

International and interprofessional experiences on welfare services for people with learning disabilities

An international experience offers students the possibility to discover and learn from practice in other countries. Going abroad on student exchange is expensive, both in terms of time and money, and it does not fit all. The EU has been funding travel and accommodation for students and lecturers giving them the chance to participate in an international classroom through a measure called intensive programmes both as part of the Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus Intensive Programme and as a possibility within the Erasmus + Strategic Partnership calls.

The University of Hertfordshire, England; Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland; the University of Oradea, Romania; Stockholm University, Sweden; and Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway; have, since 2011, developed two intensive programme modules, each delivered three times. Learning disability nursing students from the University of Hertfordshire and Edinburgh Napier University, special education students from University of Oradea and from University of Stockholm, and social education students from Oslo and Akershus University College, participated in these programmes. These were all future professionals set to play a key role in delivering welfare services to people with learning disabilities in their respective home countries.

Through the six intensive programmes, a total of 323 students from the five partner universities have had the opportunity to participate in a multinational and multidisciplinary classroom. A multinational classroom providing a forum for exchanging knowledge of welfare schemes and inclusion practices across borders, thereby giving students knowledge and insight they would not otherwise have gained.

This article sets out to describe and share some of the experiences from the six intensive programmes offered under the projects LLP Erasmus Intensive programme *Inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment, education and health services* (2011-2013) and Erasmus + Strategic partnership *An interdisciplinary approach to working with children and young people with complex intellectual and developmental needs* (2015-2017), developed and delivered together by the partner universities.

Background to the Erasmus Intensive Programmes

Traditionally, people with disabilities were disenfranchised and kept at the margins of society. Delivering social justice is at the heart of the English, Scottish, Swedish, Romanian, Norwegian and European Governmental agendas. Central to this commitment is the drive to improve health, social, educational and employment services for all marginalised groups (EU Charter, WHO 1998; Treaty of Lisbon 2008).

Studies in Europe show that whilst there have been significant improvements in living conditions, there are still barriers that exclude disabled people from full participation in education, employment and health services (Grammenos 2014). The welfare professionals in the different countries are key players in implementing the welfare schemes that are set to ensure inclusion. A common denominator in all the partners' study programmes is the focus on practices that might contribute to inclusion, but the European comparative and multidisciplinary perspective is missing. The rationale behind developing the intensive programmes has been to offer the students this comparative and multidisciplinary perspective.

LLP Erasmus Intensive Programme *Inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment, education and health services* (2011-2013)

The first intensive programme module (IP) *Inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment, education and health services*, aimed to examine inclusion of persons with disabilities from a cross-national and multidisciplinary perspective in a bid to compare and share good practices amongst the participating countries (siu.no). Three major thematic areas were addressed; employment, education and health services. The IP reviewed the welfare systems in the participating countries, the policy backgrounds as well as practices of inclusion within employment, education and health services. A comparative approach would, we believed, extract and demonstrate the “best practices” within these areas. The IP comprised one formative assessment, ten days of lectures, seminars and workshops in international groups followed by a summative assessment.



Students from England, Scotland, Romania, Sweden and Norway in between lectures at the Erasmus Intensive Programme at University of Oradea, Romania, 2011

As mentioned above, the intensive programme represented a unique learning situation for the students because of its multidisciplinary and comparative approach. Neither curricula in the ordinary study programmes, nor ordinary student exchange offered a similar learning situation where the student had to interact with students and lecturers from other European countries for two weeks, learning about and comparing inclusive practices across countries. In all our intensive programme evaluations, students have stated that they appreciate the knowledge of services for inclusion of learning disabled in the various countries, gained through working with lecturers and students from other countries.

The multidisciplinary approach presented interesting learning experiences for all participants on different levels. The IP students were BSc students in learning disability nursing, social education and special education. Any discipline tends to develop its own tribal language which can cause challenges when communicating with other “tribes”. This is perhaps particularly the case for professionals who provide services for the same person. Especially the first week of the two week programme, both students and lecturers were frustrated by the other professionals “take” on inclusive practices. Nurses focus on health, social educators on the environmental setting and special educators on the learning situation. Throughout the programme, the understanding of the importance of the different perspectives in order to secure inclusion, grew. If your health issues are not addressed you will have problems at school or at work. If you are not included in education or excluded from working, this will affect your health.



Working in an international and multidisciplinary group proved to be challenging and interesting. Erasmus Intensive Programme at Edinburgh Napier University 2012

Inclusion?

The lectures, workshops and discussions also revealed different interpretations of the concept of inclusion. Does it mean equal access to health services, education and employment? Does it mean designing special services for people with learning disabilities, ensuring that each individuals' needs are met? Does it mean mainstreaming services thus including all citizens into the same services?

The mere presence of the different professions represented in the intensive programmes exemplifies how inclusion is practiced in the five countries. Most of the countries have closed their huge special institutions that catered for people with learning disabilities, offering health services, education and employment within the institutions. Romania being the exception although they are in the process of de-institutionalising as well. Sweden and Norway have mainstreamed their health services. England and Scotland have also mainstreamed their health services, but they have kept the learning disability nurse, a profession developed within the former institutions for people with a learning disability. The role of the learning disability nurse is to support people with a learning disability in accessing health services and to ensure that specific health needs are met. The learning disability nurses also work within the

hospitals supporting patients with a learning disability. Neither Romania, Sweden or Norway offers an equivalent service within health. The three countries' position within the inclusion debate seems to be that inclusion means being included in the same services as all citizens and that services should therefore cater for all. While inclusion in England and Scotland means offering special services to people with a learning disability to ensure that their health needs are being met within the mainstream health services.

Norway also has a profession developed in the former institutions for people with learning disabilities, namely the special educator, which has "survived" the de-institutionalisation process in Norway. The social educator mostly works as a facilitator for independent living for adults (above 18 years) in residential homes or in independent living homes, to some extent in day centers, in sheltered employment and increasingly in pre-schools and schools (Grung 2016). The services social educators work within, are part of the specialist services in health, social, employment and education services. Although Norway has mainstreamed its health, education and employment services, it has retained a profession designed to support independent living and work or work-like activities for people with learning disabilities.

Within education, Norway differs from the other countries. Education in Norway is mainstreamed (government.no) in that special education is offered in the mainstream school's classroom combined with adapted education in some subjects, or in a special class within the mainstream school. The idea of inclusion in Norway seems to be that pupils of all kinds should be part of the same class thus fostering tolerance and respect for the variance in humankind. Norway has very few private schools and children in the same area attend the neighborhood school. The interpretation of attending a special school is different in such a society compared to societies in which pupils attend a variety of schools.



Students and lecturers in the Erasmus Intensive Programme at Stockholm University 2013

Sweden, on the other hand, offers two parallel school systems for pupils at the age of six until the age of 18; the mainstream education and Särskolan the latter being a school only for pupils with learning disabilities (skolverket.se). A Swedish child with a learning disability could choose mainstream school (and special education in mainstream school) or Särskolan. Both Romania, England and Scotland offers special schools as well as mainstream schools with special education. These countries seem to embrace an idea of inclusion as an opportunity for pupils in need of adapted education to develop their abilities within a school designed to meet their learning needs.

The notion of inclusion also encompasses access to employment as a means to support yourself, to contribute to society and to have an occupation during daytime. Few people with a learning disability have ordinary jobs, this applies to all European countries (Greve 2007, Grammenos 2014). In this respect, people with learning disabilities are excluded from one of the key arenas in society. If people with learning disabilities have a job it tends to be within sheltered employment, a segment which is increasingly closing down leaving a rising number of people with learning disabilities without daytime activities. Day centers seem to be the only option left for a day activity allowing you to meet up with other people and participate in activities.

Multidisciplinary approach to inclusion

The intensive programmes' multidisciplinary and multinational classroom has made it possible to provide a more holistic view on inclusion than the one offered within a student's or a lecturer's ordinary classroom. Inclusion is not only about having your specific health needs met, or about adapted education or being fit for employment, but rather as the Scandinavian normalisation tradition argued; having the same possibility as everyone else to live a normal life (Nirje 1994). The classroom discussions of whether inclusion is best accomplished through mainstreaming of services or through designing services to cater for specific needs, has given the students perspectives and arguments on inclusion that are difficult to achieve in regular classrooms.

It proved difficult to compare and extract best practices. Practices develop within a national context and its welfare scheme. Pointing to one practice as the best in order to copy it at home is likely to fail when welfare scheme conditions are different.

Intensive programme group work

The 173 students participating during the three years of the LLP Erasmus Intensive Programme *Inclusion* (2011-2013) evaluated the IP very positively. Despite long hours, extensive group work, bewilderment due to the diversity of disciplinary concepts and working methods, different learning styles all performed in a language foreign to the majority, the students valued the Intensive Programme as a unique learning experience. Workshops in the multidisciplinary and international group proved to be very educational and effective. In small groups all students had to contribute, making it possible for students to become friends as well as discuss in detail practices in the different countries. The IP developed networks among students still in existence.

Erasmus + Strategic Partnership *An interdisciplinary approach to working with children and young people with complex intellectual and developmental needs (2015-2017)*

The knowledge about the five countries welfare schemes and services gained through the Intensive Programme *Inclusion* (de Chenu, Dæhlen, Tah 2016) inspired a new application for Erasmus-funding. The application was successful and the participating universities got funding for a three years Erasmus + Strategic Partnership, *An interdisciplinary approach to working with children and young people with complex intellectual and developmental needs*, coordinated by Stockholm university, aiming at developing a shared online module. The intensive programme measure was used to develop the module. The module's intention was to enable students to develop an understanding of inter-professional practice in providing care and support to children and young people with complex intellectual and developmental needs. The focus was on education, health and social care and evolved through three intensive programmes delivered from 2015 to 2017. A total of 150 students participated over the three year period in a ten day module with lectures, workshops and presentations as well as pre-course assignments and a summative assessment.



Lecturers and future professionals in the Erasmus Intensive Programme at Edinburgh Napier University, 2015

Children and young people with complex needs

Delivering services to children and young people with complex intellectual and developmental needs can be challenging. The complexity of their needs requires support from various services and professions. Often children and young people experience services that are uncoordinated, presenting them with a host of different professionals, assessments and measures. Having a child with severe and complex needs impacts the family, and addressing the families' needs is necessary in order to support the child. In all five countries, service users have the formal right to an Individual Service Plan in order to assure coordinated services.

The intensive programme module aim to prepare future professionals to work collaboratively with other professional groups in responding to the needs of children and young people with complex needs and their families. This implies exploring and understanding their professional role and the roles of others in supporting children and young people.

The intensive programme presented the different professions; the learning disability nurses from England and Scotland, the special teachers and special pedagogues from Sweden and Romania and the special educators from Norway, as well as the theoretical rationale behind their professional approach. The students worked in international and multidisciplinary teams with scenarios presenting a family with several children, amongst them a child with severe and complex needs. Each group had to develop a joint service plan for the child describing what the group considered to be the child's and the family's needs and prioritise among them, agree on assessments and measures and a time schedule defining the responsible persons for the various tasks.

Throughout the ten days, the scenarios changed and varied among the different groups.

Across the three years of intensive programmes, what the students valued the most was working in the international and multidisciplinary team. Some students commented that other professionals brought perspectives to the scenarios they never had thought of and which they found useful. Some commented that they were surprised to learn that parts of the job their profession was responsible for, was performed by another profession in some of the other countries.

Working multidisciplinary

The students experienced encountering different professions' definitions of what was at stake as challenging and educational. A learning disability nurse might attend to her service user's

health issues without considering how this impacts the service user's learning, a teacher to a pupil's learning needs without considering how health condition impacts learning. Working in a multidisciplinary team puts forward a more holistic approach to the service user. However, this presupposes that the professional will accept the limits of his own expertise and recognise his knowledge gaps as well as other professionals' expertise. The intensive programme students, still being students with an unfinished professional identity, reported this experience as challenging. They still appreciated the experience because they recognised the value of the multidisciplinary approach in supporting the service user.



Learning disability nurses from England and Scotland, special pedagogues from Romania, special teachers from Sweden and social educators from Norway practicing working in a multidisciplinary team in the Erasmus + Strategic partnership intensive programme at University of Hertfordshire 2016

Future professionals

The participating students in all the six intensive programmes were future professionals set to playing a key role in delivering welfare services for people with learning disabilities in their home country. Although the participating countries' welfare services vary, they all face similar challenges in delivering inclusive services and services fit to meet the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups. An international and multidisciplinary classroom allows for the sharing of knowledge and experiences across countries and disciplines. This is valuable in the training of future professionals and is currently lacking within the partner universities' study programmes. LLP Erasmus funded the first three intensive programmes for a limited time span. With the extension into Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership funding, the partners have been able to deliver three further intensive programmes in order to develop an international and multidisciplinary module online.

The online module

From the autumn 2018 the module *An interdisciplinary approach to working with children and young people with complex intellectual and developmental needs*, will be delivered as an online module for students from the five partner universities. Parts of the module are delivered transnationally in international and multidisciplinary student groups meeting up online. The international and multidisciplinary groups will encounter scenarios, the scenarios will change and the group has to develop a joint individual service plan for their service user. The group will meet and work online.

During the intensive programmes, the students met in real life and of course shared more than just working hours. Will the international and multidisciplinary groups in the online module offer an equally effective and educational international learning experience preparing our future professionals?

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