

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND TRAINING DURING A PANDEMIC AND BEYOND - THE NEW NORMAL (IDENTIFYING GOOD PRACTICES)

Kamelia Nusheva, & Boryana Yankova-Hadzhieva
ULSIT (Bulgaria)

Abstract

The emergence of Covid-19 and its spread has faced the whole world with something new and incomprehensible. The pandemic led to a complete reorganization of educational services - in terms of delivery, access and structuring. Part of the measures taken was the introduction of distance learning, an approach that presents a number of challenges for both learners and training providers. In this report, answers will be given to questions such as: What are the challenges of distance learning in an electronic environment and is an effective educational process possible? What are the European policies and practices to support and promote the development of skills that lead to the creation and employment of new jobs? Are there inclusive practices in vocational education? How does the Erasmus+ Program contribute to the inclusion of children and youth with special educational needs? How do training organizations put into practice methods for building inclusive learning environments to create STEM and professional competencies? The methodology used for the present study is an analysis of information resources on the researched topic, a study of good practices and case-studies. This paper was developed within the framework of a scientific research project "A model for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning" with contract № КП-06-H80/1, funded by National science fund of Bulgaria.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, pandemic, new normal, good practices, education and training.*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to education systems around the world. School closures and the need to move to online learning have highlighted the importance of inclusive education and training. This report explores good practices implemented during the pandemic and presents opportunities to improve inclusion in education in the new normal. The term "new normal" refers to the changes in social, economic and behavioral patterns that are established as the standard after a significant event or crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of education, the "new normal" includes the adaptation and transformation of teaching methods, approaches and infrastructure in response to the challenges imposed by the pandemic and expectations for the future needs of the education system.

To introduce the report, we would like to refer to the words of Reem Al Hout (2017), director of the American Academy in Beirut, a school that includes children with special educational needs. According to her, inclusive education means that all learners are welcome – regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background or educational need. They learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of educational life. "Inclusive education" is a process of recognizing, accepting and supporting the individuality of each individual and the diversity of their needs, by activating and including resources aimed at removing barriers to learning and teaching and creating opportunities for their development and participation in all aspects of community life.

According to Grima-Farrell, Bain, and MacDonald (2011): "Inclusive education involves the whole school and works to align components of special education with general education in a way that most effectively and efficiently provides quality education to all students." To make inclusive education a standard, society must share and support the key principles of this approach, which include a focus on the needs of learners, the learning environment and a vision for the future of learners after completing the educational stage.

2. Challenges to the education system during a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant problems and difficulties for education systems around the world. Among the main challenges faced by education are:

- Inequalities in access to education: The pandemic has exposed and reinforced existing inequalities in education systems, limiting access to quality education for students from socioeconomically vulnerable families. The lack of internet access and the necessary technological equipment has made distance learning out of reach for many.
- Technological challenges: The transition to online learning requires significant technological resources and infrastructure, which are not always available. This includes appropriate equipment for students and teachers, as well as stable and fast internet connections.
- Preparing teachers for distance learning: Many teachers were faced with the challenge of teaching online for the first time, which required rapid adaptation to new technologies and teaching methods. The need for training and support in this process is significant.
- Psychosocial impacts on students and teachers: Isolation, changes in the educational process and uncertainty have caused stress, anxiety and other psychosocial problems among both students and teachers. This necessitated the need for psychological support and coping strategies.
- Specific needs of learners from vulnerable groups: Learners with special educational needs, as well as those from marginalized communities, faced additional difficulties in accessing appropriate resources, adapted learning materials and individual support during distance learning.

Addressing these challenges requires integrated approaches, including the improvement of technological infrastructure, professional development of teachers, psychosocial support for students and teachers, as well as specialized strategies to support learners from vulnerable groups.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning in an electronic environment has emerged as a key element in the educational strategies of many countries. Despite the significant challenges it poses to teachers and students, adequate management and the use of appropriate tools can contribute to its effectiveness. This analysis examines the main problems and suggests potential solutions to overcome them.

Challenges: Technical difficulties: The main obstacle is the lack of a reliable Internet connection and the necessary technical equipment, which limits the possibilities of distance learning; Self-discipline and motivation: Learners may have difficulty maintaining high levels of motivation and self-discipline without traditional learning structure and supervision; Social isolation: Physical distance between participants in the educational process can lead to social isolation; Adaptation to new methodologies: Teachers face the challenge of adapting their teaching methods to the virtual environment; Assessment of achievement: Measuring academic achievement in a distance environment requires the development of new, fair and effective assessment methods.

Despite the challenges, distance learning provides opportunities for flexibility, access to a wide range of resources and a personalized approach to learning. With adequate involvement of all participants in the educational process, distance learning can become an effective and affordable method of education.

Solutions for this can be sought in several directions: Improving the technical infrastructure: It is essential to make investments in Internet access and the provision of the necessary technical devices for students and teachers; Structuring and planning: It is important to develop clear study plans and schedules to promote engagement and efficiency; Interactive platforms: The use of platforms for interactive communication and collaboration is key to sustaining the learning process; Training for teachers: Providing training and resources for teachers to effectively use digital tools is essential; Innovative assessment methods: There is a need to develop assessment methods adapted to the distance environment, such as projects and portfolios.

Our educational system needs to change to meet the individual needs of all learners, whether they are with or without special educational needs. The modern educational system entering the Bulgarian schools requires a change in the traditional educational environment, change towards dialogue, meaningful communication between the participants, cooperation and general solving of the tasks in the educational process. Through the new educational models, the challenges of inclusion can be met, overcoming inequalities and achieving social justice. Thus everyone will be enabled to gain the basics to develop their abilities, gain knowledge and acquire skills to expand their choice and realization. It is education based on the understanding that all people are different and that each child has the right to access quality education in the general school system (Eftimova, 2018)

3. Education system response to the pandemic

In response to the global health crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational systems, including those in Bulgaria, were forced to take adaptive measures and strategies to address the emerging challenges. Educational institutions have quickly adapted to distance and hybrid learning models that combine online and face-to-face sessions. This allowed the continuation of the educational process in the conditions of social isolation and quarantine measures. Various technological innovations have been introduced to support distance learning, including video conferencing platforms, educational software and

applications that facilitate interaction between learners and teachers and support the learning process. Educational institutions have developed and implemented various strategies to ensure the continuity of the learning process by adapting curricula, methodologies and assessment to distance learning conditions. Steps have been taken to support teachers in their adaptation to online teaching, including training in digital skills and distance learning methods. Psychological support programs and wellness initiatives for students and teachers have also been introduced to deal with the psychosocial effects of the pandemic.

The adaptation of educational systems to the conditions of a pandemic demonstrates their ability to quickly orient to innovative approaches and technological solutions. Despite the challenges, quick response and adaptive strategies allowed the educational process to continue, highlighting the importance of flexibility, innovation and support.

Within **vocational education and training (VET)**, the implementation of inclusive practices is essential to ensure equal access and learning opportunities for all learners, including persons with disabilities, marginalized groups and representatives of vulnerable communities. These practices are aimed at creating an educational environment that supports diversity and ensures the development of each individual's potential (Regulation on inclusive education in Bulgaria, 2017). This scientific review presents several key aspects of inclusive practices in VET: The development of individualized curricula allows educators to tailor material and teaching methods to the specific needs and abilities of each learner. This includes adapting teaching resources and teaching techniques to support maximum student participation and success; Accessible learning environments: Creating physical and digital learning spaces that are accessible to students with various physical and sensory disabilities is a key aspect of inclusion. This includes equipping buildings with ramps, lifts, appropriate lighting and sound recordings, as well as the development of learning materials that are available in a variety of formats; Learning support: Providing additional resources and support, such as specialist help (speech therapists, psychologists), mentoring and study skills training, helps learners with special educational needs to participate fully in the educational process; Flexible assessment methods: The use of flexible and adaptive assessment methods ensures that learners can demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that take account of their individual abilities and preferences; Teacher professional development: The training and professional development of teachers and trainers in inclusive education is critical to the success of these practices. This includes training in diverse learning strategies, managing diversity in the classroom and adapting the learning process to the needs of all learners; Community collaboration: Engaging families, local communities and employers in the education process can support inclusion by providing additional resources, internships and real-world work opportunities that prepare students for the labor market.

Inclusive practices in vocational education not only contribute to social inclusion and equality, but also improve the quality of education for all learners, better preparing them for the dynamic and diverse global labor market. Educational organizations apply a variety of methods and strategies to create inclusive educational environments, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and vocational education. The main goal is to ensure equal access and opportunities for all students, including those from marginalized groups or with special educational needs, to develop their skills and competencies. In this context, several key practical approaches are used:

- *Differentiated Instruction*: Educational professionals develop and implement curriculum and strategies that are tailored to students' individual needs, interests, and learning levels. This includes adapting learning materials, tasks and teaching methods to support the achievement of learning objectives by each student.
- *Use of technology*: Technology tools play an important role in creating inclusive learning environments, providing adaptive learning platforms, assistive software and interactive tools that can be customized to the needs of individual students, while promoting independent learning and facilitating access to educational resources.
- *Collaborative learning*: Encouraging collaborative learning projects and activities that encourage teamwork and mutual assistance among students supports the creation of an inclusive environment. This approach promotes the development of social skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills in a group context.
- *Multidisciplinary approach*: The integration of multidisciplinary approaches in STEM education and vocational disciplines facilitates students to understand the real-world application of science and technology. This can include developing projects based on real problems that encourage creativity and innovation.
- *Feedback and support*: Providing regular and constructive feedback, as well as the availability of supportive resources such as extra study sessions or tutoring, helps to engage and motivate students. These resources are aimed at strengthening students' confidence and skills.
- *Professional development of educators*: Investment in training and professional development of teachers and teaching staff to implement inclusive methods and strategies is critical. This includes

preparing to work with children with special educational needs, managing diversity in the classroom and integrating technology into the learning process.

- *Community involvement and partnerships*: Engagement with local communities, the business sector and other educational institutions can enrich the educational process by providing additional resources, expertise and hands-on learning opportunities.

Through these practices, educational organizations can successfully create inclusive educational environments that promote the development of STEM and professional skills among all students, regardless of their individual challenges or needs.

4. Good practices and successful strategies

The European Union (EU) is undertaking a variety of policy initiatives to support the development of key skills that are important for boosting job creation and increasing employment. These efforts aim at the adaptation of the workforce to the dynamically changing economic and technological conditions, thereby aiming to increase the EU's global competitiveness. Within European policy and practice in the field of skills development, several main areas have been identified:

- **Europe 2030 Strategy**: This strategy is the EU's long-term plan to stimulate economic growth and employment, including specific targets to increase employment, invest in education and promote social integration.
- **Erasmus+ Program**: The program supports the education, training, youth and sports sectors in Europe, providing training and exchange opportunities for students, teachers and workers. It facilitates the acquisition of new skills and promotes intercultural understanding.
- **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**: The EQF facilitates the cross-border recognition of skills and qualifications, helping labor mobility and providing easier access to education and training across countries.
- **European Social Fund (ESF)**: As a key funding instrument, the ESF supports employment and social inclusion policies in the EU by funding training and retraining programs aimed at upskilling the workforce.
- **The Digital Single Market Initiative**: This initiative aims to boost digital innovation and investment in digital skills, creating new jobs and supporting the growth of the digital economy.
- **Skills Strategy**: The EU Skills Strategy focuses on the development of critical competences, such as digital literacy, entrepreneurial skills and transversal skills, essential for adapting to new economic conditions.
- **Pact for Skills**: Part of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Pact for Skills promotes the strengthening of cooperation between Member States, social partners and the private sector in the field of training and skills development.

European initiatives and policies in the field of skills development and job creation aim to support sustainable and inclusive growth. By investing in education and training, promoting innovation and facilitating labor mobility, the EU aims to shape a dynamic and competitive labor market.

The Erasmus+ program plays an essential role in promoting inclusive education and supporting people with special educational needs (SEN). By providing funding and resources, the program supports initiatives that aim for social inclusion and educational integration, helping to create equal and accessible educational environments. This analysis highlights several key aspects in which Erasmus+ contributes in this area:

- ✓ **Mobility funding**: Erasmus+ provides targeted mobility funding to students and young people with SEN, facilitating their participation in international educational exchanges and internships. The inclusion of additional support resources, such as teaching assistants and adaptation of learning spaces, ensures the inclusive nature of the program.
- ✓ **Strategic partnerships**: The program stimulates the creation of strategic partnerships between educational institutions, organizations and NGOs for the development and implementation of innovative approaches to inclusive education. These collaborations often focus on adapting curricula and materials to the needs of students with SEN.
- ✓ **Training and collaboration**: Erasmus+ support professional development and the exchange of knowledge and practices between teachers and educational specialists in the context of inclusive education. The goal is to increase the competencies for successful integration of students with SEN.
- ✓ **Support for youth projects**: The program finances initiatives aimed at young people with SEN that promote social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. This includes projects that offer opportunities to participate in community life and develop key social skills.

- ✓ Inclusive policies and practices: Erasmus+ actively encourage the participation of organizations dealing with persons with SEN in support of the development and implementation of inclusive educational strategies and methodologies.

Through these mechanisms, the Erasmus+ program significantly contributes to the creation of an inclusive educational environment in Europe by ensuring that young people with SEN have access to educational and developmental opportunities supporting their personal and professional development.

The Declaration on Principles, Policy and Practice in the Field of Education for Persons with Special Needs, adopted in Salamanca/Spain in 1994, emphasizes the need for UNESCO to "... encourage the academic community in the plan to strengthen scientific research in this field..... to serve as a center for the exchange of information and for the dissemination of concrete results and experiences..." In accordance with the United Nations Standard Rules for Equality and Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities, the Salamanca Declaration on Education with Special Needs and other international documents dealing with this issue in the Law on Higher Education in our country - Article 70 (2) (2004) it is stated that students, doctoral students and specialists who are blind, deaf, disabled with permanent disabilities and reduced working capacity of 70 and over 70 percent are entitled to special reliefs regulated in the regulations of the higher education institution.(Law on higher education in Bulgaria, 2004). In the Law on the Integration of People with Disabilities / in force from 01.01. 2005/ in article. 20 is specified - "Higher schools provide: 1. a supportive environment, special adaptations, appropriate teaching materials and additional teaching assistance, supporting the process of learning and assessment of people with disabilities; 2. training of specialists to work with disabled people"(Law on integration of disabled people in Bulgaria, 2006).

5. Conclusion

Good practices in this area include the development and implementation of flexible curricula, the integration of technologies to support distance and hybrid learning, and an emphasis on collaborative and adaptive learning methods. It is also important to emphasize the importance of training teachers and educators to work in the changed environment, which includes providing competencies for the effective use of digital tools and methods for inclusive learning. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for stronger socio-emotional support for learners, as part of inclusive education, to deal with the stress, isolation and other emotional challenges posed by the crisis. Furthermore, the emphasis on collaboration between educational institutions, parents and the community has proven to be key to creating a supportive and flexible educational environment. Inclusive education and training in the context of the "new normal" requires a focused effort to adapt and innovate on the part of all stakeholders. The good practices identified and implemented during this period offer valuable lessons for the development of more sustainable, flexible and inclusive educational models for the future. These approaches not only help address current challenges, but also lay the foundations for an education system that is better equipped to meet the needs of all learners in all circumstances.

Acknowledgments

This paper was developed within the framework of a scientific research project "A model for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning" with contract № KII-06-H80/1, funded by National science fund of Bulgaria.

References

- Al-Hout, R. (2017, June 26) *How to include children with special educational needs and disabilities*. Retrieved from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-include-children-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities>
- Grima-Farrell, C. R., Bain, A., & McDonagh, S. H. (2011). Bridging the research-to-practice gap: A review of the literature focusing on inclusive education. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 35(2), 117-136. doi:10.1375/ajse.35.2.117
- Law on integration of disabled people in Bulgaria*. (2005). https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/Bulgaria_LAW-ON-THE-INTEGRATION-OF-PEOPLE-WITH-DISABILITIES.pdf
- Law on higher education in Bulgaria*. (2004). <https://www.neaa.government.bg/en/legislation>
- Regulation on inclusive education in Bulgaria*. (2017). <https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2137177670>
- Eftimova, S. (2018) The Place of the Library in the Inclusive Education in Bulgaria. In *ICERI2018 Proceedings: 11th annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation Meeting the Challenges of 21 st Century Learning*. IATED Academy, 2018. doi:10.21125/iceri.2018.1493