



# **European Network of Public Employment Services**

## **PES digital services to successfully integrate vulnerable jobseekers**

Thematic Paper

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Digital service delivery is, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, omnipresent in the service offer provided by Public Employment Services (PES) and has proved to be effective in particular for jobseekers who are closer to the labour market. This however raises the question of whether and how to provide services online to jobseekers who either have no or very low levels of digital skills or who do not have the resources to access digital services.

A Thematic Review Workshop (TRW) took place on this topic in Croatia, in November 2023 within the European Network of Public Employment Services. The aim of the TRW was to examine these issues for young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and the long-term unemployed. The TRW focussed on: (1) outreach to vulnerable jobseekers; (2) diagnosis of (digital) skills shortages; (3) providing effective digital skills training and (4) online delivery of counselling and complementary services.

While presence on social media and well-co-ordinated online campaigns can be effective to raise awareness particularly with NEETs, PES also warned against the multiplication of information channels, and the authenticity of individuals promoting the PES. It also seems that low-threshold online services, which have separate branding from PES, can be effective in attracting young people who are in vulnerable situations. However, these activities can only complement a well-designed communication campaign and face-to-face outreach activities.

Diagnosing and understanding vulnerable jobseekers' barriers to using digital services is a focal point of PES' work, and they have developed a number of diagnostic tools which are effective at identifying clients with no, or minimal, digital skills. It is more difficult to detect disabilities and low levels of (job search) autonomy, hence the first interview with the jobseeker remains the focal point of these activities, undertaken mostly in-person (or on the phone). Given the wealth of experience gathered on diagnosis of digital skills, PES Network mutual learning activities can be useful avenues to share proven solutions and suitable tools.

There are a number of good practices on how to provide basic digital skills training in an accessible way to vulnerable jobseekers. Ensuring buy-in and keeping up motivation are difficult issues. Similarly, it is not clear to what extent voucher systems for digital skills training are effective for vulnerable jobseekers. At the same time, important progress has been made on how to provide information about the quality of (online) courses in a user-friendly manner, which might help vulnerable jobseekers' choices in the future.

Online counselling is now widespread and has been successfully used for some vulnerable jobseekers, with a few points to note. First, ensuring commitment and ownership is particularly important for these clients. Second, regularly mixing channels of communication can help to keep clients effectively motivated. Third, there are a number of situations where face-to-face communication is of paramount importance, particularly to diagnose especially challenging situations. Fourth, employment counsellors also need training and peer support to ensure that they can communicate effectively online with vulnerable jobseekers. Finally, while post-placement counselling could (in principle) be delivered online, this is an area which needs further exploration.

Many of the services explored during the TRW have only recently been developed, thus there is limited robust evidence to underpin their effectiveness. Although, online service delivery makes experimentation less costly, its potential has yet to be fully explored. Further, very few PES have included randomised controlled trials when piloting digital services.

## 'PES digital services to successfully integrate vulnerable jobseekers'



### QUESTIONS EXPLORED



How to provide services online to jobseekers with no / very low levels of digital skills?



How to provide services online to jobseekers who do not have the resources to access digital services?

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Digital skills are becoming increasingly important in the labour market, and jobseekers lacking these skills are at risk of being excluded from quality jobs. Numerous studies point out that people who do not have digital skills have a significantly higher chance of not being employed than those with (at least) basic-level digital skills (see OECD (2019), for instance). There are also large returns in earnings for workers with higher digital problem-solving skills. The recent COVID-19 pandemic sped up the transition towards digital online working and services, both for companies and for Public Employment Services (PES). This has brought to light groups of PES clients who either (i) lack basic digital skills or (ii) lack the resources to access digital devices and/or broadband internet. These jobseekers are at significant risk of being left behind and may find it much harder to join or return to the labour market. At the same time, digital delivery makes it possible to provide services for those who have difficulties reaching PES offices in person, namely people with disabilities and those living in more remote areas (although noting that some rural areas do have difficulties with high speed internet access).

Two groups of jobseekers, in particular, have been the focus of European Union policies<sup>1</sup>, namely the long-term unemployed (LTU) and young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs).<sup>2</sup> However, they face different issues with regards to digital skills and their usage. Long-term unemployed jobseekers can face major challenges in accessing and attending digital services and distance learning, stemming from: lack of financial resources; digital illiteracy (or low-level digital skills), especially for older individuals; poor or no support networks to assist them in accessing online resources/courses; as well as no (or little) opportunity to practice these skills. Moreover, in some cases, online methods may not be effective for practitioners, outreach social workers and others to reach out in person to people who are not motivated to undertake such training and/or not familiar with distance learning. By contrast, there are relatively few young people who do not have any digital skills, but there is a large variation across countries in the proportion of young people with digital skills. The fast-evolving nature of the digital landscape poses a challenge for vulnerable NEETs<sup>3</sup>, as technological advancements require continuous learning and adaptability. However, the lack of access to regular training and upskilling work-related opportunities makes it difficult for vulnerable NEETs to keep pace with the latest developments. In some cases, NEETs may have the skills to use social media, but they lack digital skills relating to job searches and work-related skills. This mismatch between their skills and the evolving requirements of the labour market exacerbates their marginalisation and reduces their competitiveness in the job market<sup>4</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought to light that a significant number of vulnerable jobseekers have difficulties using PES digital services effectively. While technology and the potential of digital services are rapidly changing with the opportunities brought by artificial intelligence (AI), there is also a potential discord between the lack of skills/access for vulnerable groups, and the potential for PES to further improve digital services. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> The centrepieces of EU policies are the [Council recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market](#) and the [Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee](#).

<sup>2</sup> The proportion of NEETs has started to decrease after the significant hike during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is still above 15% in a number of EU Member States, and above the target value of 10% in the EU overall.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on how the Commission examined the different groups of NEETs, please see [COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs - reinforcing the Youth Guarantee](#)

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Barth et al (2021)



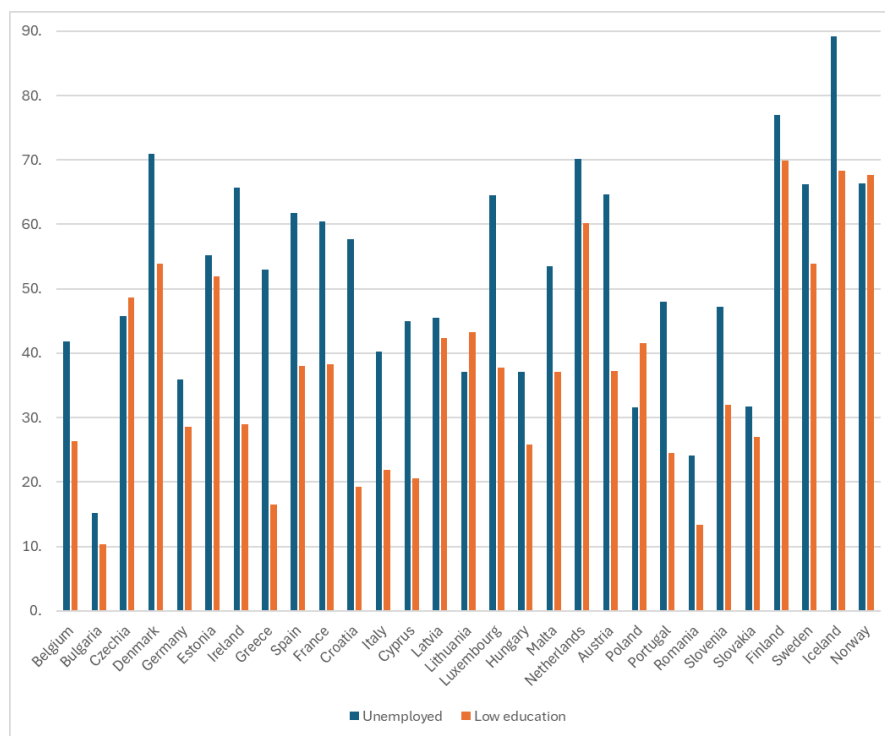
PES need to ensure that advances in digital services are accessible to vulnerable jobseekers. Rather than expecting all digital employment tools to serve all populations equally, innovative solutions need to be tailored to meet vulnerable jobseekers' needs in the job search process.

### The European digital strategy

In 2020, the European Commission launched the European Skills Agenda<sup>5</sup> which aims for 70% of adults aged 16-74 to have at least basic digital skills. The European Skills Agenda has extensive links to the European Digital Strategy<sup>6</sup>, with this decade labelled as the 'Digital Decade' by the European Commission. More recently, continuing the focus on digital skills, the European Commission adopted a comprehensive digital skills and education package in April 2023<sup>7</sup>, which (among other things) calls for more inclusive digital education and for mainstreamed development of digital skills for adults. Thus, it is imperative for PES to (i) make digital services accessible for vulnerable jobseekers and (ii) contribute to improving the digital skills of vulnerable jobseekers.

As shown in Figure 1 below, low digital skills are still an important issue, as just under half of unemployed individuals have (based on the EU Survey of ICT use) at least basic overall digital skills. The lack of skills is an even more pronounced barrier for those with low levels of education, as about one-third of these have basic overall digital skills; and there are four EU Member States, where only one in five people with low levels of education have basic digital skills.

**Figure 1: Overview of individuals with basic or above basic overall digital skills in 2024<sup>8</sup>**



<sup>5</sup> [European Commission's European Skills Agenda](#)

<sup>6</sup> [European Commission 'A Europe fit for the Digital Age'](#)

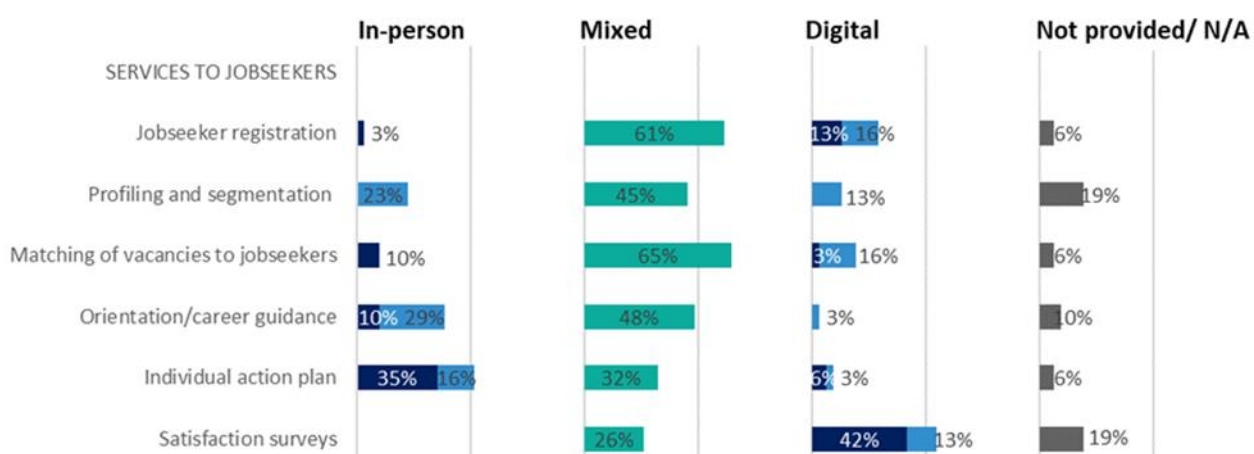
<sup>7</sup> [European Commission \(2023\) 'Commission calls for massive boost in enabling digital education and providing digital skills'](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Eurostat \(2024\) 'Individuals' level of digital skills \(from 2021 onwards\)](#)

The EU PES Benchlearning excellency model also encourages PES to develop their digital services, in order to deliver more services to more clients with less staff, and to be able to intensify services to vulnerable jobseekers. Diagnosing digital skills and developing them for clients with low levels of such skills is also part of this model.

It is against this context that the digital transformation of PES' work processes and employment services has continued to accelerate in 2023, with many PES (20) accelerating their digital strategies. In 2023, 21 PES offered digital services to job-seeking clients. The degree of digitalisation of employment services for PES clients and types of services or processes, varies across PES. The PES Capacity Report 2023 notes the vacancy registration by employers emerged as the most digitally advanced process ('fully' and 'mostly' digital) in 18 PES, while satisfaction surveys were the PES activity which was the most digitalised ('fully' digital) in 13 PES. In 2023, the number of PES that reported that they offered digital services to job-seeking clients (either 'fully digital', 'mostly digital' e.g., online or via mobile app, or 'mix between in-person and digital') was 21, while the number of PES that reported that they offer any type of digitalised services (including a mix of in-person and digital) to employers was 25.

**Figure 2: Status of digitalisation of PES services to jobseekers<sup>9</sup>**



How to offer effective support to vulnerable groups has been a focal point of the European Network of Public Employment Services' agenda since its launch, and digital service delivery has been discussed in the Network for more than 10 years. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>10</sup>, the PES Network commissioned an overview of how PES can ensure vulnerable groups access their services<sup>11</sup>. This initiated in-depth discussions on how the pandemic changed service delivery in PES<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, long-term integration

<sup>9</sup> [European Commission \(2024\) 'Trends in PES – Assessment Report on PES Capacity 2023'](#)

<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2020) [Dematerialisation of services in EU PES](#). Written by Kenneth Walsh and ICON Institute for the European Network of Public Employment Services. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

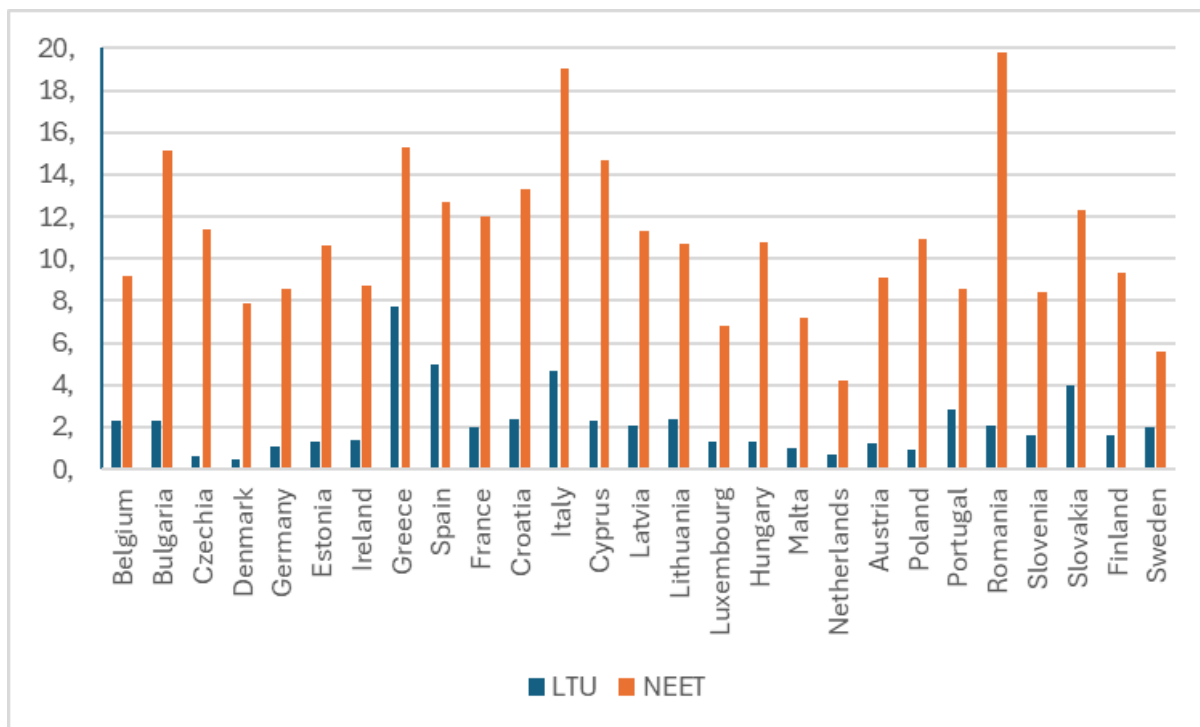
<sup>11</sup> See European Commission (2021) ['Support to vulnerable groups'](#) Written by Marton Csillag for the European Network of Public Employment Services. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission (2022) [Service delivery by Public Employment Services in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis](#). Written by Nicola Duell and ICON Institute for the European Network of Public Employment Services. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

of vulnerable groups has continued to be a central topic of the PES Network, and recent work has reaffirmed that they face a variety of challenges.

While the NEET, as well as long-term unemployment (LTU), rates have slightly decreased since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, these are still important in a number of countries. See Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: The proportion of long-term unemployed and NEETs (percent) in 2022**



Source: EU LFS, Eurostat

Note: Both series are displayed as a percent of the active population; LTU age group 20-64; NEET age group 16-29

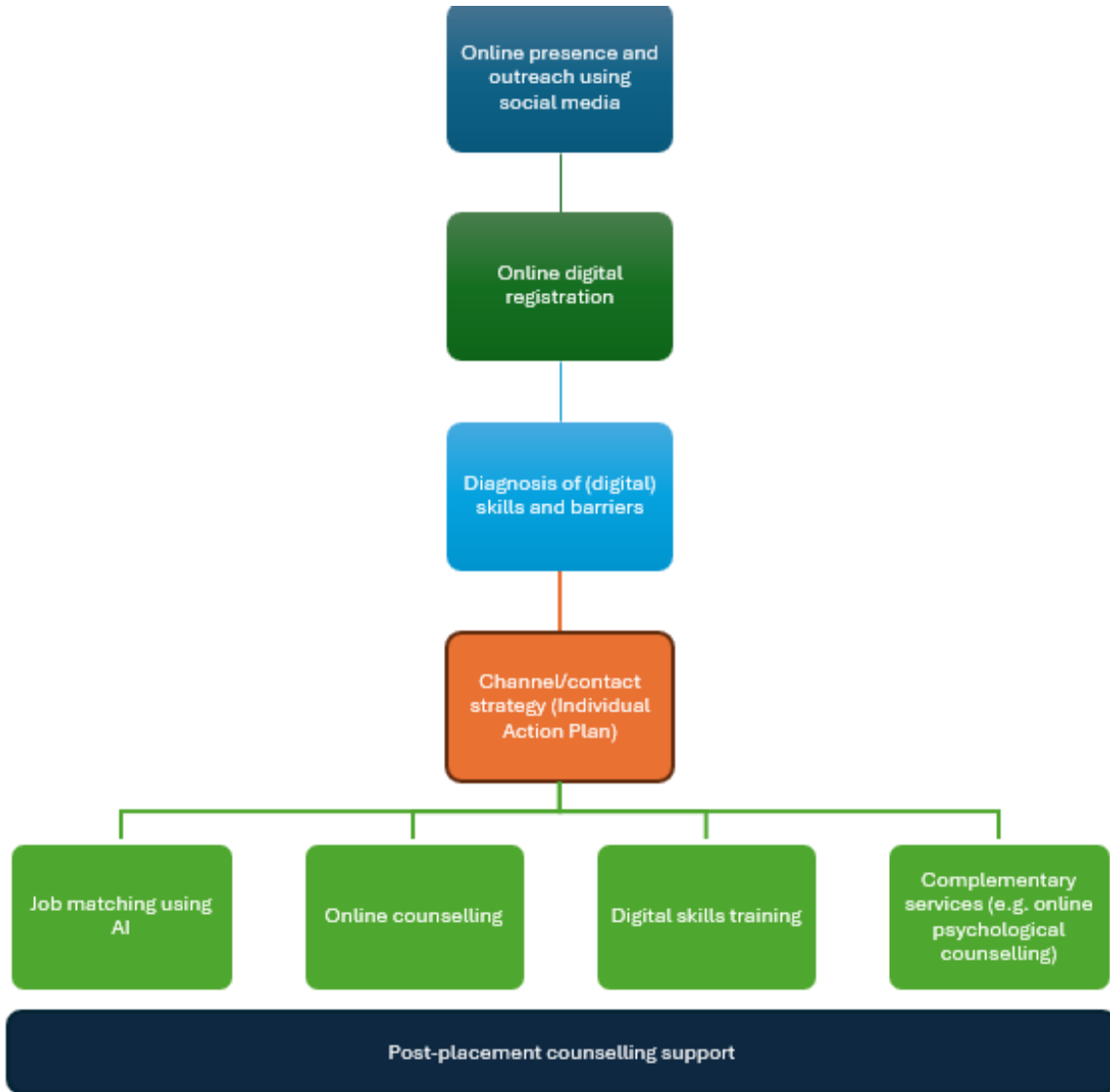
## 1.1 The structure of this report

In this paper, we summarise the evidence and good practices relating to the provision of digital services to successfully integrate vulnerable groups, in particular NEETs and the long-term unemployed. We build on previous evidence, as well as the practices presented and the discussions at the Thematic Review Workshop (TRW) “PES digital services to successfully integrate vulnerable jobseekers”, which took place on 7 and 8 November 2023 and was hosted by the Croatian PES<sup>13</sup>.

In Figure 4 below, we illustrate the scope of services discussed in this Output Paper, in line with the client’s typical journey.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to Croatia, members from 13 other PES were present – including BE-Actiris, BE-Forem, CY, EE, EL, ES, IS, LT, PL, PT, SE and SI.

**Figure 4. An ideal model of the client journey and scope of services**



Source: Csillag (2024)

The above model is an ideal model for PES to follow for the client journey and scope of services. It is noted that not all PES may currently follow this approach, or they may use some steps but not all.

As a first step, PES use digital means in their outreach activities to encourage vulnerable groups to take up the services they provide; some of whom will use digital services to register as jobseeker. The advantages and focal point of these activities form the topic of Section 2. As a next step, PES need to detect the skills and barriers of those who registered, and - in line with their channel strategy - they steer them towards the most suitable service channels - this is the focus of Section 3. Following the establishment of an action plan which also includes the appropriate channels of delivery, clients receive different services which will help them reintegrate into the labour market in a sustainable manner - these services are discussed in the following three sections. Section 4 reviews how digital means can be used to make job search more effective, which can be broken down into two sub-topics: (a) the use of AI-assisted job matching, and (b) online job search counselling. One problem that many long-term unemployed jobseekers face and that PES increasingly strive to improve is a lack of digital skills. This is discussed in Section 5. Vulnerable jobseekers often face multiple barriers (beyond low digital skills) that need to be resolved before they are ready to enter the workplace, many of which need co-operation between a number of service providers. Furthermore, they often need further counselling after placement. How

digital solutions can help the delivery of these services is the topic of Section 6. The paper concludes with key learnings in Section 7.

## **2. REACHING OUT TO VULNERABLE SUB-GROUPS VIA DIGITAL CHANNELS**

Outreach to individuals from a vulnerable background is a challenging issue for PES, as the early implementation of the Youth Guarantee and regular monitoring has shown<sup>14</sup>. Outreach may target clients who are already registered with a PES as well as those not (yet). During the COVID-19 pandemic, PES increased their online presence and more PES started to use social media and other digital tools to promote their services. There are some limitations to these communication channels (website, social media including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and X, formerly known as Twitter). However, little of PES' digital outreach seems to be tailor-made for vulnerable jobseekers, and there seems to be a consensus that most outreach activities for this group ought to be face-to-face. This could be for example via outreach teams of the PES targeting registered clients or in cooperation with partners such as street social or youth workers targeting vulnerable people (including young people) who are not registered with the PES.

### **2.1 Online presence and communication strategy**

The services offered by PES, particularly the availability of digital and online tools need to be introduced to vulnerable jobseekers, and this is increasingly done through an online presence and communication campaigns. There are several crucial points related to these activities, which emerged at the TRW.

First, it is important to embed online messages into a wider communication strategy. Messages need to be part of a wider communication campaign so that they are consistent and different channels can be used appropriately. This also means that messages and the channels used to get these across need to be more fine-tuned to the intended target audience.

Second, it is important to understand and cope with the possibility that vulnerable people might be wary of public institutions (including the PES). This issue is related to finding the right communication channels to reach vulnerable jobseekers. Face-to-face communication and building trust are also necessary, as exemplified (among others) by the communication and outreach campaigns conducted by the Portuguese PES at the launch of the Youth Guarantee. The PES conducted online and offline activities to raise awareness of the Youth Guarantee, specifically targeting NEETs. This included a mixed media approach, with TV adverts and social media as well as other information examples. Further information can be found in Section 2.2 below. Going further, it also seems worthwhile considering whether the PES 'brand' is seen in a positive light by vulnerable jobseekers (particularly young NEETs). In several countries, centres which offer low-threshold services in an integrated manner, such as the CISOK Centres<sup>15</sup> in Croatia<sup>16</sup> owe part of their success to being a distinct entity and brand for the PES offices, minimising the negative stereotype attached to them in the eyes of vulnerable young people.

An important conclusion that emerged from the TRW is that it is essential to consider streamlining information sources and messages, so that vulnerable groups do not get 'lost'

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<sup>14</sup> For more details on this see European Commission (2017). For information see the [Reinforced Youth Guarantee](#).

<sup>15</sup> Please see an earlier PES Practice for an introduction to CISOK [here](#) .

<sup>16</sup> Similar examples are the '[Ohjaamo](#)' in Finland, the 'missions locales' in France, the '[Cité des Métiers](#)' in Belgium, France and Switzerland.

or swamped by the messaging (i.e. PES need to find a balance in the messaging and providing clear signposting), and have access to information from reliable sources. In some cases, there are a number of state-run projects (including PES, and the Youth Guarantee) which aim to inform potential clients (especially young people), as well as other sources of information of varying quality. This may lead to confusion for vulnerable individuals (who may find it harder to judge the trustworthiness of sources).

## 2.2 Online communication and outreach

Recent experience has shown that fine-tuning communication activities to specific target groups and tailoring messages, so that they receive relevant information, are key elements of successful communication campaigns.<sup>17</sup> For young people (including NEETs), making extensive use of social media, hosting co-creation events and involving role models seem to be useful avenues. One such avenue is to reach out to youth social media content creators ('influencers') who can share information about PES services directly with their followers, in the language and style of delivery that resonates with the intended audience.<sup>18</sup> In principle, this may also help to change negative perceptions of the PES, which can be held by young people. However, in some cases, there are concerns that the message from individuals with no connection to the PES does not seem authentic. In contrast, involving influencers who are respected by the target audience can make a difference, for example, widely respected athletes from a vulnerable background (who are role models to many people across the general population) who have personal links to the PES can raise awareness<sup>19</sup>, partly because their involvement is seen as genuine and authentic.

At the same time, discussions at the TRW showed that it is important to be clear about the links between social media activities and the official PES stances (as published on the PES website). To the extent possible, it is also worth tailoring messages (and the communication style) to the different social media platforms. Furthermore, social media platforms also require strong moderation (on what members can and cannot post), as well as rapid responses to questions and acknowledgement of comments (within 24 hours).<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that negative comments from users need to be avoided. Instead they can be taken as constructive criticism and as an information source of real experiences. In this sense, using social media does require substantial effort (investment and ongoing resources), and it is not simply a cheap advertising tool.

A number of PES (including Bulgaria, France, Germany, Lithuania and Sweden) are using social media platforms, such as Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram, to reach out to NEETs to inform and promote their services.<sup>21</sup> The French PES is engaging its employees as the institution's first ambassadors, and uses TikTok to inform young people about their services.<sup>22</sup> A benefit of this is that PES youth counsellors can communicate in more personalised ways. The Flemish PES (Belgium-VDAB) found personalised cards useful in the outreach to NEETs, issuing brochures which include the

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<sup>17</sup> Presentation by PES of Portugal and PES of Wallonia (Belgium), TRW on 7 November, 2023, Zagreb, Croatia.

<sup>18</sup> As reported at the TRW, this has been tested by the PES of Brussels Region, and of Portugal.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, the PES of Brussels -Belgium (Actiris) ran a campaign with the famous football (soccer) player, Vincent Kompany, whose mother had previously worked for a PES in Belgium (ACTIRIS) earlier. The campaign also featured a well-known YouTuber and stand-up comedian.

<sup>20</sup> As discussed at the TRW, in Croatia, November 2023.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance [Instagram account of the German PES](#) and the Instagram account of the [Swedish PES](#)

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, in a number of PES personal communication by counsellors is ruled out, and communication goes only through official PES channels. As note previously, the different information sources need to be streamlined, and have to convey clear messages.

counsellor's hobbies and their direct contact telephone and email details. By sharing personalised cards (on paper or digitally), PES counsellors become more 'familiar' and approachable to NEETs and thus it helps to dispel any negative perceptions or stereotypes that the young people may have about them.

Effective outreach methods often build on a close co-operation between PES and local stakeholder networks. However, - as discussed at the TRW - many other service providers (for instance social services) often are not at the same level of digitalisation as PES. This, coupled with issues around data sharing (due to data protection) often makes it necessary to (i) either come up with local (informal) solutions, or (ii) to build online network and information sharing.

### **Communication about the Youth Guarantee and outreach to NEETs at the Portuguese PES**

When the Youth Guarantee was launched in Portugal, the PES designed a comprehensive and multi-channel communication campaign. Next to traditional offline communication (for instance, in public transport), more specialised offline activities were designed and delivered, such as communication campaigns/information points at youth festivals and beaches. Furthermore, the Portuguese PES collaborated with large fast-food chains, which (as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR, strategy) advertised the Youth Guarantee (on paper tray liners, for example). The Portuguese PES also used online communication strategies through a presence on several social media channels. The PES also developed a phone app for the Youth Guarantee, where potential clients could signal their interest and sign up. Their online communication included pre-roll advertisements (short adverts before a video plays) on YouTube and the PES collaborated with well-known Portuguese YouTube youth content creators ('influencers'). The influencers had the freedom to choose how they communicated, and the only pre-set guideline was what messages to include. The communication campaign as a whole seemed to be successful as there was a 15% increase in the number of visits to the PES website.

It is worth noting that the Portuguese PES also relies on local networks to engage NEETs. Since 2014, cooperation agreements have been signed with more than 1 500 local partners. The local networks typically include different types of organisations which deal with young people in their 'usual' line of work (e.g. youth organisations, sports clubs and others). Just over half of these partners primarily identify and inform the potential Youth Guarantee participants and register them to the Youth Guarantee. Other partners provide guidance and counselling (as well as eligibility checks for the Youth Guarantee) in the preparatory phase of the Youth Guarantee. At the same time, capacity-building workshops (about the goals and benefits of the Youth Guarantee and effective methods of street-level youth outreach work) for the partners also took place to keep the partners informed and to ensure a uniform approach in all localities.

The Portuguese PES recently (in February 2024) launched a new website for the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, with the objective of making it simpler and clearer, and young people can now express their interest in a very straightforward manner. The launch of the website was accompanied by a social media communication (a press release, communication in an economic journal and a TV channel, and posts on Instagram), which seems successful as more than 2,000 young people signed up in the first month after the launch. Furthermore, the registration process was simplified, in particular for those who have previously been in contact with Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional, IEFP (the Portuguese PES). The website connects with previous information and the Youth Guarantee technicians do not need the first in-person meeting with the young person to register for the Youth Guarantee. There are further steps to make the Youth Guarantee more accessible, as an app for smartphones is under preparation and a new social media campaign will be conducted. The local networks are also being updated, including signing new co-operation agreements (with data sharing clauses in line with GDPR).



## 2.3 Identifying, registration and profiling of target groups

From the point of view of outreach, it is important to consider how PES can identify vulnerable target groups. A range of data collection and mapping techniques can be adapted for NEETs as a significant proportion will not be on the PES' radar<sup>23</sup>. By contrast, the long-term unemployed tend to be more reachable as they typically receive social benefits<sup>24</sup>.

The use of interlinked administrative datasets and big data analysis techniques can also bring forward the identification of NEETs and their needs, though linking datasets is typically done in an anonymised way<sup>25</sup>. Having procedures and agreements in place for data exchange between secondary education institutions, providers of social services (or child protection services) and PES is a valuable way forward. However, defining agreements between local service providers and having a legal framework in place for sharing contact information, can often be challenging for PES. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced the use of more informal methods, such as WhatsApp groups<sup>26</sup>. In principle, this tool could be used to send targeted informational videos, which could be useful for younger individuals<sup>27</sup>.

Online registrations for jobseekers have eased access to PES services for those with sufficient digital skills. However, clients from certain vulnerable groups may still find it difficult to understand and navigate formalised and bureaucratic language (traditionally used for claiming unemployment benefits, and other registration processes). Here, PES need to make the procedure as clear and simple as possible. Furthermore, PES need to consider the language capabilities of vulnerable jobseekers. Written communication needs to be adapted to include the variety of languages spoken (not only the official languages of the country<sup>28</sup>) by young people and the long-term unemployed; and language can also be simplified to avoid using jargon. In this context, the Swedish PES increasingly focus on inclusive service design and are currently testing user flows with users that have cognitive disabilities. Furthermore, the Swedish PES commissioned a handbook for digital accessibility and inclusion, in order to guide the PES when designing digital services<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> This also depends on the welfare system. If young people are not entitled to unemployment benefits directly after their studies, they have no financial incentive to register with the PES.

<sup>24</sup> However, especially in countries with a less generous benefit system, a number of the long-term unemployed might not be registered as unemployed, and hence might not be 'on the radar' of the PES.

<sup>25</sup> This means that information can be broken down at a very disaggregated level – for instance, at the local PES office level – about the number of and issues faced by NEETs, but it cannot be used for directly contacting individuals.

<sup>26</sup> This is used both to maintain contact between different service providers, but also to contact young people.

<sup>27</sup> Recent research has drawn attention to the fact that trying, especially several times to contact individuals can lead to frustration on the part of potential clients (see Urbina et al. 2023).

<sup>28</sup> This can mean several languages according to the background of those living in the country, and can include sign language. For instance, the PES of Germany includes: simplified German, sign language and English.

<sup>29</sup> The handbook is designed to help the digital development teams to create accessible and inclusive digital services. It goes beyond the legal framework for accessibility and also includes guidelines for universal design. The handbook also contains guidelines on how to create accessible digital content, how to behave in digital meetings in order to make them accessible and inclusive, as well as a short introduction to accessibility demands in the procurement process.

#### **Practical lessons for PES:**

- Social media presence is important to reach vulnerable groups, and NEETs in particular. The content and key messages need to come from individuals with an authentic connection to the PES and in their words, so that the target groups view the messages as trustworthy and honest.
- Online communication needs to be streamlined to direct clients towards selected and relevant points of entry, for example via a particular service, in order to avoid clients getting 'lost' between messages and sources of information.
- The PES website and jobseeker registration forms need be accessible to all potential clients, and the use of simple, clear, and concise language, avoiding bureaucratic language and jargon is advised. In addition, it is recommended that sections of the website and the registration process should be available in most commonly used languages, besides the official languages of the country.

### **3. CHANNEL STRATEGIES AND DIAGNOSIS: UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET AUDIENCE AND USING THE RIGHT DIGITAL TOOLS**

In an age where PES are increasingly relying on providing digital (self-) services, it is essential to understand which clients are ready for fully digital/online communication, and which clients are not likely to be able to use digital services. This starts from making registration accessible to vulnerable individuals to in-depth conversations with the client. Furthermore, PES are likely to need to formulate specific strategies for different groups of vulnerable populations, based on an appreciation of how to 'blend' services delivered through different channels (digital/online, via telephone, or face-to-face) for effectiveness and client satisfaction.

#### **3.1 Client Profiling**

The first step towards this is client profiling, which is essential to help counsellors steer individuals towards the most effective channel of communication. The advances in computational capacities, better use of data, the use of AI and predictive methodologies have led to increasing use of (statistical) profiling in several PES<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, recent developments show that, for instance, the predictive model developed by the Belgium-Flanders PES in 2019 brought about a sizeable improvement over rules-based decision models (based on level of education, for instance).<sup>31</sup> Recent evaluations of machine-learning-based profiling in conjunction with caseworker categorisation and jobseekers' self-assessments found that statistical profiling leads to the best overall predictive accuracy, both caseworkers' and jobseekers' own judgements convey important additional information of job readiness.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, using a short set of survey questions on top of administrative data could be essential, since employment readiness is influenced by traits which can be developed and / or improved, and hence employment counselling could

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, a number of PES participating at the TRW, including Estonia, Belgium Le Forem etc. reported using a machine-learning based statistical prediction model in conjunction with in-depth counsellor interviews.

<sup>31</sup> At the same time, as Desiere-Struyven (2020) show, statistical profiling models can also produce a result where individuals belonging to a vulnerable group (of foreign origin, in their case) are more likely to produce false positives

<sup>32</sup> See van den Berg et al (2022) for Germany, and Rosholm et al. (2023) for Denmark.

concentrate on supporting clients in these areas (social skills, coping strategies, goal orientation, and self-efficacy).

### **3.2 Diagnosing digital skills shortages and other issues prohibiting access to digital services**

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the importance for PES to detect jobseekers' barriers as quickly as possible, both in terms of digital skills levels and ability to access online services. One way to observe this is when the client is not able to use online registration services. Other indicators to identify low digital skills and related issues, can be more challenging. Broadly speaking, most PES use a combination of self-assessment of digital skills, and a diagnosis established by counsellors, typically at the first interview with the client. Given the central role of the first interview, it seems imperative to use this time for an in-depth discussion, rather than administrative issues.<sup>33</sup> For instance, the PES in Sweden is currently revising its first interviews to make these more specialised and to concentrate on employment barriers (including digital skills). The PES of the region of Wallonia in Belgium (Forem) follow a blended service delivery channel and have developed a simple diagnostic tool composed of four easy-to-understand questions to diagnose digital skills. This diagnostic tool is used during the initial registration as jobseeker; and this is used, along with the results of a statistical profiling model as the determinant of segmentation for service channels.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Sweden: Understanding individual needs in a digital-first customer strategy**

The Swedish PES strive to build a customer-centric delivery model, while moving to a full self-service online delivery channel for those closer to the labour market. This is done for reasons of efficiency, accessibility, customer expectations and transparency in a complex system. At the same time, phone and face-to-face services are available, for less autonomous jobseekers. During the customer journey, the initial (planning) meeting is the key point of understanding the jobseeker's needs and directing him/her to the most effective delivery channel. While for most jobseekers, this initial meeting is on the phone, for young people with low levels of education, and those who need interpretation, the meeting could be face-to-face if the PES assess that this is needed. This meeting is crucial not just to identify digital skills, language or accessibility issues which hinder digital service delivery, but also to identify job search autonomy, which is an important indicator of a need for in-depth (face-to-face) support. One area where phone meetings have been less successful is the identification of individuals with a disability, who might not have been fully aware of their own issues or were reluctant to disclose these for fear of stigmatisation. The PES of Sweden hence have recently introduced several questions which are aimed to uncover disabilities.

It must be acknowledged that digital skills issues are not the only prohibiting factor in accessing digital services. First, vulnerable jobseekers can have low literacy skills or a poor command of the country's official language. Native speakers can also have issues with the formal language used on PES websites.<sup>35</sup> A further problem can arise from a lack of equipment or access to broadband internet at home. Several PES have developed different

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<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in Estonia, given that for most clients' data for administrative purposes can be collected electronically, almost all of the first interview can be dedicated to diagnosing clients' needs.

<sup>34</sup> This can be revised after face-to-face meetings, if counsellors deem necessary.

<sup>35</sup> While some of these issues can be remedied by simplifying the language on PES websites or enabling multiple languages, this is not (yet) a feature in most countries, see above.

apps for smartphones. Sweden takes a mobile-first approach in the development, to be fully accessible on mobile devices. There are few PES which offer more direct help for access, such as Portugal, where a social internet access tariff is offered to low-income individuals. Finally, certain disabilities can make working with digital tools a challenge if they are not fully accessible (for example, accessible using text to speech systems for visually impaired people). Indeed, as PES move towards more distance services (for instance, having first meetings on the phone), this can cause difficulties in diagnosing and understanding issues, and their impact on clients' job search processes. People with (mental) health problems may not be aware of their issues (if they are hidden, or undiagnosed) or they may not want to express these due to lack of trust in the PES or fear of stigmatisation<sup>36</sup>.

The PES of Portugal offers a notable example of skills diagnosis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the PES first developed a short online tool to diagnose digital skills, in order to find jobseekers who needed basic digital training. The PES also launched a short in-person course (lasting a few days) on basic digital skills, and many vulnerable jobseekers were invited to participate<sup>37</sup>.

#### **France: PIX Emploi digital skills assessment test**

PIX was developed by a non-profit organisation in 2017, providing online services to (a) assess, (b) develop and (c) certify digital skills. It is based on the European digital competence framework standard (current version DigComp 2.2). It is constantly updated to take into account the evolution of digital skills. It offers adaptive test algorithm (which can be done in a maximum of one hour) and it allows a user-friendly experience, from beginner to advanced levels. Cooperation has been in place with the French PES since 2019, leading to the introduction of 'PIX Emploi' which aims to test the digital skills of jobseekers. This is a shortened version of the PIX, which can be done online or on PES premises with the help of an assistant. The test is recommended to jobseekers after registration and/or renewal of registration. The 'PIX Emploi' was rolled out nationally in France in April 2021, and close to one million tests have been conducted within two years. As further evidence of its usefulness, the PES of the two French-speaking regions of Belgium (Actiris and Forem) adopted this tool in 2023.

### **3.3 Channel strategies and client classification**

Channel strategies emphasise the need for PES to deliver services to all customers, based on their needs and their 'level of autonomy' in accessing services. Thus, it is directly related to diagnosing digital skills. There are currently variations across PES in the emphasis on digital services. The PES in Sweden (similar to the Netherlands and the Flemish Region of Belgium) opted for a digital-first strategy, which is supported by the high level of digital skills of their clientele. However, participants at the TRW in November 2023 noted that several PES still use offline channels for counselling meetings (while the overwhelming majority of simpler 'activity reports' are done online)<sup>38</sup>. Most other PES permit jobseekers to choose between channels<sup>39</sup>. However, a number of PES are gravitating towards more

<sup>36</sup> Presentation by PES of Sweden, TRW on 8 November, 2023, Zagreb, Croatia.

<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, those without digital devices could participate in courses at training centres or – in rare cases – they were loaned tablets.

<sup>38</sup> This also means that people who are closer to the labour market have phone (or occasionally face-to-face meetings) only six months after the first (planning) meeting.

<sup>39</sup> This can also be a way to secure the agency (or at least agreement) on the part of the client.

clearly defined channel strategies (with certain types of activities only offered online/on the phone) due to the multiplication of the workload for PES staff when all channels are open for all activities. Furthermore, clients might not choose the most appropriate channels for their needs.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, it seems that, especially for counselling meetings, regularly changing delivery channels is a conscious strategy in a number of PES, in order to keep the clients motivated.<sup>41</sup>

The evidence cited in Section 3.1 highlights that counsellors have an important role to play in detecting jobseekers' (additional) barriers to employment; and it is often found that those further from the labour market need face-to-face services on top of digital services<sup>42</sup>. In addition to barriers to employment, it is important that PES counsellors are aware of the different (digital) channels available for jobseekers, and the challenges associated with each of these channels. This allows PES counsellors to prioritise and advise jobseekers on the right channels, based on their needs and skills (and ability to access and use digital channels, for the most vulnerable groups).

Given greater shifts towards digital channels, it is of utmost importance to ensure that digital tools are designed in an inclusive and accessible way. Some PES are therefore moving towards co-creation and regular feedback on digital services, including engaging client groups in the design of new (digital) services. In the early stages, clients can participate in interviews and focus groups in order for the PES to understand their situation and the obstacles that they are experiencing in finding a job and/or in contact with the PES. Later in the service design process, clients can participate in workshops to evaluate early product concepts and come up with solutions and ideas to remaining problems. Nonetheless, for some client groups, it is difficult to ensure participation, hence some PES have contacted interest groups (for instance, the Norwegian PES collaborated with Mental Health Youth).

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<sup>40</sup> See European Commission (2023). Thematic Learning Dialogue: Channel management strategy Pôle emploi 22-23 November 2022, European Network of Public Employment Services.

<sup>41</sup> Presentation by the PES of Wallonia (Belgium), Thematic Review Workshop on 8 November, 2023, Zagreb, Croatia.

<sup>42</sup> This is supported by 'ethnological' studies of caseworkers' practices, and there are arguments for using AI to support caseworkers.

**Practical lessons for PES:**

- In order to segment the target audience according to its digital skills, PES can have a set of simple diagnostic questions for jobseekers to answer as a starting point during the online or in-person registration process to help determine their level of digital skills. Depending on the results, jobseekers can access digital services and tools after this initial step, if they have the appropriate digital skills.
- Diagnosis of digital skills can be included in the initial interview, where interviews are conducted in person.
- Understanding who can use which tools or services is essential for the channel strategy, and the service channel should be adapted to the needs and requests of jobseekers.
- To ensure the accessibility of digital services, it is recommended that PES consult with stakeholders representing people with disabilities while designing services. This could include having focus groups with people with disabilities to gather views and feedback.

#### **4. ONLINE COUNSELLING AND JOB MATCHING**

Job search counselling has shown to be effective for raising vulnerable jobseekers' re-employment prospects. There is growing experience with online self-services for job search activities supported by online distance counselling. Advances in digitalisation are currently leading PES - with the cooperation of researchers - to experiment with an automatised counselling advice, which could yield results at a reasonable cost. However, these approaches are still being optimised (see Section 4.1). It is therefore important to investigate the extent to which vulnerable jobseekers can also benefit from these advances.

##### **4.1 Using AI for job search counselling**

Understanding why jobseekers become long-term unemployed, and why jobseekers have lower chances of finding work as their out-of-employment spell lengthens is of great importance. Some significant recent findings suggest that part of the reason why individuals become long-term unemployed is that they are overly optimistic about their job-finding chances, they have 'too high' wage expectations, and they do not revise these, and broaden the range of jobs they consider, even after a significant amount of time spent on unemployment benefits.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, part of the reason why (face-to-face) job search counselling has been found to be effective is that it helps jobseekers to revise their expectations.<sup>44</sup>

Given that PES counsellors' time is costly, there is significant interest in online automatised job search advice and AI-based recommender systems. Typically, these aim to (i) provide information on vacancies in occupations which match the jobseekers' skills and (ii) enlarge the set of occupations which jobseekers can consider. The immediate goal of recommender systems is to reduce mismatch (to direct job search towards occupations and firms where there is less competition) without imposing excessive mobility costs (by having to adjust

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<sup>43</sup> See Mueller et al. 2021; Mueller and Spinnewijn 2023.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Arni 2015.

skills too much for an alternative occupation). Several academic studies have recently sought to test online advice for jobseekers in an experimental setting, using randomised study designs, and they had broadly similar qualitative results.<sup>45</sup> The researchers find that i) the information provided does indeed change jobseekers' job search strategies, ii) they tend to apply to vacancies (occupations) where conditions are more favourable, and iii) the introduction of the recommender systems increases employment and earning of those targeted. Furthermore, there is some evidence that these recommendations are particularly effective for the low-skilled and long-term unemployed.<sup>46</sup>

Automatised and competence-based matching of jobseekers and employers is becoming more widely used and has some distinct advantages. Indeed, in a number of PES, smartphone applications (apps) have been developed to notify jobseekers about potential 'matches', with some apps enabling the jobseeker to complete their application on their mobile phone (such as 'App Le Forem').<sup>47</sup> It is important to note however, that PES often require jobseekers to complete their CVs (their competence profile and job experience) and 'publish them' online, which many low-skilled (vulnerable) jobseekers do not do, partly due to a lack of digital skills or lack of access to a suitable device (e.g. laptop or smartphone).

A few PES have also introduced AI chatbots among their services (such as AT, FR, NO and SI). However, as pointed out by some clients and counsellors, online self-services (including chat services) require a certain amount of self-advocacy, an area where some clients can face difficulties.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, some clients express that chatbots can be useful to get answers quickly, but a user of these services has to have sufficient knowledge to know what questions (prompts) to ask.

## 4.2 Online counselling for vulnerable jobseekers

Online job search advice in the form of self-service or distance online counselling has become more prominent during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, and some approaches have since been mainstreamed into PES services.

A few PES (primarily those which have a digital-first strategy) introduced online counselling years before the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the French PES 'Emploi Store' was launched in 2015 with the aim of bringing together the ecosystem of online services for job search, training, and skills development provided by the PES and other public institutions. The new version, launched in 2022, also uses AI to identify the top services that best reflect current client needs.

Online counselling for vulnerable jobseekers can be made more complex by individuals household situation and issues related to motivation. First of all, it is important to give agency to the clients, and an initial step is booking the counselling meetings. Second, the

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<sup>45</sup> This includes Behaghel et al. (2022) on the French PES online job board, Altmann et al (2023) on the Danish PES online job board, LeBarbacion et al (2023) on a large private Swedish job board, and Belot et al (2022) on a smaller private job board for long-term unemployed. Given that the exact setup of these experiments differs, the magnitude of the effects varies substantially.

<sup>46</sup> While currently a number of PES are using AI-based job matching algorithms, relatively few PES are explicitly steering the unemployed towards broader occupational search.

<sup>47</sup> It is worth noting that in some cases (such as the App Le Forem in Wallonia -Belgium), the job applications via the app can be done without connecting to the jobseeker's PES profile. However, all online job applications done through the PES jobseeker profile count towards meeting job search requirements. Clearly, there are differences across PES in the extent to which they monitor jobseekers' online job search activity, for example the PES of Flanders - Belgium (VDAB) uses it to inform counsellors about their clients' level of independent job search.

<sup>48</sup> See for instance Fugletveit and Lofthus (2021).

client needs to find a safe space and they also have to trust the employment counsellor. The latter means that in online counselling sessions, it is important for the client to speak to the same counsellor over their unemployment spell, if possible. Third, it seems that while jobseekers might experience 'fatigue' with online channels, it is harder for vulnerable jobseekers to continue to be motivated via online service provision, and hence a good practice seems to be to 'switch' between channels every three to six months (as is done at the PES of Belgium Wallonia). One of the main advantages to online counselling, which is particularly relevant for some vulnerable jobseekers, is that it is much easier to ensure translation services for those who do not speak any of the official languages of the country.

Adapting to online counselling can also be a challenge for employment counsellors also<sup>49</sup>. First, it requires attention to detect signs of the jobseeker becoming de-motivated in their job search process as early as possible (for instance, from very laconic online communication). Second, counsellors need to learn how to keep the individual motivated by using regular messages, which ought to be personalised. Both peer support and close supervision by team leaders can help counsellors adapt to these issues. At the same time, there are instances where offline (face-to-face) counselling seems to be necessary. In instances where the client needs to talk about personal issues or health-related problems, online counselling is generally not advised. Similarly, when reading body language, ascertaining non-verbal communication is needed, which cannot be done as well online.

In several countries (such as in Finland, Norway) a substantial portion of long-term unemployed and NEETs struggle with disabilities and mental health issues. Fieldwork into the experiences of these clients confirms that online counselling can be particularly beneficial for those struggling with social anxiety and depression. Furthermore, clients in Individual Placement and Support programmes (delivered in the Nordic countries) can now receive online counselling, which started to be delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>50</sup>. At the same time, these clients need to be familiar with their counsellors: building a trusting

### **E-guidance services in Lifelong Career Guidance Centres in Croatia**

A recent inspiring practice comes from Croatia, with the introduction of e-guidance services delivered as part of the Lifelong Career Guidance Centres (CISOK centres). These are partnership-based one-stop-shop centres, typically serving NEETs. The e-guidance website was set up to provide self-services adapted to the profile of the user. The most popular programme is 'My Choice', which offers interests and skills self-assessment questionnaires. Career guidance counsellors can use the results of the 'My Choice' questionnaire (i.e. a list of 10 occupations most suitable to a client's interests and skills self-assessment) to suggest suitable training courses to clients. The website also offers self-assessment of personality traits, showing the importance of these in different occupations; as well as tools showing the characteristics required by employers. Furthermore, the website includes career planning tools which, for instance, break down the steps (training) required to achieve an individual's career goals. Finally, these elements of career planning, can also be utilised during online counselling.

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<sup>49</sup> At the same time, online counselling (and counselling in general) is largely facilitated by having other activities online (partly) automatised, such as job matching. Furthermore, online job applications (and use of Apps by clients) also saves on administrative work for counsellors, since they can easily follow the job search activity of their clients (as specified in their IAPs). Please see Section 4.1 for an overview.

<sup>50</sup> In Australia, 'headspace work and study online' is a platform to provide counselling to young people with mental health issues. Young people can however choose face-to-face support.



relationship is important for online counselling to be successful<sup>51</sup>. For a number of vulnerable clients, blended service delivery can therefore be more advantageous, where clients have a degree of choice over on-site and online counselling.

**Practical lessons for PES:**

- Online counselling can work for vulnerable clients, but some additional steps are needed to ensure that delivery is tailored to the specific needs of each type of client.
- Clients' agency has to be ensured, and regularly changing channels of communication is important to maintain motivation levels.
- Online communication is a skill which must be learned by counsellors. Additional training, or refresher training, may be required for counsellors so that they can be aware of the nuances of online counselling compared to face to face. In addition, counsellors may need mutual support from others so PES may want to consider how they can foster this.
- Face-to-face meetings between counsellors and jobseekers are imperative to diagnose some more delicate issues, such as personal or health-related issues.

## **5. EFFECTIVE DIGITAL SKILLS TRAINING IN AN ONLINE FORMAT**

As digital skills are becoming increasingly valuable in the labour market, skills training is relevant for vulnerable jobseekers for two reasons: first, it reduces the risk of being excluded from accessing and using PES services; second, it allows them to access jobs. At the same time, it is well-known that it is often difficult to ensure vulnerable jobseekers take up and finish training, and this might be exacerbated if many digital skills training courses are in an online format. While job search counselling can be effective, the lack of relevant skills is often the real obstacle for vulnerable jobseekers. This was recently examined in depth by a set of research papers. These build on the job board of the Flemish PES, which has the advantage that jobseekers' competences as well as employers' competence requirements are visible<sup>52</sup>. Goos et al (2019) point out that jobseekers can only realistically compete for jobs for which they meet at least 80% of the competence requirements. Otherwise, they need skills training.

**Belgium-Wallonia: Smart Corners**

A slightly different approach has been chosen by the PES of Belgium Wallonia (Forem), which offers digital skills training in 'Smart Corners', a welcoming and immersive area in 31 different local PES offices. In each 'Smart Corner' a number of different activities are available, including 'Smart Job' workshops, basic digital skills training modules; job search coaching; video CV creation; and job interview virtual simulation through augmented reality. The basic digital skills training modules range from a four-hour initiation course, through to a four hour workshop on publishing an online CV (and using PES websites), to longer courses of 24 and 40 hours (depending on the assessed needs of each individual). Broadly speaking, this service is reaching its intended target group, as it is mostly used by low-skilled young jobseekers.

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<sup>51</sup> However, due to the fact that Individual Placement Support programmes require close co-operation between specialist from many sectors, it is arguably more advantageous to move to offline work, when possible.

<sup>52</sup> It is worth mentioning that building on this advanced feature, the Flemish PES job matching algorithm is competence-based (rather than occupation-based).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some PES made a shift towards Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for their clients, after signing agreements with some of the largest technology companies. These courses typically focused on digital skills and were often aimed at young individuals. However, to date, little evidence exists on the success of these courses, including the completion rates for young people from vulnerable groups. With dropout rates typically high, it needs to be understood if NEETs need mentoring to keep motivation levels high, especially in the first part of the course. Furthermore, finding ways to convince vulnerable jobseekers to participate in voucher-sponsored training remains a sensitive issue, as the take-up by people with lower education levels is somewhat low. At the same time, the move towards modularisation of training courses, validation of existing skills, and the use of micro-credentials will, in principle, make it easier to get vulnerable jobseekers on board. These will have them engaged for a shortened period, and therefore lower the need to maintain their motivation for a longer duration.

In some countries, the launch of the Reinforced Youth Guarantee brought about a new, comprehensive approach to offering digital skills training for NEETs. A good example is Portugal, where individuals who have at least achieved secondary education are offered intensive distance courses for digital skills, and intensive on-site training followed by a traineeship at a company. In general, all PES offer digital skills training for those who need it, and vouchers are becoming a popular option<sup>53</sup>. It is particularly important with voucher schemes that all service providers clearly define the level of training they offer, which makes comparisons and switching between providers an option.

In France (as part of the Skills Investment Plan) jobseekers with very low digital skills are offered a voucher (*'Pass Numerique'*) to participate in short courses, and preference is given to jobseekers with low levels of education. The courses last between 5 and 10 hours and enable users to gain basic digital skills (concentrating on points which are the most important for the job search process). They are offered in a large number of locations, so that they are easily accessible. Currently, it is not clear how to encourage participation in digital skills training for those who need it the most. It is likely to be very important to include counselling for vulnerable jobseekers prior to (and possibly during) enrolment in courses. This is to maintain motivation, and it is always important to emphasise what jobseekers can gain from the courses both from an employment- and from a personal perspective. Furthermore, many individuals from vulnerable groups may not have had a positive experience during their formal education, hence, teaching methods need to be adapted to their needs. In this respect, co-creation and regular feedback from vulnerable users is vital. For young individuals, gamification of training courses might be a way forward, as regular positive feedback is likely to keep their motivation high. This ties in

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<sup>53</sup> At the same time, there is considerable variation across PES in how they set the levels of training for these courses. With the advent of digital skills certificates (micro-credentials), it might be advisable for all PES to refer to the DigComp framework.

with the well-accepted practice of setting multiple smaller goals and advancing through those<sup>54</sup>.

### **Vouchers for digital skills training in Croatia**

Since April 2022, the Croatian PES have offered a voucher-based training programme which has a large focus on improving digital skills. The vouchers typically cover the total cost of training programmes, and they are entirely administered online. An IT application is used, which includes information on the courses and a skills catalogue, as well as functionalities to apply for vouchers and redeem these to enrol in a course. At the same time, applicants can receive career guidance services while choosing skills and courses financed through the voucher system. It is important to note that not all voucher users have the need for such services. The maximum allowable duration of training courses at secondary education level can last up to 10 months, while training courses at tertiary education level can last up to 12 months. On top of the vouchers, unemployed people receiving training are entitled to financial support. The cost of the courses (and hence the value of the vouchers) can range between EUR 250 and EUR 2 500 . The training programmes need to be in accordance with the Croatian Qualifications Framework, and the training can be offered by any accredited training provider. The voucher programme has been a success in attracting individuals to undertake digital skills training. Today, the proportion of vulnerable jobseekers engaged in this scheme is only around 10%, much lower than the target 40%. Part of the reason may be the lack of training programmes offered for those with low levels of (digital) skills in line with the national qualification framework. Furthermore, it is worth exploring whether the fact that the voucher system is managed entirely online deters those with relatively low levels of digital literacy.

It is particularly important, given the large number of participants, and the potentially large number of training providers to evaluate the courses that are offered. Broadly speaking, information can be gathered from two different sources: (a) looking at the outcomes of participants after some time (usually six months after the end of the course), (b) feedback on the quality of the courses as reported by participants. Collecting information on participants' outcomes is facilitated by a data warehouse where employer (social security) data can be accessed, but when this is lacking, quick surveys of participants can also work. In order to collect information on participants' satisfaction, several PES opt for phone surveys in order to guarantee high response rates (despite higher costs compared to online surveys). This information can then be processed and provided to (potential) participants in a user-friendly format (such as a star-rating system)<sup>55</sup> It is yet to be tested how this information is used by individuals planning to enrol in digital training, and further, how successful PES are in distilling information in a way that is easy for vulnerable jobseekers to understand .

## **6. COMPLEMENTARY ONLINE/BLENDED SERVICES**

Service offers and approaches (including digital services) targeting long-term unemployed people and NEETs show the need to co-operate and co-ordinate with partners more than ever before, in order to facilitate the re-integration of vulnerable jobseekers. These target

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<sup>54</sup> In this sense, vulnerable jobseekers might need several shorter courses in succession to enable them to reach a level of digital skills which makes the labour market accessible for them. At the same time, PES counsellors need to avoid a situation where individuals carry on attending courses, without a significant effort to place them on the labour market.

<sup>55</sup> Note that it is particularly challenging to gather feedback from individuals with mental health issues.

groups often face multiple barriers and offering employment-oriented services only is often insufficient. Besides employment and social counselling, health and psychological services need to be integrated in order to achieve better results for jobseekers from vulnerable backgrounds. Integrated service provision solutions (offline) are appearing in more PES, with the Greek PES recently setting up Labour Offices for Vulnerable Groups<sup>56</sup>.

Some PES view digitalisation as an opportunity to provide citizens with access to a wide range of services. The 'Guaranteed Solution for All' by ACTIRIS, the PES in the Brussels-Capital Region, aims to provide everyone who subscribes for the first time to ACTIRIS with a meeting with a counsellor and to provide them with a solution. Belgium-ACTIRIS also use Unique Citizen Files not only restricted to those who receive counselling, but it is accessible to all. Unique Citizen Files includes information on everyone who contributes to the job search process of an individual (this can be manually registered or through data exchange). At the moment, ACTIRIS' partners are starting to register and use Unique Citizen Files. The long-term aim is that every partner, services and jobseekers can have a clear overview of the job search process and the jobseeker can conduct their job search effectively. The use of using online counselling in several services means that supportive services do not necessarily need to be restricted by geography, as service providers of online support do not need to be located near the PES. Nevertheless, as these services are often at an earlier stage of digitalisation than PES, efforts need to be devoted to mapping the availability of service providers at the local level. Furthermore, many complementary services put a greater emphasis on face-to-face services, partly due to the more delicate nature of the issues to be discussed, limiting the possibility of co-ordinated online service provision.

In many cases, there are substantial unmet health needs among vulnerable jobseekers, and psychological problems such as depression are widespread. It can be expected that offering psychological support will increase the take-up of skills-formation programmes (and other active labour market policies, Active Labour Market Policies). A number of PES co-operate with health and social services, and some of those services have moved to hybrid formats since the COVID-19 pandemic. A notable example is the delivery of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) programmes in the Nordic countries. Reports show a decrease in services during the first wave of the pandemic, as employment counsellors took on other tasks - these issues were soon remedied (see Wittlund et al 2022). At the same time, most employment counsellors expressed the opinion that it may be better to return to offline communication, given the high need for cooperation in IPS services.

Previous PES experiences show that vulnerable jobseekers, such as the long-term unemployed and NEETs, can largely benefit from post-placement support to sustainably reintegrate a job. Moving post-placement support services online can offer the advantage of being potentially less costly and disruptive, especially in case employment counsellors (and not colleagues) provide this service. However, to date very little evidence exists on this issue.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Established in 2021, in these offices specialised PES staff provide the beneficiaries of ongoing programmes with additional/supporting services aiming at more effectively promoting the relevant programmes and empowering vulnerable social groups, so that they can be integrated into the labour market and become socioeconomically independent.

<sup>57</sup> Indeed, among the countries participating at the TRW, post-placement support is mostly given to individuals with health issues, and in some instances, when it is the first job of the young individual.

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought about increased communication and collaboration between employers and PES. Co-operation with employers is an essential step in securing sustainable integration for vulnerable jobseekers. First, we know from previous experience that 'vacancy hunting' for vulnerable jobseekers coupled with offering pre-screening services seems to be an effective way to increase placements for vulnerable jobseekers<sup>58</sup>. Online job interviews are now facilitated by a number of PES, which also facilitates and speeds up screening of candidates. Hence, employee-oriented vacancy acquisition is an avenue which seems worth exploring. Finally, in some cases, especially when employing people with disabilities or who have long-term health issues, employers clearly need support in accommodating their needs in the workplace and offering on the job coaching, and some of this counselling for employers can be done online.

**Practical lessons for PES:**

- There is a need to experiment with post-placement support in a digital format more widely, not only for individuals with disabilities or those entering their first employment relationship, as offering this support online can likely come at a lower cost and be less disruptive to the work environment.
- Digital solutions can help vulnerable jobseekers access a wider range of service providers, but this necessitates mapping of services on an easily accessible platform to increase user-friendliness.
- There is a need to build online signposting and referral solutions, such that PES counsellors can direct clients to the relevant complementary services. Joint online case discussion with the appropriate services is likely also helpful.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Digital services for vulnerable groups, especially for NEETs, have been widely developed over the past few years by PES.

Outreach using digital means is now widely used, but these campaigns need to be part of a wider communication strategy. While messages can be fine-tuned for the relevant audience and communication channel, it is important to streamline communications and draw attention to a website which gives up-to-date and reliable information to vulnerable jobseekers in easy-to-understand language. Some PES now use a wide range of tools to diagnose digital skills and other issues, hence, there is room for mutual learning on the most effective tools.

While digital service delivery channels are currently being further developed at most PES, digital services have to be tailored to particular vulnerable client groups, and efforts are needed to take their needs and opinions on board when adjusting and designing digital services and content. This is all the more important, since digital interactions often require a higher degree of autonomy and self-management, one area where vulnerable jobseekers might be weaker.

Training in digital skills is becoming widely available, although there are not always a sufficient number of courses at the most basic level for people who are digitally illiterate. These clients are also likely to need additional support to understand the added value of skills training and to maintain their motivation, so that they do not see it as a 'tick box'

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<sup>58</sup> See Algan et al (2023)

exercise to continue receiving unemployment benefits. Furthermore, while voucher schemes give considerable agency to clients, the extent to which they are effective in reaching a large number of vulnerable jobseekers remains to be explored.

Counselling online has proved to be cost-efficient for jobseekers who are closer to the labour market, but there are still some challenges when providing these services to the more vulnerable. For these clients, there is a need to find a balance between service provision via different channels to keep their motivation up. Employment counsellors will also need additional training or peer support to increase their effectiveness in online interactions.

There are some avenues which still need exploring and have scarcely been utilised. First, online service provision makes experimentation and also evaluation significantly simpler and cheaper.<sup>59</sup> One area where experimentation is sorely needed is encouraging vulnerable jobseekers to take part in (online) upskilling activities (such as courses). Different information provision and promotion activities are worth exploring. In addition, there are a number of innovative ways to provide vulnerable jobseekers with information about the quality of (online) training courses (such as a star rating system of training providers), and it is worth testing how this information is appreciated by (potential) participants.

A second area which merits further investigation is online cooperation with providers of complementary services (for instance psycho-social services). In principle, this could solve some of the issues of organising complementary services, and service users may potentially be less prone to be 'lost' if offered more seamless service referrals and pathways. Furthermore, online referral and delivery of complementary services could solve some of the capacity constraints which occur when there is a lack of local service providers to deliver services to the long-term unemployed and NEETs given that online delivery is less resource intensive.

Finally, a third service which needs to be explored further is the provision of post-placement online counselling, particularly for the long-term unemployed and NEETs. This service has traditionally been offered in an offline format and this has been seen as effective for long-term unemployed and hence is likely to be even more cost-efficient if provided online.

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<sup>59</sup> The Spanish PES is currently using Randomised Control Trial (RCT) methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of a new digital tool being developed to assist counsellors in their provision of individualised advice on job search and training.

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