



TRANSITION SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

ANALYTICAL PAPER

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I. Introduction

The topic of transition services is of great importance to all young people - and even more so for young people with disabilities - in assisting such youth with their specific needs as they move from education to adult life. Such individualised services can be essential to support them in addressing the challenges they face as they transition. This is of special significance when considering that youth and young adults are our future income producers, and in this time of high youth unemployment, it has never been more essential to assist these individuals during these important transitions to community living, additional educational experiences or work experiences and/or employment.

This paper describes the EU policy context and explores the various programmes and approaches that EPR members are using with transition age youth (ages 14 to 24 and beyond) to increase their independence and inclusion in the community.

II. Policy Context: The EU Initiative

ESF and Youth Unemployment

Youth is a period of transition from education to work where individuals have to find their way not only in the labour market but also their way into life as an adult in general. However, since the onset of the economic crisis in Europe, the transition experiences of young people have deteriorated¹ and, in response, the issue has become central to the European Union's agenda.²

As a response to such problems for Europe's youth, the European Social Fund (ESF) is the European Union's main tool to support employment, education and training, through investing in human capital. The ESF supports Member States in pursuing the priorities and the targets of the Europe 2020 strategy by financing actions under the investment priorities set out in their thematic objectives. This fund is available to be used to support young persons directly or indirectly under the following thematic objectives:

- promoting employment and supporting labour mobility;³
- investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning;⁴
- promoting social inclusion and combating poverty;⁵
- enhancing institutional and administrative capacities.

In this regard, the Youth Employment Initiative 2014-2020 aims to fight youth unemployment by reinforcing and accelerating the measures for the 2013 Youth Guarantee, as outlined in the Youth Employment Package⁶. The Youth Guarantee aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 are offered a good quality offer of employment - in order to avoid prolonged absences from the labour market, education or training and ease from school to work transitions for future generations.⁷ To implement the Youth Guarantee, national budgets need to prioritise youth employment in their agenda and The EU agrees to top up national spending on these

¹ In some countries, the youth unemployment rate is over 50% for 15 to 24 year olds, and the EU-28 average for the same age group was 23.4% in January 2014.

² Eurofound (2014), Mapping youth transitions in Europe, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p 12

³ with investment priorities including: promoting employment and supporting labour sustainable integration of young people not in employment, education or training into the labour market; and enhancing access to lifelong learning, upgrading the skills and competences of the workforce and increasing their labour market relevance of education and training systems.

⁴ with investment priorities including: enhancing access to lifelong learning, upgrading the skills and competences of the workforce and increasing the labour market relevance of education and training systems.

⁵ including investment priorities in active inclusion; promoting the social economy and social enterprises; and community-lead local development strategies.

⁶ the follow-up to the actions on youth laid out in the wider Employment Package to combat the "unacceptably high levels" of youth unemployment

⁷ European Commission, The Youth Guarantee: Making it Happen", Employment Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Union, 2014

schemes through the European Social Fund (ESF) and the €6 billion Youth Employment Initiative.⁸

Through these measures, there has been a focus on supporting school-to-work transitions, especially by redirecting ESF money towards support schemes, encouraging skills development, supporting labour market mobility and strengthening policy delivery. The 2014 EU study *Mapping youth transitions in Europe* has confirmed that European countries with a higher integration of school and work, through apprenticeship programmes or through more young people effectively combining school and early labour market experiences, display a smoother and quicker transition from school to work.⁹

Disability policy and transitioning youths

It is true that all young people should benefit from the support provided by transition services, nevertheless, young people with disabilities often face even greater challenges when making such transitions. With regard to the European Union, there is no specific policy on the need to support the transition of young people with disabilities, however, recent evolutions show a positive light in this direction, when dealing with the employment, education and inclusion of youth with disabilities.

The European Union has shown a strong commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities in becoming the first ever international organisation to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010. The EU has therefore committed itself to respecting and protecting the rights of all persons with disabilities, including children and young people. Related to transition support, the EU thus has committed to ensure the rights: to inclusive education including effective individualized support measures (article 24); to live independently and be included in the community (article 19); to be provided with habilitation and rehabilitation services to enable persons with disabilities to attain and maintain maximum independence, full physical, mental, social and vocational ability, full inclusion and participation in all aspects of life (article 26); to work, including the right to be provided with effective access to general technical and vocational guidance programmes, placement services and vocational and continuing training (article 27).

The commitments made by this ratification reflect the European Union's broader commitment to building a "barrier-free" Europe by 2020 as set out in the European Commission's Disability Strategy 2010-2020.¹⁰ This strategy complements the EU's CRPD obligations and provides a framework for action at European level, as well as with national action to supplement EU action, to eliminate barriers, including those to: accessibility; participation; equality; employment,

⁸ Eurofound (2014), *Mapping youth transitions in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p 13

⁹ See Eurofound (2014), *Mapping youth transitions in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

¹⁰ European Commission (2010), *European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committees and the Committee Of The Regions. Brussels, Belgium

education and training; social inclusion; health; and external action. The Strategy specifically sets out certain key actions that are conducive of supporting transition services for young persons with disabilities such as:

- using structural funds to promote the transition from institutional to community-based care including supporting the development of community-based services;
- and to pay particular attention to young people with disabilities in their transition from education to employment.

As can be seen, there is a drive towards supporting transition services for young persons both in the name of reducing youth unemployment, as well as ensuring that young persons with disabilities are supported in exercising their rights to independent living, education and employment.

III. EPR Study on Transition Services for Youth

This paper will now draw upon the 2014 EPR Study on transition services for young people with disabilities as they complete their formal secondary education and transition to adulthood, post secondary education, employment and the community. This study involved a participatory model of research to investigate the various programmes and approaches that EPR members are using with transition age youth (ages 14 to 24 and beyond) to increase their independence and inclusion in the community. Based on these programmes and approaches, the study shows specific themes that are replicated among these programmes¹¹ and unique approaches that will inform future programmes and developments and uncovers challenges, opportunities and directions for the future identified by the EPR members regarding recommendations for programme development.

A. Transition Programme, Services and Students Information

Virtually all of the EPR study transition programmes aimed to **achieve integration and inclusion** of their students in the community: whether they be conducted in the centres' offices or in the respective communities.¹² These transition programmes - **individualised** to the organisation, country and, most importantly the needs of the youth - include the development of independent living situations and the skills to be self-sufficient; enabling the persons to secure vocational training and/or employment; and others on transition from secondary education to postsecondary education.

¹¹ Such themes relate to: transition programme information; transition student information; transition programme services and interventions; public authority/legislative information; and transition programme directions.

¹² including: schools, job centres, care homes and independent living homes

Although originally developed for students with disabilities, the programmes are now being **expanded to include students without disabilities** that may need additional supports as they transition into adult life. This movement is strengthened by the focus on, and discussion of, person-centred and person-driven transition interventions. This person-centred/driven focus provides for an **individualized approach** to transition for the youth and young adults. Most of the programmes use selection criteria that are linked to educational and behavioural characteristics – not a specific disabling condition or gender. These selection criteria further support the individualized nature of the transition interventions.

Transition programmes cover a wide variety of **activities**, especially affluent are those addressing “soft skills”, strengthening the knowledge of the labour market and development of community inclusion behaviour to help the youths in their transition from school to adult life. Selected programmes also assist in the development and acquisition of specific vocational skills that will strengthen the students’ employability. In the area of work skills there are a number of opportunities for internships, trial work experiences, on-the-job training and related work transition efforts. Two of the programmes target the development of independent living skills and community self-sufficiency. The partnerships with educational institutions (both high school and post-high school education and training) provide a positive linkage that crosses organisational systems. The use of individual planning instruments is shared with the student and, in many instances, their families. Community member involvement was common in some programmes: for instance, programmes that are school based often deferred in the engagement of community members to the school personnel and those with an employment focus engage employers in work experiences, internships and/or paid employment as well as in employer forums, and mentoring and coaching.

The **outcome measures** identified by the programmes typically combined both quantitative and qualitative responses. Often these outcome measures examined completion rates from education and vocational training programmes as well as employment rates for transition participants. There are also qualitative measures for a number of the programmes; including living independently, completion of educational experiences and accomplishing transition plans and supporting educational attainments. The range of outcome measures provided numerous opportunities for examining individual changes and development.

Though the funding bases of the programmes vary, the vast majority of programmes are in receipt of legislative or government policy support for programme development and sustainability in their respective countries, with **legislative mandates** typically in providing services for youth in education, vocational training, social security and labour and/or employment preparation, and some specifically focusing on services for youth with disabilities. It is interesting to note that the EU or country legislative mandates are typically in labour, education, insurance and/or healthcare and thus cross the spectrum of human service policies. When examining these transition practices, EU **funding**, such as the European Social Fund, supports selected programmes. Other financial supports come from the government and, in selected situations, are covered through organisational funding or shared funding with other organisations such as educational institutions or labour programmes

B. OPPORTUNITIES

These programmes have created the opportunity to make a difference for the students involved by expanding their opportunities to be increasingly independent in the community. Such opportunities include working with mainstream education programmes, expanding to college students and offering the programmes to expanding consumer groups within the EPR member's respective organisations.¹³

The programmes also offer an expansion of connections with employers and other community groups including organisations representing specific disability groups. For example, increasing the involvement of labour orientation, integrated training courses and support for employers, or expanding partnerships with employers, other service providers and the national government. Such expanded connections are key to providing opportunities to increase conclusion and community engagement as well as changing community perceptions on the competencies of persons with disabilities.

C. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Many of the programmes - in their first stages having begun after 2010 - are facing challenges in managing the project growth in the context of increasing student interest and the increasingly complex needs of the individual students. The challenge here revolves around the need to ensure **quality and individualisation** at the same time that the programmes are **expanding** to more students.

Ensuring programme sustainability through **stable funding** is also a challenge. As the economic conditions change and the demands for services increase, there are issues with continued multi-year funding and sufficient support for staff to meet the continuing needs of the youth. Government and organisational funding remains a concern. There is an effort at the government level in many countries to consolidate programmes and reduce the costs of services. This is challenging given that the transition needs of youth and young adults with disabilities typically are individualized (as noted by the nature of these programmes), labour intensive and often time consuming. Challenges are presented by time-limited project funds or by anticipated changes in national legislation. These challenges are particularly impactful because the programmes often serve individuals for an extended period of time. Thus the issue of sustainability of funding and the flexibility to direct the funds to emerging needs of the students and the community is an ongoing challenge

Addressing **attitudes and support from the greater community** is also found to be a challenge to transition programmes for young persons with disabilities. Negative attitudes towards the productivity and competencies of students with disability are sometimes found in the community and there is a continued need to challenge this through educating the community

¹³ Programmes in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal identified these opportunities.

regarding the transition programmes: such as employers, funders and local and national governments.

D. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future programme strengthening will need to revolve around their **sustainability**. Many issues come into play here such as integrating with the other education programmes, developing linkages with government programmes, increasing consumer involvement and expanding geographically throughout either regions or the country. In the area of sustainability, there is also the demand to ensure sufficient qualified staff members to retain the programme's growth and focus. As an example, Portugal discussed having different programmes for the youth and ensuring that the staff had the competencies to support both the students and the community members.

Community awareness and engagement must also be addressed to ensure relevancy to other sectors of the community including employers, consumer organisations, government entities and potential partners. As an example, Pluryn intends to strengthen its external orientation through increasing stakeholder engagement and broadening the targeted students to include persons with other disabling conditions.

There is no question that the youth with disabilities have significant needs as they transition from education to adult life. The literature and research is compelling - human services, education, labour and healthcare policies must support community integration and independence for all individuals.

The challenges are equally compelling. There is not a singular approach or set of policies and practices that will work for all individuals. Therefore, the individualization of transition interventions is critical and labour intensive. Finally, if there is failure to provide effective transition interventions, the long term negative impact on these individuals will be significant for years to come.

The EPR Transition study identified areas that seem crucial for future developments :

1) Increase outcome data and study the financial benefits of the transition efforts

It is critical to demonstrate the benefits of transition programmes with individuals. The data for programmes, many of which commences in the last 10 years, needs to examine both programme completion and sustainability of individual accomplishments that occurs in post-transition interventions: including examining the ability of the individual to strengthen their independence and contribution in the community. Such outcome measures can be combined with financial benefits and factors such as "return on investment" and contributions to the community, this will strengthen the discussions with policy makers and funding organisations to provide sustainability and, hopefully, growth of the transition interventions.

2) Strive for public policy sustainability that is essential for long-term transition efforts

There is a continued need to educate policy makers regarding the importance of transition programmes. Youth and young adults, regardless of their circumstances, are the future income producers, yet the data in most EU countries reflect high unemployment rates for youth and young adults (sometimes double that of the general population). Thus, developing programmes that assist these individuals to become competent and productive is important. This is increasingly important for youth with disabilities who often have to address a number of challenges. The education of policy makers must be a consistent and constant process and must emphasize the importance of individualization of transition interventions with comparable outcome measures. What is clear is that “one size does not fit all individuals”. Individualization is a key element of transition programmes and needs to be included in the education of policy makers.

3) Continue person-centred/driven services for transition programmes

The EPR study found that most of their transition services utilized a person-centred approach with the focus on the individual and the designing of transition interventions that are unique to the person. While intensive in development, it provides a strong foundation for the individual and their family and support systems. This service approach also offers opportunities to expand options for the individual and increase future positive outcome

4) Increase family support and engagement in the transition interventions

Engaging the family members and other significant persons in the lives of the youth and young adults in the process of the transition programmes can assist in three ways. First, it will help the family members view the youth in a different manner as they are entering community inclusion. This will enable family members to see the skills and abilities of their student. Second, the family members may be able to assist with community connections – from living arrangements to work experiences. Third, they will be able to provide continuing support once the transition programme ends. Studying various models and considering the engagement of the family members to support the individual receiving transition interventions adds another dimension of community inclusion.

5) Strengthen employer engagement from the conception of transition programmes

The engagement of the employer community in the planning, development and implementation of the transition interventions strengthens long-term success and community support. This engagement becomes a learning opportunity for the employers, the youth and the service providers. Those transition services that identify employer involvement should be commended for these efforts. The earlier their involvement the more employers will be engaged and contributing to the programme's success.

IV. Conclusions

Transition services such as these can be seen to follow the European policy on supporting transition of young people into adulthood and empower young people with disabilities to overcome challenges in this difficult transition. As well as this, the programmes from the EPR study are also consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹⁴

The key element of the transition programmes in the EPR study is that all are striving for community integration and inclusion. We know that each individual is unique and has a set of skills and abilities that must be developed and adapted to achieve community integration. We know that innovation, collaboration and constant attention to the needs of the person with the disability is critical for the success of each programme. The examples and innovations articulated by these programmes provide opportunities for young adults with disabilities to become contributing members of their communities. Continued innovation, individualization and positive outcomes will benefit to the individual, their family, the community and their country.

¹⁴ While not always referenced in the Study Protocols, the goals, outcomes and transition interventions are consistent with the key elements of the Convention.