



CASE STUDY SIZAR, SLOVAK REPUBLIC



FINAL Version

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Summary

Case study SIZAR is prepared within project Dialogue, which aims is bridging the gap between academic research on ULLL and the professional practice in teaching, learning and guidance in ULLL provision. The issue of lifelong learning at Universities in general, better and stronger linking practice and research is solved from four perspectives - in terms of Access and Progression, Quality, Learning & Guidance and New Media. The case study SIZAR was prepared with emphasis on access and progression. It describes the problem of partially sighted and blind people with the access to the lifelong learning activities which help them to get back into the labour market. It is a unique example of the connection of research organizations, educational institutions and organizations, which "has a problem". This partnership „holds" compendium of highly specialized skills. Naturally, this brought with them communication problems or different understanding of the seriousness of the solved problems. Individual players had to learn to communicate together and find optimal but mainly common solutions. The outputs of the project - unique research study with recommendations and measures, educational products affirmed, however, the effect of this triangle and their use for the general practice.

Parts of this case study describe the background in which the problem was solved, research methodology and research process, link between research and practice as well as the transferability and recommendations of results of case study results into practice

This case study is a part of a national report focused on access and progression in lifelong learning at Slovak Universities and second case study describing alternative approach in the lifelong learning of Roma people.

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Abstract

Improving the position of blind and partially sighted people in society is conditioned by improving their access to employment and lifelong learning. The project was implemented by Partially Sighted and Blind Union of Slovakia in partnership with the Institute for Labor and Family Research, National Agency for Development of Small and Medium Enterprises and Agency of Supported Employment. Institute for Labor and Family Research realized the research focused on position sighted and blind persons within project. Based on the research findings have identified areas requiring intervention to foster a society-wide integration of sighted and blind people. Methods and ways of transforming the standard training courses to the courses for the visually impaired people have been developed on the basis of these studies. The project finished by the realization of developing educational activities.

General background

This is indisputable fact that eyes resp. vision belong to the crucial sense organs, through which we perceive the world. The reduced visual abilities respectively lack of vision significantly affect the life chances of people with visual disabilities in all spheres of social life. The profiling of marginalized groups, which due to its specific situation and needs require non-standard procedures and solutions is specialty of labour market developments in recent years. Persons with visual impairments undoubtedly belong to these groups.

Visually impaired people are concentrated in Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union (Únia nevidiacich a slabozrakých Slovenska, slovak acronym: UNSS). It is a civic organization. It pursues the objective to improve the quality of life of visually impaired Slovak people and to give partially sighted and blind citizens chance to live full-value life and participate in the development of an integrated society. The organization has 4832 members in 68 regional organizations at the end of 2010.

In Slovakia there are the majority of visually impaired persons with secondary education but only a quarter of them have secondary education with graduation. Those who work mostly attended special primary and secondary schools. Unemployed people usually went to school with integrated classrooms. But the low level of flexibility and adaptability of integrated education to the specific needs of students with visual impairments goes intensive to the fore. Many of unemployed people have entered into unemployment immediately after school leaving. They often tend to be long-term unemployed. Many of them are registered at the Local Labour Offices as jobseekers. But they are registered there more than one year. Alarmingly, many of visually disabled jobseeker is more than five years without job. Trainings of social rehabilitation are effective for the visually impaired. They should be supplemented by continuing education with specific knowledge and skills. The possibilities of continuing education are very limited and often ineffective for visually impaired people. For example big problem is the low level of foreign language and computer competencies is a major problem. It is therefore necessary to focus on this target group and to increase the space for their access to lifelong learning.

Finding non-standard solutions is based on comprehensive knowledge of the characteristics of persons with visual impairments and identifying the nature of their position in the labor market and access to lifelong learning.

Objectives and Purpose

The aim of the project was to develop a comprehensive system of guidance and training programs and services for a group of blind and partially sighted people. Creating a system of cooperation helped to reduce the dependence on disable people to aid others in activities supported employability. Activities led to improving their adaptability to the requirements of the labor market, in particular by obtaining computer literacy and provide support to launch and successful career. Their ability to undergo regular retraining and integrated training courses and applied in an integrated employment or own business considerably enhanced with the help of this system. Realization of sociological analysis was an important first part of the research. The second phase of research focused on the status of sighted and blind people in the labor market and lifelong learning. The purpose of the empirical survey was to obtain of relevant information and data on various aspects of the status of persons with visual disabilities in the labour market and access to lifelong learning. Main objectives of survey were:

- full information gap related to employment situation of visually impaired people;

- provide (within existing limits) comprehensive picture of labour market position of target group;
- indicate barriers and obstacles which prevent improving employment and employability of visually impaired people;
- build up range of knowledge required for policy designing towards impaired people.

Links between Research and Practice

Facts, such as:

- Demand of carrying out high quality research with clear, relevant and valid interpretation of results,
- Development a questionnaire for mapping needs of the target group and the process of developing training,
- Knowledge of specific models of behaviour of this target group, attitudes and problems in the process of the obtaining work ,
- Effective communication with target groups,

led to the relation and connecting of researchers and practitioners where each of them offer one necessary "piece " of information.

Researchers are engaged in scientific research and expertise focused on market research, labour and labour protection, research and family in modern society. Practitioners are engaged in working with visually impaired people, they help them overcome the consequences of visual impairment, support and guide the employment of people with disabilities, employment in general and further education. This partnership „holds“ compendium of highly specialized skills. This link between Research and Practice created the possibility for solving problems of the access to lifelong learning of the visually impaired.

Research Process (describe the method used to gather information /generate the new learning .)

Research issues related to employment, unemployment of blind and partially sighted people and their participation in lifelong learning has not its own tradition in Slovakia. The implementation of so broad-based empirical research was realized as a partial activity of the project SIZAR.

The collection of data was realised through “face to face” individual interviews. Two types of the questionnaires were prepared:

- a questionnaire for the working respondents with visual handicaps with 94 classified signs;
- a questionnaire for unemployed respondents with a visual handicaps contained 104 signed.

The questions about LLL were same for both groups.

Both questionnaires were consulted with Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union (UNSS) and sent to the Regional centres of Union for comments.

The system of collection of the data depended on social status. The working respondents were contacted by interviewers who used the contacts given to them by the UNSS. The regional UNSS were strong help in mediatings between the interviewers and the potential respondents. The data collecting from unemployed group was provided by the Labour office who contacted all unemployed blind and partially sighted they had in evidence. The interviewers were provided with detailed operating instructions. They got the letter of recommendation and the glossary containing the key words used in an interview. Glossary was developed based on the experience of preparatory research carried out by staff UNSS as a support tool for the process of data collection.

The survey was closed with the 445 completely filled questionnaire sheets. The survey sample was consist of visually impaired respondents of working age included both – employed and unemployed blind and partially sighted lived in all regions of Slovak republic. Due to lack of data about sociodemographical and regional structure of economically active visually impaired people it was used the “random probability sample” method. Based on references interviewer network and personal reactions of some interviewers man can concluded that the concept of research and its social value has been welcomed very positively by community of visually impaired people in Slovakia.

The survey sample was consist of 445 visually impaired respondents of working age included both – employed and unemployed blind and partially sighted lived in all regions of Slovak republic. 303 of total numbers of respondents were working people as wage-earners and self-employed. 142 of them were job seekers registered at public employment office. From the point of view of gender mainstreaming, 244 (55%) of total number were men and 45% were women. Sample distribution according to degree of visual impairment was following: 18 % blind people, 40%practically blind people, 37% partially sighted people and 3% people with binocular vision failure. Age structure of the survey sample was characterized by low range of young people less than 25 years and relatively low range of old people over 55 years. More than 35% of respondents belonged to the age group from 35 to 44 years, 29% to the age group from 45 to 54 years and the rest (20,5%) to the age group from 26 to 34 years.

The first research study - sociological analysis gives detailed information on the number of economically active population with visual disabilities in working life, in a situation of unemployment and access to lifelong learning to researchers and practitioners. Areas of requiring intervention to strengthen corporate social integration of blind and partially sighted people in the labor market and employment, access to lifelong learning and on the compensation policy were identified on research findings and recommendations of the work group. It is the first output of the second phases of the research. Examples of good practice in lifelong learning and employment of people with visual disabilities in selected countries were the second output of this phase of research. Barriers of participation in the LLL activities, possible tools for the process of continuing education, the expectations of both groups (employed and unemployed) from continuing education and many other important information describing the opportunities and obstacles for the access of the visually impaired into LLL have been described in studies. It also includes information about the main occupations open for or suitable for visually impaired people as well as other specific information concerning the jobs of this specific group.

Collected survey data show that people with visually impairment are much more endangered by unemployment than sighted population. The unemployment risk emerges not only from visual disability as well from low qualification which generally goes hand in hand with visual handicap. Visually impaired persons with low professional qualification have much more problems in finding job. Survey data once more acknowledged that qualification is a key prerequisite for access to employment. Survey reveals that becoming unemployed people with visual impairment tend to be long-term unemployed. According survey data around two thirds visually impaired respondents registered at the public employment offices as jobseekers are long-term unemployed (more than one year). At the end one information about effectiveness of the realized LLL activities : effectiveness of active labour market measures, especially training and re-training programmes, applied towards visually impaired people, is very low due to their unsuitability for need of visually impaired people.

All this information has an extremely valuable input for training providers. Allow the practitioners design the training more accessible and more effective for this specific target group.

The other partner of the project - National Agency for Development of Small and Medium Enterprises ensured the preparatory phase of the training - training of trainers (sensitization), editing textbooks, tests, questionnaires, editing environment, mediation and communication between partners and the lecturers. Methodology describing integration into the training courses and elimination of the barriers has been developed before realizing of the training courses.

The result of these activities was the realization of two types of integrated courses "Getting business" and "Telemarketing", both in the 3 regions of Slovakia - Bratislava, Banská Bystrica and Prešov. The 9-day course "Getting business", which was tailored to the needs of the target group, involved a total of 42 clients, including 11 visually impaired persons. The course was designed for candidates with strong incentives to business.

On the 8-day newly created training course "Telemarketing" was involved a total of 31 clients, including 13 visually impaired. The course was designed for jobseekers to positions that require intensive telephone communication with clients.

Feedbacks of the graduates have shown that integrated courses were interesting and well prepared. Variety people were in the group - visually impairment clients, students, moms on / after maternity leave, seniors, disabled people and clients at different educational levels. They had created a compact and lively team. Visually impairment people were not separated from the participants without visual impairment, their presence acted psychologically very positive and encouraging on the other participants. Ordinary clients and trainers were able to recognize that the visual impairment people are able to absorb a teaching material and handle drills and tests with appropriate compensatory tools as well as ordinary participants. Really interesting contribution was the fact that visual impairment people were more concentrated in the learning process and much more appreciated the information.

Linking Researchers and Practitioners

Researchers and Practitioners have worked together intensively throughout the whole implementation of the project. Mutual discussion and cooperation was essential for the successful fulfilment of the objectives of research and the successful preparation and implementation of continuing education activities. Each of them operated with specific skills needed for complex problem solving.

Transferability of the Case

Developing of the educational programs for visually impaired requires a specific approach. Before the developing of the curriculum it is necessary to know the specifics of the target group, as usual. Given that this type of so wide research for this target group is unique, outcomes and recommendations are relevant for work with visually impairments in various types of LLL activities (for example seniors,..). Recommendations for implementing the training of research carried out from education are useful not only for the visually impaired in Slovakia. Effective partnership is also a motivation for all providers of LLL and researchers, too.

Recommendations from the Case Study

Collected survey data provide rather qualitative (soft) than quantitative indicators concerning employment situation of people with visual impairment. Nevertheless, they are serving as a good background for indicating various areas of problems and tensions in employment situation of visually impaired people. Planning and designing policy towards disabled people in general and visually impaired people especially without adequate data and information is difficult and sometimes impossible. For that reason, building up developed data concerning this issue is a challenge not only for national statistical sources and as well for social research. This case study demonstrates the excellent partnership between researchers and practices. Cooperation and contribution of each partner is benefited for others. But the most important fact is the identification of opportunities and threats to the visually impaired access to the labour market through continuing education. In terms of long-term development of these information and knowledge is very valuable.

Further Reading

http://www.sspr.gov.sk/IVPR/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=34&lang=sk

<http://www.sspr.gov.sk/IVPR/images/IVPR/SIZAR/nevidiaci.pdf>

<http://www.nadsme.sk/content/projekt-sizar>

http://www.sspr.gov.sk/IVPR/images/IVPR/SIZAR/nevidiaci_2.pdf