

The Youth Transition project – A case study

Mojca Arh, MA

Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers of the Republic of Slovenia
Linhartova cesta 51, Ljubljana
Mojca.Arh@prehodmladih.si

Tatjana Dolinšek, MSc

Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers of the Republic of Slovenia
Linhartova cesta 51, Ljubljana
Tatjana.Dolinsek@prehodmladih.si

Maja Zovko-Stele, MSc

Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers of the Republic of Slovenia
Linhartova cesta 51, Ljubljana
Maja.Zovko-Stele@prehodmladih.si

Karl Destovnik

Linhartova cesta 51, Ljubljana
Karl.Destovnik@centerkontura.si

Abstract

The Youth Transition project aims at offering professional help to young people with special needs when making the transition from school to the labour market or to the next level of their education. The target group includes young people with special needs who, due to their problems, usually experience more difficulties in entering the labour market than their non-disabled peers. Consequently, they are at very high risk of suffering long-term unemployment, which can result in a decline in their basic skills, professional knowledge, working habits, etc. and in numerous secondary problems, all of which have a negative impact on their quality of life. Therefore, young people with special needs are an extremely vulnerable social group and solving problems about their transition, and especially their long-term unemployment demands a high level of social responsibility based on which various institutions and other actors function in a coordinated fashion in order to prevent social exclusion. The paper briefly outlines the project itself, its objectives and its working methods. The emphasis is on presenting a case study showing how an efficient cooperation between institutions empowers young people with special needs to act responsibly towards themselves while moving closer to the labour market, thus contributing to the development of society as a whole.

Key words: youth, special needs, transition, labour market, social responsibility



1 The problem of youth unemployment

The situation of young people in the labour market is rather concerning, and the consequences of unemployment can be even more negative for young people than for the older population. In addition to anxiety, depression, fear, apathy, irritability, oversensitivity, feelings of shame and guilt, avoidance of social interaction, low self-esteem, etc., the common consequences of youth unemployment also include various behavioural problems, addictions, and the development of socially negative attitudes towards work (Ule, 2000). All of the above indicate that youth unemployment is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

The need to address the problem of youth unemployment is also expressed in one of the main findings of the Slovenian Youth Survey 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019), which states that fear of unemployment among young people is on the rise – it has almost doubled since 2000. Although the official data for Slovenia indicate a decrease in youth unemployment, the self-reported unemployment rate has remained almost unchanged since 2013, and is more than 200 percent higher than the Labour Force Survey rate. Accordingly, Slovenian youth demonstrate increasing levels of stress and are significantly less satisfied with their self-image and overall quality of life compared to their peers from SE Europe (Naterer et al., 2019).

Thus, youth unemployment is a serious problem in Slovenia, and many young people are not successful at making the transition from school to the labour market (Tabaj et al., 2016). In general, a successful transition depends on many factors, namely cultural capital, family support, opportunities and constraints in the educational process, and sexual, social and ethnic background (Rapuš Pavel, 2010). However, for young people with disabilities, making a successful transition to the labour market is even more difficult, due to the additional health and other problems they face.

2 The Youth Transition project

2.1 Basic information and starting points – Why the Youth Transition project?

Analyses conducted at the Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers of the Republic of Slovenia before launching the Youth Transition Project (Tabaj et al., 2016) showed, that in order for young people with disabilities to make a successful transition to the labour market, a link needed to be created between well-established systems of education of children with special needs and employment of people with disabilities. In our opinion, when such a link is missing along the way from school to the labour market, young people with special needs may feel scared and lost after completing their studies and question their abilities and capabilities with regard to regular employment, which contributes to their long-term unemployment. The situation is even worse for those who,

for various reasons, are not able to complete their studies, the so-called drop-outs. As their unemployment continues, they not only lose their professional knowledge, skills and working habits, all of which comprise their work potential, but they are also prone to secondary problems such as low self-esteem and mental health issues, which in turn make them even less employable. Therefore, it seems crucial and in line with the recommendations made by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, to start employment-related activities already before the completion of their education ("Early school leaving – Izobraževanje in usposabljanje – European Commission", 2020).

The Youth Transition project was initiated with the aim to bring young people with special needs closer to the labour market by helping them acquire and develop various skills and competences and by connecting them with employers and other actors that can influence their employability. In order to make a successful transition to the labour market it is crucial that education and employment systems are interactive. However, it is also mandatory that all other systems and actors that deal with young people with special needs, such as social and healthcare services, informal organisations, volunteers, etc., function in a coordinated fashion. Such cross-sector collaboration enables a rapid, quality transition from school to the labour market. However, in order to function in a coordinated fashion, institutions and other actors must exhibit a high level of social responsibility, a crucial element of which is a holistic approach (Mulej & Hrast, in press).

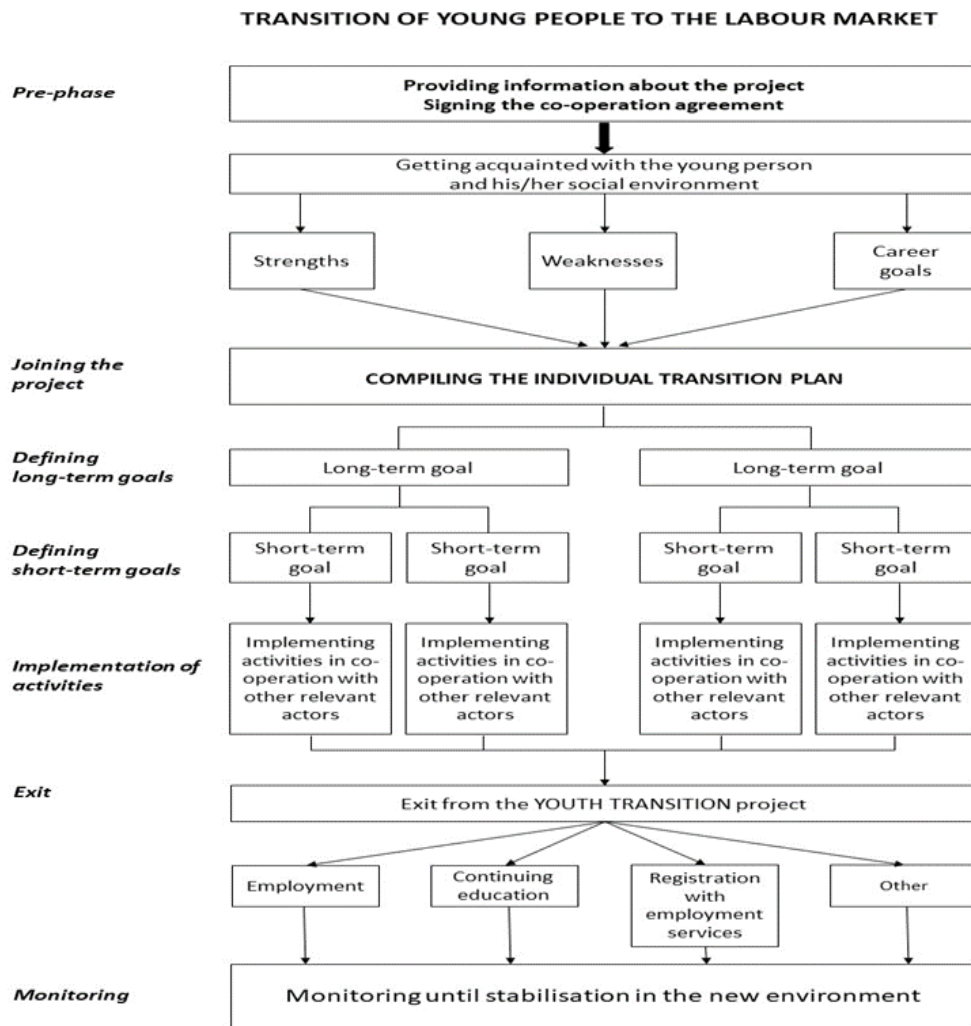
The project is co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union from the European Social Fund and is implemented throughout Slovenia. During the 2018–2021 period the project will serve 2100 young people (younger than 29 years of age) with special needs who are holders of a Placement Decision for Children/Students with Special Needs issued by the National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia. These are young people with intellectual disabilities, blind or visually impaired, deaf or hearing impaired, young people with speech impairment, physically disabled, chronically ill, young people with autistic spectrum disorders, and young people with emotional or behavioural deficit/disorders for whom major problems are anticipated during their transition to the labour market and during their employment. The project is co-ordinated by the Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers of the Republic of Slovenia and implemented by 14 project partners (vocational rehabilitation providers). Activities are performed by 38 professional workers employed at these 14 vocational rehabilitation providers. They are of various professions: psychologists, social workers, specialist teachers, occupational therapists, sociologists and similar, with diverse work experience from various fields such as economics, education, social assistance, vocational rehabilitation, etc. They hold monthly meetings where they share their knowledge and skills to solve any common problems that arise, learn from each other through sharing good practices, and gain a multi-disciplinary perspective on any issues that arise.

2.2 Project activities



Within the Youth Transition project, various activities are performed that systematically enable young people with disabilities the same opportunities for integration into the labour market and thus increase their social inclusion. The project aims at coordinating the participation of young people with disabilities and their families as well as an array of other professionals and actors (i.e. schools, employers and other formal and informal institutions).

Figure 1: Project activities



As is obvious from Figure 1, we work with young people who join the project on an individual basis in accordance with the long-term and short-term goals that are set for each individual separately based on his/her strengths, weaknesses and career goals.

Cooperation with various institutions from the fields of education, social and healthcare services, employment services and other non-profit organisations and associations begins already during a pre-phase. All these institutions and organisations are crucial in

identifying young people with special needs, who require professional help in making a successful transition to the labour market.

In our experience, the so-called NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group, which is frequently excluded from all existing systems of assistance, is especially vulnerable and in need of broad-based professional help. When involved in project activities, they usually find the motivation and courage to either continue their education or register with the Employment Services of the Republic of Slovenia (hereafter: ESS), where they can sign up for suitable programs offered by active labour market policy or vocational rehabilitation for further assistance.

When joining the project, an individual transition plan (hereafter: ITP) is compiled. The ITP is the key document for planning and carrying out the activities set for each individual separately according to his/her needs. Based on the goals defined within the ITP, young people are motivated, empowered and monitored in their transition to the labour market. The main activities involve helping young people learn about themselves in terms of their interests, qualities and abilities as well as the limitations stemming from their special needs. Furthermore, we help them find information on schools, faculties and universities, and professions, as well as the opportunities they have on the labour market as individuals with special needs. All of the above serve to help them make decisions on further education and/or a professional career.

When implementing the above-stated activities, professional project workers cooperate closely with their colleagues from vocational rehabilitation teams as well as with school counsellors and other professional school workers. In addition, parents and caregivers are actively included in these activities, since they play an important role in young people's career-related decision-making. Cooperation with employers is vital: on the one hand we seek their help in carrying out the relevant school or study practice for students with special needs, and on the other hand we organize visits to employers to get to know certain jobs better and/or to participate in on-site training or work tests, in order to become more familiar with actual work settings. This in turn gives the employer the opportunity to get acquainted with the young person before employment and make him/her ready for future recruitment in line with his/her needs. Very frequently, collaboration with other relevant actors, such as social-work centres, healthcare institutions and other organisations, is necessary. This is especially the case when recruiting individuals from the NEET group. Individuals who are excluded from education, employment or training are prone to developing secondary problems (e.g. low self-esteem, mental health issues, etc.) that influence their employability. Therefore, in order to serve the needs of young people moving closer to the labour market, permanent cross-sector cooperation must be employed. However, as has already been pointed out: various institutions and other actors must exhibit a high level of social responsibility and have the ability to function in a coordinated fashion, creating rationalisation, synergy, and a services upgrade.

The goal of the project is to achieve as high a number as possible of young people joining the project to either become employed when they exit the project or register with the ESS

in order to be eligible to sign up for suitable programs offered by active employment policy or vocational rehabilitation for further assistance. Young people joining the project can be involved in project activities for 6 to 24 months, depending on their situation and ITP. Experience shows that monitoring until stabilisation in the new environment is crucial. No matter what the exit is from the project: employment, continuing education or registration with the employment services, our youngsters are facing a new environment that they need to adapt to, which usually causes new problems. Therefore, we monitor their adaptation and offer our support for six months or until they stabilise in the new environment.

3 Case study

3.1 Person A before joining the project

Person A is a single, 21 year-old female from a dysfunctional family. She did not manage to complete regular primary school. After 7th grade, she was referred to short-term vocational education, where they recognised her many deficits and problems and helped her obtain a Placement Decision for Students with Special Needs. She was identified as chronically ill, with mild intellectual disability, and with an emotional deficit and a mild behavioural disorder. Accordingly, she received additional professional help and adaptations in her learning process upon which she was able to complete the Biotechnology and Care Assistant program. She was encouraged to continue her secondary vocational education program for shop assistant, but it was too demanding and she dropped out; she tried another short-term program, for textile assistant, but eventually dropped out of that one, too.

Due to family dysfunction, she was placed in a foster family already during primary school. During her short-term vocational education she was placed in a dormitory during the week and spent weekends with her foster family. After dropping out of school for the last time, she was old enough to make her own decisions on housing and she decided to move in with her mother, but it did not work out. She then sought help at the social-work centre and they found her a room in a women's shelter, but the regimen was too strict for her there, so she left and returned to her mother's house at first and later to her partner's. But she had no stability in this area of her life. She could not stay long with one partner.

Each time she moved in with another partner she changed location and tried to find a new job. She gained some experience as a kitchen assistant and on various assembly lines. No matter what she tried, she could not work more than five days in a row.

The Youth Transition project was presented to her by a social worker from a social-care centre when Person A was again seeking help for her housing problem. The social worker was of the opinion that by joining the project, she would get broad-based professional help in the different problematic areas of her life, namely housing, health, and the social behaviour that significantly affected her employability.

3.2 Project activities for Person A

3.2.1 Compiling an individual transition plan

As soon as Person A decided to join the project, the first activities were in line with project methodology (Figure 1) focused on getting to know her better in order to prepare an ITP in accordance with her strengths, weaknesses and career interests.

It was determined that she had well-developed manual dexterity. However, she exhibited numerous difficulties that could influence her employability, namely: an intellectual deficit expressed in low general knowledge, a weak and selective memory, attention deficit, poor social skills, a lack of persistence, and bad work habits. In addition, she showed signs of learned helplessness, especially in terms of dealing with emotional distress, social behaviour and solving everyday problems, where she needed professional help and support in order to start planning her future as a self-sufficient individual.

In terms of career goals, Person A expressed her wish to work on a production line requiring manual dexterity. She had some second thoughts about her working time as her previous experiences showed that she wasn't able to work regularly for 8 hours without frequent breaks. Therefore, she wanted a job which allowed her to work at her own pace. She was of the opinion that her work was slow compared to others and didn't want to work in a team where other people's work depended on her. She was aware of the fact that she could not deal with complex social interactions.

Based on the above, it was obvious that Person A needed broad-based multidisciplinary help and support in order to build more independence and self-sufficiency to prepare to find and keep a job. Therefore, two major long-term goals were defined: integration into a suitable work environment and successful dealing with life challenges.

Within the first long-term goal, integration into a suitable work environment, the following short-term goals were identified:

- a) learning about her abilities and opportunities for employment in the local environment, where testing her abilities, providing information on vocational rehabilitation, and visits to potential employers were planned;
- b) gaining work experience and developing work habits and job stability, where involvement in an actual work environment in terms of a work test was scheduled to assess her functioning and further test her limits and possible problems;
- c) ensuring permanent work endurance, where gradual integration into the work environment was envisioned.

Within the second long-term goal, dealing with life challenges, two short-term goals were defined:

- a) developing social skills, where learning socially appropriate behaviour was planned;
- b) improving her psycho-social state and solving her housing problem, both of which required psychological help and support.

3.2.2 Working with Person A

According to the ITP, the professional project worker started her work hand in hand with a vocational rehabilitation counsellor to inform Person A about the various opportunities in the labour market, including supportive and sheltered employment for people with disabilities. Some visits to companies employing people with disabilities were organised to demonstrate the various adaptations people with disabilities receive in such a working environment, including working at their own pace. The vocational rehabilitation counsellor presented the possibility of acquiring the status of a person with disabilities, upon which she could receive the right to vocational rehabilitation and further help on her way to employment. In order to get broader insight into her abilities and limited functioning, a three-month work test was organised at a company employing people with disabilities.

Here, Person A performed simple assembly, sorting and packing work which, based on the well-developed manual dexterity she had exhibited, was not expected to present a problem. The professional project worker collaborated with a mentor that was assigned to Person A by the employer. Based upon her known problems and limitations they designed reasonable adaptations for Person A: shorter, flexible work time (no more than 6 hours a day, no strict arrival time, working at her own pace); comprehensive work instructions; gradual involvement in a work group; and constant support in work tasks from her mentor and professional project worker.

The latter was also available for any other assistance and support. Through helping Person A deal with daily hassles, and encouraging her to bear with her new working environment, step by step the professional project worker taught Person A socially appropriate behaviours. When it became obvious that Person A's mental problems were hindering her functioning not only at work but also in general, she helped her find a mental health professional to improve her psychological wellbeing. In addition, the professional project worker got in touch with a social-work centre to help solve Person A's housing problem and managed to find her a room in a hostel until a more permanent solution could be found.

Despite all the work adaptations and the support and encouragement given by the professional project worker and her mentor, Person A was not able to demonstrate work continuity. The most she managed was working three days in row. Absences from work not scheduled in advance became more and more frequent. The reasons given by Person A were mainly health-related, and she was referred to health-care services. However, it was obvious that lack of persistence at work and lack of adaptability in interpersonal communication were the main causes. It was evident that if Person A wanted to keep a job, she needed continuous support and monitoring at work, things which cannot be provided in regular work settings.

Based on the above, the professional project worker helped her register with the ESS to acquire the status of a person with disabilities, upon which she could receive the right to vocational rehabilitation and further assistance in finding appropriate employment.

3.3 Person A today

Today, Person A is enrolled in a vocational rehabilitation program which is helping her keep the job she tried during the project and is supporting her in other areas of her life, greatly influencing her psycho-social equilibrium. She continues the psychiatric help provided to her during the project and is establishing a life with a new partner. She seems happy to have a new opportunity to be independent. The professional worker is still following and assisting her.

4 Conclusion

Each young person with special needs has abilities, competences, knowledge and creativity that can contribute to the development of society. No society should ignore this – it is wise to develop a system that ensures professional, organisational and financial resources to help tackle this issue. Within the Youth Transition project, a system helping young people with special needs make the transition to the labour market is developing. Our experience shows that cross-sector collaboration and a requisitely holistic approach to social activation are crucial. The case study presented herein proves that even young people who have been excluded from all systems for a longer period can be reactivated using appropriate multi-sector approaches and by providing adequate professional assistance. In addition, the case study shows that young people with disabilities, especially individuals from the NEET group, could indeed use a case manager as provided in the project who co-ordinates all of the professionals, institutions and other actors involved in making an efficient transition to the labour market.

The investments in the development of young people with special needs made by their society, parents and significant others pay off in the opportunity to become integrated into the working and local environment and to live to their full potential, thus contributing to the development of society as a whole.

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