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D2.1 Needs Assessment Report

AccessCareer
Enhancing Inclusive Access to Career Counselling

D2.1. Needs Assessment Report

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Main Author(s)	Elena Somano (Mylia)
Contributors	Susy Galli (Mylia), Giorgia Manzari (Mylia)
Document Reviewers	Manuel Zaballa (ACCION LABORAL)
Security Reviewer	Elena Somano (Mylia)

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Table of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation	Meaning
KA220-ADU	Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships in Adult Education
NA	National Agency
KOM	Kick-Off Meeting
TPM	Transnational Project Meeting
PSC	Project Steering Committee
QM	Quality Manager
QAC	Quality Assurance Committee
WP	Work Package
OER	Open Educational Resources
HR	Human Resources
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise / Subject Matter Expert
EPALE	Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe
DMP	Data Management Plan
M	Month (used in project timeline, e.g., M1 = Month 1)
GR	Greece
CY	Cyprus
ES	Spain
IT	Italy
BE	Belgium

Executive Summary

This Needs Assessment Report (Deliverable D2.1) represents a foundational milestone in the AccessCareer project, aimed at enhancing inclusive access to career counselling for disadvantaged individuals across Europe. The report presents a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape of career guidance¹ services in four participating countries—Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain—through a triangulated methodology combining desk research, surveys, and focus groups.

The objective of this assessment was to identify the key barriers, needs, and opportunities that shape the experiences of both career counsellors and the individuals they support. The findings will directly inform the development of tailored training curriculum, digital tools, and inclusive practices in the next phases of the project.

Key insights include:

Barriers to Employment: Disadvantaged individuals face a combination of structural, digital, and psychological obstacles. While jobseekers underline financial constraints and lack of labour market information, counsellors highlight digital exclusion and limited professional networks;

Skills Gaps and Support Needs: There is a strong demand for support in CV writing, interview preparation, and job search planning. Counsellors also report a need for training in digital tools, labour market trends, and personalised guidance strategies;

Digital Tools: Both groups express interest in accessible, interactive, and mobile-friendly digital resources. However, disparities in digital literacy and access remain a critical challenge;

Emotional and Relational Dimensions: Focus groups revealed the emotional intensity of counselling work and the importance of empathy, active listening, and motivational support in fostering meaningful engagement;

¹ In this document, the terms “career counselling” and “career guidance” are used interchangeably

Employer Engagement: Inclusion efforts are often hindered by employer bias and a lack of awareness. Stronger collaboration and targeted training for employers are needed to promote sustainable hiring practices.

The report concludes with strategic recommendations to guide the project's next steps, including the co-design of a modular training programme for career counsellors, the development of empowering digital tools for jobseekers, and the promotion of inclusive, cross-sectoral ecosystems that bridge guidance services with real labour market opportunities.

AccessCareer reaffirms its commitment to building a more inclusive, adaptive, and digitally informed career guidance system—one that empowers both professionals and disadvantaged individuals to navigate the evolving world of work with confidence and dignity.

1. Introduction

Enhancing Inclusive Access to Career Counselling – AccessCareer is a 24-month project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme. The initiative brings together partners from five countries—Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain—and aims to achieve and implement the following key objectives:

- 1) Enhance the skills and effectiveness of career counsellors, with a focus on supporting disadvantaged individuals.*
- 2) Expand access to lifelong learning and career counselling for disadvantaged individuals, promoting a culture of inclusion and empowerment. AccessCareer supports self-directed career management and personal agency.*
- 3) Adapt career counselling frameworks to meet the changing needs of the labour market by fostering the development of informal support networks.*

AccessCareer will realise these objectives through a series of actions, including the development of a unique curriculum with modules aimed at enhancing the capacities of career counsellors; the implementation of a Train-the-Trainer Programme; and the creation of an informal network of stakeholders (including HR professionals, policy makers, SMEs, trainers, career counsellors, recruitment and employment agencies, among others).

These activities pursue a dual objective: on one hand, they aim to facilitate and promote the exchange of good practices to attract and support disadvantaged individuals throughout their job-seeking journey; on the other hand, they are designed to equip career counsellors with the knowledge, tools, and practical competencies needed to face the everyday challenges inherent in their work including intercultural sensitivity, digital literacy, inclusive communication, and psychological resilience especially when working with vulnerable groups.

By aligning career counselling frameworks with the evolving demands of the labour market, AccessCareer aspires to empower socially disadvantaged groups, ensuring equitable access to career opportunities and contributing to the reduction of employment disparities. The project ultimately aims to enhance inclusivity and accessibility in career counselling, with a particular focus on supporting individuals who face greater barriers to employment.

1.1 Task 2.1 Identification of a Current State of Play

This document presents an in-depth analysis of the current state of play in which career counsellors—especially those working with disadvantaged individuals—operate daily, as examined under Task 2.1 of the AccessCareer project. The main goal of Task 2.1 was to identify barriers to career progression, access to employment, biases in hiring, and gaps in career self-management skills. In line with this, the objective of the document is to provide practical guidance for the development of tailored curriculum for career counsellors within the framework of the project. To ensure that the curriculum is both relevant and effective, the analysis also aims to identify the specific needs of career counsellors. This will be achieved through focus groups and surveys, building on the preliminary research carried out during the project design phase. This approach ensures that the resulting training programme is grounded in real-world challenges and aligned with the day-to-day realities faced by both counsellors and their clients.

1.2 Methodological Approach

This activity was led by Mylia, with the support and contribution of all project partners, and was concluded by the end of June 2025. Task 2.1 was divided into five main subtasks to develop a comprehensive and coherent document that will inform Task 2.2:

1. Initial alignment and sharing of guidelines for desk research, focus groups, and survey tools;
2. Implementation of desk research;
3. Organization and facilitation of focus groups;
4. Survey data collection and analysis;
5. Development of the final report.

An interactive **workshop on Miro**² was conducted in a hybrid format (both in-person and online). The aim of this initiative was to clarify the objectives and key stakeholders of the needs

² Link to the Miro Board https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVJhly4E=/?share_link_id=237537852000

analysis, with a particular focus on understanding the current state of career counselling, identifying existing challenges, and highlighting areas for improvement.

The in-person session took place in Valladolid, Spain, during the kickoff meeting on 1 April 2025, while the online session was held on 2 June 2025. During both meetings, a representative from each consortium partner actively participated and contributed inputs, suggestions, and diverse perspectives to the activity.

The aim of the workshop was twofold:

- To identify the main stakeholders involved and clarify their role in the needs analysis process;
- To define the goals of the needs analysis for career counselling by:
 - (a) identifying the key challenges faced by career counsellors in their daily work,
 - (b) organising these challenges into macro-categories for clearer analysis, and
 - (c) determining the specific areas the needs analysis should explore—particularly regarding gaps in services for disadvantaged groups.

Based on the main findings identified in the previous steps, the consortium exchanged inputs during the online meeting to deepen the analysis and align on the next phases of the project. These contributions formed the basis for the creation of the tools.

2. AccessCareer tools and instruments

Following the methodological framework defined in the previous section, Mylia developed a coherent set of operational tools to support project partners in the implementation of the needs analysis activities. These instruments were designed to ensure consistency across countries, facilitate data collection, and promote comparability of results. They are available in the [Annex Section](#).

The toolkit includes:

- A **Desk Research Guideline**, providing thematic areas and guiding questions to map the current landscape of career guidance for disadvantaged individuals;
- A **Focus Group Package**, including facilitation materials and templates to collect qualitative insights from career counsellors;
- Two **Surveys**, targeting disadvantaged individuals and key stakeholders respectively, aimed at gathering quantitative data on needs, barriers, and opportunities.

These tools were implemented by project partners in **Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain**, who carried out the desk research, facilitated focus groups, and administered the surveys in their respective national contexts. This ensured a diverse and representative data collection process, while maintaining a shared methodological structure.

All tools were made available through the Admin Project Tool and are annexed to this document. Their structured design ensured alignment with the project's objectives and enabled partners to collect relevant and comparable data across different national contexts.

2.1 Desk Research

As part of the toolkit developed by Mylia, the **Desk Research Guideline** provides a structured framework to support partners in analysing the current landscape of career guidance for disadvantaged individuals. It includes thematic areas and guiding questions covering counsellor training, types of disadvantage, barriers to employability, effective tools and practices, employer engagement, and the role of technology and AI. The guideline also encourages

exploration of national and European intervention models, as well as identification of emerging trends and skill gaps. These findings are designed to complement the qualitative insights gathered through focus groups and surveys, contributing to a comprehensive needs analysis.

2.2 Focus Group

In order to enrich and triangulate the findings from the desk research and surveys, each partner conducted a focus group with career counsellors working with disadvantaged individuals. The activity was guided by a structured set of tools developed by Mylia, including:

- A **Focus Group Guideline** with thematic inputs and a detailed agenda;
- An **Observation Grid** to capture group dynamics and non-verbal cues;
- A **Data Collection Table** to synthesize key findings across macro-areas;
- A **Participant Profile Sheet** to document the background and expertise of each counsellor involved.

The focus groups followed a common format of approximately 90 minutes and were conducted online with 5 to 7 participants per country. The discussion explored six key areas:

- the role of counsellors,
- types of disadvantages,
- barriers faced by clients,
- tools and training,
- employer engagement,
- the use of digital technologies and AI.

A final section was dedicated to future needs and innovation.

Each partner was also asked to produce a **short summary** (max one page) highlighting the main findings and observations from their session. These contributions, together with the observation notes and data tables, were used to identify recurring themes, emerging needs, and innovative practices across countries.

The results of this activity provide a rich qualitative foundation for the needs analysis and will inform the next phases of the project.

2.3 Surveys

To enrich the needs analysis with quantitative insights, two structured surveys were developed and disseminated among key target groups: disadvantaged individuals (Survey A) and career counsellors or related stakeholders (Survey B). These tools were designed to capture complementary perspectives on the challenges, needs, and opportunities in career guidance.

Survey A – Disadvantaged Individuals

This questionnaire aimed to understand the lived experiences and job search challenges of individuals facing various forms of disadvantage, including long-term unemployment, low education, disability, migration background, or caregiving responsibilities. The survey explored:

- Self-perception of employability and confidence in job-seeking;
- Awareness and understanding of career counselling services;
- Main barriers to employment (e.g., lack of skills, access to vacancies, financial constraints);
- Desired outcomes from career guidance (e.g., tailored action plans, CV support, motivation building).

Survey B – Career Counsellors and Stakeholders

This survey targeted professionals involved in career guidance, including counsellors, HR professionals, educators, and policymakers. It focused on:

- The types of disadvantaged groups most frequently supported;
- Common barriers and skill gaps observed among clients;
- Training needs of professionals (e.g., bias awareness, digital tools, labour market trends);
- Preferences for training delivery formats and features desired in digital support tools;
- Confidence in using digital platforms and suggestions for future resources.

The data collected through these surveys provide a dual perspective on the career guidance ecosystem, highlighting both the needs of disadvantaged individuals and the capacity-building requirements for those who support them. These findings will be triangulated with desk

research and focus group results to inform the development of tailored interventions and tools in the next phases of the project.

The combined use of desk research, focus groups, and surveys—supported by a shared set of tools—ensured a comprehensive and multi-perspective needs analysis. This integrated approach enabled partners to collect both qualitative and quantitative data across diverse national contexts, laying a solid foundation for the development of targeted and evidence-based interventions in the next phases of the project.

3. Surveys: Perspectives from the Field

3.1 Findings from Surveys

The survey component of the needs analysis was designed to gather structured, quantitative data from two key target groups: disadvantaged individuals and career counsellors/stakeholders. This chapter presents a detailed overview of the survey implementation process, the characteristics of the respondents, and the main findings across thematic areas. The results contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges and expectations surrounding inclusive career counselling and complement the qualitative insights from desk research and focus groups.

3.2 Survey Respondents and Implementation Context

The two surveys were designed to capture complementary perspectives from two key target groups:

- **Survey A:** individuals experiencing various forms of disadvantage (e.g., long-term unemployment, low education, disability, migration background, Young NEET).
- **Survey B:** professionals involved in career guidance, including counsellors, HR professionals, educators/trainers, and policymakers.

Both surveys were administered online using Microsoft Forms, in the national language of each country, between the second half of May and the first half of June 2025.

To ensure a diverse and representative sample, each partner was responsible for disseminating the surveys within their national context. The following table summarizes the number of responses collected in each country:

Table 1: Respondents by country in the two surveys

Country	Survey A Disadvantaged Individuals	Survey B Stakeholders in career guidance	TOTAL
Cyprus	13	11	24
Greece	10	22	32
Italy	9	61	70
Spain	129	51	180
TOTAL	161	145	306

The distribution of responses across countries and target groups provides a solid foundation for the analysis of needs, barriers, and expectations related to career guidance.

Table 2: Disadvantaged Individuals: distribution

DESCRIPTION	Cyprus	Greece	Italy	Spain
Immigrant	2	1	\	26
Long-term unemployed (12+months)	5	\	3	50
Person with Disability or long-term health conditions	1	3	1	4
Young NEET	1	1	1	10
Person with no formal qualifications or a secondary education		\	1	2
Worker over 50 years old	4	1	\	
Single parent or caregiver	\	\	\	10
Woman re-entering in the job market	\	4	\	13
Others	\	\	3	14

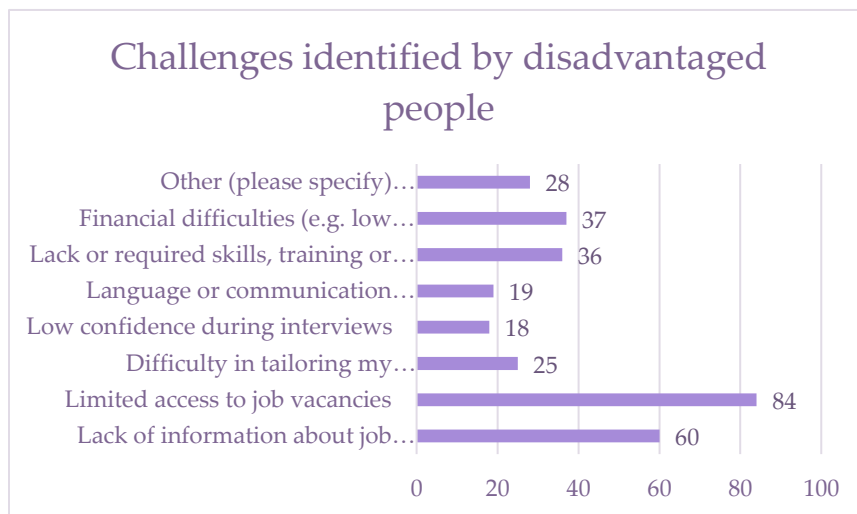
Table 3: Career Counsellors/Stakeholders: distribution

ROLE	Cyprus	Greece	Italy	Spain
Career Counsellor	2	12	33	44
HR Professional	8	1	6	\
Policymaker	\		9	\
Educator or training provider	1	8	11	2
Other	\	1	2	5

3.3 Comparative Insights Across Countries

This section presents the main findings from the two surveys conducted within the AccessCareer project. While each survey explored the topic of inclusive career counselling from a different perspective—one targeting disadvantaged individuals and the other career counsellors and stakeholders—their combined analysis offers a comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of the challenges, needs, and expectations involved. The results are organised thematically to highlight key trends across both groups, enabling a comparative reading of the data. This approach not only supports the identification of shared priorities and critical gaps in current career guidance practices but also provides a solid foundation for the development of targeted training curriculum and digital tools within the project.

3.3.1 Barriers to Employment



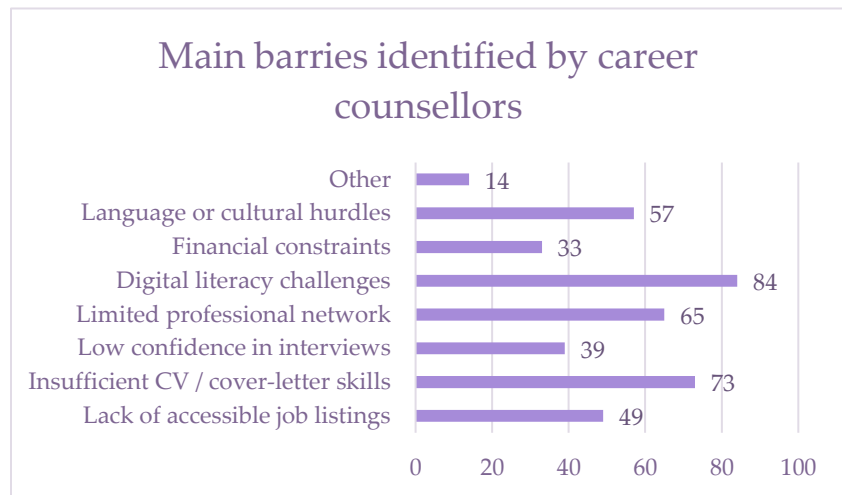
The comparison between the barriers reported by disadvantaged individuals and those identified by career counsellors reveals both areas of alignment and divergence.³ Both groups agree on the relevance of limited access to job opportunities and difficulties in CV and interview preparation,

confirming the need for practical, job-readiness support. However, counsellors place much greater emphasis on digital literacy challenges and limited professional networks, which are not explicitly recognised by jobseekers—suggesting a potential gap in self-awareness or digital confidence.

Please note that respondents could select up to three answers for each question. A total of 307 responses were collected from disadvantaged individuals and 414 from career counsellors and stakeholders

Conversely, disadvantaged individuals highlight the lack of information about the labour market and financial difficulties more frequently than counsellors, pointing to broader structural and socio-economic constraints that may be underrepresented in professional assessments.

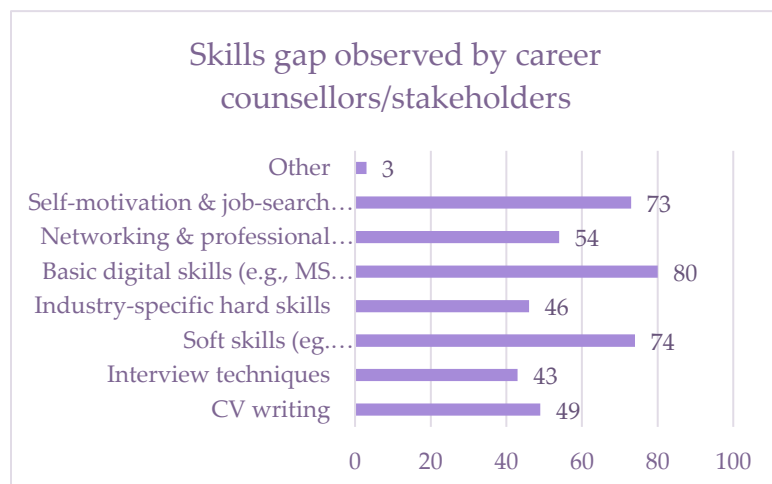
This divergence underlines the importance of combining both perspectives to design effective support services. While counsellors can identify hidden or underestimated barriers, the lived experience of jobseekers brings attention to contextual and systemic issues that also require targeted intervention.



3.3.2 Skills Need and Support Expectation

The comparison between the skill gaps observed by career counsellors and the support needs expressed by disadvantaged individuals offers a well-rounded view of the challenges faced in the job search process⁴.

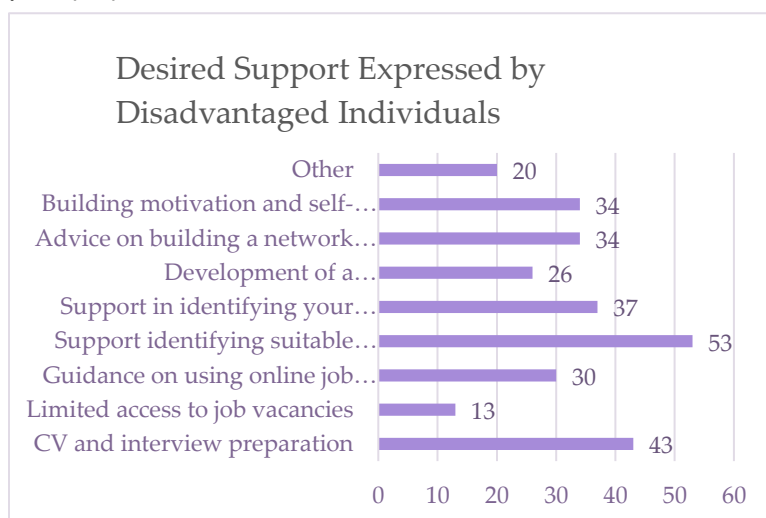
⁴ Please note that respondents could select up to three answers for each question. A total of 290 responses were collected from disadvantaged individuals and 422 from career counsellors and stakeholders



Career counsellors most frequently reported gaps in basic digital skills (80 mentions), followed closely by soft skills such as communication, flexibility, and adaptability (74), and self-motivation and job-search planning (73). These were seen as the most critical areas where disadvantaged individuals struggle. Other notable gaps

included networking and professional communication (54), CV writing (49), industry-specific hard skills (46), and interview techniques (43).

On the other side, disadvantaged individuals highlighted support in identifying suitable job openings (53 mentions) and CV and interview preparation (43) as top priorities. They also expressed a strong interest in developing their skills (37), receiving guidance on using online job platforms (30) and building motivation and self-confidence (34). Additional areas of support included networking advice (34), personalised action planning (26), and overcoming limited access to job vacancies (13).



While there is clear alignment on the importance of CV and interview preparation, the data also reveals some differences in perception. For example, digital skills and job-search planning, which are highly prioritised by counsellors, are not explicitly reflected in the support requests of jobseekers—possibly indicating a lack of awareness or confidence in these areas. Conversely, jobseekers place more emphasis on practical guidance and emotional support, such as motivation and confidence-building, which may be underrepresented in the counsellors' assessments.

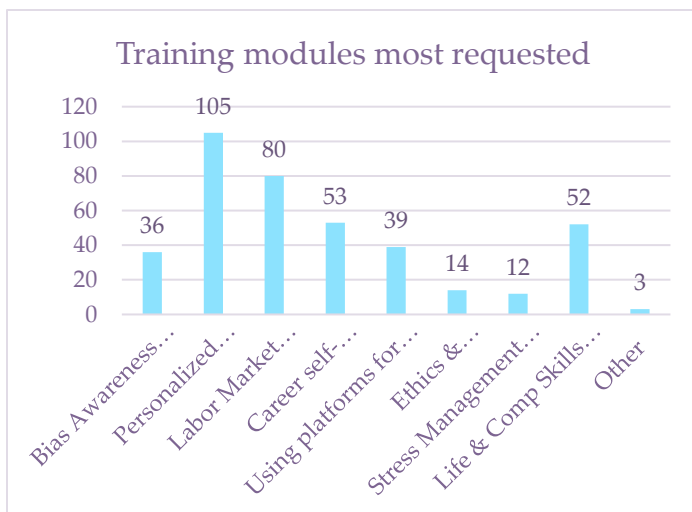
These findings suggest that effective employment support should be both comprehensive and customised, combining practical tools, digital upskilling, and motivational coaching. Bridging the gap between observed skill deficits and perceived support needs is essential to ensure that services are both relevant and impactful.

3.3.3 Training Needs of Career Counsellors and Stakeholders

The responses collected highlight a clear preference for training modules that enhance the ability to provide personalised, informed, and future-oriented support to disadvantaged jobseekers.

The most requested module by far is Personalised Guidance (105 mentions), confirming the importance of equipping counsellors with tools and strategies to tailor their support to everyone's background, skills, and aspirations. This aligns with the growing emphasis on customised career pathways in inclusive employment services.

The second most valued area is Labour Market Trends (80), underlining the need for up-to-date knowledge on how evolving economic and sectoral dynamics affect disadvantaged groups. This is followed by Self-management Skills (53) and Life and Competence Skills & Agency (52), which reflect a growing awareness of the importance of empowering individuals to take ownership of their career paths.



Other relevant modules include CV enhancement platforms (39) and Bias Awareness in AI-driven recruitment processes (36), showing that counsellors are also attentive to the digital and ethical dimensions of modern job search practices.

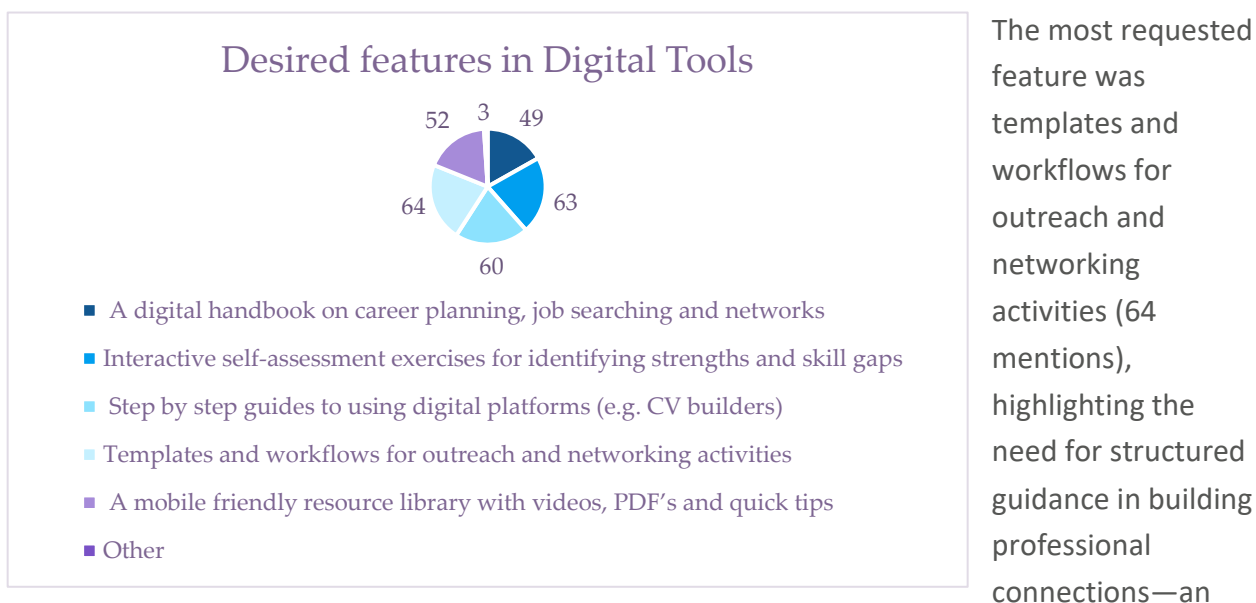
Less frequently mentioned, but still relevant, are Ethics & Professional Conduct (14) and Stress Management & Burnout Prevention (12), which may reflect emerging needs in contexts where counsellors face high workloads or emotionally demanding situations.

These results suggest that training programmes should prioritise customisation, labour market intelligence, and empowerment, while also integrating digital and ethical awareness to ensure

counsellors are fully equipped to support disadvantaged individuals in a rapidly changing employment landscape.

3.3.4 Desired Features in Digital Tools for Disadvantaged Candidates

When asked about the most valuable features for future digital tools, respondents showed a clear preference for interactive, practical, and user-friendly resources that can directly support disadvantaged individuals in their job search.



area often challenging for those with limited networks.

Closely following were interactive self-assessment exercises (63) and step-by-step guides for using digital platforms such as CV builders (60). These results suggest a strong demand for tools that not only inform but also actively engage users in identifying their strengths and navigating digital job search environments.

A digital handbook covering career planning, job search strategies, and networking was also well received (49), as was a mobile-friendly resource library with videos, PDFs, and quick tips (52), reflecting the importance of accessibility and multimedia formats for diverse user needs. Although only a small number of respondents selected “Other” (3), the overall responses point to a clear direction: digital tools should be practical, personalised, and easy to use, with a strong focus on empowerment and autonomy for disadvantaged candidates.

4. Desk Research on Inclusive Career Guidance: Key Findings

4.1 Findings from Desk Research

The desk research conducted across Spain, Cyprus, Greece and Italy reveals a complex and evolving landscape of career guidance for disadvantaged individuals. While each national context presents unique characteristics, several common themes emerge, highlighting both systemic challenges and promising practices.

The following section presents a comparative summary of the national desk research findings. The full reports for each country, as submitted by the piloting partners, are available in the [annex section](#).

4.2 Key Insights

Counsellor Training: Across all four countries, the role of career counsellors is increasingly recognised as pivotal in supporting vulnerable groups. However, gaps persist in training systems. In Spain, there is a lack of structured training in intercultural contexts and digital literacy. Cyprus benefits from strong institutional frameworks (e.g., YSEA, ONEK), yet coordination and integration of emerging technologies remain limited. In Italy, the absence of a harmonised national certification system and regional disparities in training access are key concerns. National bodies like ASNOR play a central role in promoting lifelong learning for counsellors. In Greece, while many counsellors are trained through academic and postgraduate programmes, there is a growing need for continuous professional development in digital and inclusive guidance. The implementation of European frameworks such as NICE remains uneven.

Types of Disadvantages: The target groups identified are broadly similar across countries: NEETs, migrants and refugees, women re-entering the labour market, older adults, and people with disabilities. In Spain, additional attention is given to Roma communities and survivors of gender-based violence. Cyprus highlights the precarious conditions of migrant domestic workers and the systemic exclusion of people with disabilities. Italy highlights the intersection

of disadvantage with regional inequalities, particularly in the South. In Greece, NEETs, long-term unemployed individuals, migrants, and those living in rural areas are particularly affected by economic instability and social exclusion.

Barriers faced by beneficiaries: Barriers are multifaceted and often intersecting. Digital exclusion, language barriers, and bureaucratic complexity are recurrent themes. In Spain, low self-esteem and limited digital access hinder job-seeking. Cyprus reports a significant digital divide and lack of accessible childcare. Italy points to fragmented services and cultural expectations as major obstacles. Greece faces similar challenges, with additional barriers including limited access to training, language and cultural integration issues for migrants, and insufficient support infrastructure, particularly in remote areas.

Tools and Practices: Innovative tools are emerging, though their reach and impact vary. Spain favours blended learning and informal use of AI tools like ChatGPT. Cyprus has developed platforms such as HelpRefugeesWork and mobile PES units targeting NEETs. Italy employs digital portals like MyANPAL for the GOL (Worker Employability Guarantee) initiative and Garanzia Giovani, alongside mentoring and peer support networks. In Greece, a combination of traditional counselling and digital platforms is used, with NGOs and public services collaborating to provide tailored support. However, access to these tools remains uneven across all countries.

Technology and AI: The integration of technology in career guidance is still in its early stages. Spain and Italy report experimental use of AI, while Cyprus has yet to adopt such tools systematically. In Greece, digitalisation is progressing, with the introduction of e-counselling, virtual job fairs, and AI-based matching tools. Nonetheless, disparities in access and digital literacy persist. Across all countries, concerns remain around ethical standards, accessibility, and the need for counsellor training in digital tools.

- **Future Outlook:** Looking ahead, all four countries acknowledge the urgency of modernising career guidance systems. Spain calls for personalised tools and stronger links to regional labour markets. Cyprus advocates for one-stop-shop models and structural reforms to support inclusion. Italy emphasises the importance of digital and green upskilling, territorial equity, and scaling up integrated service models. Greece is focusing on hybrid service models, expanding digital literacy, and improving



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coordination between education, employment, and social services. Across the board, the focus is on building inclusive, adaptive, and digitally informed systems that empower both counsellors and beneficiaries.



5. Focus Groups Perspectives: An Open Dialogue Among Career Counsellors

5.1 Findings from Focus Groups

As part of the AccessCareer needs assessment, focus groups were conducted in each participating country to gather qualitative insights from career counsellors working directly with disadvantaged individuals. Each session involved between five and eight professionals and followed a mutually agreed methodology and thematic guide to ensure consistency across national contexts.

The discussions explored key challenges, emerging needs, and innovative practices in career guidance, offering valuable perspectives grounded in the everyday experiences of practitioners

5.2 Key Insights

Across the four focus groups, counsellors described a professional landscape marked by complexity, emotional intensity, and structural limitations. Their experiences reflect a common commitment to supporting vulnerable individuals, but also reveal systemic gaps that hinder both the effectiveness of guidance services and the empowerment of beneficiaries.

The emotional toll of the work was a recurring theme. In Greece, burnout was explicitly identified as a major challenge, with counsellors expressing the need for supervision and peer support spaces. Similarly, in Spain and Italy, participants highlighted the psychological dimension of their role, emphasizing the importance of empathy, active listening, and emotional empowerment as foundational to effective guidance. The Italian group, in particular, stressed the need to address internalized biases among disadvantaged individuals, noting that many approach services with low expectations or passive attitudes shaped by past exclusion.

Digital exclusion emerged as a cross-cutting barrier. While often associated with older adults, counsellors in all countries noted that younger people may also lack functional digital skills, especially when overconfidence masks real gaps. In Cyprus and Spain, the digital divide was particularly evident among Roma communities, migrants, and low-literacy populations.

Counsellors called for tailored digital literacy training, adapted to different learning levels and contexts, and for the development of user-friendly tools to support job search and self-assessment.

The mismatch between training provision and labour market needs was another shared concern. In Spain, the training process was described as stereotyped and disconnected from real opportunities, often reinforcing gendered or low-skilled pathways. In Cyprus, participants noted the lack of cultural awareness among employers and HR staff, which limits the impact of inclusion strategies. Italian counsellors emphasised the need for structured, long-term support systems that go beyond emergency responses and are grounded in solid, transferable competencies.

Employer attitudes were frequently cited as a barrier to inclusion. Across the groups, participants reported that vulnerable individuals are often perceived as “cheap labour” or hired to meet quotas rather than as part of genuine inclusion efforts. This perception reinforces instability and high turnover, particularly in sectors like cleaning and care. Several groups called for awareness campaigns and training for employers to promote inclusive recruitment and retention practices

Despite these challenges, innovative practices are emerging. In Cyprus, mentorship and buddy systems were proposed as effective tools to support workplace integration. In Spain, counsellors are experimenting with AI tools like ChatGPT for CV preparation, while in Greece, digital platforms and hybrid formats are being explored to expand access. However, the integration of technology remains uneven, and concerns persist around accessibility, ethical use, and the need for adequate training for both counsellors and users. Counsellors expressed a clear need for structured training and ethical guidelines to support the meaningful use of digital tools, while also calling attention to the risk of reinforcing exclusion if access and skills gaps are not addressed.

Looking forward, participants across all countries stressed the need for more coordinated, inclusive, and adaptive systems. This includes investing in experiential training for professionals, strengthening links between guidance services and local labour markets, and ensuring that both counsellors and beneficiaries are equipped to navigate increasingly complex socio-economic

environments. The future of career guidance, as envisioned by those on the front lines, lies in combining emotional insight, practical tools, and structural reform to create pathways that are not only accessible, but also meaningful and sustainable.

Both Spain and Greece underlined the importance of building stronger digital skills, not only among disadvantaged individuals but also among career counsellors themselves, who must keep pace with evolving technologies in their field.

As one participant from Spain reflected, “Inclusion is not charity. It’s a matter of redesigning the system to work for everyone.” A counsellor in Greece added, “What we need is not one more tool, but a cultural shift.”

6. Conclusions

The AccessCareer needs assessment has provided a comprehensive and multi-layered understanding of the current landscape of career guidance for disadvantaged individuals across four European countries. By integrating findings from desk research, surveys, and focus groups, the analysis has revealed both systemic challenges and promising opportunities for innovation and improvement.

Across all methods, a number of recurring themes emerged:

Barriers to employment remain multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Disadvantaged individuals face structural, digital, psychological, and socio-economic obstacles that hinder their access to meaningful employment. While jobseekers emphasise financial constraints and lack of labour market information, career counsellors highlight digital exclusion and limited professional networks—underscoring the need for holistic and tailored support services.

- Skill gaps are evident on both sides of the guidance relationship. Disadvantaged individuals often lack basic digital skills, self-confidence, and job-search planning abilities, while counsellors express a need for updated training in digital tools, inclusive practices, and labour market trends. This dual gap calls for capacity-building interventions that empower both groups.
- Digital tools are increasingly seen as essential, yet their adoption remains uneven. There is a clear demand for user-friendly, mobile-accessible, and interactive resources that support self-assessment, CV building, and networking. However, without adequate training and ethical safeguards, digitalisation risks reinforcing existing inequalities.
- Emotional and psychological dimensions of career guidance are central. Focus groups revealed the emotional toll of counselling work and the importance of empathy, active listening, and motivational support. Disadvantaged individuals often carry internalised barriers that require not only practical tools but also emotional empowerment.
- Employer engagement is a critical but underdeveloped area. While some inclusive practices are emerging, many employers still perceive vulnerable groups through a deficit lens. Awareness-raising, incentives, and structured collaboration between guidance services and employers are needed to foster sustainable inclusion.

Looking ahead, the findings of this report point to several strategic priorities for the next phases of the AccessCareer project:

Developing modular, flexible training curriculum for career counsellors that address both technical and relational competencies, with a strong focus on digital inclusion, bias awareness, and personalised guidance;

1. Designing digital tools that are not only accessible and practical but also empowering—supporting disadvantaged individuals in navigating their career paths with autonomy and confidence;
2. Fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, particularly with employers, to bridge the gap between guidance services and real labour market opportunities;
3. Promoting a cultural shift in career counselling—one that values emotional intelligence, inclusivity, and adaptability as much as technical expertise.

By building on the insights gathered through this needs assessment, AccessCareer is well-positioned to co-create innovative, inclusive, and impactful solutions that respond to the real needs of both counsellors and the individuals they support.

Annexes

Annex 1 – Survey A for Disadvantaged Individuals

1. How would you describe your current situation? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Immigrant
- ☐ Long-term unemployed (unemployed for 12+ months)
- ☐ Person with disability or long-term health conditions
- ☐ Young NEET (“Not in Education, Employment or Training”)
- ☐ Person with no formal qualifications or a secondary education
- ☐ Worker over 50 years old
- ☐ Single parent or caregiver
- ☐ Woman re-entering in the job market
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

2. How confident do you feel about your ability to find and apply for a job?

1 – Not at all confident 2 – Slightly confident 3 – Moderately confident 4 – Very confident 5 – Extremely confident

3. How familiar are you with the role and services of a career counsellor?

1 – Not at all familiar 2 – Slightly familiar 3 – Moderately familiar 4 – Very familiar 5 – Extremely familiar

4. What are the main challenges you face when looking for a job? (select up to three)

- ☐ Lack of information about job market
- ☐ Limited access to job vacancies
- ☐ Difficulty in tailoring my CV/cover letter
- ☐ Low confidence during interviews

- ☐ Language or communication difficulties
- ☐ Lack on required skills, training or qualifications
- ☐ Financial difficulties (e.g. low income, difficulty accessing essential services such as transportation or education)
- ☐ Oher (please specify) _____

5. Which specific support from a career counsellor would help you most in your job search?

- ☐ CV and interview preparation
- ☐ Limited access to job vacancies
- ☐ Guidance on using online job search platforms
- ☐ Support identifying suitable job openings
- ☐ Support in identifying your skills and developing new ones
- ☐ Development of a personalised action plan
- ☐ Advice on building a network or connecting with employers
- ☐ Building motivation and self-confidence
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

▪ **What specific outcome from career guidance would make the biggest difference in your job search?**

6. (e.g., “A tailored action plan or learn how to apply for a job etc)

Annex 2 – Survey B for Key Stakeholders in Career Guidance

1. What is your primary role?

- ☐ Career counsellor
- ☐ HR professional
- ☐ Policymaker
- ☐ Educator or training provider
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

2. Which of these disadvantaged groups do you most often support? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Immigrants / refugees
- ☐ Long-term unemployed (12+ months)
- ☐ Young NEETs (“Not in Education, Employment or Training”)
- ☐ Low-educated individuals
- ☐ Workers over 50
- ☐ Single parents or family caregivers
- ☐ People with disabilities
- ☐ Women re-entering in the job market
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

3. In an average month, how many disadvantaged clients or candidates do you interact with?

- ☐ None
- ☐ 1–5
- ☐ 6–15
- ☐ 16–30
- ☐ More than 30

4. **In your experience, what are the top three barriers these candidates face in their job search?** *(Select up to three)*

- Lack of accessible job listings
- Insufficient CV / cover-letter skills
- Low confidence in interviews
- Limited professional network
- Digital literacy challenges
- Financial constraints
- Language or cultural hurdles
- Other (please specify): _____

5. **What are the most common skill gaps you observe or predict in these candidates?** *(Select up to three)*

- CV writing
- Interview techniques
- Soft skills (eg. communication, flexibility, adaptability)
- Industry-specific hard skills
- Basic digital skills (e.g., MS Office, email)
- Networking & professional communication
- Self-motivation & job-search planning
- Other (please specify): _____

6. **Which types of training modules would be most valuable for you to better support disadvantaged candidates?** *(Select up to three)*

●

- Bias Awareness (especially in AI generated hiring process)
- Personalised Guidance (adapting strategies to individual backgrounds, skills and aspirations)

- Labour Market trends (understanding trends & their impact on disadvantaged groups)
- Career self-management skills
- Using platforms for CV enhancement
- Ethics & Professional Conduct best practices
- Stress Management & Burnout Prevention
- Life & Comp Skills & agency
- Other (please specify): _____

7. Are you attending some training in particular?

- NO
- YES
- If yes please specify which one: _____

8. What features would you like to see in new digital tools for disadvantaged candidates? (Select up to three)

- A digital handbook on career planning, job searching and networks
- Interactive self-assessment exercises for identifying strengths and skill gaps
- Step by step guides to using digital platforms (e.g. CV builders)
- Templates and workflows for outreach and networking activities
- A mobile friendly resource library with videos, PDF's and quick tips
- Other (please specify): _____

9. How confident do you feel using digital platforms and tools to guide disadvantaged candidates?

1 – Not at all confident 2 – Slightly 3 – Moderately 4 – Very 5 – Extremely

10. Which delivery format would you prefer for training *you* as a key stakeholder in Career Guidance?

- Live online workshops
- Self-paced e-learning modules
- Blended (online + in-person)
- In-person only

11. Please share any further suggestions for courses or tools that would improve your ability to support disadvantaged candidates into employment opportunities. (eg. Use of AI in career guidance, Training on Emotional Intelligence)

Annex 3 – Desk Research Inputs

Overall Objective:

To collect and analyse existing sources in order to understand the context, recurring challenges, and best practices related to career guidance for disadvantaged individuals. The aim is to complement and support the findings that will emerge during the focus group phase.

1. Objectives:

- Identify the main barriers to employability for vulnerable groups
- Gather insights into the professional practices of career counsellors
- Explore the role of technology and AI in career guidance
- Analyse European and national intervention models
- Identify the most in-demand skills and specific training gaps

2. Guideline Questions for research

Main Theme	Questions
1. Counsellor Training	What key competencies are expected of career counsellors today? What training gaps have been identified at a national or European level?
2. Types of Disadvantage	Which vulnerable profiles are most frequently addressed in literature and active projects? What data is available on NEETs, migrants, long-term unemployed individuals, etc.?
3. Barriers Faced by Beneficiaries	Which types of barriers (digital, cultural, economic) are most commonly documented? What solutions have been proposed?
4. Tools and Practices	Which tools are considered most effective in supporting individuals entering or re-entering the job market?
5. Relationships with Employers	What models have proven successful in building bridges between counsellors and companies? Are there public incentives promoting inclusive hiring?

6. Technology / AI	How is technology being used in career guidance? What role does artificial intelligence play, and what are the perceived benefits?
7. Future Outlook	What trends or needs are emerging when it comes to future strategies for job market inclusion?

3. Outputs

A maximum of two Word documents summarising the findings from the desk research

Annex 4 – Focus Group Inputs

THEMATIC INPUTS

1. **Perception of your role in supporting disadvantaged individuals**
How do you see your role in promoting job inclusion for disadvantaged people?
2. **Most frequent types of disadvantage you encounter**
Which groups do you mostly support, and what common challenges do they face?
3. **Main obstacles faced by clients**
What types of barriers (personal, cultural, digital) do your clients usually face?
4. **Skills and tools used in daily work**
What tools or strategies do you use to support people? What works well?
5. **Training received and training needs**
What skills do you feel you lack? What kind of training would be most useful to you?
6. **Experience working with employers and companies**
How do you collaborate with employers? Are they open to hiring disadvantaged candidates?
7. **Use of digital tools and AI in career support**
How do you relate to digital tools or AI in your work? Are they an opportunity or a challenge?
8. **Future outlook and professional aspirations**
What changes would you like to see in the system? How do you envision the future of your profession?

AGENDA (90 minutes)

Time	Phase	Objective
0–10 min	Welcome and introduction	Present goals and structure
10–25 min	Warm-up: Role and target groups	Inputs 1–2
25–40 min	Barriers and obstacles	Inputs 3–4
40–55 min	Competences and training	Input 5
55–70 min	Employers and technology	Inputs 6–7

Time	Phase	Objective
70–85 min	Future perspective and recap	Input 8
85–90 min	Wrap-up	Final remarks and follow-up

Facilitator Guide – Focus Group (90 minutes)

Target: Career counsellors working with disadvantaged individuals

Format: Online – 5 to 7 participants

Goal: Explore current practices, needs, and future perspectives in career guidance for vulnerable groups.

1. Welcome & Introductions (10 min)

Micro-goal: Help participants feel comfortable and build trust.

Opening prompt:

“Let’s start with a short round: please tell us your name, your current role, and one group of people you work with most frequently.”

If needed:

“Do you mostly work with youth, migrants, long-term unemployed...?”

2. Your Work & Target Groups (15 min)

Micro-goal: Understand the working context and key needs of supported groups.

Discussion prompts:

“Let’s talk about the people you support: what do they typically need from you?”

“Have you noticed any changes in their needs or profiles over the last few years?”

Optional stimulus:

“Are there specific challenges that are becoming more common?”

3. Skills & Training (15 min)

Micro-goal: Explore essential skills and training needs for counsellors.

Discussion prompts:



“Which skills do you consider essential today when supporting disadvantaged groups?”

“Do you feel prepared, or are there areas where you would like more training?”

Optional stimulus:

“What training formats work best for you—online, peer exchange, practice-based?”

4. Technology & Digital Barriers (15 min)

Micro-goal: Understand the role of technology and digital challenges in guidance work.

Discussion prompts:

“Do you use digital tools in your work? Which ones?”

“Do your clients face digital barriers? How do you support them?”

Optional stimulus:

“What’s your take on AI in career counselling—opportunity, risk, something else?”

5. Employers & Labour Market (15 min)

Micro-goal: Explore how counsellors engage with employers and interpret labour market needs.

Discussion prompts:

“How open are employers to hiring people from disadvantaged backgrounds?”

“Do you work directly with companies? If yes, what are their biggest concerns?”

Optional stimulus:

“What kind of support would help employers become more inclusive?”

6. Looking Ahead – Needs & Innovation (15 min)

Micro-goal: Collect forward-looking ideas and suggestions for tools or services.

Discussion prompts:

“If you could design a new tool or programme to better support your work, what would it include?”

“What do you think will be most needed in the next 2–3 years?”

Optional stimulus:

“What would make your job easier or more impactful?”

7. Wrap-up & Final Thoughts (5–10 min)

Micro-goal: Give space for free reflections and close with appreciation.

Prompt:

“Is there anything we haven’t covered that you feel is important?”

“Any final thoughts or suggestions you’d like to share?”

Annex 5 – Focus Group Participants

	Field	Answer
1	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	
	Main area of expertise/interest	
2	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	
	Main area of expertise/interest	
3	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	
	Main area of expertise/interest	
4	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	
	Main area of expertise/interest	
5	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	
	Main area of expertise/interest	
6	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	

	Main area of expertise/interest	
7	Full Name	
	Current Professional Role	
	Years of experience in career counselling	
	Disadvantaged groups you primarily work with	
	Use of digital tools or AI (Yes/No)	
	Main area of expertise/interest	

Annex 6 – Focus Group Observation Grid

Area of Observation	What to observe / take notes on	Observer's Notes
Active participation	Who speaks the most? Is anyone consistently silent?	
Non-verbal communication	Signs of interest, boredom, agreement/disagreement (e.g. nodding, posture, facial expressions)	
Group atmosphere	General tone: cooperative, tense, disengaged?	
Reactions to specific topics	Which topics spark engagement, resistance, hesitation?	
Relevant contributions	Noteworthy insights, practical experiences, innovative suggestions	
Power dynamics or dominance	Does anyone dominate the discussion? Are certain people frequently interrupted?	
External factors	Technical issues, distractions, or anything that affects the dynamic of the group	
Additional observations	Any useful detail not covered above (key quotes, notable behavior, attitudes)	

Annex 7 – Focus Group Data Collection Table

Macro-area	Insights Emerging	Examples or Key Quotes	Frequency / Consistency	Notes / Observations
Training & Skills				
Social Barriers & Bias				
Labour Market Access				
Technology & Digital Tools				
Identified Emerging Needs				

Annex 8– Desk Research Cyprus

Introduction

This report is part of the Access Career project, which works to strengthen the skills of career counsellors and support more inclusive guidance services for people who face disadvantages. It draws on both national and European sources to explore the challenges, gaps, and successful approaches in career counselling.

The research is organised around the following core themes: how counsellors are trained, the identification of vulnerable groups, the barriers these groups face, the tools and practices currently in use, the role of technology and AI, and ideas for the future. The sources consulted include reports from the Cyprus Refugee Council, the European Disability Forum, the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce, as well as other relevant publications

Counsellor Training

To offer effective support to vulnerable groups in the job market, it's essential to strengthen the role and skills of career counsellors. This section highlights key initiatives and good practices that help counsellors develop the tools they need to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Two organisations play a major role in this effort: [the Counselling and Career Education Service \(YSEA\)](#) and the [Youth Board of Cyprus \(ONEK\)](#). They offer a range of services such as:

- One-on-one career guidance for young people of all ages through Youth Information Centers
- Skills assessment tests for high school students to help them explore career options
- Soft skills workshops that focus on job search techniques and professional development

Career Academies that include lectures, hands-on workshops, and real-life examples of good practice.

In addition to these services, YSEA leads various prevention programmes like “Mediation and Conflict Resolution,” “Fred Goes to School,” and the “Students Assistance Programme.” It also supports the continued training of school counsellors through events such as the “Career Management Skills: Hard Skills vs Soft Skills” conference. Finally, YSEA



coordinates the National Committee for Lifelong Guidance, which is responsible for improving the quality of guidance services and promoting participation in European networks.

The Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK) also plays a significant role in supporting young people through its [YBC Career Counselling Service](#). This comprehensive programme offers guidance and opportunities for both personal and professional development to individuals across a wide age range. By focusing on holistic support, ONEK helps young people navigate educational and career paths, empowering them to make informed decisions and develop skills that enhance their employability in a competitive job market.

Types of Disadvantaged People

Career counsellors in Cyprus are tasked with supporting a wide range of vulnerable groups, each facing unique challenges that can directly impact the effectiveness of the guidance they receive. These groups are diverse and complex, requiring tailored approaches.

➤ Refugees and asylum seekers

Many refugees and asylum seekers possess degrees and professional backgrounds. However, upon arrival in Cyprus, they often find themselves relegated to low-paid, low-skill jobs unrelated to their qualifications. This mismatch is not due to a lack of ability but rather systemic barriers, such as non-recognition of foreign qualifications and limited support in navigating the local job market. A skills [profiling report](#) by the Cyprus Refugee Council highlights these challenges, emphasizing the need for better integration strategies

➤ People with disabilities

According to [Eurostat](#), the disability employment gap in Cyprus reached 27% in 2021, up from 23.5% in 2020. This indicates a growing disparity between the employment rates of people with and without disabilities. Many people with disabilities would love to work — and are fully capable — but the doors just are not open. Whether it is a lack of accessible workplaces, the right kind of training, or even just employers' assumptions about what they can do, the result is the same: they are left out. That gap is not just about policy. It is personal and it affects real lives.

➤ NEETs

Young individuals who are not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEETs) represent a critical demographic requiring targeted support. Factors such as poverty, lack of guidance, and caregiving responsibilities, particularly among young mothers, hinder their participation in the labour market.

➤ Immigrants

In Cyprus, many migrant women working as domestic helpers find themselves in some of the toughest and most vulnerable job situations. A 2023 [report by ETIAS](#) sheds light on the reality they face—low pay, long hours, verbal mistreatment, and in the worst cases, exploitation that borders on human trafficking. What makes things even harder is that these women often live in the homes of the families they work for, leaving them isolated and without a clear way to ask for help.

Barriers Faced by Beneficiaries

The barriers that vulnerable individuals face in accessing the labour market are complex, deeply connected, and often overlooked in everyday policy discussions.

Language

Language is one of the most basic tools for inclusion, yet a major obstacle for many. Around 36% of refugees in Cyprus do not speak Greek, and another 20% do not speak English (Mathioudakis, M., 2021). Without language, doors to training, communication, and job opportunities remain firmly closed. Regarding a [comprehensive report](#) of Cyprus Refugee Council, refugees want to learn Greek to integrate and their interest for such classes highly surpasses available offers. Stronger Greek language skills are more closely linked to participation in the workforce. (Mathioudakis, M., 2021)

Digital Literacy

Digital readiness is another critical area of concern. According to the [2024 Digital Decade Country Report](#), less than half of Cyprus's population (49.5%) possesses at least a basic level of digital skills, which is below the EU average of 55.6%. This digital divide is likely more pronounced among persons with disabilities, further exacerbating their exclusion from the job market

Slow and inaccessible system for people with disabilities

Persons with disabilities often encounter physical barriers such as lack of accessible

infrastructure, as well as employer bias and low expectations regarding their productivity. (Georgiadou M, 2024) According to the latest [Eurostat figures \(2024\)](#), the gap between people with and without disabilities in the job market remains one of the biggest inequalities across both Cyprus and the EU. In Cyprus alone, the difference in employment rates between these two groups hit 24.5 percentage points—a clear sign that people with disabilities still face major roadblocks when it comes to fair job opportunities.

Lack of accessible childcare

For young mothers, the lack of accessible childcare means their chances to train or find a job are minimal. When support systems do not recognise their specific needs, the result is further exclusion. A [UNICEF report](#), Supporting the Expansion and Strategic Development of Early Childhood Education and Care in Cyprus, highlights that affordable, quality childcare is largely inaccessible in Cyprus, placing a disproportionate burden on families and hindering women's participation in the workforce.

Tools and Practices

Despite these challenges, there are tools that are making a difference. One example is [HelpRefugeesWork.org](#), an online platform run by the Cyprus Refugee Council and the UNHCR. It connects refugees to job listings, training programmes, and potential employers—offering not just opportunities, but a clearer path forward.

Another promising initiative according the Cluster Report (2022) is the mobile units of the Public Employment Service (PES). These teams travel to reach NEETs—young people not in work, education, or training—especially those in remote areas or outside formal systems. They provide hands-on help with CV writing, job applications, and access to other support programmes. As part of the National Youth Strategy, they aim to reach at least 2,400 young people across Cyprus by 2026. (Palaonda D., Michael E., 2022)

For NEETs, the Cypriot Government has implemented [incentive schemes](#) that combine subsidized employment with training opportunities, aiming to facilitate their integration into the workforce. YSEA also, offers [career counseling](#) for people in need

Technology/AI

In Cyprus, technology has not yet found its place in career guidance. Some tools, like HelpRefugeesWork, do a great job connecting vulnerable groups with job opportunities online. However, beyond that, the use of digital platforms in public employment services remains limited. Artificial intelligence is still off the radar. No real plans and no structured approach to using AI for career leaves a gap between what technologies can offer and what people actually have access to

For people with disabilities, this digital gap is even wider. The pandemic made this painfully clear, with many struggling to adapt to online work or access even the simplest digital tools.

Programmes like ENTELIS+, [SIDE](#), and [DIG-i-READY](#) have started laying the groundwork by teaching digital skills and promoting assistive technologies but these efforts are still on the fringes.

Outlook

Looking forward, the shift toward inclusive, adaptive and cross-sectoral employment strategies is becoming more pressing in Cyprus. One clear need is the creation of one-stop-shop centres that offer integrated career guidance, job matching, psychosocial support, and referral services. The CLUSTER report (2022) also recommends conducting a national mapping of NEETs to understand the diverse profiles and challenges within this group, particularly focusing on women, persons with disabilities, and youth in rural areas. These strategies call for better coordination among ministries, local governments, and NGOs, as well as dedicated funding mechanisms.

For people with disabilities in particular, the future depends on structural reforms that expand access to lifelong learning, inclusive training programmes, and assistive technologies. The Social Enterprises Law (2020) provides a promising opportunity by offering a legal framework for the creation of businesses that employ vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities, ex-prisoners, and refugees. There is also growing demand for digital inclusion initiatives, where training is tailored to accessibility needs.

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- [Be prepared for inclusion in digital education | DIG-i-READY](#)

Annex 9 – Desk Research Greece

Introduction

The landscape of career guidance in Europe is undergoing rapid transformation, driven by structural labour market shifts, technological advancement, and increasing social inequalities. Career counsellors now face the dual challenge of addressing the needs of diverse job seekers while adapting their own professional practices to an evolving environment. Vulnerable groups—including NEETs, migrants, long-term unemployed individuals, and people with disabilities—are often disproportionately affected by unemployment and social exclusion. This desk research explores current trends, systemic challenges, and innovative practices in career guidance for vulnerable groups across Europe. It highlights the necessary skills for guidance professionals, the barriers faced by marginalized populations, and the role of digital innovation, employer collaboration, and EU policy frameworks in creating more inclusive labour markets.

1. The Evolving Role of Career Counsellors

As digitalization, automation and global mobility continue to reshape the world of work, career counsellors must adopt a more strategic and interdisciplinary approach. The CEDEFOP and the NICE Foundation emphasise that modern career counsellors need to be empathetic, culturally competent, and digitally literate, with an up-to-date understanding of labour market trends. They must also be skilled in using labour market information (LMI), coaching methodologies, and digital tools to deliver individualized support.

Nevertheless, significant gaps persist in counsellor training across Europe. Research from the OECD (2023) and CEDEFOP (2022) reveals uneven access to professional development opportunities, particularly in digital and inclusive guidance methodologies. Furthermore, although frameworks like the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) and the NICE Competence Framework provide valuable guidance, their implementation remains inconsistent among EU Member States.

2. Defining Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerable groups commonly referenced in European research and policy include:

- NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training)
- Migrants and refugees
- Long-term unemployed individuals
- Women returning to the labour market

- People with disabilities or low qualifications

According to Eurostat (2023), over 9 million NEETs reside in the EU, with the highest concentrations in Southern and Eastern Europe. Migrants and refugees face distinct challenges related to language proficiency, legal status, and the recognition of foreign qualifications (CEDEFOP, 2020; Kapsalis, 2018). Meanwhile, low-skilled adults are often excluded from lifelong learning opportunities and have limited access to effective career support (OECD, 2023; ETF, 2022).

3. Barriers to Employment and Participation

These vulnerable groups often experience intersecting barriers such as:

- Digital exclusion: due to lack of skills, devices, or internet access
- Economic hardship: limiting access to transportation, childcare, or training
- Cultural and structural barriers: including discrimination, gender bias, and lack of recognition for informal learning

These obstacles reduce their chances of employment and social integration. The European Training Foundation (ETF, 2022) and the European Commission (2020) stress that integrated, cross-sectoral interventions are necessary to overcome these barriers—particularly for young people and migrants

4. Policy Responses and Inclusive Practices

Tackling these challenges requires systemic solutions, including:

- Digital upskilling programmes
- Culturally responsive and person-centred counselling
- Financial support mechanisms for job seekers
- Integrated models that bring together education, employment, and social services (e.g., the PES Network Strategy)

The Youth Guarantee, European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and Upskilling Pathways initiative provide funding and frameworks to support lifelong learning, social inclusion, and labour market reintegration for disadvantaged groups (European Commission, 2023).

5. Digital Tools and Innovation

Digitalization offers significant opportunities for scaling up career guidance services. Online platforms like:

- EURES: provide cross-border job matching
- AI-powered CV builders and job platforms (e.g., Jobiri, FutureFit AI)

- Validation tools for non-formal and informal learning (e.g., EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals)

Innovative projects like Future Time Traveller show that gamification and virtual environments can enhance career engagement for young NEETs. Artificial intelligence is increasingly used to forecast labour market trends, personalize support, and optimize matching processes.

However, scholars caution against risks such as algorithmic bias, lack of digital ethics, and unequal access (ILO, 2021; CEDEFOP, 2023).

6. Strengthening Collaboration with Employers

Stronger partnerships between guidance services and employers are key to improving employment outcomes. Effective practices include:

- Regional employment pacts
- Employer/hr-involved training curricula
- Targeted hiring incentives for disadvantaged groups
- Work-based learning and apprenticeship programmes

Public Employment Services (PES) and private sector initiatives can jointly design pathways to employment, especially for NEETs and migrants (PES Network, 2022). The Social Economy Action Plan and Pact for Skills also promote cooperation between education providers, guidance professionals, and employers.

Conclusion

Career guidance for vulnerable groups in Europe must evolve to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex and digital labour market. This involves not only empowering individuals through skills development and personalised support but also transforming guidance systems into proactive, integrated, and inclusive structures. Guidance professionals need continuous training in digital, intercultural, and data-driven methods. Policy-makers must ensure sustainable funding and cross-sector coordination, while leveraging technology in a transparent and ethical way.

Ultimately, the future lies in hybrid service models, a skills-first approach, and a lifelong guidance system accessible to all—especially those furthest from the labour market. With strategic investment and political will, career guidance can become a powerful tool for promoting equity, resilience, and inclusion across Europe.

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Annex 10 – Desk Research Italy

COUNSELLOR TRAINING

In Italy, Career counsellors play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate their paths through education, training, and employment. They are expected to blend key competencies such as active listening, guidance methodologies to master skills evaluation, knowledge of the labour market, and digital literacy. Current frameworks emphasise the importance of interpersonal skills, familiarity with active labour market policies, and proficiency in digital platforms for job matching. However, several gaps remain, including the absence of a harmonised national certification system, uneven training availability across regions, and limited integration of AI or emerging technologies into existing curricula. National bodies such as [ASNOR \(Associazione Nazionale Orientatori\)](#) play a key role in certifying and developing the profession. As a member of the MIUR-accredited system, ASNOR maintains a national register of guidance professionals and promotes counsellor’s lifelong training.

TYPES OF DISADVANTAGE

Several vulnerable groups have emerged as primary beneficiaries of career guidance services in Italy. Among them, NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training) represent a significant portion, especially in Southern regions. Migrants and refugees often face systemic hurdles such as language barriers and non-recognition of foreign qualifications. Older adults, particularly those who have been unemployed long-term, struggle with digital illiteracy. Women returning to the labour market encounter rigid structures and insufficient care support, while people with disabilities continue to face both physical and institutional obstacles to employment (employers’ bias, fragmented support services, insufficient inclusive education and training). Navigating between health services, social services and employment [centrescentres](#) is often complex and time-consuming.

TOOLS AND PRACTICES

Italy employs a diverse toolkit to support individuals entering or re-entering the job market. Key instruments include personalised skills assessments, individualised action plans, and mentoring initiatives tailored to specific communities. Digital services like MyANPAL and the Garanzia

Giovani portal streamline access to job listings and training offers. Moreover, job clubs and peer networks play a valuable role in providing collective motivation and shared experiences.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYERS

Strengthening collaboration between career services and employers is vital. Successful strategies include public-private partnerships, initiatives led by corporate social responsibility goals, and welfare-to-work programmes like 'GOL'. To incentivise inclusive hiring, the government provides fiscal benefits for companies employing NEETs, women, or workers over 50. National and regional projects, often supported by the FSE+ or the PNRR, reinforce these efforts by funding pilot initiatives and integrated employment schemes.

TECHNOLOGY AND AI IN CAREER GUIDANCE

In Italy, the integration of technology in career guidance is still in a developmental phase. Some digital platforms, such as [MyANPAL](#) and [Garanzia Giovani](#), offer basic services like job matching and registration, but the use of artificial intelligence remains limited and mostly experimental. Pilot initiatives have explored tools for profiling job seekers or providing virtual assistance (e.g. chatbots), but these are not yet systematized.

Concerns around data privacy, algorithmic bias, and ethical standards remain largely unaddressed. As a result, one of the key challenges is ensuring that career counsellors are gradually trained to understand and responsibly adopt digital and AI-based tools, while preserving the human dimension of guidance.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

While Italy is gradually exploring how to modernise its career guidance system, the shift toward a more personalised and digitally integrated approach is still at an early stage. Some regions have piloted blended models that combine human support with digital tools, but nationwide implementation remains limited and uneven. Key priorities emerging from national guidelines and European analyses, such as the Cedefop Skills Forecast and the Inventory of Lifelong Guidance Systems, include closer coordination between the education and employment sectors, wider access to lifelong learning opportunities, and upskilling aligned with the green and digital transitions. Ultimately, ensuring that these advancements are accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable, will be critical to building an inclusive labour market.

CONCLUSION

Italy has made substantial progress in designing a career guidance system that is both inclusive and forward-looking. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring territorial equity, integrating technology responsibly, and harmonising counsellor training nationwide. It is also essential to further invest in counsellor training and professional recognition. To tackle accessibility barriers, language services must be expanded. Migrants and refugees often lack access to Italian language training, with CPIA (Centri Provinciali per l’Istruzione degli Adulti – Local Centres for Adult Education) being some of the few providers of such support.

Additionally, inclusive childcare is a vital factor in helping women re-enter the workforce. As the UNICEF-supported reports highlight, limited access to affordable early childhood education hampers labour market participation for many mothers. Integrated access points such as the Sportello Unico per l’Orientamento should be scaled nationally to replicate the good practices already piloted in some regions. With the right investments and partnerships, career guidance can become a true catalyst for social and professional empowerment, especially for those most at risk of exclusion [PNRR Missione 5 & 4 \(2021\)](#)

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Annex 11 – Desk Research Spain

COUNSELLOR TRAINING

Career counsellors are expected to master essential soft skills such as empathy, active listening, emotional intelligence, and intercultural communication. These competencies are crucial for building trust and adapting guidance approaches to the diverse needs of users. The focus group highlighted a lack of structured training in intercultural contexts, particularly in dealing with culturally diverse groups such as rural women and migrant populations. Furthermore, counsellors often lack familiarity with the local labour market, limiting their ability to provide relevant guidance. There is a growing need for capacity building that bridges human-centered approaches with labour market intelligence and digital literacy.

TYPES OF DISADVANTAGE

Participants reported working with a variety of vulnerable groups, including women over 45, migrants, members of the Roma community, survivors of gender-based violence, individuals with low educational attainment, and NEETs (youth not in employment, education, or training). These profiles face intersecting forms of disadvantage, often including cultural stigma, discrimination, unstable living conditions, or limited access to education and healthcare. The challenges experienced by each group vary but tend to converge around structural inequalities and social exclusion. These insights underscore the need for tailored, flexible interventions that take into account each individual's background and capabilities.

BARRIERS FACED BY BENEFICIARIES

A wide range of barriers were identified. Economically, many beneficiaries accept low-skilled jobs in sectors such as cleaning or retail to secure basic needs like rent and childcare. Culturally, some users experience bureaucratic resistance, showing reluctance or fear in dealing with administrative documentation. The digital divide remains a critical issue, especially for older users or those with low literacy, who often lack basic digital skills or access to technology. Additionally, many individuals face internalised limitations, such as low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their own professional abilities. These barriers often overlap and compound, making sustained labour market integration difficult.

TOOLS AND PRACTICES

Blended learning formats, combining online and in-person components, were identified as the most effective training approach, offering both flexibility and accessibility. Participants expressed the need for intuitive digital tools that can assist users in building CVs automatically from their employment history, particularly for those with limited digital literacy. Basic digital support, such as assistance in accessing e-government services or digital identification systems, is still essential. AI tools, such as ChatGPT, are starting to be used informally by counsellors to generate ideas or structure CVs, although their use is still limited and unstructured.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYERS

The connection between counsellors and employers varies significantly across sectors and regions. In certain industries like care or cleaning, employers show more willingness to hire from vulnerable populations, particularly when public incentives or rural employment schemes are in place. However, many employers express concern about the lack of stability and continuity from these candidates. The need for long-term reliability from workers often clashes with the socio-economic instability of beneficiaries. Promoting inclusive employment therefore requires ongoing awareness-raising among employers and support systems that help maintain job retention.

TECHNOLOGY/AI

Technology is playing an increasingly visible role in career guidance. Some counsellors are beginning to use AI tools like ChatGPT to support users in writing CVs or identifying transferable skills. Despite this, digital platforms such as Europass remain underused, often due to their complexity or lack of familiarity among users. Beneficiaries still struggle with basic digital skills and online administrative processes, making targeted digital literacy training a continued priority. The integration of AI in recruitment processes (e.g., automated CV screening) is also a growing reality, which may pose challenges related to bias and fairness, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Looking ahead, the role of technology—especially AI—will become increasingly important in both job searching and recruitment processes. Career counsellors will need to become more

fluent in digital tools and strategies, while also retaining a human-centered approach that fosters resilience, autonomy, and empowerment among users. There is also a pressing need for tools that connect user profiles with regional employment opportunities in a personalised and accessible way. Finally, future training should focus not only on external job market trends, but also on reinforcing users' confidence in their own value and potential.

CONCLUSION

The focus group provided rich insights into the systemic, interpersonal, and technological challenges faced by both career counsellors and their beneficiaries. While the structural disadvantages of vulnerable groups remain consistent, the context of service provision is shifting rapidly. This calls for integrated, inclusive, and digitally informed strategies that support employability through empathy, innovation, and access to relevant tools and networks.

Annex 12 – Focus Group Data Collection Table Cyprus

Executive Summary

This report shares the insights from an online focus group that took part on June 18th, 2025, bringing together five professionals who work closely with vulnerable groups across Cyprus. The participants included HR officers, caseworkers, trainers, team leaders, and mentors of people with disabilities, asylum seekers, migrants, and others seeking fair access to employment. The discussion focused on the challenges these individuals face, the skills and support they need, and how professionals can better support them.

Key findings	Disadvantaged people often lack basic communication and digital skills essential for employment.
	Negative stereotypes and misconceptions from employers continue to make it harder for many individuals to enter the workforce.
	Legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures create structural barriers for asylum seekers.
	Both workers and employers would benefit from stronger mentoring support and better understanding of different cultural backgrounds.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Develop targeted training programs for jobseekers and staff.
- ✓ Introduce awareness campaigns for employers to reduce stigma.
- ✓ Implement mentorship and buddy systems to support workplace integration

INTRODUCTION:

In the framework of the Access Career project, partners have joined forces to support individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing employment opportunities. Based on desk research conducted across all partner countries, it is evident that disadvantaged individuals face barriers to employability and equal participation in the workforce. These challenges come from social biases, gaps in skills, and rigid systems that don't support everyone equally. The next phase of the project focuses on working closely with specialists who can provide inclusive and tailored career guidance to those people. This focus group aimed to

gather insights from professionals directly engaged in these efforts, ensuring that future interventions are both informed and impactful.

METHODOLOGY

The focus group was held online via ZOOM on June 18, 2025. It lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format with guiding questions. The chosen format of focus group was based on the availability of participants to participate and contribute online as they were from different cities.

During the focus group session, the purpose of the project was presented. Participants were informed about the purpose of the focus group and provided verbal consent to recording and anonymity were assured. Therefore, all participants introduced themselves in order to feel more comfortable and safer in sharing personal insights. The questions were provided by the guidelines of responsible partner MYLIA that was designed specifically for the needs of the focus group.

PARTICIPANTS PROFILE

The focus group included a diverse group of professionals in Cyprus with experience in human resources, social inclusion, training, and project management. Specifically, five professionals were contributing with their insights during the Focus Group session.

- Participant 1 and 2 both work for the organization CODECA in the Human Resources Department. P1 is also involved in coordinating the "MyHub" program in collaboration with the University of Nicosia, while P2 oversees operations that include asylum seeker support through affiliated companies and structures for unaccompanied minors.
- P3 is an HR consultant in the hospitality sector and runs her own consultancy business, acting as an external HR partner to other companies. She is expert in corporate recruitment and staff development.
- P4 is the Head of Training and Digital Learning at CARDET, a prominent research organization. She is actively involved in recruitment procedures and organizational development.
- P5 is the Team Leader of the Sustainability and Entrepreneurship Unit at CARDET. He works closely with P4 and is heavily involved in recruitment processes and HR management.

DISCUSSION GUIDE AND FINDINGS

- DISCUSSION GUIDE

The discussion was guided by the following areas

Perception of participants' roles in supporting employment inclusion.

Groups most commonly supported and the challenges they face.

Practical tools and strategies used or needed.

Skills needed by both staff and jobseekers.

Suggestions for improving inclusion strategies.

DATA COLLECTION – MODERATION

The Project Manager of Learning Edge led the session, with a co-moderator helping out by taking notes and keeping an eye on the chat. The whole discussion was recorded and transcribed.

MYLIA, who is the lead partner for this activity, shared Data Collection Table-Forms with all the partners. These made it easier for moderators to keep track of the data from the focus group, along with any notes or personal observations based on what people said.

We grouped the data into five main areas and took a closer look at each one in the Findings section:

- Training & Skills
- Social Barriers & Bias
- Labor Market Access
- Digital Tools

FINDINGS

- TRAINING & SKILLS

Insight: Participants highlighted a significant skills gap among vulnerable jobseekers, especially in communication, digital literacy, and self-presentation

“Basic communication skills: how to behave in an interview or in the workplace.”

Key Quotes:

“We need to learn how they think and how to communicate with them.”

Observation: There is also a gap among HR staff and employers in terms of cultural awareness and inclusive communication

SOCIAL BARRIERS & BIAS

Insight: Social stigma and stereotypes, especially toward people with disabilities and migrants are persistent. Employers often fear disruption, lack of productivity, or difficulty managing diversity.

“Employers are afraid to hire people with disabilities due to stereotypes.”

Key Quotes

“I don’t want to approach employers with the logic of 'please help these poor kids.' It should be about competence.”

LABOR MARKET ACCESS

Insight: Legal and bureaucratic challenges, particularly those surrounding asylum procedures, create major barriers. Even when individuals are willing and able to work, policy limitations prevent access.

“There are many obstacles due to laws and procedures in migration.”

Key Quotes

“Their main concern is to find work and survive.”

DIGITAL TOOLS

Insight: During the focus group session, participants were asked whether they use any kind of AI tools in their daily work and whether these tools are helpful or considered as obstacles by complicating their work. Apart from ChatGPT, no other AI tools were mentioned

EMERGING NEEDS AND SOLUTIONS

Insight: Participants agreed that buddy systems and structured onboarding (mentorship) can significantly ease the transition into the workforce

Key Quotes	“People from disadvantaged backgrounds need someone next to them at first, to help them adapt to the environment.”
	“Even employers need training to deal with their own stereotypes.”

CONCLUSION

The findings of this focus group highlight the multiple barriers that individuals from disadvantaged groups are facing in order to access the labor market. These challenges include a lack of skills such as digital literacy and communication, deep-rooted social stigma and stereotyping by employers, and bureaucratic obstacles - especially for migrants and asylum seekers. Participants emphasized that while many individuals from these groups are highly motivated and capable, they are left out because of structural obstacles and negative perceptions.

It became clear that inclusion requires structural adjustments within organizations, comprehensive training for both jobseekers and employers, and consistent advocacy to address policy-level constraints. Employers often lack the tools and knowledge to recruit and support individuals with diverse backgrounds and needs.

Moreover, the discussions revealed that there is a strong need for peer support systems—like buddy or mentorship schemes. Practices like those, can be an important tool in bridging the gap between recruitment and retention

The group concluded that inclusive employment needs a better approach by changing laws and policies, but also by offering community-based training, raising public awareness, and encouraging innovation in the workplace. For real and lasting change, it’s essential that public institutions, private companies, and community organizations work together

Annex 13 – Focus Group Data Collection Table Greece

Topic: Counsellors' Experiences and Needs in Supporting Vulnerable Groups

Format: Online Focus Group

Participants: 8 Career counsellors

Date: 20.06.2025

Duration: 85'

Organizer: Headway, Athens, Greece

Key Observations

The participants in the focus group organized by Headway work across a wide range of services and sectors, which enabled them to share diverse and valuable experiences. Their contributions reflected collaboration not only with vulnerable individuals, but also with employers and both public and private institutions. The **key observations** and themes that emerged from the discussion are summarized below:

Emotional Challenges and Burnout Experienced by Counsellors

Burnout emerged as one of the most commonly reported challenges, with counsellors expressing a strong need for support in managing stress and emotional fatigue. Many highlighted the intense pressure to deliver measurable results, while meeting high expectations from socially disadvantaged people.

Barriers for Socially Disadvantaged People:

Disadvantaged people face multiple obstacles such as insufficient self-career management competencies, low confidence, limited knowledge of processes, limited accessibility to platforms, lack of legal documents and insufficient digital skills. Counsellors noted that many employers are also unaware of the documentation required to legally hire migrants and refugees, creating additional employment barriers.

Employers' Attitudes and Systemic Barriers:

A recurring theme was the way employers often perceive vulnerable groups. Some see them as easily exploitable or as "cheap labour". Counsellors emphasised the need to address these issues through awareness and employer education.

Key needs

Furthermore, the focus group discussion brought to light **several key needs**, reflecting the everyday challenges counsellors face in their work with vulnerable groups. These needs span areas, as outlined below.

Training and Capacity Building:

Counsellors requested training on:

- Burnout prevention
- Empathy and basic psychological knowledge

- Time management and multitasking
- Effective use of AI and digital tools (e.g., Teams, Zoom)

Digital Competence for Socially Disadvantaged People:

Participants agreed that socially disadvantaged people must first acquire essential skills before being able to effectively use tools like AI. There is also a strong need for digital career guidance tools (e.g., self-assessment tests, CV / job search platforms).

Networking and Self-Career Management:

A major need expressed was for socially disadvantaged people to be empowered in managing their own career paths and building professional networks.

Experiential and Flexible Training:

Effective training for counsellors should include experiential workshops, be practically applicable and be offered in online or hybrid formats.

Suggestions for Future Action

- **Create a central platform** (or resource library) for supervision, sharing good practices, and storing useful materials — to be continuously updated.
- **Invest in employer training** on inclusion and long-term employee development.

Foster spaces where counsellors can continue to exchange experiences and co-reflect on challenges and solutions

Annex 14 – Focus Group Data Collection Table Italy

Topic: Counsellors’ Experiences and Needs in Supporting Vulnerable Groups

Format: Online Focus Group

Participants: 5 Career Counsellors, 1 Moderator e 2 Observers

Date: 12.06.2025

Duration: 90’

Organizer: Mylia (Adecco Formazione), Italy

Key Observations

The focus group, which included five participants, highlighted their diverse backgrounds, with experiences and stories that were different from one another but shared several significant commonalities. The discussion brought to light the challenges and difficulties faced in daily work, which are briefly summarized below.

Understanding the Needs of the Disadvantaged

The discussion centered on the importance of focusing on the needs of disadvantaged individuals—a term that includes a wide range of situations and complexities. Thanks to the counsellors’ diverse professional backgrounds, it quickly became clear just how many different people require support and guidance along their path.

Promoting Engagement and Inclusion: Overcoming Bias Among Disadvantaged Groups

Several cognitive biases among disadvantaged individuals emerged during the discussion—biases that counsellors strive to address and overcome. Their role involves encouraging genuine engagement with proposed activities, aiming to spark interest and curiosity rather than allowing these initiatives to be perceived merely as tools for subsistence. In many cases, such biases are further reinforced by outdated institutional regulations that fail to meet today’s social and professional realities. For example, one perspective was offered by a participant working in human resources, who highlighted how some individuals are hired within workplaces solely to comply with legal obligations, rather than as part of a genuine inclusion effort.

The Importance of Psychological Insight in Supporting Disadvantaged Individuals

It is essential to focus on the psychological dimension of these individuals, reflecting on what is truly needed to support them effectively. Active listening represents the first and fundamental step in establishing a meaningful connection—allowing counsellors to understand their interests and natural inclinations.

Key Needs

One of the key needs that emerged from the focus group is the importance of aligning increasingly pressing market demands with the real needs of individuals. The aim is to build a solid and structured support network, grounded in strong, well-developed competencies rather

than in temporary or improvised solutions driven by immediate necessity. In doing so, they help bridge the skill gap that is increasingly evident in today's socio-economic landscape.

Digital Competence for Socially Disadvantaged People

A tangible issue is the challenge of digitalization. While it may seem obvious to associate this with older individuals, the problem is actually more widespread. It often stems from a general lack of interest in engaging with available tools, or, in the case of younger people, from the assumption that they already possess sufficient digital skills—an overconfidence that leads them to overlook important aspects and functionalities.

The Counsellor's Role: From Psychological Support to Practical Guidance

The role of the counsellor is to provide all the necessary tools, starting from psychological support and personal resources, all the way to practical, hands-on guidance.

Future Directions and Opportunities

It is necessary to acknowledge the areas that require improvement and to take concrete action on all fronts, addressing the growing generational divide. This calls for the implementation of a truly inclusive approach, capable of responding to diverse needs and fostering meaningful participation for all.

Annex 15 – Focus Group Data Collection Table Spain

Topic: Counsellors' Experiences and Needs in Supporting Vulnerable Groups

Format: Online Focus Group

Participants: 5 Career Counsellors

Date: 23.06.2025

Duration: 90'

Organizer: Accion Laboural, Spain

The focus group included five professionals with varied backgrounds and experience levels in career guidance:

- Career Guidance Technicians, Employment Technicians, and Training Technicians, with experience ranging from 1 to 15 years in career counselling.
- They work primarily with people at risk of social exclusion, women victims of gender-based violence, immigrants, NEETs, long-term unemployed individuals, Roma populations, disabled people over 45, and rural women.
- Most participants reported using digital tools and AI in their work, though one indicated no current use.
- Their areas of expertise and interest include digital skills development, building business networks, employment counselling, and resume writing.

This diversity of professional backgrounds contributed to a rich exchange of perspectives.

Key Observations

The participants shared experiences reflecting collaboration with vulnerable individuals, employers, and public institutions across different regions of Spain. Several important themes emerged during the discussion:

Training and Skills

- There is a strong demand for training in essential sectors such as cleaning, hairdressing, and mechanics. However, the counsellors highlighted that available training often remains stereotyped and disconnected from current market needs and cultural diversity.
- This issue appeared frequently, with many expressing interest in updating training content and introducing modules on multiculturalism and emerging technologies like AI.

Social Barriers and Bias

- Participants reported that cultural and social barriers remain persistent obstacles to inclusion. Empathy, active listening, and intercultural communication were identified as crucial skills in their daily practice.
- Counsellors emphasised the need to tailor approaches for different profiles, for example, differentiating strategies for rural women and Muslim immigrant women.

Labour Market Access

- Many local businesses still show reluctance to hire people from vulnerable groups. Even when jobs are secured, instability in personal circumstances often leads to high turnover.
- Cleaning and care sectors were described as “safe havens,” but they rarely provide long-term career prospects.

Technology and Digital Tools

- While the use of digital tools (e.g., ChatGPT for CV preparation) is growing, a significant digital divide persists, especially among Roma communities, older adults, and low-literacy populations.
- Counsellors acknowledged the importance of building digital skills but noted that access and training opportunities remain uneven.

Key Needs

The discussion highlighted several priority needs:

Updated and Inclusive Training Content

- New training programmes incorporating multicultural competencies and emerging technologies.
- Gender-sensitive approaches to challenge stereotypes in vocational pathways.

Strengthening Digital Competence

- Basic digital literacy training adapted to different learning levels and contexts.
- User-friendly resources to facilitate online job searching and the use of digital certificates.

Emotional Support and Empowerment

- Activities to build self-confidence, self-awareness, and motivation among beneficiaries.
- Combining emotional empowerment with career guidance strategies.

Employer Engagement and Awareness

- Training programmes for employers to promote inclusive recruitment practices and reduce stigma.

Practical, Flexible Counsellor Training

- Experiential and blended learning formats for professionals to improve resilience, digital skills, and intercultural communication.

Suggestions for Future Action

Participants suggested several actions to address the identified challenges:

- **Develop digital tools that automatically generate CVs** based on employment history and connect users with local employers.

- **Create an online platform or resource library** to share good practices, training materials, and supervision resources.
- **Invest in employer awareness campaigns** to foster more inclusive and supportive workplaces.
- **Offer experiential, flexible training programmes** for counsellors focusing on burnout prevention, technological adaptation, and intercultural competencies.
- **Monitor and mitigate potential biases in AI recruitment tools**, ensuring fair and equitable access to employment opportunities.

Overall, the focus group concluded that the future of career guidance in Spain requires combining technology, personalization, and emotional empowerment to create pathways that are inclusive, sustainable, and adapted to evolving labour market demands.



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