

**MAREN GAG & JOACHIM SCHROEDER****CHALLENGES AND HURDLES****EXAMINING VET TRANSITION SYSTEMS IN DIFFERENT EUROPEAN COUNTRIES – DUE TO PARTICIPATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS****Abstract**

Educational and vocational research shows that there are considerable numbers of adolescents and young adults in the European member states who are failing to make the transition from school to vocational education and training (VET). In many European countries the formal educational systems, have made considerable progress in meeting the demand for integrative education and training concepts, but there is a lack of concepts and systems targeting vulnerable groups and in particular migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other minorities subject to discrimination. The goal of a Leonardo da Vinci Partnership “Integration of vulnerable groups, focused on the transition from school to vocation or world of work” has been to identify problems in transition to the world of vocational education and training or to the world of work, and to develop a tool for targeted local and regional planning of education and training.

**Rationale**

People in vulnerable groups, and especially adolescents and young adults in these groups, are exposed to greater risk of failure in integration into vocational training and access to the world of work, due to the current financial and economic crisis in Europe. One in three Europeans of working age has few or no vocational qualifications; the employment rate of those with poor qualifications in the EU as a whole is only 49%. According to EU figures, there are nearly 23 million people out of work and an estimated 113 million on or below the poverty line, at risk of social exclusion. On the other hand, as the demographic changes progress there is a lack of qualified people in the European labour market. Many of the problems have become worse due to the financial and economic crisis (European Parliament, 2013).

All of these factors make the upcoming EU strategy 2014-2020 all the more important, including measures to combat social exclusion and poverty. By 2020, about 35% of all jobs will require a high level of qualification, increasing the pressure on young people. At present 15% of 20 to 24-year-olds in the EU member states have no employment and no vocational training (European Parliament, 2013). This particularly affects a number of risk groups, varying from country to country. They are at risk of exclusion and discrimination in the vocational education and training systems (VET) and in the labour markets of the European countries, and are often left out at the periphery of society. So it is very important to ensure that the VET systems are open to young people in the vulnerable groups, enabling them to take their opportunities for education and training, and to develop their potentials.

Across Europe migrants and ethnic minorities tend to have lower employment rates than host country nationals. In 2010, when the overall employment rate in the European Union was 64.1%, the employment rate of non-EU citizens was only

55.2% (Cedefop, 2013). Non-EU citizens are more likely to be unemployed because of inactivity and job mismatch, which are sometimes associated with perceived discrimination and negative views on migration (Cedefop, 2011). Migrants should have the opportunity to learn the language of the receiving country, to have access to employment, health and care systems, as well as to have the economic capacity to support themselves. They should be better equipped with the skills required in the labour market and receive better support to overcome barriers, such as discrimination, unrecognised skills and qualifications, inadequate information, advice and guidance.

### **Mapping and comparing local VET transition systems in five countries**

A number of European countries make efforts, at least sporadically, to build up and institutionalise a vocational *transition system*. It is well known that the players involved in the design of educational courses related to the world of work have to try in cooperation with businesses, educational and labour administration and with the youth services to improve the interfaces between the various sub-systems. The transition systems from school to VET and work comprise a wide range of programmes and sub-programmes:

- Programmes of career guidance and teaching of first vocational skills are provided in secondary schools, and young people can do internships in companies, they can request vocational guidance from the job centres, etc. Many secondary schools work with VET schools to prepare the transition for young people from one sub-system to the next one in good time, and to support them in this process.
- If young people do not succeed in finding a job or getting into VET immediately after completing their general school education, they can make use of specific courses and education programmes designed to prepare school students for vocational training after they have acquired a final certificate from their general education school, or after the end of their regular schooling time at a general education school. These education programmes and courses are often conducted by non-governmental organisations.
- In some EU countries there are programmes run by school and out-of-school education providers that do not give full vocational training qualifications but include elements contributing to vocational qualification, and these can later be counted towards a certificate of vocational training or fulfil conditions required to enter full vocational training.
- The transition system also includes all programmes for additional language promotion (for illiterates, for migrants, etc.), job application training, computer courses, e-learning, etc.
- The transition system also includes all social support programmes – counselling, supervision, mentoring, and accommodation groups, residential schools, study grant programmes, etc., that are needed to secure successful vocational qualification.

In our research we tried to identify the differing characteristics and legal frameworks of the VET systems in each partner country. In some of the partner countries we found that the access to VET systems is more or less easy whereas in

other countries there are legal obstacles in terms of access to education and employment. All partner countries identified problems relating to risks of exclusion. One of the central reasons for the existence of numerous exclusion mechanisms is the orientation of vocational education systems in general. Most are oriented towards the legal and educational standards which have become fixed in a national context resulting in the creation of barriers which members of vulnerable groups encounter when they enter the respective country system. These barriers often prevent the vulnerable groups from further developing their educational and working careers.

- Bulgaria has a national policy and a centralized, school-based VET system. There are no legal restrictions, but, no special attention of problems is paid, which vulnerable groups have, which hinders the transitions within the country.
- In Finland there is a national education policy, and the VET system is school-based. Access to basic educational and vocational institutions and same social benefit is guaranteed for all young adults. Mother tongue language is important to acquisition of other languages, but preparatory programmes are too short. There are needs to enable “late arrivals” to get access in VET.
- Ireland is divided in 33 Regional vocational education committees; the VET system is school-based. Type and duration of legal status is determining the level of funding. There is a lack of language support, understanding immigration system and process, and VET guidance.
- Germany has 16 autonomous Federal States. The VET system is based on a combination of schooling and apprenticeship. Migrants have problems in getting access to work permit, language courses, dual system and all kinds of VET opportunities. The formal and non-formal system is often separated. School management is not qualified; there is no recognition of informal competencies.
- Turkey runs also a national and centralized policy, but with significant regional differences (urban and rural areas). The VET system is school-based. There are no legal restrictions for migrants to access school- and VET system. But there is no specific educational (VET) policy for vulnerable groups.

One of the central reasons for the existence of numerous exclusion mechanisms is the orientation of vocational education systems in general. Most are oriented towards the legal and educational standards which have become fixed in a national context resulting in the creation of barriers which members of vulnerable groups encounter when they enter the respective countries. These barriers often prevent the vulnerable groups from further developing their educational and working careers. As lateral entrants, they become outsiders because the educational programs and formats tend to be oriented towards homogeneous groups and because, as a rule, they are explicitly tailored to the requirements and normative rules of the labor markets of the respective host countries.

In some countries a holistic approach is not being taken in relation to the problems and experiences of vulnerable groups. Problems experienced by vulnerable groups include issues relating to health, language, intercultural learning, networking and links between schools and the world of work, domestic circumstances and the

separation of families. There is a lack of understanding of the rights, entitlements and other needs of vulnerable groups by education providers, teachers, and counsellors.

Financial supports and access to funding for vulnerable groups differ in each partner country. The achievement of a VET qualification can be dependent upon whether the individual is continually exposed to poverty or financially secure. However financial security does not always ensure success. On a structural level, different financial conditions were identified in relation to the facilities of the various VET systems (quality of programs, scope of curricular, funding to offer support for special needs).

### **A comprehensive tool to examine local VET transition systems**

Bearing in mind the life situations of particularly vulnerable groups, it is evident that the conditions and quality of the transition systems are often not appropriate to ensure successful movement into VET and employment. Discussions on monitoring instruments showed that *index instruments* are applicable and very supportive tools for transition management (Parreira, 2006). But so far only a few of these tools have been set up. The Learning Partnership developed a local index instrument<sup>1</sup>, which helps to reflect on demands in the existing particular transition system. We were inspired by the “Index of Inclusion”, which was originally developed by the British educationalists Mel Ainscow and Tony Booth and has been translated into many languages (CSIE, 2015). The word “Index” has many different meanings. It can be a table of contents, a list, an indicator, a system of reference tags, or a table of key words.

The central methodological element of an Index is a list of questions designed to work out the status quo, the problems and obstacles, and the needs and recommendations. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers to these questions, but rather this is a systematic, structured analysis of the issues affected by the questions. Thus the list of questions permits initiation of discussion and reflection processes locally, monitoring and further development and helps to set the process going elsewhere. Thereby, the questionnaire shall help to initiate a change of perspective which stimulates the inclusion of members of vulnerable groups, and to build and improve the skills of process monitoring staff in support to municipalities and regions for work.

The tool is designed in such a way that it can be used in various contexts, depending on closeness and responsibilities for individual subgroups of participants. It can be the starting point for concept debates, or a useful aid for team meetings, a tool for quality management, for use in teachers’ conferences, or it can be used for development and implementation of pilot schemes.

The tool prepared by the Learning Partnership is focused exclusively on the setting of the transition from school to work. It is tailored to a selection of categories which have key importance in the experience of the participating experts. The

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<sup>1</sup> “Fit for Purpose: Examining the local VET system and the integration of vulnerable groups. A comprehensive tool to assess the suitability of supports for vulnerable groups in transitioning from school to vocation and to the world of work.” After June 2015 the instrument will be available as a download on the TransVet project Web-Side.

authors decided to take this approach because they have learned from their own practice that institutional re-orientation processes are challenging and that time resources for their implementation are often limited by the pressure of practical everyday work. The list of questions for discussion is arranged in six categories:

- *Target group*: The first set of questions is related to the educational subjects, because individual life situations and specific disadvantage symptoms are as different as the overall spectrum of the vulnerable groups themselves. Relevant points include knowledge of their individual life situations, the relevant legal framework applicable to them, the responsibilities in the institutions, and target group relevant problems due to structural exclusion mechanisms.
- *Institutional transition*: Other questions are referring to the special characteristics of the work setting in the transition system. In order to respond to specific problems in the transition system, it is advisable to examine the specific institutions and systems at the transition phase from school to VET or the world of work. Close attention should be given to the nature of the interfaces, which can often cause young people to lose the way as they move from one system to the other.
- *Access and assignments*: Questions of whether target groups have access to counselling and education programmes, and whether their rights of participation are hindered by legal barriers, are particularly important for lifelong learning and for them to earn a living, and thus for their participation in society. Arrangements for contact with support structures need to be arranged for easy movement through various programmes, because they build on one another and are linked with each other.
- *Pedagogical aims – curricula*: Educational concepts have to be designed to take account of the heterogeneity of their target groups and respond to individual education and support needs. Relevant aspects may include not only unconventional learning settings, but also institutionalised support systems which ensure that participants can stay in the programme, the course or the job.
- *Questions concerning the organizational development*: Targeted strategies and action concepts are needed to ensure that justice in opportunities for participation is not restricted to an individual event or project, but is established on a long-term basis. It is important to consider how far all the levels and decision makers within an institution or programme are involved, in order to institutionalise a diversity concept which is externally visible and provides appropriate controlling tools which are effective internally.
- *Networking and cooperation with external groups*: Practical experience over many years has shown that networking to support practical work secures the wide range of skills of the players in the process, and thus improves the results of educational and social work. Cooperation of strategic partners at operating level and interlinking of targeted lobbying at local and regional level and beyond can establish working structures which promote long-term integration of vulnerable groups. Networking helps in transfer of knowledge, and also provides a platform for joint work on politically disputed subjects and fields of activity.

This structure aims to set up a programme where all levels and dimensions can be handled, for reorientation to establish a diversity based concept, profile, and corresponding strategy.

In the different Partner countries the tool has been applied in various institutions of the local VET transition systems. Positive feedback was given, that it is very easy to familiarise users with the tool for monitoring, and to adapt it to the local transition system. It has been qualified as very supportive to strengthen cooperation with other establishments, organisations and initiatives, and to build and improve the skills of process monitoring staff.

The tool makes evident, that vulnerable groups are not homogeneous, they have heterogeneous conditions and problems and different needs. Social relationships (family relationships and other stable social links) have a substantial influence on the course of migration education and working life. This influence can be both positive and negative. Family ties, demonstrate among other things that the economic pressure of making a financial contribution to the family is often the initial trigger for migration and can be the driving force for subsequent onward migration within transnational networks. Family relationships are widespread, and dispersed and are in many cases located in different countries. The tool helps to understand these structures, but it also shows the limitations of the transition system to respond to these challenges.

Limitations of the tool are described as follows: too many questions have to be responded. In the institutions there is not enough time to discuss and answer all the questions in detail. Some users pointed out that transition barriers are supposed to be more complex than it has been considered in the Index, and they are criticising, that the tool is considering more organisations and systems than biographies and individuals. Others mentioned, that it can be somehow frustrating to detect the lack of adequate educational offerings. Nevertheless the tool has been valued as practical, useful and adaptive to get insights of the local transition system from school to world of work and to support the municipalities in initiating and shaping integration processes with active participation of all stakeholders in the community.

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