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Bridging the Gaps: SOGIESC-responsive Career Guidance for
LGBTQIA+ Youth

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“ACT02- T.2.3: Mapping Report”



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About the Project

The critical gap in SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics)-responsive career guidance for LGBTQIA+ youngsters, is addressed by the RAINBOW BRIDGES project. More specifically, this initiative identifies the lack of methodologies to support and guide the entry of LGBTQIA+ youngsters into the labor market confidently. Youth workers may play a critical role in this situation, especially by equipping them with innovative ways to approach and orient LGBTQIA+ youth. So, the RAINBOW BRIDGES project, primarily, aims to empower youth workers by equipping them with educational methodologies tailored for SOGIESC-responsive career guidance, hence supporting social inclusion of LGBTQIA+ youth in their career development and entering young adulthood.

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Aim of the document

The overall aim of Activity 2 is to map and analyze existing practices, challenges, and needs related to the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ perspectives—covering sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)—within career guidance, education, and employment systems in Greece and Belgium. Through this activity, the *RAINBOW BRIDGES* project seeks to develop a deeper understanding of how young LGBTQIA+ individuals experience these systems, to identify structural barriers, and to highlight opportunities for more inclusive and equitable approaches.

More specifically, **Task 2.1** focuses on **Literature Review and Contextual Analysis** based on national resources as regards the good practices and the challenges, barriers as well. Secondly, **Task 2.2** concerned the **Focus Groups** conduct (2 focus groups in total, on the local level), inviting relevant stakeholders (career counselors, youth workers, LGBTQIA+ youth, LGBTQIA+ activists, etc.) to identify existing good practices that foster inclusion and respect for diversity in career guidance and employment support, but mainly, to discuss and underline systemic gaps and challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ youth, based on their personal experiences. A key component of this activity is the exploration of training needs among career counsellors, teachers, and guidance professionals, ensuring that future services are affirming, inclusive, and well-informed.

By establishing a baseline of knowledge, Activity 2 lays the foundation for recommendations to inclusive practices and tools, that will promote inclusive career services across Europe. Finally, **Task 2.3** brings together the findings from both tasks into this **Mapping Report**, integrating the national results and providing comparative insights between the two partner countries along with the evidence-based recommendations.

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Introduction

The present Mapping Report brings together the findings from both the Literature Review and Contextual Analysis (Task 2.1) and the Focus Groups (Task 2.2), providing a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of SOGIESC-responsive career guidance in Greece and Belgium. It aims to explore how inclusivity, equality, and recognition of diverse identities are—or are not—embedded within the national systems of education, training, and employment in the two countries.

Both contexts reveal that, despite ongoing efforts toward equality and anti-discrimination, LGBTQIA+ youth continue to encounter significant obstacles in accessing fair and supportive career guidance. In Greece, institutional gaps are particularly evident in the absence of national frameworks that explicitly integrate SOGIESC perspectives within mainstream career services. Career counselors and educators often lack targeted training, resulting in a limited understanding of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals. Conversely, in Belgium, although a more progressive legal and social framework exists, the provision of SOGIESC-responsive career guidance remains fragmented and inconsistently implemented. Most initiatives depend on localized NGO efforts or individual institutional commitments rather than coordinated national policies.

Across both countries, a recurring theme is the lack of systematic training for career counselors and educators. Professionals frequently report uncertainty about how to address issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression in their practice, often due to the absence of structured guidelines or educational materials. Consequently, LGBTQIA+ youth may experience invisibility within career services or encounter environments that unintentionally reproduce heteronormative assumptions.

The findings from the focus groups complement these observations by shedding light on the lived experiences of both professionals and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Participants described how discrimination, fear of bias, and the absence of inclusive tools or safe spaces affect their confidence in navigating career decisions. At the same time, they highlighted the critical role of awareness, empathy, and inclusive communication in transforming the counseling process. The discussions underscored the need for educational programs designed in close collaboration with the LGBTQIA+ community, ensuring that the materials developed are authentic, accurate, and responsive to real needs.

Importantly, the report also identifies several promising practices—such as DYPA's collaboration with Athens Pride in Greece and initiatives like "Rainbow for a Job" and KU Leuven's diversity policies in Belgium—which demonstrate that progress is achievable when inclusion is embedded at both policy and practice levels. These examples serve as potential models for scaling inclusive approaches across other regions and institutions.

Ultimately, this Mapping Report situates the findings within a broader European effort to promote equity and inclusion in career guidance and youth support. By analyzing both structural frameworks and lived experiences, it provides evidence-based insights and practical directions for professionals, policymakers, and organizations seeking to ensure that all young people—regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression—can access career guidance that is safe, affirming, and empowering.



Greek National Context by THESSALONIKI PRIDE



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GREECE

National Report: Assessing the best practices and gaps in SOGIESC-responsive Career Guidance in Greece

The national reports below have been developed under Task 2.1, as part of Activity 2, aiming to map the current situation in both countries and specifically to describe not only the best practices in Greece and Belgium but also the challenges and gaps identification at the national level.

Greece's National Report

This research, on behalf of 'THESSALONIKI PRIDE', maps the best practices as well as the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ youth in the career guidance process in Greece, highlighting significant gaps in both policy and practice. Although Greece has a comprehensive national framework for career guidance through its education and employment systems, the explicit integration of the SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics) perspective remains largely absent. This omission creates substantial barriers for LGBTQIA+ young people in accessing inclusive and effective guidance services, limiting their ability to make informed career choices and achieve social and professional integration.

Best Practices in Greece

- ❖ DYPA, towards a safe and inclusive environment, for the professional support and empowerment of LGBTQI+ people

In recent years, efforts to support trans individuals in the Greek labor market have been limited but are gradually expanding. One foundational measure has been the Career Guidance Program for Special and Vulnerable Social Groups offered by the Public Employment Service (DYPA). This program, which includes trans individuals within its definition of vulnerable social groups, acknowledges the specific challenges they face in accessing equitable employment opportunities. Within this framework, trans individuals are eligible to receive personalized career counseling tailored to address the systemic barriers they often encounter—such as discrimination, lack of legal recognition of gender identity, and exclusion from mainstream career services (DYPA, 2025).

Building upon this existing program, DYPA has recently launched a new initiative in collaboration with Athens Pride. This marks a significant advancement in trans-inclusive career support by introducing a series of targeted informational sessions specifically designed for trans job seekers. The initiative aims not only to inform participants about available services but also to provide practical tools that facilitate their engagement with DYPA's employment and training systems (Athens Pride, 2025).

The sessions cover several critical areas. Participants are guided through the process of obtaining a digital unemployment card and completing a Digital Individual Action Plan, a personalized strategy that supports their job search and professional development. Additionally, the sessions introduce participants to DYPA's individual and group counseling services, as well as to employment grant schemes tailored to vulnerable groups. These grants are designed to encourage inclusive hiring practices by offering financial

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Crucially, the collaboration between DYPA and Athens Pride represents a move toward more community-informed and inclusive service provision. It goes beyond simply listing available programs; it actively works to empower trans individuals to navigate public employment services with confidence and agency. By increasing awareness and accessibility, the initiative addresses long-standing support gaps and contributes to a more equitable labor market for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Athens Pride, 2025).

Although still limited in scope, this collaboration stands as a promising example of inclusive practice. It offers a scalable model that could be expanded or replicated in other regions or integrated into broader national employment strategies to ensure consistent and affirming career support for trans people across Greece.

Gaps Identification

In Greece, significant structural and systemic barriers continue to hinder the equitable and consistent delivery of SOGIESC-responsive career guidance for LGBTQIA+ youth. These challenges are often rooted in a lack of national coordination, limited integration within mainstream career services, and inadequate training for professionals working directly with young people.

This section aims to critically explore the key obstacles that restrict the widespread adoption of inclusive and affirming career guidance across the country. By shedding light on these limitations, the report underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions, policy reform, and capacity-building efforts to ensure that all LGBTQ+ youth—regardless of their location, background, or educational path—receive the necessary support to pursue meaningful and empowering career opportunities.

❖ Career Guidance Policies

At present, Greece lacks a national framework or standardized set of guidelines that require or promote the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ youth-specific needs within career guidance services. Although broader diversity and anti-discrimination policies are in place across the education and employment sectors, they seldom translate into practical tools or targeted approaches addressing SOGIESC-related concerns in youth career counselling.

Consequently, the provision of inclusive support remains inconsistent and largely dependent on the initiative of individual counselors or institutions.

❖ Career Guidance Services in the Public Sector

The vocational guidance system in Greece is coordinated by the Ministry of Education and the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP) (The Role of EOPPEP, n.d.). Key components of the system include the Educational and Guidance Support Centers (KE.S.Y.), which offer counselling and career guidance to students and their families at the regional level (Ministry of Education, Religion and Sports,

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n.d.). Moreover, university liaison offices support students in career planning, while Employment Promotion Centers (EOPPEP) focus on providing guidance to job seekers (EOPPEP, 2021). EOPPEP also organizes public seminars and workshops to promote access to guidance services (EOPPEP, n.d.-b).

In addition, the vocational school course in secondary education is only offered to students at Vocational High Schools and not to students of General High Schools. This course got institutionalized by the Ministry of Education with its official name being "School Vocational Orientation, Working Environment, Safety and Hygiene" (Government Gazette 2446/B/13- 11-2015) ('Detailed Curriculum of the course "School Vocational Orientation, Working Environment, Safety and Hygiene" for Vocational High Schools', 2015).

More specifically, regarding the Career Guidance Class, the Ministry, through document F3/99101/D4 (08-09-2023), confirms that the course curriculum is based exclusively on general issues of professional integration without a socio-cultural approach (Ministry of Education, Religion and Sports, 2023). As a result, mainstream career guidance programs seldom integrate content, protocols, or resources tailored to LGBTQIA+ students. This omission effectively renders LGBTQIA+ youth invisible within the system and perpetuates their marginalization.

Moreover, the course includes activities such as the completion of online tests of professional interests and values (e.g., via the EOPPEP platform) and the compilation of CVs and simulation of evaluation processes (Papachristou, 2023).

However, none of the proposed activities or training materials address SOGIESC issues or anti-discrimination strategies (Papachristou, 2023; Voutsadaki et al., 2020).

There is no legal or policy framework obliging professional guidance services to recognize or address the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ youth. Thus, a fundamental institutional gap in Greece's career guidance system is the absence of a national mandate requiring the mainstreaming of SOGIESC issues.

Although it is not just about this school class, the problem is general as the system lacks inclusivity regarding LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite the general accessibility of EOPPEP's services, it does not explicitly acknowledge the unique challenges that LGBTQ+ people face in accessing employment opportunities or receiving equal treatment in vocational guidance. This gap suggests a need for more inclusive policies and practices to ensure that guidance services in Greece effectively support all individuals, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, in navigating their educational and professional pathways.

Another significant challenge is the lack of systematic data collection and research concerning LGBTQ+ youth. These people are not represented in official statistics, nor are their experiences or outcomes tracked in evaluations of career guidance programs (ELSTAT, n.d.). The absence of such data has two critical consequences: it hinders the development of targeted interventions that could address the unique barriers faced by LGBTQ+ youth, and it makes it nearly impossible to assess the effectiveness or shortcomings of existing career guidance services for these people. Without visibility in data and policy, the needs of LGBTQ+ youth remain unaddressed, reinforcing existing inequalities and limiting their opportunities for professional and social integration.

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❖ Professional Training of Career Guidance Consultants

The lack of specialized training is a critical problem. Most career counsellors and teachers have not received training on LGBTQ+ issues, leading to a lack of awareness and understanding. This situation is exacerbated by the adoption of heteronormative approaches to professional guidance, which often assume heterosexual and gendered norms.

Ministerial Decision 92984/Γ7/2012 stipulates that heads of career guidance services must hold a master's degree in vocational guidance (Ministerial Decision 92984/C7/2012 - Government Gazette 2316/B/10-8-2012, 2012). Despite this academic requirement, a critical shortcoming exists in the content of the relevant postgraduate programs offered in Greece, as they do not include dedicated coursework or training on managing SOGIESC issues.

In summary, the lack of SOGIESC-focused training in both initial and continuing education for career guidance consultants undermines the inclusivity and effectiveness of career guidance services. Addressing this gap through curriculum reform and targeted professional development is essential for ensuring that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, receives equitable and supportive career guidance.

❖ Career Guidance Services in the Private Sector

In the private sector, there is a wide range of specialized training programs for career guidance, which are designed to equip participants with the essential knowledge and skills necessary for effective career mentoring of both young people and adults. They cover techniques for identifying aptitudes, assessing interests, and supporting individuals in their educational and professional decisions (EOPPEP, n.d.-a).

However, a significant limitation of these programs in Greece is the absence of any specific content or staff training focused on the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth. The course materials and instruction do not address issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, or the specific barriers that LGBTQ+ people encounter in their career development.

Most notably, most of these programs rely on the Ariston series of psychometric tests, which are widely used in Greece to assess personality traits, aptitudes, skills, and interests (Ariston Test, n.d.). While the use of such psychometric tools represents a modern approach to career guidance, they are not designed to consider the challenges or experiences of individuals with diverse sexual orientations or gender identities. The structure and language of these assessments are based on mainstream assumptions, which can render them less relevant or even exclusionary for LGBTQIA+ participants (Ariston Test, n.d.).

In summary, while private sector educational initiatives in career guidance are well-developed in terms of general methodology and assessment, they fall short in providing an inclusive environment or tailored support for LGBTQIA+ youth. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive review of training content and assessment tools, ensuring that future career guidance professionals are prepared to meet the diverse needs of all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

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❖ Career Guidance Services by Non-Governmental Organizations

A thorough review of available sources reveals the existence of limited targeted initiatives by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Greece that focus specifically on inclusive career guidance for LGBTQ+ youth. While several NGOs in the country are actively engaged in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, combating discrimination, and providing psychosocial support, the domain of professional and career guidance remains largely unaddressed within their documented programs and activities (Athens Pride, n.d.; Color Youth, n.d.; Tgender, n.d.; Thessaloniki Pride, n.d.).

This lack of specialized initiatives highlights a broader systemic gap in support services for LGBTQ+ youth as they navigate educational and professional pathways. Existing NGOs such as Color Youth, Athens Pride, and Thessaloniki Pride have made significant contributions in areas such as legal advocacy, anti-bullying campaigns, and community-building. However, none have developed or implemented structured programs, workshops, or resources dedicated to helping LGBTQ+ youth with career planning.

The reasons for this gap may include limited funding, prioritization of more urgent legal or social needs, and a lack of collaboration with educational and vocational institutions. As a result, LGBTQ+ youth in Greece are left without access to career guidance services that are sensitive to their unique experiences and challenges, further compounding the barriers they face in entering and thriving in the workforce.

❖ Social Climate and Violence

The social climate in Greece continues to pose significant challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly youth. Data from the Racist Violence Incident Recording Network indicate that in 2023 at least 39% of the hate crimes is targeting LGBTQ+ people, with the percentage to rise the last years (RVRN, 2024). Such a hostile environment not only threatens the safety of LGBTQ+ youth but also discourages them from seeking professional counselling or openly expressing their personal and career aspirations in fear of hostility towards them.

Family acceptance is another critical factor influencing the educational and professional trajectories of LGBTQ+ youth. Based on the 2020 European Social Survey, only 49% of the Greeks would not be ashamed of having a close gay family member, with the European average being 64% (EU, 2020). A lack of support at home can lead to social exclusion, isolation, and diminished self-confidence, all of which negatively affect access to educational resources, extracurricular activities, and career opportunities. Moreover, many families—often influenced by prevailing heteronormative ideals—may consciously or unconsciously impose traditional models of professional success, steering young people away from career paths that align with their authentic identities and aspirations (Ryan et al., 2010).

In this context, the presence of a well-educated, SOGIESC-sensitive career guidance system becomes not just beneficial but essential. Career counsellors who are trained to recognize and challenge stereotypes, address the realities of discrimination, and provide affirming support can empower LGBTQ+ youth to pursue their true professional goals. Such counsellors can help young people build resilience, develop self-advocacy skills, and navigate social and familial pressures with confidence.

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An inclusive and informed career guidance system can also serve as a bridge between LGBTQ+ youth and the broader world of work, helping to dismantle barriers and expand opportunities. By fostering environments where everyone feels seen, heard, and supported, career guidance professionals play a pivotal role in enabling young people to overcome stereotypes and chase their professional dreams, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression.

Focus Groups Findings

As part of Activity 2 and specifically Task 2.1, partners from Greece conducted 1 local Focus Group in total, inviting people from the project's target groups, meaning LGBTQIA+ activists, youth workers, career counselors, and NGO/CSO representatives, to discuss the national contexts with relevant stakeholders. More specifically, people shared key challenging experiences, gaps and needs, and several good practices as well.

A. Key Experiences & Challenges Identified

During the focus group organized by THESSALONIKI PRIDE, the counselors shared that it's not their place to limit any person's access to the labor market, much less an LGBTQ+ person. Those who have had experience helping LGBTQ+ people said that when they were aware of a work environment being anything but fully inclusive, they merely informed the person in question and let them make their own decisions.

In terms of challenges, the first issue identified by the career counselors is the lack of widely known and easily accessible career guidance services. They said that it's very difficult to find reliable information for career guidance in Greece. People, and especially young people, don't know what's being offered (i.e. what the purpose of career counseling is), where they can find it, and for free, and if they're "friendly" towards all individuals. At the same time, they recognize that an LGBTQ+ identity can, even subconsciously, stop a person from seeking career guidance services in the first place. From their experience, the counselors pointed out that any counseling session forces a person to expose part of themselves and that might be unwelcome to people with an LGBTQ+ identity, no matter how comfortable they are with it. All the participants agreed that some parts of SOGIESC are invisible, such as sexual orientation. The actual problem they continued is the perceived gender expression, and that's where biases and issues arise. The possibility of the existence of other identities, such as a migrant background, that informs a person's attitude towards the job market and career guidance was also brought to the table. The LGBTQ+ activists who participated brought up the difficulties LGBTQ+ people might face when addressed by names and/or pronouns they don't use, due to bureaucratic propriety, and said that such phenomena can be deterrents.

B. Identified Gaps & Unmet Needs

The first thing the career counselors said they need is continuing education and training. They described that there are no obligations for counselors to keep up to date with new tools, new approaches, or to widen their understanding of the experiences and particularities of the people who receive

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career guidance services. The career counselors who work for the States (at the Municipalities for the most part) can voluntarily attend a 14-hour seminar on how to approach LGBTQ+ identities in their work, but that seminar isn't targeting career guidance; it's available to all the employees of public services. Those who work in the private sector are subject to their employer's wishes and allowances. In both cases, the available training opportunities are woefully lacking.

Another issue mentioned by the counselors is the fact that the aptitude tests given to discover a person's interests and inclinations are not inclusive, even in terms of gender (for example, all the sentences use the masculine gender to refer to a professional of any field). And that is true for the tools used both in the public and private sectors. The participating counselors said that at that point, their input is crucial in order to balance the result of the test with all the gaps it has.

Unfortunately, the publicly offered career guidance services at DYPA (Public Employment Service) are carried out in most cases by unqualified people. Added to that is the rigidity of the people working in those services, who strictly use only official information about a person, such as their name, and through that assume gender identity, which can be off-putting, according to the activists, when receiving communication.

A major gap that was pointed out is that the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the workplace and any obstacles they've faced and/or overcome aren't easily accessible to career counselors, who can't, consequently, use them to craft an approach to guidance that is tailored to the needs of other LGBTQ+ people. At the same time, it was mentioned that "dissemination" of such experiences can become widespread knowledge, to the better education of the "general public", as is true for other groups that face difficulties in the workplace.

C. Good Practices Shared

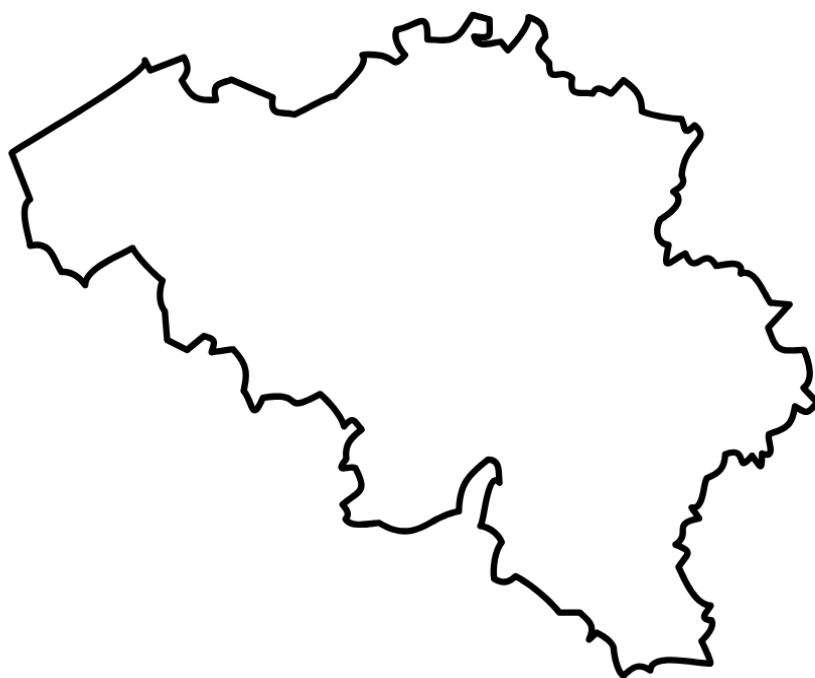
Everyone participating agreed that a good practice that worked in a specific setting might not apply to other settings.

The first thing suggested that can ease an LGBTQ+ person, especially one who doesn't share their identity from the beginning, is the use of inclusive language and mentioning our pronouns when introducing to a new person, signing an email, or with our name in a digital meeting.

To overcome the difficulty of using unfamiliar pronouns (such as they/them in any language), the activists suggested that trying out sentences with them will make a person more comfortable when having to use them in a real situation.

Another suggestion was that the counselors use online communities, like groups on Facebook that are about a specific part of the population, to get a glimpse into their everyday lives. When it comes to the counseling process, the first and foremost thing that can be helpful is active listening so that the person's needs and wants are fully understood by the counselor, who can then support that person in their chosen path.

The counselors suggested that group counseling can be helpful in groups like LGBTQ+ people, because it allows them to see that their situation isn't unique and others might be in similar circumstances, and to hear how other people, further along in their professional path, have succeeded, and to get inspired by their journey.



Belgian National Context by the PAL Network



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BELGIUM

Belgium's National Report

In Belgium, the legal and social framework is generally supportive of LGBTQIA+ rights, ranking among the top European countries for legal protections and anti-discrimination laws. Several organizations, such as Çavaria and Rainbow House Brussels, offer training, resources, and advocacy that contribute to more inclusive environments in education and employment, indirectly supporting career guidance for LGBTQIA+ youth. However, there is still no standardized or nationwide system for SOGIESC-responsive career counseling specifically tailored to the needs of LGBTQIA+ young people. Many youth workers and career counselors lack formal training in addressing the unique barriers faced by LGBTQIA+ youth, such as discrimination in the workplace, lack of role models, or limited access to inclusive mentorship.

Best Practices in Belgium

❖ Rainbow for a Job

A pilot initiative called "Rainbow for a Job" seeks to assist LGBTQIA+ people and LGBTQIA+ people with a history of migration in their job search. The project focuses on providing a safe and inclusive space while reinforcing intersectional objectives. The following are the project's goals:

- To offer complementary and specific support to job seekers and enhance their skills.
- To plan and carry out a mentoring/peer procedure.
- To use employment assistance systems to help companies and job seekers connect.

The initiative includes the use of several techniques, such as career coaching, mentoring, and accompanying, to help match job opportunities with people's needs and skill sets. The initiative seeks to establish a secure atmosphere for participants while acknowledging the existence of discriminatory barriers. The initiative uses methodical workshops that address issues like participation, empowerment, and the development of social and professional skills.

Furthermore, seminars, training sessions, and job fairs are planned to offer chances for skill development and networking. For any LGBTQIA+ person looking for individualized support, the project is free, and the help is kept private. The initiative offers opportunities to people from diverse backgrounds, including Belgian citizens, Europeans, refugees, migrants, and others. It primarily operates in French, Dutch, English, and Spanish to foster inclusion.

❖ Çavaria

In all aspects of everyday life, Çavaria advocates for sexual and gender diversity. In order to do this, they assist associations, create initiatives, lobby governments, and spread awareness of significant issues. They provide instructional resources for preschool, elementary, and secondary education, offer guidance and training, and produce pamphlets to educate the public.

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Çavaria operates at the structural level to achieve equal rights and opportunities. They firmly chose the route of communication and collaboration in their pursuit of a world free from prejudice and inequity. Their KLIQ advise and training center creates methods and offers training to educational institutions, businesses, residential care facilities, local government agencies, and the asylum sector, among other areas. They have an online store as well. You may get our brochures and download them for free there, along with a variety of other devices. Çavaria doesn't offer individual help. "Do you require a discussion? Are you trying to find a lawyer, counselor, or anti-discrimination hotline? Contact our Lumi information and listening line via phone, email, or chat. We are available to answer any inquiries you may have regarding sexual orientation and gender."

❖ KU Leuven (& KU Leuven's Diversity Policy)

KU Leuven, as a university, is not a direct provider of public career counselling for the general LGBTQIA+ youth population in Belgium. However, it plays an important institutional role in advancing LGBTQIA+-responsive career guidance within the higher education context, specifically for its students.

KU Leuven has established a Diversity Policy that encompasses training, education, and career counseling focused on gender diversity and unconscious bias. The university offers various services, including career counseling for students and staff, aiming to promote awareness of barriers and support professional development within an inclusive framework.

Here's how KU Leuven contributes:

1. Inclusive Career Services:

KU Leuven's Career Services Office guides students and graduates, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, on navigating career paths. While not exclusively LGBTQIA+-focused, their counsellors are trained within a broader diversity and inclusion framework to recognize and address barriers related to SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics).

2. LGBTQIA+ Support Structures:

The university offers specific services such as the LGBTQIA+ Info Point, part of the Student Services (STUVO), which provides confidential support. This includes addressing concerns related to being out at work, navigating discrimination, or choosing safe/inclusive employers.

3. Diversity Policy & Gender Equality Plan:

KU Leuven's Diversity Office promotes inclusive hiring and education practices, including training modules for staff on unconscious bias and gender diversity,

and an environment that indirectly benefits LGBTQIA+ students preparing for their professional lives.

4. Awareness and Role Models:

The university promotes LGBTQIA+ inclusion through visibility campaigns, academic research on gender/sexuality, and public events, thus creating a safer climate for LGBTQIA+ students to explore and plan their futures.

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Gaps Identification

While Belgium demonstrates several commendable practices in promoting LGBTQIA+ inclusion, particularly through localized initiatives, NGO-led support services, and progressive institutional policies, significant structural and systemic gaps remain that limit the equitable and consistent provision of SOGIESC-responsive career guidance for LGBTQIA+ youth. These gaps often reflect a lack of national coordination, insufficient integration into mainstream career services, and limited professional training among those working directly with young people.

This section aims to critically examine the barriers that prevent the widespread implementation of inclusive and affirming career guidance across the country. By identifying these shortcomings, the report highlights areas where intervention, policy reform, and capacity-building are urgently needed to ensure that all LGBTQIA+ youth, regardless of location, background, or educational status, receive the support they need to access meaningful career development opportunities.

A study titled "Implementing Youth Worker Networks to Achieve Social Impact in the Eradication of LGBTQIA-Phobia"(2023, Springer) focuses on the critical role of youth workers in supporting LGBTQIA+ youth and the current limitations in their knowledge and training/guidance. Also, the research reveals that only 39.4% of participants had received formal training on LGBTQIA+ topics, leading many to rely on social media or informal sources for information. Such gaps in knowledge hinder the ability of youth workers to provide effective, inclusive career guidance, thereby impacting LGBTQIA+ youths' transition into the workforce. These findings collectively indicate that while there are initiatives aimed at supporting LGBTQIA+ youth in Belgium, significant gaps remain in providing systematic, SOGIESC-responsive career guidance. Addressing these gaps through comprehensive training for youth workers and inclusive policies is crucial for ensuring equitable support for LGBTQIA+ individuals entering the labor market.

More specifically, below are some areas where a lack of SOGIESC-responsive career guidance has been identified in Belgium;

❖ Absence of Structured, Inclusive Career Guidance Policies

Belgium does not currently have a national framework or standardized guidelines that mandate or encourage career guidance services to address the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ youth. While diversity and anti-discrimination policies exist in broader educational or employment contexts, these rarely translate into concrete tools or procedures tailored to SOGIESC-related issues within youth career counselling. As a result, implementation is inconsistent and often left to the discretion of individual counselors or institutions.

❖ Underrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ Perspectives in Career Materials

Career guidance resources, such as job orientation materials, training manuals, or digital career platforms, do not feature LGBTQIA+ role models or case studies. This lack of visibility contributes to the invisibility of queer experiences in professional settings and can result in LGBTQIA+ youth feeling

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unable to envision inclusive work environments. As a result, young people and adolescents are less likely to feel safe expressing their identities or exploring career paths aligned with their values and identities.

❖ Limited collaboration between career counselling services and LGBTQIA+ organizations.

While Belgium hosts strong LGBTQIA+ civil society organizations (e.g., the above-mentioned as good practices), collaboration between these actors and formal career services (like VDAB, Actiris, and Forem) is limited. This limits the integration of LGBTQIA+-inclusive knowledge into mainstream guidance services. Career counselors and employment coaches often operate in isolation from the expert knowledge and lived experiences held by LGBTQIA+ organizations.

❖ Lack of Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

There is no systematized way to track whether career guidance practices are inclusive and effective for LGBTQIA+ youth. Belgium lacks evaluation metrics or feedback mechanisms that assess how career services perform in terms of equity and inclusion for sexual and gender minorities. This data gap makes it difficult to advocate for targeted improvements or funding.

❖ Discrimination in Career Services

Even in existing youth workers/ career counsellors, reports and testimonials from LGBTQIA+ youth indicate they often experience subtle discrimination in educational and guidance settings. Counselors might unintentionally use heteronormative language, assume gender roles, or fail to recognize the impact of coming out in the workplace.

Focus Groups Findings

As part of Activity 2 and specifically Task 2.1, partners from Belgium conducted 1 local Focus Group in total, inviting people from the project's target groups, meaning LGBTQIA+ activists, youth workers, career counselors, and NGO/CSO representatives, to discuss the national contexts with relevant stakeholders. More specifically, people shared key challenging experiences, gaps and needs, and several good practices as well.

Focus Group on behalf of the PAL Network

A. Key Experiences & Challenges Identified

Participants shared a variety of personal experiences that reveal the systemic barriers and emotional impacts faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in professional environments. Some described being explicitly rejected from

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workplaces because of their sexual orientation, while others noted that promising job opportunities often ended abruptly without explanation. A few participants reported that employers directly asked about their sexual orientation or identity during interviews, raising concerns about privacy and fairness in hiring. These accounts illustrate how both overt discrimination and subtle exclusion remain persistent challenges.

Feedback from evaluation questionnaires reflected similar themes. Fear of discrimination or harassment discourages many LGBTQIA+ youth from pursuing certain careers or attending interviews with confidence. Career guidance services are often perceived as non-inclusive and lacking understanding of LGBTQIA+ identities, with many advisors seen as untrained in addressing related issues. The fear of being outed during career or employment processes also remains a major concern. Limited inclusive job opportunities and the mental health impacts of societal stigma further hinder career development, especially for those facing intersectional discrimination, such as LGBTQIA+ Roma youth.

Participants noted that inclusivity in career services varies widely across Europe. Urban and progressive regions—such as parts of France—tend to offer more supportive environments, while rural or conservative areas often leave LGBTQIA+ youth feeling invisible or unsafe. Despite gradual improvements, most services still lack specific LGBTQIA+ training, consistent standards of practice, and intersectional approaches. Overall, career guidance systems across Europe remain underfunded, unevenly inclusive, and often fail to provide safe, affirming spaces where LGBTQIA+ youth can express their identities freely.

B. Identified Gaps & Unmet Needs

The discussion revealed several systemic gaps and unmet needs affecting both LGBTQIA+ youth and the professionals who support them. Participants emphasized that inappropriate or inadequate guidance often stems from biases related to sexual orientation and intersecting identities—such as belonging to the Roma community—reflecting broader patterns of intersectoral discrimination. They noted that this lack of appropriate support extends beyond career counselors to families, schools, and universities, where inclusive structures are often insufficient or entirely absent. A major concern was the absence of inclusive sex education in schools, which leaves LGBTQIA+ youth without essential information and contributes to stigma, isolation, and vulnerability to discrimination.

Participants also highlighted disparities between urban and rural areas, with regional communities lacking resources, awareness initiatives, and training opportunities. Limited financial support further restricts access to services such as university counseling and psychological care. Overall, participants called for stronger institutional engagement, as current efforts remain fragmented and inconsistent.

Findings from the post-focus group evaluation questionnaire reinforced these points. Many professionals lack specialized training on LGBTQIA+ identities, mental health, and the unique challenges youth face in education and employment. There is a need for clear protocols and resources to address discrimination, as well as training in inclusive language, intersectionality, and the recognition of microaggressions. Participants also called for practical tools—such as guidelines for creating safe spaces, tailored career resources, and access to LGBTQIA+-specific mental health first aid training. Establishing

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peer support networks for professionals was also seen as a valuable way to promote empathy, confidence, and informed guidance. Some respondents, however, were uncertain or did not provide specific recommendations.

C. Good Practices Shared

Despite the challenges discussed, participants also highlighted several encouraging practices and initiatives supporting LGBTQIA+ inclusion. In Belgium, participants noted the existence of various positive initiatives aimed at empowering LGBTQIA+ communities, although specific examples were not detailed. A representative from the Czech organization ARAART shared that their group offers career guidance services to LGBTQIA+ individuals, including through an online counseling application. Their work also extends to supporting families, helping parents better understand and affirm their children's identities through approaches sensitive to both youth and family needs.

The BeNeLux LGBTQIA+ Business Chamber (BGLBC) was also mentioned as a strong regional initiative that supports LGBTQIA+ individuals in professional settings. The Chamber promotes LGBTQIA+ entrepreneurship and inclusive business practices across Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg through certification, advocacy, and networking opportunities that encourage diversity in the business sector.

Responses from the post-focus group evaluation questionnaire further illustrated good practices. Participants mentioned mentorship programs connecting LGBTQIA+ professionals with young people to build confidence, provide guidance, and foster supportive networks. In some cities, career fairs specifically welcoming LGBTQIA+ youth have been organized, featuring inclusive employers and creating safe spaces for networking. Additionally, the use of online counseling platforms and digital LGBTQIA+ communities has offered accessible, private spaces for sharing experiences and obtaining tailored guidance.

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Recommendations

Recommendations on the Greek context

The primary gap identified—namely, the lack of sufficient education and training—was reflected in the main demand expressed by participants. Counselors consistently emphasized that any educational or training initiatives should be developed collaboratively with the LGBTQIA+ community to ensure authenticity, relevance, and inclusivity. They stressed that the lived experiences and perspectives of LGBTQIA+ individuals are essential for creating materials that truly address the needs and realities of the community. Ideally, participants suggested members of the LGBTQIA+ community should also take an active role in delivering these trainings, as their direct involvement can foster empathy, credibility, and deeper understanding among professionals.

Furthermore, participants agreed that such training should be made available to professionals at all levels—from school staff and career advisors to employers, HR departments, and policymakers—to promote systemic change rather than isolated improvements. Finally, it was noted that companies and career counseling professionals can benefit from greater LGBTQIA+ community visibility in general, not only in the context of employment but also in everyday social and institutional settings. Increased visibility can help normalize diversity, reduce prejudice, and strengthen mutual understanding between professionals and the communities they serve.

Recommendations on the Belgian Context

The focus group discussions highlighted a broad range of needs expressed by professionals working with LGBTQIA+ youth. One recurring theme was the strong demand for targeted training on how to provide appropriate mental health support and effectively address discrimination in job application and employment processes. Participants emphasized that such training should not be limited to career counsellors but should also include teachers, who are often the first point of contact for young people in educational settings.

Another key area identified was the need to expand resources and services in rural areas, where LGBTQIA+ individuals are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of visible support systems and community networks. Participants also stressed the importance of integrating inclusive Sex Education into school curricula as an essential step toward normalizing diverse identities and reducing discrimination from an early age. Beyond technical expertise, there was also a strong call for training on the use of inclusive and affirming language, which plays a vital role in creating safe and welcoming environments for LGBTQIA+ youth.

Raising awareness about the risks of isolation, stigma, and their impact on mental health was identified as another crucial need. Additionally, professionals highlighted the importance of providing accessible information on the legal rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the workplace to empower both employees and employers to promote equality and inclusion.

Insights from the post-focus group evaluation questionnaire further reinforced these points. Professionals emphasized the importance of mandatory training for career advisors and staff on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, professional boundaries, anti-discrimination principles, and mental health

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awareness to ensure affirming and competent guidance. Participants recommended the development of dedicated programs, mentorship schemes, and networking events that connect LGBTQIA+ youth with role models, supportive employers, and tailored career advice. They also advocated for the creation of safe, inclusive, and affirming spaces where young people can openly discuss their experiences and concerns without fear of judgment or discrimination.

To ensure systemic inclusion, participants called for the consistent implementation of anti-discrimination policies within career services and for the provision of resources and materials that reflect the diverse identities and experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Targeted outreach to marginalized groups, such as Roma LGBTQIA+ youth, was seen as essential to addressing intersectional needs and ensuring that no group is overlooked. Intersectionality, participants noted, must be embedded at the core of all support structures and materials to acknowledge and respond to the multiple layers of discrimination that some young people face.

Moreover, participants encouraged the involvement of mentors and professionals from the LGBTQIA+ community itself, as their lived experience can serve as a source of empowerment and relatability for youth. Regular, comprehensive training on LGBTQIA+ identities, rights, and inclusion was identified as necessary for building competence and awareness among professionals. Using inclusive language, asking for and respecting preferred names and pronouns, and displaying visible signs of allyship—such as rainbow flags or inclusive posters—were also suggested as simple yet powerful ways to signal that services are safe and welcoming.

Finally, participants underscored the importance of ensuring that career guidance remains respectful, person-centered, and responsive to the diverse realities of LGBTQIA+ youth. By actively challenging discrimination, bias, and stereotypes, professionals can help create environments where all young people feel valued, supported, and empowered to pursue their goals without fear or limitation.

Conclusions

The mapping process conducted in Greece and Belgium reveals both shared challenges and contextual differences in the inclusion of SOGIESC perspectives within career guidance, education, and employment systems. Across both countries, LGBTQIA+ youth face persistent barriers that hinder their access to equitable and supportive career pathways. These include a lack of inclusive guidance methodologies, insufficient professional training, and enduring social stigmas that continue to shape educational and workplace environments.

In **Greece**, the findings highlight a clear absence of institutionalized frameworks that explicitly address LGBTQIA+ inclusion in career guidance and counseling. Support structures tend to rely on the initiative of individual professionals or organizations rather than coordinated national policies. Moreover, the absence of comprehensive sexuality education and limited awareness among teachers and counselors contribute to the invisibility of LGBTQIA+ youth within mainstream educational and employment systems.

In **Belgium**, by contrast, a more established legal and social environment supports diversity and inclusion, yet implementation remains uneven. While some organizations and institutions demonstrate strong inclusive practices—such as targeted mentorship programs, diversity charters, and LGBTQIA+-friendly recruitment initiatives—these efforts are often localized and not systematically embedded across all regions or sectors. This creates disparities between urban centers, where resources are concentrated, and rural areas, where LGBTQIA+ youth may continue to experience isolation and exclusion.

Despite these differences, both national contexts share a set of common needs such as the strong demand for specialized training for career counselors, teachers, and youth workers on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, anti-discrimination, and mental health, the development of accessible and inclusive educational materials co-created with LGBTQIA+ communities, the creation of safe and affirming spaces in schools, universities, and employment services, the need for systematic policy frameworks that ensure consistency, visibility, and accountability in promoting equality and the integration of intersectionality into all levels of guidance and service provision, addressing the multiple layers of discrimination faced by marginalized subgroups such as Roma LGBTQIA+ youth.

Based on these insights, several key recommendations emerge: First, training programs for professionals should be mandatory, continuous, and community-informed, ensuring that guidance services are equipped with both knowledge and empathy. Second, national and local authorities should embed SOGIESC-responsive approaches within career guidance systems through clear standards, funding, and policy commitments. Third, collaboration with LGBTQIA+ organizations must become a cornerstone of policy and practice development, enabling authentic representation and sustainable impact. Finally, there is a need to expand good practices—such as inclusive job fairs, mentoring programs, and visibility initiatives—to reach smaller cities and rural communities.

In conclusion, the Mapping Report underscores that meaningful inclusion requires more than isolated initiatives; it calls for systemic change. By combining community expertise, institutional commitment, and continuous education, both Greece and Belgium can move toward truly inclusive and

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equitable career guidance systems—bridging the gaps that still separate many LGBTQIA+ youth from realizing their full professional potential.

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*Bridging the Gaps: SOGIESC- responsive Career
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