

MUTUAL LEARNING PROGRAMME:

HOST COUNTRY DISCUSSION PAPER - SLOVENIA

AT THE CROSSROADS

Peer Review on “Project Learning for Young Adults: A social integration programme helping young people back into work and education”

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1 QUICK SUMMARY

This paper has been prepared for a Peer Review within the framework of the Mutual Learning Programme. It provides information on the policy example of the Host Country for the Peer Review – in this case, Slovenia. For information on the views of the countries participating in the Peer Review, please refer to the relevant Peer Review Comments Papers.

The “Project Learning for Young Adults”, which has now been running for over 15 years, is an important part of the employment policy measures in Slovenia and has been given the status of a certified public education programme. It focuses on a specific target population, the so-called “hard to employ” young adults - in particular vulnerable young adults who have dropped out of school early because of various challenges in their social, cultural and economic environment. As a result of these particular risk factors, special counselling and pedagogical methods have to be used in order to help these young people reintegrate into education or employment.

These special methods are based on existing contemporary interdisciplinary knowledge about individuals and their interaction with society and are easily transferable into similar socio-cultural contexts in other European countries. The methods are based on a contemporary curriculum which respects the needs and interests of each individual and enables them to shape their own programme, while also allowing the individual to talk about their life-experiences which may have interfered with their educational or work progression in the past. It is important to note that the programme acknowledges that the school, from which particular individual has dropped-out, can also be a risk factor in their life because teaching methods have not been adapted to the specific needs of this target group. Therefore one of the tasks of the programme is also to find alternative ways of educating vulnerable young people. As part of the project, specially trained mentors use non-formal work with young peoples to re-build their self-confidence and understand and address the circumstances in life that have ultimately led to failure in the formal education system. The programme is only successful when these methods are fully realised. The outcomes have been very positive, both in terms of the evaluation by participants but also in leading to a return to education or integration into employment. Nonetheless, the programme continues to be hampered by financial difficulties as a result of its complex inter-institutional setting.

The lessons regarding the methodology of the programme are transferable to other countries as they are based on the latest understanding of the particular needs of this target group and the pedagogical approaches most suitable to help them to achieve their successful integration.

2 LABOUR MARKET SITUATION IN THE HOST COUNTRY

The data available on GDP in Slovenia (see Table 1 below) provides a somewhat erroneous reflection of the challenges currently facing the country as a result of the economic crisis. Slovenia has in recent years been a success story with regular significant increases in GDP between the years 2005-2008. This positive growth trend began to reverse towards the end of 2008 and during the second quarter of 2009, GDP declined by -9.3% (<http://www.stat.si/eng/indikatorji.asp?ID=12>).

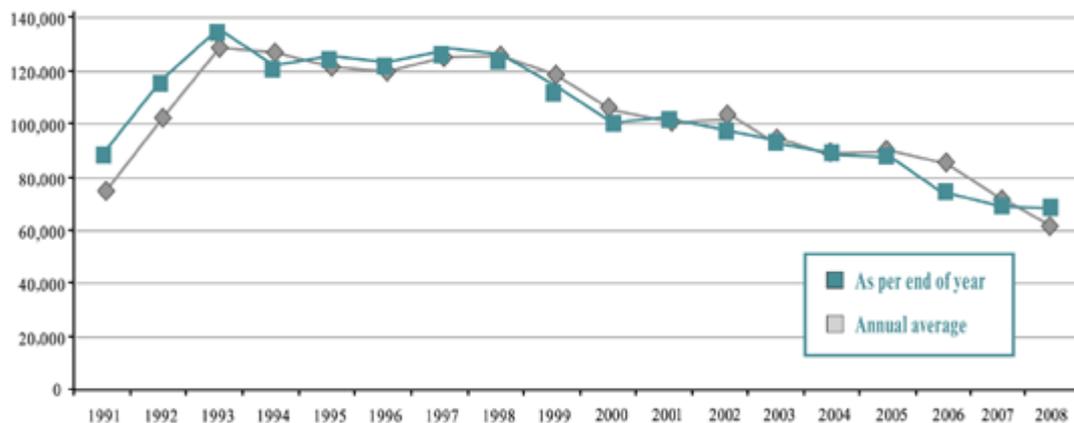
Table 1. Gross domestic product in Slovenia, 2005-2008

2005	2006	2007	2008
28,750 mio€	31,050 mio€	34,568 mio€	37,135 mio€

Source: http://www.stat.si/eng/tema_ekonomsko_nacionalni_bdp1.asp

The economic slowdown is increasingly being reflected in labour market data. While unemployment continued to fall in 2008 (following a generally positive employment trend since 1993 (see Figure 1 below), 2009 has seen a reversal in fortunes with the number of individuals registering as being unemployed more than doubling in comparison to the previous year and demand for workers decreasing by more than a third.

Figure 1. Trends in registered unemployment, 1991-2008:

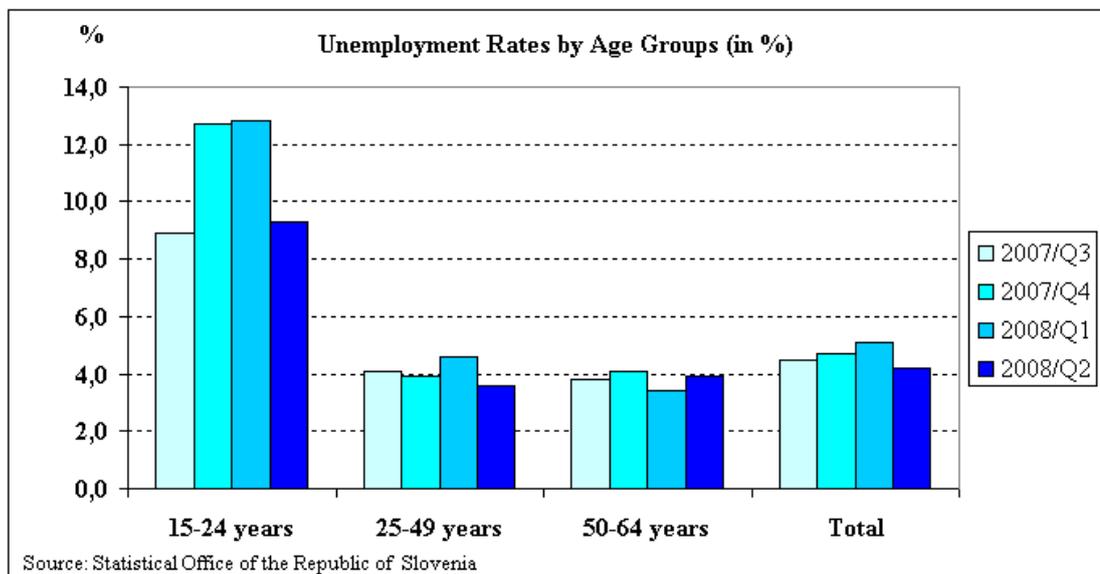


Source: <http://www.ess.gov.si/eng/AnnauReport/lp08/eng/08-qibanje-zaposlovanja.htm>

By June 2009, the number of unemployed had increased by more than a quarter from the same period last year. According to Eurostat figures, in April 2009, the unemployment rate in Slovenia stood at 6.1% - a 1.7% increase from the previous year. Nonetheless, unemployment in Slovenia remains below the EU average. The same is true for youth unemployment, which only 10 years ago made up around a third of unemployment in the country. The average unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 in the EU Member States is 2.4 times higher today than that for the working age population as a whole. In Slovenia, following a decline in youth unemployment between 2001 and 2007 (from 18.1%

to 10.4%), youth unemployment began to rise in 2008 (to 12.8% in the first quarter), but has since seen a fall (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Unemployment rates by age groups (in %)



Source: <http://www.ess.gov.si/eng/UnemplTrends/UnemplAgeGroups.htm>

Since 2000 there has been a trend towards a decline in youth unemployment, which can be partly attributed to the fact that in the past five years the number of young unemployed persons without vocational or professional education has fallen markedly. This in turn is partly the result of effective active labour policy measures, especially the programme of education for the unemployed. More than half of these young people generally find employment within the first five months of being unemployed (for more information, see <http://www.ess.gov.si/eng/Annuaireport/lp08/index.htm>).

There are concerns that the current economic crisis could translate into a social crisis, with disadvantaged groups (including vulnerable young people and low-skilled individuals) most likely to suffer from diminishing employment opportunities.

In 2008, there was a change in the structure of unemployment. Although youth unemployment initially increased in the early part of 2008, it subsequently fell again. Similarly, the rates of female and long-term unemployment also fell. However, as the number of bankruptcies increased, there was an increase in the number unemployed individuals aged 40 and over, and particularly older workers. The share of unemployment among other vulnerable groups (such as disabled or low skilled workers) also increased (<http://www.ess.gov.si/eng/Annuaireport/lp08/eng/08-gibanje-zaposlovanja.htm>).

Young people can contribute a great deal to society if they are actively included in work and in the further development of their careers. To achieve this, the Slovenian Employment Service consistently encourages that the guidelines set out for this population group are included in active labour policy programmes or are used within the first six months of the young people having registered themselves as unemployed. The continuous and intensive attention given to this group is monitored at the end of the fourth month of unemployment, with the aim of ensuring the most effective continued support leading to employment and preventing the transition of young people into long-term unemployment. Employment Service counsellors provide individual counselling, which is supplemented, where necessary, by short forms of group counselling or workshops for career planning, job skills training, motivation, improvement of self-image and so forth. Furthermore, there are various active labour policy programmes available for young people.

The most effective programmes are: help in career planning and job-seeking, formal education, project learning for young adults, work trials, institutional education and job training. In addition to this, the Employment Service is developing several e-services which are tailor-made for young people. At the same time, the Employment Service is aware that their role also involves preventative work. The transition of young people from education to the labour market is least painful if young people make the transition from school to employment as soon as possible. This is only possible if the supply and demand for skills is evenly balanced. The Employment Service therefore also has a role to play in providing the public with objective information about employment prospects in individual professions and in individual activities, and in this way it seeks to contribute to reducing structural imbalances. To achieve this, the Employment Service's professional counsellors give lectures to parents and children at primary and secondary schools. Since 2000, the Employment Service has also been providing the "Different approach to careers" programme, which enables young people to become familiar with careers in real working environments, with the cooperation of employers. Vocational Information and Guidance Centres at all regional offices of the Employment Service organise school visits aimed at disseminating as much information as possible about the labour market situation. Every year all the regional offices of the Employment Service organise employment fairs, where employers, unemployed people and school pupils come together. In the area of youth employment, the Employment Service therefore plays both a preventive role in the area of career orientation for young school students, and an exceptionally important role in the rapid transition of young people from unemployment to employment (<http://www.ess.gov.si/eng/annaulreport/lp07/eng/13-poklicna-orientacija.htm>).

3 POLICY MEASURE

General policy measures to reduce youth unemployment

The Employment Service of Slovenia carries out a number of active employment policy measures targeted at disadvantaged groups in the labour market. One particular programme entitled “Training and Education” aims to increase employability and competitiveness in the labour market by enabling participants to acquire new knowledge, skills and abilities, and to raise the education and qualification levels of unemployed individuals as well as those in employment (to prevent future unemployment). The measure is particularly aimed at individuals without vocational qualifications, young unemployed individuals under 25 years of age, young people without work experience, recipients of social security payments and allowances, and other difficult-to-employ people, particularly members of the Roma community, people with disabilities and people with a recognised employment handicap.

Project “Learning for Young Adults”

Young people exposed to risks no longer come exclusively from traditionally underprivileged social environments, lower social classes or ethnic minorities. Young people on the whole seem to be exceptionally sensitive to “risk discourses” (Tivadar et al, ed. 2002: 11). As they grow up in a risk society, young people’s lives are very much affected by the threats and opportunities they face. For young people living in modern societies, the transition to adulthood itself is risky (ibid: 67). Risk factors include family, school, peer groups, values and gender. Such risks are particularly great for socially excluded youth, so called vulnerable young people. It is these vulnerable young people, who are the target group for the “Project Learning for Young Adults”. The programme was specifically designed to address the shortcomings of “ordinary” methods of working with unemployed young people, which are often insufficient to help integrate this target group. In order to assist vulnerable young adults, provisions and assistance must take in account their often negative previous life experience and work on issues such as self-esteem, etc.

The project is targeted at young adults aged from 15 to 25 years, whose main characteristic is that they left their formal education at one point (primary or secondary) and therefore have no formal educational qualifications at all, are unemployed and are considered to be ‘difficult to place’ because they lack both formal qualifications and work experience. The programme was developed in 1993 by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education and is so far the only programme of non-formal education aimed at this specific target group. It is based on the two years’ experience of the “Centre for young adults” pilot project, which ran from 1993 and was developed into its current form in 1999. The purpose of the programme is to help young adults to acquire sufficient experience, knowledge and skills to give them the opportunity to successfully resume their education or enter a vocational career. The programme uses project work as a key tool, which is split into four distinct types: selected project work, production project work, individual learning projects and free activities. (ibid: 290). The programme is free of charge for the participants (ibid: 293).

For each individual, the programme lasts for up to one year and runs every weekday, seven hours per day and starts in the morning. It follows a similar cycle to the academic year, running from September to June. In July more vocational programmes take place: for example, individual learning projects or other selected interest activities. August acts as a holiday period. It is the young people themselves who decide whether to join the programme or not, but they must be recommended by friends, parents or counsellors (who are part of a school counselling service), the centres for social work or the local labour agencies. They can enter or leave the programme whenever they want (ibid: 293).

The Project “Learning for Young Adults” is a public non-formal educational programme (ibid: 290), which primarily aims to prevent social exclusion, reduce social problems, change negative elements in their environment, develop motivation mechanisms to encourage a return to school and help develop working habits. The educational aims of the programme are divided into three groups:

1. Acquiring functional knowledge, developing general education, and improving the flexibility of the mind.
2. Acquiring functional skills, increasing general practical skills and activities and expanding fields of interest.
3. Acquiring experiences that contribute to new opportunities for the personal, social and cultural identity of young people.

The project setting has nothing in common with a traditional school situation. Issues from everyday life are reflected in both learning and working situations. The choice and arrangement of the place itself makes it a pleasant stay for young people. There is no assessment in the programme and the mentors do not use any methods from a traditional school setting to keep discipline. The success criteria focus instead on the quality of the final product on which the learning achievements depend further on. Instead of marks the participants write down their own learning achievements on their personal evaluation sheets. The mentors act as counsellors for learning issues, not as teachers – their co-operation with young participants goes on in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, respect and friendly help in order to resolve any learning or other difficulties experienced by the young participants (Tivarad et. al. 2002: 292). The main focus of the programme is on improving the self-esteem of participants and improving their basic skills to enable them to cope with everyday situations in life.

Mentors who work with participants are required to have a degree in higher education and have to have successfully completed a training programme. An evaluation of the programme has found that the role of the mentors is critical and their training has a substantial impact on the success of the programme (Dobrovoljc et al, ed. 2003: 77-104). In general, mentors are individuals with higher degree qualifications in subjects such as pedagogy, social work, psychology and sociology.

The programme is partly financed by the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Employment Service of Slovenia and the participant’s local communities. Each of them currently contributes to one third of the cost (Tivadar et. al, ed. 2002: 293). As a result, the programme is meant to have strong links with the local community. Currently, however, the extent to which local authorities and local employers support the programme depends principally on their good will.

At present in 2009, there are twelve different institutions across Slovenia which provide the programme. Some of them are private non-profit organisations, others are part of the so called “Peoples University” or “Workers University” and one is part of a Catholic organisation. Mentors in these organisations are students who have graduated in the fields of social work, psychology, pedagogy, or theology.

4 RESULTS

The results of the evaluation study which was carried during the period 2000 to 2002 (Tivadar et. al, ed. 2002: 293-294; Dobrovoljc et al, ed. 2003) showed that the project achieved very positive results. The working methods and the whole structure of the programme were considered to be adapted and suitable for the target population. They also confirm that Slovenia needs such programmes (Tivadar et. al, ed. 2002: 294).

The key findings of the evaluation were:

- The programme has long-term effects on social integration.
- Young people from high-risk groups are most likely to enrol in the programme: their families are not supportive and education is not a protective factor in their lives. Family situations and the wider environment have not supported or encouraged positive learning outcomes.
- The psycho-social rehabilitation of an individual is the first condition for a successful continuation of his education. Vulnerable youngsters need external support and help. A sufficient number of mentors are needed per group of participants to provide extra support to combat the problems caused by difficult life experiences.
- The research group determined that the reasons for the positive results of the programme can be found in its aims, contents and methods, as well as in the qualifications of the mentors. The programme curriculum allows individuals to make their own original choice of themes/topics, which can at later stage, be structured as a subject with the appropriate specific goals and standards.
- The aims of the programme originate from progressive studies of the target group and its needs; they are adjusted and aimed at the progression of the curriculum, its process development and execution (Dobrovoljc et. al, ed. 2003: 9-10).
- The researchers also stressed the importance of the flexibility of the programme; the participants were able to enter and leave even during the school year (ibid: 11). The role of the mentors in the successful execution of the programme was also emphasised by the researchers, which is especially important. Mentors should of course have basic education, but they also have to finish qualifications in a longer programme, which helps them to recognize the social reasons, psychosocial reasons and characteristics of drop outs, modern curricular principles and execution, as well as initial practical testing. The mentors have to prove their qualifications every three years in a specific procedure; this encourages them to improve continuously (ibid: 11).

The evaluation showed that 94% of young people were satisfied with their participation in the project and 70% achieved the goals which had been set. Around 41% of young people chose to continue their education; 15% entered part-time employment; and 9% entered full-time employment. However, 21% did remain unemployed following their participation in the programme. The main benefit of the programme could be said to be the improved motivation and self-esteem gained by participants.

The evaluation study is quite old, but the results are still important today and appear to indicate that if the programme can be maintained in its current format, its positive results are likely to continue. Of course an important challenge is the availability of jobs in the current labour market.

As a result of existing evaluations and the financial challenges facing the programme, all partners involved in the programme are planning to systematically solve the problem of financing the programme. They are also discussing questions about the training programme for mentors. One question to deal with in the future remains the law for local communities to have legal basis for financing the programme.

5 DIFFICULTIES AND CONSTRAINTS

One of the biggest problems of the programme is its financing. All the parties involved in this matter are aware of this. Its current method of funding through the European Social Fund is not appropriate for a number of reasons. The main reason is that the funding is retrospective, which is a considerable problem for the small agencies which provide the programme and of which there are many.

As previously mentioned, the programme is partly financed by the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Employment Service of Slovenia and the participant's local communities; each of which contributes one third (Tivadar et. al, ed. 2002: 293). Local communities often fail to provide the third of the funding for which they are responsible as locally elected representatives argue that there is no legal basis for paying the money (which should be provided by the Adult Education Act, 2006).

Questions have also arisen concerning the institutional framework. Participating organisations (twelve in 2009) are very diverse. Mentors on these organisations also have different backgrounds. Moreover, another difficulty arising from the institutional and legal framework is the need for the programme to combine labour market policy with counselling, psychological and pedagogical measures to assist this particular target group which faces multiple challenges. As a result the programme sits at the crossroads of the responsibilities of the Ministry for Education and Sport (of which the Institute for Adult Education is part) and the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs. However, arguably, the respective field of responsibilities of these two ministries is still insufficient to design a programme which can fund, mainstream and deliver a programme such as this in a sustainable fashion.

As a result of these factors, the programme lacks a central institution. The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education used to provide qualifications for mentors and yearly outcome evaluations of the programme. But the institute is not appropriate for the systematic implementation of programmes of this type. In the future, mentors in the programme should be provided with full qualifications, which include competences and skills for efficient execution of this demanding and multi-layered programme, which is potentially, as a project, very well constructed. Its success, according to the findings, depend on the qualification, knowledge and skills of mentors; those skills and qualifications either gained before the individual took up the position of mentor or were acquired individually and as such are not part of an obligatory skills base set out by the programme providers. As such they can vary from organisation to organisation.

The programme is a voluntary one and young people at risk are not expected to enter the programme without having had time to think about their decision. They should be given a proper presentation, a chance for them to improve their lives. This should not be another one of the institutions which ultimately leads to their alienation or discriminates against them and leads to their unsuccessful integration in education and training or in the labour market. The continuity of the programme is therefore the most important aspect. The institution should establish a public profile, which is visible to vulnerable and at risk young people. This should include non-formal work with the young people, street work, and social-cultural work to attract them to this pathway.

6 SUCCESS FACTORS AND TRANSFERABILITY

There is no problem with undertaking such a programme anywhere in the world. The basic condition is solely the use of expert principles and methodologies, developed on the basis of an expert understanding of the counselling, social, pedagogical, psychological, and other contemporary skills required for individuals from this target group. Amongst them are respect for the user, implemented through non-formal work with the youngsters, social-cultural work and other approaches, which consider the full individual life experience of each participant. Participants in these programmes are vulnerable young people, who, because of their life situation, have developed or used inappropriate strategies of coping with life risks. The purpose of the programme is to revise such inappropriate strategies and replace them with more appropriate ones, thus moving them closer to succeeding in education or the labour market. The mentors should also succeed in empowering the youngster or young adult to be able to deal with daily challenges and to do it more efficiently. One of the reasons for them to abandon the process of schooling is namely the potential risk factor – the school, or better yet, the unsuitable approaches of the teacher(s) or the school system in its entirety. Mentors in the programme represent or should be representing the improvements that modern pedagogy is offering as a modern curriculum – a different programme for the youngsters. When there are some other risk factors present in the life of a given user (for example, family, peers ...), the programme cannot be sufficient and other services should be included: counselling centers for children, youngsters and parents, social services and similar programmes.

ANNEX 1: REFERENCES

Books

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http://zakonodaja.gov.si/rpsi/r02/predpis_ZAKO4962.html

ANNEX 2: SUMMARY TABLE

Labour market situation in the Host Country
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current financial crisis will strike population in question • Careers guidance programmes of Employment Service of Slovenia
Key features of the policy measure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and education programme of Employment Service of Slovenia • Non-formal work with young adults • Social integration
Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term social integrating effects • Flexibility of the programme • New know-how
Difficulties and constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financing • Legal issues • Participating of local communities • Participating organisations network
Success factors and transferability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good methods and curriculum – non-formal work with youngsters and young adults, project learning, socio – cultural work, new know-how. • Mentors are very well trained, their education is based on contemporary knowledge. • Sustainable programme. • Transferable without problems because of the common socio – cultural context of EU countries.