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TRANSITION OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES FROM EDUCATION TO LABOUR MARKET IN SLOVENIA

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to present the transition of youth with disabilities from education to labour market in Slovenia. The article introduces the European Social Fund project "Transition", provided by the partnership of Racio, University Rehabilitation Institute and Auris, operated from 2010 to 2013. The Transition project was intended for two target groups: youth with disabilities in the education process, with the aim to achieve their integration from education to the labour market, and for professionals who provide the transition. Young people in Europe have been facing increasing uncertainty in the labour market. The labour market transition for youth, and especially for youth with disabilities, is a very demanding question. Policymakers and experts in the European Union have therefore developed programs for social inclusion, improved access, achievement and integration of young people with disabilities into the labour market. Youth unemployment during economic crises has increased in all parts of the world, with the impact of prolonging the duration of unemployment. The transition of young people with disabilities from school to the labour market in Slovenia is not integrally and adequately organised. A support system should be introduced to monitor young people with disabilities while they are still at school and prepare them for entering the labour market. After finishing school, a model of transition from school to work is proposed to prevent unemployment.

Key words: disability, transition, education, labour market

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Introduction

Transition from school to work is an important and usually a difficult step for persons with disabilities. Like all other young population they face unemployment. Besides the barriers at the labour market youth with disabilities face barriers caused by their disability.

In Slovenia, the transition of youth with disabilities from school to the labour market has not been satisfactory. Youth with disabilities are often left to themselves after finishing the education. Many of them stay at home, some register at the Employment Service of Slovenia, others enter vocational rehabilitation programs, and rare individuals become employed. Often a young person enters vocational rehabilitation after many years of having stayed at home unemployed and having lost the basic employability skills, professional knowledge, working habits and confidence.

Clearing service in Austria, selected as a best practice in the field of social integration by EU Peer Review programme for 2004, served as a good basis for research as well as development in Slovenia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, joined in Leonardo da Vinci project 2007-2009, under Austrian coordination.

To implement a successful and effective practice model of the transition of youth from school to labour in Slovenia, Racio Social, University Rehabilitation Institute and Auris launched a three-year project which started in December 2011 and closed in December 2013. The project was financed by Slovene national sources and the European Social Fund. The project comprised an analysis of the current transition of young people with disabilities from school to the Slovene labour market, theoretical and practice models, presentation of global good practices, adaptation of an educational training program for the Slovene environment, and a training program for fifteen transition trainers who offered support to more than sixty young people with disabilities during their entry into the labour market. Through practical work with the young people, transition trainers were able to test the knowledge acquired during the program and suggested potential improvements to be developed. Based on the experience acquired during the practical experiment, the solutions for integration into the system, policies and best practices were suggested in the Transition project.

There have been emerging needs in Slovenia for a support system that would start monitoring young persons with disabilities while they are still at school and prepare them for entering the labour market. Conditions and organisational structures must be established that will enable

professionals (transition trainers) to work with young persons with disabilities and help them from school to the labour market.

Through education and training young persons with disabilities acquire the key competences in order to respond to the needs of the labour market. The transition to the labour market should enable everyone to acquire his or her first fully-paid job.

Youth unemployment

A survey by the International labour office (ILO) presented key statistics about global youth:

- The crisis has led to a substantial increase in youth unemployment rates,
- Youth are more vulnerable to economic crisis – young people are »first out« and the »last in«,
- Youth jobs crisis has been confirmed in both developed and developing economies, but the highest price of the crisis was paid by youth in developed economies (ILO, 2011: 1).

One of the strategies of managing to bridge the job crisis is often »hiding« in the education system rather than facing the job search or staying at home. An increasing number of young people combine work with study, or work part-time (ILO, 2011: 4).

ILO lists the activities of governments for supporting youth unemployment:

- Addressing skills mismatches among youth as vocational training programmes, re-training of unemployment or discouraged youth, workplace training schemes, the creation or improvement of apprenticeships systems, entrepreneurship training programmes, soft and life skills training programmes for youth with disabilities, etc.,
- Addressing inadequate job matching as programmes to bring relevant information;
- Addressing poor signalling: programmes to ensure skills to employers;
- Supporting strong labour market information systems;
- Addressing slow job growth barriers – programmes for job creation, public works;
- Financial and macroeconomic policies as credits to SME enterprises (ILO, 2011:6).

Youth with disabilities are amongst the most marginalized and poorest of all world's youth. Youth with disabilities face dual disadvantages as

individuals with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty even in developed countries (United Nations, 2011: 1).

Youth unemployment rate was more than twice as high as the adult one – 23.3% against 9.3% in the fourth quarter of 2012. In 2011, 12.9% of young people were neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET's). There are also skills mismatches on Europe's labour market (European Commission 2013).

Transition into working life for youth with disabilities can be particularly challenging as they face discrimination and attitudinal barriers (United Nations, 2011: 4). Obstacles for employment are:

- youth do not receive skills and qualifications;
- inaccessible environment and
- initial costs (ramps, accessible IT) pose a formidable barrier for youth with disabilities looking for employment.

The key aspects needed to be considered in the field of transition are:

- Transition is a process that must be supported by the existence and implementation of legislation and policy measures;
- Transition needs to ensure the young person's participation and respect personal choices of the young person;
- The development of an individual education plan focused on the young person's progress should be part of the transition process;
- Transition must be based on the direct involvement and cooperation of all parties concerned;
- Transition requires close co-operation between schools and the labour market in order for young people to experience real working conditions;
- Transition is a part of a long and complex process of preparing and facilitating young people to enter into economic and adult life (European Agency for Development in Special Needs, 2006: 12).

Based on those facts, EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020 addresses the issue and promises that "EU will pay particular attention to young people with disabilities in their transition from education to employment" (European Commission, 2010: 7).

Vickerman and Blundel (2010: 26-28) found out:

Students with disability frequently do not disclose their disability during higher education due to a perceived fear that they may not be offered a place on the course of their choice. On that basis, reasonable accommodation may not be available of. Therefore, they recommend more proactive policy;

50% of disabled students did not have any contacts with the university careers services and those who did found the advice to be limited in relation to specific issues around employability.

Marks (Winn and Hay 2009: 104) found out that what school leavers do in the first year after school was especially important, and this decides on good or bad transition from school to work.

The study by Roggero et al. (2010: 647) found out “society tends to view disability in isolation that is without reference to other social issues. Stigma and prejudice are perpetuated by schools, employers, society as a whole, and even by the families of disabled people. Employers tend to assume that a person with a disability is unable to handle the competitive work environment”.

Costs of youth unemployment are high for the society. The study by EUROFOUND (2012) concentrated on the costs for young persons not in education, employment or training (NEET's). The data for Slovenia in 2008 show that the cost per person is 9,937 euro, and with adding the costs of the institutions dealing with youth unemployment it becomes 0.92 GDP (2012, 76). The costs for 2011 are even higher – 10,766 euro per person and per GDP – 1.31 (2012, 79).

Transition Project

The comprehensive training program for professional workers encompassed 80 hours of theoretical work in 5 modules:

- Legislation,
- Evaluation and assessment of competencies,
- Learning and planning for future,
- Partnership: schools – employers, good practices,
- Management of transition process.

100 hours of practical work per each youth with disability was also provided.

In the training program professional workers worked practically with 62 young persons with:

- Physical disabilities,
- Hearing and visual impairments,
- Learning disabilities,
- Mental health problems, behavioral or emotional disorders, autism and other special needs.

State of the art in Slovenia reveals that many institutions take care of youth with disabilities but their activities are not connected: Employment Service of Slovenia, school councillors, Career centers at Universities, Association of students with disabilities, The National Education Institute of The Republic of Slovenia, providers of employment rehabilitation, University Rehabilitation Institute – medical examination and vocational counselling, and others.

When education institutions close their door, it is hard to find appropriate information and the best possible outcome in the unfamiliar area covered by many institutions. That is especially true in times of rapid legislation, crisis and institutional changes – in recent years, the changes in labour market have been substantial in Slovenia; many employers have shut down their facilities and legislation changes have been comprehensive. The knowledge about possible engagement is not so easy to be assured for youth with disabilities and for their parents since average professional workers know only the area they cover in their institution and rarely what other institutions can do.

The project has gathered data on the population with disabilities transitioning from education to labour market. The assessment was made on the basis of the data provided by the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for persons with special needs: about 1,000 youth with disabilities yearly make transition from education to the labour market. This number is also in line with the assessments of international institutions – “*Global Burden of Disease* estimates the number of children aged 0–14 years experiencing “moderate or severe disability” 5.1% and 0.7% children experiencing severe difficulties)« (WHO 2011, 36).

Research method

The action research theory was set as a framework for the training model. The methods included quantitative and qualitative data.

Figure 1: Action Research Model



Source: New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2010)

In the transition process a training program was developed and tested for professionals providing support to youth with disabilities in transition from school to the labour market. Professionals (transition trainers) did a pilot testing of their theoretical knowledge gained from the prior training program in practice with 62 young people with disabilities who were actively involved in the project in the school year 2012/2013. For the purpose of evaluating the impact of the transition trainers' work and with the aim of evaluating the project, 11 transition trainers of different professions (i.e. social worker, psychologist, social and special pedagogue) who were involved in the project from the very beginning of their training program and all the way to the end, i.e. completion of the training process of young people with disabilities, were asked to draw up a report on the counselling process and all the work they had done with young people with disabilities in the previous school year. The reports contained information about young people with disabilities, information about the process of counselling, effectiveness and outcomes, as well as feedback on the project and trainers' work provided by the youth's parents, school counsellors, young people with disabilities, and trainers themselves (where successful employment was carried out, the opinion of the employer was obtained as well). Furthermore, we gathered basic demographic data about the participants, such as gender, level of education, categories or types of disabilities, and their status in terms of their successful enrolment in employment or education (next level of education) at the end of the school year 2012/2013.

Results and discussion

Quantitative Analysis

Transition trainers worked with 28 young female with disabilities and 34 male with disabilities. The project included 14 deaf and hard of hearing, 13 physically impaired, 11 individuals with mental illness, 9 with learning disabilities, 6 blind and partially sighted, 5 with speech and language disabilities (for more information, see Table 1). In addition, there were 3 young people with behavioural and emotional disorders and one diagnosed with chronic illness.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for categories/types of disabilities

Categories/types of disabilities	N	Proportion
Deaf and hard of hearing	14	22%
Physically impaired	13	21%
Individuals with mental illness	11	18%
Individuals with learning disabilities	9	15%
Blind and partially sighted	6	10%
Individuals with speech and language disabilities	5	8%
Individuals with behavioural and emotional disorders	3	5%
Individual with chronic illness	1	1%

Furthermore, the results in Table 2 show that the majority of young people with disabilities were visiting vocational or secondary school, 13 were undergraduate students and two post-graduate students. There were two pupils of primary school, one graduate (but unemployed), one undergraduate dropout, three students who had completed studies but did not yet graduate, and two with unfinished secondary school.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for level of education

Level of education	N	Proportion
Students of vocational and secondary school	41	66%
Undergraduate students	10	16%
Students who had completed studies but did not yet graduate	3	5%
Pupils of primary school	2	3%
Post-graduate students	2	3%
Students with unfinished secondary school	2	3%
Undergraduate dropout	1	2%
Unemployed graduate	1	2%

The young people with disabilities who were involved in the project after the completion of their training and receiving counselling, consultations and other support from transition trainers in most cases (34 total) continued their schooling: a few of them had to repeat a grade, some continued their education (progression to the next grade and transitioning from e.g. secondary school to undergraduate study), some successfully finished their education process (or they had to do some exams or obtain a diploma or baccalaureate and their schooling would be completed). Nine young people with disabilities were included in vocational rehabilitation, seven were given fixed-term employment, three were successful in completing their schooling and three unsuccessfully completed their education and registered for employment at the Employment Service of Slovenia. One student with disabilities, who was enrolled in an elementary school with special curriculum, failed to successfully complete it. He acquired the status in accordance with the Act Concerning Social Care of Mentally and Physically Handicapped Persons and will probably decide (if he has not already by now) to join one of occupational activity centres or programs of social inclusion (for more information see Table 3). Fifty-seven (57) young people with disabilities successfully finished their transition; 5 of those 62 who had at first decided to participate ended their training prior to the end of the project. The reason for that is probably their lack of motivation in the first place.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for project outcome

Project results	N	Proportion
Continuation of schooling	34	60%
Vocational rehabilitation	9	16%
Employment	7	12%
Successful completion of schooling – registration as unemployed at the Employment Service of Slovenia	3	5%
Unsuccessful completion of schooling – registration as unemployed at the Employment Service of Slovenia	3	5%
Acquiring the status in accordance with Act Concerning Social Care of Mentally and Physically Handicapped Persons	1	2%

The majority of the 34 young people with disabilities decided to continue with their schooling at the end of the school year 2012/2013. They successfully passed the academic or professional practice with the help of their transition trainers. Young people with disabilities met with employers (or future employers) and gained practical insight into what awaits them when they successfully complete their studies and become active job seekers.

Qualitative Analysis

One purpose of the present study was getting feedback about the project and its effectiveness from different viewpoints, i.e. youth with disabilities, their parents, school teachers or school counsellors, and transition trainers. In order to get as much information as possible, each transition trainer was asked to collect the necessary data in the final report. Afterwards, a qualitative analysis was made. In the analysis, the typical stages of the counselling process were as follows:

1st stage: getting to know each other, i.e. young person with disability starts the process of transition with the trainer (exploring young person's strong points and points of weaknesses, potentials and challenges; training social skills and meta-learning skills);

2nd stage: exploring career goals of young person with disability: learning how to properly plan the career and setting career goals;

3rd stage: job search (learning how to write applications, CVs and Europass, job interviews simulations, etc.).

It is evident that young people with disabilities gained a lot of benefits out of this project, such as:

- useful information that helped them in planning their life, search and assistance in finding employment opportunities;
- feelings of not being alone, having much needed support and knowing that whenever help is needed, they have someone they can turn to for advice and help;
- a better insight into their own abilities, improved self-esteem, new knowledge about the labour market and the sources of assistance that is available; timely detection of problems and dealing with them appropriately;
- moral support, encouragement, and confirmation that the young person with disability is on track to reach his or her goal;
- assistance in getting suitable employer when young person seeks professional school practice or internship,
- help in learning for school exams and getting proper meta-skills as well as social skills;
- becoming familiar with the options of vocational rehabilitation at the Employment Service of Slovenia;
- assistance in preparing for a job interview and knowledge how to write a good CV and job application;
- new knowledge about the employment rights and duties;
- assistance in finding a suitable employer for employment of young person with disability and establishing contact with him or her.

The positive influence of the project on the young people with disabilities was certainly not overlooked by their parents. They had a lot of good things to say about the project and the trainers. The parents of one adolescent had commented on their daughter's positive development during the project which was largely driven by the transition trainer. They said that:

"...soon after the beginning of cooperation with the trainer she began changing positively: she was more relaxed and less aggressive. She became more confident, talkative and open. She showed that she had aims and the needed motivation to go to school and to finish it. She realized that without finishing her schooling and education process successfully it would be very difficult for her to find appropriate employment."

Needless to say, the young people with disabilities who were included in the project were almost all very grateful for having the opportunity of support by the transition trainers. Some of them even reported being

inspired by the whole project activities and trainers. This is true for the following student with disabilities who said:

“Just as I myself needed help so I try my best to give help and support to other students who have difficulties during their studies. The work of transition trainer gives each of us, students, who were involved in the project even more motivation. I can just honestly thank my transition trainer who really did a remarkable job in helping me to find suitable employment.”

School counsellors were also in favour of the project and often participated with transition trainers very actively. One school counsellor reported that at first the students were not motivated to join. The reason for that was the fear of stigmatization from their schoolmates (i.e. “What others will say about their sessions with transition trainer – will they think that they are helpless and that they cannot work out appropriate solutions for their challenges by themselves?”). However, the students accepted that their schoolmates with disabilities had after school sessions with “some special trainer”, where they got support concerning school and career orientation. In fact, it turned out that even students without disabilities were interested in having such support. Due to that and due to good results in working with young people with disabilities one trainer said that the profile of transition trainer should be included in the national qualification of professions, while one of the young person’s parents gave an appeal to increase the project’s idea and include it into the system. It was suggested by one trainer to broaden the counselling target group from young people with disabilities to all young people (also those without disabilities) because all young people nowadays face the same problem - finding employment - and are in great need of support at the transition from school to the labour market. Let us conclude with one of the trainers who ended her report by saying:

“When working with the candidates I came to the conclusion that young people with disabilities are genuinely in need of help in the transition from school to the labour market because they will have significantly bigger problems in finding the right employment. We are here talking about young people with disabilities who do not have appropriate techniques to solve problems themselves, have difficulty adapting, and are not equipped with information about where or to whom they can turn for help. For those reasons, they could be facing several years of unemployment. This applies to the entire group of young people with disabilities, as well as a number of young people who are not defined as persons with disabilities, but are facing major difficulties in the successful transition to the labour market anyway. Therefore, I believe

that the role of the transition trainer is extremely important because he or she can detect problems in time and can help solving them and then also properly orient the young person.

Although the project has helped more than 50 young people in facilitating their transition to the labour market, I believe that this is far too little. Similar assistance should be given to all young people with disabilities as well as young people who do not have that status but their teachers and parents estimate that they would need help. Therefore, I believe that the only appropriate solution would be applying this form of assistance at the national level, with the aim to help as many young people as possible, who are really in need of help. This could then result in a decrease of the large yearly number of newly unemployed young people which nowadays steeply continues to grow. Young people should be directed to various forms of assistance that are available to them (e.g. vocational rehabilitation) which would have a positive impact on their employability."

Conclusion

The article presents a possible solution for the transition of youth with disabilities from education to labour market. The project was inspired by the Austrian best practice where every young person is given advice or further options after finishing education. Especially in times of high youth unemployment, transition options can bring solutions for many young persons with disabilities. Within the dissemination of the project, all the Slovenian key stakeholders have been informed with the transition process and the needs of the target group. So far, no system solution has been provided but the idea lives and continues with the new EEA Grants project in cooperation with Norway.

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