



**SOS-Network –  
Social Inclusion of Students/Learners with  
Special Needs into Mainstream VET and Labour  
Market**

Progress Report

Public Part

## Project information

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## Executive Summary

The SOS-network is being established due to the need for instant and relevant help and inspiration for teachers/trainers, employers, counsellors and others working with social inclusion in vocational education and training and at the labour market.

The SOS-Network has two main objectives: One is to reduce early school leaving and the second is to ensure a good transition between education and employment. The main target group is teachers and trainers in vocational education and training working with students/learners with special needs on a daily basis, but also employers and counsellors who meet these young people in their transition to the labour market. The students/learners with special needs have prior to the project start been identified with reference to four categories of problems that may cause early school leaving or difficulties entering the labour market. They are 1) students/learners with medical diagnosis; 2) students/learners with social problems; 3) students/learners with literacy and numeracy problems (learning difficulties not due to a medical diagnosis); and finally 4) students/learners with immigrant background.

The SOS-Network unites 14 vocational education and training institutions, job centres, higher education institutions, employers' organisations and others working with social inclusion in education and training from 12 different European countries. Each of these has specific competences and experiences in working with students with special needs. For instance, one partner is specifically experienced in working with student/learners with special needs in mobility projects; another has special competences in dealing with young people with Aspergers' syndrome; and others are experienced in guidance issues or are working specifically with teachers within special education needs. In total, the consortium represent a wide range of experiences and competences that cover all the aspects of the social inclusion being dealt with in the SOS-network.

So far, two major steps have been finalised by the network. One is a Europe-wide mapping of barriers to education presenting different perceptions of students/learners with special needs. This mapping set the starting point for the second major step, namely the identification of interesting cases describing innovative and success-proven approaches to students/learners with special needs in different learning environment. This second step has just been finalized, resulting in 65 interesting cases as well as the 15 best practice cases. All cases are available at the SOS-website. Both the mapping of barriers and the collection of cases have been done through questionnaire based surveys, and with due respect to representativity in relation to target groups and different learning environments.

The SOS-website is more than a website with project information. It is meant to become a 'one-stop-shop' with semantic web functionalities allowing cross-reference between all uploaded materials, and giving visitors access to a broad range of information and resources, including methods and tools to be applied in daily teaching/training.

Next steps include the identification of methods and tools as they can be identified in the interesting cases, and the testing of some of these methods and tools in different learning environments. Both the methods and tools and the recommendations and outcome of the testing will be made available on the SOS-website.

Beyond these, other major tasks lie ahead. One is to reach a clear decision on how the SOS-network can be maintained and further developed after the project period has ended. Another is to disseminate the results so far and to turn the SOS-portal into a tangible source of inspiration and knowledge on all aspects of social inclusion in education and training. But even more important will it be to present an approach to social inclusion in vocation education and training that focuses on competences and potentials instead of difficulties and diagnosis. This lies as a mainstreaming approach beneath the discussions and activities taking place in the SOS-network, and it will be kept in mind constantly throughout the last part of the project period.

So far, the meetings with external stakeholders have shown that certain elements, like for instance well-proven methods and tools and also inspirational cases of approaches to social inclusion, are highly needed in daily teaching and training. Stakeholders have also emphasized that availability of cases and methods/tools in national languages is essential for the real lift of the usability of the website. These aspects will be paid high attention during the rest of the project period.

Internally, the cooperation so far has given inspiration and new knowledge of how social inclusion is handled in other countries to most partners. It has also opened up to an on-going discussion of the approach to social inclusion. In general, this discussion benefits the network by ensuring a high quality of the results and a broad applicability of the results.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. PROJECT APPROACH .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. PROJECT OUTCOMES &amp; RESULTS.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. PARTNERSHIPS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES .....</b>	<b>16</b>

## 1. Project Objectives

The SOS-Network aims at contributing to social inclusion of students and learners with special needs into vocational education and training and, further on, into the labour market. The network operates with two main objectives which are:

1. To reduce early school leaving in the vocational education and training sector
2. To ensure a better transition from education and learning into the labour market

More specifically, in order to achieve the objective of early school leaving the SOS-network intends to:

- Provide a better Europe-wide understanding of students and learners with special needs by mapping the barriers to education and the labour market through descriptions of learning environments in different European countries;
- Provide different approaches, methods and tools that are being used with success throughout the EU and which can be adapted and transferred to other learning environments in other EU-countries;
- Establish a platform for cooperation between practitioners in this field which can give immediate access to exchange of experience and knowledge within this field;
- To create knowledge of specific work-related requirements that students/learners with special needs will be able to fulfil;

The second main objective concerning the transition from education to the labour market can be specified into the following objectives:

- Enhancing the cooperation between the vocational education and training sector and the labour market
- Identify job-related functions that match specific skills, competences and potentials possessed by students/learners with special needs
- Create awareness among practitioners at the labour market of the skills, competences and potentials that may characterize students/learners with special needs.

The SOS-network also aims at introducing a new and more positive 'language' with concepts and approaches that is focusing on competences, skills and potentials rather than problems and diagnosis. This objective is seen as intertwined with most of the specific objectives mentioned above.

Moreover, the SOS-network intends to create a long-standing and sustainable network for teachers, trainers, counsellors and employers working with young people with special needs. One of the main features of the network will be an online portal that functions as a 'one-stop-shop' with easy access to methods and tools, inspiring cases, definitions, and exchange of information and knowledge. The SOS-portal is intended as a dynamic platform that contains possibilities for constant development in the future through interactive involvement of users.

Both teachers, trainers, employers and counsellors are directly involved in the project by providing descriptions of barriers to education based on local learning environments, and by delivering examples of approaches, methods and tools, that are being used successfully in their daily activity. Moreover, local stakeholders are invited to participate in Local Reference Groups that are established in the partner countries during the project time. The Local Reference Groups meet three times during the project period to discuss issues that are related to the specific stage the project covers at that specific time.

Students are also involved directly, both by providing input to the different material that is being collected during the project lifetime, but also by giving their active feedback on methods and tools when they are being tested.

The impact of the SOS-network upon the target user group is closely connected to the quality and dissemination of the SOS-portal. By establishing an online platform that gives direct access to material of different kinds plus the benefit of being able to share experiences and cases of interest with other, teachers and trainers and people working with social inclusion in vocational education and training and at the labour market will be provided with a tool that doesn't exist today and which is strongly needed. There is an urgent need for new methods, new approaches, and inspiration across of sectors and countries. The project wishes to establish a learning lab allowing for common, knowledge based experimentation in the field of special needs education and training. The real impact of the SOS-network will be found in the virtual community being created in the online portal, based on the principles of providing practitioners with inspiration, knowledge, tools and methods that they need in their daily practice.

## 2. Project Approach

First of all, it has been very important to establish a common framework of understanding of the concepts that people who are working in this area apply in their daily practice. Are we speaking the same 'language' when we are talking about students with social problems? How is a diagnosis like for instance ADHD perceived in learning environments in Poland? And is it the same perception as in Denmark?

It was necessary to create a picture, not of how the concepts should be defined theoretically, but of how they were connected to specific learning situations in concrete and specific learning environments in different countries. The intention was to create a mapping of the four different target groups we had identified as a starting point – student/learners with social problems, student/learners with medical diagnosis, students/learners with literacy and numeracy difficulties and students/learners from ethnic minorities. But instead of focusing on these four target groups which would just have further underlined an approach that focuses on the individuals' personal situations and defines the problems as related to this, we chose to work with the expression 'barriers to education'. It removed the focus from the individual and onto the issues that challenge the individual. Moreover, it helped us to avoid a long discussion on how each of those four target groups should be defined and determined from each other. Moreover, the choice of the expression 'barriers to education' as the guiding approach in the survey was also intended to satisfy the overall objective of a new and more positive approach to the students/learners in question.

The survey was done by a questionnaire distributed to different learning environments in the partner countries. The questionnaire included a description of the barrier as it was perceived, but also a description of the learning environment and the competences, skills and potentials that could be observed in relation to the individual in question.

The survey was not representative for any specific type of learning environment or country. But it gave a first indication of practice-related perceptions of barriers to education, and presented a rather clear picture of the concepts that are in daily use in learning environments in our partner countries.

These concepts or topics were reactivated during the next step. This step actually went further into the barriers to education presented during the first analysis. Through questionnaires sent to schools, training institutions, employment centres, enterprises and other institutions meeting students/learners with special needs we collected rather extensive descriptions of how different types of barriers to education were approached. The survey was by purpose made very broad – we wanted to include not just schools and educational institutions but also other learning environments of formal and informal kind.

The cases being collected were analysed in order to come up with at least 50 cases defined as 'interesting cases'. This analysis was done both in relation to representativity – we wanted to have different sectors and different learning environments represented in the final collection – and in relation to criteria like quality, innovation and identifiable methods and tools. A follow-up interview with either project partners or individuals completing the questionnaire was made on cases chosen as interesting cases.

Each of these steps have been conducted with one partner being responsible for setting-up the process and collecting and computing the data, while the other partners contributed with cases and descriptions. The results have been discussed at partner meetings, giving good indications of specific issues that needed further attention. For instance, the first meeting after the start-up of the project indicated very clearly that more focus should be put into the project website, thus adjusting the focus of the project.

The project website is intended to become a 'one-stop-shop', compiling all the data and interesting material that will be collected during the project period, and giving users immediate access to relevant knowledge and information without being lost. So far, the basic functionality has been established. When more data is added further adjustments and changes might be required, also in relation to opening up the website for uploads of content from stakeholders outside the SOS-consortium.

The evaluation throughout the project period is based on an evaluation plan that predicts in-depth surveys of the progress and the general understanding of the project at critical stages as well as a continued evaluation of meetings through feedback forms. Moreover, the evaluator and the Coordinator have been in contact at least once every month through Skype and here discussed issues in relation to progress and involvement of the partners. The conclusions of these meetings have been compiled in short minutes which have been sent to the Coordinator.

In general, the feedback from the meetings has been good. The in-depth survey that was conducted prior to our last meeting in October 2012 gave nevertheless a few points for thought as well as clear indications of where the project needs to improve. The need for improvement mainly concerns the challenges connected to being a consortium of 14 partners of which some only have minor roles in the project. Even more focus needs to be put on communication internally in the consortium to involve all partners and to ensure clarity concerning the specific tasks.

The dissemination of the results and activities in the SOS-network is based on a dissemination plan which was drafted at the very beginning of the project. It includes communication of the project through social media and the project website, through Local Reference Groups, and through the press (newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.). A Facebook-site and a LinkedIn-group have been established – both linked to the SOS-website, [www.sosnetwork.eu](http://www.sosnetwork.eu). Two newsletters have been distributed to all partners for further dissemination. The main dissemination channel, though, probably is the Local Reference Groups that each partner has established comprising external local stakeholders. These groups have a disseminating role throughout the project and provide the network with crucial feedback on outcomes. One meeting including local stakeholders has already been conducted in the partner countries, and this has resulted in valuable feedback to the project and to indications of needs and interests among practitioners working with students/learners with special needs.

The Local Reference Groups also play a crucial role in relation to the sustainability of the network as it is expected that they will create real involvement in the network.

Both dissemination and exploitation issues will be high on the agenda for the rest of the project period. The exploitation strategy has been drafted and discussed at the partner meetings, and will be further developed and discussed during the remaining project period. A central issue to be settled concerns the website – which organisation is going to take ownership after the project period? Secondly, it is of uttermost importance that the network is extended with more partners from more

countries. A preliminary survey of drop-out rates in different European countries has been planned as a basis for extending the network to stakeholders in these countries, but the exact way forward still has to be decided upon by the partners. The first discussions of how the SOS-network can be turned into a permanent network have already taken place in the consortium with some clear indications and possible solutions for the future.

### **3. Project Outcomes & Results**

Through the first part of the project period, the SOS-network has collected, analysed, structured and made available two major bulks of data relating to the objective of reduce early school leaving. Firstly, a mapping of barriers to education experienced by teachers, trainers and others working with students with special needs in different learning environments in the partner countries has been completed and made accessible at the SOS-portal. The mapping establishes an understanding of differences and similarities in the perception of barriers to education in different European countries, and moreover, how concepts related to early school leaving are being used and perceived. Secondly, more than 200 cases describing different approaches to students/learners with special needs in different contexts have been collected. Of these, 65 cases have been selected as interesting cases and furthermore 15 cases as examples of best practice. These cases constitute a unique pool of approaches that can be accessed easily through the SOS-portal and thus give teachers, trainers and others new approaches based on the experiences presented in the cases.

The creation of Local Reference Groups (LRG) in partner countries is another of the project results so far. LRG activity relates both to the objective concerning prevention of early school leaving but also to the second objective that deals with the transition between education and the labour market. The inclusion of different local stakeholders in LRG has created an interest in the project and the network as such, but also given valuable feedback regarding the needs and interest they have.

The SOS-network has experienced a constant and clear interest in the project from people and organisations outside the consortium. In addition to the fact that newsletters, articles in newspapers, magazines and presentations at for instance the EfVET Annual Meeting in October 2012 have created a beginning awareness of the project and its results, it is also a fact that early school leaving is a huge issue occupying many organisations and projects from different perspectives. Even though, the SOS-network platform intends to be a one-stop-shop compiling all kinds of relevant information as well as providing a platform for interactive discussion, we are well aware that achieving this objective demands a constant effort and content of a high quality. The first results have been produced and made accessible now – which sets the scene for the future awareness campaign that will turn the SOS-network into a platform for all those combatting early school leaving.

## 4. Partnerships

The SOS-consortium consists of 14 partners from different institutional and organisational background in 12 European countries, and with different competences and experiences in relation to early school leaving and transition from education and into the labour market. A main benefit of a multi-country partnership lies with the possibility to pick specific competences that are not always found in one country. For instance, the SOS-network are benefitting from the unique experience that our Italian partner possess in mobility for students/learners with special needs. Moreover, the high degree of knowledge that our Finnish and British partners have of specialized education for students/learners with special needs also provides the network with a valuable benefit which would not have been achieved if the network had been established nationally. Other examples are our Irish partner with specific experiences in working with criminals and young people in NEET (Not in Employment, Education and Training), and likewise our German partner with years of experience in training and employment related activities for young immigrants. The partnership has specific competences that cannot be found in for instance a small country like Denmark.



This diversity of competences has a clear and concrete benefit to the scope of approaches that are presented in our cases. Furthermore, it is expected to have a similar benefit in relation to the identification of methods and tools.

Another clear benefit of a multi-country partnership is the possibility for obtaining clear statements and arguments. Discussing complex issues like early school leaving and in general social inclusion of young students/learners with special needs with colleagues from institutions and organisations that operate in a different context in another country drag the participants out of their comfort zone and force them to reflect upon own practice. A concrete example of the benefit that this aspect has given the SOS-network is the discussion in relation to our target groups and the intention of the network to move beyond problems and into potentials. This led to the conclusion that 'barriers to education' is the best approach to achieving a common understanding of the issue. Another issue here to be mentioned is the Finnish position that refers to the need to approach these young people, not by how they are diagnosed, but by how they behave as individuals. These positions and the discussions they create, help the SOS-network to raise the quality of the conclusions, and it leads to broader and more Europe-wide positions.

A consortium with so many partners from so many different countries and institutional backgrounds also present a challenge in relation to proper inclusion of all and clear understanding of the different positions. Sometimes it takes time to get to the core of a subject because a basic understanding of the different positions has to be created. Moreover, the language is felt as a barrier to some of the partners making them reluctant to participate in discussions. The number of partners and the fact that not all of them are included in the project management board means that it is a real challenge to establish a sense of ownership. Especially the fact that our meetings are split into two with the participation of all partners only during the first half of the meetings has a risk of leaving the partnership slightly divided.

Inclusion of local stakeholders has been done through Local Reference Groups where employers, teachers, counsellors, head of schools, social partners and others with a interest in social inclusion of student/learners with special needs will meet three times during the project period. The first meeting has already taken place in eight partner countries. Participation has been from 100 participants (Poland) to 10-15 (UK and Ireland). Beyond creating an awareness outside the network of what is going on and what will happen next, it also provides the network with valuable information about the needs and interest of those who potentially will be using the results and outcomes of the network. Some clear recommendations and expressions of interest have already been presented to the partners: Translation of parts of the material is needed before it can be applied; and secondly, methods and tools and in general inspiring approaches to working with these young people are felt as a real need.

## 5. Plans for the Future

Success of the SOS-network depends on the quality and relevance of the products and outcomes of the work being done. So far, the cases presenting interesting examples of approaches to social inclusion have been collected and made available at the website. Next step is identification of innovative, success-proven and transferable methods and tools as well as testing some of these in different partner countries. The identification of methods and tools has already been initiated and when identification and testing is complete, the SOS-network will present a fully functional website with all data compiled through the project period.

The finalization of the SOS-portal is an integral part of the next steps of the project. Beyond uploading the methods and test results it will also include setting up feedback forms, and it will provide practitioners outside the network with the possibility to upload own cases, methods/tools and relevant information.

Two very essential aspects of a successful achievement of the objectives of the SOS-network are related to the future of the network and the portal, and the scope of interest it will create. Both of these issues will be given maximum attention during the last project period.

What concerns the future of the network decisions need to be taken on how the SOS-portal will be maintained? This concerns both the hosting of the portal beyond the two years foreseen as a transition period after the project period ends, but also how to ensure that it is maintained as a dynamic and vivid website with a constant flow of visitors.

Moreover, the network needs to be expanded, not just to members outside the rather small consortium in this context, but also to other countries, and other sectors and organisations working with inclusive aspects in education and at the labour market. The network has already discussed these issues. The next step will be to take concrete decisions that can put into reality the intention of becoming a long-living network that compile knowledge and experience in this area across sectors.

An intertwined aspect about the sustainability of the network is the extent to which we can make relevant organisations, institutions and practitioners aware of its existence. Included in this is also the intention of establishing a forum for students and furthermore, to highlight skills, competences and potentials that students/learners with special needs might possess. This awareness campaign will be multi-folded:

- During a Brussels-based seminar taking place in April 2013 the content of concepts and approaches like drop-out and push-outs will be discussed including experiences from other EU-funded projects working with social inclusion.
- In April 2014 the final conference will present all the achievements of the network so far and set the first step for the future activation of the network.
- Two more Local Reference Group meetings will be conducted in the partner countries contributing to a local awareness of the achievements and progress in the network, and establishing the platform for extending the network beyond the current scope. This will also consolidate the cooperation between the organisations and institutions included in the network and representatives from the labour market.

- Continued communication of results and achievements will be presented to stakeholders interested in the subject via social media and via participation in national and European seminars and events focusing on social inclusion of young students/learners with special needs according to the plan for distributing information about the network set up during the first month of the project period.

Besides the awareness that these activities create it also gives the possibility of having valuable feedback to the content and progress of the SOS-network.

## 6. Contribution to EU policies

Early school leaving and in relation to this transition from education to the labour market are issues placed at the top of the European policy agenda. Reducing early school leaving is one of five heading targets in the Europe 2020 strategy, and early school leaving is seen as one of the main challenges concerning the objective of creating an inclusive Europe with a well-educated labour force.

In 2010, the Bruges-communicé further pointed to the need for measures in this field, followed up by a Council Recommendation in 2011, and later this year the establishment of a European Thematic Working Group on early school leaving. All this underlines the attention that early school leaving gets today, and the contribution of the SOS-network is well in line with these initiatives. The explicit ambition of the Thematic Working Group is to analyse and identify best practice – the aim of the SOS-network is to contribute to this ambition.

The necessity of a closer link between the vocational education and training sector and the labour market that the students will access has been clearly expressed since the European Commission in 2008 launched the initiative New Skills for New Jobs. This initiative has also been included in the Europe 2020 strategy as one of seven flagships, and also the Bruges-communicé referred to the need for involvement of stakeholders outside the vocational education and training sector in order to provide the labour market with employees who have the relevant competences and skills.

The SOS-network targets both areas – the vocational education and training and the labour market that vocational education and training leads to. It has a specific and clear focus on young students/learners with special needs, and it provides practitioners in both fields a wide range of inspiring cases and innovative and success-proven methods and tools beyond access to knowledge, organisations, projects and people working with these areas. What is needed to fight early school leaving and ensuring a good transition to the labour market for students/learners with special needs is a basket of methods, tools and approaches that have been tested and proven successful, easily accessible and applicable in different learning environments. The SOS-network is not pointing to one solution or one approach but is setting up a bouquet of different approaches that could be included in different learning environments. By doing this, the network aims at functioning as the European access to practice-based knowledge and experience that can help practitioners to act when it is necessary but based on a fund of knowledge and experience that has been tried out elsewhere.

