

## **TRANSITION PLANNING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (HE) STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: THE OPINIONS OF STUDENTS AND EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES IN SERBIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND MONTENEGRO**

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**Abstract:** *According to the opinions of students with disabilities (SwD) and employees with disabilities (EwD), the employment is harder available for them than for the rest of the population. The transition from academic education to the inclusion in the work force is very complex and demanding process that has profound impacts primarily on SwD and subsequently at universities and organizations that offer jobs. Universities need to expand the area of operation and its role in the formation of SwD who will become successful employees and to actively participate in the process of transition itself. If it is examined widely, it will have a great opportunity to be involved in the curriculum mechanisms that will enable SwD to get the best possible education and a positive experience with the process of transition to work. Finally, the continuous support during studies and work should be provided by the local educational institutions and society.*

**Keywords:** *Higher Education (HE), Students with Disabilities (SwD), Employees with Disabilities (EwD), Inclusion, Transition.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is generally accepted in the Balkan region the fact that the employment is hardly available for employees with disabilities (EwD) as well as for the students with disabilities (SwD) than for the rest of the population, and consequently EwD and SwD are more exposed and treated of long-term unemployment. The initiation of the research lies in the project evaluation that is based on the investigation of the school-to-work transition for higher education (HE) students with disabilities in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The project aim relies on the fact to facilitate the acquisition of professional experience in higher education, to give a better chance for employment especially to the employees and students with disabilities.

This paper focuses on the investigation the opinions of SwD and EwD regarding their transition from HE to work. However, we report on various mechanisms that can overcome the possible problems. The main objective should be encouraging dialogue and activation of all participants in the transition. On one hand local

stakeholders and communities have to be ready to support the process of employment of the EwD, while on the other, Universities need to expand the area of operation and its role in the formation of SwD who will become successful employees. After that, it is necessary to continue to actively participate in the process of transition itself [1-17].

The organization of the paper is as following. Section 2 deals with the legislative regarding the position of EwD and SwD in the reported regions. In Section 3 we provide a comprehensive analysis on obtained results for professional status of EwD and year of study of SwD. Results of the analysis with the discussion are presented in Section 4. Final section gives concluding remarks.

### **2. LEGISLATIVE**

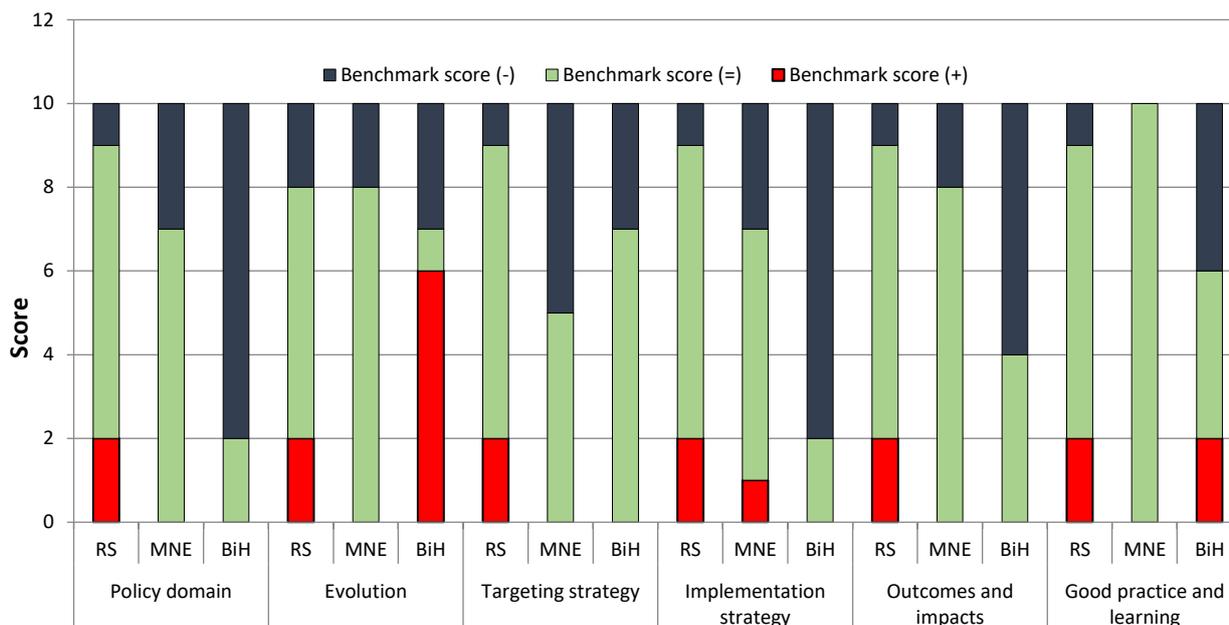
Based on the comparative analysis of the legislation, similarities and differences between the laws, policies and legislation relating to the transition of EwD and SwD from HE to work, we summarized the data and conclusions of the laws of partner countries namely Serbia (RS), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and

Montenegro (MNE) in relation to European Union (EU) law. Therefore, in Chart 1 we present the results of benchmarking scores regarding six themes: policy domain, evolution, targeting strategy, implementation strategy, outcomes and impacts and good practice and learning [1-20]. The benchmark scores are related to the following:

- Benchmarking score (-) signifies that partner country laws are at the moment below the ‘norm’ for the EU as a whole
- Benchmarking score (=) signifies that partner country laws are at the moment broadly at the same level as the ‘norm’ for the EU as a whole

- Benchmarking score (+) signifies that partner country laws are at the moment broadly above the ‘norm’ for the EU as a whole.

It is well known that benchmarking transition and employment policy should offer assessment of the initiatives in regional, national and international level that could be adopted in partner countries in order to facilitate the transition of EwD and SwD from HE into the labour market. It is clear that most of the legislation that is needed to be adopted in mentioned countries is in line with EU policies.



**Chart 1:** Distribution of benchmarking scores

Current legislative should be improved, especially the part that refers to mechanisms that are made to ensure implementation of those laws. There should also be a concrete encouragement by the government for the employers who hire persons with disabilities. This encouragement should not only be in terms of some tax benefits but also as a help with practical problems they can face when hiring EwD or SwD (like need for special equipment that can enable them to perform better on the job etc).

Despite the existence of legal framework and society in the labour market cannot always provide support for EwD and SwD. Many of them still have architectural barriers that are very slowly eliminated. Regardless of the numerous shortcomings that exist in higher education to all students, should be given continuous support during their studies. Beside the positive results already achieved by applying the existing legislation, for successful implementation of the principle of non-discrimination and improvement of the position of disabled persons, it is necessary to further develop, elaborate and harmonize legislation referring to the rights of the disabled with

regard to education and employment. The previous experience and practice show that it is necessary to improve inter-institutional cooperation (education, health care, employment, social protection) through involvement of all relevant actors in the mentioned areas (line ministries, institutions, faculties, associations, organizations, NGOs).

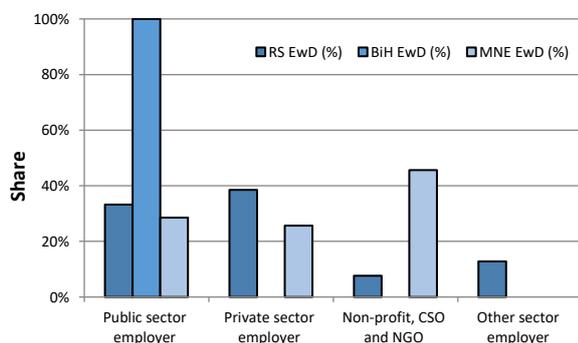
### 3. DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

Since in our analysis we divided two categories of examinees, we collected the data of 77 EwD and 170 SwD in all three countries. The distribution of categories is show in Table 1 [18-20].

**Table 1:** Categories' data [19]

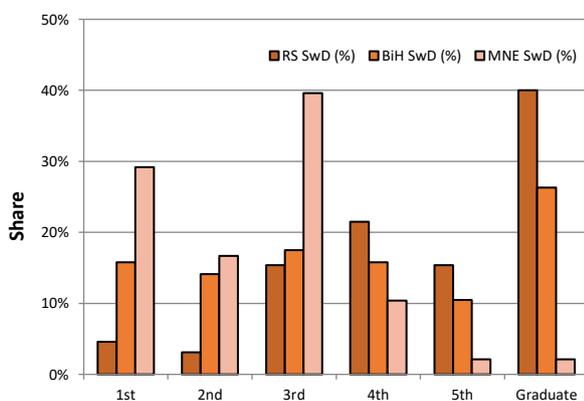
Category	RS	BiH	MNE
No. of examined EwD	39 (50.65%)	3 (3.90%)	35 (45.45%)
No. of examined SwD	65 (28.24%)	57 (33.53%)	48 (28.24%)

This was collected by the questionnaires provided in hard copy and electronic form. With respect to the first category, 29 participants were male (37.66%) and 48 participants were female (62.34%). Concerning participants type of disability that better describes their condition, 5 (6.49%) identified themselves as having a visual impairment, 3 (3.9%) as having a hearing impairment, 1 (1.3%) as having a visual and hearing impairment, 6 (7.79%) as having a visual and physical impairment, 2 (2.6%) as having a visual and hearing and physical impairment, 50 (64.94%) as having a physical impairment, 1 (1.3%) as having a learning impairment and a visual and physical and learning impairment, respectively, 2 (2.6%) as having other impairments and 7 (9.09%) are not reported answers [19]. Also, the results for professional status of EwD that were examined are shown in Chart 2.



**Chart 2:** Results for current professional status of EwD

As far as concerning second category, 76 participants were male (44.71%) and 93 participants were female (54.71%). In relation to participants' year of study, 26 (15.29%) were in 1<sup>st</sup> year, 18 (10.59%) were in 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 39 (22.94%) were in 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 28 (16.47%) were in 4<sup>th</sup> year, 17 (1%) were in 5<sup>th</sup> year and 42 (24.71%) were graduated (see Chart 3) [19]. Regarding the year of study of interviewed SwD, the results are shown in Image 3. Even 40% of examinees graduated in Serbia, 26.3% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and only 2.1% in Montenegro. The difference is also evident for the third year of study where Montenegro has the biggest share of 39.6% while only 15.4% and 17.5% is noted in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively [19].



**Chart 3:** Results of year of study of SwD

## 4. RESULTS

In this Section, we provide the results from the questionnaires on the following questions:

- What are the most important things that employer could do to facilitate a SwD/EwD to do the job?
- What Universities need to do in order to facilitate the transition to employment of SwD?
- What companies can do in order to improve the employment of SwD/EwD?
- Where Universities should focus on in order to better promote SwD transition from HE to work life?

First two issues implied the outputs from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the last two are indicated for Montenegro. Regarding Serbia, concerning participants' views on the most important things an employer could do to facilitate a SwD/EwD to do his/her job best, the top ranked thing was to make certain facilities accessible. After that, making their work schedule more flexible is of utmost importance. Then, the next requests were elaborated: purchase or change equipment, to reassign them to a vacant position, to leave them to do their job and provide supervision, to change a company policy and finally to assign part of their job duties to a co-worker. The opinion of Serbian SwD with regards to the activities of Universities in order to facilitate the transition to employment of them, the most important thing is to raise the awareness and sensitivity of the employers. The second top ranked was to educate employers on issues concerning accessibility, assistive technologies and individualized support. It is followed by informing employers on the provided support services that person with disabilities might need during their employment. In addition, according to the answers, the attention should be paid on education of employers on issues concerning the obstacles a person with disabilities may encounter during their employment, support the position of mentor during their first period at work and improve the knowledge and skills of persons with disabilities through additional training and education [19].

Similarly like in Serbia, the answers from Bosnia and Herzegovina shown that the most important issue was related to make certain facilities accessible for SwD/EwD, followed by the necessity to purchase or change equipment. Also, for them, it is very important to provide supervision, make their work more flexible, to change a company policy, to reassign them to a vacant position and to assign part of their job duties to a co-worker. With reference to Universities, we obtained the following answers: first ranked was to educate employers on issues concerning the obstacles a person with disabilities may encounter during their employment, then, we have the support services that should be provided, raising the awareness and sensitivity of the employers and consequently educate them on issues concerning accessibility, assistive technologies, individualized support. Finally, we have support the position of mentor during their first period at work and improve the knowledge and skills of persons with disabilities through additional training and education [19].

In Montenegro, the results of the questionnaires showed that providing an accessible environment/work place to attract employees with disabilities has the greatest result which is followed by the support of a mentor during the first period at work and finally, to take targeted training/educational actions for improving working skills and knowledge of persons with disabilities, so they are better prepared for employment ranked the lowest result. Regarding the answers of Universities that should focus on in order to better promote SwD transition from HE to work life, it was found that statement use appropriate technology to enhance and manage communication knowledge has the highest result, followed by integrate, experience, disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and communicate this effectively has the best score. Apart from few other answers, the lowest rank were related to the issues of being engaged within the community to make a difference in a civic life and interpret, use and communicate numerical data and quantitative evidence [19].

## 5. CONCLUSION

The transition from academic education to the inclusion in the work force is very complex and demanding process that has profound impacts primarily on EwD and SwD and subsequently at organizations and universities that offer jobs. If the society and the labor market have not been positioned in front of university requirements to modernize curricula and study programs from the point of transition, the organizations and universities themselves need to take the necessary steps in this direction. Closing the gap between the educational institutions and employers, universities are not only helping the SwD, labor market and the society, but also have the opportunity to further strengthen its influence on employers and portray itself as a trusted service to the vulnerable part of the population.

It seems that the mutual cooperation between the universities and partner organizations would be useful. Seminars, conferences and the meetings aimed at the issue of transition of SwD, where it would participate both academic staff and managers of firms and companies and could form the knowledge that greatly help the successfully start, duration and finish the transition of SwD and the rest of the population. The main objective of these activities should be encouraging dialogue and activation of all participants in the transition. Universities need to expand the area of operation and its role in the formation of SwD who will become successful employees. After that, it is necessary to continue to actively participate in the process of transition itself. However, the space for further investigation is enormous, so any analysis or research can be directed to provide a better understanding of position of SwD and EwD and their transition from HE to work.

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