

Media report describing conclusions from research entitled "Disabled persons in Podlaskie province – education, job market"

Disability – barrier or asset?

The situation of the disabled in the Podlaskie province is very difficult. First of all, there are no jobs adjusted to their needs and possibilities. Additionally, changes in regulations related to obtaining external funding by employers from State Fund of Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PFRON) make their situation even worse.

In the period June – November 2011, Provincial Employment Agency in Białystok conducted a research project entitled "Disabled persons in Podlaskie province – education, job market" within the project: Podlaskie Social Policy Observatory co-financed from the funds of the European Union within the European Social Fund. The research was conducted by the Institute of Research and Studies, Olsztyn Group, School of Business by order of the Provincial Employment Agency.

The primary purpose of the research was to identify the situation of the disabled in the aspect of education and job market in the Podlaskie province and creating recommendations for changes in activities/solutions applied by institutions and organizations involved in helping disabled persons.

In the course of the research, a number of research techniques were used, both quantitative and qualitative, e.g. partially structured interviews among the unemployed and those looking for employment, computer-assisted telephone interviews among employers and the working disabled, a questionnaire sent to the disabled receiving education, deepened individual interviews, focused group interviews and a panel of experts.

Unemployment is one of the major problems of contemporary societies. At the turn of the 1980s, unemployment significantly increased touching mainly countries undergoing transformations of their political system (towards a free market economy), including Poland. Analyzing the situation on the job market from the perspective of the last twenty years, it turns out that the group that is most affected by unemployment are disabled persons, also young, a vast majority of whom remains outside the job market. The professional activity of this group of employees is the lowest and the problems of professional adaptation are the most difficult to overcome.

The Podlaskie province is a poorly urbanized region, of the lowest population density in the country. This is a typically agricultural region, with a low degree of urbanization and poorly developed living and communication infrastructure. No raw materials, a poorly developed industry and small location-related competitiveness do not encourage investment inflow. These and other conditions cause the limitation of job supply and difficulties in development of the unemployed, including the disabled.

One of the key problems in the analysis of the disability phenomena is that there is no one single definition of "disability". In addition, within the legal regulations presently valid in Poland, two kinds of disability certification are used – for pension purposes (Social Security Office (ZUS)) and for purposes beyond pension (Teams for Certifying Disability). Owing to the fact that e.g. a considerable degree of disability referring to absolute inability to work and independent existence, in the opinion

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of employers automatically discriminates this person as a potential employee, provisions in ZUS's rulings for pension purposes should be changed. One certification for pension purposes and purposes beyond pension should be used.

In making the evaluation and diagnosing the population of the disabled, lack of up-to-date statistical information is an important issue. The only reliable source are National Censuses (NSPs) carried out by the National Statistical Office (GUS) approximately every 10 years. This period is, however, definitely too long. Since the Research Program for Public Statistics is consulted by a wide group of recipients, including local governments on the level of communes, districts and provinces on an annual basis, introduction should be postulated of periodical research devoted to the issues of the disabled e.g. every 5 years.

One of the fundamental elements and, at the same time, one of the barriers for professional development of the disabled is also hindered access to full rehabilitation, particularly in rural areas. Change in perception of the world by the disabled and their problems in professional and civil development is also important. As a result, it is necessary to undertake actions aiming at allowing the disabled to have wide access to rehabilitative services including, among others, a full diagnosis, nursing care, professional and psychological consulting.

The problems of the disabled both on the job market and in the education system are often related to architectural barriers. Despite a number of positive changes in this respect, there is still much to do. A prerequisite for the improvement in the situation in this respect is incorporating the disabled persons themselves, of various degrees and types of disability, into works on designing transportation and communication solutions within cities and communes and public buildings.

A high unemployment rate in the Podlaskie province, underdevelopment in economic development in relation to the country and thereby no job offers, especially adapted to the needs and requirements of the disabled, constitute the main causes of low professional activity of the disabled. In spite of the fact that the employers have a high opinion about the disabled employees' commitment and notice the benefits resulting from hiring this type of people, economic considerations often limit their activities in this respect. What is worse, the research shows that the situation of the disabled on the job market in the Podlaskie province in the near future will not significantly improve. Most companies both from the protected and the open job market do not intend to employ the disabled persons within the next 2 years. One solution seems to be the promotion of good practices developed within the EQUAL program with regard to social economics. Additionally, all groups of respondents in the Podlaskie province - employers, employees, the unemployed and persons receiving education, practically do not have any knowledge and experience within flexible forms of employment and their benefits, both for the employers and employees. An information-promotional campaign conducted on a large scale could bring benefits, particularly for the disabled, resulting in increasing the level of professional development of this social group.

The professional inactivity phenomenon among the disabled constitutes an important element in the analysis of the situation of this group of people on the local job market. The fact that this phenomenon is mainly associated with the fact that the disabled persons are very often dependant on their families. This, in turn, negatively affects their mobilization to actively search for employment and reduces the activity on the job market. Furthermore, most of the disabled perceive their material situation as moderately good, which, in turn, does not mobilize them to change their professional situation and hence affects their professional inactivity.

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The research shows that, in the opinion of the respondents, there are no educational fields which will ensure employment for them, and this results mainly from the lack of knowledge about the job market needs, especially in the perspective of a few years. Thus, it is necessary to conduct periodical deepened research by employment agencies with regard to shortage and surplus professions and forecasting changes on the local job market. Also the problem of the lack of knowledge among the disabled about the possibilities of obtaining any support from public institutions and non-governmental organizations with regard to professional and social development has been emphasized particularly in the course of qualitative research. A proposal to solve this problem is to create an information point for the disabled within each commune of the Podlaskie province and wide promotion (with the use of e.g. village administrators and priests) of this form of aid.

The education system in the Podlaskie province is relatively well-prepared to create appropriate scientific conditions. A separate issue is the education profile and particularly the problem of adjusting the educational fields to the needs of the job market. In this case, what is necessary is close cooperation between District Employment Agencies and entrepreneurs operating within a given district with regard to forecasting needs for staff with specific qualifications in the perspective of a few years and information flow and specific actions of District Offices as founding bodies of vocational schools towards adjusting the education offer to the needs of the job market. However, a small interest of the disabled in supplementary education is an alarming phenomenon. The lack of activity in the discussed area is undoubtedly affected by the reported lack of funds, architectonic and psychosocial barriers also turn out to be a problem. Thus, it is important to promote the idea of life-long education among the disabled and encourage them to increase education and professional competence by a system of scholarships.

From the point of view of public institutions supporting the disabled persons, the greatest barriers with regard to undertaking activities for the disabled mainly result from the lack of funds for implementing activities and problems with their acquisition, frequent changes of legal regulations and incoherence of these regulations, low level of education of the disabled, as well as a small number of specialists prepared to work with the disabled persons. Cooperation between various public institutions with regard to supporting the disabled applies, to a large extent, to joint implementation of EU projects. In order to increase the effectiveness of activities conducted for the disabled, a number of changes should be introduced. The changes should mainly apply to: facilitating organizations and institutions acquiring funds for their activities, standardization of legal regulations, establishing in each district at least one centre which would support the disabled, promotion of good image of the disabled, supporting employers in hiring the disabled and employing more speech therapists and psychologists etc. in schools.

The barriers and limitations of employing the disabled in Podlaskie province are mostly the same as in the whole country. Thus, what is necessary is a wide information campaign which will effectively reach the entrepreneurs and will encourage them to hire this group of people. Previously conducted campaigns have yielded a relatively insignificant effect. Due to the fact that, from the point of view of employers, the greatest problem in employing the disabled is the need to incur additional costs related to the adaptation of work posts, it is important to inform about the

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Information on the research is available on the website of the Podlaskie Social Policy Observatory
<http://www.pops.up.podlasie.pl>