economic shock. In 2020, the unemployment rate was rising for the first time since 2013. In a report by the National Statistical Institute, the data on the onset of the pandemic in Bulgaria in 2020 are presented: "In the first quarter of 2020, the total number of employed persons aged 15 and over years of age was 3 107.2 thousand, of which 1 667.1 thousand men and 1 440.1 thousand women. Relative share of employed persons in the population aged 15 and over is 52.4%, 58.7% for men and 46.7% for women. In the first quarter of 2020, the number of unemployed persons was 148.9 thousand, of which 86.0 thousand were unemployed. (57.8%) were men and 62.9 thousand (42.2%) were women.

The unemployment rate is 4.6%, respectively. 4.9% for men and 4.2% for women. In comparison with the first quarter of 2019, the unemployment rate decreased by 0.4 percentage points, the decrease was the same for men and women.

While data from the following year shows, "In the first quarter of 2021, the total number of employees aged 15 and over is 3 028.7 thousand, of which 1 626.4 thousand men and 1 402.3 thousand women. The employment rate is 51.4%, respectively 57.7% for men and 45.6% for women. In the first quarter of 2021, the number of unemployed persons was 204.0 thousand, of which 114.0 thousand (55.9%) are men and 90.0 thousand (44.1%) are women. The unemployment rate is 6.3%, respectively 6.6% for men and 6.0% for women." The EUROSTAT graph below shows the change in the unemployment rate in Bulgaria (green) compared to the European Union (blue).



Bulgaria is one of the countries where measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus were defined as relatively mild and yet the effect on society was great. Since the first lockdown was announced on 13 March 2020, safety measures have changed depending on the situation. There is no concrete data on the effect on different groups of society in Bulgaria, if we talk about emotional-psychological effects. For the elderly, people with chronic diseases and those with disabilities, isolation has left its mark. Despite the challenging tests of normalcy, the price paid by youth during almost two years of the pandemic has been heavy, especially for pupils and students from the most vulnerable families from an economic and social point of view, often part of the Roma and Turkish communities. Service workers were the most affected by the pandemic COVID 19. Ignorance and lack of consistent safety and work measures led to the closure of restaurants, grocery stores, etc., bars, etc., as well as the reduction of working hours, pay or loss of jobs. Many people found themselves out of work and without any prospect of financial security within the months of the lockdown. Despite compensation and business support measures, people had to quickly retrain and turn to career counsellors for support and guidance.

### **3. State of Digitalisation (due to Corona) in Bulgaria**

Bulgaria ranks 26th of the 27 EU Member States in the European Commission Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) in 2022. Bulgaria's DESI score grew at an annual average of 9% over the past five years. Given the positioning of Bulgaria, this growth rate is not sufficient for the country to catch up with the other EU Member States.

On digital skills, despite recent increased efforts, the country remains significantly below the EU average, having a score of 32.6 versus the EU average of 45.7. The proportion of individuals with at least basic skills and above basic digital skills is well lower than the EU average, the latter significantly so (8% versus the EU average of 26%). Considering the EU's ambitious target of 80% of adults having at least basic digital skills by 2030, the country needs to step up efforts, as more than two thirds of its population lack such skills. Bulgaria also underperforms on the proportion of ICT specialists in the workforce (3.5% versus 4.5% EU average). However, the proportion of female ICT specialists is high.

On the business side, the adoption of digital technologies by SMEs remains almost half the EU average. Only 6% of Bulgarian enterprises use big data, 10% cloud and 3% artificial intelligence (AI), as opposed to the EU 2030 targets of 75% for each technology. To support business digitalisation, Bulgaria is making use of European Digital Innovation Hubs. Four European Digital Innovation Hubs proposed by the country received a successful evaluation result and another eight proposals got a Seal of Excellence.

Bulgaria		EU		
DESI 2020	DESI 2021	DESI 2022	DESI 2022	DESI 2022
<b>3a1 SMEs with at least a basic level of digital intensity</b>	NA	NA	25%	55%
% SMEs	2021		2021	
<b>3b1 Electronic information sharing</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>38%</b>
% enterprises	2019	2019	2021	2021
<b>3b2 Social media</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>29%</b>
% enterprises	2019	2019	2021	2021
<b>3b3 Big data</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>14%</b>
% enterprises	2018	2020	2020	2020
<b>3b4 Cloud</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>34%</b>
% enterprises	2021		2021	
<b>3b5 AI</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>8%</b>
% enterprises	2021		2021	
<b>3b6 ICT for environmental sustainability</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>66%</b>
% enterprises having medium/high intensity of green action through ICT	2021		2021	2021
<b>3b7 e-Invoices</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>32%</b>
% enterprises	2018	2020	2020	2020
<b>3c1 SMEs selling online</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>18%</b>
% SMEs	2019	2020	2021	2021
<b>3c2 e-Commerce turnover</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>12%</b>
% SME turnover	2019	2020	2021	2021
<b>3c3 Selling online cross-border</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>9%</b>
% SMEs	2019	2019	2021	2021

Bulgaria is facing many challenges regarding the digitalisation of its public services, as it underperforms in most indicators, with the exception of open data, which is on par with the EU average. Only 34% of internet users interact with the government online (65% in the EU). The supply of digital public services for citizens (with a score of 59 versus an EU average of 75) needs to improve significantly to enable Bulgaria to contribute to the 2030 Digital Decade

target of all key public services offered fully online. To achieve this goal, Bulgaria has launched the National Registry reform and defined the path to enhance digital transformation.

To overcome the shortcomings in Bulgaria’s digital transformation and to put it on a par with the other EU Member States, there needs to be a continued, sustained effort at political and administrative level that builds on the country’s strengths to deliver on the reforms and investments in all four dimensions. The recent political instability may have significantly affected attempts in this area.

Bulgaria		EU			
	DESI 2020	DESI 2021	DESI 2022	DESI 2022	
<b>4a1 e-Government users</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>65%</b>	
% internet users	2019	2020	2021	2021	
<b>4a2 Pre-filled forms</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>64</b>	
Score (0 to 100)	2021	2021			
<b>4a3 Digital public services for citizens</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>75</b>	
Score (0 to 100)	2021	2021			
<b>4a4 Digital public services for businesses</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>82</b>	
Score (0 to 100)	2021	2021			
<b>4a5 Open data</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>81%</b>	
% maximum score	2021	2021			

Bulgaria launched several initiatives for the digitalisation of public services, unfortunately without yet tangible effects on its DESI performance, potentially also due to the political instability. The adoption of electronic identification and the digitalization of National registries remain at the top in the list of priorities for the new Ministry of e-Government. Targeted actions have been [Digital Economy and Society Index 2022 Bulgaria](#) taken to encourage citizens and businesses to further take up e-Government services while offering training in cybersecurity to raise the trust levels of the users in adopting public e-services.

As the statistics above show, schools, VET centres, training organisations and government institutions were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of moving from face-to-face work to a digital format.

However, all training and counselling went online and transformation happened through trial and error, without structured processes and even without the physical facilities such as computer devices and software programs. The home office format was implemented by all sectors whose field of work allowed it. Organisations, where digitalization was part of the organisation's strategy, did not face much resistance and challenges, while the institutions that did not observe this, suffered a crisis at all levels.

The main tools implemented by the organisations are ZOOM and Microsoft Teams. With smaller organisations, training centres and NGOs prioritising the choice of ZOOM, and larger institutions using Microsoft Teams. Tools such as Viber, Whatsapp and Facebook are used in more informal contexts but are also chosen for consulting and training depending on the situation.

Although many changes and developments have taken place in the 3 years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the areas of digitalization of information, counselling and guidance, efforts are needed to sharpen the skills and quality of services in the different institutions, as well as to support individual professionals in improving their skills in blended counselling and training.

## 4. Counselling and C-VET in Bulgaria

Career guidance and counselling in Bulgaria is presented on 2 levels: public and private. Institutions providing information, guidance and counselling at the state level are: the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET); the Ministry of Education and Science and the Employment Agency.

### Career Guidance in public setting:

The [Ministry of Education and Science](#) offers career guidance through a dedicated portal for Career Guidance in Education. The portal has 28 career centres in the regional cities of Bulgaria.

The centres provide individual or group services in the field of:

- ❖ Information about: types of preparation in school education; institutions in the secondary and higher education system; admission procedures and conditions for pupils and students, etc. the professions and profiles studied in the school system; labour market dynamics and needs.
- ❖ Work on career guidance programmes: with students of classes I-IV - creation of first and earliest projects; with pupils in grades V-XII - preparation for transition to higher education/labour market; with students from different target groups - students at risk of dropping out of school, talented students, students with special educational needs, students with deviant behaviour, etc.; reintegration of school leavers; building new skills for social inclusion and mobility.
- ❖ Advice on: Discovering interests, attitudes and motivation for the choice of education and profession; overcoming typical mistakes related to students' choice of education and profession; planning skills for study and personal time; linking individual characteristics to the requirements of the desired education; decision support related to further education; career planning skills; resolving internal and external conflicts related to educational, professional and personal fulfilment opportunities.
- ❖ Mediation between students, school and business on career guidance issues

Students from all grades, regardless of the type of school; parents, teachers, representatives of business and other organisations can benefit from the services of the career centres.

The **Employment Agency** provides career guidance services for employed, unemployed and students. There are 10 Career Centres of the Agency based in the major cities of the country. The other unit which directly deals with counselling and information for the Job Centres.

The service of professional informing, consulting and guidance is targeted at the jobseekers (unemployed or employed persons who wish to change their profession), pupils, and students. It is also aimed to support the work of pedagogical advisors. While consulting persons, the employment mediator can offer their inclusion in professional informing, consulting and guidance activities at the Job Center (information-consulting unit at the Labor Office Directorate) or self-informing through specialised information materials - short descriptions of professions, videos, multimedia products, and career guidance programs. Individual vocational guidance is carried out in case of need of additional information when choosing the appropriate profession and/or on the way to acquiring professional qualification in accordance with the person's individual qualities and the needs of the labour market. Guidance is done for unemployed people, for employed people who wish to change their jobs, as well as for learners.

Labour offices of the Employment Agency also provide individual and group services.

**NAVET** licensed Centres for Information and Vocational Guidance (CIVG) offer a wide range of services including counselling, motivation, career guidance, coaching, competency assessment, referral to vocational training or key skills training. Centres for information and professional training actively interact with training institutions, public and private organisations in the implementation of various measures and programs. They carry out their activities in accordance with the Vocational Education and Training Act, the Employment Promotion Act, the Labour Code and in line with the national strategic documents in force concerning adult education and employment.

### **Career Guidance in private setting:**

There are private career centres focused mainly on assessing an individual's personal qualities and guiding them towards a professional field, as well as preparing them to perform better in the labour market.

The non-governmental organisations (NGO) are very active with providing different types of projects in the field of career guidance and developing web portals which support young people's choice of educational and professional development.

The network of Youth information centres was created to support young people's motivation for further development through formal and non-formal education activities.

## C-VET in Bulgaria

Continuing vocational training can again be formal or informal.

- ❖ Formal continuing vocational training is controlled by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, which licences training providers, programmes and issues vocational qualification documents.
  - There are four national VET qualification levels: (a) level 1: acquired competences for performance of routine activities (WBL at least 70%) – NQF/EQF level 2; (b) level 2: acquired competences for performance of complex activities in a changing environment (WBL at least 60%) – NQF/EQF level 3; (c) level 3: acquired competences for performance of complex activities in a changing environment, including human resource management (WBL at least 50%) – NQF/EQF level 4; (d) level 4: acquired competences for performance of a broad range of complex activities in a changing environment, including human and financial resource management (WBL at least 50%) – NQF/EQF level 5.
  - The requirements for enrolment in VET programmes are minimum age, health condition, previous education and qualification level. The minimum required age is 13 (in the year of application) for vocational gymnasiums and schools. It is 16 for vocational training centres (initial and continuing VET providers for employees and the unemployed, without acquisition of an education level). The health condition of the applicant is attested by a medical certificate indicating fitness for the selected occupation. Previous education requirements are at least a completed primary, basic or secondary education or a successfully completed literacy course under the employment promotion Act. The following programmes are available for VET school learners.
- ❖ Non-formal continuing vocational training may be provided by the employer, an NGO or a lifelong learning organisation.

Figures show that in 2020, 12 405 enterprises provided C-VET activities (in-house and external) and 362 550 people engaged in various forms of C-VET activities.

**Guidance of young citizens** is one of the key priorities in the Strategic Framework for development of education, training and education (2021-2030). The document identifies four main priorities aimed at:

- Implementing an educational approach that supports the development of all learners and contributes to the development of thinking, capable and proactive people capable of coping with change and insecurity;



- Improving the quality of education and training;
- Providing an educational environment for equal access to lifelong learning, active social inclusion and active citizenship;
- Stimulating education and training tailored to the needs of the economy and changes in the labour market.

## 5. Career Counsellors in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria there are no state-accepted requirements for the position of a career counsellor. Depending on the scope and depth of the activity, the requirements range from a high school diploma to a specialised higher education. Information, guidance and advice can be provided without specific profile and educational requirements. For psychological testing and career guidance, a university degree in Psychology is required.

As described in detail in the section above, career counsellors in Bulgaria can pursue careers in public institutions; counselling agencies and in the NGO sector.

- ❖ The main providers of career guidance at school level are the pedagogical advisers. They are supported by career counsellors from the non-governmental sector.
- ❖ Career counsellors working in the employment offices of employment agencies have:
  - Mediator, information and placement
  - Labour intermediary
  - Counsellor, supported employment, and other positions.

The requirement for this position is the acquisition of a Level 3 professional qualification (EQF4) in the profession of EMPLOYMENT INTERMEDIATE.

- ❖ In the non-governmental sector and youth centres, the role of career counsellors is often played by youth workers and trainers who use the methods of non-formal education to improve and form skills for more successful professional realisation of youths and adults. The profile of these experts varies and there is no formal requirement for professional qualifications and education.

There is no common professional association or registry of career counsellors due to the lack of established uniform criteria and requirements for job performance. Due to the different scope of activities, each institution is solely responsible for its own activities.

## 6. The view from the Practitioners

### (a) General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

The Znanie Association team interviewed 5 guidance practitioners individually. This included a youth worker, an adult trainer, HR experts and a school psychologist.

A separate event organised as a World Café was attended by 9 representatives from the Employment Agency, such as 7 Job Brokers and 2 experts from the Agency's Training Department.

All the interviewees had different experiences in the field of counselling and especially digital and blended counselling. Their different perspectives helped make the study more comprehensive.

Specifically, the guidance practitioners interviewed work with:

- The target group of the interviewed youth workers are young people aged 13-30 who wish to develop their personal professional skills in order to better their professional qualifications.
- HR professionals mainly advise team leaders, helping them to develop skills to deal with different situations and separately organise training for employees in the companies where they work. Having one interviewed in Bill's recruitment position right at the beginning and height of the fallout and shared specifics of the recruitment process in a digital format.
- The adult trainer mainly counsels unemployed individuals seeking employment.
- Employment assistants provide information, advice and counselling to employed, unemployed and learners in order to find training or employment.

During the interviews and the group event, there was a big difference in the approach to digital counselling between professionals representing the private sector (HR experts, trainers and youth workers) and those representing counselling in public institutions. The main difference is mainly in the approach to digital counselling and its implementation in practice, and in public structures. This has hardly happened during the pandemic.

In the current setting counselling is both face-to-face and digital depending on the situation, timing and purpose of the event. Such as government institutions email and phone for the means of remote counselling and in training and recruitment organisations things happen mainly with video conferencing and chat.

Zoom, Ms Teams, Trello and Viber are used depending on the organisation and the client's capabilities.

## (b) Practitioner Skills and Values

The main challenges can be divided into 3 main groups:

- Technical skill and lack of devices
- Specifics of digital communication, presentation and consulting
- Setting personal and professional boundaries

Employment agencies' job brokers said they were working mainly face-to-face work even in the midst of the pandemic, and the main reason was the lack of structure and mechanisms to implement blended and digital counselling. Lack of all the necessary computer and software support peripherals such as microphone and camera prevented their attempts at online counselling as well as support from colleagues and supervisors. All interviewees mentioned the lack of a quiet and secure space alongside a stable internet connection as a challenge to digital counselling.

One of the primary challenges of online counselling is the lack of face-to-face interaction, which can make it difficult to establish rapport and build a strong relationship between the counsellor and the client.

Online counselling can also be subject to technical difficulties such as internet connectivity issues, which can interfere with the counselling process. Another challenge of online counselling is the potential for distractions in the client's environment. Clients may have difficulty finding a private space to engage in counselling, or may be interrupted by family members or pets, which can disrupt the process. Confidentiality is another challenge in online counselling. The use of technology may increase the risk of breaches in privacy, such as the client's information being intercepted or accessed by unauthorised persons. Finally, online counselling can limit the counsellor's ability to read and respond to nonverbal cues and body language, which can be important in understanding the client's emotional state and needs. However, despite these challenges, online counselling can still be effective in certain situations and with appropriate preparation and training, counsellors can adapt their practice to provide effective online services.

The move to online counselling has presented several ethical and professional challenges for counsellors. Confidentiality is a crucial ethical principle in counselling, and online counselling raises concerns about the security and privacy of client information. Counsellors need to ensure that they are using secure platforms and take appropriate measures to safeguard client confidentiality and privacy.

Another ethical challenge of online counselling is informed consent. Counsellors need to provide clients with clear and comprehensive information about the nature and limitations of online counselling, including issues such as confidentiality, security, and technology limitations, before obtaining the client's consent to participate in the counselling process.

In addition, counsellors need to be aware of the potential for power differentials in online counselling. Clients may feel more vulnerable or uncomfortable sharing personal information

in an online setting, and it may be more difficult for the counsellor to read and respond to nonverbal cues and body language.

Finally, online counselling raises concerns about accessibility and equity. Not all clients may have access to the necessary technology or internet connectivity for online counselling, which may limit their ability to participate in the counselling process. Additionally, counsellors need to be aware of potential cultural and linguistic barriers that may arise in online counselling with clients from diverse backgrounds.

In regards to GDPR none of our members have been trained, however we all need to comply with the regulations and organisations providing online counselling services should have clear policies and procedures in place for handling personal information and ensuring data protection and privacy. This may include training for counsellors and staff on GDPR compliance and best practices for data security and storage. Currently that is a topic that needs to be explored further by organisation members.

Another challenge interviewees faced was setting boundaries and work-life balance. The digitalisation of work and the ability to work from home has for some blurred the boundaries of work and personal time and created a sense of being constantly on the line.

### **(c) Working with Clients**

As mentioned earlier in the text, the main difference everyone is pointing out between online counselling and face-to-face counselling is the way we communicate. At the core of any career counselling activity sits connecting with the client and creating a trusting relationship. All interviewees mentioned that they had great difficulty building this relationship in a fully online environment.

However, benefits of implementing online counselling were also highlighted, such as expanding the scope of work and flexibility in planning and organising work. As a negative aspect, interviewees mentioned the change in the relationship of clients who do not always feel engaged with the process if they are in an online environment.

The move to digital counselling has led to some changes in coaching/counselling techniques, as counsellors have had to adapt their approach to the online environment. Some of the key changes include:

-Use of technology: Digital counselling requires the use of technology such as video conferencing software, messaging apps, and file-sharing systems. Counsellors may need to become proficient in using these tools and may need to adapt their counselling techniques to suit the medium.

-Communication: Communication in a digital counselling setting may be different from face-to-face counselling. For example, nonverbal cues and body language may be more difficult to

pick up on, so counsellors may need to rely more on active listening and verbal communication.

-Environment: The counselling environment may be different in a digital setting, with clients participating from their own homes or other remote locations. Counsellors may need to adapt their techniques to suit the client's environment and to help them feel more comfortable and relaxed during the session.

-Accessibility: Digital counselling can increase accessibility to counselling services for individuals who may have difficulty attending face-to-face sessions. Counsellors may need to adjust their techniques to accommodate the needs of clients with disabilities or who may be using assistive technology.

## **(d) The System and Networks**

It was found that more organisations were unprepared for digitising their workflow and had to cope by keeping up-to-speed. Many training organisations, recruitment firms and HR departments are now very flexible in planning and delivering blended consulting, training and information.

Information gathered from interviewees indicates that preparing an online consultancy requires more preparation time for the consultant but saves time for the client. At an organisational level, planning and managing a blended working approach takes time to create a structure and facilitate a well-communicated process. But once established, it is no problem for workers to work in a blended environment.

The key skills and duties of career counsellors arising from digitalisation relate to digital skills, presentation skills in a digital environment, time management skills and boundary setting.

From the information gathered we can conclude that skills are mainly formed informally and through trial and error.

The pandemic has brought many changes to the way organisations in general operate, and as a result, new tasks and practices have emerged. Here are some examples:

1. **Digital Transformation:** With the pandemic limiting physical interactions, organisations have had to shift their operations to the digital space. This means that they have had to adopt new technologies and digital platforms to continue their work. This includes online communication tools, virtual event platforms, and online fundraising platforms.
2. **Remote Work:** Many organisations have had to transition to remote work, which has created new challenges related to communication, collaboration, and productivity. Organisations have had to find new ways to ensure that their staff members can work effectively from home, including providing the necessary equipment and support.
3. **Virtual Events:** With the pandemic limiting in-person gatherings, organisations have had to switch to virtual events. This includes webinars, online conferences, and virtual

fundraising events. NGOs have had to adapt their event planning and management strategies to the virtual environment.

4. Crisis Response: The pandemic has created a range of social and economic crises, and organisations have had to respond quickly to support their communities. This has included providing emergency relief, healthcare services, and mental health support.

5. Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns: many organisations have had to ramp up their advocacy and awareness campaigns to address the unique challenges of the pandemic. This has included campaigns related to public health, economic justice, and social inequality.

## 7. Conclusions

After doing desk research and analysing the information shared during the interviews and workshop with job brokers, youth workers, trainers, counsellors etc. we have identified several key areas for development towards digital and blended career counselling:

- Digital transformation in government institutions providing career counselling should start with changing the physical environment including provision of devices, robust internet connection and ensuring physical space in order to enable transformation.
- In the last 3 years, NGOs, training organisations as well as recruitment firms have come all the way from face-to-face work, through full digitization to the point where counselling is blended. Interviewees shared that learning has happened in an on-going process and mainly as self-directed learning. Several key learning themes emerged as necessary to enhance the quality of career counselling in a digital environment.

New knowledge or skills that needs to be learned:

1. Familiarity with online platforms and technology: Counsellors may need to become proficient in using online platforms and technology such as video conferencing software, messaging apps, and file-sharing systems.
2. Understanding of ethical and legal considerations: Counsellors need to be aware of the ethical and legal considerations involved in online counselling, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy.
3. Ability to establish rapport and build a relationship online: Counsellors need to learn how to establish rapport and build a relationship with clients in an online setting, which can be more challenging than in face-to-face counselling.
4. Skills in active listening and nonverbal communication: As nonverbal cues and body language may be more difficult to pick up on in an online setting, counsellors need to develop their skills in active listening and nonverbal communication.

5.      Adaptability and flexibility: Online counselling may present unexpected challenges and technical difficulties, and counsellors need to be able to adapt and adjust their approach as needed.
6.      Knowledge of cultural diversity and accessibility: Counsellors need to be aware of cultural diversity and accessibility issues that may arise in online counselling, such as language barriers, access to technology, and different cultural attitudes towards mental health.

## 8. Acknowledgements and references

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Ralica Popova	Trainer	Association Lovech
Stanislava Tsoneva	School psychologist	Professional high school of telecommunication
Petranka Dzhibrova	Job Broker	Employment Agency
Nadezhda Bogdanova	Educator	Employment Agency
Radka Terziiska	Senior counsellor	Employment Agency
Rumnyana Lazarova	Occupational mediator	Employment Agency
Monika Milina-Ildurum	Job Broker	Employment Agency
Desislava Ivanova – El Haiek	Job Broker	Employment Agency
Rosica Dimova	Job Broker	Employment Agency
Lilia Koceva	Job Broker	Employment Agency
Boryana Venkova	Career counsellor	Employment Agency

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# Sweden

Completed by:

**TRIMTAB** 

 Folkuniversitetet

## 1 Introduction

Geographical targeting of the research – regional, national, local. Which counsellors have participated.

TrimTab has geographically chosen a national approach, hence country-wide, to see the regional differences in unemployment/employment factors throughout the country, comparing unemployment in the biggest counties in Sweden, as well looking at where unemployment was lowest and highest during the pandemic, and among which groups. The same approach has been taken in regards to the interviews conducted with career counsellors, job coaches and other IAG-professionals. Both public and private organisations have been involved.

Overall characteristics within (a) the VET or public employment services sector that you focused your research on (b) overall approach to desk research (summarising the main type of sources and references examined)

The Desk Research aims to:

1. show numbers on risk of becoming unemployed and unemployment statistics in Sweden among different groups based on age, gender, work sector/industry, employment type and country of birth, during the Coronavirus pandemic. The report covers the years 2019-2023.

The Interviews and Focus Groups with counsellors aim to:

2. highlight challenges, solutions, and day-to-day professional life of career counsellors working with “blended counselling” towards their target groups. This has been done through interviews and focus-group sessions with 30 career-counsellors and job coaches working in job coach companies, municipalities and VET-providers.

Each month, the Employment Service in Sweden publishes data on the number of people that are registered with the employment services and can take up a job directly (the number of job seekers). The majority of the findings in the Desk Research section of this report, are based on the numbers from Employment Services in Sweden and Statistics Sweden ([Statistics Sweden \(scb.se\)](https://www.scb.se)). The counsellors interviewed in this report have mainly come from job coaching companies, municipalities and VET-schools.

How important is online counselling in Sweden - policy changes due to corona. Summary of overall approach in terms of focus in desk research and subsequent interviews.

Online counselling and online meetings have become widely important due to the pandemic, and now being an option for anyone. SWE Employment Services have since the end of the pandemic required a mandatory presence on site for the unemployed who are enrolled with a job coaching program. This is how it worked before the pandemic, and this is how it is now.

Regarding the rest of the career counsellors, they tend to work in a 80/20 fashion regarding meetings on site vs online. Focus in this report has been to understand the needs of the counsellors to be able to conduct more efficient and applicable online meetings with clients.

## 2 Corona Pandemic effects on workforce groups in Sweden

### 2.1 Risks of unemployment during the Corona Pandemic 2020-2022

**From 2017 to 2020**, the average risk of unemployment varied between **0.8% and 1.4%**. In **February 2020**, the coronavirus was classified as a disease and started affecting the Swedish society and labour market.

**Beginning of 2020**, the risk of unemployment increased sharply to **2.0%**, and remained at a high level throughout 2020 compared to previous years.

**As of 2021**, the risk of unemployment seems to have stabilised and only minor fluctuations can be observed.

**As of February 2022**, the coronavirus is no longer classified as a socially dangerous disease.

**The risk of unemployment increased sharply for both men and women during 2020**, compared to 2019.

**The risk of unemployment for men** peaked in the Q3 2020, reaching **2.0%**. Thereafter, **the risk of unemployment for men has gradually decreased** and returned to a lower level than in 2019.

**The risk of unemployment for women** partly follows the same pattern as for men.

**The risk of unemployment during the pandemic increased more for foreign-born people** compared to native-born. For **foreign-born the increase in risk of unemployment during 2020-2021 was 3.8%**. For those **born in Sweden**, it was **1.0%**.

**By Q3 2022**, the risk of unemployment for both native and foreign-born was at a lower level than in 2019.

**Significant changes in the risk of unemployment** can be observed for the **youth (15-24 years)** in 2020, an increase of **6.0%**. **By 2022**, the risk of unemployment in this group was still **1.9% higher than in 2019**.

**Increases in the risk of unemployment for persons aged 25-34 years** are also observed. The elevated level started to **decline by the end of 2020**, and **by 2022 the risk of unemployment rate for this group had recovered** to a lower level compared to 2019.

For the group aged **35-74 years**, the risk of unemployment rate increased during 2020 and then started to decline in 2021. **By 2022**, the unemployment risk for this age group was **0.5% higher than**

## **2.2 Unemployment rates in different groups during the Corona Pandemic (2020-2022)**

During the **1st year of the pandemic (2020)**, the **unemployment rate** increased sharply by **2.0%** while the **employment rate** decreased by over **1.5%**. **Employment rate** has gradually **recovered fully in 2020 and 2021**, and **in 2022 it is at a higher level** than before the start of the pandemic. **The unemployment rate shows a slower recovery** and it was not until late 2022 that we could see the unemployment rate at a **lower level** compared to 2019.

### **Unemployment 2020**

In 2020, the **unemployment rate rose to 8.3%**, an increase of **1.5%** compared to 2019. The **unemployment rate for women and men was 8.3%**, an increase of **1.4%** for women and **1.6%** for men.

The number of unemployed people born in **Sweden increased 0,7%**, a total of **5,1%**.

Among **foreign-born**, the **number of unemployed increased by 3,7%**, a total of **18,8%**.

**Youth (15-24) unemployment rate increased from 20% to 24.0%.**

**Long-term unemployed (unemployed for 27 weeks or more) among people aged 15-74, increased with 17,000.**

### **Unemployment 2021**

In 2021, the unemployment rate rose to **8.8%**.

Unemployment rate among men was **8.5%**, and among women **9.1%**.

Unemployment rate among foreign-born was **19.5%**, and for those born in Sweden, **5.4%**

Unemployed young people aged 15-24, rose to **24.8%**

### **Unemployment 2022**

2022 was marked by a recovery in the Swedish labour market. Unemployment fell to similar levels as before the

Corona pandemic and, at the same time, employment reached a higher level. However, the trend rate of decline in the unemployment rate slowed down during the year and stalled in the last quarter.

**The unemployment rate decreased consistently compared to 2021, for both men and women, for people born in Sweden and abroad, and for most age groups.**

**In 2022, the unemployment rate was 7.5%, a decrease of 1.3% to 2021.**

The **unemployment rate for men was 7.0%** and **8.0%** for women, a decrease of **1.5%** and **1.3%** for each .

**Unemployment among people born in Sweden decreased by 0.8% to 4.6%**

**Among foreign-born, unemployment decreased by 3.5% to 16.0%**

**Young unemployed decreased by 3.1% to 21.7%.**

**Number of long-term unemployed (those unemployed for 27 weeks or more) decreased by 23 000 people.**

### **2.3 Employment effects on specific groups of people (age, gender, ethnicity, contract-type)**

The coronavirus pandemic has changed behaviours in society and has hit certain sectors and especially young people in the labour market hard.

**The pandemic has particularly affected industries such as transportation, hotels and restaurants, which employ a significantly higher proportion of foreign-born people** compared with the average in the business sector (Konjunkturinstitutet, 2020). **Foreign-born** people are also **overrepresented among temporary employees**, the group that first loses its employment when the labour market situation deteriorates and the demand for labour falls. Among those born in Sweden, the **employment rate decreased by 0.8% points to 69.5%**. For the foreign-born, **it decreased by 1.9% and amounted to 59.7%**. Thus, **foreign-born people had a much higher unemployment risk** than native-born people during the pandemic. A large increase in the risk for foreign-born people can be observed **between the Q1 and Q2 of 2020, from 3.0 to 4.1%**. From 2021, smaller variations in the unemployment risk for foreign-born can be observed.

**Unemployment between Men and Women** - the number of **employed women decreased by 49 000**. Among **those born in Sweden**, the number of employed persons saw a decrease of 62 000, **of which 47 000 were women**. Employment is higher among men than among women for both those born in Sweden and those born abroad. However, the difference between the sexes is much greater among the foreign-born.

Overall, the breakdown by country of birth **shows that the effects of the pandemic affected foreign-born people to much greater than domestic-born people**. Foreign-born people also had a more protracted recovery, with an **increased risk of unemployment risk and lower job prospects**, compared to those born in Sweden.

A big decrease of employment is also found among those who **were on temporary employment**. The decrease of **temporary employees was 62 000 people in 2020 compared to 2019, 28 000 men and 34 000 women**. Among **young people aged 15-24**, the number of temporary workers decreased by **25 000, of which 21 000 were women**. The risk of unemployment was also **higher** for people who worked **part-time** compared to full-time. The **unemployment risk for part-time workers rose sharply in 2020, increasing by 1.1%**.

**The descriptive statistics shows that the risk of unemployment during Covid-19 was higher among**

- temporary employees compared to permanent employees
- foreign-born compared to native-born
- young people compared to other age groups
- occupations with lower versus higher qualification requirements
- people working part-time compared to full-time.

## **2.4 Difference in unemployment within geographic areas in Sweden during Corona Pandemic**

There are large variations in unemployment between genders and counties.

**The unemployment rate during Covid-19 for men was highest** in Blekinge County (north-east), **11.8%**.

**For women, it was highest** in Gävleborg County (north-east), **14.6%**

**The lowest unemployment rate among men** was in Norrbotten County (north), 5.6%

**For women, the lowest unemployment** was Västernorrland county (north), 6.3%.

**In the three largest counties, the number of unemployed was 114,000 in Stockholm County, 80 000 in Västra Götaland County and 83 000 in Skåne County.**

- Stockholm County, unemployment rate **for men was 8.0% and 8.3% for women.**
- Västra Götaland County, unemployment rate **for men was 7.9%, and for women, 9.4%.**
- Skåne County, unemployment rate **for men was 10.8%, and for women 11.7%**

## **2.5 Main reasons for risk of unemployment during Corona Pandemic**

During the first wave of the pandemic, the burden of unemployment has been largely groups that were already **disadvantaged in the labour market** and **particularly young people** (Engdahl & Nybom, 2021). Many young people are working in industries that were hit hard by the pandemic, **such as hotels, restaurants and trade**. Furthermore, young people are more likely to have **looser ties to the labour market**, in the form of **temporary employment arrangements and limited work experience**. Those who became unemployed often **had temporary jobs and were in certain industries**. Many of them were **new to the labour market** - that is, **newly immigrated or young people with recent education**.

**Being foreign-born** and working in an occupation with **lower qualification requirements** were more at risk of unemployment during the pandemic, as well as **temporary workers**.

**Working in the public sector reduces the unemployment risk**, compared with **work in the private sector**. These effects are significant in both the state, **primary and county municipality sectors**.

**Working in the hotel and restaurant industry**, showed an elevated risk of unemployment during the pandemic.

**Young people aged 15-24**, also have elevated unemployment risks compared to other age groups.

**The results show** that the negative employment effects associated with the pandemic hit **hardest on temporary workers in the private sector, especially in the hotel and restaurant industry**. Among permanent employees, the risk-increasing effects can **be linked to young people and the foreign-born**. **For young people**, however, these effects also **existed before the pandemic**, while the elevated risk for foreign-born people arose at the beginning of the pandemic. Among **fixed-term**

**employees**, there is also a risk associated with foreign-born but not with youth. No differences are identified between women and men regarding the risk of becoming unemployed.

## **2.6 Industries particularly affected by the Corona-pandemic and still are today**

Due to Covid-19, some changes in employment were recorded in the various labour sectors. **This is especially true for industries that have been particularly affected by restrictions due to the pandemic. Mainly service industries such as transport, hotels and restaurants, industries with personal ("face-to-face") service that were initially affected by the coronavirus pandemic.** The Corona pandemic has also affected **industries that are relatively dynamic and have low requirements for education and job-specific skills (Riksbank, 2021).**

- **Transport sector, public transport and taxi services, decreased by 15,000 people.**
- **In hotels and restaurants, there was a decrease of 24,000 people.**
- **Information and communication continued to grow, with an increase of 15,000 people.**
- **The private sector saw a decrease of 48 000, compared to 2019.**
- **The government sector saw a decrease of 29 000, compared to 2019.**
- **Personal, cultural services, including culture, entertainment, religious activities, decreased 11.8%**
- **Decreases in Manufacturing and Extraction, Energy and environment, Commerce, and Education.**

**Occupations with lower qualification requirements compared to occupations with higher qualification requirements showed a higher decrease in employees during the pandemic.** The risk of unemployment increased to 3.2% in 2020 for people in **lower skilled occupations**. From 2021 onwards, some fluctuation in the group's unemployment risk for the group can be observed. For people in occupations with **higher qualification requirements** unemployment risk increased gradually in 2020. In 2021 and 2022 there are no significant changes in the unemployment risk for this group.

**The unemployment risk still appears to be at a higher level** compared to the pre-pandemic level for commerce, transportation, hotels and restaurants. **The largest decrease is in the sector Hotels and restaurants. The redundancies are largely concentrated in hotels and restaurants, financial and business services (including travel agencies and travel services), and transport.**

## **2.7 How these numbers compare to the overall European position.**

During the Covid Pandemic, **the unemployment rate in Sweden averaged 8.8%.** The unemployment rate was higher among women than men. **The unemployment rate for men was 8.5%, and for women it was 9.1%.** The unemployment rate increased during 2020 and then declined from April 2022 in Sweden. In April 2022 the **unemployment rate in Sweden was 7.6%.**

This ratio can be compared to the numbers of unemployment in the EU. In March 2020, the **euro area unemployment rate was 7.4%**. The unemployment rate **for women was 7.0%, and for men 6.3%**. **The unemployment rate of the European Union was 6.2% in April 2022.**

### 3 State of Digitalisation (due to Corona) in Sweden

The Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 caused many difficulties in many working areas, especially it created a need to immediately switch to a digital working environment. On behalf of the Swedish Government, [PTS](#) (Post- och Telestyrelsen) conducted a national report, to identify and analyse the measures needed to live and work digitally in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak in Sweden.

The pandemic mainly **affected sectors such as: culture, education, health and social care**. These sectors needed to quickly adapt to a new way of working, in a digital environment. Regarding education, the Swedish Government decided to switch all education to distance/online-based education. The biggest change took place in **secondary schools and adult education**, where classrooms were closed and the lectures took place online. In higher education, all on-site education was cancelled for 2020 and majority of 2021.

The transition from on-site to distance/online learning took place from one day to the next and was based on recommendations from [Folkhälsomyndigheten](#) (The Public Health Agency of Sweden). **In health and social care** the outbreak caused reduction in physical visits, and did switch to online sessions. The number of digital care contacts, both in primary and special care, increased greatly during the pandemic. While all areas learned to adapt rather quickly, PTS still in 2023, recommends further competence development within digital counselling, for example in digital tools. They also highlight the importance of not leaving anyone behind that might lack competence about the digital environment.

Of course, as **the pandemic affected culture, education, health and social care**, it also affected counselling. Counsellors had to switch from a more traditional counselling to a digital form of counselling, using tools such as Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams. In a [thesis from Umeå Universitet \(2021\)](#), the researchers investigated through interviews with Swedish counsellors, regarding the change to digital counselling, and its pros and cons. One change for example is that counsellors now have a new kind of accessibility with their students, as they can reach out through emails as soon as they have a question, and can receive a reply faster. We also saw a **change in efficiency** - as availability is higher with a digital approach, it is possible to schedule more calls in a working day. Another change, and also a possible disadvantage, is that counsellors **can't "sense the situation"** if they cannot clearly see the client in front of them, meaning, facial expression and body language.



As with further competence devolvement, counsellors according to Umeå Universitets thesis, seem to have gathered **their competence on digitalisation on their own**. Meaning, they have researched digital tools on their own, **instead of receiving any formal education in the subject**. In the study it is found that counsellors wish to have **further education on the subject** and want to develop the digitalisation approach. For example, using personality tests that students can do digitally and that can be used as a basis for discussion or learning more **about guidance techniques and methods that can be used digitally**. The methods they currently use are adapted to traditional guidance that takes place in a physical room. Another approach could be social media. So, PTS conclusion was, there is **still need of further competence devolvement**, even in the counsellor's area.

## 4. Counselling and C-VET in Sweden

### What is the legal basis for the counselling offer in your country?

According to Swedish Education law, students in all types of schools, except preschool and pre-school classes, must have access to study and career guidance. Students need to develop knowledge both about themselves and about different options during their time at school in order to be able to make well-founded study and career choices. [Studie- och yrkesvägledning som hela skolans ansvar - Skolverket](#)

### Initial survey

Section 7a of the Education Act (2010:800) states that **the home municipality is obliged to ensure that a person who wants to have their knowledge mapped before education or examination is offered an initial mapping**.

### Individual Plan

Section 8 of the Education Act (2010:800) states that the **home municipality is responsible for drawing up an individual study plan for each pupil and that the plan shall contain information about the individual's educational goals and planned scope of studies**. The individual study plan shall be prepared in collaboration with the pupil. In connection with its preparation, the student **shall be offered study and career guidance**. The guidance should include information about further studies, skills and recruitment needs of working life, and the student's financial circumstances. The plan must be drawn up in connection with admission.

### Study guidance

Study guidance should be provided to pupils in municipal adult education in a language the pupil knows.

### **What is the system of C-VET in your country?**

In Sweden, there is a strong connection between the vocational education and training and the labour market. C-VET relies on the labour market to indicate the need for a specific VET-program. The labour market plays an important role in the development of C-VET. Sector representatives contribute to the development of the curricula, help find lecturers, ensure good quality and proper engagement with the sector. They are included in every step of C-VET, from planning to implementation, evaluation and review. They have an essential role to ensure the proper anchoring in VET-programs and can quickly adjust to changing demands and offer placements for work-based learning. The close collaboration in all stages is essential to ensure high quality VET.

Vocational education is available in a variety of sectors across the country. The courses are designed to meet the needs of the labour market for professional skills, and run in close cooperation with companies and employers. C-VET programs are always post-secondary and usually last between 1-3 years. During VET-education, students combine theoretical studies with work-based courses called Work-based learning (WBL). The labour market is actively involved in the courses in various ways. Representatives from the labour market participate in the management group of the program, contribute with lecturers, participate in projects or offer LIA (WBL) places. The content of the programs evolves as the requirements of the labour market change.

### **What kind of organisations provide counselling in your country/region/city?**

Any school on any level will have a study and career counsellor, from primary school to university, this is mandatory. Recruiters often have a non-formal career counsellor role. Anyone working at the Swedish Employment Services will have a non-formal career counsellor role. It is not mandatory to offer formal career counselling with a job coach organisation, but most will have 1 or 2 career counsellors on site.

### **What are the main relevant policies at the national / regional / local level in terms of C-VET and counselling?**

In Sweden, there are several national, regional, and local policies related to continuing vocational education and training (C-VET) and counselling. Some of the most relevant policies are:

**National Policy on Adult Learning and Education (APEL):** APEL is a national policy aimed at promoting lifelong learning opportunities for adults, including C-VET and career counselling. The policy is implemented by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

**Education Act:** The Education Act provides the legal framework for education in Sweden, including C-VET. The act mandates that **all adults should have the opportunity to access education and training** to improve their skills and knowledge.

**Swedish Public Employment Service:** The Swedish Public Employment Service is responsible for providing career counselling, job matching, and vocational training for unemployed individuals. The service works closely with employers to identify the skills needed in the labour market, to provide training to meet those needs.

**Municipal adult education:** Municipalities in Sweden are responsible for providing adult education and training programs, including C-VET. The programs are designed to meet the needs of local industries and help individuals acquire new skills to advance their careers.

**Vocational education and training (VET):** Sweden has a well-developed VET system that provides vocational education and training to young people and adults. The system includes both school-based and work-based training programs.

**Regional development strategies:** Sweden has a decentralised governance structure, and regional development strategies are used to **promote economic growth and development**. These strategies often include provisions for C-VET and career counselling to support workforce development.

Overall, Sweden has a strong emphasis on lifelong learning and provides a range of opportunities for individuals to improve their skills and knowledge through C-VET and counselling programs.

## 5. Career Counsellors in Sweden

Where do career counsellors work? In which types of organisations?

Career counsellors in Sweden, usually called by the short term “SYV” (short for studie- och yrkesvägledare, which is a combined study and career guidance), usually work in schools, universities, private organisations and vocational universities. They can also work in the Swedish Employment Services (Swedish: Arbetsförmedlingen), in different projects with counselling for young and adults who are looking for employment. In [Arbetsförmedlingen](#) they are called *job guidance counsellor* or simply “Career counsellors”. The Swedish Employment Services can also help career seeking adults with a service called “Rusta and matcha”. Rusta and matcha is a service where Arbetsförmedlingen, together with independent actors, helps job seekers to get into work or training in the shortest possible

time. The aim of the service is for participants to get a job or start studying as quickly as possible. Here, they often received either formal or non-formal career counselling.

Quote from Arbetsförmedlingen homepage:

“Once Arbetsförmedlingen has decided that a jobseeker should participate in the Rusta and matcha program, the applicant chooses the provider. With the help of a tutor at the provider, the participant receives individually tailored activities with the aim of getting a job or training. The activities may include contacts with employers, support in finding and applying for jobs, information on training opportunities and guidance.”

Rusta and matcha exist in 85 Swedish towns/communes. Rusta and matcha (<https://www.rustaochmatcha.biz/>) describes their service as: *“to provide additional support to people who are able to work but for various reasons are relatively far from the labour market. As a service provider, it is our mission to make sure you get the support you need to find a job that is right for you. This support ranges from interview training and motivational talks to study visits to employers and training in relevant fields.”*

There are also companies that offer counselling online, for example <https://snackamedsyv.se/> - but it is more common that career counsellors work physically on site.

What kind of qualification is needed in order to work as a career counsellor? What is the state of the art?

The goal for a career counsellor is to help people choose a career and/or education. They are there for guidance, and can make a big difference for people's study and career choices. Their guidance can also reduce the number of choices made because of prejudices and habits. Sometimes the guidance counsellor informs groups of students or parents and sometimes they have individual counselling. Counsellors also provide support to teachers and other school staff in their study and career guidance activities. (källa).

Personal qualifications should be of following nature (taken from a job application at ledigajobb.se <https://ledigajobb.se/jobb/a457e6/studie-och-yrkesv%C3%A4gledare>):

- Self-driven
- Committed to other people
- A relationship builder
- Driven to work with people from different backgrounds and needs and see solutions for individuals.

To become a qualified SYV/career counsellor, you must graduate from the Study and Vocational Guidance Programme, which comprises 180 credits, equivalent to 3 years of full-time study and is available at several colleges/universities around Sweden. The National Agency for Education (Swedish: Skolverket) offers additional education for SYVs.

There are people who work as counsellors (in primary school) who lack training/formal education (approx. 30%), as well as recruiters and job coaches who per se conduct career guidance, but it is non-formal. It is not a must to have a graduation, but it is recommended. There are only 3 universities in Sweden that offer the Study and Career Counsellor program, and the number of new graduates is therefore relatively small. The need for SYV skills varies across the country, but [framtid.se](http://framtid.se) expects that there will be a stable demand for career counsellors in the coming years.

Quote:

“Schoolchildren need to be guided through the increasing range of educational opportunities on offer and we also see a need for career guidance in the face of an ever-changing labour market. SYV skills are also in demand by companies working with adults who are further away from the labour market (rusta and matcha)”

According to Swedish school law, (Chapter 2, Section 29), study and career guidance must be offered in all forms of school in Sweden, except in preschool and pre-school class. Anyone intending to enter education should have access to guidance.

Is there a professional association or any kind of formal professional registration?

There is not a specific professional association or professional registration for career counselling. The Swedish Statistics Authority does have a professional registration, but it is a registration that all companies have to do, and it is not specific for a certain occupation.

## 6. The view from the Practitioners in Sweden (Trimtab)

### (a) General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

What are the target groups of the career counsellors you interviewed?

- Youth 18-25
- Anyone making a change in the labour market and studies.
- Those who want to study nursing/health and care.
- Job-seekers are a specific target group. Anyone who needs guidance in studies and work-life.
- 80% from SFI (Swedish language school), migrants, 20% SWE natives. VET-students.
- Anyone re-assessing their career in some way.
- People who are long-term or short-term unemployed.
- Job-seekers who are language weak.
- Language weak, foreign-born, only speak Arabic. Anyone unemployed.
- New arrivals, refugees, people from the municipalities.
- Unemployed in general from Arbetsförmedlingen (Employment Services).

**Are there differences between counsellors who specialise in people with particular needs and counsellors generally?** Counsellors that are specialised towards certain groups have certain knowledge, such as **specific language knowledge, specific work sector or education knowledge, or labour market law knowledge.**

**What kind of formats (chat, video-conferencing tools, e-mail) do counsellors use? Is f2f counselling used additionally and how are the formats being combined? Which online-tools are being used by counsellors?**

The majority of the counsellors answered that they today mostly do F2F counselling, and some online. **Approximately an 80/20 distribution, with 80 F2F and 20 distance/online.** The format used for online/distance is normally **Teams, Zoom, phone, e-mail, text, Skype, Whatsapp, and Outlook. Microsoft Teams** seems to be the preferred tool and most widely used. Mostly used distance tools are phone, text, or e-mail.

**Focus Group - what kind of online tools do you use besides those mentioned?**

Internal video platform at AMS, Zoom internal to us. Zoom can handle many people in the same meeting.

**Which format can be used with what kind of target group?**

Online-format is used with **clients that are technically up to date and have access to devices and internet**, as well as **being able to communicate more or less in the local language**. The rest of clients usually are counselled F2F. For 2 counsellors, the video-format has worked well for the most part, even with SFI (swe language school) participants. Digital counselling is **well suited for Komvux (VET) students.**

**Focus group - what target groups can online counselling be used with/not used with?**

Hard to use with technically and linguistically weak, suitable for those who need to stay at home.

## **(b) Practitioner Skills and Values**

**What are challenges with clients and services in online counselling? How are they solved?**

Difficult to show what you mean, **information is not as easily accessible** to show and share. Solve it by **showing information on paper, large texts, scan, or share digitally.**

- Sometimes **technical issues**, clients and counsellors, technology doesn't work.
- Many do not have **technical skills** and need extra support. For some it takes 2 minutes, others take longer. In terms of **time**, this affects the conversation and the actual professional advice. Solving the technical issues, by **doing an assessment before the call on the technical skills**, book **more time** for clients who do not have **digital skills**, or reschedule for a physical meeting.

- You can't see the **body language** and it becomes a **barrier in communication**. Also the environment the customer is in, it can be a **public environment and that affects the conversation**. Solve by always **testing the technology** first, **clear instructions** for the clients to connect, where, when and how. **Digital reminders**, links and instructions must go out in time and maybe several times.
- Challenges with clients who are **technically weak**, it requires a lot of time before they know how to use Zoom/Teams. Solved by **creating a workshop on how to use Teams/zoom/technical**.
- You feel that you **don't get to know the clients** so well.
- **Practical** challenges, the clients were **not so high-tech** at the beginning of the pandemic.
- **Technical problems**, "I haven't received your email", "the connection is bad", sets a tone/stressful tone to the conversation.
- **Technical/practical obstacles**. Some have never used e-mail. Solve it by trying to call instead, texting, many don't know Swedish very well either. SMS is best for this target group.
- Challenges revolve around **building the personal relationship** and how to take **advantage of communication/information**. You don't always know if the information has reached the recipient correctly, it's **easier to misunderstand digitally**. You may not even hear what the person said. Haven't solved these problems, as they are very individual.
- **Technical capacity is lacking** with the clients, and **Focus Group - can you mention any other challenges with online counselling or high-light the most important: technical capacity, building personal relationships, barriers in communication, share information?**

Potential challenges are very much connected to the individual client, some people **feel more nervous** in front of a camera. I prefer to meet physically, it is difficult to read body language online. The conversation is better physically, the work is **more boring digitally**. Some have also wanted to come on site and get access to a computer and have the conversation digitally, **those who live further away or have difficulty with a connection**. If you only have phone calls, the relationship suffers. Works well with those you have a relationship with before. The first meeting can be challenging, solved with phone calls beforehand. People who do not know the **language well are a challenge digitally**. **Technical problems with communication problems are the biggest challenge**. Elders can't take it.

### **What professional training did practitioners have in dealing with clients online? What would they need to be able to deal with problems?**

- Have not received any training. Would like to receive training in: **Motivation, advice/guidance, being able to convey information better digitally**. How I, as a counsellor, **search and find information online**, so I give the right advice.
- Have not received any training, because I personally went quickly to the online space and it was quick for me to adapt. I did not experience any difficulties with the group of youth in an online setting. Would like to receive training in: become more **confident in the digital space, present clients with the benefits of online counselling, Digital/technical skills development, digital tools** for counselling, **functions in Teams/Zoom** that suit counsellors.

- No, I probably haven't. Would like to receive training in: **Theories and research around online communication/counselling.** The approach to the **individual**, how does it shift online. The meeting builds the conversation you have, and being able to do that digitally is a challenge. **Better communication.**
- No, not professionally. But I am a relatively digital person. Would like to receive training in: **Workshop around the theme of online counselling, to sharpen practical practice of digital guidance, raise problems and questions, share experiences.** Focus on the guidance, and how to **deal with technical problems**, how it affects the conversation and one's professional performance.
- No. Would like to receive training in: Improve skills in the pedagogical approach, the way of working. How to **adjust to people who are not so good digitally in a pedagogical way.**
- No. Online communication between client/facilitators. **Creating and implementing digital activities.**
- No. Would like to receive training in: preferably **digital communication**, how to get the **participants' attention** and **follow up on the information** provided.
- Has used the SWE Employment Services website to read up on digital counselling. Nothing else. Would like to receive training in: **Online communication**, improve it.
- Had own training digitally to a large extent. Would like to receive training in: when clients don't know what they want, **how to apply guidance methods online**, e.g. someone drawing on a board, drawing on an online whiteboard (**digital tools and how to use them**). **Guidance theories**, how to apply online.

**Focus Group - what other competencies do online counselling requires or can you highlight the most important ones from online communication, digital tools, applying guidance methods online, pedagogical approach, technical knowledge, communication, functions in Teams/Zoom?**

Have received it via Sthlm city. The rest have not had any training. More difficult to motivate people to do a task remotely, **how to motivate people online, how to conduct a digital conversation in a professional way.**

**What ethical or professional problems did practitioners have after the shift to work online?**

- No, it has not occurred to me that there are any ethical or professional problems.
- Nothing specific that I can think of, but face-to-face meetings are better.
- Nothing I can think of, but the problem has **mostly been technical with all clients**, and if they have **access to online counselling.**
- If there are many in the same meeting, the challenge is that you need to **send a secret copy to everyone, how to handle personal data then.**
- No, nothing I can think of.
- The biggest ethical dilemma for me is that **not everyone has the technical/digital conditions for counselling, and many from the vulnerable groups are then left out.**

**Focus Group - what ethical or professional problems have you experienced with online counselling?** Nothing I have encountered. During a Zoom meeting, there was a person



cutting their nails of the ex, etiquette missing online.

### **What problems occurred in using information and computer technology and how could they be solved by practitioners?**

- Clients who are **newly arrived or from an older target group**, find it more difficult to use technology. I have shown some people how to do it, or sent them to a digital course at a municipality.
- There can be problems with those who are **not used to using computers and information technology**, it varies a lot.
- Clients that **do not want to be seen on video, or share personal information** in a digital setting. Do **not have a habit with online calls/meetings**. Solve these problems by **being flexible** regarding the type of meeting the client needs.
- **Communication is hampered** by clients who **do not know the local language**, and online, the body language is lost. Solving this by taking help of someone who knows their native language, or using simpler language, takes **extra time to explain**. Double check that they understand and have absorbed the information.

### **Focus Group - can you name any problems you have experienced using technology in counselling, or highlight most important problems: difficult communication, lack of language knowledge, extra time to share information, problems with specific target groups?**

Some target groups are the most difficult, such as the elderly, people who do not come from a digital generation, cannot handle a computer. Basic digital course for the target group, manual on how to do it would be good. Those who need it can get it as part of training activities, "how to do an online interview". The group of elders may also have a reluctance, lack of motivation and understanding of why it is necessary. Supervisors should be able to motivate target groups that do not want to meet digitally.

### **What are the main areas of newfound knowledge practitioners had to acquire concerning online counselling?**

- Learned enough in counselling education, a big part was digital counselling. Other than that, I need to learn what **digital tools** I can use and how.
- **Communication, how to use the technology**. I needed more courses on how to use **digital tools**, how to **deal with technical problems and digital platforms**.
- **Digital skills, digital tools, training others** in digital skills (clients and colleagues).
- **Communication and information**. To repeat certain information and ensure that the information has been conveyed.
- Needed to **adapt my communication** to the online space.

### **Focus Group - name main areas of new knowledge that counsellors need to have in an online setting, or highlight most important ones between digital tools, communication, how to use technology?**

In F2F meetings, you don't need as many tools. You need to be able to share a screen, have a PowerPoint, have information available. Being able to use new tools is something we had

to

learn.

**What were challenges concerning personal information/GDRP/privacy in online-counselling and how were practitioners trained in the proper storage and use of data?**

- I think **I know how to handle GDPR**, and **received information from my organisation** when I started working. I do not see any specific challenges.
- I **received GDPR information from my organisation**. I do not see any specific challenges.
- I have worked in large organisations, so I personally **received a lot of training on GDPR**. But, some municipalities and secondary school admissions may not be as far along in the GDPR issue, e.g. personal numbers.
- No, more that I have read up on it myself. I do not see any specific challenges.
- Yes, I've been **trained partly through my counsellor education**, and partly via my workplace. It is something **important to have as part of skills development, and it is not talked about enough**. A challenge we met was how students book themselves in for meetings with counsellors. We used a booking system that we thought worked well, but during an evaluation we noticed that it's not "GDPR-proof".
- No, **I have not received any training**. I am not aware of any challenges.
- Yes, I am aware of the personal data issue. I **have received training** from TrimTab. Took it verbally with my immediate supervisor and colleagues, when I started working.
- No, not to my knowledge. I don't see specific challenges with this theme.
- Yes, **I have received information/training from Nacka Municipality and SWE Employment Services**.
- Took a **GDPR course** via a municipality.

**Focus Group - name main challenges regarding GDPR/personal that counsellors see in an online setting?**

Have received training in another industry, when GDPR came. Some clients say directly that they do not want to be seen or share information online, it is a challenge how to meet that. There are no real guidelines or training on what applies to GDPR online. Would need a GDPR training on how to apply it in digital channels.

**How are organisations dealing with processes regarding data protection, privacy, and confidentiality?**

- **I have built the GDPR policy**, so I am responsible that the org follows the general GDPR policy.
- We **do not use personal Id-number in calls, or write** anywhere. No other private information.
- We are following **SWE Employment Services and Nacka municipality guidelines** on how to communicate personal information via e-mail. For example without specific numbers or names.
- **Internal video platforms**.
- **No general processes**, each supervisor has had to create their own locally.
- Take **everything individually** with the client in question, **not administering sensitive topics**.
- Approve **GDPR forms prior to participation**.



- Yes, absolutely, the **clients need to know how we handle this personal data**, so they feel safe online.
- **Share the information** that we have about a person **with the client** as well.
- We **do not record** any of the conversations with the clients.
- **Do not document anything** without the clients saying it is ok, **just general information**.
- **ISO certification**

### **Focus Group - how is GDPR handled at your org?**

There is some on the intranet on TrimTab, otherwise no direct training. Personal data is not used in emails, we have systems that have been GDPR-secured, internal systems. Every system where we have personal data must be secured and approved. Outlook is not GDPR-secured, for example. Something that is difficult is that because we match people to jobs, we handle CVs that go out to employers. First it should be approved by the person that their CV is sent out, in the current situation we send out the CV. We go out with the information to all employees, if you work with these types of issues, it is the employee who has an obligation to read the guidelines for GDPR. However, the guidelines should be available.

### **(c) Working with Clients**

#### **How does communication with clients differ online, in comparison to f2f?**

- Online-settings **create a distance in communication**.
- **Poor sound, image and technology** stand in the way.
- For my **target group (youth) there is not an extreme difference** in communication online vs F2F.
- **Online communication must be clearer**, you **need to repeat yourself and double-check** that the information has been understood.
- There is a big difference, **clients are more open and honest F2F**.
- I experience **people as quite closed in online conversations**. I have a feeling that they do not feel **they are talking to a real person**. Then the personal relationship suffers.
- You **lose a lot of the hidden communication online**, and it is **more difficult to understand each other**.
- Some people are **not as personal when they are online, it feels more distant**.

#### **Focus Group - name biggest differences in online communication vs F2F, or highlight the most important differences, choosing between distance/closed communication, poor sound/image, need to repeat and double-check, losing hidden communication, difficult to understand each other, information gets lost?**

The social part disappears, meeting and drinking coffee, chatting, social interaction disappears, trust is affected. More difficult to coach/supervise, requires relationship building and trust. It takes longer to build the relationship. Engagement gets worse online, F2F requires a higher level of engagement. You cannot capture the person in the same way.

#### **What are differences in building relationships with clients online/ in blended formats and what problems do arise in this regard?**

- I was able to get to know my clients personally before the pandemic, because there is a certain difference in the relationship online. I always try to **take the first meeting F2F**, it provides a **good basis for cooperation**. When I have **taken the first meeting remotely**, the relationship **has not been so good. It always works better F2F**.
- It becomes **anonymous/general at a distance**, we are here to support/help customers, and you need **to have confidence in each other**. It **gets worse when you do it online. More impersonal**.
- **Physical meeting is always better** because it is **a personal meeting, you see and understand** and then **know the person better than online**. F2F meetings improve and strengthen the relationship. Being **able to show the whole head and body, the body language**.
- It is **difficult to see how a person really feels during a video call. Body language can be lost** and it is **difficult to know what the truth "behind the mask" is**.
- Some may **say that "the camera is not on" when that is not true**.
- I **need to be able to read a person, how important something is to them**, and then I need to see the person to make that assessment. More difficult online.
- **More comfortable to connect with someone sitting across the table**, easier to reach the person.

**Focus Group - name biggest differences in building relationships online vs F2F, or highlight the most important differences, choosing between less good co-operation, less confidence in each other, more impersonal, body language lack, difficult to see how a person really feels, being behind "a mask", harder to connect?** Body language and facial expressions is a problem, it is more difficult to interact, it is more difficult to cooperate and engage someone. More difficult to cooperate.

### **How did counsellors adjust to clients with diverse needs in an online environment?**

- Those with **mental and physical diagnoses prefer to meet F2F**, so we do that.
- It is mostly those **who are working/studying who cannot come on site**, for them this is a good option
- There is **no specific adaptation online** I feel, there is more adaptation in a physical room.
- Those who need adaptation, we **meet physically instead**.
- Clients that **can't communicate in Swedish**, it was difficult to coach them. I then use digital aids, such as **online translators**.
- In F2F meetings I can use body language or point to things.
- It **requires much more time from me and requires adaptation**. I **send information in Swedish**, let them translate and then **have a follow-up conversation**.
- **Speech impaired people need more attention online**, technically and language impaired people have the most difficulty getting help.
- Nothing I had to do yet. Some **people benefit from meeting physically, so we do that instead**.
- I feel **I can't adapt the digital rooms to individual needs**, possibly choose to **meet person instead**.

**Focus Group - name how you had to adjust to clients with diversities online, or highlight the most important adjustments, choosing between online translators,**

spending more time on administration, meet physically instead? We had to hire a sign language interpreter at some point, but nothing else.

### What are the positive and negative sides of online counselling?

#### NEGATIVE:

- Meeting F2F is better, as they can say more F2F, feel more confident, more honest, more open.
- Advantage of F2F is that you can read each other as people more easily in a room.
- Many colleagues feel that online guidance works very well. Depends very much on the target group that you guide, partly because of the environment where the person is.
- I (counselor) become more happy/enthusiastic/motivated when I have a person in front of me.
- Online works less well for personal counselling, it is difficult to create trust.
- Everything feels much easier and freer F2F, it's like something is in the way at a distance.
- F2F, establish a personal relationship, physical communication, easier to understand each other.
- It's easier to convey information in person, it feels like you have more time to discuss things and raise issues. It is also more personal.
- The physical meeting is more engaging for both counsellor and client.
- Easier to express your feelings too, and be more personal F2F.
- Disadvantage is that some do not have camera, the contact is not as personal.
- You need to speak more clearly.
- Some groups are easily left out from online counselling, and they are the ones who most often need guidance.
- Someone with technical "problems" gets less time for the actual conversation.
- Some clients do not want to meet F2F, but would have needed to meet F2F.
- Counsellors must be able to determine who benefits most from the digital conversation vs. the physical.

Focus Group - name the challenges you have encountered with online communication vs F2F, or highlight the most important challenges: clients don't want to meet F2F, some clients don't have access to online counselling, client gets less time, impersonal relationship, hard to convey information, less engaging, hard to reach people, hard to create trust? Participants not wanting to meet F2F, "do I have to come to the office", the choice of provider can be influenced by this issue. Building relationships is the biggest problem. I personally work better digitally, so I don't experience any major problems, it's more efficient. When the meeting is informative and concrete it works well, with clear questions.

#### POSITIVE

- What I have observed is that you can be less in the office, as there are more online conversations.
- I have a digital drop-in, giving more access to counselling for all.
- More flexible.

- Digital conversation in my experience is **very good based on the type of guidance my clients need, the informative guidance works well online.**
- My role is very informative, and **being able to share a screen** is an important tool in online conversations. **The visual is easier online, I have more tools** to guide students digitally.
- **Being able to talk/ask about what is on the screen.**
- I **can present the information** much more clearly and visibly online.
- I **became more efficient online**, and can have more conversations than F2F.
- Much **less travel time, online I can have more conversations** as I save on travel time.
- Advantages are that you **do not have to go anywhere**
- Clients who do not want to sit in the same room, **for them it is a relief** to have online meetings.
- Target groups **with "social challenges" benefit greatly** from having online-meetings. They find that **it is easier to get to know each other better online**, it can be **less rigid and less formal**. I see **online counselling as a good complement**, 50/50 blended would be great.
- Counselling is **easily accessible, and you can access information** from anywhere.
- **Clients who had difficulty getting to the site physically** can now meet me anyway. **More people are able** to have the conversation with me.
- **Being able to turn off the camera, don't want to talk on the phone**, so online works well.

**Focus Group - name the advantages you have encountered with online communication vs F2F, or highlight the most important advantages: flexible, reach more clients, reach target groups who can not meet F2F, easily accessible counselling and information, more time efficient, less rigid and formal, sharing information on a screen, less time in the office, visual content is easier to present?** I think all these benefits are important, digital meetings are very effective with both participants and customers. You can skip what takes time that is relevant. A problem with digital is that you don't have time to "clear your brain" in between, you jump between meetings. More efficient and stick to the point. Better presence digitally, people show up. Applies to everyone, participants and other meetings.

**Were there any changes in clients expectations since the beginning of the Pandemic and if so, which effects did they have on the practitioners as well as the organisation of services?**

- No, **I don't think there is any affect on the organisation**, but I would have preferred more **flexibility with online meetings to have more meetings and reach more people**. Working life has **gone back too quickly to F2F**, we should have taken advantage of what we learned during Covid.
- Many orgs lack a career counsellor at their organisation, it would have been good to have an **employed career counselor only digitally to help more people**.
- At first, we saw a change, that **everyone adapted to having meetings digitally**. Our org analysed **the result of having only digital meetings, and discovered that we do not achieve the results we want only with online meetings**. We **have not achieved results** on personal development, motivational efforts, the **client does not reach the goals only**

**with online meetings.** We have agreed on a policy that **99% should be physical and not digital.**

- **Clients who want online conversations expect to be able to have it,** that the career counsellor is more flexible with how to meet.
- **Clients want more online meetings, because of financial reasons,** “why do I have to travel there physically?”. **Expectations have shifted towards online.** It doesn't affect me too much, I would **prefer a blended approach,** more online after establishing a personal relationship 50/50.
- **Clients demand now that they want it remotely.** It feels **more flexible for them to be remote,** they feel that **they are more active and participate** more from home.
- Expectations **are low in terms of being on site from clients.** It has become **more difficult to coach on site, they are not as eager to show up on time.** I think it **affects the organisation negatively, as often remote work means that you do not work 100%, clients put in less** than when they are on site, **do not enter the labour market as quickly,** and affect the org negatively financially.
- Initially, clients wanted to come out and meet, but it is convenient to have the meeting digitally, and sometimes **they would rather have it online, but sometimes come and meet.** It works well for me and my org. I think **freedom is good.**
- The whole **org is now more online, save money on office space and other adaptations,** cost issue becomes less online.
- Many **people find it convenient to have it online,** that you have the opportunity to do it digitally. But **most people want to come and meet F2F.** I think it is positive to have it both ways, you reach more people then. **Freedom of options is good. Has not affected the org significantly.**
- Would **rather have seen greater flexibility with online meetings** and been able to have more meetings online and reach more people.

### **Focus Group - your experience of clients expectations on counselling and how it affects your organisation?**

We are often asked by clients if we can have the meetings and activities online, they don't see any reason for physical meetings. We as job coaches (and the clients), have to be present in the office, it is mandatory by SWE Employment Services. It took longer for staff to get used to going back to the office. It can affect the org negatively, not doing 100% at home. You have to be very structured and have a high work ethic. Can result in fewer working hours. In our industry, you get worse results if you only work online. You can "hide more" both as staff and client.. It requires a specific personality to be able to work only online.

### **Were there any changes in the willingness of clients/ counsellors to attend on site? What are possible consequences?**

- Some would like to **continue having online meetings because it is more convenient** and easier to show up for the meeting, but the vast majority want to be on site.
- Many **have gone back to physical meetings too quickly,** I see great advantages with online meetings.
- Yes, **some want more distance and not on site. But I motivate them to come here.**
- **Easier to be at home,** no need to meet others.

- **I always work on site**, regardless of the online meeting or not.

**Focus Group - your experience of clients willingness to attend on site and possible consequences?**

More than ever, staff and participants want to work from home. For me, it's been the opposite, people prefer to come on site. As a job seeker you're already at home a lot, you want to leave home and meet people, and have activities.

**What changed in coaching/counselling techniques in a digital counselling setting, compared to f2f?**

- Have **more space to do things visibly when we are F2F, have to remember more when online.**
- Requires **more administration and "to-do"** after an online session.
- No, I would not say anything changed.
- I don't really know what has changed.
- **I needed to learn more about digital communication.**

**Focus Group - name you experience with the changes you've seen in counseling/coaching due to online setting, compared to F2F counselling?** I haven't noticed any change, the same for the rest in the focus group.

**(d) The System and Networks**

**How did the different organisations plan the online counselling beforehand?**

- We **don't have online activities anymore**, in the past they were planned and implemented online.
- Like **hiring a digital teacher, consultant** that has specific digital expertise.
- We **didn't plan** in any specific way.
- **No**, not to my knowledge.

**Focus Group - name what you know about the organisational plan regarding online counselling.**

We were more "thrown into it", from the AMS (Employment Services) side. Adapting to the digital setting, and then going back to F2F. We were **more prepared to go back to F2F, not to digital. The org had to submit a plan to AMS** on how we will work digitally, have meetings via Teams and telephone. Implemented purchase of technical equipment for clients, so they can borrow computers for example, planning group activities online, seminars and activities online, bringing in external expert help with the digital.

**How did practitioners prepare and plan for the online counselling? Were there significant differences?**

- There are some differences, **you need to have more information and more answers** when you have digital conversations.
- **Greater challenge to have the conversation digitally, the communication needs to be more prepared** digitally, digital presence, **"has the person understood"**. Time is ticking away.
- **More demands on the person who holds the digital meeting.**



- **No, it does not differ**, I prepare in the same way. Have a structure/template to follow.
- You **need all information online, links, documents prepared beforehand**.
- All **administration** before and after the counselling is bigger.

**Focus Group - name any differences in preparation for counselling online vs counselling session F2F?**

Can not think of any specific differences.

**How are networks/ stakeholder networks being maintained and were there any changes doing that due to the pandemic?**

- Has **become easier to maintain contact with my network**, we have a lot of online meetings now, internally and externally. With municipalities, for example.
- There is **no travel time, more meetingtime, can listen to lectures and have a national network**.
- I **don't experience any negative things** when it comes to online networking. I think the network has **been strengthened more**, we almost only have these meetings digitally.
- It is **quite similar** to what it was before, but the **physical meeting has the most strength from a network perspective**. Digital cannot replace it, but it is **convenient to have meetings digitally. Everyone can participate**.
- Availability is there, but **personal relationships are not improved**.
- Your **ability to network suffered a setback. Back to LinkedIn**, more difficult to do in person.
- **Stakeholders prefer to meet on site**.
- Much **easier with networking**, as you can have a Teams meeting quickly with an organisation, so working with my network has become easier.
- With customers and clients, online/offline, **it works well**.
- **Online meetings are more difficult for the personal relationship**.
- It **becomes less engaging**. No one has the camera on, need to concentrate a lot, easier to lose the thread.
- The **advantage online is that you can have time to meet with people. Faster and more efficient**.
- My personal view is that **digital has more challenges than benefits**. More **difficult to build relationships** within the profession, with the municipalities, our principals.
- **More passivity in online meetings, one talks, everyone "listens"**. You don't get to know others in the same way. When you build networks, it is **"outside" the meeting that you actually network**.

**Focus Group - name any reflections on how your relationship with the external network have changed due to the online meetings? Or highlight the most important themes, choosing between, it becomes less engaging, you can have time to meet with more people, difficult to build relationships online, more passivity, don't get to know each other, easier to keep contact with network, harder to keep contact with network?**

I think it has become better. I thought it would be more difficult to meet employers or partners digitally, but the majority of these meetings today are digital. The advantage is that the meetings are more concrete and effective, saving time, not having to go and meet people. I think it has become easier, you are available in a different way. Even if you have a cold, you

can participate. Everyone in the focus group agrees that it has become easier.

**What kind of new tasks/ practices did counselling require since the pandemic started?  
How did practitioners update their knowledge and skills?**

- **No, not directly.** I like to take courses and training. I took an online course on e-guidance. I also attend international courses. I think it's sad that we do not use digital space more after the pandemic.
- **No new tasks/methods** that I can think of. I don't attend any training courses, but am involved in various networks, development as an entrepreneur, agreements, regulations and business organisation, keeping myself updated as a business leader.
- **Hard to pinpoint** what practices/tasks are new. Talk a lot with colleagues and managers about what the best solution is.
- **No specific new tasks.** Like to go to lectures, to expand my knowledge, for example communication, organisational development.
- **Nothing I can think of,** more digital work, improving digital skills. Technical problems that pop up that we can't always handle.

**Focus Group - name the new tasks/practices that online counselling has required you to use?**

I have become more flexible, learned how to make better presentations, such as Powerpoint for example, presentations with engagement. No, not what I can think of. Nothing to add.

**Focus Group - Do you have any advice to others who want to become better at online counselling?**

Presentation (Power Point, other information sharing) skills, good storytelling, information must be clear, how to engage and motivate online, how to use digital tools, how to "capture" the individual. Difficult to engage and motivate people online. Technical knowledge and etiquette. Presence in the meeting if you are at home, active participation. A more structured way of working is needed in a digital setting. Digital manners and etiquette.

## 6. Conclusions

### **General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began**

Most of the **counsellors work in a generalist way**, overall working with anyone who is in need of a career change. The majority of the counsellors **work mostly F2F today, an 80/20 distribution, 80% F2F and 20% distance/online**

The **format used** for online/distance is normally **Teams, Zoom, phone, e-mail, text, Skype, Whatsapp, Outlook.** **Mostly used distance tools are phone, text, or e-mail**, internal video platforms, Zoom and Teams.

Online counselling fits the groups that are **technically up to date and have access to devices and internet**, and are **able to communicate more or less in the local language**. It is also **well suited for Komvux (VET) students**, and **people who need to stay at home**.

Online counselling does not fit groups that **are technically/linguistically weak**, usually older people/new arrivals.

## **Practitioner Skills and Values** **Challenges with online counselling. Solutions to challenges.**

**Main challenges** with online counselling seem to revolve around: information sharing online, technical issues, clients and staff do not have technical skills, time management, extra to-do's, environment of the client and how it affects the conversation, building a personal relationship, don't get to know the clients, communication/information online, not always knowing if the information has reached the recipient correctly, misunderstandings digitally, clients that do not have access to computers, lack of body language and barriers in communication, language barriers.  
**Technical problems with communication problems are the biggest challenge.**

**The solutions to these challenges** presented today are: showing information on paper, large texts, scan, e-mail info, doing a technical/digital assessment with clients/staff, book more time for clients, reschedule for a physical meeting, phoning or texting instead of video calls, creating a workshop on how to use Teams/zoom/technical, always testing the technology first, clear instructions for the clients, digital reminders, links and instructions.

### **Professional training for online counselling and what training counsellors need.**

**Almost 100%** of the counsellors say that they have NOT received any formal training to be able to counsel online, but searched out on their own. **100%** of them also said that they would like to receive some sort of training to become a better digital counsellor.

**There are 4 MAIN themes that counsellors see they need more development to work online:**

**Digital/Technical Skills** - digital/technical skills development, digital tools for counselling, functions in Teams/Zoom that suit counsellors, how to deal with technical problems, how to conduct a digital conversation in a professional way.

**Guidance Skills** - confidence in the digital space, creating and implementing digital counselling activities, guidance theories (how to apply online), how to apply guidance methods online, digital tools for counselling and how to use them.

**Communication Skills** - Online communication, how to convey information digitally, theories and research around online communication/counselling, how to search and find information online, how to follow up on the information provided, "when clients don't know what they want".

**Sharing of practice** - workshops around the theme of online counselling, to sharpen practical practice of digital guidance, raise problems and questions, share experiences.

**Client Skills** - present clients with the benefits of online counselling, motivation online, approach to the individual online, pedagogical approach, how to meet and counsel people who are weak digitally in a pedagogical way, how to keep attention and engagement online, how to motivate people online.

### **Ethical or professional problems in online settings**

This was a **hard question for practitioners to answer**, they didn't understand what "ethical problems" might mean, showing that counsellors either don't have a very good understanding of potential ethical problems, or have not been able to connect these to online settings, OR actually have not experienced any ethical or professional challenges online. But, some of the themes raised revolved around **target groups being left out from online counselling** due to lack of access to computers, internet, having different disorders or low language skills. So **the biggest ethical dilemma** in online counselling is that **many from the vulnerable groups are left out**. Also the theme around **blending private life with a formal setting**, can become a problem in online settings. Etiquette is often missing online.

### **Problems occurred using information and computer technology and how to solve them**

Majority of counsellors brought up the **difficulty working with specific target groups online or at a distance**. Specific target groups, such as **newly arrived or elderly are hard to manage at a distance**, because of technology skills. Clients that **don't want to be seen on video or share personal information (not honest)**, have **no habit with online calls/meetings**. **Communication is hard** with those who do not know the local language. Some groups (elderly) have a **lack of motivation and understanding of why online counselling** is necessary.

**Solutions for these problems today are** - send clients to a **digital course externally or internally**, own digital course for clients, be **flexible regarding the type of meeting the client needs**, engage **someone who knows the native language** or use **simpler language, take extra time to explain**. Double check that clients understand and have absorbed the information. **Basic digital course or manual** on how to use technology. Activity for clients "**how to do an online interview**". How to motivate clients that do not want to meet digitally.

### **Main areas of newfound knowledge practitioners had to acquire due to online counselling**

Again, **not so many answers from counsellors**, they **do not seem to experience that they needed to acquire any specific new knowledge** for an online setting. The ones who answered, **focused on the themes of**: how to use **digital tools, communication online, how to use technology**, how to deal with technical problems and digital platforms, **training others in digital skills, information sharing, adapt communication to online space**, prepare information before, use new digital tools.

### Challenges on personal information/GDRP/privacy online and training in GDPR

Majority of the counsellors have “**received information at some point regarding GDPR**”, “**feel confident in online GDPR**” and “**do not see any specific challenges regarding GDPR in online settings**”. The information on GDPR has been **received mostly from the organisation they work in**. Although when asked, the **majority also wanted to receive more information** on how to handle personal information online. The **challenges regarding GDPR online** are: some **municipalities and secondary school admissions may not be as far along** in the GDPR issue, it is something **important to have as part of skills development**, and it is **not talked about enough**, how to “**GDPR-proof**” internal systems, clients that say **they do not want to be seen or share information online**, it is a challenge how to meet that because it’s **not always on accordance to actual GDPR**, use it as an excuse, no real guidelines or training on what applies to GDPR online, would like a GDPR training on how to apply it digitally.

### How are organisations dealing with processes regarding GDPR

Almost all counsellors **knew that the org does have a GDPR process, but far from all could answer how** this process looks. Some of the **GDPR-practices mentioned** were: do not use personal Id-number or write anywhere, follows SWE Employment Services and Nacka municipality guidelines, **have internal video platforms**, take everything individually with the client in question, not administering sensitive topics, approve GDPR forms prior to participation, tell the client how org handles their personal data, share the information about the a client with the client as well, **do not record any of the conversations** with the clients, **do not document anything** without the clients saying it is ok, just **documenting general information, ISO certification**, personal data is not used in emails, **internal systems are GDPR-secured**, employers (counsellors) have an obligation to read the guidelines for GDPR, guidelines are available.

## Working with Clients

### How does communication with clients differ online, in comparison to f2f?

All counsellors **experience that communication is a big factor** and differs greatly online vs F2F, and that the main **problem is that trust and personal relationships suffer**. Main **issues in online communication** are: Online-settings **create a distance in communication**, poor sound, image and technology, online communication must be clearer, need to repeat and double-check, clients are more open and honest F2F, people as **more closed in online conversations**, client don't feel they are talking to a real person, **personal relationship suffers**, lose a lot of the hidden communication online, more difficult to understand each other. People are not as personal when they are online, **it feels more distant**. The social part disappears, **meeting and drinking coffee, chatting, trust is affected**. More **difficult to coach/supervise**, which requires trust. Takes **longer to build the relationship**. **Engagement gets worse** online.

### Differences in building relationships with clients online

All the counsellors expressed that they **prefer a blended approach with their clients**, establishing a personal relationship first by meeting F2F, and continuing with online meetings, mixed with some F2F meetings. Building relationships was another major negative factor/problem of online counselling. The **need for trust, smooth cooperation and personal relationship**, are huge factors when it comes to counselling overall. Differences with building relationships online are: it is more **anonymous/general at a distance, lack of confidence** in each other, **More impersonal**. Harder to see and understand the client, not being able to show the whole head and body, the **body language is a problem, difficult to see how a person really feels**, difficult to know what **the truth "behind the mask"**, **hard to read a person**, how important something is to them, **hard to connect with someone online**, Body language and facial expressions is a problem, it is more **difficult to interact, difficult to cooperate** and engage someone.

### Counsellors adjustments to clients with diverse needs in an online environment

Majority of counsellors had no answer for this, or suggested that clients with special needs **just need to be met in person instead**. The **special needs clients that were brought up are the ones without language skills, mental issues, or physical issues**. Some options to online adjustments were: send information in Swedish, let them translate and then have a follow-up conversation, hire a sign language interpreter or native language speaker.

### Positive and negative sides of online counselling

**MAIN NEGATIVE:** Clients are less confident, less honest, less open, can't read the person, counsellors are more happy/enthusiastic/motivated F2F, difficult to create trust, something is in the way at a distance, hard to establish a personal relationship, physical communication lacks, hard to convey information, less personal, less engaging for counsellor and client, hard to express your feelings, do not have camera on, less personal, some groups are easily left out, someone with technical "problems" gets less time, clients not wanting to meet F2F anymore, "do I have to come to the office", building relationships is the biggest problem, don't have time to "clear your brain" in between, you jump between meetings **It seems that most of the counsellors do prefer to have online meetings, but the environment, knowledge and clients are not suited for that.**

**MAIN POSITIVE:** you can be less in the office, more access to counselling for all. More flexible, informative guidance works well online, being able to share a screen, the visual is easier online, have more tools, being able to talk/ask about what is on the screen, can present the information more clearly and visibly online, more efficient online, more conversations, less travel time, do not have to go anywhere, clients who can or don't want to meet F2F, target groups with "social challenges" benefit, less rigid and less formal, easily accessible, and access to information from anywhere. Digital meetings are very effective and stick to the point. Better presence digitally, people show up more.

Overall it seems that the negative and positive aspects of online counselling are more or less equal.

### Changes in clients expectations and effects on the practitioners and the organisation.

Counsellors agree with the fact that many clients expect to be able to have **only online meetings**, and do not see the necessity of being on site. The **effect on the counsellors and organisations are pinpointed to the following:** Counsellors would have liked more flexibility with online meetings, in order to have more meetings and reach more people. Having only an **employed career counsellor digitally** would help more people. After analysing the results of having **only digital meetings, the org does not achieve the results** they want, such as personal development, motivational efforts. **The client as well does not reach the goals only with online meetings.** Career counsellors now need to be more flexible with how to meet. Affects the organisation negatively, often remote work means that you **do not work 100%. Clients and staff put in less work and clients do not enter the labour market as quickly.** Affects the org **negatively financially.** Org is now more online, which **saves money on office space** and other adaptations. **Freedom of option is good.** Has **not affected the org significantly.** In a job coach org, everyone has to **be present in the office, it's mandatory** from SWE Employment Services. It took longer for staff to get used to going back to the office. It can **affect the org negatively, not working 100% at home.** You have to **be very structured and have a high work ethic.** Can result in **fewer working hours**, and worse results if you only work online. You can **"hide more" both as staff and client.** It requires a **specific personality to be able to work online.**

### Changes in the willingness of clients/counsellors to attend on site and possible consequences

It's a split situation, based on the individual. Some clients and counsellors **prefer to meet more on site**, while others prefer to **have more online meetings.** Possible consequences are: having online meetings because it is more **convenient and easier to show up for the meeting.** We have **gone back to physical meetings too quickly** and we're **losing the advantages** with online meetings. **Easier to be at home**, no need to meet others. As a **job seeker you're already at home a lot**, you want to leave home and meet people, and have activities.

### Changes in the coaching/counselling techniques in a digital counselling setting, compared to F2F.

Interestingly enough, **most of the counsellors can not pinpoint any specific changes in their coaching**, online vs F2F, either due to lack of reflection, or actually not experiencing that. One counsellor mentions that they **prefer F2F because they have more space to do things visibly**, and need to remember more for an online meeting, and another one tells that **online meetings require more administration and "to-do".** One counsellor **needed to learn more about digital communication.**

## The System and Networks

### How organisations planned for the online counselling

Most of the organisation **did not plan online counselling, but were rather thrown into it**. Job-coach org had to **submit a plan to SWE Employment Services on how they will work digitally**, such as having meetings via Teams and telephone. Some **implemented purchase of technical equipment for clients**, so they can borrow computers for example, **planning group activities online, seminars and activities online, and external help with the digital**.

### How counsellors view preparation and planning for online counselling

Very **few counsellors thought there is any difference** in preparing for a physical vs online meeting. Most of them have **specific procedures and structure to follow**, hence they do it the same way. Some expressed the **following needs**: you need to have **more information and more answers when you have digital conversations**, the communication needs to be more prepared digitally ("has the person understood"). **Time is ticking away** more in digital settings due to **technical issues or communication issues**. You need to **prepare all information online**, links, documents beforehand. **Administration before and after online-counselling takes longer**.

### Maintenance of stakeholder network online

Networking **has overall become better**, according to counsellors. The **advantage they see** is that the meetings are more **concrete and effective, saving time, availability is better, no travel time, more meeting time, convenient** to have meetings digitally. **Everyone can participate** and anyone can have a **national network**. The network has been strengthened more.

**Approximately 20% of counsellors** feel that **the physical meeting has the most strength** from a network perspective and **digital cannot replace it**, because the **personal relationships are not improved**, ability to network suffers a setback and it's more impersonal, **stakeholders prefer to meet on site**. Online meetings are **more difficult for the personal relationship**, they are **less engaging**. No one has the camera on, you need to concentrate a lot, and digital meetings have more challenges than benefits. **More passivity** in online meetings, one talks, **everyone "listens"**. You **don't get to know people** in the same way.

### New tasks/practices that digital counselling requires, how practitioners update knowledge/skills

It seems **the practitioners do not see a specific change** required in their competence due to digital counselling, **except the technical/digital competence + better presentations**. The counsellors choose more often to **educate themselves** outside their working place.

### How to become a better online counsellor

Presentation (Power Point, other information sharing) skills, **good storytelling, information must be clear**, how to **engage and motivate online**, how to **use digital tools**, how to "capture" the individual. **Difficult to engage and motivate** people online. **Technical**



**knowledge and digital etiquette.** Presence in the meeting if you are at home, **active participation.** A more structured way of working is needed in a digital setting. Digital manners and etiquette.

## 6 The view from the Practitioners in Sweden (Folkuniversitetet)

### General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

The target group we interviewed was: one participant **(1)** worked as a counsellor for other teachers and the rest was for people that were assigned to program Rusta and Matcha **(7)**, often people with special needs. For example, new migrants who couldn't speak Swedish very well, people who had been out of job for a longer time, someone who isn't 100% capable of working or jobseekers who need coaching and matching in order to find work or study faster. Counsellors working within the Rusta and Matcha program get their participants assigned to them from the Swedish Public Employment Service (will be referred to Arbetsförmedlingen in the rest of the rapport), which is the difference from other counsellors, so the majority of those we interviewed were counsellors for people with for example, special needs or other difficulties. We also interviewed someone who is responsible for training managers in Rusta and Matcha **(1)**, who had a background as a counsellor within Rusta and Matcha as well.

Since we did not interview many people from organisations that is not assigned to the Rusta and Matcha program, it is difficult to draw a conclusion whenever there are any differences between counsellors who are specialised on people with particular needs for example or counsellors in general – but an observation from our side was that when the participants worked with people that did not need special tools – for example, a language interpreter/translator – it was generally easier to perform the counselling. Since you did not need any extra help or guidance. The participant who worked as a counsellor for teachers did not see the same boundaries as the people who worked within Rusta and Matcha – maybe because she did not need to use the same tools or guidance as the rest. Or did not need to take other things into consideration when performing the counselling. The people who worked within the Rusta and Matcha program are also connected to Arbetsförmedlingen, meaning they need their approval to be able to perform counselling on distance. Meaning it is required to meet face-to-face, especially the first meetings and especially now, after the pandemic. This is something counsellors outside Rusta and Matcha might not need, as they are assigned to the program.

The participants used all different tools for their counselling – chat, video-conferencing tools, e-mail, phone call, and face to face meeting. And they were combined in most cases. In Rusta and Matcha program, during the pandemic all meetings/contacts had to be online, but after the pandemic it went to be a blended environment. Two people from Rusta and Matcha said that they have one mandatory physical meeting every month, where they have conversations, and the next meetings can be remotely. They added that some actually choose to come twice a month, since it works better for them. A person from another organisation who also is working with the program Rusta and Matcha said that “According to an agreement with Arbetsförmedlingen, we have mandatory physical activities every week. In between, we work with the participants by phone and digitally.”

The counsellors who counsel other teachers said that it is optional – if they want to meet up face to face or have it online. All the participants said that they can chat in between meetings, and also write questions through emails. Of course, this is also depending on which target groups or if there are people with special needs. For example, if you have a participant with a hidden identity, then it is more difficult to meet that participant on Teams or in situations when they have to show their face. Then it is easier to have counselling on the phone, but they agreed that it was more difficult to reach that kind of target group. For counselling people with a language barrier, it was easier to have a meeting face to face, if you needed to have a translator with you. One of the participants had an experience of having a group meeting online, with a lot of participants who did not understand Swedish, so they had to have two-three translators, and that was a bit difficult. Other counsellors said that they once had a face-to-face meeting with a participant, with the translator on the phone (on speaker). They said that it works, but can be a little complicated.

**These was the online-tools that were used:**

- Zoom
  
- MS Teams
  
- Google meets
  
- Phone calls
  
- Workbuster (recruitment tool, with chat function)

- Skype (not that common now)
- Moodle (Learning Platform)
- Email

They all had different opinions regarding each tool. Workbuster was an appreciated tool – used also for administrative tasks (invoicing), but it also exists a chat function where they can chat with their participants. It looks like instant texting – in that way they can also save the conversation easier, instead of sending a lot of email back and forth.

Some counsellors appreciated Teams more and thought it was more liked by their participants, while others said that they used Zoom more, and that their participants did not have access to their Teams network, which made it more difficult.

Moodle was a good tool in a way to use when working in an online environment between counsellors and their client. If the client needs to go on a job interview the next day, they can log into Moodle to get interview questions and practice, instead of contacting the counsellors and going to their office. According to a participant, it's simple and accessible.

## **(b) Practitioner Skills and Values**

Some of those we interviewed expressed that there had been challenges with clients and services in online counselling. While, for example, one of the people we interviewed said that there was no problem at all for him, saying that he was a “friend of tech” and could figure out the solution to any problem that might happen. This was also agreed by another participant for Rusta and Matcha program.

However, other participants said that they faced other challenges. For example, when they needed a translator (mentioned above).

In regards to receiving training from their organisations, the answers were divided. One participant said that if they needed support, you could get help from their organisation. Another said (the one working with teacher counselling) said that they used digital counselling

before the pandemic started, and that they have sent out a guidebook to their counsellors. The rest said that they more or less were self-taught. One said that they maybe got help 10%, while he solved 90% himself.

One of the participants said that Arbetsförmedlingen tried to give a course in the beginning, but that it did not really work out that well. They also launched a tool for the counsellors to use, but that did not go well either. So, most of the people we interviewed had to research themselves, and learn from each other. Two participants called themselves a “team” and that they helped each other a lot, and discussed with each other if any problem occurred.

Regarding challenges and how they were solved as with ethical and professional problems, many relied on communications from other colleagues. But it also depended on the challenge, the challenges were more discussed under “**(c) working with clients**”, and they were often related to the client and how they communicated online. But the biggest challenge was of course communication, and some of them thought that it was hard to read the client (their body language), when they only saw them online. It was more difficult to see if the client really understood them or not. But this will be described more later.

Regarding professional training on how to handle clients online, this was not always given to the participants. Two of them said that they have received none, and they were self-taught and that they relied a lot on their earlier work experience and their teamwork. However, one of the participants said that getting help from another colleague was not always a guarantee. They said that the branch they are working with are very result-driven. It’s about individuals taking on other individuals. There should not really be teamwork. They added that they even have administration program top lists, where they list the ones who performed the best (who helped the most participants). They did not agree to this approach, mentioning that there are people that they are working with, and it all depends who their participant is, which kind of result they are getting.

There were not that many who wished to have more support, since some of them said that things are going well and that they did not face many challenges. Two of the participants said that if they could wish, of course they would get more skills development, and they also said that since they have a lot of experience themselves, they would like to share it with others.

They mentioned that their organisations have started with so called “inspirations meetings” online, where all of the regions are included. But the downside of that is that it is getting a bit too big, something smaller would be appreciated.

Regarding securing information and GDPR - Participant within Rusta and Matcha program said that, once the pandemic started, Arbetsförmedlingen started their own function on their website. Through that they could start video-online meetings. But it did not work really well, eventually people gave up on the function. The main aim for that was to secure information. But, instead the participants started to use Workbuster more, where all of the providers within Rusta and Matcha work. They started to work with codes, so that every person has a certain code. So, when they call Arbetsförmedlingen, or emails, they never see a name that you can view, only a personal code.

Regarding the clients, if they need to write a name, then they have to communicate with the client and they always have to ask the question when the person is sitting with them. They have to explain that it is because of GDPR. All of the challenges seem to be resolved through communication. One of the participants said that they once had an employer that could not give out a name, then they had to solve it on the phone with the client. But it is difficult, since the participants want to network and provide their clients CV:s, but they still need to get their approval every time they need to provide it.

Two of the participants said that they have developed a skills matrix – it includes what kind of knowledge they want their client to know to be able to look for jobs, or finding an education that is suitable for them. They added that they are very creative and do a lot of their material on their own, and they are trying their best to make it look professional. They work a lot with mapping material, where they try to gather as much as information they can about their client, in that way they can also avoid mistakes when they get a type of client that they have not had before. They use the same kind of skill matrix online, but then it is more difficult to see if their client actually has the skills that they are saying that they have. One of the participants gave an example that it once took 6 months for her to understand that one of their clients couldn't look for a job on their own. The problem she thought was the translator,

which was not so good at translating her intentions. Some languages are more difficult to translate, she added.

### **(c) Working with Clients**

When working with clients online - According to 8 of the participants, the main difference was the lack of being able to read the client correctly. You couldn't really see if they understood your questions – and it was more difficult to read their body language, face expression etc. Some said it was more difficult than others, for example, a participant said that you couldn't really see if they were looking at you or something else on their screen. Or if they checked their phone since they couldn't see anything below the chest. It was more difficult to get a “full picture” of the person online, and how they manage a conversation with their counsellors. The conversation can for example be about giving advice for an education that the client has been accepted to, or if they should go to a job interview. It was easier to have those sorts of conversations face to face.

They agreed that a client opens up more when meeting face to face, and that it is more “formal” online. A participant said “they should feel like we trust them, and they should trust us, and that can be more difficult online. They might not feel that trust for us when the conversation is online”.

Another one said “it is more difficult to anchor what you say lands on the person, it is a big part of the coaching that the person should recognize what I say and believe in what I say. I usually explain that they come here and they are completely blank, many do not know what I can do, who I am, etc. Despite having worked all their lives, they have nothing to stand on that is valuable anymore. That process is more difficult online, to identify a person. Because it's easier when you sit down and coach.”

A better approach would have been, according to one of the participants, to instead adapt quite a lot physically to get started, to create the right conditions for the person to get this relationship and trust right from the start. Then let go a bit and be able to have digital feedback. Because once the client gets started, many of them are incredibly good at self-leadership, developing themselves and taking on everything. A better hybrid version.

The same participant said that in a way it was better before, when the client visits them every day in the beginning of their counselling. For approx. two weeks, to make sure that they work with certain things, getting to know them and then put them up online.

Another participant said that it could be more difficult to have counselling online, but that they did not experience it to be that much of a difficulty. But they agreed that the most optional way is to have a more blended environment, which other participants also agreed with.

Some of the participants agreed that it takes longer to build a relationship with their clients, when it is online. For some of the clients you can build up a relationship online if the meeting is about one hour. Then the main focus is about mapping the other person, then the client can “soften up” a bit. For some of the clients it takes longer, especially online. Another participant said: “Initially, we always meet physically, and then the foundation is laid. Then it depends on the participant; some are comfortable with digital meetings, while others are not. But in general, based on our mission to get people into work or studies, we will get to know the participants just as well if meetings take place online.”

The participant who is counselling other teachers said that for her it was not that difficult to build a relationship with her clients. She said that meeting digitally is more effective, and that you can bring your own notes that you might not want to hold on to in a physical meeting. She said that the meeting often starts on time, and can maybe last for an hour and that it does not take longer than that to get to know your client. She added that even when discussing sensitive information, it is easier online. When in the office there might be people who accidentally hear the discussion. She felt that Zoom was safer that way, that others can not accidentally join. It is also 100% certain that the meeting is not getting recorded if you do not want to.

Those who experienced these difficulties tried to overcome them the best way possible. For example, they got better at reading the person, and asking follow up questions to make sure that the person understood what they said. They focused a lot on their face expression, and the tone of the client’s voice. They also made sure to, once they met up face to face, to face all the questions they did not feel were properly understood in their online meeting. A

participant said that getting to practise digital meetings and associated tools is probably a prerequisite because, among other things, employers often conduct interviews by phone or digitally. But this was also depending on their organisations, two other participants from another organisation said that they were self-taught, and maybe did not get to practise that much before the pandemic hit.

One response from a participant said that you just needed to ask more control questions, for example, get them to retell what you just told them, in that way you can hear if they understood you correctly. And that can be done online as well.

Regarding special needs tools, like we have mentioned earlier in the rapport, if someone had a language barrier, they always used a translator. Online the translator/interpreter has to be included in the online meeting, which can work but can also be difficult. Regarding other difficulties, such as dyslexia, most of the participants were quite prepared beforehand. They can always adapt their homework assignments to a more verbal assignment/presentation and that usually works, and makes no difference when doing it online. Then they do not have to present any material. For someone with more difficulties, they can maybe get one question to take home instead of many. The process takes longer, but it is not impossible.

Most of them had really good material for language barriers, and they have material that is adapted for different kinds of languages, which, for example, explains how to self-integrate and how to enter the job market. Some of the materials are in their own language, so that they have the opportunity to practise. They also have training material in Swedish.

One of the participants said that it should not make a difference if this is online or not, but that the overall process can take longer online. Another one added that if someone has a language barrier, maybe it is easier to have a meeting face to face. In that way you can easily analyse their body language and you can even draw on a board and explain.

Most general response from the participants, in circumstances when having a client with a special need – it is very much adapted to your client. And you have to ask them – what do they need, what do they wish to have in order for it to work? Etc. And that is the same in an online environment.



The participant who was responsible for training managers in the Rusta and Matcha program and had a background as a counsellor within Rusta and Matcha said that they could get a lot of help from Arbetsförmedlingen, from their specialists. If someone had dyslexia, they could get a special software installed on their computer that could help them, or if someone needed a special chair, they could get that as well. But he was the only one who mentioned Arbetsförmedlingen in this context.

We have explained the downsides of online meetings, but there are some positive sides. One participant said that it is easier online to show presentations, for example in Teams. Instead of doing it face to face. Another one said that meeting on Zooms tends to be more effective (easier to hold the time). Another one said that if a client is feeling insecure, then it can be a good way to have a meeting online so that the client has time to prepare themselves.

Regarding time efficiently, some of them said that it was good to work in an online environment because you had the opportunity to have more meetings if all of them were online. It's easier to plan, and to include more time for counselling. Since working from home erases time for example travelling to your office location. Instead, they could use that time to work.

Another participant was surprised over the fact that they felt like there were lesser cultural barriers online, if they had a group meeting. She said that in a physical room some cultures might clash, as they do not get along or have tensions between each other. It can also occur between men and women. But online meetings facilitate this. It is not as easy to integrate online, and you do not have to sit next to each other.

One participant said that there are of course both negative and positive sides, while online meetings can be more effective, it is still required to have a structured working method. Otherwise focus might turn into private stuff than the work that needs to be done.

It was concluded by most of the participants that the best way to work is to have a blended environment.

All the people we interviewed shared the experience of having a hard time to motivate their clients to come to the face-to-face meetings. One participant said that most of his clients want

to have meetings online, and he experienced that the overall motivation has decreased since the pandemic. But he also thought that it could be because of the pandemic, that some people isolated themselves and now have a hard time to come back. He agreed that it sometimes can be a bit intense with psychical meetings, but he didn't want his clients to isolate themselves because then it gets more difficult to get a job, for example.

Others said that their clients like to have it online, that some of them are so used to it and are more independent. But if there is a client with a language barrier, then it can feel easier for the client to have support in a physical meeting. One participant said that it was really hard for her sometimes to motivate her clients, as they sometimes are people that are struggling financially. She finds it hard to convince them to pay for the bus or train when she knows this information, and also knows that there is a possibility to have the meeting online. But since she is having a contract with Arbetsförmedlingen, she doesn't have a choice. She mentions one situation when she had a client that paid for every trip with their credit card, and that of course is not okay. She wishes to have an even more blended environment. Two participants discussed the fact they should have a focus on the individual, but that it is impossible sometimes since they have a framework with Arbetsförmedlingen that they have to follow, and that they have no entitlement to change this framework.

The participants themselves answers were a little bit divided regarding their own motivation and expectations when the pandemic hit and working online. Some of them said that it works very well, or worked well. That they had bigger freedom to form their schedule, and that also gave them more motivation to work. Of course, there are situations where they felt like they may be forced to work in the evenings, and that they also did that sometimes since the border between private and job decreased. They could reply to emails on their phone later in the evening. But they never felt forced from their organisation to work this way, and that it was more about themselves and their morals and work discipline. But in general, many of the counsellors liked to work online, they got more freedom and more time.

Regarding their organisations, our conclusion is like with almost all organisations when the pandemic hit, there was not much planning done beforehand. And in general, the participants relied on their own experience much. One participant said that she had studied much online

before the pandemic came, which helped a lot during the pandemic. Others said that they asked their colleagues if they had any problems with online tools. It did not seem that much was done on a more organisational level when it came to training or other things people might need to know when the business shifted to be online. As with working with clients, the counsellors helped their clients a lot during online activities. For example, they asked their clients to send a test email, or test Teams or Zoom beforehand.

#### **(d) The System and Networks**

There was some difference in regards to planning the counselling online beforehand, but not that much and not so much between the organisations. One participant said from one organisation that they have clear questions that derive from their mission, checklists so there is no difference when it comes to preparation. But, they need to guide their client more in how to technically get to a digital meeting. The same was with another organisation, they had their skill matrix they used, with also contained experience from earlier candidates in the Rusta and Matcha program, which they used a lot. They also said that recently people have been hired in their organisation (national) that are a bit more responsible over IT-related things. They are often supervisors or training managers within Rusta and Matcha, and they check if everyone knows about the system and how they work. They had little support of that when the pandemic hit, but there was a period when they did not have that help. And when everything eventually started to work, everything started to go back as they were before the pandemic. But, one of the participants said that it exists tons of material online which they used to update skills and knowledge but also material which can help their clients. They gave example of occupational tests, personality tests to find things that are difficult to know about yourself, how you function in certain situations. They've had a lot of help with that, their clients can get a result of how they function in stressful situations, for example, and that is good when shaping their job application. They found it great that so much is available digitally after the pandemic. They also said that they have access to a course portal within their organisation, which is called jobbmacha, these are paid courses that their clients can take to develop their skills in areas that they may have worked with before. And also gain knowledge

in data and IT, which is essential for job searches. The participants used it a lot. It's very popular.

Regarding maintaining the network and stakeholders, there was some difference. One organisation said that work has become more online-based after the pandemic, while the other said that their stakeholders/networks have decreased after the pandemic. But that was also because they receive no budget for marketing. One of the participants said that she had a big network, but they are only business and give her no clients.

## 7 Conclusions

The participants of course had different opinions on certain areas, regarding difficulties and how to solve them. But, an overall conclusion was that there existed difficulties reading body language when you perform counselling online, and that it could be more difficult when working with people with special needs – for example, needing a translator and how to include them in an online conversation. The counsellors themselves learned to work with their clients online and adapted to their needs, but one conclusion from our side is that it could be useful to have some tips or guidelines for this, how to read body languages and how to ask follow up questions that could get the best answers. This might be helpful for the future, or if some organisations continue to work in a more blended environment.

But from what we gathered, it seems like most of the counsellors were very self-driven, and solved the difficulties on their own or with the help from a colleague. There were not that many discussions on organisational-level, even if there was some opinion for example about Arbetsförmedlingen and how much support people working for Rusta and Matcha could get from there. Of course there was an exception, but that was from a person who had worked for Arbetsförmedlingen before and knew how to work with them. The same person also mentioned that new regulations will be added, and they will release the next version of Rusta and Matcha (Rusta and Matcha 2); those regulations state that you no longer can use Teams or Zoom in individual conversations, only for group activities. And counselling will need to be performed face to face. If this will affect all of the organisations working within Rusta and Matcha was not clear, and how the organisations that will be affected will adapt to the new

regulations will of course be interesting, but this rapport was based on how they worked during and after the pandemic so we chose not to elaborate it further.

Besides difficulties reading body language and facial expression, we got the impression that things have been going well, or as good as it can during the pandemic from the participants that we interviewed. As with most of the organisations in Sweden, no one was really prepared for the pandemic and did what they could in the situation. But as one of the counsellors said – when things (working online) started to work, it was time to go back (the pandemic was over). Meaning learning to work online took time, maybe more time than needed, and time was also something mentioned when getting to know your clients, that also took more time online, and working with people with special needs – that also took longer. It would be good to set up certain instruments that could focus on working efficiently, in a blended environment, or develop tools that help counsellors or prepare them more for counselling online. That would be an ideal. Since most of them were so self-driven, it would be good to provide them materials that are all in one place, instead of pushing them to search around online, which we got a feeling that most of them did (or asking a colleague for advice/help).

All of the participants agreed on one thing – the blended environment works best. In that way you can adapt your counselling more to your client and their needs. And that was also a conclusion we draw from this, is that no one wanted more physical meetings or online meetings – a mix would be for the best. In this work field, you work with individuals that all have different needs and wishes. While a certain way to plan counselling might work for one client, it does not mean that it works for someone else. One of the participants even mentioned that some of his clients had left for other organisations that provided more online meetings. All of the participants also expressed that it was difficult to motivate your client to attend physical meetings, especially if the client is self-driven and feel like they do need to attend a meeting face to face. Since most of the counsellors also preferred to have the freedom to set up their own schedule, a blended environment works best for the client and the counsellors.

The goal would be to have a focus on the individual – but maybe this is easier for people who are not assigned for programs such as Rusta and Matcha. Most of these opinions came from

organisations assigned to the program. If not assigned to a certain program, you might have more freedom to plan your counselling and can have a more blended environment if you would like.

It would have been interesting to add more counsellors to the report, who did not work within Rusta and Matcha, or were not assigned to the program. But from what we gathered, those few that did not work within the program were overall pleased with how things worked online, and did not express the same opinions as the others. But, in general, what they had in common was that they still thought a blended environment was the best, and that it all depends on your client in the end.

## 8. Acknowledgements and references

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Name	Position	Organisation
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Julie Lau	Career Counsellor	ABF
Maryon Abdulsada	Job coach	TrimTab
Lydia Liu	Job Coach	Alljobb
Ann-Christine Nilsson	Career/ed counsellor	
Maram Almadi	Jobcoach/Manager	TrimTab
Jessica Thorell	Career Counsellor	ABF
Anjam Nagi	VD	Yrkescentrum (VET)
Gulsinem Erdogan	Job coach	TrimTab
Abdel Rahman	Job coach	TrimTab
Michaela Carlbaum	Job coach	Folkuniversitetet
Maria Olsson	Job coach	Folkuniversitetet
Roger Engmalm	Training manager	Folkuniversitetet
Helena Isakson Molin	Job coach	Skolcoacherna
Sandro Kåhre	VD	TrimTab
<b>Focus Group</b>		
Suzanne Andersson	Jobcoach/Manager	TrimTab
Sandro Kåhre	VD	TrimTab
Heya Hussein	Job coach	TrimTab
Jana Stevanovic	Job coach	TrimTab

Tina Nilo	Jobcoach/Manager	TrimTab
Marian Naoum	Job coach	TrimTab
Parisa Foroughi	Jobcoach/Manager	TrimTab
Ban Jameel	Job coach	TrimTab
Hana Bisevac	Job coach	TrimTab
Madeleine Blomkvist	Job coach	TrimTab
Oscar Mresha	Job coach	TrimTab

**References**      **Desk**      **Research**      **TrimTab**      **and**      **Folkuniversitetet:**  
[Coronapandemin slog hårt mot arbetsmarknaden 2020 \(scb.se\)](#)

Source: Statistics Sweden, The labour market situation for the population, 15-74 years, LFS 2021.

Source: Statistics Sweden, Risks of unemployment and chances of employment during the corona pandemic

Source: Statistics Sweden, The Labour Market Situation for the Population, 15-74 Years, LFS 2022

[Så ser den nya corona-arbetslösheten ut - Arbetsvärlden \(arbetsvarlden.se\) 05df809c-7eb8-10c7-efcf-35325c84f56e \(europa.eu\)](#)

<https://pts.se/globalassets/startpage/dokument/icke-legala-dokument/rapporter/2021/uppdrag-digital-omstallning-till-foljd-av-covid/digital-omstallning-till-foljd-av-covid.pdf?sa=D&source=docs&ust=1681144244388113&usg=AOvVaw3vWCdNH7gqde5GdxmNCUA1>

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<https://arbetsformedlingen.se/for-arbetssokande/yrken-och-framtid/hitta-yrken/yrkesgrupper/1211>

# Greece

Completed by:  
Leo Kraus  
Project Officer

# symplexis



# 1. Introduction

This report, combining desk and field research, thus pulling from both primary and secondary sources, aims at providing an overview on the career and guidance counselling in Greece, with a focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the trend towards digitalization.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a big push in the whole of Greece, especially from the State, to digitalize services, a trend that spread to the private sector. This resulted in an increase in offer of online counselling and guidance services, changing practices and opening counselling to new target groups.

The research for the situation in Greece focused on the whole country, and not on any particular region. However, due to the repartition of the Greek population, counselling happens de facto mostly in the large agglomerations of Athens and Thessaloniki. As counselling is not very developed in Greece, the research did not focus on any specific group of counsellors, but instead sought to paint a picture of the general state-of-the-art in the country.

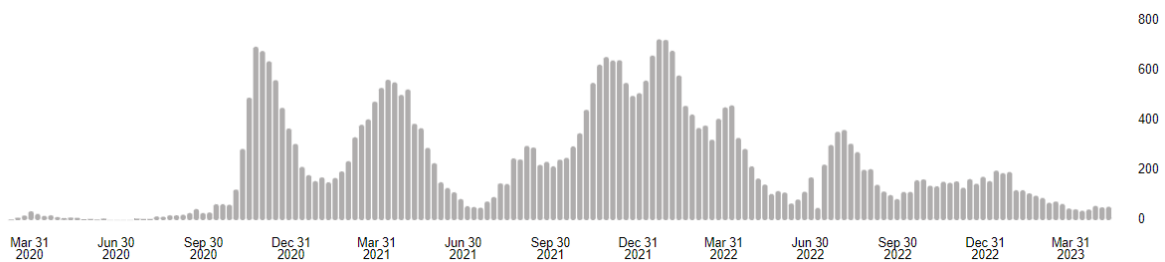
The desk research pulled on the writings from professional associations, official recommendations from governmental bodies, as well as research on the impact of COVID-19 on guidance counsellors and their clients. However, it should be noted that, as mentioned above, counselling is not very developed, thus there are few sources on the field in Greece, and especially few that relate to digitalization and the pandemic. Additionally, 6 trainers and 9 guidance counsellors were interviewed, in order to gather their view on the issues of counselling and digitalization.

## 2. Corona-crisis affecting specific target groups in Greece

### COVID-19 in Greece

Like the rest of the European countries, Greece was first hit with the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and underwent lockdowns, in spring of 2020, and in winter and spring of 2020-21, following high waves of cases.

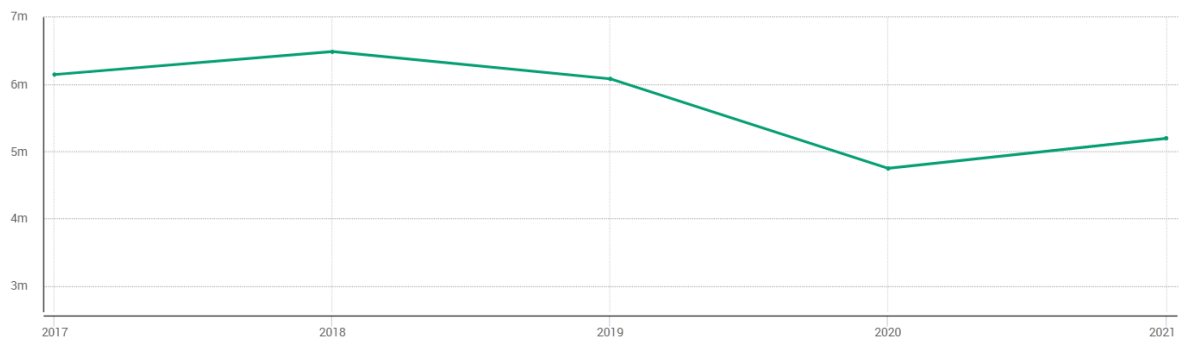
In total, over 35,000 deaths were recorded due to COVID-19 until May of 2023, with a total of over 6 million cases detected.



Weekly evolution of COVID-19 related death in Greece<sup>1</sup>

### Impact of the economy

In Greece, the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on the economy, as the lockdowns and travel restrictions strongly impacted tourism, Greece's leading industry, representing a large part of its GDP. Indeed, the country saw a sharp decrease in the number of tourists in 2020, with almost 1.5 million less tourists in comparison to 2019, as can be seen on the graph below.



Number of trips to Greece<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the issues in the tourism sector, the lockdowns and restrictions on commerce also negatively impacted retail, leading to a fall of the Gross Domestic Product, from 183,351 million euros in 2019 to 165,406 million euros in 2020.

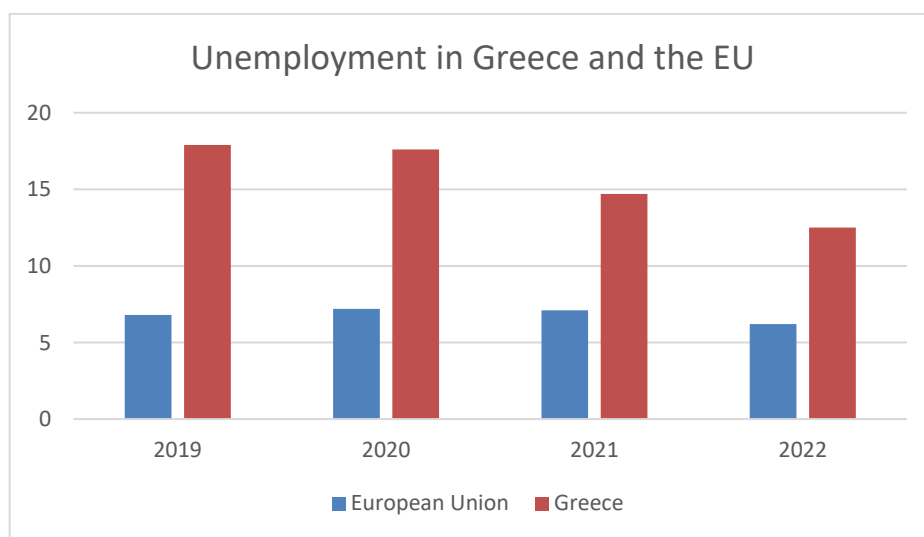
<sup>1</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/gr>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tin00190/default/line?lang=en>

With the lifting of travel restrictions, and the spread of vaccination, both tourism and retail have bounced back, with 2023 being slated to exceed pre-pandemic level in touristic activity in Greece, and the GDP at large increasing again.

### Impact on employment

The decrease in touristic activity, and in the GDP at large, added to the other struggles linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, and led to an increase in unemployment, from 16.8% in the fourth quarter of 2019 to 17.1% in the first quarter of 2021. The sharpest increase was noted in the unemployment level of young people, as the unemployment rate for persons under 30 jumped from 34.1% to 44.3% between the fourth quarter of 2019 and 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2021. As the economy, and especially tourism, bounced back in 2022, the unemployment rates dropped to below pre-COVID-19 levels, at 11.9% for the fourth quarter of 2022. Nevertheless, this rate remains high compared to the EU average (6.1% in 2022).



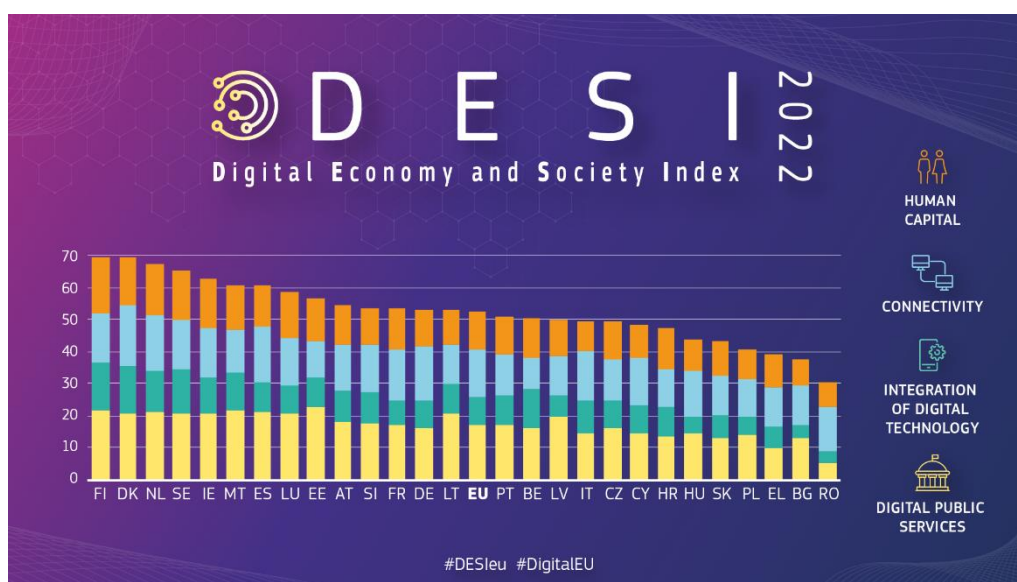
However, despite the positive developments, a gap remains visible between unemployment rates for men (8.8%) and women (15.7%), showing the need for better integration of women in the labour market.

Additionally, as noted above, young people were particularly impacted by the pandemic and the associated restrictions, and their employment rate still lags behind that of the general population.

### 3. State of Digitalisation (due to Corona) in Greece

In Greece, before the COVID-19 pandemic, very few State services were digitalized, with most procedures necessitating citizens to go in person to offices, in order to complete them. With the arrival of COVID-19, and the ensuing lockdowns and closing of all but non-essential services, many services were digitalized, allowing citizens to access them from their homes. This switch was greatly beneficial, especially for persons with disabilities, and for persons living in remote areas far away for physical services. However, and despite many progresses since 2020, Greece still lags behind in terms of digitalization, Internet use, and access to Internet, in comparison with the rest of EU countries.

Emblematic is the Digital Economy and Society Index<sup>3</sup> (DESI), that ranks Greece third to last among European countries in 2022 – a small progress from 2019, where it was second to last.



Digital Economy and Society Index 2022, showing the scores of all EU countries.

Indicatively, it ranks second to last in digital services both to citizens (with a score of 52.4) and to businesses (with a score of 47.6), and, although the rural standard fixed broadband coverage (96.1%) is above average, Greece is the EU country with the most households with no access to the Internet at home (14.5%).

Additionally, and although the country scores above the EU average in individuals with basic overall digital skills (30.8%), there is a gender gap in access and use of the Internet, with women using the Internet below the EU average (58.3% in Greece, below the EU average of 63.3%).

Additionally, and although primary and secondary education took place online during the heights of the lockdowns, when schools were closed, many issues were identified, with many households not having a good enough Internet connection, and/or enough devices for all the

<sup>3</sup> <https://digital-agenda-data.eu/charts/analyse-one-indicator-and-compare-countries>

children to follow their lessons at the same time. A similar issue was encountered by teachers, who, additionally, had not been trained in the use of digital software for classes, and thus had to learn how to teach classes online “as they went”.

Another area of improvement that can be identified is the possibility for remote work, as only 60.8% of businesses provide their employees a remote access to the enterprise's e-mail system, documents or applications. Here, Greece ranks last, and many enterprises that had switched to remote working during the height of the pandemic are now back to in office work on a permanent basis.

Finally, the percentage of persons looking online for a job or sending a job application is only 10.3%, under the EU average of 13.4%. This shows that the Internet is still not the primary vector of access to the labour market, with more traditional alternatives, and especially word-of-mouth, being still widely used.

All these data show that Greece still has a long way to go in terms of digitization of services, both public and private, and that the use of the Internet still does not represent an obvious way of communicating.

This is the case also for career counselling: many career counsellors started offering remote, digital services at the start of the pandemic, and are now back, at least partially, to in-person services, with most places offering a mix of online and physical offers.

In a study by Boura & Kaliris<sup>4</sup>, taking place between September and December of 2021 in Greece and Cyprus, 80% of surveyed guidance counsellors thus declared that they were in favour of remote guidance counselling, with 93% actually implementing it. A vast majority of respondents (95%) also believed this trend would continue. The persons benefiting most from this new mode of counselling were school and university students, and generally persons under 45; persons with disabilities; and persons living in remote areas.

Although most surveyed counsellors considered that the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on the development of guidance counselling, some challenges were identified, namely: poor internet connection and digital skills; lack of visual contact; and ethical issues. The study thus proposes that new guidelines be developed, taking into consideration the new digital reality, that digital skills be included in the criteria for certification of guidance counsellors, and that guidance counsellors receive special education on remote guidance counselling in the course of their studies.

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<https://www.elesyp.gr/images/%CE%A0%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%AE%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%82%20.%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B1%20%CF%80%CE%BB%CE%B1%CE%AF%CF%83%CE%B9%CE%BF%20%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82%20%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%B5%CF%83%CF%85%CE%BC%CE%B2%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%BB%CE%B5%CF%85%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE%CF%82.pdf>

## 4. Counselling and C-VET in Greece

### Counselling in Greece

In Greece, EOPPEP, the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance, is the overseeing body responsible for upgrading and assuring the quality of career guidance provision in Greece. It operates under the supervision of the Minister of Education & Religious Affairs, and provides scientific and technical support for the regulation and implementation of guidance counselling in the country.

In the country, several organisations are certified to provide counselling, under the supervision of different Ministries.

More specifically, in the public sector, in the Education field supervised by the Ministry of Education, & Religious Affairs, guidance targeted at youth is provided at the following organisations:

- Centers of Educational and Counselling Support;
- Career Guidance Bureaus of Universities;
- Second Chance Schools of Foundation for Youth and Life Long Learning.

In the Employment field, guidance is provided at Centers for Promotion to Employment, supervised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs<sup>5</sup>, with a focus on unemployed persons.

Finally, guidance is also provided in the social welfare field, under the supervision of other Ministries, in organisations such as:

- Counselling Bureaus under the Ministry of Health, for specific target groups such as addicted persons;
- Municipalities and other Local Government Authorities;
- Non-profit Organisations, like KETHEA (Centre for Rehabilitation of Drug Addicts), and KETHI (Center for Research on Gender Equality).

In the private sector, guidance is provided at the following kinds of organisations:

- at the Centers of Life Long Learning, licensed by the Ministry of Education;
- at Job Finding Bureaus and Temporary Employment Companies licensed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs;
- Private practises.

### C-VET in Greece<sup>6</sup>

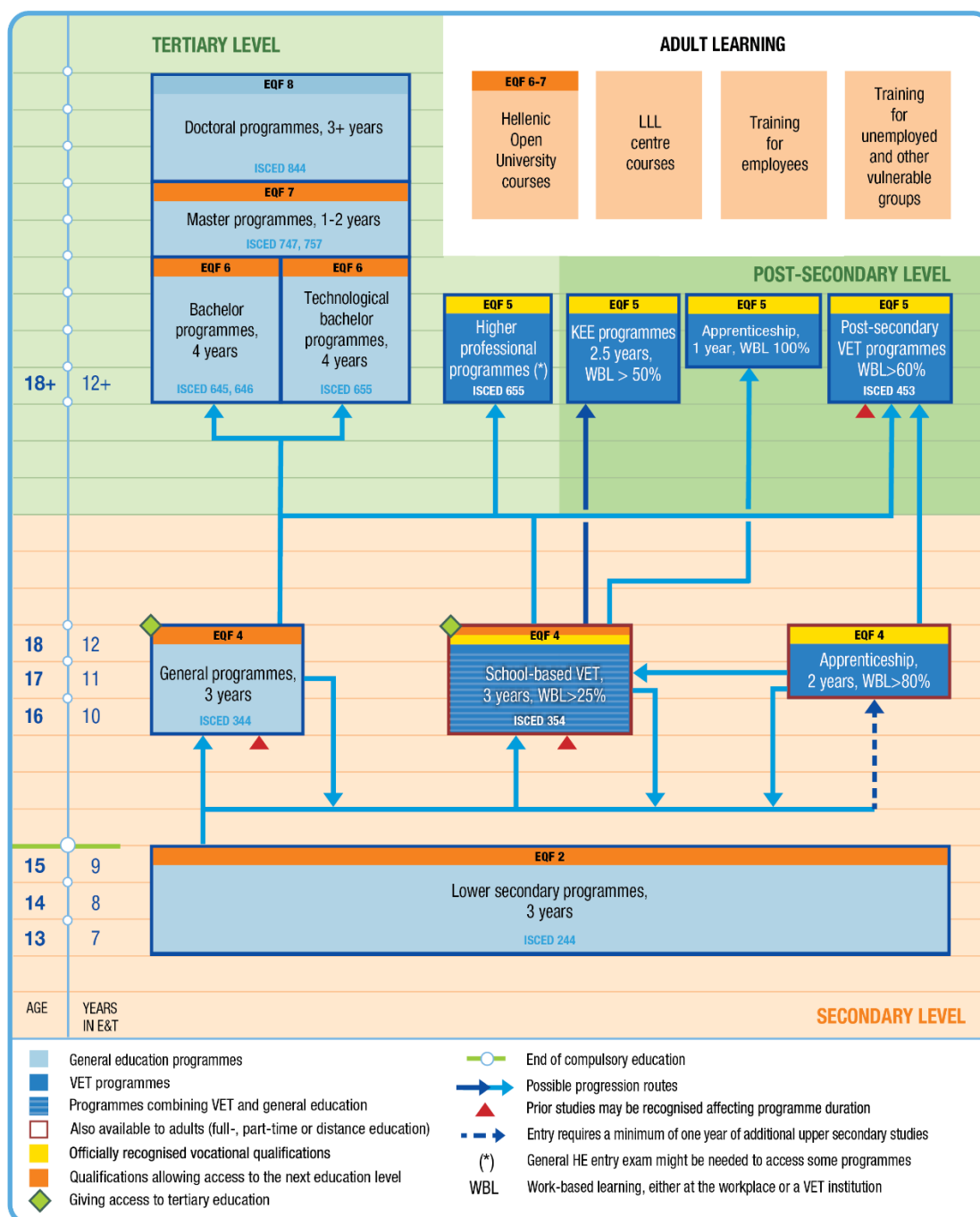
In Greece, VET is strongly state-regulated, with the national education policy, approved by the government, being the roadmap for all education-related issues.

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<sup>5</sup> [ypakp.gr/](http://ypakp.gr/)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/greece-2019>

The education system is charted out as follows:



NB: ISCED-P 2011.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Greece, 2020.

In Greece, the law 4763/2020, stipulates that VET is provided in schools of vocational training, under the purview of the Ministry of Education and in the vocational schools of Manpower Organisation, under the purview of the Ministry of Labour. Both school types lead to an EQF level 3 qualification and provide apprenticeship learning aiming to address early leaving from education and training; they support the employability of students and ensure the standards

of skills training that matches labour market needs. These programmes include school-based and work-placed learning, with apprenticeships being developed in recent years.

VET providers, both public and private, are monitored, evaluated and usually funded by bodies supervised by the Ministry of Education, such as General Secretariat of lifelong learning, and National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance -EOPPEP.

To improve the coherence and quality of VET, a National strategic framework for the upgrade of VET and apprenticeship was developed in 2016, and has been implemented since. The National committee for VET, set up in 2017, is responsible for the implementation and evaluation of this strategic framework, as well as for the overall coordination of the governance of the national VET system. Two additional bodies, National Apprenticeship Coordination Body and the National Council for Education and the Development of Human Resources, have also been created to reinforce the governance of VET in Greece.

However, despite recent improvements in VET systems, and due to high rates of acceptance in general education, and to poor image of VET in Greek society, VET is not seen as a primary choice, but rather as a last resort for persons not performing well in general education, and thus remains unattractive, with drop-out rates remaining high.



## 5. Career Counsellors in Greece

In Greece, EOPPEP is the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance, an all-encompassing statutory body investing on better quality and more efficient & reliable lifelong learning services in Greece.

Specialised training in career guidance is offered only by postgraduate programmes in Greek Universities. Such programs are offered by the University of Athens, the University of Patras and by the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education. These programmes are accessible to graduates of the Departments of Psychopedagogy, Humanities and Social Sciences, and offer a master's degree.

Continuous training programs in career guidance are also provided by Lifelong Learning Centers certified by EOPPEP, offering an alternative way to get the qualifications essential to guidance counsellors.

Below is a table detailing exactly the qualifications needed to be recognized as a Career / Guidance Counsellor<sup>7</sup>:

Profession	Educational Paths	
Career / Guidance Counsellor (Level 2)	Path 1	Graduates of Higher Education and Continuing Vocational Training in Counselling and Career Guidance/Career Counselling of at least two hundred and fifty (250) hours and a minimum of two years of full-time professional experience in the implementation of the institution, in the public or private sector
	Path 2	Graduates of Higher Education and Continuing Vocational Training in Counselling and Career Guidance/Career Counselling of at least two hundred and fifty (250) teaching hours and Practical Training of at least two hundred (200) hours
	Path 3	Graduates of Higher Education and Continuing Vocational Training in Counselling and Vocational Guidance / Career Counselling of at least two hundred and fifty (250) teaching hours.
Career / Guidance Counsellor (Level 1)	Path 1	Graduates of Higher Education with a PhD in the field of Counselling and Career Guidance / Career Counselling.
	Path 2	Graduates of Higher Education with a Master's Degree in Counselling and Career Guidance / Career Counselling.
	Path 3	Graduates of Higher Education in Counselling and Career Guidance / Career Counselling, or other related Science with specialization in Counselling and Career Guidance.
	Path 4	Graduates of Higher Education with a degree of the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education, of the Programme Specialization in Counselling and Guidance.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.eoppep.gr/images/SYEP/perigramma\\_SEP.pdf](https://www.eoppep.gr/images/SYEP/perigramma_SEP.pdf)

According to the relevant Ministerial Decision<sup>8</sup>, Career /Guidance counsellors at level 1 (higher level) perform the following professional functions:

- Plan, organise and prepare the framework for the provision of guidance and counselling services;
- Organise, plan, organise, organise, organise, organise and provide Information, Advice or Guidance (IAG) services;
- Evaluate, redesign and expand access to IAG services and professional practice;
- Oversee and ensure the quality of the provision of IAG services;
- Conduct research and provide training on the institution of IAG;
- Promote the development of vocational guidance tools.

Career /Guidance counsellors at level 2, on the other hand, are tasked with the primary provision of IAG services, in education, training, or employment, to different target groups. Their tasks include:

- Organizing and planning the framework of provision of IAG services;
- Providing IAG services;
- Evaluating, redesigning and expanding access to IAG services and their professional practice.

Additionally, the Ministerial Decision No. ΔΣ/64529/27-1-2017 Government Gazette B' 317 6/2/2018 "Determination of the Terms and Conditions for the establishment and maintenance of the Register of Vocational Guidance Counselling Executives"<sup>9</sup> has established in 2017 a register of guidance counsellors in Greece. Registration is mandatory for Career and Guidance Counsellors to practise their profession.

There are no official statistics detailing where guidance counsellors work exactly in Greece. However, the organisations listed in the section above (4. Counselling and C-VET in Greece) are the ones where most guidance counsellors work, with a recent rise in private businesses (including private tutoring institutions) providing counselling, especially aimed at school students.

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<https://www.alfavita.gr/sites/default/files/2022-02/%CF%80%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%B7%CF%83%CE%B7%20%CF%83%CF%85%CE%BC%CE%B2%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%BB%CF%89%CE%BD.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Government Gazette B' 317 6/2/2018, [https://dimitrissolomidis.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/fek\\_317\\_06\\_02\\_2018.pdf](https://dimitrissolomidis.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/fek_317_06_02_2018.pdf)

## 5. The view from the Practitioners

### (a) General information and Status Quo in Counselling since the pandemic began

For the field research, interviews and a focus group were held with guidance/career counsellors, and with C-VET trainers.

Some of the interviewees did not focus on any particular target group, while some counsellors worked exclusively with youth. Additionally, some participants focused on vulnerable groups, like migrants (with a focus on migrant women), NEETs, victims of gender-based violence, and Roma (with a focus on Roma women).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, participants reported that they used digital tools extremely rarely, and conducted their activities face-to-face. Now, they all offer remote counselling and training, as the switch to online during the height of the pandemic, and the two lockdowns in Greece, have shown that there is a need for such services.

However, and despite recognizing the advantages of online sessions, participants stressed that the choice between online, blended (their favoured formula), and in-person needed to be made according to the needs of the client.

Indicatively, the participants mentioned the following:

- Face-to-face is best for some very vulnerable groups, such as Roma populations, who live in slums with little to no access to the Internet; it is also ideal for older adults, not used to technology;
- Blended is ideal for more tech-savvy groups, such as young people and NEETs, to combine the advantages of both face-to-face and online options;
- Online is preferred for persons living in remote areas, as well as people with disabilities impacting their mobility. One participant also mentioned that online was a great method for parents and caregivers, giving them more flexibility.

For online sessions, the participants indicated a strong preference for Zoom and WebEx as platforms, as they are considered secure, and have many useful options, such as screen sharing and break-out rooms. One participant added that, as these platforms are widely used, it is an additional advantage, as the clients already know how to use them.

### (b) Practitioner Skills and Values

As mentioned above, the participants only rarely, if ever, conducted online counselling or training sessions before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, they all reported having had no training in the use of digital tools in this context. Thus, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns, and the switch to online activities was a time of “learning by doing”, where each practitioner had to experiment with online solutions, to find the ones most suited to their work and their clients.

Some of the participants reported that they got some technical support from their workplace, but most declared that they learned mostly through looking online for solutions, as well as

through discussions with colleagues and peers, leading to the development of new knowledge and skills related precisely to online guidance, counselling, and training. However, despite having learned how to use these new tools, and adapt them to their needs, the participants all agreed that they think it would have been useful to have had a course on digital counselling during their studies.

Indeed, in addition to the technical aspect, the participants mentioned that online counselling poses other challenges, especially in respect to the protection of data, and the privacy of clients. More specifically, they cited as challenge the fact that, during online sessions, clients at home may have other members of their household present in the same space, able to hear what they are saying. This, of course, negatively impacts the session, as the client may not feel free to express honestly all their aspirations and goals. Similarly, the counsellors and trainers interviewed mentioned that, at the beginning of the pandemic, many of them shared their working space with other members of their households, and thus felt they were not able to ensure an adequate level of privacy. This issue, however, is now resolved, as all participants offering online services now have a dedicated, private space they use for sessions when working from home.

Finally, the biggest challenge that participants identified for digital counselling related to technical issues. Some mentioned that, often, their client's Internet connection was weak, unable to support video calls. Additionally, all mentioned that they had clients not used to technology, and who had great difficulties using video call platforms, connecting camera, microphone, earbuds, etc. Thus, the counsellors and trainers often had to take on the role of technical support, to ensure that the session could take place in good conditions. Two of the interviewees explained that they now called clients on the phone ahead of their first online sessions, to explain how to use the platform, and ensure that the appointment is dedicated exclusively to the object of the session, and not to solving technical issues.

### **(c) Working with Clients**

In addition to the technical issues mentioned above, the participants all explained that working online has brought changes and challenges in how to relate with the clients.

The main challenge, mentioned by all participants, is the distance created by the lack of direct contact. Indeed, the lack of eye contact and the impossibility to read body language lead to a slower building of trust between counsellor/trainer and client, and to some subtler cues being missed, that could give the counsellor clues to better identify the problems they can help the client with.

In order to avoid these issues, most participants preferred blended solutions, with the first session happening face-to-face, in order for both parties to get to know each other well before switching to online sessions. In the case of fully online work, the participants recommended putting a big emphasis on interactivity, letting the client speak as much as possible. In the case of training sessions, one participant recommended having the trainees speaking for 70% of the session, and the trainer for 30% only.

Despite these challenges, online counselling and training offers an expanded reach and more flexibility, allowing persons who wouldn't be able to access face-to-face services to benefit from career guidance and counselling. As mentioned above, these are persons living in remote areas, who have difficulties reaching city centers due to time and money constraints; people with disabilities who, similarly, have a hard time reaching offices - in Greece, many places are not accessible for wheelchair users, for example-; and parents and caregivers, usually women, who face high time constraints and benefit from the flexibility of joining counselling sessions from their homes.

Additionally, some participants noted that some clients beyond the groups mentioned above, used to the convenience of digital services, are reluctant to come to in-person sessions. In addition to the accessibility issues, it was thus imperative for the participants to continue offering online sessions, even after the lifting of the COVID-19 restrictions, in order not to lose clients.

On the other hand, all interviewees also reported that many clients were tired of living "digitally", and were asking for face-to-face meetings, refusing to have online sessions.

#### **(d) The System and Networks**

As mentioned above, the majority of the organisations where the participants work did not provide online services before the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, they had to learn to plan online counselling as they went, experimenting with tools, and putting into place new systems to ensure the protection of the clients' data. Participants mentioned protecting documents with passwords, ensuring counsellors only used their professional e-mails in all communications, as well as using end-to-end encrypted software, such as Zoom and WebEx (see part a), to protect data and privacy. However, despite the tools they have discovered, the participants mentioned that they would like additional training on data protection and GDPR, to make sure they are respecting all guidelines and regulations.

In terms of content, participants said that the preparation of online sessions was very similar to that of face-to-face ones. Some mentioned sending a preparatory e-mail to the client, in order to gather some information ahead of the meeting, while others had developed an online form (using tools such as Google Forms or Microsoft Forms) for that same purpose. As it is easier to share content in an online setting, some counsellors interviewed mentioned that, in their preparation for the sessions, they were looking for material to show their clients during the course of their session.

At a larger scale, participants explained that they mobilised mostly informal networks of colleagues and peers in order to exchange their experiences, come up with solutions, and generally improve their offer of online counselling and training, to adapt to the new, post-COVID-19, situation. One participant noted that, during the second lockdown in Greece, which lasted several months, a monthly meeting with all counselling staff to discuss issues related to digitalisation was put into place in her organisation, something that she felt was extremely beneficial.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic, and assorted restrictions, triggered and sped up the digitalisation of many services in Greece, including training and career/guidance counselling. After the lifting of restrictions, career and guidance counselling organisations continued offering online services, in addition to face-to-face, “traditional”, sessions.

The shift to online has allowed more persons, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, to benefit from counselling services, through improved accessibility and flexibility. The counsellors and trainers interviewed for this report all emphasised that this was an extremely positive outcome, and stressed that they wanted to keep this element going forward

However, this change has also brought new challenges, both on the technical side, with difficulties in the use of technology, and on the human side, with the screens creating distance between counsellor and client, and making it more challenging to establish a trusting relationship. Additionally, counsellors and trainers reported that holding sessions online necessitated more interactivity than in-person ones, in order to keep clients engaged.

As the counsellors and trainers surveyed declared that they expected to continue using both online and offline methods of counselling, they identified the following areas as necessitating training:

- **data protection and GDPR:** there is a need for training on what the official guidelines are, what they mean, and what tools and techniques they can use to ensure conformity;
- **digital tools:** what softwares can be useful for interactive counselling sessions, how to use them to their maximum potential, and how to support clients in their use;
- **online counselling techniques:** techniques and tools to help engage clients, motivate them, and get the most out of online sessions.

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