digital freelancing

diFree

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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

Digital Freelancing for Higher Education Students and Recent Graduates Project

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PREFACE

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

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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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