

Developing a support methodology for disabled students allowing to conjugate effectively academic success and access to employment

Aarhus University of Denmark

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Summary Analysis**

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The growing number of students with disabilities in tertiary education has only a limited impact on their employment rate that has lowered in many EU states over the last years. Paradoxically many enterprises seeking to hire people with disabilities face difficulties in finding people with a university degree corresponding to their recruitment level.

This is why it is of crucial importance to develop a pedagogical device for assisting efficiently people with disabilities in academic success and access to employment. The stakeholders involved in this project are therefore committed to developing such a tool together with the needed supports for its implementation starting from the innovative experience of the Danish University in Aarhus.

The Univers'Emploi project is aimed at creating a methodological guide and tools helping Universities to include employment prospective of people with disabilities as a main feature in their pedagogical organisation and to develop strategies allowing students to reconcile learning, employment and social life; in so doing Universities will also reinforce their anchorage in their socio-economic environment.

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Partnes in the projekt :

INS HEA Institute (France) in collaboration with Savoir et Competences Formation (France)
University of Aarhus (Denmark)
Trinity College Dublin (Ireland)
University College Cork (Ireland)
University of Rome "Foro Italico" (Italy).

1. PRESENTATION OF THE CONTEXT OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNIVERS' EMPLOI PROJECT

The work with facilitating of learning processes to promote employability has, in a Danish context, mostly focused on creating conditions that transcends the dichotomy between the Medical- and the Social Model. The purpose of the specific project activities was not just to compensate and adjust but also to empower and encourage the students' own ability to master their existence. In France, Ireland and Italy the focus was among other things in creating broader intersectional collaboration, promoting contact with other relevant organizations, or disseminating internships for the students. This was not our primary goal - our aim however was to create a participating co-operation, where the university counselor, professional Academic-mentors, and Company-mentor who works in companies and has similar disabilities as their associated student, are working together towards creating better conditions for facilitating development and exceeding towards participation in the labor market. Our effort was not explicitly directed towards enhancing of synergistic action among different institutions. Instead, our focus has been to facilitate learning processes, built on a series of educational psychological theories and methods, that encourage the students' own capacity to master their existence (focus on the subject formation in a subject scientific frame of reference), by promoting real inclusion (focus on the social context for learning and expanding participation opportunities), where the students modify their way they relates to themselves and their job-opportunities in a more agency oriented, proactive, nuanced and exploratory way (and where change is expected conceptualized in meta-cognitive/affective and maybe even on the ontological level).

The majority of the students involved in the project come from the department for Advice and Support that has a branch in the University of Southern Denmark (This department provide support for students with neurological and psychosocial difficulties). The rest of the students come from the head office in Aarhus University.

The first meeting between the University counselor and the student, has taken place right after the verbal agreement (we didn't use charter) of the student gave to participate in project. There have been three university Counselors working on the project. The main purpose of the counselling was the assessment, which consists in one or more clarifying conversations and aims to convert the learning differences into more identifiable study related, career related and learning related problems. The facilitating strategy which is related to the *Integrative model*, conceptualize change through a learning perspective integrated as personal development, and involves counselling based on Existential, Cognitive Behavioral and psychoanalytical foundation. (Read more: "*Univers' Emploi, Leonardo Draft model, Lifelong learning*", which depicts the academic framework and the four key concepts: *education, inclusion, learning and existence*).



The university counselor is also responsible for *supervision, evaluation* and *quality assurance*. The meeting between the professional Academic mentor/Company mentors and the student is organized as a result of the initial learning assessment done by University counselor.

In the Danish model we had two types of mentoring. Mentoring 1: works with students who are in transition between BA to MA- program. In this context, we have worked to promote the student prerequisite for making realistic and informed choices in relation to future studies. The student dreams and aspirations for future employment opportunities becomes the focal point for the student reflections. Moreover, some students needed help to establish contact with jobs where they could do practical training and internship. In this situation it has been more useful for the student to work with a Company-mentor, which possess more specific experience of the difficulties and opportunities that people with disabilities face in employment.

The facilitating strategies related to the Integrative model was *academic support, advisory, guidance, coaching*. The mentor was also encouraging the student to create a contact for the public sector and to enter an agency-position relates to *case work*, that may be of importance in relation to the student's requirement for receiving technical-, human- or financial arrangements and supports. We had seven Academic mentors associated with the project.

Mentoring 2: is about the transition from education to work. In this context we were working on CV elaboration and job applications, enhancement of relevant competences, encouragement to use current activities from the job center and career guidance center at the university, while always focusing on the learning perspectives. The facilitating strategy which was related to the Integrative model is *career coaching and guidance*. The total number of meetings between mentor and student was two to four , depending on the needs of the students. There have been nine Company-mentors involved in the project. Two mentors were associated with the career service at the university, and the seven others came from companies . All mentors have work experience that could benefit the student, as well as relevant life experience coping with disability in the labor market.

After the first meeting between the mentor and the student, we conducted a midterm feedback. The purpose was to assess whether the student felt comfortable with the mentor, and whether the mentor felt that she possessed the right knowledge and skills to facilitate the necessary learning that was essential for the students employability.

Analysis of the experimentation

The strategies used in research:

- Focus group interview of students and mentors
- Individual semi structured interviews with students, mentors and university counselors
- Analysis of Template for recording process-intervention focusing on transition into employment
- Analysis of records from the meetings between the university counselor and the students
- Reports on balance of competence
- Elaboration of CV

Methodology

Due to some dropout from the project¹, we have chosen not to make generalizable quantitative study and instead to focus on qualitative phenomenological approach and producing nuanced knowledge that can help us learn about the complexity and diversity of the student's life situation. The analysis was made by using a 'meaning condensation' approach, where data is distributed in certain categories that seem to constitute the core topics that have the greatest relevance for understanding the learning process of students and exceeding of the students life situation, toward employability. The 'learning and exceeding' is conceptualized through an epistemological (social) constructivist and existentialistic framework of understanding. Though this framework change is understood as both the accumulation of competencies and skills, and simultaneously as genuine transformation of the students attitude towards his/her own existence i.e., how the student come into agency-position in relation to the challenges experienced during the transition to employability and life in general.

The following text is not an analysis of the empirical material, but only a preliminary draft summary of analytical results. A more detailed description of the project's theoretical foundation and frame of reference can be found in the project's web site.

The terminology in this text can sometimes be characterized by quantitative discourse. The reason for this is our effort to deliver in a few words a description that provides an overview of general typical situations. For example a description of the student's motivation as "high" is not an expression of quantitative measurement, but qualitative findings reflect the

¹ Reasons for dropout are:1) replacement of project manager have influenced the students' motivation to participate. 2) It was not possible to complete the project before the examination-period, and the students did not have the time and energy to engage in the project, while preparing to exams.

students' constitution of meaning - a process regarding a number of relevant themes concerning their struggle to create new understanding and consistency in their modified orientation towards their future.

2. COMMITMENT AND PERCEPTION OF THE PROJECT

2.1: Perception of the Students:

The students who participated in the project had demonstrated high commitment to the project's inception. For most students was the motivation for participation related to their worries and negative perceptions of their conditions and opportunities to realize their career dreams, in times where the hard competition and high unemployment, positions people with disabilities in an utterly difficult and vulnerable situation.

Expectations

The students had very low expectations at the beginning in relation to their specific potential of being integrated into the labor market and realize their career dreams. But these students were still quite open to the possibility that the project could help them, and that the various forms of support and various initiatives could give them a head start at the labor market.

More over many of them hoped that the project will mediate contact to jobs and professional network, and were slightly disappointed, when they have found out that this was not the project's objectives.

The student's expectations were in continuing modification and in accordance with their own preconceptions about what is possible for them to achieve.

Dissemination of the project

The students have been contacted by the Department for Advice and Support at the Aarhus University.

Perceptions on the project

The students have experienced the information concerning the project as incomplete, and not as adequately proactive.

Commitment along the project

There has been a great enthusiasm in the beginning, which has followed a declining and decreasing commitment, after the students have met their mentor and have discovered that the project objectives is not creating internships. After this short phase of disappointment, followed by expectation reconciliation, all the students has enhanced more motivation with a more stable commitment, gradually as the students and mentors have created a more coherent expectation agreement.

2.2: Perception of the University Counselor:

The process of initial mobilization of actors

There have been 3 university Counselors working on the project, employed at the Department for Advice and Support at the Aarhus University.

Initial commitment

High.

Expectations

The Counselors had high expectations because they have a long training program and has approx. 2-5 years experience with counseling of students with different kind of difficulties.

Dissemination of the project

The Counselors have been informed about the project through the Danish project coordinator in a staff meeting and gave their consent to participate

Perceptions on the project

The Counselors experienced that they have received sufficient information about the project goals and process.

Commitment along the project

The Counselors involvement has been highly stable throughout the process

2.3. Perception of the Mentor

The process of initial mobilization of actors

The mentors have been recruited by a mentor-coordinator who had contacted a number of networking forum for voluntary and has announced information about the project in their website. Moreover, the Counsellors have used their own network to find the most suitable mentors. The match between the student and the mentor has been done mostly by the standards of similar disability-forms.

Initial commitment

The mentors justify their motivation, as a vocation, a desire to support others through the challenges and handle difficult life situations, which in many ways similar to the challenges the mentors have been through, and therefore knows the importance of guidance and support from others.

Expectations

Mentors have expected to meet other students and mentors, and engage in a practice field that both helps others but also opens up the opportunity for learning and network expansion for the mentors.

Dissemination of the project

The mentors, have been informed of an initial meeting for all mentors, a workshop for mentors and students for information on state and municipal support. Moreover, the mentors had supervision from project coordinator.

Perceptions on the project

All mentors consider the project as entirely relevance, mainly because they have experienced at first hand the lack of such an effort, and secondly because they believed that it is useful to focus on learning and development and not just on compensation. Some have experienced the lack of a more detailed proactive communication about what was expected of them. According to them, the project has not defined specific measurable objectives, which mentors could evaluate their efforts in relation to. They have experienced it as insufficient, that the only knowledge they can contribute is from their own experience. In this context it was interesting that the students have experienced the mentors' *life experiences*, as the most beneficial aspect in their learning process.

Commitment along the project

As emphasized previously, the mentors justify their motivation, as a vocation, a desire to support others through the challenges and handle difficult life situations. This has contributed to a stable motivation throughout the project, despite the challenges.

Some of the mentors have encountered problems along the way, needed supervision, and needed to have a forum they could share experiences, and support each other. Some of them have therefore emphasized the need to create a context for learning and knowledge-sharing for mentors. Moreover the absence of Long-term vision was problematic for the mentors concerning a better commitment to the process.

3. COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIP/JOINT-VENTURE

3.1 Perception of the Students

Characteristic of partnership between university and companies

The students have experienced the project as utterly relevant since there is no other entity within the university context, which is directed towards the creation of the transition between university studies and employment for students with disabilities.

Cooperation relations between the stakeholders (*Students' expectations concerning stakeholders*)

The students have expected to use their mentor as a role model and inspiration to achieve new possibilities for action. They hoped that the mentor will help them to create network, give them information about government funding opportunities and help them to find internships.

Knowing the roles of stakeholders in the project: who is doing what?

Despite a brief period where students had difficulty in defining the role of mentors, they had managed to create more coherent expectation reconciliation. The students have not experienced difficulty in knowing the roles of other stakeholders - project coordinator, university counselor and mentor coordinator.

The students were overall satisfied with the quality of relationships with the stakeholders, but some have not felt sufficiently involved in all aspects of the project.

3.2 Perception of the University Counselor

Characteristic of partnership between university and companies

The University Counselors did not have a direct contact with the company, even though the student has been in the internship.

Cooperation relations between the stakeholders

The Counselors have experienced the cooperation as good. Some of them have expressed the wish for a more proactive planning and clearer formulation of expectations.

3.3 Perception of the Mentor:

Characteristic of partnership between university and companies

The mentors did not have a direct contact with the company, even though the students has been in the internship.

Cooperation relations between the stakeholders

The mentors have experienced the cooperation as good. Some of them have expressed the wish for a more proactive planning and clearer formulation of expectations. Some mentors were not sufficiently informed about the project purpose and content, and felt that they lacked both the knowledge and training to perform their task optimally.

4. GUIDANCE METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the counselling was the assessment, which consists in one or more clarifying conversations and aims to convert the learning differences into more identifiable study related, career related and learning related problems. Our approach to clarification the dimensions of assessment is phenomenological inspired (we are not doing a screening of all life aspects, but investigating step by step and trying to be sensitive to the level of openness and authenticity the students ready to share).

4.1 Perception of the Students:

Implementation of the guidance methodology

The students experienced that the learning assessment has embraced both their difficulties and resources. Furthermore, the students experienced that they have acquired a deeper and more meaningful conceptualization of the complexity of their life situation in relation to employability, and have benefited from considering their disability in learning perspective.

Some students felt the need to spend more time just participate from a peripheral position before they decided to engage completely in the process

Appropriation of tools

The students had no specific comments to the tools, as they consider this as the mentor's instrument. Some of them have emphasized the mentors 'life experiences' as a significant factor, which has facilitated their learning.

Appropriation of the guidance methodology

The students have experienced the method as relevant. The initial learning assessment with university counselor was appropriate to create more nuanced understanding of their life situation and define their learning goals. The subsequent meetings with the mentor has encouraged their prerequisite for creating realistic expectations, and put in place appropriate actions. In addition they have experienced that the mentor's attitude has been flexible and responsive to their changing engagement.

Quality of relation within the mentor/student pair

The students have experienced a trust in their relation to the mentor - according to them the voluntary aspect was very important, because it create more equal positions (which do not based on 'disability support' as a reference framework, but on expansion of action opportunities).

Adaptions done in order to facilitate the participation of the students to the project

The students have experienced their mentors as being flexible and attentive to their changing requirements.

Some students had emphasized the view that the project efforts should attempt to relate to the student's study-related life at the university, and match the expectation for student involvement in employability activities in better correlation with the academic demands that the student must fulfill. A Part of the drop-out from the project was due to this lack of correlation.

4.2 Perception of the University Counsellors:

Implementation of the guidance methodology

Counselors have used a phenomenological approach to the assessment of student learning needs. They have experienced the method as utterly useful, as they have helped to develop this method over several years.

Appropriation of tools

The nine dimensions of assessment were taken into consideration in the case of each student.

We did not need to implement the method, because the University Counsellors use the method as their professional 'habitus'. They consider therefore the tool to be utterly useful because it makes it possible to conceptualize the student's difficulties in a more nuanced holistic way, and thereby promote the student's development within the transition to employment process.

Appropriation of the guidance methodology

Counselors have experienced the guidance methodology as beneficial framework.

Quality of relation within the mentor/student pair

University Counsellors reported that the relationship between mentor and student have been predominantly good. There have been some situations where the relationship has been challenging at first, and where there have been necessary to have a longer period of time to establish trusting relationships.

Adaptions done in order to facilitate the participation of the students to the project

University Counsellors have tried to be flexible and attentive to the students' evolving needs. Adaptions are done in situations where students have canceled participation and there has been a need to find other times for meetings.

4.3 Perception of the mentors:

Implementation of the guidance methodology

The mentors experienced the method as quite relevant and as a tool that provides many opportunities to facilitate development and learning. Some of them demanded more information and training in counseling and coaching, since they in some situations experienced that they do not possess the necessary skills to facilitate the necessary learning for students.

Appropriation of tools

The mentors have regarded 'themselves' and their life experiences as the main tool in the work. Apart of their mission was to provide an inspiring role-model. Some mentors experienced lack of a more specific knowledge about labor market conditions as well as tools to use their experience and competence in a more systematic work with the students. Some mentors have informed that the interaction with the student was in some situations utterly demanding, and that they have lacked tools to tackle these situations.

Appropriation of the guidance methodology

For many students represent the topic of dealing with disability disclosure issues in the transition to employment project, a difficult dilemma. Through collaboration with the mentor, participation in group discussions and workshop given by a manager in public employment department, students have experienced significant learning in this area. The mentors have also supported the students in exploring the opportunities to receive public support from public agencies take advantage of the university's career counseling center, prepare a resume/CV, to apply to potential companies, create a realistic- but ambitious future career plan, and maintain participation in a challenging internship.

Quality of relation within the mentor/student pair

Since the project is composed of 2-4 meetings between mentor and student, there were not many opportunities for constitution of voluminous relations. Moreover, the importance of that the mentor and the student can quickly find reassurance in relationships, requires certain homogeneity in the match between them. All mentors have experienced relationships as good, despite the fact that there have been a number of challenges in the interaction between students and mentors

Adaptions done in order to facilitate the participation of the students to the project

Especially when dealing with students with mental disabilities, it is important that the facilitating-efforts flexible enough and can continually reconcile the students changing needs and ability to engage in the process. Adaptions were done in situations where students have canceled and there has been a need to find other times for meetings.

5. THE EFFECTS OF THE PROJECT

5.1 For the Student:

Effect at the personal level (towards oneself)

Most of the students experienced increasing faith in their ability to achieve their goals, and increasing view of their personal resources.

All the interviewed students have experienced the learning assessment done by the university counselors as an effective tool for assessment of their difficulties and resources, a way to gain clarity and overview of their life situation in relation to employability, which until then, seems confusing, diffuse and threatening. For some students, was that an essential insightful moment where they could begin to relate more consciously and constructively to their future, and mobilize more resources to expand their possibilities for action, rather than on vicious circles of escapes and concerns. The employment expectation and motivation for engagement in the project has increased through the learning assessment.

Since employability as a key theme, transforms the meaning of learning context that university enabling, most of the students experienced the project as a learning context which had significant outcome in their everyday lives, as they gradually begin to relate to their study as a bridge, a transition phase and not merely as a context that fragmented from the rest of their lives and leads toward diffused future.

According to the students, mentors and counselors, it has been possible to facilitate learning so that students have taken a more proactive, actor position, and a more agency- oriented approach.

Effect at the personal level (concerning social aspects)

Students, who have undergone internship and training at a workplace, experienced the contact with University Counselor and mentor as a significant condition that helped them to cope with- and learn from the many difficulties they have encountered at work place. Regarding this, it was mostly the learning of social skills that have created more possibilities for action for these students, because it was the social interaction that has undone the greatest challenge for them in maintaining participation in previous internship.

Students stress the need to create engagement among other students to attend information meetings and networking-forums, where students can meet and share knowledge (some students are experiencing great difficulties in participating in social events, but recognize that this has great significance in relation to employability).

Professional level/dimensions

The students begin to relate to their university life as a context which is work-related, and that helps them to organize and select study program and curricula in a way which is more realistic and consistent with their careers-dreams, and is more consistent with their disabilities and resources.

Acquisition of knowledge about the possibilities and rights for people with disabilities in employment, and the various forms of support that is possible to apply through the public employment center.

On the topic of dealing with disability disclosure issues in the transition to employment project, students have experienced significant learning in this area, where many new options have been identified.

Most respondents were introduced to a variety of Job-hunting technics and information about disability compensation, they have benefited greatly from

Acquired/gained/reinforced aptitudes

The students generated more knowledge about how to use a professional network. Some were experiencing more courage to engage in new challenges, since they were more conscious about their own capabilities and vulnerabilities. Moreover the image of 'perfect employee', as an competitive and error free human being (that many students who are in marginalized life situation comparing themselves with), was deconstructed and the students have begun to operate with a more nuanced and ambiguous image of 'good employee', where careers are seen as a project that can be performed also by people with some disabilities.

For the University Counsellors:

Effect at the personal level (towards oneself)

The University Counsellors experienced the work with the students as being meaningful. Focus on transition to the labor market has helped them to be much more concrete in their counsel distribution work, since the goal of facilitation was becoming more evident, demarcated and well defined.

Effect at the personal level (concerning social aspects)

The project has enabled them to work with company mentors, which has been a learning experience for them and gave many ideas about how the work with company mentors could integrates with university counselling in a more coherent way.

Professional level/dimensions

Counsellors have acquired some relevant experience, which used to practice their counseling approach.

Acquired/gained/reinforced aptitudes

Acquired knowledge about public funding opportunities for students with disabilities.

5.2 For the Mentors:

Effect at the personal level (towards oneself)

The mentors have experienced the process as a challenging but meaningful. In the beginning, they have experienced a brief period of uncertainty, lack of knowledge and skills to perform their task. This can be seen as a general phase in all learning and not directly as inconsistencies of project design, stakeholder cooperation, and amount of supervision.

Effect at the personal level (concerning social aspects)

There has not been identified a specific effect concerning social aspects

Professional level/dimensions

Mentors have expressed a need for a better context for learning and knowledge sharing. They have experienced a lack of contact with other mentors as they have lacked a better support and information.

Acquired/gained/reinforced aptitudes

Acquired knowledge about public funding opportunities for students with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

6.1 Added benefits of the program and recommendations

All the interviewed students have experienced the learning assessment done by the university counselors as an effective tool for assessment of their difficulties and resources, a way to gain clarity and overview of their life situation in relation to employability, which until then, seems confusing, diffuse and threatening. For some students, was that an essential insightful moment where they could begin to relate more consciously and constructively to their future, and mobilize more resources to expand their possibilities for action, rather than on vicious circles of escapes and concerns. The employment expectation and motivation for engagement in the project has increased through the learning assessment.

Since employability as a key theme, transforms the meaning of learning context that university enabling, most of the students experienced the project as a learning context which had significant outcome in their everyday lives, as they gradually begin to relate to their study as a bridge, a transition phase and not merely as a context that fragmented from the rest of their lives and leads toward diffused future. The students begin to relate to their university life as a context which is work-related, and that helps them to organize and select study program and curricula in a way which is more realistic and consistent with their careers-dreams, and is more consistent with their disabilities and resources.

Students, who have undergone internship and training at a workplace, experienced the contact with University Counselor as a significant condition that helped them to cope with-

and learn from the many difficulties they have encountered at work place. In some cases, the contact with the mentor had a preventive effect against internship dropout.

For many students represent the topic of dealing with disability disclosure issues in the transition to employment project, a difficult dilemma. Through collaboration with the mentor, and participation in group discussions, students have experienced significant learning in this area, where many new options have been identified.

6.2 Challenges experienced during participation in the project

Facilitation efforts should attempt to relate to the student's study-related life at university, and match the expectation for student involvement in employability activities in better correlation with the academic demands that the student must fulfill. A Part of the drop-out from the project was due to this lack of correlation.

The need to create a context for learning and knowledge-sharing for the Company mentors. Supervision of mentors has great significance, when it comes to students located in difficult life circumstances requires considerable sensitivity of mentor's side.

The need to create engagement among students to attend information meetings and networking-forums, where students can meet and share knowledge (some students are experiencing great difficulties in participating in social events, but recognize that this has great significance in relation to employability).

Especially when dealing with students with mental disabilities, it is important that the facilitating-efforts flexible enough and can continually reconcile the students changing needs and ability to engage in the process.

Coordination of cooperation between Company mentors and students can be made more effective with higher levels of proactivity in planning, formulation of measurable objectives and expectations for performance, i.e. form and content of mentoring context.

Stakeholders need more nuanced knowledge about the respective roles and task division between them. Some mentors were not sufficiently informed about the project purpose and content, and felt that they lacked both the knowledge and training to perform their task optimally.

Mentors must be aware of the limitations of this form of short-term intervention in relation to the creation of trust and alliance with the students. Especially when it comes to students with mental disabilities that manifest themselves as relational difficulties, will the short-term intervention of 2-4 sessions are not enough to create confidence, which affects the efficacy of counseling.