

## **Challenges and opportunities regarding occupational rehabilitation of NEETs – the SEPAL experience**

The present paper regards the implementation of SEPAL project by Bucovina Institute for Social Partnership, together with partners from Spain, Lithuania, Greece and Poland. The main objective of SEPAL is creating a model for job insertion of minimum number of 300 NEETs aged 24 - 29 years old, coming from various vulnerable groups through developing Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) model by offering apprenticeship training and supported employment services to access the open labor market.

Due to particularities of target groups – lack or insufficient work experience and a less clear vocational path – a mixture of vocational training (apprenticeship) and supported employment is needed.

Vocational training at the workplace – social enterprise or public firm - capitalizes on existing motivation and lowers the chances of drop-out. Apprenticeship programs are needed to support the existing career goals that are unmet due to lack of competences. Also, they provide a smooth transition from unemployment to a structured activity, by adjusting expectations and preparing the youngster for future employment. Both soft skills and practical skills that are needed to maintain job and obtain success are trained during the apprenticeship program. Apprenticeship programs provide young people with the opportunity to take their first steps in the business world and they play a key role in producing highly qualified workers. They represent highly structured training programs that help unskilled individuals acquire the competences that are needed to succeed in a chosen industry. Hands on training is an opportunity to put the existing skills into practice and helps the NEETs to gain more confidence in themselves and in the working environment.

The vocational training duration should be kept at minimum, as longer periods diminish motivation. Many NEETs might have had bad experiences with the school system therefore they are unwilling or reluctant to engage in classroom-like training approaches that focus mostly on providing theoretical knowledge. Providing vocational training in the real work environment, with the main focus on developing the practical skills and the basic soft skills, can be very attractive and enhance the motivation for participation. Also, the perspective of an internship at a private enterprise, on the open labor market can mitigate the negative expectations about training outcomes (‘I study for nothing, nobody will hire me anyway’) and learned helplessness regarding work. For some NEETs, especially for those that had negative experiences at former workplaces, no work history, low work skills the friendly, tolerant, inclusive and stigma-free environment of social enterprises can be a strong incentive and a good starting point. There they can find supporting colleagues and peers that can act as positive role models and skilled mentors that can kindly coach them to develop relevant work skills and knowledge. Of course, for the other NEETs that already have the skills and the experiences, the apprenticeship might seem a waste of time and resources. Therefore, this stage could be skipped, and other services should be provided, for example support with finding a job on the open labour market or coaching for performing efficiently at task.

Internship programs further enhance the development of work skills. Ideally the internship is to be continued with employment on the open labour market.

SEPAL Program is flexible enough so that WISE services are person centred and adapted to individual needs. That allows selection of best career options given the existent competences and labour market offers.