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INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT I: NEW-D RESEARCH STUDY

Executive Summary

prepared by

Sarah LAND, Meath Partnership, IE

Project title: *New Didactical Models for Initial VET Training of Young Disadvantaged Persons to Reduce Drop-Out*

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PROJECT

New Didactical Models for Initial VET Training of Young Disadvantaged Persons
to Reduce Drop-Out

Acronym: NEW-D

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DISCLAIMER

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2 Executive Summary

The New-D project aims to develop a new approach to education for disadvantaged youth. The project consortium has identified the deficiencies in the current training opportunities available for youth-at-risk and early school leavers, and the partners believe that by developing and implementing a new didactical approach to this type of education, not only will the quality of VET be improved across Europe, but there will be significant reductions in the numbers of young people dropping out of education, which will lead to improved employment opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged young people.

The recent Eurozone economic crisis has effected an entire generation of young people in Europe, who now need to be re-introduced and re-integrated into the labour market. The loss of European human capital through emigration to other continents, and the absence of professional skills and experience among this generation of young people, is having, and will continue to have, adverse effects on Europe's economy, unless a new approach is found to deliver targeted VET which addresses the needs of the European labour market. Data from the EuroFound website estimates that the “economic cost of not integrating NEETs [young people who are ‘Not involved in Education, Employment or Training’] is estimated at over €150 billion, or 1.2% of GDP, in 2011 figures. Some countries, such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia and Poland are paying 2% or more of their GDP” (EuroFound, 2015). Recent research also stresses the need for this type of new approach to targeted VET for this group. A report from EuroFound in 2012 highlights that as well as being economically detrimental to the progress of Europe and the European Union, the high level of education drop-out and unemployment among Europe's youth also has a social implications for the European community;

... being excluded both from the labour market and the education system heightens the individual's risk of social exclusion and their likelihood of engaging in asocial behaviour; this affects both the individual's well-being and their relationship with society.

(EuroFound, 2012)

Similarly, the Council of the European Union have also acknowledged that there is link between young people leaving formal education, and not pursuing employment opportunities and social disadvantage when they state that NEETs “can face negative social conditions, such as isolation, lack of autonomy, involvement in risky behaviour, and unstable mental and physical health, which expose them to higher risks of unemployment and social exclusion later in life” (Council of European Union, 2013). Further to behavioural and health difficulties, by withdrawing from

education pre-maturely and not being able to access employment opportunities, disadvantaged young people also risk disengagement with social, civic and political processes in Europe, and a withdrawal from the European community. The further these young people get from civic participation, the more difficult it will be to re-integrate them to the European community, education opportunities and the labour market. This research highlights the relevance and pertinence of the New-D project to the future sustainability of the European community and economy.

The recent economic downturn in Europe has led to a number of policy challenges both at national and European levels. With the unprecedented levels of youth unemployment and underemployment, and the increasing rate of education drop-outs in this age group, the New-D project has the potential to react to these current trends and to address the identified policy deficits. This will be achieved through community consultations with the target group, extensive empirical and desk-based research and adherence to quality assurance measures which will guarantee the relevance and applicability of resources developed. Project partners are committed to improving the economic and social outlooks for disadvantaged youth in Europe and have identified vocational education and training as the key medium through which to enact change within this target group.

Research conducted in 2012 estimates that 48% of young people leaving education had no previous experience of paid employment, which highlights the pivotal issue; young people are not being supported in their transition from formal education to employment (Sissons and Jones, 2012). Where formal education has failed, and young people drop-out and become unemployed, the problems facing the European formal education system are further exacerbated. As a bridge between formal education and the labour market, a new approach to VET can augment the retention of disadvantaged young people in these educational programmes, and subsequently improve their employment prospects in the European labour market. The value of VET in this context has also been highlighted in a recent publication by the Solidar Foundation. In this report, the Foundation asserts that finding new, sustainable approaches to VET for disadvantaged youth is seen as “an essential part of building learning societies where young people are empowered and their skills and competences are both shared and developed” (Reuter, 2014). The New-D project team aims to fully exploit the potential of VET in this regard, and to design and develop a new approach to vocational education and training for disadvantaged youth across Europe.

3 Introduction

The purpose of the New-D research study is two-fold. Firstly, project partners aimed to identify the real learning needs of the project's target group; disadvantaged young learners and NEETs, a young person who is currently 'Not involved in Education, Employment or Training'. Also as part of this aim, project partners sought to understand the background, and previous learning experiences of this target group so as to ascertain what didactical approaches have worked well in the past, and which models were unsuccessful. Secondly, partners undertook this research to understand, document and present the latest cutting edge knowledge regarding the learning process of young learners. To achieve these research aims, partners completed a two-stage research process, comprising desk-based research into best practices in second-chance education and VET for disadvantaged youth, and empirical research facilitated through online questionnaires, focus groups and face-to-face interviews.

With the scarcity of current stock, flow and empirical data available which determines the reasons why education drop-out occurs with this target group, this study essentially aimed to gather this data from each partner country and to gain insights into the experiences, opinions and sensitivities of young people towards formal education opportunities. When designing this research framework, Meath Partnership considered the specific aims of the research phase, and of the New-D project as a whole. In order to successfully develop a new didactical model for VET for youth-at-risk and early school leavers (ESL), it was important to complete the desk-based research under three distinct themes. These themes were then summarised into the following research questions, with partners sharing the research tasks under each question:

1. What is current research telling us about new didactical approaches for working with drop-outs & NEETs in the education, training and employment spheres; what examples of good practice exist and what recommendations can be made to assist in the formulation of the New-D guidelines?
2. What can learning and development psychology offer New-D in terms of approach and content; what recommendations can be made to support the didactical model New-D is formulating?
3. Neurophysiology – how do young people learn and how different is it from how adult's learn – what do we need to adjust from our "normal" approach, what factors do we need to consider in terms of the New-D model and what recommendations are to be made from this short analysis

The overall aim of this study was to explore young people's perspectives on learning styles and education systems in the partner countries of Austria, Germany, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia and Turkey. The study was carried out against the backdrop of changing trends in EU society, most notably, growing level of NEETs and rising unemployment rates of young Europeans.

Little is known in the EU context about young peoples' views of different teaching styles and, in particular, about the views of young people in respect of didactics used by formal teachers and VET trainers. In line with the ethos of the New-D project, the research involved consulting directly with young people at risk of school leaving or those already out of education, training and or employment. This report provides a summative overview of the research undertaken and the data collated in each partner country.

4 Research Methodology

Given the paucity of previous research into young peoples' perspectives on this issue, the study is essentially an exploratory investigation that seeks to uncover insights, experience and perceptions. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate method for the study, as they represent an effective research method by which various issues can be explored with young people within a peer group setting. Moreover, the use of focus groups with young people acknowledges young people as experts and important informants on their perspectives.

Partners decided that they would conduct preliminary research through the distribution and completion of an agreed questionnaire template. These questionnaires were to be completed by at least 20 young people, aged between 16 and 25 years in each partner country. The project team agreed that these questionnaires could be completed either online or face-to-face as part of the focus groups. Following this, partners decided that they would interview at least 5 young people from this research sample, to gather their feedback and opinions on the research findings, and to ask them further questions in relation to their preferred educational setting, methods of teaching and subjects and to make some recommendations to the New-D project team to inform the project development work.

Further topics discussed in the focus groups included young people's views on education and training, teacher's style and skills, reasons for school drop-out, supports currently available and creating an ideal learning environment.

Questionnaires were completed with 147 young people, aged between 16 and 25. The gender composition of the sample was 74 boys, 72 girls and 1 transgender. Further to this, 11 focus groups and personal interviews were conducted with 43 young people, aged 16-25. The

perspectives of young people were explored in order to identify core recommendations for the development of the New-D didactical framework.

Prior to this empirical research, partners undertook a phase of desk-based research. This research phase was broken into 3 core themes, mentioned above, in line with objectives of the project proposal. Partners worked in pairs and peer-review each other's work in relation to this first project Intellectual Output.

5 Recommendations & Conclusions

Young people who took part in the research process first agreed that a comfortable, bright and friendly environment is needed in order to make school and education more welcoming and appealing for young people. Their specific requirements included having alternative seating plans for classrooms, comfortable chairs, brightly painted walls, open windows for fresh air, adjustable air conditioning, heating and lighting, clean classrooms and with IT infrastructure including strong Wi-Fi connections, interactive smart boards and the use of tablets and smart devices.

In the focus group sessions, participants also highlighted the need to create supportive learning environments for students, where they are not intimidated or fearful of asking for help from teachers when they need it. It was stated small class sizes, or smaller working groups within the class structure, is also the most preferred method of teaching delivery. While respondents from Denmark preferred individual work, the majority of participants stated that they would prefer group work activities. They see group work as providing a stimulating working environment for young people to study in, as it allows the students to complete tasks in an interactive, fun and active way, with their friends. Concerns about group work were raised in Denmark however, where students listed low self-esteem, psychological issues and poor discipline and control by the teachers as the main reasons why they preferred to work alone. These young people emphasised that in a group work setting, one student always tries to dominate the work of the group, and this can be intimidating for other students who feel they cannot express their vision for the group's tasks. Poor management of group interaction by teachers was blamed for this, and students also recommended that if using group work techniques, an induction session should first be held, to teach students how to work as part of a group in a friendly, welcoming and respectful manner. This focus group also emphasised, however, that group work and project work are very enjoyable formats for learning, when the group dynamic is managed and is appropriate and inclusive. Focus group participants in Ireland also prioritised group work as their preferred style. These young people placed a high value on experiential and authentic learning, which adds instant practical value to their acquired theoretical knowledge. In this way, young people also prioritised activity in the

delivery of this type of training. They want to be active, learn in practical workshops or on field trips, and undertake work placements and apprenticeships which give them real-life professional experience before they leave school.

With regard to teaching methodologies, students were also very enthusiastic about ICT-based learning. The level of expected IT infrastructure varies widely across the consortium, where students in Ireland want computers and Wi-Fi in every classroom, which is currently not a staple in Ireland, and students in Turkey, Denmark and Germany who want smart classrooms with interactive whiteboards as well as the use of smart devices by the teacher to work with students on an individual basis. Respondents from Austria emphasised the need for teachers to challenge their students intellectually by encouraging their critical thinking and communication skills by asking thoughtful and open-ended questions, and seeking to challenge previous conceptions the students may have held by asking them to elaborate on points they have raised. To address this learning need, it was recommended that group discussions and debates are the most effective teaching methodologies.

At this point, it is also worth mentioning the value which these young people placed on their teacher. Successful or failure in formal education, based on the outcomes of this study, can be largely dependent on the type of teacher you have. Respondents to questionnaires and focus group participants equally emphasised the role of the teacher as being crucial to obtaining a good education. All respondents agreed that a supportive, friendly, approachable, well-educated and resourceful teacher would make a big difference to young people at-risk of dropping out of formal education. If a teacher is well-educated, they have a passion for their subject which comes through in their teaching style; if they are resourceful, they can use a variety of teaching styles to communicate a message to their group of students, thus making the learning experience interesting and unique for the students; if a teacher is friendly, supportive and approachable, a student will feel that they can go to speak to that teacher if they are struggling with school work or personal problems. Students will not approach a teacher for help if they do not trust them, and so it is important for teachers to cultivate this trust with their students by showing them patience and respect. Young people who were interviewed felt that teachers should be interested in their students' lives and have their best interests at heart; they should prioritise the personal development of their students, as well as exam results and achieving the curriculum's learning outcomes. This point was highlighted in the Italian focus groups in particular, where young people expressed that teachers typically follow the school curriculum strictly, and do not show any interest in their students' development; and this can be very de-motivating for students. Focus group respondents highlighted the need for a change in this respect when they explained that they went to friends and family for education and employment advice because they could not approach their teachers with these queries. This point was particularly emphasised in Denmark and Ireland;

with Turkish respondents highlighting the need to train teachers to better help disadvantaged young people so that numbers of absenteeism and school drop-out falls.

The next issue raised in the focus group sessions pertained to the supports students would need in order to complete their school education. Focus group participants highlighted a range of supports in this category, and these ranged from a room where students can relax or do work in between classes to more pragmatic supports such as having a student liaison officer who will provide personal, as well as academic and professional, support to students. There was an emphasis, in the majority of focus groups, on the need to have expert advisors for students. Participants in the Irish focus group recommended that recruiters from specific industries present the skills, qualifications and experiences needed to obtain jobs in a given sector, leading to students placing a higher value on their potential qualifications, and seeing the benefit of staying in school to secure a better job in the future. Interviews conducted in Austria also highlighted additional supports such as having a 'role model' or a past student come to talk to the current group of students, recounting their story of how they completed their education and progressed to find employment. Austrian respondents also highlighted the need for more excursions and outdoor activities as potential supports for disadvantaged young people, acting as a motivating factor to staying in school. One suggestion from Turkey was also particularly interesting. Here focus group participants highlighted that students often fail in their first year of secondary education, because they find it difficult to adjust to the new school system and the step-up in academic level. Young people recommended that schools implement an induction year for incoming first year students to make the transition from primary education more seamless. These young people also highlighted the need to include parents in the education system, as students will rarely drop-out if their families are against the decision and are supportive of their education.

While these suggestions are many and varied, the recommendations which have a direct correlation to the development work of the New-D Didactical Model are summarised in the section below.

6 Implications for Didactical Models

As part of this research process, disadvantaged young people who had previously dropped out of education, or who were at risk of dropping out, were asked to comment on a range of topics all pertaining to why they were dropping out or had dropped out, what they didn't like about school, what would make them stay in school and what they would do differently if they had the opportunity to repeat their school education. The reason why these questions were put to this target group was to gather insight and feedback which would inform the New-D new didactic

model for providing initial VET to this target group, so that even though they have left formal education, they can still pursue a high quality vocational qualification. Project partners wanted to gain this insight to understand the reasons why people drop-out of school and to understand what supports will need to be made available in order to ensure school drop-out rates fall in the future. These recommendations have been summarised in the previous section, and below, they have been converted into practical tips for project partners to bear in mind when designing the New-D didactic model.

1. Training should be delivered to this target group in the form of practical workshops, excursions, field trips and group-work activity. Practical workshops should be designed to actively involve each students, and to allow for collaboration between learners;
2. If using group work techniques, endeavour to work with smaller groups to allow all participants to have their say and feel involved in the group. Before starting a group work session, ensure that there are some ground rules to ensure effective communication and respect by all group members – this can be a short induction into working as part of a group, or it can be something simpler such as writing a group contract;
3. Teachers should be adaptable, flexible, friendly and approachable in order to relate to the students' needs and to provide interesting and interactive learning experiences for them;
4. Where training in classroom-based, the classroom should be bright, airy and comfortable, and teacher's should feel comfortable setting the room up in an alternative layout, such as chairs in a circle, etc.;
5. Teachers should be comfortable using a range of modern technologies. New technologies are interesting to young people, and so to ensure their interest in the learning content computers, laptops, smart devices and interactive whiteboards should be used, where available, to deliver the training;
6. Labour market-oriented and industry-savvy career advice should be on offer to young people, to emphasise the importance of education in securing a good job later in life, and to make recommendations on future career paths following secondary education. In the New-D curriculum, this could take the form of a career road-map or career planning tool for some of the larger industries in the European economy;
7. All teachers and trainers involved in providing VET opportunities for this target group should show these young people respect and consideration; this point was made repeatedly in the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews, and it is of paramount importance that these young people are viewed and regarded as adults by their teachers,

and not spoken-down to, disrespected or their wishes ignored. This is pivotal to the success of the New-D didactical model.

7 Summary & Conclusion

All members of the New-D project team undertook a comprehensive research process, the outcomes of which will now act as the evidence-base for the development of the New-D innovative didactical model for providing initial VET opportunities for disadvantaged youth. Throughout the research process, partners have been committed to involving members of this youth target group at every stage. Following on from desk and field research activities, partners now have a clear understanding of the current models of second-chance education being utilised across Europe, and of the actual needs, apprehensions and aspirations of Europe's disadvantaged young school drop-outs. Current successful education models identified by project partners almost exclusively involve some form of practical, labour-market-oriented training. Where school drop-out rates in Europe are at their lowest, Member States operate a dual education system, where non-academic students can undertake apprenticeships to gain their school diplomas and qualifications. Where second-chance education or school completion initiatives are concerned, a similar practical approach needs to be adopted. Students need to see the value in education and for many the only way this is achievable is by understanding the link between completing education and obtaining a job with a competitive salary or in an industry which interests them. Therefore VET models for disadvantaged youth need to emphasise the correlation between education and employment.

It is also worth noting that where project partners interviewed students at risk of dropping out of school and disadvantaged youth who had already dropped out, these young people, though some were aged as young as 15, viewed themselves as adults. It is therefore important that teachers and tutors who offer education programmes to this target group similarly see and treat these young people as adults. It is important that students trust their teachers, so that they approach them when they need help or advice, and so it is important that teachers show their students respect and understanding, as a means of cultivating this trust. If teachers respect their students and show a genuine interest in their personal circumstances and professional ambitions, students will respond to this by showing interest in their education and mutual respect will grow between teacher and student as a result. By showing students respect, and being approachable and friendly to them, teachers are fostering positive attitudes among these young people towards school and education. A bespoke teacher induction programme, or in-service training programme, could be designed and implemented with secondary teachers to ensure they are adequately trained to offer this type of support to their students, thus ensuring a higher level of school completion.

Furthermore, this research highlighted that young people respond best to fun and interactive teaching methodologies; therefore teachers should be well-educated in didactic models which allow them to provide a variety of teaching styles to students. Our research has highlighted that the most stimulating teachers for students are the ones who have a genuine interest and enthusiasm for their subject, are friendly, open-minded and capable of delivering training in a dynamic way, where there may be group work, practical assignments, outdoor activities and excursions or individual working tasks on any given day.

Project partners will consider all of these research findings when making recommendations to second-chance education providers and when designing the project's innovative didactical model in initial VET for disadvantaged young people.