

TRANSITION PLANNING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE OPINIONS OF EMPLOYERS IN SERBIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND MONTENEGRO

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Abstract:

In this paper we presented research as just one part of a comprehensive study of Erasmus + Trans2work project, aimed on supporting SwD from HEI to labour market and help HEI, employers and SwD to successfully complete this transition. The data analysis, where total of 426 employers from RS (341, 80.05 %), BiH (45, 10.56 %) and MNE (40, 9.39 %) participated in the project, included statistical indicators of descriptive statistics, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and ANOVA with Scheffe post hoc tests. Acquired results formulate strategies and activities that can be adopted at national and regional level in order to facilitate the transition of SwD from HE into the labor market.

Keywords: Higher Education (HE), Students with Disabilities (SwD), Employers, Benchmarking, Transition.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on one goal set by members of the consortium of Trans2work project in the Republic of Serbia (RS), Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) and Montenegro (MNE). This goal is to improve the quality and relevance of support for the transition of SwD from HE to work, in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro. In line with this overall goal, the main objective is to map the conditions and standards that will support the transition of SwD, in accordance with EU practices and policies. Therefore, first steps have descriptive purpose – mapping the ‘landscape’ of policies and practices to support the transition of SwD from HE to work in the EU; an analytical purpose – identifying commonalities and differences in policies and practices between EU as well as between three partner countries (similarities and differences in the legislation and their practical application in three partner countries: Serbia, BiH and Montenegro); and a ‘benchmarking’ purpose – comparing current state of the art in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro with that of the EU and identifying areas for improvement. Descriptive role, in addition, should review

the relevant legislative, regulations and rules in the sphere of inclusion of the highly educated students from education point to the employment. Benchmarking role needs to answer the question “Where is our position compared to other countries in the EU from the transition standpoint of SwD”, i.e. to compare the current situation in the three partner countries with the situation in EU and to propose a sphere in which there is a space for improvement.

Assessment of the initiatives in regional, national and international level that could be adopted in partner countries is necessary in order to facilitate the transition of SwD from HE into the labour market. In addition, the results obtained from the research analysis conducted so far need to formulate strategies and activities designed to achieve the overall objectives of the project:

- upgrade and prepare HEs services to support SwD to their transition from HE to Work following the EU policies;
- link Higher Education to “disability friendly work environments, assimilate transition opportunities and skills with EU practices and policies;

- to prepare employers on understanding the needs of employees with disabilities in order to offer new jobs.

2. METHODOLOGY

Benchmarking is a modern technique based on comparisons with other companies that provides the opportunity of learning and changing the behaviour. The process of benchmarking includes: defining the problem and data collection, data analysis, making decision on the best solution, implementing the solution etc. Benchmarking is used as an instrument to identify and assess their competitive position and also provides a continuous process of comparing the organization with others to find and run the best business practices to ensure long- term competitive advantages. In business practice benchmarking organization is an instrument that continuously compares the extent of their business compared to other organizations and consequently learns from the most successful and applies the acquired knowledge in order to increase performance and efficiency of the business. It can compare the products and services, business processes, technical solutions, strategy, etc., with the aim of understanding their own shortcomings, limitations and possibilities of their removal or improvement. Benchmarking is a continuous process of identifying, understanding and adapting products, services, equipment and procedures of companies with the best practices to improve their own business. This landscape identifies the standards and good practices that can then be used to develop and apply a benchmarking framework to enable the situation in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro to be compared with the EU situation, and key areas for future development identified. The overall approach proposed to benchmarking is taken from the BENVIC approach developed in collaboration with a number of organisations under the Socrates programme (Benchmarking for higher education campuses). The methodology is based primarily on 'Best Practice' benchmarking but reflects elements of two other approaches – process benchmarking and strategic benchmarking. 'Best Practice' benchmarking describes the comparison of performance data that has been obtained from studying similar processes or activities and identifying, adapting, and implementing the practices that produced the best performance results. Process of benchmarking starts where the initiating organisation focuses its observation and investigation of business processes with a goal of identifying and observing the best practices from one or more benchmark organisations. Strategic benchmarking involves observing how others compete. Benchmarking methodologies typically encompass the following methods and actions:

- Identify the subject or 'problem' area – i.e. the business/organisational processes to be assessed;
- Identify other industries that have similar processes;
- Identify organizations that are leaders in these areas;
- Identify data sources for comparison;
- Collect data (e.g. Survey companies for measures and practices; visit the "best practice" organisations to identify leading edge practices);
- Identify gaps between actual and desired state;
- Establish future changes and targets;
- Implement new and improved business practices.

3. PARTICIPANTS

A total of 426 employers from RS (341, 80.05 %), BiH (45, 10.56 %) and MNE (40, 9.39 %) participated in this study. As concerns participants' distribution based on the employment of PwD, 310 (72.77 %) participants had EwD and 116 (27.23 %) did not have EwD when data collection was undertaken.

4. COMPARISON AMONG EMPLOYERS OF SERBIA, BIH AND MONTENEGRO

Concerning the most important reasons for employing persons with disabilities the highest mean value scored the statement "Their employment helps the company fulfill its social responsibility to the community" ($M=4.29$, $SD=0.756$), followed by they "Tend to be reliable to be on time and to turn up" ($M=4.02$, $SD=0.754$), "Tend to be loyal employees" ($M=3.96$, $SD=0.748$), "Give a positive image for the organization/company" ($M=3.96$, $SD=0.840$), "Have a strong motivation to work" ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.851$), "Tend to be punctual and stay focused on one job for a long time, so they can be good employees" ($M=3.91$, $SD=0.740$), "Help all employees get on well socially" ($M=3.85$, $SD=0.850$), "Do good quality work" ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.749$), "Are open for new knowledge and training" ($M=3.74$, $SD=0.809$), "Because of their competence, not for any other reason" ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.016$), while smallest mean value had option that "They are well qualified to do the job" ($M=3.52$, $SD=0.849$). Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicates unequal variances in the case of questions "They are well qualified to do the job" ($p=.002$), "They give a positive image for the organization/company" ($p=.005$), "They help all employees get on well socially" ($p=.005$), "They tend to be punctual and stay focused on one job for a long time, so they can be good employees" ($p=.007$) and "They are open for new knowledge and training" ($p=.008$). The Scheffe post hoc tests indicated that Serbian and BiH answers on question "They give a positive image for the organization/company" ($p=.013$) are significantly different. Also, Montenegrin answers on question "They are open for new knowledge and training" ($p=.003$, $p=.033$) and "We employee persons with disability because of their competence, not for any other reason" ($p=.000$, $p=.036$) are significantly different from answers in Serbia and BiH.

- Employers were asked additional about the reasons for not employing PwD in companies. Answers on this question, sorted in descending order of mean values are: "They take a lot of time to fit in a working environment" ($M=2.10$, $SD=0.931$),
- "A person with disability does not have the same rights in the working place as a person without disability" ($M=1.86$, $SD=1.023$),
- "It is better for them to work at home" ($M=1.78$, $SD=0.857$),
- "Other employees will feel uncomfortable and unhappy if they have to work together with a person with disability" ($M=1.76$, $SD=0.859$),

- “A person with disability should learn and do their job in a separate, protected environment” (M=1.71, SD= 0.851),
- “A person with disability has a lot of behavior problems, so it is best for them to work in private” (M=1.69, SD= 0.795).

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicates unequal variances in the case of questions “Other employees will feel uncomfortable and unhappy if they have to work together with a person with disability” ($p=.011$) and “A person with disability should learn and do their job in a separate, protected environment” ($p=.031$). The Scheffe post hoc tests indicated that Serbian and Montenegrin answers on questions “Other employees will feel uncomfortable and unhappy if they have to work together with a person with disability” ($p=.010$) and “A person with disability has a lot of behavior problems, so it is best for them to work in private” ($p=.015$) are significantly different. Also, Montenegrin answers on question “A person with disability should learn and do their job in a separate, protected environment” ($p=.007$, $p=.024$) are significantly different from answers in Serbia and BiH.

Concerning the questions about employers' views on what the universities should do in order to facilitate the transition to employment of SwD based on the results, the most important is “Raise awareness and sensitivity of employers towards employees who may have a disability/impairment” marked with M=4.21 (SD= 0.698), followed by “Inform employers on the provided support service that PwD might need during their employment” (M=4.16, SD=0.677), “Educate employers on issue concerning the needs of PwD” (M=4.13, SD=0.728), “Educate employers on the potential obstacles a PwD might encounter during their job” (M= 4.11, SD= 0.732), “Support the position of a mentor during their first time at work” (M=4.10, SD=0.751), and the least important is “Improve the knowledge and scales of PwD through additional training and education” (M=3.97, SD=0.840). Variances are not significantly different (all p values are greater than 0.05).

Employers were asked to answer concerning where universities should focus on in order to better promote SwD transition from HE to work life. It was found that “Work together with team members in a respectful and collaborative manner to complete tasks”, is the most reliable task (M=4.22, SD=0.618), followed by “Use appropriate technology to enhance and manage communication knowledge” (M=4.16, SD=0.593), “Present and write information clearly and effectively” (M=4.14, SD=0.624), “Be engaged within the community to make a difference in a civic life” (M=4.13, SD=0.647), “Integrate, experience, disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and communicate this effectively” (M=4.11, SD=0.642), “Exhibit personal organization, accountability and time management” (M=4.09, SD=0.604), “Gain intercultural knowledge so as to interact effectively in various cultural contexts” (M=4.08, SD=0.646), “Obtain, critically evaluate and use information effectively from a variety of resources and formats” (M=4.05, SD=0.642), “Identify and solve problems, including evaluating alternatives and articulating reasoning” (M=4.04, SD=0.652), “Demonstrate leadership, including giving

direction and guidance, as well as strategic visioning” (M=4.01, SD=0.671) and “Interpret, use and communicate numerical data and quantitative evidence” (M=3.94, SD=0.697). Variances are not significantly different (all p values are greater than 0.05). There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA in questions:

- “Work together with team members in a respectful and collaborative manner to complete tasks” {F(2.413) = 3.479, $p=.032$ }.
- “Demonstrate leadership, including giving direction and guidance, as well as strategic visioning” {F(2.411) = 6.739, $p=.001$ }.
- “Interpret, use and communicate numerical data and quantitative evidence” {F(2.410) = 4.984, $p=.007$ }.

The Scheffe post hoc tests indicated that Serbian answers on question “Work together with team members in a respectful and collaborative manner to complete tasks” ($p=.039$) differ significantly from answers in BiH. Examinee in BiH gave significantly different answers on questions “Demonstrate leadership, including giving direction and guidance, as well as strategic visioning” ($p=.002$, $p=.017$) and “Interpret, use and communicate numerical data and quantitative evidence” ($p=.036$, $p=.009$) that examinee in other two countries.

Employers were asked to evaluate the helpfulness of specific strategies in retaining PwD's job within their organization/company. According to employers' answers the most helpful strategy is considered “Employer tax credits and incentives” (M= 4.11, SD=0.972), followed by “Disability targeted internship program” (M=3.87, SD=0.914), “Assistive technology” (M=3.83, SD=0.975), “Disability awareness training” (M=3.69, SD= 1.0313), “Flexible work schedule” (M=3.60, SD=1.007), “Mentoring” (M=3.55, SD=1.003), “Visible top management commitment” (M=3.54, SD=1.028), “On-site consultation or technical assistance” (M=3.49, SD=0.974), “Training existing staff” (M= 3.46, SD= 1.011), “Reassignment” (M=3.34, SD= 0.983), “Other strategies” (M=3.08, SD=1.207), “Short-term “on the job” assistance with an outside job coach” (M=3.01, SD= 1.074), and “Centralized accommodations fund” (M=2.96, SD= 1.037). Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicates unequal variances in the case of question “Reassignment” ($p=.001$). There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA in questions :

- Short-term “on the job” assistance with an outside job coach {F(2.410) = 3.501, $p=.031$ }
- Mentoring {F(2.412) = 6.433, $p=.002$ }
- Visible top management commitment {F(2.409) = 3.925, $p=.020$ }
- Disability awareness training {F(2.412) = 3.660, $p=.027$ }
- Disability targeted internship program {F(2.415) = 3.349, $p=.036$ }
- Assistive technology {F(2.413) = 5.512, $p=.004$ }

- Reassignment { $F(2.408) = 7.643, p=.001$ }
- Employer tax credits and incentives { $F(2.414) = 3.427, p=.033$ }

The Scheffe post hoc tests showed that there are significantly different answers between: Serbia and Montenegro on question “Short-term “on the job” assistance with an outside job coach” ($p=.040$) Serbia and Montenegro on question “Mentoring” ($p=.002$) Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on question “Visible top management commitment” ($p=0.26$) Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on question “Assistive technology” ($p=0.033$) Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on question “Reassignment” ($p=0.001$) Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on question “Employer tax credits and incentives” ($p=0.035$).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Obtained results clearly indicate that good quality services within the process of supporting students at universities are needed. First of all, it means enabling equalization of opportunities while studying (elimination of architectural barriers, providing access to the latest technologies, equal opportunities during exams, etc.). Afterwards, a long-term program has to be built and improved as well as the competence of students with disabilities needed during the study and in the labour market, for example time management, planning activities, the ways to cope with stress, computer skills, etc. Again, in common with a number of EU member states, implementation of policy and legislation has been uneven and fragmented, and significant work is still required to achieve the objectives of the disability action plan and the new ‘disability policy’ on transition from HE to work. 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 PwD from HE into the labour market. Current legislative should be improved [1] [2] [3] [4], 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 PwD. On the other hand, SWOT analysis [11] as well as recommendations from this conclusion also point out that all of them have a greater significance because through research and benchmarking does not explicitly recognize such a number of indicators and that SWOT analysis and conclusion correlate with the real situation in the field of higher education and employment of persons with disabilities in all three countries. The specific areas where Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin HEIs could benefit from ‘transferable learning’ using examples of good practices from the EU should focus on: more extensive public awareness-raising programmes; improving methodologies to accurately assess target populations and their profiles and needs; improving accessibility in the built environment; promoting better integration between the different education sectors to support the educational needs of young people with disabilities; building more effective ‘transition pathways’ for young people between school, tertiary education and work; better training for professional staff in HEIs; improved ‘systematic support’

for disabled students – at all stages of the HEI ‘life cycle’ (including pre-entry, whilst studying, and post-qualification). Summarizing this paper, we need to focus on some points that are crucial for the transition from HE to work life [12] [13]:

- HE services: career counseling and guidance, internship/employability training, mentoring etc.
- Employment services: raising awareness on employers, mentoring, networking, ongoing support etc.
- Career preparation: self awareness, career awareness, work experience, mentoring, etc.
- Daily living skills: self advocacy, self determination, time management skills, safety and health etc.

Finally, other steps that could be done to upgrade and prepare HEs services to support SwD to their transition from HE to work following the EU policies include seminars, conferences and the meetings that are aimed at the issue of transition of SwD. Both academic staff and managers of firms and companies should take part in these in order to form the knowledge that can greatly initiate the successfully start, duration and completion of their transition [5] [6]. The main problem that could be solved is to encourage labour market to be positioned in front of university requirements to modernize curricula and study programs from the point of transition, and the universities need to take the necessary steps to create practices for SwD.

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