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EU-level project launched to improve competences of career counselors working with clients at risk of exclusion

30 March 2011

The project **LINK - Career Services for Better Jobs** aims to transfer and adapt a training curriculum for enhancing career counselors' competences for working with clients in risk of exclusion and to map the career services in Bulgaria, Spain and Poland.

The project consortium includes 6 partners: Business Foundation for Education and Institute for Social, Economical and Trade Union Researches, Bulgaria; SURT Foundation, Spain; University of Lodz, Poland; BEST, Austria and Folkuniversitetet, Sweden. The initiative is co-financed by the European Commission, under the program Leonardo da Vinci - Transfer of Innovations, and its duration is 2 years.

The dynamic labor market situation in the enlarged European Union – aging, diversity and mobility of population, multiple transitions in the lifespan, gender issues, etc.– requires new skills, more complex knowledge and a holistic approach from the career practitioners in order to better understand the needs of citizens and provide them with quality services.

Bulgaria, Poland and Spain are facing similar challenges regarding large groups of population in risk of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion: low-paid and low-skilled workers, senior adults, women employees. These groups are extremely vulnerable in the times of recession and technological development, as they are not competitive in the labor market. Lifelong guidance services can encourage participation in further learning, acquisition of new skills and managing career transitions, but usually these individuals stay out of sight, unaware of and with limited access to career services until they lose their jobs.

In the same time there is a variety of stakeholders –trade unions, employers' organizations, NGOs, education and training providers, etc., acting in the social arena in the 3 countries– which have access to these groups and provide counseling, job mediation services, training for employability skills and labor market information. These practitioners are at the right place at the right time but their potential is still underused. If appropriately trained, they can meet the needs of these clients in risk.

The project **LINK - Career Services for Better Jobs** aims to transfer and adapt to Bulgaria, Poland and Spain a comprehensive program for upgrading the guidance skills of career practitioners in the social arena to meet the needs of specific groups in risk of exclusion. The training program includes a Curriculum and Manual and a counselor's Handbook that have been elaborated and successfully implemented by 10 European countries under the project Labor Offices and Clients. Additionally, the project will map the career services and providers in the 3 target countries –Bulgaria, Poland and Spain– to facilitate access of citizens to lifelong guidance.

In Bulgaria, Poland and Spain the whole set of materials will be approbated in pilot training sessions of 10 counselors and exploited in practice with 10 clients. The final products will be available in 4 languages for free downloads on the website <http://www.link-project.eu/en/>.

As an impact, the project will improve counselors' vocational skills in correspondence with the labor market needs; improve the capacity of stakeholders to deliver lifelong guidance to clients in risk of unemployment and social exclusion; and enhance the access of citizens to quality career services.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission, under the subprogram Leonardo da Vinci – Transfer of Innovation. This communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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