

## **TRANSITION PLANNING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (HE) STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: THE OPINIONS OF EMPLOYERS IN SERBIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, AND MONTENEGRO**

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**Abstract:** A survey within Erasmus+ Project Trans2Work was conducted in order to identify and analyze the needs of employers. The sample consisted of 426 employers from Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Formal education of persons with disabilities was not prime consideration of employers. Although this varied by country, additional skills seemed to be the most important. Employers tended to employ persons with disabilities in order to fulfill social responsibility of the company - not for their professional skills. The main obstacle for employing persons with disabilities is time they need to fit in the working environment. Improvement of the soft skills of persons with disabilities has been pointed out as the most important task of HEIs in order to facilitate their employment. Disability targeted internship programs, financial incentives, assistive technology and disability awareness trainings are seen as the most important strategies in retaining jobs for persons with disabilities. Transition planning of students with disabilities to work life should take in the account these findings.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Students with Disabilities, Employees with Disabilities, Inclusion, Transition.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Due to the current economic crisis, the labor market in the Western Balkan region is characterized by the high rate of overall unemployment, a large share of long-term unemployed persons, as well as insufficient number of vacancies. As far as persons with disabilities are concerned, their position in the labor market is even more unfavorable, in view of all barriers they encounter in their private and professional life on daily basis. The position of this disadvantaged group in the labor market is influenced by personal qualities, complexity of their disability, degree of rehabilitation, motivation, educational level existing skills and potentials, and accessibility of their environment. However, in recent years there are highly educated persons with disabilities appearing at the labor market, who have difficulties to find a job regardless of their expertise. The fact is that the position of persons with disabilities in the labor market is unequal compared to other job seekers, what emphasize a need for a law to regulate the field of employment for the

persons with disabilities, and stipulate the commitment to recruit persons with disabilities under a quota-based principle.

Generally speaking, even though a significant progress has been made in the Western Balkan region regarding the adoption of laws that govern the employment of persons with disabilities [1-17], the progress is somewhat less visible in practice. The Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities is coordinated with all EU directives and is being constantly improved through the practice, while the relevant institutions show continuous readiness to improve this law and its enforcement in practice. This law regulates the manner and procedure of exercising the right to professional rehabilitation of persons with disabilities, measures and incentives for their employment, financing and other issues. However, despite significant subsidies, employers still prefer to pay special contributions to the Fund for Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities. The current economic situation negatively affects the level of employers' social responsibility and

their interest in issues that are not directly related to their economic benefit. Employers' prejudices towards persons with disabilities and the absence of adequate jobs (while the adaptation of workplaces is costly), are the main reasons why the situation on the ground changes rather slowly.

It is necessary to improve inter-institutional cooperation through involvement of all relevant factors in the mentioned areas. In this sense, the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) would be to facilitate and promote transition process by improving competences of students with disabilities, and educating employers on needs of persons with disabilities.

As a part of activities within ERASMUS+ Project „School-to-Work Transition for Higher education students with disabilities in Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro“, there has been conducted a survey of the employers from these three countries [18]. This particular survey aimed to identify and analyze the needs of employers in order to explore and create the methodologies for pioneering categorization and analysis of employers' needs. These findings could be used for further studies and/or to develop programs that would facilitate transition of students with disabilities to work life. This paper presents the most important results.

## 2. METHOD

The survey was conducted during March and April 2016. The process of distributing the questionnaire was the same in all three countries. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent by e-mail to the employers registered in the national employment agencies of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. They were informed about the objectives of the Project and asked to complete the questionnaire which was available in two forms: 1) online (the web link was forwarded via email); 2) a hardcopy questionnaire. Employers willing to participate in the survey have signed the letter of consent (if the questionnaire was in hardcopy), or it was assumed to voluntarily approach the survey by following the link attached to the online questionnaire. Participants were informed that they are allowed to withdraw at any moment. The questionnaire was at their disposal for 2 months. The survey was completely anonymous.

The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions divided into five sections. The questions were of different types: 5-point-Likert-scale type, open-ended, binary, multiple choice and multiple response.

The survey was completed by 426 employers (341 of them from Republic of Serbia, 45 of them from Bosnia & Herzegovina, and 40 employers from Montenegro). The majority of participants were from private sector (71.06%), and rest were from public sector, non-government organizations (NGO), Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and non-profit organizations (NPO), and companies/organizations declared as "other" (Table 1). 52.37% of employers participated in the survey were male, and 47.63% of them were female. An average number of employees in organizations/companies included in this survey was  $M=105.26$  with  $S.D.=174.23$ .

310 (72.77%) employers who took part in the survey had employees with disabilities.

**Table 1:** Participants by sector and country

Sector		RS	BiH	ME	TOTAL
private	f (%)	246 (72.14)	36 (80.00)	20 (50.00)	302 (71.06)
public	f (%)	71 (20.82)	4 (8.89)	13 (32.50)	88 (20.71)
NGO, CSO, NP	f (%)	12 (3.52)	5 (11.11)	4 (10.00)	21 (4.94)
other	f (%)	11 (3.52)	0 (0.00)	3 (7.50)	14 (3.29)
missing	f	1	0	0	1
total	f (%)	340 (80.00)	45 (10.59)	40 (9.41%)	425 (100.00)

*Legend: RS – Republic of Serbia, BiH – Bosnia & Herzegovina, ME – Montenegro, TOT - total, NGO – non-government organizations, CSO – civil society organizations, NP – non-profit organizations, f – frequency, (%) - percentage*

Disproportion between private (50%) and public sector (32.5%) of employers was the lowest in Montenegro. A percentage of employers who had employees with disabilities was the highest in Serbia (77.64%), and the lowest in Bosnia & Herzegovina (46.67%). Employers from the Republic of Serbia more often employed persons with disabilities than employers from other two countries. This difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2_{(2)}=21.764$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

**Table 2:** Employers who had employees with disabilities by sector and country

sector		RS	BiH	ME	TOT/BS
private	f (%)	204 (77.30)	17 (80.00)	12 (48.00)	233 (77.15)
public	f (%)	45 (17.00)	2 (8.89)	8 (32.00)	55 (62.50)
NGO, CSO, NPO	f (%)	5 (1.90)	2 (11.11)	2 (8.00)	9 (42.86)
other	f (%)	9 (3.40)	N/A	3 (12.00)	12 (85.71)
missing	f	1	0	0	1
TOT/BC	f (%)	264 (77.64)	21 (46.67)	25 (62.50)	309 (72.70)

*Legend: RS – Republic of Serbia, BiH – Bosnia & Herzegovina, ME – Montenegro, TOT/BS – total and percentage by sector, TOT/BC – total and percentage by country, NGO – non-*

government organizations, CSO – civil society organizations, NPO – non-profit organizations, *f* – frequency, (%) – percentage

A percentage of organizations/companies which had employees with disabilities (Table 2) regardless of the country was largest in private sector (77.15%). Organizations/companies from the private sector employed persons with disabilities more often than employers from public sector and NGO/CSO/NPO. This difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2_{(3)}=18.250$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

In fact, the highest percentage of companies/organizations which had employees with disabilities was in the sector designated as “other” (85.71, but it is our opinion that this finding should be taken with caution due to a small size and non-probabilistic nature of the sample).

### 3. RESULTS

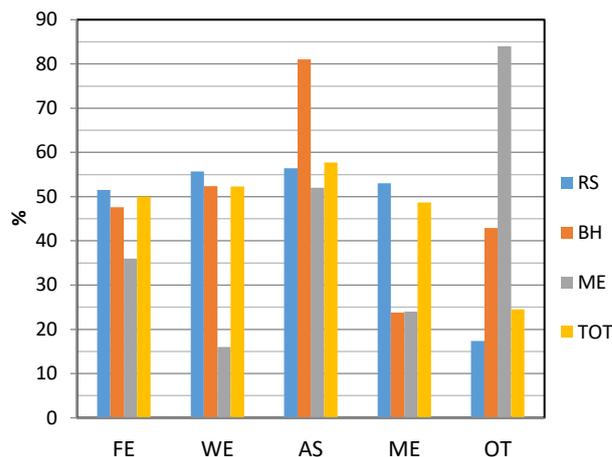
As far as employees with disabilities are concerned, according to data provided by the employers, majority of employees with disabilities have some kind of physical impairment (between 56 and 76.2% depending on the country), then visual impairment to much lesser extent (between 4.8 and 22.7%), hearing impairment (between 9.5 and 26.9%), or other types of impairments. Organizations/companies employ persons with disabilities mostly at administrative positions (between 33 and 57.1%), and much less at middle (between 6.4 and 14.35%) and high management positions (up to 12%). Employers have stated to a large extent that they have employees with disabilities at positions classified as “other” (from 36 to 70.1%). This category may contain positions that cannot be categorized in any of previous categories, or may be a container for positions that employers do not know how to classify.

Considering the strategies which the employers use to recruit employees with disabilities, we could say that they do not have such strategy at all in most cases. The most utilized strategy is posting job announcements in the job service or workforce employment center (48.4%). Creating partnerships with the organizations of/for person with disabilities, posting job announcements in disability-related publications, and including persons with disabilities in diversity recruitment goals are strategies that are used by less than 20% of employers (each). 14.2% of the employers are not fully aware of recruitment processes they follow.

When employers were asked (multiple response question) what was their prime consideration when hiring a person with disabilities, *Additional skills* was the most frequent response (57.7%). The least frequent option (excluding option “other”), *Mandatory employment*, was prime consideration in 48.7%. The employers from the different countries exhibited different patterns of responses. For employers from Serbia, the first four options were almost equally important (Formal education 51.5%, Working experience 55.7%, Additional skills 56.4, Mandatory employment 53%, and “Other” 14.4%). The magnitude of differences between frequencies of these considerations was not large enough to allow us to say that additional skills were more important than formal education or work experience and mandatory employment. In Bosnia and

Herzegovina, clearly the most important consideration was *Additional skills* (81%). *Mandatory employment* was much less important than in Serbia. Likewise, in Montenegro, *Mandatory employment* was not as important as in Serbia (24%), *Additional skills* were also very important (52%), but the most frequent considerations were those designated as “Other” (84%). We must keep in mind that, although here we speak about high percentages, absolute numbers are indeed small due to rather small samples from Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro (i.e., 84% from Montenegro is just 21 case).

**Chart 1:** Prime consideration when hiring persons with disabilities



Legend: FE – Formal education, WE – Working experience, AS – Additional skills, ME – Mandatory employment, OT – Other

In line with this result there were the answers of the employers on 5-point Likert-scale-type question regarding the most important reasons for employing persons with disabilities. 11 reasons were offered. Majority of reasons were related to work ethics and competencies of persons with disabilities. Employers seemed to agree that the most important reasons for employment of persons with disabilities were to *fulfil social responsibility of organization/company* (means between 4.15 and 4.32 depending on the country) and *positive image that employees with disabilities give to the organization/company* (means 3.92-4.24). On the other hand, *qualifications for the job* of persons with disabilities were seen as the least important reason to hire them (means 3.47-3.52). Means of the employers responses followed approximately the same pattern in all three countries. There was one exception. Employers from Montenegro stated that they employed persons with disabilities primarily *for their competencies*, more often than the employers from the other two countries ( $M_{ME}=4.20$ ,  $M_{RS}=3.47$ ,  $M_{BH}=3.67$ ).

When employers were asked the opposite question, *What are the main reasons for not employing persons with disabilities* (again 5-point Likert-scale-type question), they did not agree with most of the offered reasons. None of the means of the responses was higher than 2.43. Montenegrin employers consistently had the lowest means, but the differences were very small for all 6 offered reasons. The highest means were recorded for

*long perceived time persons with disabilities need to fit in the working environment* (means from 1.76 to 2.43 depending on the country). The second most important reason was the opinion that *persons with disabilities do not have the same rights in the working place as persons without disability* (means 1.61-2.33).

The employers tended to agree that a role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to *facilitate the transition* to employment of students with disabilities was very important. Means of the employers responses to 5 offered statements were between 3.61 and 4.52 with  $M=4.16$  (Likert-scale-type question). *Raising awareness and sensitivity of employers towards employees with disabilities* (means between 4.13 and 4.52) and *educating employers on the needs of persons with disabilities* (means 4.08-4.22) were pointed out as HEIs most important tasks.

When the employers were asked a similar question, *What universities should focus on to promote transition of students with disabilities from higher education to work life*, they agreed that pretty much everything was important (median of means was 4.10). Skills of *presenting and writing clearly and effectively* (means 4.08-4.16 depending on the country), *Using appropriate technology to enhance and manage communication* (4.06-4.20) and *Obtaining and critically evaluating information from different sources* (3.78-4.08) emerged as the most important items. Although these three items had highest means, the differences from the means on other 8 items were rather small. The employers from three countries exhibited similar mean responses pattern to items, with two exceptions. The employers from Bosnia and Herzegovina had significantly lower scores than the employers from the other two countries on items concerning *Demonstrating leadership* and *Interpretation and communicating of numerical data*.

The employers tended to agree that improvement of the employability of persons with disabilities was duty of organizations/companies as well. All three offered options had high mean scores (from 3.93 to 4.44 depending on country). The highest median of means scores for three countries had *Providing accessible environment* ( $Me=4.12$ ), then *Supporting the role of the mentor* ( $Me=4.06$ ) and *Targeted trainings for improving knowledge and skills of persons with disabilities* ( $Me=4.05$ ). The employers who did not have employees with disabilities considered duties of organizations/companies as more important, but all differences between mean responses were too small to say they were significant.

Among the thirteen offered strategies for retaining jobs of persons with disabilities, employers most often agreed with three. Strategies with which employers agreed the most were *Use of assistive technology* (means 3.70-4.39 depending on country), *Tax credits and incentives* (3.80-4.28) and *Disability targeted internship programs* (3.78-4.26). Next to these three strategies, there was *Disability awareness training*, with somewhat lower means (3.57-4.18).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the survey data we can conclude that, although a large percent of organizations/companies employ persons with disabilities, their number could and should be higher, especially at higher level positions.

In the opinion of the employers from the Republic of Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro, this is responsibility of higher education institutions, organizations/companies and governments.

Although highly valued, formal education and qualifications for the job of persons with disabilities, often are not prime reasons for their employment. As well as for the persons without disabilities, additional skills are something that employers value the most. To improve employability of persons with disabilities, higher education institutions and associations of persons with disabilities should encourage them to constantly work on their self-improvement through acquirement of additional skills, such as clear and effective presentation and writing, obtaining and critically evaluating of information from different sources and using appropriate technology to enhance and manage communication. It is our opinion that persons with disabilities should also be informed that having additional skills is an important factor in finding a job in order to motivate them to work on their acquisition.

Employers who participated in this survey stated that they often did not hire persons with disabilities because of their competencies, but for expected positive effect on organizations/companies image, and/or to fulfil social responsibility of organization/company. This could mean two things: either stated reasons are really more important to employers, or they do not have high opinion of persons with disabilities' competencies. The former case is legitimate. If latter is the case, it is misconception which must be corrected. Higher education institutions should not lower criteria for students with disabilities, but create conditions which would help and ensure that students with disabilities acquire the same level of competences as students without disabilities.

In this survey, as the most important reason for not hiring persons with disabilities emerged their perceived long time to fit in the working environment. Programs aimed to facilitate transition of students with disabilities from higher education to work life should take that into account. Higher education institutions should take actions which would facilitate faster adaptation of students with disabilities to the working environment, such as disabilities targeted internship programs. This is also one of the solutions that employers recommend the most (along with the use of assistive technologies) in order to retain persons with disabilities' jobs.

This study did not address the role of governments in the promotion of employment of persons with disabilities. Still, one thing that government could influence emerged. The employers stated that tax credits and incentives were a good strategy for retaining persons with disabilities' jobs.

In order to create programs which will promote and facilitate employment of persons with disabilities we should have all this in mind. Such programs should also

help employers to devise sound recruitment strategies of persons with disabilities, because they often have none.

At the end we should point out shortcomings of this survey. In the first place, it is relatively small and perhaps biased sample, especially in the case of subsamples from Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro. Also, the questionnaire could have been somewhat more detailed and specific. Nevertheless, we think that this survey significantly contribute to identification of employers' needs when it comes to employment of persons with disabilities in the three countries of Western Balkans.

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