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EVALUATION REPORT AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

**on
Supported
apprenticeships for
persons with
disabilities**

**Securing the transition to
labor market for persons with
disabilities through the
Supported Apprenticeship
Scheme**



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INTRODUCTION

The present document compiles the feedback obtained during the pilot testing phase of the SAS project from the project participants: apprentices, VICs, training centers and employers.

This evaluation report assesses the impact of the Referential, highlighting the needs for a better implementation of SAS project. The evaluation of the experimentation led in the project proves the efficiency of the scheme: a key solution to the need of labour inclusion.

The approach of the SAS project implied the collaboration of the professional, educational and personal spheres. A co-construction and support worker initiated and facilitated by vocational integration counsellors (VICs) working with: apprentice training centres/schools, trainers, specialised employment organisations, disability referents in the company, the employer, public administrative process (financial and administrative process) etc. All of them tried and evaluated SAS implementation.

The evaluation was conducted in three phases: before the start of the pilot, at the midpoint, and at the conclusion. These phases provided valuable insights into the evolution of participants' attitudes, knowledge, and skills as a result of the project's implementation. The questionnaires were qualitative, to analyze the results we used the method of Thematic Analysis, following these steps:

Coding and Grouping: we examined the data and gave initial codes to identify themes and recurrent topics and issue, which were grouped to be compared

Analyzing and Reporting: we analyzed the data within each theme to derive relevant insights, organizing the topics into a consistent structure and explaining the findings in this report.

The pilot test has been carried out from October 2022 to August 2024 in Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy, Norway and Spain by the partner organizations:

1. NASO (Bulgaria)
2. LADAPT (France)
3. Theotokos Foundation (Greece)
4. Divalenza (Italy)
5. FØNIX AS (Norway)
6. SPIR OSLO AS (Norway)
7. Fundación INTRAS (Spain)

A total of 29 apprentices have been followed during their apprenticeship by 14VICs. This project has helped apprentices to develop confidence and professional and communication skills.

Country	Apprentices	VICs	Training Centers	Employers
³ Norway (SPIR OLSO)	6	2	1	2
Norway (Fonix)	4	2	1	1
Italy	4	2	2	2
Spain	5	2	3	3
France	4	2	3	4
Bulgaria	4	2	1	1
Greece	4	2	1	1
TOTAL	29	14	12	14

RESULTS

APPRENTICES

At the outset of this project, nearly all participants faced considerable challenges in adapting to their new reality, primarily due to a widespread deficiency in self-esteem. This lack of confidence hindered many from fully engaging with the opportunities available to them. However, as the transformative “job journey” unfolded, the invaluable support provided by the Vocational Integration Coaches (VICs) played a pivotal role in helping apprentices not only acquire essential professional skills but also develop critical communication abilities. This gradual process of growth ultimately empowered them to embrace and appreciate the entire experience, transforming their initial apprehensions into newfound confidence.

Many apprentices entered the program driven by dual motivations: a desire for economic independence and a willingness to challenge themselves by stepping outside their comfort zones. This aspiration for personal growth emerged as a common thread among participants. As they navigated the complexities of the workplace, the majority reported feeling warmly welcomed in their new environments, which significantly enriched their overall experiences.

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that one individual voiced feeling of exclusion, expressing a sense of competition with colleagues that detracted from their enjoyment of the program. This feedback underscores the critical need to foster an inclusive atmosphere where every apprentice feels valued and supported. Ensuring that the journey toward professional growth is accessible to all participants is essential for cultivating a positive and productive learning environment.

The program featured a natural and flexible mechanism for seeking feedback from both apprentices and their families. This ongoing dialogue allowed for timely adjustments to the program based on their needs, concerns, and suggestions, ensuring that the training remained relevant and effective. When the apprentices started, they were well-prepared, but it was through their hands-on practice that they developed essential communication and job-specific skills. Over time, they became increasingly comfortable in their roles, which encouraged them to express their desire for changes and provide constructive feedback without hesitation.

VICs

In the context of apprenticeship programs, the assignment of two Vocational Integration Coaches (VICs) to each participating country has proven to be instrumental in shaping the success of apprentices. These coaches serve a dual purpose: not only do they assist apprentices in honing their professional skills, but they also nurture their individuality within the workplace environment. This personalized support is crucial for helping apprentices navigate their roles effectively and fostering their growth as individuals in their respective jobs.

From the very beginning of the project, the VICs took into account each apprentice's prior skills, as well as any previous or ongoing employment. This comprehensive understanding of the apprentices' backgrounds allowed the VICs to tailor their guidance and support more effectively. As a result, they observed a remarkable improvement in both the apprentices' attitudes and their self-esteem by the end of the project. This transformation underscores the importance of recognizing individual experiences and capabilities in the development process.

The majority of VICs come equipped with substantial experience in their field, having pursued relevant studies that have significantly enhanced their skill sets. This strong foundational knowledge was pivotal throughout the apprenticeship, enabling the development of effective communication skills among the apprentices. The VICs utilized their expertise to create an environment conducive to learning and personal development, ensuring that apprentices felt empowered to express themselves and engage with their colleagues.

Additionally, the VICs fostered a sense of security in the apprentices by demonstrating unwavering belief in their potential from the outset of the project. This supportive dynamic played a crucial role in motivating apprentices to take risks and embrace challenges. By showing a genuine interest in the apprentices' broader lives— including family dynamics and workplace environments— the VICs cultivated a deeper sense of care and support. This holistic approach not only enriched the apprentices' professional journeys but also contributed significantly to their overall well-being.

In summary, the impact of the Vocational Integration Coaches in apprenticeship programs cannot be overstated. Their commitment to understanding and supporting apprentices on multiple levels has led to enhanced professional skills, improved self-esteem, and a more positive outlook on their career paths. As the program continues to evolve, the role of VICs will remain a vital component in fostering the next generation of skilled and confident professionals.

TRAINING CENTERS

The training centres are excited to participate in the project, which provides job opportunities through non-formal training, allowing apprentices to practice real tasks in a work environment. They have experience working with individuals with mental disabilities but all of them aim to enhance their skills in supporting those with sensory disabilities. The centre focuses on improving punctuality, flexibility, and adaptability among participants.

The transition poses significant challenges for apprentices, who initially lack preparedness for workplace demands. By the end of their training, however, they demonstrate a clear understanding of the differences between academic and professional environments. One apprentice successfully secured a desired job immediately after completing the program. Empowerment through decision-making and feedback is a cornerstone of the training, fostering a sense of confidence and competence in their roles.

The training courses aim to teach specific skills in sectors such as goldsmithing and catering. Participants include individuals with Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, and autism spectrum disorder. Expectations for apprentices include gaining confidence in social skills and personal autonomy, as well as improving hard and soft skills necessary for effective job performance.

EMPLOYERS

All apprentices were assured of employment following their apprenticeship, which greatly contributed to their confidence and motivation throughout the entire process. This assurance created a positive environment, allowing them to focus on their development without the anxiety of uncertainty regarding their future. Supervisors and educators played a pivotal role by actively involving apprentices in every decision-making process, fostering a strong sense of ownership and engagement. This collaborative approach not only empowered the apprentices but also encouraged them to take an active role in shaping their own learning experiences.

Moreover, the staff was already attuned to the unique needs and abilities of each apprentice. This awareness significantly contributed to creating a more inclusive and supportive workplace environment, a vital aspect of the project's success. As a result, the apprentices not only found a sense of belonging but also thrived in an atmosphere that celebrated their individual strengths. Ultimately, through gaining practical experience and focusing on their personal development, the apprentices became not only more familiar with their profession but also significantly enhanced their self-confidence. This journey of growth and empowerment set a solid foundation for their future careers, equipping them with the tools necessary to navigate the professional world with assurance and competence.

CONCLUSIONS

The project has had a significant impact on the apprentices, largely thanks to the support from Vocational Integration Counsellors (VICs) and the training environment provided by the centres. At the beginning, many participants struggled with low self-esteem, which affected their ability to engage fully in the program. However, with the help of the VICs, they developed important professional and communication skills, which helped them gain confidence over time.

A major driving force for the apprentices was their desire for economic independence and personal growth. This motivation was supported by a welcoming workplace, which made it easier for them to adapt to their new roles. While most apprentices thrived, one individual expressed feelings of exclusion, highlighting the ongoing need to promote an inclusive atmosphere for everyone.

The training centres provided practical, hands-on opportunities that allowed apprentices to work on real tasks. The flexibility in seeking feedback from both apprentices and their families ensured that the program remained relevant to their needs. Involvement in decision-making processes empowered apprentices, making them feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and suggestions.

The success of the program also stemmed from the experienced staff, who tailored their support to each apprentice's background and abilities. This approach helped create a supportive learning environment that recognized individual strengths. As a result, apprentices not only improved their skills but also experienced significant growth in self-esteem and a better understanding of their professional roles.

In summary, the combination of dedicated support from VICs, a flexible training structure, and a focus on inclusion and empowerment has positively impacted the apprentices' experiences. The project has equipped them with the skills needed to succeed in their fields and laid a strong foundation for their future careers, helping them become confident professionals ready to face workplace challenges.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve the access to education, training and employment

In many European countries, the percentage of people with disability in unemployment is much higher than national averages. It requires additional effort, commitment and investment to provide pathways to employment for people with disability. This begins with education and training systems able and suited to give persons with disability the knowledge, skills and experience they require for entering the labour market. It is important that persons with disabilities are aware of their education, training and employment options from early childhood onward. Adjusted education and training ought to be accessible for people with different disabilities, for example cognitive disabilities, and adaptable to different individual needs.

“In Bulgaria, people with disabilities consists of 1% of the population in the country. Those who are in the workforce are around 93000, the others are neither in work nor in education. The national legislation should be changed in a way that gives awareness of education and training opportunities of the PwD and then the government to support those people when they enter the open labor market. They should support the employer of the disabled person, again to provide him resources to train and integrate the employee, etc. It all starts from education from early childhood. In Bulgaria that is missing and this results in the big gap between the number of people with disabilities at all and those who are working.” (NASOR)

Promote the inclusion in mainstream education, training and employment

Supported apprenticeships should lead towards - or be part of - mainstream education, training, employment pathways, and facilitate the transition into the open labour market. Persons with disability should not be treated entirely differently, nor exactly the same as others. They should receive support that is adapted to their individual situation and according to their interests and ambitions, and that facilitates equal access to education and training to accomplish their personal career plans. The goal is to promote the inclusion of persons with disability with the prospect of dignified and independent living, as valued and valuable contributors to the community and to the economy.

Enhance female representation in apprenticeships and employment

A lack of representation of women in the workforce can still be observed in many sectors and places. Women with disabilities are particularly exposed to exclusion from the labour market, and being denied access to education, training and employment. They may be confronted with overprotective family members, expectations to stay at home, or with another vulnerable situation that prevents them from seeking a professional career. Women with disabilities require additional attention, adequate and adapted support in school, training and at the workplace. Support systems should be particularly on the lookout for women exposed to violence or other vulnerabilities.

"In Greece, even today, the work of women with disabilities is treated with many stereotypes and prejudices. In fact, these prejudices concern both the fact that they are women and the fact that they have a disability. Many families do not allow their girls to work and prefer to keep them at home to perform domestic tasks or to take care of elderly family members or young children of the family. In addition, families of women with disabilities fear that their girls are likely to be sexually abused in the workplace or on the way to and from work. (...)" (Theotokos Foundation)

Invest in the people contributing to a successful apprenticeship

It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a factory to train an apprentice. Persons with disability require skilled supporters, teachers, trainers, counsellors, recruiters and managers to complete an apprenticeship and become fit for employment. Every educator, co-worker, line manager or advisor should receive training to be able and willing to interact with a person with disability at the workplace. There is need for substantial investment in the people who have a role and a responsibility for the inclusion of persons with disability in the workplace. Financial incentives, together with awareness raising, information, training and counselling for employers, their staff and their teachers ought to be provided as a convincing package to companies, making it attractive and appealing to hire persons with disability for supported apprenticeships. Training and support for the supporters should be seen as an investment in inclusive workplaces and in the overall workforce.

Make best use of technical solutions and new technologies

There is a wealth of technologies available for supporting the learning and working for persons with disabilities. New technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI) promise a multitude of solutions that allow setting up work places for persons with different disabilities in a way that they can make full use of their talents, skills and work experience. Employers are often not aware of the availability of technology, the availability of expertise and funding for workplace adjustments. Or they may require expert advice on adapting jobs to the abilities and capabilities of a worker with disability.

“Documentation tools can play a crucial role in tracking progress for the apprentices and their supervisors. Apprentices follow their progression within the curriculum, submit assignments, receive feedback, competencies achieved, set goals for upcoming tasks, communicate with the supervisors, upload photos or simple text.”
(SpirOslo)

“Assistive technologies like OCR-based text-to-speech tools allow to scan printed or handwritten text and have it read aloud, making written information more accessible. Other tools integrate dictionaries and visual aids for illustrating word meanings. These tools not only support comprehension but also foster more effective communication and learning.” (SpirOslo)

Raise employer awareness on supports as well as benefits

It is crucial that employers are well informed, supported and aware of the benefits that come (for them) with recruiting persons with disability into their workforce. Beyond information about available financial incentives and support measures, management and recruiters ought to be aware of the challenges and the benefits with hiring a person with disability, in particular for building a qualified and diverse workforce. If employer support is reduced to financial incentives without guidance and perspective, it is likely that skills and competencies gained in school and at work get lost as soon as payments stop and apprenticeships are abruptly ended.

Improve co-worker competencies on supportive ways of working together

“Difficulty raising awareness among an apprentice's two colleagues, who remain closed off and attribute bad intentions to the apprentice rather than recognizing his disability.” (LADAPT_Logbook)

"I keep a close dialogue with the trainer, and talk to the trainer daily, to keep us both informed about the apprentices. I also coordinated the meeting between the VIC, apprentices, trainer and supervisors at the IT-section." (SpirOslo_Logbook)

Stigma, discrimination and exclusion can become an issue for supported apprenticeships and employment in the open labour market. Managers and co-workers may feel insecure in dealing with disability and resort to behaviours that prevent staff from working together and being productive. Companies should have access to support and guidance for successful integration of people with disabilities on the work floor e.g. with coaches and trainers who provide continuous support on site and to all staff. Coordination of support efforts between managers, co-workers and the apprentice, including informal meetings and gatherings, can be instrumental for the integration at work, and also for supporting the apprentice in decisions for their career choices.

Seek practical adaptations and solutions for the workplace

Policies and legal frameworks have limitations for making workplaces inclusive. Employers and managers need to be aware that a supported apprenticeship may benefit greatly from practical adjustments such as modifying work routines, offering flexible hours, or creating a quiet work environment. These adaptations do not necessarily incur costs or require expensive equipment but help ensure that the apprentice can perform their tasks effectively and contribute meaningfully to their roles. Practical adaptations should be considered for the meaningful and long-term integration in the workplace.

Ensure the recognition of acquired skills and competencies

One critical issue with Education and Training lies with the recognition and validation of knowledge, competences and skills relevant as qualifications for a profession. Ideally, the recognition of skills and competences follows universal principles or standards, allowing students to learn a trait in one school or company and be considered as qualified in any other. For this reason it is important that education and training of persons with disability follows the principles and standards of mainstream education and training. The objective of supported apprenticeships should be recognition in the open labour market, offering workers with a disability a career prospect and opportunities for further learning and professional development.