



Final cross-country evaluation report: Executive summary

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This summary presents the main findings from the final cross-country evaluation of the Erasmus+ funded “Guidance and Orientation for Adult Learners” (GOAL) project. The evaluation was carried out by the UCL Institute of Education (IOE), London, working with local evaluation teams in the participating countries. A range of evaluation publications from this project is available at <http://www.projectgoal.eu/index.php/publications>.

1. About GOAL

GOAL aimed to develop or expand guidance and orientation interventions for low-educated adults in **six countries**: Belgium (Flanders); Czech Republic; Iceland; Lithuania; the Netherlands, and Slovenia. Running from February 2015 to January 2018, GOAL was coordinated by the Flemish Government’s Department of Education and Training.

GOAL was a guidance pilot targeted at adults without upper secondary education (ISCED level 3). It tested the hypothesis that a guidance service centred on the needs of **low-educated adults** may help to **increase the participation of this cohort in education and training**. Each of the six partner countries piloted new guidance models at two or more programme sites to specific target groups within the low-educated adult population.

Though the specific focus of the GOAL intervention differed somewhat across countries, the pilot had **four primary implementation objectives**:

- developing and/or enhancing **partnerships and networks** with other organisations serving the target groups
- engaging in **outreach activities** designed to bring guidance services to those target groups
- defining the **competences** which counsellors require to enable them to address the specific needs of GOAL clients, and
- developing and effectively using **guidance tools** tailored to low-educated adults.

Through the combination of these four intervention strategies, countries pursued **a fifth, overarching objective**: to provide **high-quality guidance services** that optimised adults’ education and/or employment outcomes.

2. About the GOAL evaluation

The GOAL **evaluation had three aims**. The first was **developmental**: to support programme development across the six countries by providing evidence during the life of the pilot on **programme processes**. The second was **summative**: to assess, as rigorously as possible, **the impacts of GOAL** on service users and other programme stakeholders. The third aim focused on **knowledge cumulation**: to provide evidence on programme processes and outcomes in order to support future policy and programme development in the field of adult education guidance.

Five research questions were asked:

1. To what degree did programmes achieve their implementation aims across the five intervention objectives, and what factors at programme and policy level appeared to influence the achievement of implementation aims?
2. What service user outcomes were achieved, for what groups, and to what degree?
3. What *programme-level* factors were associated with the achievement of positive service user outcomes?
4. What *policy-level* factors were associated with the achievement of those outcomes?
5. To what degree were programme expectations met?

This was a mixed methods evaluation. Data were gathered via **a range of quantitative and qualitative methods** including: client monitoring data; a client satisfaction survey; a client follow-up survey; and qualitative interviews with clients, programme staff, programme partners and policy actors. The collection of client monitoring and satisfaction data was ongoing, qualitative data were collected in two waves in Spring 2016 and 2017, and the follow-up survey was conducted in Spring 2017.

3. Programme participants

The six GOAL programmes were targeted at specific sub-groups of low-educated adults who were seen as particularly in need of guidance in their respective countries:

- **Czech Republic:** early school leavers, immigrants, and adults with a criminal record
- **Flanders:** unqualified school leavers, migrants and unemployed job seekers
- **Iceland:** vulnerable adults facing multiple barriers to progress in education and employment
- **The Netherlands:** adults with low basic skills
- **Lithuania:** early school leavers and low-qualified adults
- **Slovenia:** low-educated adults, migrants and people aged over 50.

Within each country, different intervention sites typically had different mixes of the national target groups, due to local demographics.

A total of **981 service users** was reached by the GOAL programmes across the six countries: **132** in the Czech Republic, **418** in Flanders, **95** in Iceland, **100** in Lithuania, **76** in the Netherlands, and **160** in Slovenia. This distribution in part reflects the different recruitment targets set by each country based on resources and other factors. Most countries achieved their recruitment targets, with the Czech Republic, Slovenia and (especially) Flanders exceeding their targets. The relatively small figure for the Netherlands masks a much larger number of clients (1,525) who used that country's Literacy Screener tool (see below).

Sixty percent of service users were early school leavers. There were **equal numbers of male and female** clients in the full GOAL sample, although not within countries. Across the six countries as a whole, more than seven in 10 service users (71%) were aged 35 years or under, with the most common age range being 19-25. Eighty-four percent of service users were citizens of their country of

residence. Just over seven in 10 (71%) were native speakers of their country of residence's primary language(s).

One in five GOAL clients (20%) had no qualifications beyond primary education, while three in five (59%) had lower secondary education as their highest qualification. Although the GOAL project was targeted at adults without upper secondary education, a significant percentage of clients (21%) had qualifications beyond lower secondary, with approximately half this group having some form of vocational qualification. **More than half (56%) of GOAL clients were unemployed, and another 21% were economically inactive.** One in three (34%) had some previous experience of adult guidance, e.g. through employment services. Clients cited a number of barriers that had prevented them from improving their qualifications or career prior to coming to GOAL, with the most common being the cost of education (28%), low motivation (25%), health problems (19%), family commitments (18%) and lack of confidence (18%). Overall, general self-efficacy was high and self-reported attitudes to learning were positive.

Generally speaking, GOAL clients could be categorised into **three broad groups reflecting their starting points and guidance needs:**

1. Some clients had relatively clear ideas of their educational goals and the steps they needed to take to achieve those goals, and **primarily needed information** from their counsellors.
2. Other clients were less clear and/or less motivated, and **needed more support and guidance** in order to define and pursue their educational goals.
3. Still other clients faced particularly significant personal barriers, including poor psychological and/or physical health, substance abuse problems and social isolation. These clients typically needed a **high level of support** in a range of areas.

Clients in these three groups exhibited different levels of "readiness" to enter education or training.

4. The GOAL guidance services

Although each GOAL programme sought to develop the guidance service model best suited to that country's potential clients and to the wider context in which the service would operate, there were a number of shared principles and practices. Generally speaking, the programmes aimed to provide services that:

- were **one-to-one** and **face-to-face**
- were **client-centred** rather than institution-centred
- were **custom-fit to the clients' needs** and their personal circumstance
- encouraged clients to be active participants in the guidance process, and supported them to **make their own decisions** regarding their next steps
- helped clients to understand and navigate the complex range of adult education options by providing **information and support**.

The exception to this overarching approach was the Netherlands, where the intervention was not based on the provision of in-depth, client-centred guidance by experienced counsellors, but on the

deployment of a “**Literacy Screener**” tool across a range of partner organisations, e.g. social services. The aim in the Netherlands was for those organisations to use the Literacy Screener to identify, from amongst their their own clients, individuals who may have literacy difficulties. Partner organisations would then provide “light touch” counselling focused on the client’s possible literacy needs.

The Czech Republic, Lithuania and the Netherlands started GOAL with counselling models based on **one counselling session only** for each client. In Flanders, Iceland and Slovenia, GOAL allowed for **several guidance sessions** with no set limit on number or length, or rules on frequency. In the second half of the pilot, Lithuania amended its programme model so that GOAL in this country also offered multiple counselling sessions. This adaptation was in recognition of the **limitations of the one-session model and the greater benefits of a multi-session approach**.

Across the six countries, 98% of the first counselling sessions and 97% of all subsequent sessions were **individual face-to-face sessions**. Almost half of all clients (45%) had one planned session only; a further 34% had two planned sessions and completed them. For slightly more than half (55%) of GOAL clients there was no specific number of sessions planned. Fifty percent of first guidance sessions were **31-60 minutes in length** and **28% were 61 minutes or more**.

Most clients (75%) came to the guidance service to **explore educational opportunities**, followed, with a significant gap, by clients who came to **find links between personal interests and occupational/educational opportunities** (37%). A further 22% of service users wanted **assistance with job seeking**. (Clients could choose more than one objective.) The desire to **explore educational opportunities** showed an inverse U-shaped curve with age. Exploring educational opportunities was an objective for 67% of 19-25-year-olds, rising to 84% for 26-35-year-olds, and falling slightly to 76% for 36-55-year-olds.

A key strength of the GOAL approach was that the **counselling was tailored to the individual clients’ needs, interests and personal context**, and sought to **empower clients** to make their own decisions and take their own steps. As such, GOAL guidance differed from that typically provided by agencies such as employment services, where the counselling tends to be less individualised, and more focused on institutional targets or objectives. Within GOAL, a central objective was for clients to enrol in education or training, but the primary focus was on helping clients take the steps that were most appropriate for their current situation. For many clients, this meant that GOAL focused on “stepping stone” (i.e. intermediate) outcomes that were a necessary part of a longer journey towards educational enrolment. Such stepping stones included noncognitive outcomes such as the building of self-esteem and motivation.

5. Findings: intervention strategies

Given the limited research and under-developed programme theory in the field of educational guidance for low-educated adults, it was important that the GOAL evaluation provide evidence on:

- the **impact of the different national contexts** on programme implementation and the achievement of programme objectives
- programme resources and processes, and their relationship to programme quality and outcomes.

Partnerships and Networks

For the GOAL programmes, partnerships proved to be a **rich source of benefits**, including:

- more successful **recruitment of clients** than could be achieved through direct routes
- **cross-organisational learning** about counselling tools and approaches that work well for the target groups
- expanded capability to provide holistic, cross-organisational and cross-sectoral services for clients.

Overall, the GOAL programmes were **very successful at strengthening and expanding partnerships and networks** with other service organisations such as social services, labour offices and educational institutions. The key contextual factor facilitating this achievement was the willingness of partner organisations to work with, learn about and learn from GOAL, despite some initial scepticism. Over the life of the GOAL pilot, there was a growing **recognition by partner organisations that the GOAL counselling service added value** to their own work with marginalised adults, particularly through the provision of specialised education-focused guidance of a sort that went beyond the expertise of the partner organisations themselves.

To cultivate and then capitalise on other organisations' willingness to work with GOAL, counselling staff devoted significant resources, in the form of time and effort, to informal networking. These efforts were successful: the improvement in partners' understanding of and respect for the added value of GOAL served as a stepping stone towards increased partner willingness to commit to working more, and more closely, with GOAL. Partnerships appeared to flourish best when they **built on previously existing relationships across organisations**.

Although the GOAL programmes succeeded in their aim to develop, enrich and extend partnerships and networks, they **were not successful in their objective of formally embedding these partnerships** within regional and national policy systems. Primarily due to barriers in the policy landscape, partnerships and networks remained dependent on individual counsellors' efforts to maintain them, and thus may not prove sustainable beyond the life of the pilot.

Outreach activities

Outreach activities focused on identifying and attracting low-educated adults to GOAL. Most countries **achieved their service user recruitment targets**. GOAL countries typically did this through **referrals from partner organisations: “reaching in”** to these organisations and gaining referrals from them was the most successful form of outreach. In some countries, direct outreach to clients also played an important role in recruitment. The most common route for client enrolment in GOAL was referral from employment/unemployment services (30%), followed by self-referral (15%) and referral from social welfare services (14%).

The **key contextual factor** influencing outreach and recruitment was the **willingness of partner organisations to work with, learn about and learn from GOAL**. Programme staff worked hard to develop and maintain relationships with the organisations that would be instrumental to referral pathways, and to show these organisations the added value of GOAL. They were highly successful in doing so; however, this was a **resource intensive** process.

Counsellor competences

Most GOAL staff (83%) were female. The average age of programme staff was 43 years old; ages ranged from 26 to 71. In Slovenia all staff members were over 40 years old whereas in Flanders none were. Staff were generally well educated: just under two-thirds (64%) had a Masters degree. The majority of counsellors (52%) had a degree in education; two-thirds (66%) of counsellors had a specific guidance/counselling qualification. GOAL staff’s **average years of experience ranged from two years in Flanders to 12 years in Slovenia**. Aggregating all GOAL countries (except the Netherlands), the average years of experience in adult counselling was seven years. Surveyed in Spring 2016, most GOAL counsellors said they had engaged in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the past two years. Of the GOAL countries, only Iceland has structural professional standards for adult guidance professionals.

In each country, GOAL programme teams **defined the competences** needed to provide effective educational guidance to low-educated adults in general and the GOAL target groups in particular. While the exact definitions differed slightly across the six countries, all national definitions of counsellor competence emphasised the importance of:

- a rich (and regularly updated) **knowledge of the complex and fragmented adult education landscape**
- well-developed **guidance counselling skills** to address a range of client needs and challenges
- excellent **communication and interpersonal skills**, which were needed both when working with clients and when engaging in partnership and outreach efforts.

Clients were **very pleased** with the counselling they received, and said they would recommend the service to others. Most clients across all countries thought that the counsellors respected their choices, understood their needs, explained things clearly, were encouraging, and gave them helpful information. Counsellors appeared to be **highly committed** to their clients’ well-being, and were keen to offer guidance which took account of service users’ personal contexts, needs and challenges.

GOAL counsellors highlighted the positive impact of the pilot on improving their counselling competences. Key drivers of competence development were: having a **supportive workplace environment that encouraged informal learning on the job**, and having the opportunity to **learn from partner organisations** that serve the client group. However, a number of barriers to competence development were identified. Opportunities for external training were generally limited and there was lack of policy support for adult educational guidance as a profession. An absence of formal national professional standards and formal competence profiles may impact negatively on **professional identity**. Furthermore, the relatively high salience of GOAL clients' personal problems (particularly in some countries) meant that service users often needed counselling that went beyond the professional remit of GOAL's education-focused counsellors; this presented challenges with regard to professional boundaries. Finally, **in some countries, counselling was a "bolt-on" to other responsibilities such as teaching**: counsellors at some sites devoted only a few hours per week to GOAL.

Guidance tools

Overall, the programme teams were **successful in their aim of developing and using appropriate guidance tools**:

- existing tools were mapped and assessed
- relevant tools were adapted and applied in the field
- counsellors acquired the skills they needed to use the tools to the best effect.

Where teams did encounter challenges, these were primarily related to the complexities of working with the vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups targeted by GOAL.

Some **key messages** regarding the effective use of tools emerged:

1. Not every tool is right for every client, nor every counsellor.
2. Services can benefit from using a **data monitoring tool** that helps to structure guidance sessions and facilitates the collection of contextual and specific data. Such data help counsellors learn more about clients and address their needs with greater precision. A data monitoring tool also provides evidence for programme monitoring and evaluation purposes.
3. In the GOAL countries, there was not a strong need to develop counselling tools from scratch: it was feasible to **adapt existing counselling tools** to meet the needs of GOAL clients.
4. The process of selecting which existing tools were best suited to use or adaptation for the target group ideally begins with a **mapping exercise** conducted by experienced counselling staff.
5. **Other service organisations** working with the client group can potentially provide relevant tools and guidelines for their use.
6. **Social media** can be a powerful tool, enabling more frequent, informal contact between the counsellor and client, with the aim of keeping the client motivated and engaged.
7. Counselling tools include instruments such as **manuals that support the work of the counsellor**.

Providing high quality guidance services

The overarching aim of GOAL was to implement high quality guidance services for low-educated adults. The pilot was primarily exploratory – investigating **what level of service quality could be achieved under differing national conditions**, and what impacts GOAL might have on different groups of low-educated adults in the various national contexts. It proved possible to achieve a high degree of programme quality across a variety of national settings and contexts, and in the face of a range of obstacles. However, although high quality counselling was a necessary condition for successful outcomes, it was not a sufficient one: what happened during counselling was but one part of the equation determining client outcomes.

Clients themselves rated service quality very highly: **97% of clients said they were satisfied**. To a large degree, this was related to counsellor competences: clients felt that counsellors did a very good job of meeting their needs. GOAL appeared to be most effective **when programme resources were matched to client need**. Where the counselling model allowed for only one session per client, service users with higher levels of need were not able to receive as much counselling as was desired. This resource limitation placed clear **limits on counsellors' ability to provide "custom-fit" counselling**. Single-session counselling models may be more suited to an environment such as an educational institute, where potential pathways are more clearly defined and limited, clients have more pre-existing awareness of the range of available options, and counsellors have more in-depth knowledge about those options.

6. Findings: client outcomes

Information and support were key to positive client outcomes. Many clients were motivated to improve their qualifications but found it difficult or impossible to navigate the complexities of adult education without the support of GOAL. Counsellors appeared to do a very good job of providing information and support that was tailored to clients' interests, objectives and contexts. From the client perspective, **information made a significant difference to their understanding, ambitions and ability to progress into education**. Many clients had been held back, not by poor attitudes to learning, but by a lack of information and support to act on the opportunities available to them. Almost all clients agreed that their **next steps were clearer after counselling**.

Clients were supported to **develop their own education plans and goals**, rather than simply following the counsellor's lead. This client-centred model takes more time but appeared to help clients improve their education-related motivation and self-belief. For many clients, the process of achieving their goal was one that required overcoming a range of obstacles and challenges, and taking a number of intermediary steps (e.g. gaining information about available opportunities, increasing motivation and self belief, and identifying barriers to enrolment and persistence on a course). In qualitative interviews, clients spoke positively about the **impacts of counselling on their personal motivation**. Clients across countries reported that the counselling helped them to **improve their self-image and educational motivation**.

Surveyed 2-4 months after leaving GOAL, 38% of the 149 follow-up survey respondents reported that they had fully achieved their educational goals and an additional 50% said they had made some progress towards those goals. Exit data from the GOAL monitoring instrument for 438 clients showed that **66% of these clients said that they had fully taken their planned steps** by the end of counselling, and an additional **23% said they had taken at least some steps**. **Forty-eight percent had entered education/training, 7% had entered employment and 4% had improved their employment**. Amongst follow-up survey respondents who entered GOAL to pursue educational (rather than employment-focused) objectives, **71% had enrolled on a course** by the time of their exit from GOAL and, of this group, 77% had enrolled on a course leading to a qualification. The availability of free or heavily subsidised courses played a central role in educational enrolments: in Slovenia, where there is funding for some further education courses, 61% of GOAL clients enrolled on a course, and more would have done so if sufficient funding had been available. In Flanders, where adult education funding is more widely available, a sub-sample of service users was tracked: 74% of these clients had enrolled on a course by the end of the evaluation's data collection period.

7. Implications for programme and policy development

The key programme and policy messages emerging from this evaluation can be grouped into two broad categories: 1) the costs and benefits of partnerships and outreach, and 2) the potential benefits and limits of the GOAL approach to guidance.

The costs and benefits of partnerships and outreach

Successful partnerships increase the likelihood that the policy and programme environment addresses the “whole client” rather than just individual, sector-specific aspects of the client's life. Future programmes should be aware of the **clear benefits of partnerships, but also the costs in terms of programme resources**. Successful outreach involves the investment of considerable staff time to build relationships of trust between organisations and between the guidance service and potential clients. The GOAL pilot suggests that the efforts and costs associated with outreach are likely to be higher the more vulnerable or hard-to-reach the potential client is. Future programmes may need to focus on target groups which are characterised by more active demand for the service and which present fewer outreach challenges. In other words, it may be more financially viable and more sensible for these programmes to target “low hanging fruit” than to use their finite resources to target more marginalised adults, even if the latter are the most in need.

In the long run, the strength and sustainability of partnerships and outreach is dependent upon financial and other policy mechanisms being in place to support these efforts. The GOAL project represented **joined-up policy in action** – that is, there was an explicit aim to develop, contribute to and benefit from partnerships that crossed policy boundaries and moved beyond the traditional “policy silo” approach to public services. Programmes would benefit from greater policy support aimed at reducing structural barriers to cross-sectoral partnerships. Policy makers would benefit from a clearer understanding of **how educational guidance for low-educated adults fits in with existing (and more high profile) policy objectives** and commitments, (e.g. **reducing early school leaving or increasing participation in lifelong learning**).

The potential benefits and limits of the GOAL approach to guidance

Guidance programmes for low-educated adults should base their expectations and approach on client need and readiness. Where programmes focus on more vulnerable clients, it is likely to prove difficult to provide evidence of large average gains in clients' education and/or employment outcomes. It is possible for even very vulnerable service users to make a great deal of progress, but these clients are unlikely to achieve measurable educational or employment outcomes without addressing a range of personal and psychological issues first. The population of low-educated adults is highly heterogeneous, however, and for many adults in this cohort, progress into education is possible with only a small number of high quality guidance sessions. Given the likely need for future programmes modelled on GOAL to justify their costs to funders and policy makers, such programmes may wish to target their services (at least initially) at low-educated adults who have relatively high levels of "readiness" to enter education or training.

In general, the key problem for most GOAL clients was not a lack of desire to improve their qualifications, but a lack of knowledge about educational opportunities. This suggests that there is a substantial level of **untapped desire or willingness amongst the low-educated population to pursue further education.** Guidance targeted at low-educated adults could thus play an important role in helping Member States achieve their education targets. However, in the absence of sufficient policy commitment to providing educational guidance for low-educated adults, it will be difficult or even impossible to develop and maintain high quality, sustainable guidance programmes, and in the absence of **adequate funding for adult education courses**, few clients will be able to progress into and through education, no matter how high the quality of the guidance they receive. This latter point suggests that adult education guidance programmes may not be a sensible investment for governments in the absence of free or subsidised courses that clients can progress into as a result of guidance. However, in the appropriate policy environment, guidance of the type piloted in GOAL **appears to produce significant results, and can play an important role in the pursuit of national education objectives.**



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