
Young Persons with Mental Health Problems in Estonian Labour Market: Experience of Young Persons, Employers and Service Providers

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The article explores how mental health services, social services and support from employers enable young persons with mental health problems to participate in the labour market. The qualitative study based on 32 semi-structured interviews was carried out within the framework of the project “Positive Attitude Development” among persons with mental health problems, service providers and employers in Estonia. Young people with mental health problems, aged 18-35, are interested in participating in the labour market, but they experience multiple problems in different domains of life due to their disease, an insufficient educational level and working skills, and the lack of a supportive environment. Employers are motivated to employ them, but they need more support. A various selection of supportive services has been developed and provided by the Unemployment Insurance Fund, but the availability varies in different Estonian regions. The service providers and specialists point out the positive influence of the closest network and support programmes.

Keywords: young persons with mental health problems, young persons in Estonian labour market, participation, unemployment, social protection.

Introduction

During the last decade, several European Union member states have paid increased attention to the employment issues of people with a reduced work ability, which involves changing the principles of allocating benefits, simplifying access to labour market services and developing various support schemes for fostering the employment of people with special needs (European Disability Strategy 2010-2020).

In 2016, the work ability reform was initiated also in Estonia, with the objective of supporting the full and active life of people with a reduced work ability. The reform renewed the principles of how work ability is evaluated, the system of support and the variety of services.

Starting from 1 January, 2016, the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the Social Insurance Board started providing totally new and renewed services to people in need and the Unemployment Insurance Fund took over the administration of the system.

Starting from 1 July, 2016, the Unemployment Insurance Fund evaluates the work ability and pays work ability allowance to people whose incapacity for.

The reform is accompanied by the responsibility of the state to assist people with special needs in finding work, keeping work and improving their coping with everyday life, taking into account the individual abilities and needs of the person (Estonian Work Ability Reform, 2017).

Involving more than 100 000 persons in Estonia, among whom a large proportion is already working or would like to find work, the work ability reform is accompanied by the responsibility that the people with a reduced work ability are expected to be active; until now, however, this responsibility has remained unclear for many, creating insecurity and prompting questions.

The activity requirement does not mean that people are expected to start working immediately, but rather that the people with a reduced work ability who do not work have to register themselves as unemployed in order to be entitled for the work ability allowance. They should also look for work and cooperate with the Unemployment Insurance Fund, from where they are entitled to receive monetary assistance and various types of support necessary for finding work (Arusoo, 2017).

The aim of the work ability reform is to support bringing together the employers and the employees with a reduced work ability. In order to support employers, the Unemployment Insurance Fund offers services directed at the employers who already employ or wish to employ people with a reduced work ability.

The aim of the study and research questions

The qualitative study based on 32 semi-structured interviews was carried out within the framework of the project “Positive Attitude Development (PAD) – access to labour market for young adults with mental health problems” among persons with mental health problems, service providers and employers in Estonia. The aim of the study was to develop the knowledge base about how to support more effectively the participation of young people with mental health problems in the labour market, based on the viewpoints of youth with mental health problems, service providers and employers.

The study attempted to answer the following research questions: 1) What have been the positive and negative experiences of young people with mental health problems in finding and keeping a job and participating in work life in general? 2) What have been the experiences of the specialists and service providers who support the youth in finding a job? 3) What are the experiences of employers who have supported young people in becoming and being employed (Medar, Bugarszki, Saia, Tiko, Sooniste, Hall, Rahu, 2017).

Research method and Sample

Considering the context and activities of the reform, the target group of the current study consists of young people with mental health problems in the age group of 18-35, who have been diagnosed with a mental disorder and have been assessed as in need for special care services.

The qualitative research method was implemented as an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups describe to a social or human problem.

The empirical data was collected from September to December 2016 through 32 semi-structured interviews conducted with:

1. young persons with mental health problems (7),
2. service providers (including specialists from the Unemployment Insurance Fund) (12),
3. employers (13).

Results as answers to the three main research questions.

The experiences of young persons

Young persons with mental health problems have little experiences in looking for and finding work. They have mainly done preparations for starting to look for work and received help from different service providers. The process has been complicated due to **insufficient education** – dropping out of school has been related to personal health problems as well as problems at school. It has been difficult to obtain education due to the curricula and study forms that do not take into account their special needs. Young people would like to have more flexibility in their career choices while studying, and they need more individual support in the form of career counselling.

The incomplete educational opportunities of young people and wrong career choices lead to burnout and **worsening health**. It is considered important that the school supports the ability and willingness of young people to cope in the main life domains, including working life. When heading towards burnout, young people start to drink. Career choices should be made at the beginning of secondary school. Being absent from school, complaints and bad grades lead to burnout, stress and symptoms of illness. It is important to ensure that the person still has the ability and willingness to act. (22-year-old male, 10 grades of education).

On several occasions, the experiences young people have obtained from the process of searching for job are negative, as they have not received work although they have applied for it or they have not been able to keep their job. The reasons for not getting a job have been mainly mentioned as health problems and **unsuitability due to special needs** for performing certain tasks, e.g. jobs needing strength and psychological resilience and self-defence skills. In addition to previously mentioned problems, there is the fear that special needs are not understood and people will be ridiculed. Also, the received experiences are deepening this understanding that the society does not accept and does not understand.

Young people would like to find **part-time work**, as this is suitable and realistic considering their health problems. “I am not able to work every day, I would like to find work for a few days in a week, because I have an anxiety disorder. I take pills.”

(22-year-old male, basic education.) Young people have positive views of their experiences of looking for work and working, when the **working conditions are flexible** – they have been able to choose their working time and make their own schedule, and when work has entailed physical activity and creativity.

Young people have received support in looking for work, finding work and going to work mainly from their **family members**, who have assisted them in finding information, making contacts and have acted as a support person.

Young people have sometimes received information from acquaintances and social media. When looking for work, finding work and working, information from the CV Centre (a job advertising portal) and the Unemployment Insurance Fund have been useful. At the same time, there are young people among the interviewed persons, who have not turned to the Unemployment Insurance Fund.

Young people understand that they should be more **open with employers** when discussing their special needs, which will prevent future problems. An obstacle is also that young people are insufficiently heard and included in making the decisions that concern them in the work context. Young people wish to choose their own paths, find their talents and skills.

At the same time, they feel the pressure to meet the demands of their parents, school and society. “Young people should be allowed to choose their own paths, find their talents and skills. I feel two kinds of pressures, graduate secondary school and choose a career in addition to addictions and disorders” (22-year-old male, 10 grades of education).

Young people feel there is too much **bureaucracy** when looking for work and getting work, and requirements for work are too high and unreasonable. It can also refer to the difficulties in assessing the realistically suitable work places before submitting their application. The target group needs more guidance on how to evaluate the appropriateness of available job offers.

Sometimes **transportation problems** are an obstacle for young people in going to work, including having no driving license and/or a suitable public transport connection. This is an issue which needs to be more supported in rural and remote areas.

Young people **value good relations** with their employer and colleagues. They expect that employers offer legal counselling, safety guidelines and advice as supervisors.

Young people emphasise the need to develop **critical thinking** skills already in the education system, which also ensures their ability to cope with working life. Young people felt they could not participate enough as they lacked the knowledge, skills and abilities to be heard. Young people should be trained and included. They should be prepared for inclusion. Young people are good at recalling things (because they have learned these by heart at school), but they are not able to think. Young people need to be taught how to think, after which they can be included, otherwise we do more harm than good. (22-year-old male, 10 grades of education).

Experiences of employers

The interviewed employers have hired young people with mental health problems mainly through the Unemployment Insurance Fund or the NGO Hea Hoog (special NGO, who are acting in sphere of mental health). In both cases, the cooperation has

produced positive results. While looking for workers, if necessary, the employers turn directly to the institution where young people with special needs reside and recruit an employee who is recommended and whom they need.

The employers need to be **aware of the special needs** of these young persons for the work to be more efficient. The employer needs to know what these young people are capable of doing, otherwise work cannot be done and these special needs are not taken into account. Supervision needs to take into account the peculiarities of these young people and demonstrate how a task should be done, as then work is performed with great precision and diligence. The employers have to pay attention to developing the work habits of young people and take the peculiarities of their employees into account outside the working hours and, if necessary, teach them the rules of communication. The knowledge of the employers has been gathered through everyday practice and disability is not directly an issue in the work place. “Experiences are good, it is good to communicate with young people, and they are dutiful, humane and positive. Young people are proud and thankful for being offered a job and fulfil their tasks dutifully depending on their abilities” (Manager of service company).

The main task of the employer is to manage his business, and it is not possible to assume additional duties for arranging the work. For that reason, the employers would especially like to receive **support services**, but also additional resources or other goods from the welfare system, while hiring young people with special needs.

The employers feel responsible for their young employees with special needs and try to give them tasks that can be completed. “It is necessary to assist young people with blending into the team, in order for the work to go well and for team members to accept each other” (Manager of a landscaping company). The employers point out that it is necessary to draw up **guidelines on** how to act with young people with special needs in a work situation and in a work collective. Young people are motivated through **recognition and feedback** on their work. “It is a simple rule that if an employer gives praise, then work goes well and results are good. People are proud of being recognised. Young people enjoy their work being valued. Young people need to be accepted as equal partners” (Chairman of a housing association).

The employers emphasise a viewpoint related to the organisation culture that people with special needs should be **equally treated** in the enterprise.

The employers need knowledge and **training**.

Another problem for the employers that they are unaware of the background, capabilities and skills of the young people with special needs. Often young people do not want to acknowledge their disability and **try to hide** their special needs, *e.g., give the reading tasks to someone else. The employer needs to know if young persons can read and write and what they can do, otherwise there are problems with contracts and work-related documentation.*

Negative aspects include the **bad habits** of these young people, e.g. stealing, eating disorders or overly critical and demanding attitudes. The employers claim that sometimes they are employing people who clearly have special needs but are not diagnosed. This is seen as incomplete work on the part of the Unemployment Insurance Board, because the board should also be able to notice undiagnosed persons and refer them to respective specialists (e.g. Asperger).

It was seen as a problem that the service of **work-related rehabilitation is insufficiently available** in certain regions, and the specialists of the Unemployment Insurance Board have not always been prepared for offering this service. For example often times when the employers have needed support they have not received it, as the specialists are unable to help.

In some cases, the obstacle lies in the organisation of transport or observing the bus schedule. Sometimes, it is not very clear, who needs help, the young person or his family, and it is necessary to work with all of them in order to increase the ability to work.

Concluding a contract of employment with employees who have mental health problems is complicated for employers, because it is difficult to organise the work as usual and observe that the tasks have been carried out. The employers are not interested in investing additional time and money related to organising the work of young people with special needs. For the employers, it is a **social project** and usually not valued enough by society.

Experiences of support service providers

The main instruments for supporting young people with mental health problems, who are looking for work and working, are **different programs** that support employment, developed by the Tallinn Mental Health Centre, the Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre and the Unemployment Insurance Board. Currently, several programs that support employment, including symptoms control program, developing communication skills with video training, a family training program for the family members of people with mental disorders, an inpatient rehabilitation program, vocational rehabilitation programs and others, are available for people living in Tallinn and Harju County.

Young people usually say during the first meeting that they are interested in finding a job, but the evaluation often concludes that this is **not realistic**, as people tend to overestimate their abilities and possibilities.

If employers have the necessary knowledge, it is possible to agree on what the employee wishes, determine individual conditions and inform the employer about how to support the young person.

Cooperation is going on at the level of institutions and specialists, including vocational education teachers, specialists in centres as psychologist, psychiatrist, employment specialists, social workers, etc. in order to support the young people. Cooperation is also going on with local governments, and these activities focus mostly on providing support and services, adjusting a person's living place and on issues of transport and access to information needed every day.

The experiences of the specialists of the Unemployment Insurance Board point out that it should be kept in mind that the target group is very **vulnerable**, and the dignity of these young people has to be respected in all activities as then cooperation is better and more effective.

Negative experiences are related to the fact that **young people with mental health related special needs do not stay at work for a long time**. If they are aware of their illness, they stay at work for a longer time and are not afraid of asking for help.

It is important to be able to attend work-related internships. If a young person does well during the internship, then there is a 50% guarantee that the place of internship becomes their future place of work.

Obstacles of getting and maintaining work are: a low level of knowledge and a lack of information among employers regarding the peculiarities of their employees; resistance from family members and learned helplessness acquired by the young person himself, and a lack of work motivation and information about support services and support measures, especially in the case of youth who **do not speak Estonian**.

The hardest client group are undiagnosed people, who should in fact be sent to a psychiatrist.

It is important to work with the identity of young people- the question is who I would like to be, an artist, an employee, etc.? *It is important to understand what the person himself wants and if it is possible to achieve it.*

Finding employment is made easier by certain personality traits that young people have, e.g. being positive and taking into account **hobby activities**. **It is important for the young person to find his place.**

In matters related to the work of young people with mental disorders, it is necessary to determine and describe their work profile in detail, so that the employer can then find the right tasks for the person. **An activity supervisor** can supervise the young person in his communication with the employer, including discussing one's problems and needs in order to avoid future misunderstandings.

Conclusions

The specialists who participated in the study mentioned that society is judgemental and this will not change before the focus is on the person and their strengths. Decreasing stigmatisation in society happens through **positive experiences**. Positive experiences need to be described and introduced to the wider public, by using the help of experienced advisors. It is necessary to decrease people's fears related to special needs. Thus, emphasising the success stories should be an everyday task for the support system.

Employers need more support services, training and positive attention while they are planning or employing young persons with mental health problems. The necessary services must be equally accessible in all regions. Knowledge is needed about psychological peculiarities in order to better understand and support one's employees, and to prepare job related tasks, taking into account their special needs.

The skills related to work and other areas of life should be developed already **in the education system**, both in general and vocational Education. In terms of education, young people see the need for greater flexibility in terms of career choices and timely career counselling. The insufficient career opportunities and wrong career choices of young people lead to burnout and worsening health. Communication and other social skills can be developed through **extracurricular activities**.

The opportunities of participating in specific support programs need to be expanded to cover all young people with special needs and their families in need of those services when preparing them for going to the labour market. While participating in **different programs**, it is important to focus on the identity of young persons, on increasing their self-esteem and work motivation and facing fears related to becoming employed.

The current study shows that the **employers fulfil a key role** in easing young people into working life and training them. The employer acts as a mentor and a supervisor. The results of the study show that there is still room for improving the implementation of the principles of the support model as empowering individuals and communities, strengthening existing resources, working together on “social capital” related to the participation of young persons with mental health problems in different life areas including work.

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**Jaunieši ar garīgās veselības problēmām
Igaunijas darba tirgū:
Jauniešu, darba devēju un pakalpojumu sniedzēju pieredze**
Kopsavilkums

Raksts pievēršas tam, kā garīgās veselības uzlabošanas pakalpojumi, sociālie pakalpojumi un darba devēju atbalsts palīdz jauniešiem ar garīgās veselības traucējumiem piedalīties darba tirgū. Kvalitatīvais pētījums, pamatots 32 daļēji strukturētās intervijās, tika veikts projekta “Pozitīvas attieksmes attīstīšana” ietvaros ar personām ar garīgās veselības traucējumiem, pakalpojumu sniedzējiem un darba devējiem Igaunijā. Jaunieši ar garīgās veselības traucējumiem vecumā no 18 līdz 35 gadiem ir ieinteresēti piedalīties darba tirgū, tomēr viņi sastopas ar problēmām dažādās dzīves jomās gan savas slimības dēļ, gan nepietiekama izglītības līmeņa un prasmju trūkuma dēļ, kā arī viņiem trūkst atbalstošas vides. Darba devēji ir motivēti pieņemt viņus darbā, taču arī viņiem ir vajadzīgs atbalsts. Bezdarbnieku apdrošināšanas fonds ir izstrādājis dažādu atbalsta pakalpojumu piedāvājumu, bet to pieejamība dažādos Igaunijas reģionos atšķiras. Pakalpojumu sniedzēji un speciālisti norāda, ka nepieciešams izveidot ciešāku sadarbības tīklu un atbalsta programmas, kas pozitīvi ietekmē procesu.

Atslēgas vārdi: jaunieši ar mentālās attīstības traucējumiem, jaunieši Igaunijas darba tirgū, piedalīšanās, bezdarbs, sociālā aizsardzība.



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