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Slovakia

A second chance for second-chance schools

Although Slovakia is among the best-performing countries in the EU in terms of ISCED 3 attainment and early school leaving rates (91.3 % among 20-24 year olds and 7.1 %, respectively - Eurostat 2004), low educational attainment continues to be a problem, and in fact is becoming worse. Slovakian data do not adequately reflect the educational achievements of socially marginalised groups, such as poor families living in Roma settlements - an estimated 140 000 people. Thus, we are seeing an army of low- educated people whose high rates of long-term unemployment lead to even lower employability. Unlike the education sector, employment services recognise the problem and have urged action to be taken. The approximately 15 000 job seekers who lack an education represent 4 % of job seekers nationwide but over 10 % in the underdeveloped districts of Eastern and South Slovakia (and 16 % in the district of Spišská Nová Ves).

In September 2004 the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family launched a project, with the assistance of the Ministry of Education, aimed at

- providing ISCED 2 level education for 139 low-educated people from East and South of Slovakia;
- testing an experimental curriculum developed by the National Institute for Education;
- instigating cooperation between district labour offices, schools and job seekers.

The results of the project provide food for thought in considering the next step forward. In statistical terms, the efficiency of the project is questionable. The cost of each programme is four times higher than regular ISCED 2 education programmes. In addition, a high dropout rate was recorded despite the motivating tools offered (e.g. reimbursement of travel costs, provision of meals, contributions to childcare, a financial contribution usually offered to jobseekers involved in municipal public works). One-third of the participants dropped out of the programme; of these, 70 % simply lost interest, while 17 % left because of other obstacles (prison or maternity leave).

A follow-up report has recommended continuing the project with 240 participants starting in the 2005/2006 school year, but also suggests imposing a lower age limit (up to 30 years), limiting the number of pupils per class to 15, and introducing exploratory screening in order to better reflect the different needs of participants.

Another problem is the employability of people acquiring this new certificate. In the regions mentioned above, with low job creation for low-skilled workers, the certificate is a pathway to continuing education rather than a ticket to employment. Thus, the monitoring body recognises that the involvement of VET schools is inevitable. The guidance services of labour offices must therefore concentrate not just on those willing to complete basic education, but on people who wish to acquire a qualification - for the sake of efficiency, this should be a qualification that is in demand by regional employers.

Slovak education authorities should reflect on this experience in the light of the following challenges:

- The provision, already introduced, of preparatory grades for socially deprived pupils, and the employment of Roma assistants to mediate between non-Roma teachers and Roma pupils and parents, should be urgently expanded and the introduction of bilingual Roma/Slovak and Roma/Hungarian elementary schools should be reinforced;
- Learning by doing should be strengthened at the expense of general education, as it is precisely the academic approach of traditional education that has caused most of these people to drop out of mainstream education in the first place;
- ISCED 2B programmes, which have not yet been officially recognised, should be further elaborated for those reluctant to join the mainstream, academically-oriented programmes of basic schools, and more attention should be paid to achieving functional literacy;
- Recognising prior and experiential learning should help pupils acquire certificates of apprenticeship. To this end, however, methodological tools should be urgently developed, in cooperation with small craft industries and guilds representatives.

For further information:

**Juraj Vantuch, Slovak National Observatory of VET,
Černyševského 27, SK - 851 01 Bratislava.
Tel./fax (421-2) 62410678,
sno@netax.sk
<http://www.siov.sk>**

*Source: Eneke Hanzelová,
Centre for Work and Family Studies
hanzelova@sspr.gov.sk*