TRANSFERABILITY MANUAL

Edited by Anna Romagnuolo

Digital Freelancing for Higher Education (DiFree) A Transferability Manual for Freelance Readiness in the Digital Age

An Erasmus Plus Project

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When I was invited in May 2022 to take on the scientific coordination of the DiFree project, I accepted with a mix of curiosity and enthusiasm—naively, I now realize—without fully grasping the scale of its ambitions. What followed was an intense and, at times, overwhelming journey. The challenges were significant, but so were the rewards. Coordinating a transnational team of dedicated scholars, educators, designers, and developers across institutions and countries has been one of the most demanding, yet fulfilling, experiences of my academic career.

As the project unfolded, we collectively built something that goes beyond a series of outputs: we created an ecosystem of tools, resources, and ideas intended to help higher education students and recent graduates navigate the increasingly complex and globalized freelance economy. We worked hard to produce accessible, multilingual, open-source materials that reflect the competencies required for digital self-employment—resources that we hope will continue to grow, evolve, and serve diverse learners across Europe and beyond.

This *Transferability Manual* reflects the knowledge, tools, and collective effort that shaped DiFree. It is both a record of what we achieved and a guide for those who wish to adapt our model to new contexts.

My sincere thanks go to the team at UNITUS — Prof. Andrea Colantoni, Carlo Contardo, and Felicetta Ripa — as well as to all our partners and colleagues across institutions. It has been a challenging but truly rewarding experience.

Anna Romagnuolo

CONTRIBUTORS

Isabella Querci   (CRS Laghi)

Prof. Anabela Mesquita   ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

Paulino M. Leite da Silva ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

Luciana Olivera   ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

Joana Araújo   ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

Adriana José de Oliveira   ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

Olímpio Castilho   ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

António J. Abreu Silva   ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

Maia Velez   UCA - University of Cadiz

José M. Sanchez   UCA - University of Cadiz

Yannis Skarpelos   Panteion University

Sophia Messini   Panteion University

Efi Ntrouva   Panteion University

Pepi Marioli   Panteion University

Stelios Petrakis   Panteion University
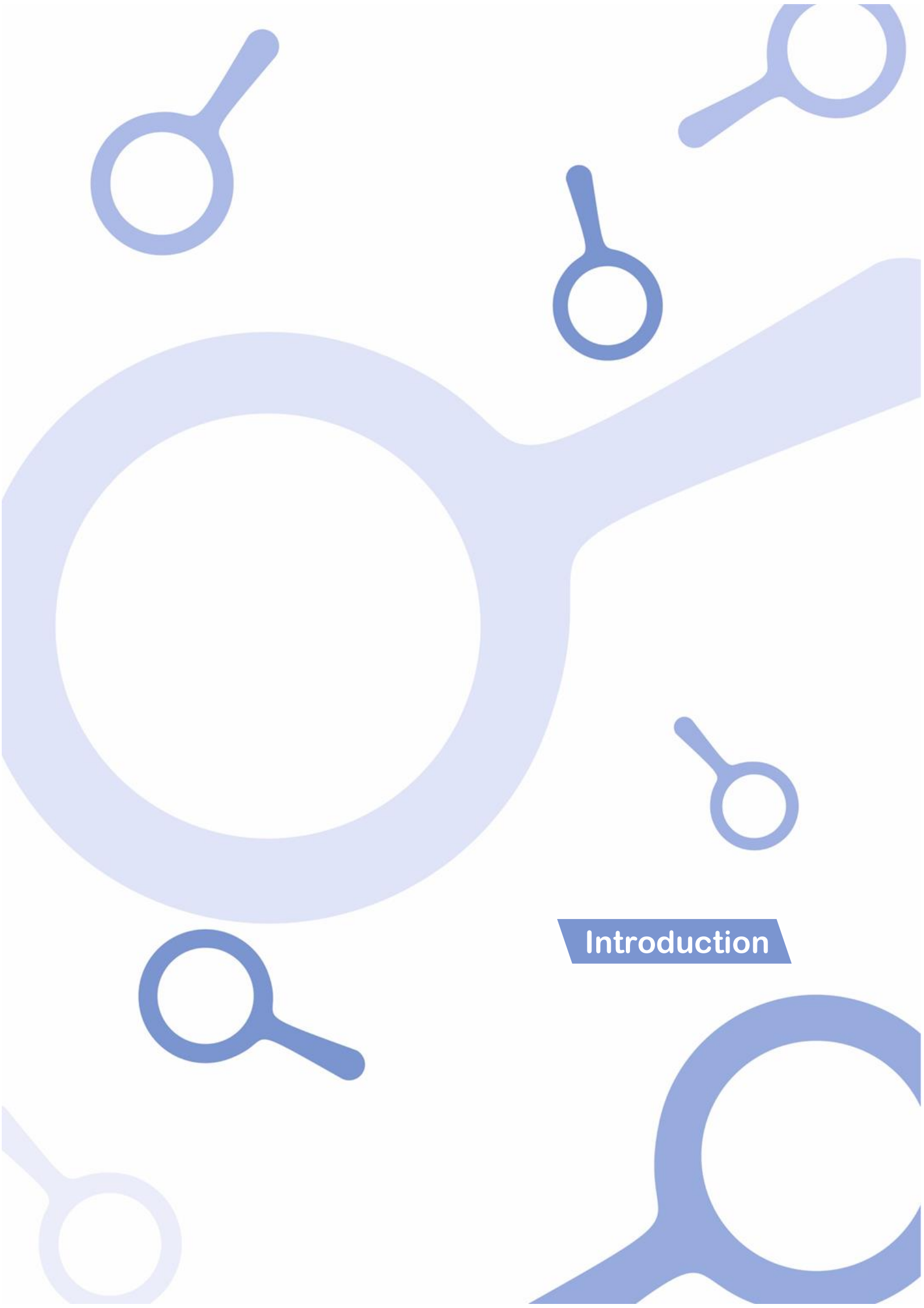
Introduction

Introduction

Freelancing, particularly in its digital forms, has become a central feature of contemporary labor markets, but it resists any single, univocal definition. In both scholarly literature and common usage, the term "freelancer" encompasses a broad and often contradictory array of identities: from highly specialized self-employed professionals and creative workers, to digital nomads and platform-based gig workers. For some, freelancing suggests autonomy and flexibility; for others, it signals precarity and informality. The Erasmus+ DiFree project embraces this complexity, treating freelancing not as a fixed category, but as a dynamic, evolving field of work that demands transversal skills, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial self-awareness.

The project was launched in 2022 in response to the rapid rise of digital freelancing across Europe, a trend particularly evident in the post pandemic period especially among younger generations seeking autonomy, flexibility, and self-empowerment in their professional lives.

Despite this growing trend, many higher education institutions appear not to fully equip students and recent graduates with the tools needed to navigate freelance careers. The gap between academic training and the practical demands of the freelance labor market leaves many ill-prepared for self-employment. Universities rarely offer dedicated guidance on how to build a sustainable freelance career, while companies that engage freelance professionals seldom invest in training for these workers. As a result, graduates are left without the necessary competencies to successfully position themselves as digital freelancers. This lack of preparation not only limits access to viable career paths but can also leave young professionals vulnerable to precarious or misleading opportunities, including on-demand poorly paid jobs that mimic the flexibility of freelancing without providing meaningful long-term prospects. It also impedes vulnerable groups such as stay-at-home parents, geographically isolated individuals, the unemployed, or those with mobility challenges from profiting from the advantages of freelancing, a flexible, accessible entry point into the labor market.

To address these gaps and foster these opportunities, the DiFree Erasmus Plus project has aimed at equipping higher education students and graduates with the

entrepreneurial, digital, and professional competences needed to thrive in freelance work. Its approach is grounded in learning-by-doing, and benefits from collaboration with partners experienced in business education and from consultations with professional freelancers.

The five chapters that follow document this three-year journey - recently concluded - by offering an account of the project outputs, results, and the creative processes behind them, while providing a multi-layered exploration of freelancing.

Chapter 1 introduces the *DiFree Toolbox*, titled *How to Become a Freelancer: A Practical Guide for Students and Early-Career Professionals*. This foundational eBook addresses the conceptual, regulatory, and practical dimensions of freelance work across Europe. Freely downloadable from the DiFree website (https://www.difree-project.it/) and translated into the national languages of the partner institutions, the manual offers a modular, multilingual guide to freelance readiness. Aligned with EU competence frameworks such as EntreComp, ESCO, and the EQF, it is intended not only for learners but also for educators seeking to discuss freelancing and embed freelance-related content into their teaching.

Indeed, the *Toolkit* provides a functional definition of freelance work by identifying its key structural and economic features. These include: (1) independence and flexible working hours; (2) the ability to work entirely from home - an arrangement particularly appealing to young parents, individuals with mobility impairments, and others seeking accessible entrepreneurial pathways; (3) minimal overhead costs, such as the absence of office rent or commuting expenses, with compensation based solely on services rendered; (4) the ability for clients to hire qualified professionals "on demand," transparently and for clearly defined tasks; (5) faster access to skilled talent - often within days or weeks - compared to the lengthy processes involved in recruiting and onboarding full-time employees; and (6) a scalable response to the demographic challenge of persistent talent shortages. Overall, these attributes outline a model of work that is economically efficient, technologically enabled, and socially inclusive.

Chapter 2 focuses on the *DiFree Repository*, an open-access, multilingual digital library of CV/resume templates, portfolios, and professional writing resources. Conceptualized as an Open Educational Resource (OER), the Repository goes beyond template distribution to support learners in adapting and localizing materials across linguistic and cultural contexts. Rooted in theories of textual genre, scaffolding, and cross-cultural communication, it is designed to help users develop rhetorical awareness and linguistic competence in professional self-presentation. It is complemented with an open access e-learning professional English crash course on job hunting and cold pitching in the freelance world which is accessible via the project webpage.

Chapter 3 presents the *DiFree Mentoring Program*, developed to support mentees and mentors in building productive, reciprocal relationships. The program includes a modular video course, practical guidance, and multilingual resources aimed at fostering a reflective, skills-sharing culture of mentorship. It is framed as a two-way process: mentees gain support and direction, while mentors benefit from the opportunity to develop leadership and empathy in guiding the next generation of digital freelancers.

Chapter 4 details the *DiFree Self-Assessment and Vocational Orientation Tool*, a digital diagnostic instrument built around the EntreComp and DigComp frameworks. The tool encourages users to reflect on their digital and entrepreneurial competences, providing personalized feedback that can inform engagement with the other project outputs. Designed through participatory methods and expert consultation, the tool supports self-awareness, autonomy, and strategic career planning.
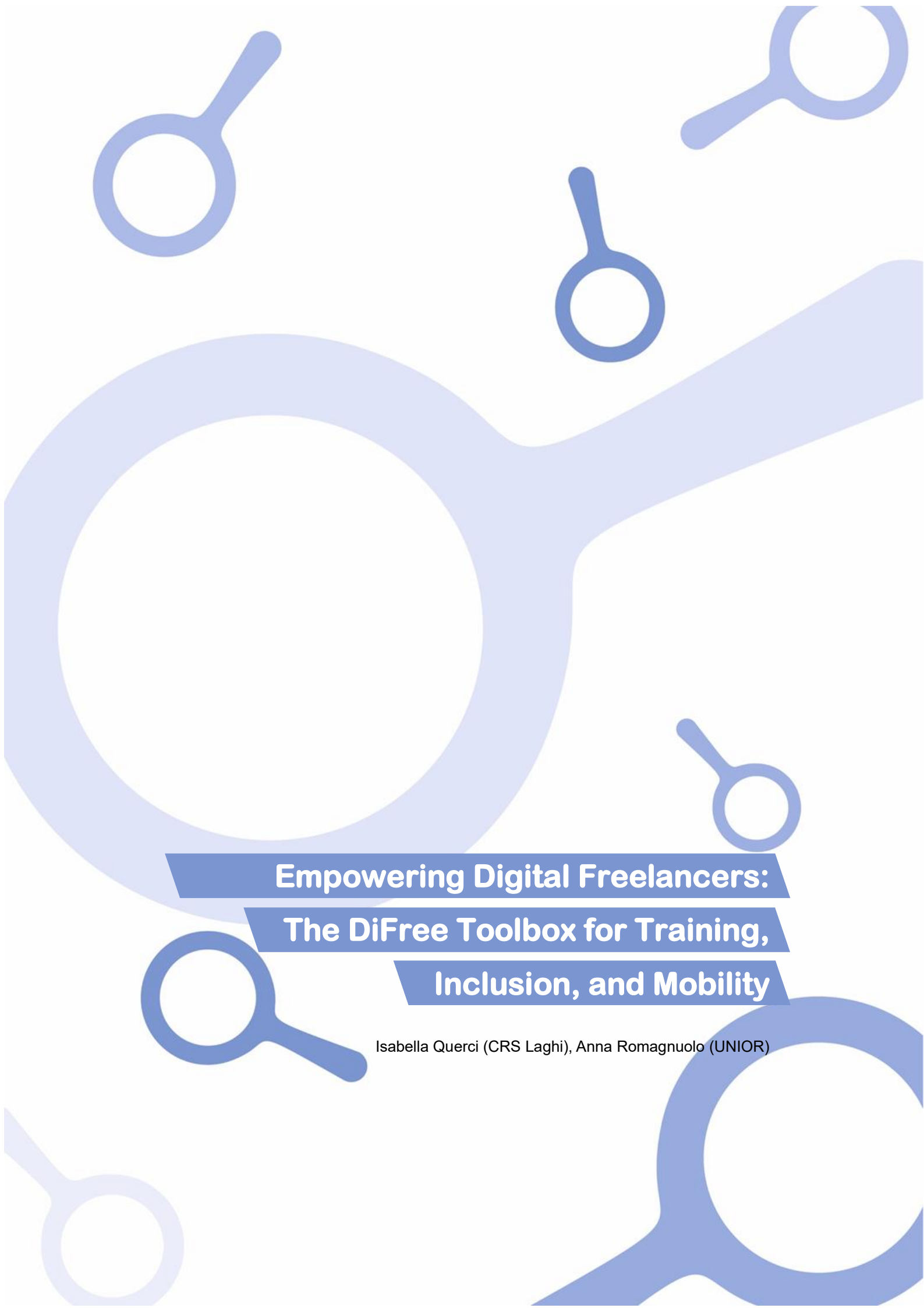
Chapter 5 turns to the *DiFree Physical and Digital Hub*, hosted by Panteion University. Inspired by the concept of hybrid creative hubs and evolving models of career services in higher education, the Hub serves as both a community platform and resource center. It connects users with curated materials, career guidance, and freelance-specific events, bridging institutional support structures with the realities of digital and transnational freelance work.

Together, these chapters offer a comprehensive, evidence-based response to the growing demand for freelance training, orientation, and support in higher education. By acknowledging the complexity of freelance work and foregrounding its pedagogical, regulatory, and cultural dimensions, the DiFree project contributes to a more inclusive and adaptable vision of employability, acknowledging the complexity of today's labor market and equipping learners to shape their own professional paths.

Anna Romagnuolo

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Empowering Digital Freelancers: The DiFree Toolbox for Training, Inclusion, and Mobility

Isabella Querci (CRS Laghi), Anna Romagnuolo (UNIOR)

Empowering Digital Freelancers: The DiFree Toolbox for Training, Inclusion, and Mobility

The DiFree Toolbox, titled *How to Become a Freelancer: A Practical Guide for Students and Early-Career Professionals*, represents the first intellectual output of the Erasmus+ DiFree project. Conceived as a foundational educational resource, the Toolbox was developed to respond to an emerging need for accessible, structured, and learner-centered guidance on navigating freelance work in the digital economy. The primary target audience comprises university students, recent graduates, and aspiring professionals approaching the freelance sector for the first time. However, the Toolbox is also addressed to teachers, trainers, and educators who wish to incorporate content on digital freelancing into their teaching practice. For this reason, the second edition of the e-book has been enriched with educational materials such as vocabulary-building tasks, reading comprehension quizzes, and reflective prompts. These pedagogical additions are designed to facilitate classroom use, support autonomous learning, and encourage discussion around key themes in contemporary freelance work.

The development of this resource was driven by institutional observations across partner countries, which consistently pointed to a lack of structured knowledge on digital freelancing and a pressing need for accessible guidance tailored to university students and recent graduates on how to acquire relevant digital and entrepreneurial competences, build a visible online presence, and develop effective self-promotion strategies. These insights laid the groundwork for the DiFree Toolbox, which was conceived as a modular, multilingual, and open-access guide to enhance freelance preparedness among students and early-career professionals.

The Toolkit Multiphase Creative Process – needs analysis

As a preliminary step in the development of the *DiFree Toolkit – How to Freelance Online*, a short online survey was administered to university students and early-career professionals to explore their perceptions and understanding of freelance work, particularly in digital environments. Participants were invited to reflect on the essential professional traits of freelancers, preferred channels for locating freelance professionals, and the soft skills they considered crucial for effective collaboration. Among the most cited personal qualities were punctuality, honesty, responsibility, and effective communication. From a skills perspective, students emphasized the importance of digital competence, organization, flexibility, and problem-solving abilities. In terms of professional visibility, students reported they would primarily use search engines, professional social networks such as LinkedIn, freelance platforms, and personal referrals to find freelancers.

Although the sample size was not statistically representative, the responses were nonetheless revealing. Many participants demonstrated confusion over what constitutes freelancing, often conflating it with remote work or short-term employment. A notable number indicated that they had obtained freelance assignments primarily through personal or informal networks, rather than through structured platforms or professional outreach. These findings pointed to a widespread lack of structured knowledge and clear guidance on navigating freelance careers—especially in a digital context. The results of the survey, therefore, validated the project's assumption that early exposure to entrepreneurial and digital skill-building is essential, and that a practical, accessible resource was needed to support informed decision-making. The survey was complemented by an extensive literary review of existing research, as well as a comparative analysis of the freelance labor markets across partner countries. These activities provided a robust foundation for the structure and content of the Toolkit, helping to ensure both its relevance and adaptability.

The Toolkit also builds on the European Commission's strategic emphasis on developing transversal competencies—including digital and entrepreneurial skills—as outlined in the *Digital Education Action Plan* (2021–2027), the *European Skills Agenda*, and the *Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. In line with these priorities, the DiFree Toolkit seeks to equip learners not only with technical knowledge, but also with the mindset and strategies necessary to thrive in increasingly flexible and digitalized labor markets.

To inform the design of the first edition, the author team undertook a multi-pronged development process that included a literature review on self-employment, digital entrepreneurship, and online freelancing in Europe; an analysis of relevant EU-level and national regulations on freelance work (including fiscal obligations, the recognition of qualifications, and the mobility of services); and a comparative exploration of country-specific challenges across partner institutions. Institutional reports, regulatory documentation, and statistical sources were also consulted. The goal was to identify both commonalities and divergences in the freelance landscape, thereby grounding the Toolkit in an evidence-based and transnational perspective.

The second phase focused on qualitative data collection through structured interviews with experienced freelancers. A purposive sampling approach was adopted to ensure diversity in terms of professional sectors and national contexts. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, each designed to explore the interviewee's professional journey, the challenges encountered, strategies for client acquisition, and the relevance of digital, soft, and entrepreneurial skills in shaping a successful freelance career. These interviews were audio-recorded and archived within the project's shared drive. The narratives served as a valuable empirical complement to the literature review, grounding the Toolkit in authentic practitioner experience.

In parallel, a series of six focus group discussions were conducted during the 2nd Transnational Project Meeting (TPM) of the DiFree Project. These sessions brought together project partners and external experts to collaboratively identify best practices in the field of digital freelancing. The discussions covered key themes such as digital self-management, soft skills acquisition, platform usage, productivity, and ethical considerations in remote work. The results contributed to defining the structure and thematic priorities of the Toolkit, ensuring its practical relevance and alignment with real-world needs.

Drawing on the insights gathered from the literary review, interviews, and focus groups, a draft version was organized thematically and structured to be accessible to a non-specialist audience. This underwent a rigorous revision process undertaken collaboratively by project partners. This phase sought to harness the collective expertise of the consortium, leveraging their diverse perspectives and knowledge. Each partner's contribution was subjected to critical evaluation, ensuring alignment with project goals and the broader context of the European Union. The revision phase included fact and source checking and a feedback mechanism to incorporate valuable

insights and recommendations from the partners. Feedback was collected on both the thematic coverage and pedagogical clarity of the resource. Suggestions for improvement were incorporated, and inconsistencies or gaps identified during the internal peer review were addressed.

As to style, initially, the eBook was conceived as a practical and accessible manual, but its first draft adopted a tone that was somewhat overly informal and journalistic, better suited to general divulgation than to academic or institutional use. Under the supervision of the project's scientific coordinator, the style was subsequently refined to strike a more balanced register—maintaining clarity and approachability for a non-specialist audience, while ensuring sufficient depth, precision, and coherence to meet the expectations of a higher education and professional readership.

Although the project grant initially required only summary translations of the eBook into the national languages of the consortium, the project partners collectively decided to translate the entire manual. As a result, five complete versions of the first edition—English, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish—were produced. Both the PDF and ePub formats of these translations have been made freely available through the official DiFree Project website, ensuring open access and wide dissemination across all participating countries. Naturally, the translation phase required not only linguistic adaptation but also cultural contextualization to preserve clarity and usability across diverse audiences.

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Content and structure of the E-Book

How to Freelance Online is the result of collaborative research and writing by the university partners involved in the Erasmus+ project *Digital Freelancing for Higher Education Students and Recent Graduates* (DiFree). Each partner contributed specific insights into their national regulations concerning freelance work, allowing for a comparative understanding of legal and economic frameworks across Europe. Drawing on these national contributions, collective research efforts, and qualitative interviews with freelancers and educators, the eBook aims to foster entrepreneurial thinking, increase awareness of self-employment opportunities, and support students in reflecting on their emerging professional identities.

In addition to its research-informed foundation, the eBook is designed as an accessible educational resource that addresses key preliminary questions about the nature of freelancing, with particular attention to its digital forms:

- Who is a freelancer?

- What legal protections do freelancers have across Europe?

- In what ways can digital freelancing support social and economic inclusion?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing a freelance career?

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the freelance market?

The first chapters of the eBook concentrate on defining freelancing and situating it within the broader context of contemporary labor trends. Freelancing is presented as a distinct form of self-employment characterized by flexible, contract-based work arrangements. Freelancers typically operate independently, earning income on a per-task or per-project basis rather than through salaried employment. The text explores the blurred boundaries between freelance work and related categories such as independent contractors and employees, emphasizing that freelancers may engage in diverse types of projects—ranging from one-time assignments to ongoing collaborations—often without long-term contractual obligations.

Unlike employees, freelancers are not entitled to employment benefits and must manage their own tax obligations, insurance, and retirement contributions. Their work is often mediated by digital platforms that facilitate matching with clients globally, enabling location-independent and remote work structures. In contrast to contractors, who may be temporarily integrated into an organization's structure or work on-site, freelancers typically maintain autonomy over when, where, and how their work is performed. Freelancers also differ from entrepreneurs in that they often operate solo, without employees, although they may outsource specific tasks or collaborate informally.

In providing this overview, the eBook highlights the significance of freelancing as a growing segment of the labor market. According to recent data, as of 2023, Italy had the highest number of self-employed workers in Europe,[1] followed by the United Kingdom, France, and Poland. In the United States, the freelance workforce has expanded significantly, with approximately 64 million Americans freelancing in 2023, representing 38% of the U.S. workforce.[2] Projections indicate that by 2028, the number of U.S. freelancers could reach 90.1 million, accounting for over half of the workforce.[3] Particular attention is paid to digital freelancing, which combines the entrepreneurial nature of freelance work with the technological infrastructure of the digital economy. Given its relevance for flexible career pathways and its alignment with students' need for adaptable, skill-building work experiences, the text argues that freelancing is an important topic to be addressed in higher education contexts.

The eBook underscores the multifaceted benefits of freelancing for both professionals and students. For the former, freelancing offers unparalleled flexibility, autonomy, and the opportunity to diversify income streams. By engaging with multiple clients, freelancers can mitigate the risks associated with reliance on a single employer, thereby enhancing job security. This diversification is particularly advantageous in times of economic uncertainty,

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[1] Cfr. *Self-employment in Europe 2023, by country | Statista*. (2023). Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1197059/self-employment-in-europe-by-country/ See also: *Self-Employment in Europe*. (2023, January 21). Landgeist. https://landgeist.com/2023/01/21/self-employment-in-europe/?utm_source=chatgpt.com. These figures represent the proportion of self-employed individuals relative to the total employed population within each country, not the absolute number of self-employed individuals.

[2] Cfr. *How Many Freelancers Are In the US? [Statistics for 2024] - Carry*. (2025, January 9). Carry. https://carry.com/learn/freelancing-statistics?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[3] Cfr. Statista. (2024). *Gig economy: number of freelancers in the U.S. 2017-2028*. Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/921593/gig-economy-number-of-freelancers-us/

as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-covid period characterized by what has been defined as the "Great Resignation" phenomenon.[4]

The pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work, with 48% of employees working from home by July 2020. This shift not only demonstrated the viability of remote work but also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of freelancers in navigating such transitions. In 2021, over 47 million Americans quit their jobs, citing reasons such as low pay, limited opportunities for advancement, and feeling disrespected at work. This mass exodus from traditional employment, a trend which continued in 2022-2023, although starting to level off, underscores a growing desire for more fulfilling and flexible work arrangements, with many former employees turning to freelancing as a viable alternative.

For students, freelancing presents a unique opportunity to apply academic knowledge to real-world projects, thereby enhancing learning through practical experience, gaining both financial independence and the opportunity to build a professional portfolio, while developing essential skills such as time management and client communication.

In summary, the eBook illustrates how freelancing serves as a dynamic and adaptable career path, offering significant advantages for both seasoned professionals seeking autonomy and students aspiring to gain practical experience and financial independence.

The structure and content reflect both empirical insights and theoretical frameworks gathered during the initial phases of the DiFree project. The Toolkit's core objective was to present, in a clear and accessible format, the skills and competences necessary for successfully initiating and managing a freelance career, particularly in an online context. For this reason, the eBook introduces key European policy frameworks - such as EntreComp, ESCO, and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) - to support learners in understanding the competences associated with digital freelancing.

The *DiFree eBook* draws on the *EntreComp* (Entrepreneurship Competence Framework) to outline the entrepreneurial skills and attitudes essential for success in freelance careers. Developed by the European Commission, EntreComp conceptualizes entrepreneurship as a transversal competence relevant not only in business but also in personal development, education, and civic engagement. The framework is structured

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[4] *Great Resignation*, a term coined by Professor Anthony Klotz (Texas A&M University) to describe the wave of workers quitting their jobs in search of better conditions, is generally recognized as a post-COVID phenomenon. Cfr. World Economic Forum. (2021). *What is the 'Great Resignation?' An expert explains*. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/11/what-is-the-great-resignation-and-what-can-we-learn-from-it/ and Parker, K., & Horowitz, J. M. (2022, March 9). *Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/

around three main competence areas—*Ideas and Opportunities*, *Resources*, and *Into Action*—each comprising five core competences. While the eBook does not systematically cite each EntreComp descriptor, many of the entrepreneurial traits it emphasizes - such as creativity, mobilizing resources, initiative, planning, and perseverance - reflect EntreComp's theoretical underpinnings. These competences are particularly evident in the sections dealing with self-promotion, home working, and self-management. The text positions these entrepreneurial attributes not only as professional tools, but as personal strategies for navigating uncertainty and self-employment. EntreComp continues to evolve through initiatives such as EntreComp4ALL and EntreComp Europe (2023–2024). Its relevance is further explored in Chapter 4 of this manual, which also introduces the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp) as another key policy framework supporting digital freelance readiness. While the Toolbox frequently emphasizes the importance of digital competences - such as remote collaboration, online platforms, time management with digital tools, and visibility through social media - these are not formally linked to the DigComp framework, the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens.

The eBook well references the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification to contextualize freelance professions within a broader European labor market taxonomy. ESCO, developed by the European Commission, serves as a multilingual framework that identifies and categorizes skills and competences relevant to specific occupations across EU member states. In the context of the eBook, ESCO is introduced to help learners and educators understand how freelancing roles are formally recognized and how transferable competences can be aligned with labor market expectations. The framework aids readers in situating freelance activities—such as content creation, translation, digital marketing, and web development - within clearly defined occupational profiles, thus bridging the gap between informal, self-directed work and formal employment structures. Moreover, ESCO serves as a useful tool for building a CV or e-portfolio that speaks the language of recruiters and institutions across Europe.

In addition, the eBook briefly addresses the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to underline the importance of aligning freelance competences with standardized levels of educational attainment and training across Europe. The EQF offers a shared reference point linking national qualifications systems across EU countries, facilitating transparency, comparability, and recognition of skills and learning outcomes. Although freelancers often acquire skills through non-formal or informal learning pathways, the EQF offers a structure to describe these learning achievements in a way that is both comprehensible and transferable across borders. The eBook highlights how entrepreneurial and digital competences - though not always linked to formal certification—can be mapped to EQF levels to help freelancers articulate their value in both national and international markets.

This is especially relevant for students and early-career professionals looking to enhance their mobility and employability in an increasingly interconnected freelance economy

The central chapters of the ebook broaden the scope of discussion to include the regulatory and institutional environment in which freelancing takes place. Special emphasis is placed on national legislation and the evolving European legal framework affecting self-employed professionals. Each project partner contributed an overview of their country's national laws regarding self-employment, including fiscal responsibilities, social protection, and contractual norms. This comparative approach enables learners to grasp the diversity and commonalities of freelance regulation across Europe and to appreciate the challenges posed by a lack of harmonized legislation for cross-border freelance activity.

At the European level, the legal definition and protection of self-employed workers remain underdeveloped. Freelancers are not consistently categorized within EU labor law, which tends to focus on salaried employment. Notably, self-employed individuals can only have their professional qualifications automatically recognized in another Member State if they already have access to the same profession in their home country and meet the conditions outlined in Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications. This lack of harmonization presents barriers to professional mobility and legal certainty for freelancers seeking to offer services across borders.

The *DiFree eBook* connects this regulatory gap to broader developments in the European single market. Since its inception with the Treaty of Rome in 1958, the internal market has aimed to remove barriers to the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people - commonly known as the "four freedoms." Over time, foundational rulings by the Court of Justice of the European Union and legislative milestones like the Single European Act (1987) and the Single Market Act II (2012) have progressively expanded and deepened the internal market. These reforms have facilitated access to professional opportunities across borders, improved consumer protections, and stimulated digital innovation.

Particularly relevant to freelancers is the 2015 Digital Single Market Strategy, which established the groundwork for a unified European digital economy. This strategy promotes cross-border e-commerce, reduces unjustified geo-blocking, and seeks to ensure portability of online content, all of which enhance the ability of freelancers to operate across member states. Later communications, such as the 2015 "Upgrading the Single Market" initiative, aimed to generate practical benefits for professionals and consumers by fostering mobility, simplifying access to finance, and enabling digital entrepreneurship.

While the single market has created more favorable conditions for freelancers, including greater access to international clients and digital platforms, it has not yet resolved

critical issues such as taxation complexity, fragmented recognition of qualifications, and lack of social protection.

At the time the first edition of the *How to Freelance Online* eBook was published in May 2023, there was no comprehensive EU legislation specifically addressing the status and rights of platform workers. However, in October 2024, the European Union adopted Directive (EU) 2024/2831, commonly referred to as the Platform Work Directive. This landmark legislation establishes a legal presumption of employment for platform workers, mandates algorithmic transparency, and reinforces data protection obligations for digital labor platforms. The directive marks a turning point in EU labor policy by offering stronger protection and greater clarity for millions of individuals engaged in freelance and platform-based work. Member States are required to transpose the directive into national law by December 2026. This development underscores the increasing recognition of freelancing and platform work within the EU's broader strategy for labor market modernization and digital inclusion.

The remaining chapters of the eBook focus on DiFree partner countries' national legislation and on digitalization and freelancing fostering mobility, inclusion and occupation for people with disabilities. Finally, the last section combines theoretical insights with practical tips and references, aiming to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application. While the first edition was rich in content, it was primarily informative and did not yet include interactive learning features or pedagogical resources, which have been added in the form of reading comprehension tests with open and close question, vocabulary exercises in the second edition. This has offered the authoring team an opportunity to provide an overview of major freelancing platforms and their role in the gig economy. Both editions are freely downloadable from the DiFree project website.

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Conceptualizing and Constructing the DiFree Repository: A Multimodal Library in Open Source

Anna Romagnuolo[5]
UNITUS/ UNIOR

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[5] When I began coordinating the scientific production of the DiFree team, I was a member of the academic staff at the University of Tuscia (UNITUS). Toward the end of the project, I was transferred to the University of Naples "L'Orientale," from where I have continued to coordinate and support the project's development and implementation.

Conceptualizing and Constructing the DiFree Repository: A Multimodal Library in Open Source

The DiFree Repository is the second product result of the DiFree Project, publicly available via the project website ([All docs – DiFree Project](#)). It is conceptualized not merely as a storage platform but as a fully-fledged Open Educational Resource (OER) in its own right. Founded on the principles set forth in the 2012 Paris OER Declaration and operationalized through David Wiley's (2017) 5Rs - retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute - the repository is designed to ensure both technical access and pedagogical adaptability across linguistic and cultural boundaries. It includes not only downloadable content (CVs, portfolio templates, video resumes) but also editable, interactive templates that users can adapt to their own professional trajectories. This makes the repository a "living archive", supporting the creation of derivative works and encouraging iterative engagement from diverse users, including early-career freelancers and experienced professionals.

Its design is the result of a multiphase process:

1. a review of existing literature on repositories and Open Educational Resources (OERs);

2. a survey of ready-made materials already available on the web, followed by the collection and cultural adaptation of selected models;

3. the development of a complementary e-learning course in reading and writing, aimed at helping users, both teachers and (aspiring) freelancers, tailor the provided samples to their personal and professional goals.

Literature Review: An Analysis of Existing Configurations

In the evolving landscape of digital knowledge management, repositories have emerged as critical infrastructures for the storage, dissemination, and preservation of educational and research materials. At their core, repositories are understood as structured digital environments that collect, manage, preserve, and provide access to digital objects and their associated metadata (Clobridge, 2010; Witten, Bainbridge, & Nichols, 2010). While initially conceptualized as institutional tools for archiving scholarly output, repositories have since expanded to encompass a broad range of models and functions. They are now integral to OER ecosystems, research communication, metadata standardization, and user-driven content organization (Marco, 2000; Sarker, Davis, & Tiropanis, 2010). As Witten, Bainbridge, and Nichols (2010) assert, repositories are more than passive containers; they are dynamic frameworks that structure access to knowledge while supporting its continuous enrichment and recontextualization. In this light, repositories must be understood not only through their technical architecture, but also through their epistemological, pedagogical, and sociotechnical implications.

As to their design, Federico Meschini (2018) provides a foundational yet pragmatically nuanced definition of a repository, describing it as a "low-level digital library", a structured "warehouse" for digital objects and their metadata. While this may appear reductive at first glance, the complexity increases when considering content type, access granularity, metadata schema, and system functionality. The essential structure of a repository thus consists of a triad: digital objects, metadata, and functions, upon which higher-level applications such as search, visualization, and user interaction are constructed. These three components determine both the archtecture and the capability of any given repository, shaping decisions around granularity of access, data types supported, and user interactivity. The balance among these components significantly impacts the kind of services a repository can offer, whether it serves merely as an archival space or functions as an OER, research dissemination tool, or lifelong learning hub.

Several structures have been proposed for repositories. One of the most mature and widely adopted is the federated model, exemplified by systems like DSpace and Fedora, which provide a modular architecture capable of integrating disparate collections and metadata schemas (Sarker, Davis, & Tiropanis, 2010). Other significant contributions to repository architecture include the 5S model (Streams, Structures, Spaces, Scenarios, and Societies), a formal framework that offers a mathematical and conceptual foundation for the organization and analysis of digital libraries and repositories (Gonçalves et al., 2004). Although such formal models may appear abstract or detached from immediate practical applications, they are essential in providing a common language for evaluating repository systems, especially regarding interoperability and scalability.

In terms of function, repositories can be classified according to their primary purpose. Clobridge (2010) identifies a range of functions that a repository may fulfill, particularly in institutions with limited resources. These include supporting teaching and research, promoting institutional visibility, enabling preservation, and fostering collaboration. She underscores the critical importance of aligning repository development with the institution's strategic objectives and available technical expertise. Her work also highlights the sociological aspects of repository implementation, emphasizing the necessity of cross-institutional cooperation, staff engagement, and gradual iteration rather than top-down mandates.

The value of repositories is perhaps mostly visible in the domain of higher education. Sarker et al. (2010) provide an exhaustive analysis of how institutional repositories can serve as strategic tools for responding to higher education challenges, such as student retention, curriculum alignment, employability, and accreditation. They propose a classification of repositories based on content type - course information, teaching materials, research output, student records, and more - and whether each type should be shared externally or kept within institutional boundaries. This functional segmentation supports the idea that repositories should not be monolithic but rather carefully layered systems with nuanced access policies.

However, as repositories grow in scale and ambition, challenges related to metadata become increasingly significant. In his comprehensive guide on metadata repositories, Marco (2000) emphasizes that metadata are not merely descriptive but also operational: they facilitate data quality, interoperability, and discoverability. He proposes a lifecycle approach to metadata management, encompassing standards selection, tool evaluation, architecture development, and delivery strategies, and warns against the risks of "metadata chaos", a condition wherein inconsistent, poorly governed metadata structures hinder knowledge retrieval.

These issues are closely connected to several efforts in Europe to improve how research and digital content are shared and organized. Two important initiatives, DRIVER and DRIVER II, highlighted the importance of building repositories that work well with other systems and platforms across Europe (Vernooy-Gerritsen, 2009). They focused on making repositories compatible with common standards, like the Common European Research Information Format (CERIF) and the Open Archives Initiative (OAI), so that information can be easily exchanged and reused.

From a user-experience perspective, interface design also plays a pivotal role. Wu et al. (2014), in their study on digital libraries for children, emphasize the necessity of age-appropriate, intuitive interfaces that reflect users' cognitive models and information-seeking

behaviors. Although their focus is on children, the principles they articulate - iconic representation, wayfinding, and visual categorization - are broadly applicable to any repository aimed at non-specialist audiences. This is especially important in OER contexts like DiFree, which target adult learners and job seekers with varying levels of digital literacy.

Contemporary repository design is also increasingly shaped by technological shifts toward cloud computing. Bogucki (2021) outlines the rationale for moving digital repositories to the cloud, especially in light of pandemic-induced disruptions. Cloud-based repositories offer advantages in scalability, remote access, and cost-efficiency, but also raise concerns about data sovereignty, vendor lock-in, and long-term preservation. Bogucki suggests that the resilience of educational institutions now depends, in part, on their ability to deploy distributed, cloud-based knowledge infrastructures, which have been used for the realization of the e-learning course associated with the Repository.

Furthermore, the sustainability and credibility of repositories depend on trust, both in their governance and their data management practices. The TRUST principles - Transparency, Responsibility, User Focus, Sustainability, and Technology - proposed by Lin et al. (2020), are now widely recognized as foundational for assessing repository integrity. They complement the FAIR data paradigm (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) by emphasizing human-centered governance alongside machine-readable standards. Together, TRUST and FAIR provide a dual lens for evaluating repository design, especially in OER contexts where data ethics and user empowerment are paramount.

Repositories are also increasingly recognized not only as technical infrastructures for digital preservation and access but also as cultural artifacts. These systems are not neutral containers but are shaped by disciplinary norms, institutional ideologies, and epistemological assumptions that determine what is curated, how it is classified, and which narratives are made visible or obscured (Ketelaar, 2001; Agre, 2004). The selection of a document worthy of preservation is itself culturally and historically contingent, often reflecting dominant knowledge paradigms and professional standards within specific contexts (Srinivasan, Becvar, Boast, & Enote, 2009). This perspective could not be overlooked when deciding the form and content of the DiFree Repository, which, by Grant agreement, was required to collect CVs and resumes in multilingual formats[6], and which, to be effective had to be not only linguistically translated but culturally localized during the drafting process. As observed in scholarly research, a repository becomes a site of cultural

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[6] The DiFree Grant Agreement states: "The repository will include easily accessible, interactive, modifiable CV templates and resume models suitable to entry-level positions in different sectors of the freelance job market. […] The repository will allow the insertion of a multilingual version of the models provided (for future developments and follow-up of the project)", p. 59.

negotiation, where varied semantic structures, professional norms, and rhetorical expectations (such as those surrounding self-presentation or credential framing) must be reconciled. Metadata schemas, interface design, document structure, and even default values are influenced by context-dependent, functional and conditional values (Wang & White, 1999). The Repository should also mediate between local professional traditions, transnational interoperability standards and multipurpose students' and teachers' usage, particularly in in terms of adaptability and localization (Romagnuolo 2018).

Defining Open Educational Resources: Foundations for the DiFree Repository

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are teaching, learning, and research materials that can include not only digital content but also print, audio, and hybrid formats and reside in the public domain or are openly licensed to allow free access, use, adaptation, and redistribution (UNESCO, 2015). Introduced during a 2002 UNESCO forum, they have evolved into a global movement promoting open access to educational content through digital technologies and a shared ethos of knowledge as a public good (Hylén, 2006; Wiley & Gurrell, 2009).

At the heart of their model lies Wiley's 5R framework - retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute. This distinguishes OERs from other digital resources by enabling legal and pedagogical flexibility (Wiley & Hilton, 2018), which, as Bliss and Smith (2017) note, reflect OER broader shift toward collaborative, ethical, and adaptive education. However, openness does not mean the absence of constraints. As Butcher (2015) explains, OERs operate within legal, technical, and social frameworks that shape their use. Creative Commons licenses, for example, allow creators to define conditions such as attribution or non-commercial use (Hylén, 2006; OECD, 2007).

Pedagogically, OERs support resource-based learning, promoting active, personalized, and learner-centered education. This has been the inspiring principle for the DiFree Repository, which functions as an OER platform by offering modular, adaptable, and multilingual resources - CV templates, portfolios, video resumes, and job-seeking guides, localized to potentially meet the needs of DiFree partners' countries' users. From a pedagogical point of view, repositories of OERs (ROERs) must also support discoverability, reusability, and alignment with educational goals.

The provision of CV and resume templates at entry-level, mid-career, and senior levels not only reflects users' varying stages of professional development but also

introduces increasing linguistic complexity. As professional experience deepens, so too does the technical specificity and rhetorical sophistication required in self-presentation. Entry-level templates rely on more general vocabulary and simpler syntactic structures, while mid-career and senior-level models incorporate domain-specific terminology, discipline-bound phraseology, and more nuanced expressions of achievement, leadership, and specialization. This progression from entry-level to senior-level CV and resume templates within the DiFree Repository not only reflects career trajectories but also introduces a gradual increase in linguistic and cognitive complexity. It mirrors key principles of scaffolding in educational design, whereby learners are supported through increasingly challenging tasks that develop both content knowledge and linguistic proficiency, while also familiarizing them with the discourse conventions of more advanced professional communities.

Even though the original project proposal did not explicitly adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a guiding model, the repository's structure implicitly aligns with its logic. As users engage with more advanced templates, especially with those tailored to senior-level professionals, they encounter richer vocabulary, specialized terminology, and more rhetorically complex language, all of which demand higher levels of language competence. This design choice acknowledges the multilingual realities and international mobility of digital freelancers, who often operate across linguistic and cultural borders.

Recognizing this need, the repository has been further complemented by the Moodle-based course *From Job Hunting to Cold Pitching*, freely accessible from the DiFree home page (DiFree Project – Digital Freelancing), which provides additional guidance on language use, professional writing strategies, and self-presentation tailored to the global gig economy.

The course (Fig. 1) is structured into four interconnected modules that guide learners through the evolving landscape of freelance employment. Module 1, *Types of Jobs*, introduces the changing world of work through three key units: *The Future of Jobs*, *Different Job Types*, and *Self-employment: Pros and Cons*. It offers foundational insights into various employment forms, with a particular focus on freelance and self-directed careers. Module 2, *The Skills You Should Have*, centers on personal and professional development. In *Unit 1*, learners engage with interactive self-assessment tools based on five major European competence frameworks: DigComp (Digital Competence), EntreComp (Entrepreneurship), ESCO (Occupational Classification), EQF (Qualifications), and CEFR (Language Proficiency). This is followed by *Unit 2: How to Develop Your Skills* and *Unit 3: How to Evaluate Your Skills*, which encourage learners to reflect on their strengths and

identify areas for growth. Module 3, *Job Hunting*, provides practical tools and strategies for entering the job market. It includes *Unit 1: Where to Find a Job*, *Unit 2: How to Market Yourself*, and *Unit 3: Job Hunting Strategies*. A wide range of resources—such as editable CV/resume samples, portfolio templates, video CV examples, professional phraseology, and vocabulary tests—support learners in presenting themselves confidently to potential employers. The module also addresses *The Application Process* and *The Interview*, supplemented by curated external reading materials. Finally, Module 4, *Cold Pitching*, prepares learners for proactive engagement in freelance work through three thematic units: *Understanding the Basics of Freelance Jobs*, *How to Write a Personal Brand Story*, and *What Is Business Etiquette?*. This module emphasizes self-marketing, storytelling, and soft skills essential for thriving in the gig economy. The course concludes with a final quiz on self-employment, designed to test integrated knowledge acquired throughout the course.

Figure 1 – Sample exercises and interface from the DiFree Moodle course From Job Hunting to Cold Pitching

In addition to consolidating topics introduced in other DiFree resources, such as the competence frameworks presented in the eBook and the Self-Assessment Tool, the course also includes readings that delve more deeply into the realities of freelance professions. It explores new areas not previously covered, particularly the writing and communication skills necessary for successful freelance job hunting, which go beyond the ability to draft a multilingual CV or résumé, encompassing more advanced strategies such as cold pitching, personal branding, and persuasive self-presentation. These skills are essential for navigating client outreach and securing work in competitive freelance markets.

Together, the Repository and the Moodle course help bridge the gap between career development and language competence, which is an essential, yet often under-addressed dimension in ESP and EAP textbooks. Due to the lack of educational material on writing for Freelancers,[7] it would have been insufficient to provide templates alone - no matter how well-designed - without also empowering users, particularly non-native English speakers, to develop the linguistic skills needed to personalize, adapt, and reuse these materials over time and across contexts. Unlike the countless downloadable samples available online, many of which are generic, linguistically inaccessible, or poorly aligned with the realities of early-career professionals, the DiFree Repository is purposefully scaffolded to ensure users can engage with the materials not just as static forms, but as adaptable communicative tools. This dual focus - on content and language - responds to the complex demands placed on freelancers who must continuously tailor their self-presentation for diverse international audiences, platforms, and purposes.

Repository Content

Although the Grant Agreement only required "easily accessible, interactive, modifiable CV templates and resume models suitable to entry-level positions in different sectors of the freelance job market" (p. 59), the UNITUS team decided to provide a more comprehensive collection of ready-made materials also for mid-career and more experienced professionals. These are intended for use by freelancers in later-life cold pitching activities and proposal submissions. As of now, the website hosts 469 multilingual files covering the following professions: Accountant, Architect, Copywriter, Editor, Graphic Designer, IT Specialist, Journalist, Photographer, Psychologist, Students, Teacher, Translator, Virtual Assistant. Each profession is intended as an *umbrella term* covering related job occupations—for example, the *Architect* templates can be adapted to compile CV/resumes for surveyors, building renovators, and interior designers; the *Translator* templates are adaptable to sketch the educational background of interpreters, linguists, and intercultural mediators. For every profession, three professional levels are represented: one template for graduate students with no or little work experience, one for entry-level positions and one for mid-career professionals. Additionally, three CV/resume

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[7] The author was able to find only a few blogs and brief webpage content on cold pitching strategies containing writing tips, as Powerful Cold Pitching Strategies Every New Freelancer Should Master | by Creative Design | ILLUMINATION | Medium and How to Cold Pitch…the Right Way — MACE Writing.

formats have been created for each profile: a European CV style, a reverse chronological resume, and a non-traditional format, pragmatically labeled "colorful style".

These files are available in six languages: English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and (partially) Greek. For Greek, only the three basic templates (graduate student, early career, mid-career) are provided due to the difficulty of accurately formatting machine-translated content in a language not known by the repository's curators.

For now the Repository contains:

- 5 Portfolio templates: for architect, graphic designer, photographer, and virtual assistant, and for a generic use.
- 12 profession-specific vocabulary files in English, offering relevant technical language and phraseology for: accountant, architect, copywriter, editor, graphic designer, IT specialist, journalist, photographer, psychologist, teacher, translator, and virtual assistant
- 60 CV/resume files per language (English, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese), totaling 300 CV/resume documents. Moreover, a dedicated folder with 31 senior-level resumes has also been created for future uploads.
- A Soft Skills List and an Adjective and Verbs List in English has been added for each profession.

Since in the gig economy the video-cv modality is increasingly used as a means of personal branding, a DiFree Drive folder has been created for 41 Video CVs, collected from YouTube, which show the does and don'ts of personal branding in video. These are distributed as follows: (3) Accountant, (4) Architect, (2) Copywriter, (5) Graphic Designer, (4) Photographer, (2) Psychologist, (4) Students, (3) Teacher, (4) Translator, (4) Virtual Assistant.

Key technical features include: a global search function that allows users to retrieve templates by profession; a language filter for selecting materials in the desired language; download tracking and user activity logs; dedicated landing pages for each document, complete with optional descriptions, previews, and download links. The repository also provides direct links to ESCO Occupational Descriptions and the DOT Crosswalk for international job classification support.

What, then, is the DiFree Repository?

By adhering to Creative Commons licensing and ensuring that all templates and resources are modular, remixable, and language-adaptable, the DiFree Repository meets the operational definition of an OER (Bliss & Smith, 2017). It is a cultural collection of multilingual digital objects (audio- video, images, or text-based documents), whose textual elements have required some form of localization and adaptation. The localized versions of CV templates/resumes emphasize the repository's commitment to cultural inclusivity and pedagogical relevance, aligning with global standards of equity and access in lifelong learning. Thus, the DiFree Repository should be understood as a culturally situated knowledge infrastructure, which not only stores documents but also mediates between diverse linguistic, cultural, and professional frameworks. In this sense, the DiFree Repository does not merely "store" resources—it generates access, enables transformation, and bridges linguistic and professional divides. As such, it represents a new generation of open, adaptive, and culturally responsive OERs designed to meet the needs of 21st-century freelance workers across Europe and beyond.

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The DiFree Mentoring Program: Empowering Freelancers through Guided Mentoring

Prof. Anabela Mesquita, Paulino M. Leite da Silva, Luciana Olivera, Joana Araújo,
Adriana José de Oliveira, Olímpio Castilho, António J. Abreu Silva
ISCAP – Polytechnic Institute of Porto

The DiFree Mentoring Program: Empowering Freelancers through Guided Mentoring

The DiFree Mentoring Program represents one of the key deliverables of the Erasmus+ project "DiFree – Digital Freelancing for Higher Education Students and Recent Graduates." This modular video-course has been developed by the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (ISCAP) and aims to promote mentoring as a pedagogical and professional development tool for students, recent graduates, and aspiring digital freelancers. The course is hosted on ISCAP's Moodle platform and can be accessed through the DiFree project webpage using the following guest credentials: Username: difree_guest | Password: DI_free789.

Purpose and Pedagogical Rationale

The main goal of the Mentoring Program is to foster a culture of mentoring in higher education and to prepare both mentors and mentees for meaningful engagement in the digital freelance economy. By presenting clear and practical guidance for structuring and managing mentoring relationships, the course empowers young professionals to navigate their career paths more effectively and equips educators and experienced professionals with the tools needed to become impactful mentors. Mentoring is presented not only as a means of personal and professional development but also as a mutually enriching exchange that fosters skill-sharing, resilience, and confidence in navigating today's dynamic labor market.

The development of the program was not accomplished without overcoming challenges. Designing and implementing the mentoring program within this international project presented a series of difficulties that demanded strategic thinking, intercultural awareness, and close cooperation among partners. However, from the outset, the goal was clear: to develop a program that supports both mentees and mentors, not only by offering structured knowledge but also by nurturing meaningful mentoring relationships grounded in reciprocity and reflection.

The process began with a thorough search and analysis of existing mentoring and freelancing courses. One key observation stood out: while many resources focused on

preparing mentees, very few offered guidance for mentors or recognized the importance of preparing both roles for a productive and mutually beneficial relationship. This insight became the foundation for a program that embraces both perspectives and positions the mentoring dynamic as a two-way process of learning and development.

A central difficulty was the design of a pedagogically sound and modular structure that could be relevant across diverse cultural, linguistic, and professional contexts. The result was a program divided into six thematic sections (Fig. 1), supported by 15 instructional videos, each accompanied by a slide presentation and a full script. Every video explores essential dimensions of mentoring and digital freelancing, blending theory with practice in a way that is accessible and adaptable.

Recognizing the importance of multilingual accessibility, all video scripts were translated into five languages, a process that required more than linguistic accuracy - it demanded cultural sensitivity. To reinforce understanding and engagement, each video is followed by a quiz containing ten multiple-choice questions. Developing these assessments required careful attention to fairness, clarity, and consistency. The quizzes are not only tools for validation, but also opportunities for learners to consolidate key messages and reflect on their learning.

Another crucial element in the program's implementation is the use of an initial Moodle forum, designed to welcome participants and foster a sense of community from the very beginning. In this space, participants are invited to introduce themselves—sharing their name, location, and professional or academic background. They are encouraged to state whether they are joining as a mentor, mentee, or both, and to express what they hope to gain from the experience. A light-hearted prompt also invites participants to share a fun fact, hobby, or interesting story, helping to create a warm and engaging atmosphere. This forum plays a vital role in breaking the ice, encouraging early interaction, and laying the groundwork for trust and openness throughout the program.

Finally, the program includes a feedback questionnaire at the end of the course. This instrument is key to understanding participants' experiences, gathering insights for improvement, and ensuring that the course evolves in response to real needs and expectations. The feedback process reinforces the reflective dimension of the mentoring journey and supports the continuous enhancement of the project's quality.

Target Audience

The course is primarily addressed to:

- Students and recent graduates preparing to enter the freelance or remote work landscape.
- Early-stage freelancers seeking structured guidance.
- Higher education instructors, trainers, and career counselors interested in incorporating mentoring into their support practices.
- Professionals or freelancers willing to take on mentoring roles and contribute to the growth of a new generation of independent workers.

Course Access and Structure

The DiFree Mentoring Program is structured into eight thematic sections, each consisting of 1–3 video-lessons (for a total of 15 videos), accompanied by downloadable slides presentations and short quizzes to reinforce learning. All video content is recorded in English and supported by full transcripts translated into the languages of the project partners - Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. While the course encourages a linear progression to support deeper learning, users are free to navigate the modules at their own pace, allowing for a flexible and personalized learning experience.

A summary video introduces the program and objectives, while a final reflection video and post-course questionnaire help learners consolidate the experience. Real-life interviews embedded in the video lessons offer authentic, experience-based insights that complement theoretical content and provide practical illustrations of effective mentoring.

> *Figure 1 -* **Overview of the Mentoring Course Sections and Content**
>
> 1. **Introduction**
>   - o *Introductory Video* — outlines the goals and methodology of the course.
> 2. **Main Concepts**
>   - o Explores the differences between mentoring, coaching, and tutoring.
>   - o Defines key mentoring principles and values.
>   - o Quiz and slides included.
> 3. **The Relevance of Mentoring**
>   - o Discusses mentoring as a career development tool.
>   - o Examines the different types of mentoring relationships (peer, reverse, group mentoring, etc.).
>   - o Includes materials on motivation and benefits for both parties.
> 4. **Mentoring for Development**
>   - o Focuses on the business and organizational value of mentoring.
>   - o Defines clear objectives for structured mentorship programs.
>   - o Provides answers to frequently asked questions, especially by mentors.
> 5. **Mentor–Mentee Relationship**
>   - o Offers operational guidance for handling requests for mentorship.
>   - o Describes the process for forming mentoring pairs.
>   - o Clarifies the roles and responsibilities of both mentor and mentee.
> 6. **Meetings Between Mentor and Mentee**
>   - o Focuses on how to prepare for and conduct effective mentoring sessions.
>   - o Covers the first meeting, development meetings, and the final meeting.
>   - o Offers best practices for evaluation and closure.
> 7. **Key Mentoring Skills**
>   - o Emphasizes communication, empathy, leadership, and emotional intelligence.
>   - o Encourages reflective practice and adaptation to mentees' evolving needs.
> 8. **Conclusion and Testimonial Videos**
>   - o Recaps key takeaways.
>   - o Ends with a self-reflection questionnaire.

Academic Relevance and European Alignment

The program promotes mentoring as a valuable soft skill and pedagogical practice in higher education. It directly contributes to DiFree's broader mission of supporting youth employability, fostering career autonomy, and contributing to innovation in teaching practices across Europe. By aligning with the European Commission frameworks for digital and entrepreneurial competences (DIGCOMP and ENTRECOMP), the course ensures coherence with key EU education strategies.

Furthermore, it reflects current educational policy recommendations from the Counsil of the European Union, particularly in relation to blended[8] and flexible learning

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[8] See for example the *Council Recommendation on blended learning approaches for high-quality and inclusive primary and secondary education*, Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27.

arrangements and inclusive pathways to student success.[9] These frameworks recognize mentoring as a key mechanism for offering personalized support, especially for students with learning difficulties. The program is also consistend with the aims of the European Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring, [10]which higlights the importance of quality mentoring in both academic and career development.

Impact and Transferability

The DiFree Mentoring Program plays a transformative role by creating a dynamic and supportive environment for emerging digital freelancers, helping to develop learners' professional identity and readiness for the freelance labor market. Educators and institutions can reuse or adapt the course's practical templates and scripts to suit their own mentoring initiatives.

The course is explicitly designed not only to guide and empower mentees but also to prepare and strengthen mentors: the program ensures that both sides of the mentoring relationship benefit from structured, reflective, and well-supported interactions. This dual focus enhances the overall quality and sustainability of the mentoring process. The program is framed as a catalyst for personal and professional development. For mentees, it offers guidance, confidence-building, and contextualized learning opportunities. For mentors, it provides a framework for sharing expertise effectively, developing leadership and communication skills, and gaining insights from new perspectives.

The program promotes reciprocity, emphasizing that mentoring is not a one-way transfer of knowledge, but a collaborative relationship that evolves through trust, empathy, and shared learning. By fostering this two-way growth, the mentoring program contributes meaningfully to the international project's aim of equipping digital freelancers with both the technical tools and human support systems they need to thrive.

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[9] Adopted in 2022, it encourages school intervention measures, such as mentoring schemes and peer mentoring, among others, to provide "support to all learners facing learning difficulties or at risk of underachievement". Cfr. COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success and replacing the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving, *Official Journal of the European Union*, p. 11.

[10] Cfr. Home - mentoringeurope.eu

The Mentoring Program Within the Broader DiFree Framework

The Mentoring Program integrates and complements the other outputs of the project in multiple ways. First, mentors and mentees are encouraged to engage with the Toolbox *How to freelance online*, using its contents to identify key learning priorities, skill gaps and practical challenges to address. The Toolbox serves as a foundational resource that mentors can tailor to each mentee's goals, offering a structured framework for sessions while leaving room for personalization and flexibility.

In addition, the repository of templates, digital CVs, and e-portfolios is actively incorporated into the mentoring process. Mentors guide mentees in selecting and adapting these materials, providing feedback on how to present themselves professionally, communicate their strengths, and meet the expectations of international digital marketplaces. Through this process, standardized templates become personalized tools for self-expression, branding, and career development.

The self-evaluation and vocational assessment tools developed in the project also play a critical role. Mentors assist mentees in interpreting the results, promoting reflection on their professional identity and helping them define realistic, motivating career goals. This reflective approach deepens self-awareness and ensures that the mentoring relationship remains aligned with each mentee's personal aspirations and potential. Moreover, the mentoring program is closely linked to the Freelancers Hub, a digital space created by DiFree, where participants can continue the mentoring dialogue, access curated resources, and engage with a broader community of peers. Mentors may use the Hub to facilitate group discussions, host Q&A sessions, or follow-up asynchronously, thus ensuring continuity between one-on-one mentoring and community-based learning environments.

Finally, the mentoring experience feeds directly into the Transferability Manual by generating real-world insights, documented challenges, and success stories. These contributions help shape a set of transferable practices for broader use in higher education and professional training. For instance, testimonials and reflections shared by mentors during the Multiplier Event held in Porto have already informed recommendations for adapting and sustaining the program in different contexts. In this way, mentors also act as key contributors to the broader goals of DiFree, helping to document what works and providing guidance for future implementations.

Conclusion

The DiFree Mentoring Program stands as a flexible, multilingual, and engaging tool to strengthen mentoring practices in higher education and beyond. It is particularly well-suited for universities, training organizations, and professional networks seeking to enhance the digital, interpersonal, and entrepreneurial competences of Europe's emerging freelance workforce.

Through participation in the program, learners will gain a clear understanding of what mentoring is and how it differs from related concepts such as coaching and tutoring. They will also come to recognize the mutual value created through mentoring, especially in the context of digital and freelance work environments.

They will gain knowledge of the principles, goals, and types of mentoring relationships. In addition, they will learn how to structure and conduct effective mentoring sessions, ensuring that each stage of the process - initiation, development, and closure— is carried out with purpose and clarity.

Finally, the program supports the development of key interpersonal and communication skills. By its conclusion, learners will be equipped not only to participate in a mentoring relationship but also to guide it constructively and meaningfully, creating lasting impact for both mentor and mentee.

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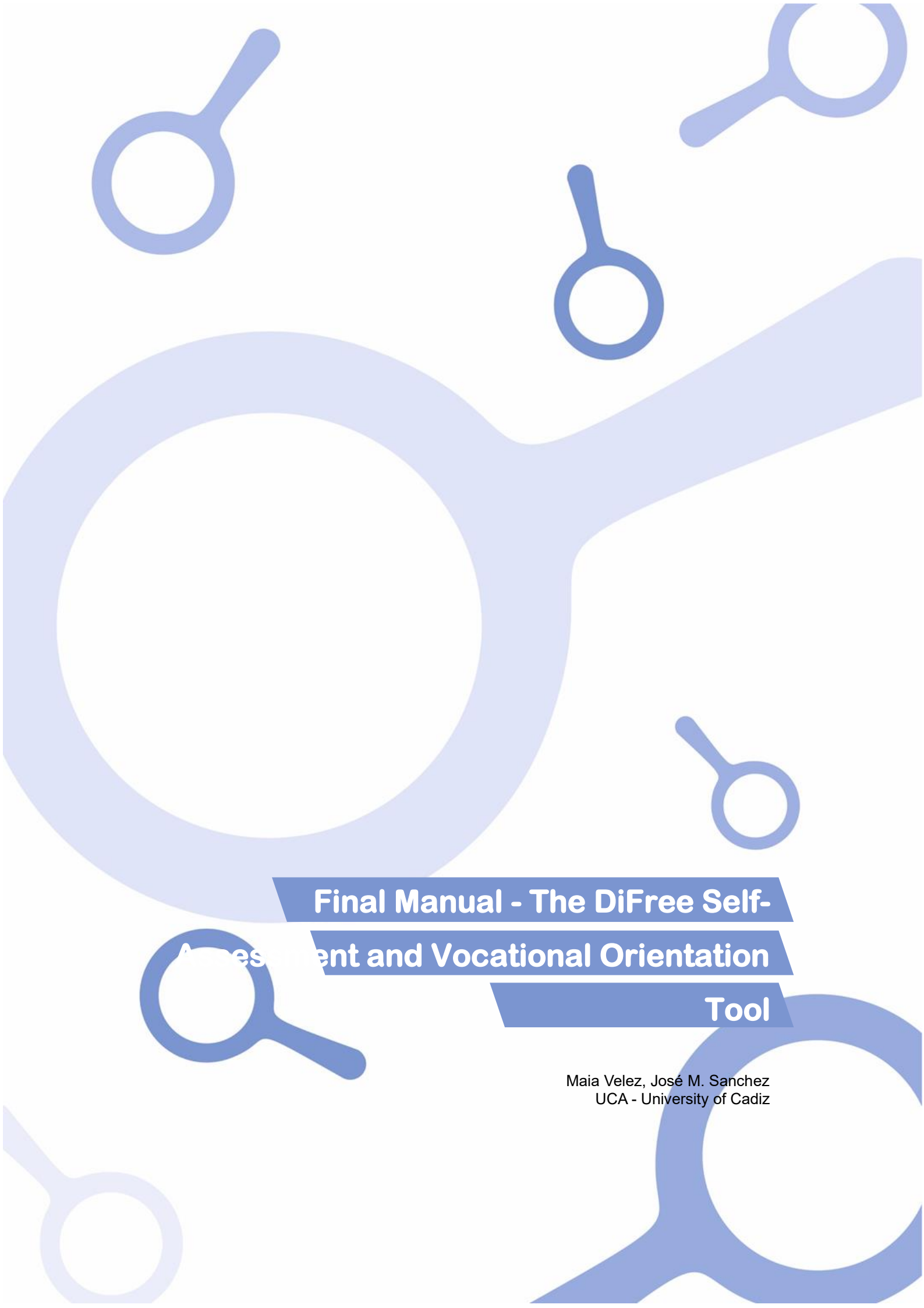
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Final Manual - The DiFree Self-Assessment and Vocational Orientation Tool

Maia Velez, José M. Sanchez
UCA - University of Cadiz

Final Manual - The DiFree Self-Assessment and Vocational Orientation Tool

One of the key intellectual outputs of the DiFree project is the Self-Assessment and Vocational Orientation Tool, a digital resource designed to support students and aspiring freelancers in evaluating their readiness for the digital freelance economy. Developed and tested by the University of Cádiz in collaboration with the project partners, this tool reflects the project's wider commitment to empowering individuals with the self-awareness, skills, and guidance necessary to navigate today's rapidly changing labor markets.

It has been conceived not as a standalone product, but as a foundational element within a broader ecosystem of resources developed by the DiFree project. Its results can inform and personalize the use of other outputs, such as the Mentorship Program and the "How to Freelance Online" Toolbox. For instance, mentees and mentors can refer to the tool's diagnostic report to identify priority areas for growth, set targeted goals, and monitor progress during the mentoring journey. Likewise, users can draw on their self-assessment insights to navigate the Toolbox more effectively, selecting relevant templates, tutorials, and practical materials that align with their current competence levels. By connecting reflective self-evaluation with tailored learning and support, the tool contributes to a cohesive learner-centered approach and enhances the overall impact and transferability of the DiFree methodology across diverse learning environments.

Theoretical Frameworks: EntreComp and DigComp

The DiFree Self-Evaluation & Self-Vocational Assessment Tool is conceptually grounded in two key competence frameworks developed under the auspices of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC): EntreComp (the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework) and DigComp (the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens). Both were designed as part of the EU's broader agenda to support lifelong learning, employability, innovation, and social inclusion in response to the evolving demands of the 21st-century labor market. These frameworks provide structured, research-

informed models for understanding and developing key skills required for professional autonomy and personal growth—particularly within the digital and freelance economies.

EntreComp, first introduced in 2016 by Bacigalupo et al., presents entrepreneurship as a transversal competence applicable across all spheres of life—not only in business creation, but also in employment, education, civic engagement, and personal development. The framework identifies 15 key competences grouped into three overarching areas: *Ideas and Opportunities*, *Resources*, and *Into Action*. Its open and flexible structure enables its use in curriculum design, policy development, career guidance, and self-assessment initiatives. EntreComp emphasizes value creation in a broad sense—economic, cultural, or social—and highlights entrepreneurial learning as a lifelong, inclusive, and adaptable process.

DigComp, first launched in 2013 and most recently updated to DigComp 2.2 in 2022 (Vuorikari et al.), was developed to support European citizens in acquiring and improving their digital competences for active participation in the knowledge society. It defines digital competence as the confident, critical, and responsible use of digital technologies for learning, work, and participation in society. The framework includes five competence areas—*Information and Data Literacy*, *Communication and Collaboration*, *Digital Content Creation*, *Safety*, and *Problem Solving*—which are further subdivided into 21 competences. Each is described across eight proficiency levels, making the framework suitable for use in self-assessment tools, curriculum development, and professional upskilling across diverse user profiles.

Both frameworks have been widely adopted and adapted across European educational and training contexts, offering structured, research-informed taxonomies for assessing competences relevant to today's rapidly evolving, digitally mediated work environments. Their integration into the DiFree tool provided a robust theoretical foundation and practical taxonomies for assessing digital and entrepreneurial self-awareness, while enabling practical application tailored to the needs of aspiring freelancers and young professionals. However, they were not adopted aprioristically; rather, their applicability was carefully assessed through a multi-phase process. This included a literature review, consultations with experts involved in the design of the frameworks, an evaluation of existing online tools for measuring entrepreneurial competences (see Table 1), and validation through focus group discussions with university students from partner institutions as well as with professional freelancers.

Foundations of Design: Comparative Research and Expert Consultation

The development of the DiFree Self-Assessment and Vocational Orientation Tool was preceded by an extensive phase of psychological and methodological research, led by the University of Cádiz. This phase, conducted between July and September 2022, was rooted in a dual objective: first, to ensure the theoretical and empirical robustness of the tool; second, to benchmark existing frameworks and instruments that assess digital and entrepreneurial competences in education and professional settings. The research team conducted a comprehensive review of academic literature, drawing on the Web of Science database and identifying over 100 peer-reviewed articles and conference papers referencing the EntreComp and DigComp frameworks.

In particular, the EntreComp review focused on publications that explored the applicability of the framework across various educational and training contexts. These included studies such as Baena-Luna et al.'s systematic literature review on EntreComp, Dinning's work on integrating entrepreneurial competences in undergraduate curricula, and Lopez-Nuñez et al.'s development of a self-assessment questionnaire based on EntreComp indicators. The findings confirmed the wide use and adaptability of the EntreComp framework across Europe, as well as its evolving nature and applicability to different user profiles and learning environments. A key insight emerging from the literature was the predominance of Likert-scale based instruments, often structured around the 15 core competences defined by the framework.

To further consolidate the scientific and operational validity of the tool, the Spanish team established direct contact with Margherita Bacigalupo and Yves Punie, leading figures in the Joint Research Centre (JRC) team behind EntreComp, and engaged in dialogue with Cristina Armuña, who provided additional documentation and guidance. These consultations were instrumental in shaping the descriptors and the evaluative logic of the questionnaire.

In parallel, the team explored and analyzed existing digital self-assessment tools developed on the basis of EntreComp and DigComp. This included instruments such as EntreCompScan, Pointerpro, Enterprise Catalyst, Scify, Diagnóstico Emprende, and EntreComp4All, among others. Each tool was examined in terms of its alignment with EntreComp descriptors, interface usability, feedback mechanisms, and reporting formats. While many tools demonstrated strengths—such as interactive visuals, competence-based feedback, and adaptive questioning—several limitations were also noted. These included lack of reference to the original EntreComp taxonomy, limited cultural adaptation, and low transparency in question design or scoring logic. The comparative analysis, summarized

in Table 1, offered the DiFree team a critical perspective from which to build a more transparent, learner-centered tool grounded explicitly in the EntreComp and DigComp principles.

The review also extended to digital competence frameworks. The research covered DigComp 1.0, 2.0, and 2.1, as well as related instruments such as SELFIE, DigCompEduSAT, and VUELA. The DigComp model, developed by the European Commission, was analyzed for its five competence areas—Information and Data Literacy, Communication and Collaboration, Digital Content Creation, Safety, and Problem Solving—and its progression model based on proficiency levels. These elements informed the structuring of the digital competence descriptors used in the DiFree tool.

Importantly, the Spanish team also engaged in knowledge exchange activities and public presentations of their work. The project's methodology and preliminary outputs were shared at the TPM in Athens (November 2022) and at the First Congress on Digital Nomads and Teleworking, held in Cádiz. As a follow-up, the team joined a working group on digital nomadism, which included local institutions, professional freelancers, and policymakers as stakeholders. These forums served as a testbed for validating ideas, obtaining real-world feedback, and identifying user needs in the digital freelancing context.

Table 1. Overview and Evaluation of Online Self-assessment Tools Based on the EntreComp Framework

Name & Website	Comments
Diagnóstico Emprende Diagnóstico emprende	A government-supported Spanish platform assessing 15 EntreComp competences through 50 questions (16 from 'Into Action', 17 from 'Resources', and 17 from 'Ideas and Opportunities'). It offers a Likert-scale based assessment and a detailed feedback report.
EntreCompScan Test del emprendedor ¿ES USTED UN EMPRENDEDOR AL 100%?	A Spanish-language tool offering a detailed report and cross-country comparison of entrepreneurial traits. Although not explicitly aligned with the EntreComp framework, it evaluates commonly referenced competences such as motivation and self-perception.
EntreComp4All https://entrecomp360.eu/toolbox/entrecom4all/	Developed by a consortium of organizations, including the Spanish Confederation of Education and Training Centers (CECE) and the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. It features a 30-question self-assessment (two per EntreComp competence) and allows users to share results on LinkedIn. Also includes entrepreneur profiles for peer learning.
Enterprise Catalyst enterprise education, impact analysis, business start-up	An English-language tool grounded in Bacigalupo's work on entrepreneurial competence. It uses a comparative hint-based approach, though EntreComp descriptors are not explicitly defined. Provides a comprehensive report on entrepreneurial capacity.
GrowINg Online Entrepreneurial Skills Assessment Tool	Part of the GROWINg Project, an Erasmus+ (2018-2021) strategic partnership that aimed to foster innovation and entrepreneurial skills in

https://growing-project.eu/portfolio/online-entrepreneurial-skills-assessment-tool/	SMEs and educational institutions. The tool is an online questionnaire comprising 45 statements, designed to allow individuals to self-assess their proficiency in 10 entrepreneurial skills. The tool is based on the Framework for Learning at the Workplace and aligns with the EntreComp framework. It is available in English, Portuguese, and Greek, and provides users with insights into their entrepreneurial competencies.
HEInnovate Self-Assessment Tool https://heinnovate.eu	English. Developed jointly by the European Commission and the OECD, this self-assessment tool is aimed at higher education institutions. It evaluates institutional capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship across eight dimensions (e.g., leadership, digital transformation, knowledge exchange, internationalisation). It is not aimed at individuals but rather at institutional teams. The tool encourages reflection, dialogue, and action planning. It does not assess individual competences but helps organizations identify areas of strength and opportunities for strategic development.
MEP – Migrant Entrepreneurial Pathway N/A (PDF format only)	A non- digital self-assessment tool consisting in a PDF-based educational resource designed to support migrants interested in entrepreneurship. The tool is divided into pre-startup and startup phases, with customized competences for each, though it lacks interactivity.
Pointerpro EntreComp flower ES	Spanish tool still under development. Visually appealing interface based on the EntreComp flower structure. Users can explore competences through videos and additional content, but detailed assessment methods are not yet fully available.
Scify Build your entrepreneurial IQ	English tool presenting a well-structured overview of EntreComp dimensions. While assessment methods are not fully disclosed, the platform effectively communicates the framework's structure and relevance.

Contextual Adaptation Through Focus Groups

The EntreComp and DigComp frameworks were also assessed through participatory discussion sessions. The development team at the University of Cádiz recognized the need to adapt these frameworks to the real-world experiences of the tool's target users: university students, recent graduates, and aspiring digital freelancers. To that end, two rounds of focus group discussions were conducted to validate and refine the relevance of specific competences, language, and self-assessment indicators.

- The first focus group included students from partners' universities. Participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of entrepreneurship and freelancing, identify the skills they believed were critical for success, and evaluate sample

descriptors drawn from EntreComp and DigComp. Participants were also invited to reflect on how each competence applied to their experience, aspirations, and perceived gaps, thereby helping refine the final formulation of each item. Results indicated a strong awareness of the importance of digital literacy, self-management, and creativity but revealed some confusion over abstract concepts such as "ethical thinking" or "mobilising others." Students favored more concrete, scenario-based questions.

- The second focus group engaged freelance professionals, particularly digital nomads and entrepreneurs, to gather insights on the applicability of the frameworks to professional contexts. These 60 experienced digital freelancers (12 for each of the 5 partners' institutions) were interviewed on the usefulness of the competences in their real-life work experiences, revealing that some competences are considered more important than other to grant success in the freelancing world. They also emphasized the importance of soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and resilience, particularly in unpredictable freelance environments.

These findings led to a rephrasing and simplification of the original descriptors provided by EntreComp and DigComp. Technical jargon was reduced, Likert-scale questions were made more intuitive, and in several cases, competence descriptor clusters were adjusted to better reflect the interdisciplinary nature of freelance work.

From Conceptual Frameworks to Digital Implementation

A two-part structure was adopted for the DiFree tool:

- Part 1: Entrepreneurial Competence Assessment (15 competences, 0-8-point Likert scale)
- Part 2: Digital Competence Assessment (based on DigComp's 5 areas)

Each competence area was broken down into behavioral descriptors phrased in accessible, real-world language. Users respond using a 0-8-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." This self-perception methodology is standard in competence assessment tools and supports user reflection and self-awareness.

Technically, the tool is hosted on the University of Cádiz's Moodle platform and is available in six languages: English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Greek, German, and French. Once registered, users are prompted to evaluate their own digital and entrepreneurial competences by responding to a set of statements on a Likert scale. Each

statement corresponds to a specific descriptor from the DIGCOMP or ENTRECOMP frameworks, inviting users to reflect on their level of confidence, experience, and preparedness in relation to key areas such as creativity, resource mobilization, risk management, collaboration, and financial literacy.

At the end of the questionnaire, users receive an automatically generated personalized report that highlights their strengths and identifies areas for further development. This report can be used as a roadmap for setting personal learning goals or as a preparatory document for engagement in mentoring sessions or career counseling. No user data is stored beyond the anonymized results. One of the strengths of the tool is its reusability: users are encouraged to complete the questionnaire at different stages of their professional or academic journey to track progress and reflect on evolving priorities and competences.

With its iterative, user-centered design, the tool not only aligns with European policy frameworks but also meets the practical and motivational needs of freelance-oriented learners navigating a complex digital labor market. It is designed with flexibility and accessibility in mind. It can be used independently by students, recent graduates, and job seekers, or integrated into teaching and training activities by educators. Within the DiFree Mentorship Program, for example, mentors are encouraged to use the tool results to better understand mentees' profiles and tailor their guidance accordingly. In classroom or workshop settings, teachers can use aggregated results to initiate discussions on freelance career planning, digital skills, and the nature of entrepreneurship in the online economy.

From a pedagogical perspective, the DiFree Self-Assessment Tool promotes active reflection and learner autonomy, key principles in modern higher education. Rather than passively receiving feedback, users are invited to evaluate themselves and reflect critically on their professional identity, ambitions, and areas for growth. This approach is aligned with current trends in education that emphasize personalized learning paths, the integration of transversal competences, and the development of metacognitive skills.

In addition to its individual use, the tool also plays a crucial role in contributing to the sustainability and transferability of the DiFree project's results. Because it is easily accessible, translated into multiple languages, and based on pan-European frameworks, it can be adopted and adapted by other higher education institutions, coworking hubs, training centers, and organizations that support youth employment and entrepreneurship. Its structure and methodology are openly shared, making it possible to replicate or expand its use in future European projects or national initiatives focused on career guidance and digital upskilling.

Conclusion
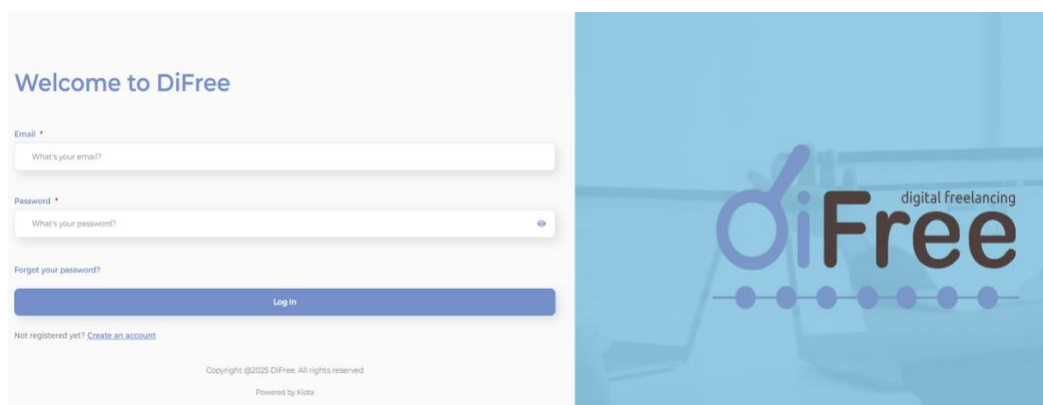
The design of the DiFree Self-Assessment Tool is the result of a rigorous and participatory research process. It reflects an informed synthesis of validated frameworks, critical engagement with similar tools, expert consultation with developers of EntreComp and DigComp, and collaborative dialogue with future users. This approach has ensured the creation of an evidence-based, user-friendly, and adaptable resource capable of supporting diverse learners in their journey toward professional autonomy and digital fluency.

The DiFree Self-Assessment and Vocational Orientation Tool exemplifies the project's holistic and learner-centered approach. It empowers users to better understand themselves, make informed decisions, and prepare for meaningful participation in the freelance digital economy. By promoting self-reflection, supporting informed goal setting, and enhancing digital and entrepreneurial awareness, the tool contributes significantly to the project's broader mission of preparing young Europeans for the challenges and opportunities of flexible, autonomous, and digitally mediated work.

What follows is a description of the step-by-step use of the DiFree Self-Evaluation Tool.

Practical Application: A Step-by-Step Guide

1. Creating a User Account

Step 1- Register

To access the tool, users must first create an account at https://difree.uca.es/register/. The registration process requires users to enter their email, first name, surname, and password, and to accept the terms and conditions of use. Once submitted, a confirmation email is automatically sent to the user's inbox.

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2. Account Verification and Access
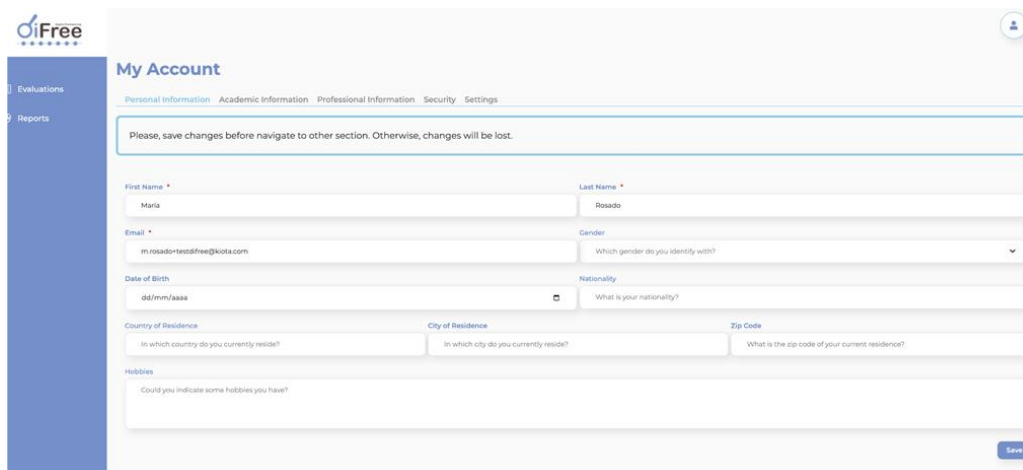
Step 2- Insert your details

The user must verify their account by clicking on the activation link provided in the confirmation email (sent from no-reply.difree@uca.es). After verification, the user receives a welcome message confirming their successful registration and can log in to the platform using their credentials.

3. Completing the User Profile

Step 3- Complete your profile

Upon first access, users are encouraged to complete their profile by providing additional demographic and background information. These fields include gender, date of birth, nationality, current place of residence, educational history, professional experience, and personal interests or hobbies. Although optional, this information helps contextualize the self-assessment results and supports a more personalized user experience.

4. Initiating Self-Assessment

Step 4- Start self-assessment

Once the profile is complete, users can begin the self-assessment by navigating to the "Evaluations" section. Two questionnaires are available:

- EntreComp Assessment: Evaluates entrepreneurial competences based on the EntreComp framework.

- DigComp Assessment: Measures digital competences in line with the DigComp framework.

Each assessment is preceded by a short introduction, providing information about the number of questions and the estimated time required to complete the evaluation. Users can then select and start the assessment that best fits their needs.

5. Answering the Questionnaire
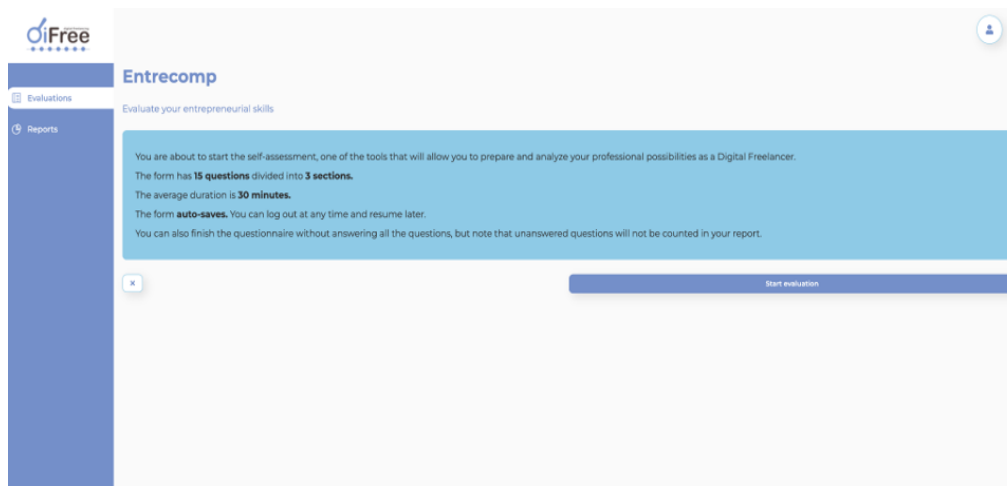
Introduction to the questionnaire

Step 5- Answer the questions

During the assessment, each question appears on the screen with its corresponding category. Users respond using a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 8, indicating the degree to which they feel confident or experienced in that particular area. After answering each question, users must click "Save and Continue" to proceed.
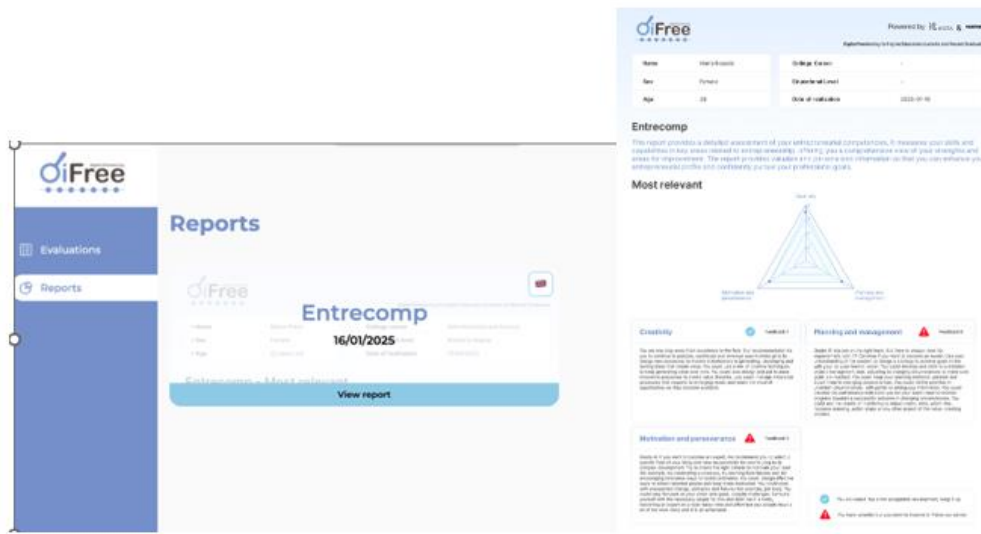
6.   Finalizing the Assessment

Step 6- Review your replies

Upon completion of all questions, users are given the option to review their responses before submission. This feature supports critical reflection and allows for corrections if needed. Once the user is ready, clicking "Finish Evaluation" confirms submission. A notification will appear confirming that the evaluation was successfully submitted.

7. Generating and Downloading the Report

Step 7- Get your report

After the assessment is submitted, users can navigate to the "Reports" section, where their personalized evaluation report is available for download in PDF format. This report provides detailed feedback on strengths and areas for development, aligned with the selected competence framework.

8. Monitoring Progress Over Time

Users may repeat the assessment as often as desired. This allows for longitudinal self-tracking and the measurement of improvements in specific competences over time. This feature is particularly beneficial for those participating in mentoring programs or digital upskilling courses, offering a way to reflect on growth and identify new learning goals.

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The DiFree Physical and Digital Hub

Yannis Skarpelos, Sophia Messini, Efi Ntrouva, Pepi Marioli, Stelios Petrakis

Panteion University

The DiFree Physical and Digital Hub

The DiFree Freelance Hub, hosted by Panteion University in Athens, serves as a hybrid resource center - both physical and digital - designed to support higher education students, early-career freelancers, and educators interested in integrating freelance-related content into their teaching practices. Developed within the framework of the Erasmus+ project Digital Freelancing for Higher Education Students and Recent Graduates (DiFree), the Hub complements the project's other outputs, such as the eBook on digital freelancing, the Repository with CV/Resume models and its e-learning professional writing course, the Mentoring Program, and the Self-Assessment Tool. Together, these resources form a coherent ecosystem of support for individuals entering the freelance labor market in a rapidly digitalizing world.

The Hub functions as both an access point and community platform, offering curated materials, career development tools, on- demand appointments with career consultants, links to national employment services, and recorded interviews with established freelancers. It fosters knowledge-sharing and active participation by encouraging users to engage with career guidance content, attend digital events, and benefit from interactive mentoring forums. The hub emphasizes the acquisition of transversal skills, especially digital and entrepreneurial, and communication skills, which are central to freelance success.

Theoretical Foundations: Creative and Physical Hubs in the DiFree Context

The conceptual development of the DiFree Freelance Hub was grounded in an interdisciplinary literature review on creative hubs, co-working spaces, and hybrid learning environments. The term "creative hub", although loosely defined, has been widely used to refer to flexible, collaborative spaces that foster knowledge exchange, innovation, and

community-building among creative professionals, freelancers, and entrepreneurs (Schmidt et al., 2014; Bagwell, 2008; Oakley, 2004).

Initially emerging in the late 1990s, the concept gained traction during the early 2000s through urban regeneration policies and cultural planning strategies, such as Michael Porter's theory of industrial clustering and Florida's "creative class" paradigm (Porter, 1998; Florida, 2002). These approaches positioned creative hubs as enablers of economic and cultural revitalization. Although influential, they were later criticized for overlooking the precarious labor conditions often found within freelance and creative economies (Dinardi, 2019).

Creative hubs have since evolved into multi-dimensional entities existing as physical, digital, or hybrid spaces that support various forms of knowledge work and self-employment. They are often understood as boundary-spanning environments: part coworking spaces (providing shared workspaces for freelancers and small businesses, emphasizing collaboration and flexibility), part incubators and accelerators (designed to support startups, offering mentorship, funding, and networking opportunities), and part learning labs, as the so-called "FabLabs"[11] focused on research, development, and prototyping, often in technology and design fields (Ashton and Comunian 2019).[12] Many are university affiliated or cooperate with higher education institutions, as, for example, the Digital Creativity Labs at the University of York and the CoAST Research Group at Canterbury Christ Church (Ashton and Comunian 2019). Their defining characteristics include openness, adaptability, and an emphasis on social interaction, co-creation, and entrepreneurial upskilling (Mert, 2019; De Miguel Molina & Segarra-Oña, 2018). These models, which have historically taken various forms,[13] provided inspiration for DiFree's hybrid design. As such, the Freelance Hub was imagined as a space for multidirectional learning: a physical and virtual environment where students, educators, and professionals could engage in guided mentorship, co-working, and self-directed training in digital and entrepreneurial skills.

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[11] FabLabs were first conceptualized by Neil Gershenfeld (2005) at MIT's Center for Bits and Atoms. They serve as incubators for entrepreneurial projects, startups, and local innovation.

[12] In their work, Ashton and Comunian examine how FabLabs and creative hubs intersect within the university setting, arguing that these spaces can play a key role in bridging the gap between academia and industry. They explore how FabLabs contribute to innovation ecosystems by supporting practice-based learning, encouraging experimentation and rapid prototyping, cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets.

[13] These include artist collectives, shared studios, and government-backed cultural initiatives, like for example the latin American "distritos creatives" or creative districts (Dinardi 2019).

The hub, however, was also conceived as a functional structure integrated into its broader environment. While much of the research on hubs, considered as coworking spaces or creative centers, tends to focus on their internal characteristics (like how they are managed, how people work there, or how communities are built), more recent studies, as Avdikos and Pettas (2021), argue that this view is too narrow. They propose a broader, more dynamic approach called a topological perspective. This perspective looks beyond the hub as a self-contained space and instead emphasizes how it is connected to and influenced by larger systems - such as market forces, urban settings, and social movements. In other words, they see hubs as fluid and evolving spaces, shaped by both internal practices and external relationships.

From this perspective, a physical hub like – such as one based at a university - should not only be viewed as a local resource for students or researchers. Instead, it should be understood in relation to its urban context, national education system, partnerships, and economic context. This approach helps explain why Panteion University, through the DiFree project, strategically linked its Freelancers Hub with the university's Career Office, enabling shared expertise, broader outreach, and more effective support for digital freelancers.

HE Career Offices as Hubs

Career services in higher education have experienced significant transformations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, shaped by shifting economic landscapes, technological innovations, and evolving student and labor market expectations. Beginning with vocational guidance in the early 1900s, the focus transitioned to job placement initiatives in the post-World War II era, followed by more individualized career counseling in the 1970s and 1980s. These developments mirrored the changing demands of students, institutions, and employers.

By the 1990s, the rise of the internet and the dot-com boom had a profound impact on university career services. As Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) note, career centers became increasingly proactive, engaging directly with corporate recruiters and developing employer relationships. The integration of technology became central. It included recruitment software for streamlining hiring processes, online job portals connecting students to opportunities and social media platforms like LinkedIn to help students build their personal brands.

The global financial crisis of 2008 marked another turning point. With growing concerns about the return on higher education investment, career services were called upon to demonstrate tangible outcomes. Universities began prioritizing first-destination employment data, data-informed decision-making and tracking of graduate outcomes and integration of career services into institutional strategy and alumni relations.

From the 2010s onward, career services moved away from a transactional model focused on résumé assistance or job postings toward a relational, community-oriented model known as the career hub. This approach emphasized: networking between students, faculty, alumni, and employers; career services as facilitators rather than mere service providers; personalized career pathways supported by AI-based tools; expanded services for alumni, reflecting a commitment to lifelong employability.

Universities such as Stanford, the University of Chicago, and Wake Forest have pioneered the "career ecosystem" model, wherein career hubs serve as network enablers. This transformation involves several key dimensions. First, career centers increasingly operate as interconnected stakeholder ecosystems, serving as central nodes that connect students, alumni, employers, and academic departments. In this framework, employers and alumni engage not only as recruiters but also as mentors and advisors, fostering a more relational and collaborative career development model. Second, the integration of technology-enhanced career services has extended the reach of career support well beyond campus boundaries. Virtual career communities, online job platforms, and AI-powered advising tools now play a pivotal role in helping students build their professional profiles. Additionally, the strategic use of social media and digital branding has become a core component of employability strategies. Third, there is a growing emphasis on experiential learning and industry collaboration. Career hubs actively promote project-based learning, internships, and apprenticeships, thereby forging closer ties between academic institutions and the labor market. These initiatives equip graduates with practical, real-world skills—particularly in problem-solving and workplace readiness—enhancing their ability to navigate complex professional environments.

In this evolving model, career hubs are expected to provide lifelong support, reflecting the increasingly non-linear and dynamic nature of professional pathways. They are becoming not just facilitators of graduate employment, but strategic partners in upskilling, reskilling, and career adaptation across the lifespan.

Based on this conceptual model, the DiFree Freelance Hub was also imagined as an attractive space for local and, potentially, international stakeholders. To this end, and beyond its physical integration within Panteion University's career services, the Hub was envisioned as a transnational digital network linking university career centers across

partner institutions. The objective of this broader network was to offer aspiring freelancers country-specific guidance and create a shared platform for exchanging best practices, resources, and expertise across borders. However, several challenges emerged during the development phase.

University career centers are typically structured to serve their own enrolled students, alumni, or international students participating in formal exchange programs, along with businesses seeking employees—whether freelance or full-time. These centers are often institutionally introverted, with limited capacity or mandate to engage externally on an international scale. Furthermore, their staff may lack specialized knowledge of foreign labor laws, taxation systems, and freelancing regulations. Practical constraints such as differing time zones and different working schedules, limited human resources, and the absence of sustainable long-term funding further impeded the realization of a cross-border digital advisory network. As a result, the original vision had to be adapted.

The Freelance HUB for DiFree

The Panteion team ultimately chose to focus on fulfilling the project's originally stated goals for the Hub: to serve as "a physical place where the partners will run events, gather with the target groups, and work as a 'research center'"[14] for monitoring the legislation and political direction regarding the freelance career at national and EU level, foster networking, support young freelancers in creating their portfolios." Physically located at Panteion University, the Hub now serves as a local center for organizing "career days," hosting in-person and online consultations by appointment, and connecting freelancers with companies and global employment platforms.

Its digital counterpart, which is accessible through the Hub's webpage at the link https://difree-hub.eu/, acts as a curated repository of information and resources. This includes links to partners' national institutions responsible for job placement and career development. To avoid duplicating existing DiFree outputs, the website offers a condensed summary of each country's freelancing landscape, drawn from the Handbook, along with direct links to the full eBook and other project results. Additionally, the virtual hub features news about upcoming professional development events, podcasts on career building and job hunting, and video interviews with professional freelancers recorded during the project's implementation.

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[14] DiFree Project Grant Agreement, p. 84.

In its final form, the DiFree Hub represents an innovative and adaptive hybrid model. It blends features of co-working spaces, university-affiliated innovation centers, and digital platforms, while fostering interdisciplinary interaction, integration within the university ecosystem, and both asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities. Reframed as a "learning-by-sharing" environment, the Hub encourages peer-to-peer support, community-building, and inclusive access to the resources needed for freelance career development. As the DiFree project concludes, the Freelance Hub remains one of its most versatile and sustainable resources. Its value lies in its integrative nature, offering guidance, community, and tools in a format that reflects the realities of digital freelancing. Designed to be scalable and adaptable, the Hub can be updated with new content and linked to other universities' and EU-level initiatives. It stands as a replicable model for institutions seeking to support students' transitions into freelance and entrepreneurial careers, particularly in the context of increasing digitalization and labor market fluidity.

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