AMBER BRIDGES

INTEGRATING VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION IN EUROPE

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Inclusive strategies in vocational rehabilitation

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Introduction

This series of e-books provides an in-depth look at inclusive strategies in vocational rehabilitation – a process that helps individuals with additional support needs to overcome barriers to gaining, maintaining, or returning to employment. Vocational rehabilitation is a multi-dimensional approach that includes medical, social, and vocational aspects to promote the integration of people with disabilities into society and the labour market.

In this edition of the series, we will look at the nature, aims, and methods of vocational rehabilitation, emphasising individual approaches and the latest academic definitions. This document will serve as a resource for professionals, practitioners, and all those involved in the field of vocational rehabilitation. We will review the different aspects of an effective vocational rehabilitation process – from inclusive education to career management and workplace adaptation. We will focus in particular to the development of an individual rehabilitation plan as the basis of the vocational rehabilitation process. We will provide practical advice and strategies on how to create a plan that meets a person's unique needs, abilities, and preferences, taking into account their social, family, and educational context.

The conceptual diversity of vocational rehabilitation at a national level is reflected in institutional structures, policies, and practices. To bridge these conceptual gaps, we aim to provide the knowledge and tools to foster an inclusive and supportive environment that allows all to participate fully in education, the labour market, and society. In addition, we will focus on best practices and effective communication tips to foster better cooperation between all stakeholders and ensure that the vocational rehabilitation process is successful and sustainable.

Introduction to vocational rehabilitation: definition and objectives

Vocational rehabilitation is part of the measures covered by the broader concept of "rehabilitation". Adjectives, such as "medical" and "social", are also used with "rehabilitation" to refer to different types of activities, objectives, and sets of measures. The European System of integrated Social PROtection Statistics (ESSPROS[1]) defines "rehabilitation" as provision of specific goods and services (other than medical care) and vocational training to further the occupational and social rehabilitation of disabled people.

One academic definition of "vocational rehabilitation" is "a multi-professional approach that is provided to individuals of working age with health-related impairments, limitations, or restrictions with work functioning and whose primary aim is to optimize work participation"[2].

The latest academic definition of "vocational rehabilitation" reads as follows: "Vocational rehabilitation (VR) services are a strategy for people with health-related reduction of work ability to return to work. The services can either aim to restore the work ability to stay in a job that is still available or to reintegrate people into working life after a period of unemployment. The understanding and implementation of VR differ internationally, but there is agreement that VR is a process that optimizes work participation"[3].

ILO Convention No 159[4] states that the aim of vocational rehabilitation should be "to enable a disabled person to secure, retain, and advance in suitable employment and thereby to further such person's integration or reintegration into society". The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)[5] states that: "vocational (or occupational) rehabilitation aims to enable persons [...] to overcome barriers to accessing, maintaining or returning to employment or other useful occupation" (2016). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[6] , the aim of vocational rehabilitation is to "increase the productivity

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[1] European System of integrated Social PROtection Statistics – ESSPROS. Manual and user guidelines. 2016 edition. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3859598/7766647/KS-GQ-16-010-EN-N.pdf (p. 58.)

[2] Escorpizo, Reuben et al. (2011) A Conceptual Definition of Vocational Rehabilitation Based on the ICF: Building a Shared Global Model. In: Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation, DOI 10.1007/s10926-011-9292-6

[3] Sternberg, Annika/Fauser, David/Banaschak, Hannes/Bethge, Matthias (2024): Sequences of vocational rehabilitation services in Germany: a cohort study In: BMC Health Services Research (2024) 24:74, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-023-10499-3

[4] C159 - Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159) https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312304

[5] European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. Rehabilitation and return to work https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/work-related-diseases/rehabilitation-and-return-work

[6] Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) (2013): Mental Health and Work: Denmark https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/mental-health-and-work-denmark_9789264188631-en.html

of people with disabilities by restoring and developing their skills and abilities to enable them to participate in the mainstream labour market".

The conceptual diversity of VR at national level can be seen in the variety of institutional set-ups, policies and practices, as seen in, for instance, Estonia, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden. In countries where the system is not oriented around the medical dimension, vocational education and training is often a core part of VR.[7].

In Latvia, vocational rehabilitation service is a set of measures that, following an individualised assessment of functional disorders and determination of vocational suitability, ensures a new occupation, vocational knowledge, or skills are acquired or renewed, including the acquisition of a vocational education programme at basic and secondary education level and multidisciplinary services for integration into the labour market for persons of working age[8]. Professional rehabilitation is a set of measures that ensure the acquisition of a profession as consistent with the type and severity of functional disorders, and the level of education and qualification previously acquired.[9].

Through summarising several definitions, vocational rehabilitation could be defined as follows:

vocational rehabilitation can be described as a process that helps an individual with additional support needs to overcome barriers, mainly to accessing education or employment, or to maintaining or returning to employment. This process can also include support for social inclusion. The process involves a variety of services that are different for each individual, and can take place in a group or individually. Vocational rehabilitation can be beneficial for people returning to work after a chronic illness, accident, or acquired disability, or for disabled people who have not yet entered the labour market.

Vocational rehabilitation methods, strategies, and components

General recommendations for an effective vocational rehabilitation process:

- Inclusive, supportive education and training that meets labour market needs.
- Proactive early intervention.

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[7] European Commission. Guidelines for Effective Vocational Rehabilitation Schemes (2024). https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3f102797-c8fb-440a-9fa1-4a4bc9286021_en?filename=Guidelines%20for%20Effective%20Vocational%20Rehabilitation%20Schemes.pdf

[8] The Parliament of the Republic of Latvia. Law on Social Services and Social Assistance. https://likumi.lv/ta/id/68488-socialo-pakalpojumu-un-socialas-palidzibas-likums

[9] Social Integration State Agency of Latvia. Vocational rehabilitation. https://www.siva.gov.lv/lv/pakalpojumi/profesionala-rehabilitacija

- A well-planned, individual-focused, strengths-based, holistic, and systematic approach that focuses on empowering individuals to get involved in the labour market.
- Developing and implementing an individual plan, based on joint collaboration in multi-disciplinary teams.
- Effective coordination and communication mechanisms between stakeholders.
- Career guidance and counselling, including considering models, such as *place then train*" and "*train then place*"; providing early work experience and support in the workplace.
- Adaptations to the workplace and work that make it easier for the individual.
- Regular review and adjustment of the individual plan and the required support, especially at times of transition, for example, when transitioning into employment.

Prerequisites for providers of professional development training and education involved in professional development.

Training and education are often, but not exclusively, part of the vocational rehabilitation process. It can take place in a learning environment, such as a college or vocational school, in the workplace, or a combination of multiple environments.

General education/training providers:

- Ensure an inclusive organisational culture/values based on inclusive education.

An inclusive organisational culture is essential for inclusive vocational education/training. This must include respect for the principle of non-discrimination. Assurance and clear and unambiguous communication to signal that learners with special needs or those with different needs or backgrounds (including, for example, learners with previous negative learning experiences) are welcome. An inclusive organisational culture encourages people to apply for training. To provide effective education/training for all learners, regardless of their support needs, inclusive education must always be a core principle of the organisation, reflected in its values. "Today, inclusive education is seen as an 'organisational principle' that underpins the structure and processes of schools. Inclusive education ensures equal learning opportunities for all learners in a rights-based approach to education"[10]. Shared values, a clear vision for the future, a mission, and expectations need to be articulated and communicated to all staff. If inclusive education is not a core value and concept that underpins the work of an educational institution, it will be difficult to consistently deliver it in day-to-day operations.

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[10] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022. https://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications?

- Provide easy-to-understand information on education and vocational rehabilitation programmes.

Information must be accessible to all. Texts describing facilities and courses should not be long or complicated. Easy-to-read descriptions may be considered. Clear, concise texts help potential learners to distinguish what is important to them. Oral explanations may also be necessary. If this information is available online, it must be readable through speech synthesis software for the visually impaired, and material using audio recordings must include subtitles for the hearing impaired.

All education/training providers:

- Ensure clear staff roles and responsibilities.

To ensure effective work and collaboration while supporting learners receiving different types of support, every member of staff of an education provider needs to be aware of their role, the points of collaboration, and how information is shared with other staff. The provider must clearly define the responsibilities of the vocational education teacher, support specialist, group leader/mentor, etc.

- Ensure well-trained and equipped teaching staff to support students.

Teachers must have the training and skills to support all pupils. They need to be appropriately trained and supportive so that they, in turn, can support learners with additional support needs. Teaching assistants must also be properly trained.

Training. Training on how to adapt teaching methods, use different pedagogies and tools/supports is essential to be able to teach students with different needs and support them both pedagogically and emotionally. To ensure that learners are given tailored support and the education/training they need, it is also important to provide training in order to identify additional needs that may not have been identified before the learner started their education/training. Training should also be provided on how to be aware that learning materials may not be accessible to learners with certain disabilities, and how teachers can adapt existing materials so that they can be used by as many learners as possible. This is where external experts who specialise in supporting pupils who need extra learning support can help. They can provide *ad hoc* advice and training[11], advise staff on teaching methods and resources, as well as on the organisation of the learning environment and the general approach to teaching.

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[11] *For tips and ideas, see the content published* by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education https://www.inclusive-education-in-action.org/

Promoting exchange of experience. Give teachers the opportunity to share how they have dealt with different situations, what challenges they have faced, what has worked and what yielded good results, as this mutual exchange of ideas is an effective way to build teachers' capacities. This can be achieved by encouraging participation in networks, providing opportunities to observe other teachers' lessons and job shadowing opportunities in other educational institutions. Strengthening the teaching staff may also mean providing additional teaching or support staff to accompany the main teacher and support the individual pupil(s). The role of support staff, such as teachers or teaching assistants, needs to be clearly defined.

- Provide support from within the school or get external support.

If all services are not available "in-house" to meet learners' support needs, they should be coordinated with relevant external support providers or agencies. In this context, it is important to build relationships with these stakeholders and interested parties.

- Carefully document support processes.

Information, such as early identification of needs, addressing learners' financial debts, support when the learner is in an external working environment, social problems, learner participation, motivation, and other relevant and related information, should be systematically described. Process descriptions should be regularly updated to ensure that they support smooth learning.

- Different levels of training should be made available.

Where possible, different levels of similar subjects should be offered so that the learner can move between different levels of difficulty to reach their full potential. If this is not possible, the education provider should work with other providers offering different levels and, where necessary, support the learner to transfer to another place of learning.

- Ensure that learning material is accessible to all learners.

The training material must be accessible to persons with disabilities, for example, by providing adapted texts where necessary, e.g. for persons with intellectual disabilities or neurodiversity. Online material must be readable through a speech synthesis software for the visually impaired, and material using audio must include subtitles for the hearing impaired.

- Ensuring education that meets labour market needs.

It is important that the provider has an up-to-date understanding of labour market needs and emerging or future requirements for credentials and skills to ensure that the curriculum provides the learner with relevant knowledge and skills. To achieve this, it may be important to develop an understanding of the local or regional labour market and to network with career support specialists. For example, partnerships with trade unions and employers' organisations

or individual employers help to establish direct links in the labour market. It is worth considering the possibility of developing training programmes with employers and social partners to provide a more targeted approach in order to increase the chances that learners will find a job in the future.

- Ensure recognised qualifications.

If the credentials offered by an education institution are not recognised in the labour market, they will be less valuable. Recognition of such credentials can be carried out by the competent authorities, but more informal routes can also be effective, for example if employers approve the curriculum of a training programme. Micro-credentials[12][13] can play an important role in this confidence building process and in ensuring the quality of labour market-driven and inclusive training courses.

- Provide mental health support for the learners, faculty, and staff.

Educational institutions should take steps to support its staff and students towards, for instance, maintaining their own mental health, recognising mental health problems in others, and what to do and what not to do to ensure a safe and supportive working and learning environment. Organising mental health support groups is also useful.

Individual approach to vocational rehabilitation

Individual rehabilitation plan

In general and vocational education institutions, an admission and/or assessment process may take place before an individual education plan is developed[7]. However, it would be helpful if individuals were counselled and prepared to make an informed career choice before this stage. During the admission phase, it is important that at least one support professional – someone with experience in supporting people with additional support needs – is present during the admission interview. This increases the likelihood that potential support needs will be identified in addition to the individual's professional motivation. If the support worker is unable to attend, it is important to ensure that the interviewers are still able to effectively assess the learner, their needs, and potential. The conversation should be based on the documents submitted by the learner, the admission application, and a structured supplementary information sheet to help guide the conversation. As many observations as possible should be made to ensure that the admission decision is data and facts-based. If the learner is not enrolled in the desired programme, possible next steps should be suggested to

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[12] EPALE. What are micro-credentials? https://epale.ec.europa.eu/lv/blog/kas-ir-mikrokvalifikacijas
[13] Micro-Credentials in a nutshell. https://microcredentials.eu/

ensure that the person does not drop out of the potential educational pathway. This could include a referral to a support service provider.

General principles of an individual rehabilitation plan (IRP):

- An IRP should be developed as soon as an individual starts the vocational rehabilitation process.
- The IRP should be developed collaboratively, involving all of the necessary specialists and service providers. The client (learner) must be at the centre of his/her IRP, his/her needs are at the heart of the IRP. The professionals involved usually include academics, educators, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychiatrists, social support workers, mentors, career counsellors, and family. In a situation where an individual is in the process of returning to work, those representing the workplace will involve health and safety experts, human resources managers, line managers, or equivalent specialists.

  If the person needs medical rehabilitation, it is important to involve healthcare providers to facilitate the return to work and the measures needed to do so.

  If the learner is an adult with additional support needs, discuss whether the learner wants their family to be involved in the discussions and development of the IRP.
- It should take into account previous education, work experience, and social/family context.
- A holistic approach to the individual is needed, focusing on social or "soft" skills and independent living skills, as well as psychosocial factors and mental health.
- The implementation and monitoring of the IRP must involve the relevant specialist – social worker, social rehabilitator, case manager, or other specialist.
- Individual needs, abilities, aspirations, and motivation must be taken into account. There are various methods and tools that help the specialist to better understand these aspects or allow the individual to understand themselves more deeply. An approach based on strengths rather than deficits is more motivating and broadens an individual's horizons and ambitions
- The IRP should be regularly reviewed and updated at least twice a year, especially during times of transition (e.g. before starting education/training, starting a job).

If the person has not yet enrolled in a learning programme, the plan should take this into account and include, where appropriate:

- Potential employment opportunities. It is important to discuss employment or options for returning to work at an early stage to ensure that services and training support

people's path to a future career. Career counselling in the context of an individual plan can take place at different stages of the vocational rehabilitation process.

Career counselling usually includes information on different career options, including the type of job and the qualifications needed, as well as practical aspects, such as how to look for vacancies, writing CVs and cover letters, and prepare for job interviews. Other elements of the personal planning process can also be considered as professional guidance, such as setting goals and determining future education or training. In some cases, this support is provided by a career counsellor, but it can also be provided by another specialist in a relevant field. In any case, an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the labour market and potential employers is needed.

- Place then train model in the workplace[14]. This approach can be summarised as follows: "the person is first placed in a suitable job position that reflects his wishes, interests and abilities for work, and then receives training on work-specific skills and broader topics like work-life management. Placement in an ordinary job therefore is not seen as the end-point but as a key first step in successful training"[15]. This model often includes the possibility of working towards a qualification on the employer's premises. It is one of the key elements of the supported employment model to help people with disabilities or other disadvantaged groups to access and remain in paid employment in an open labour market. The basic concept is that anyone can be employed if they want to work and are given enough support. It is based on the principles of individuality, paid work, inclusion in the open labour market, and ongoing support.

Individual placement and support is a specific type of supported employment[16], which includes intensive one-to-one support, a rapid job search followed by placement in a paid job, and support for the employer and the employee in the workplace for an indefinite period. Historically, it has focused on supporting people with severe mental health problems, but it is increasingly being used for people with other support needs, such as people with addictions. This model has an additional focus on collaboration between employment and clinical specialists[staff15].

- **Traineeship** If it is concluded that the place where the learner initially wanted to study is not the best option, discuss other education options. Provide advice and information

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[14] Association for Supported Employment Europe. https://a4se.eu/

[15] European Platform for Rehabilitation, 2022. Pathways to Employment. Analysis of policies and practices for pathways to the mainstream labour market. https://www.epr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Pathways-to-Employment-Analysis-of-policies-practices.pdf

[16] Individual Placement and Support (IPS) interventions to improve employment outcomes. https://www.euda.europa.eu/best-practice/evidence-summaries/individual-placement-and-support-ips-interventions-improve-employment-outcomes_en

on vocational education and training opportunities, including places where training takes place in enterprises. Provide information on specific programmes and opportunities available. In this case, the individual's characteristics and learning style must be taken into account to find the best solution for the learning environment.

- **Entrepreneurship**. Support should be provided throughout the business development process, from idea generation to implementation (helping to plan, revise, and adapt). In some countries, special funding is offered to people with disabilities to make it easier for them to start a business.

- **Occupational profiling**[17] can be viewed as an approach to personal planning that focuses on employability, taking into account an individual's experience, skills, abilities, interests, needs, and aspirations. It "differs from the assessment process that traditionally takes place in rehabilitation programmes, where individuals are assessed in a sheltered environment in the context of specific vocational rehabilitation services"[15].

- **Work trial opportunities.** Consider offering a work trial if this is possible under national law, to give individuals a better understanding of their interests and abilities. Work trials can take place in an enterprise or in a vocational training centre (e.g. training laboratories). Work trials can last from one hour to several days and should be carefully monitored. They help to understand the learner's behaviour and cooperation skills with other learners/workers, ability to work in a team, possible additional support needs, etc. The learner should be given clear instructions about what is expected of him/her during the work trial and how it will be conducted.

- **Specialised work-based learning.** There are models of "on-the-job" training tailored to people with additional support needs, including work integration social enterprises.

- **Another approach to vocational rehabilitation is on-the-job training.** In this model, people are not employed, but receive training and support in the work environment, which can include community work to ease the transition to employment.

- **Functional capacity assessment measures.** They can help to understand a person's physical abilities, which are important for potential future education or employment, as well as how to improve them.

An individual rehabilitation plan should always include:

- the individual's goals (for employment, education and training, social inclusion);
- the timetable and deadlines for achieving the final and intermediate targets;

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[17] DFN Project SEARCH. Vocational Profiling Tools. https://asset.nasen.org.uk/6a-%20Vocational%20Profiling%20Tools.pdf

- a list of steps and measures agreed by both parties to take a systematic approach and avoid misunderstandings;
- a list of all the support measures needed, including for mental health, independent living, social or family issues, etc.;
- where appropriate: the need for pre-employment training, social, "soft" and job search skills development;
- a list of persons responsible for support and education;
- the individual's own responsibilities.

If the individual is enrolled in a learning programme, the plan should include information on:

- learning environment adjustments necessary to achieve educational goals;
- ways of measuring the effectiveness of support measures;
- appropriate training group size.

Before the individual starts the education process

- Provide clear and specific information. Information about the start of the school year or course makes it easier to get started smoothly. When and where to arrive, what to bring, basic rules to follow at the learning facility, information on student accommodation, internal rules, accessibility, public transport options, and other important information, where applicable.
- Ensure a clear understanding of additional support needs. It is important to clearly communicate the needs of learners to all stakeholders (e.g. teachers) to ensure learners are supported and to reduce the risk of dropping out.
- Ensure that support specialists are recognisable and known to learners and staff and are easily accessible. There should be a main point of contact that the learner can turn to when needed to facilitate access to support or information.

Starting vocational education and training

- Support the individual through the adaptation period. Families and other support persons can be introduced with the learning facility if necessary, for example, by visiting (e.g. during open days or by arranging a separate visit). It is important that learners understand the processes and rules not only in writing, but also by discussing them together. Social activities during the adaptation period can help the learner integrate and feel comfortable in a new environment and with peers.

During the education process:

- Monitor and look out for new support needs. Support is more effective for both the provider and the learner if a challenge or a new need is identified early. An internal process with regular meetings involving both teachers and support staff should be developed to share information on the learners' progress and identify problems before they become more serious, and involve the individual's case manager/social worker where applicable. The involvement of parties, including parents and other relatives, also depends on the severity of the problem. Where possible, the individual's family or support persons should be kept informed about what is happening at the learning facility, so that they can be involved in problem-solving if necessary. It is important that all stakeholders (teachers, canteen staff, hostel staff, other learners, etc.) are responsible for the early detection process, so that no signal about the learner's problems goes unnoticed.
- Ensure access to support. The educational environment must provide access to all necessary support services, as well as medical rehabilitation if needed.
- Provide early work experience opportunities after training. The earlier a learner has contact with the workplace, the easier it will be for them to settle into their next job and feel comfortable in their working environment. Ideally, the learner should be given the opportunity to get to know different jobs in different companies. This way, it becomes clearer to the learner what interests them and which job or type of work is more suitable for them. Cooperation between the learner (and their family, where appropriate), the service provider, and the enterprise is essential for a successful work experience.

If the learner is living in a student house/dormitory

- Some learners may not have lived away from their families and may lack skills, such as socialising with others, managing their finances, or handling daily errands.
  For this reason, additional support may be needed.
- Ensure good communication between the learner's support persons, family, and place of learning. To ensure that a person can continue their education successfully and that they receive all the support they need, the staff involved need clear communication between these two environments. This will ensure that any problems that may arise are identified and can be addressed.

For all learners:

- The IRP should be regularly reviewed and adapted with the individual, including taking into account the context, changes in the environment, etc. if necessary. Support and adaptations at the learning facility should be adapted where necessary.
- If necessary, the learner may transfer to a different course, level of curriculum, or even education facility.

For the education provider:

- Provide career counselling regarding employment or further studies.
- Ensure that the personalised transition plan is adapted to the labour market. At this stage, the plan can include information about the learner's skills and knowledge, describing them as an employee.
- The expectations of each party regarding future work should be discussed. The plan should include specific targets for work experience or a job.
- Maintain and develop partnerships with employers. This may include providing employers with information on vocational rehabilitation opportunities for workers with long-term inability to work or trainees with additional support needs, disability, and/or chronic disease-specific support, inclusion, and accessibility.

Recommendations for communication and cooperation with people with disabilities

Persons with impaired mobility

Adapting the environment

Access. All entrances must be equipped with ramps and automatic doors to ensure easy access. The premises must be accessible to people with impaired mobility (equipped with an elevator) or have a wide staircase with grab handles.

Room layout. Furniture must be positioned so that there is sufficient room to manoeuvre. Furniture placement should be planned taking into account movement and orientation.

Toilet and recreational facilities. Ensuring quality access to sanitary facilities and recreation areas, e.g. with adapted toilets.

Communication

- **Speak in a normal voice**. Speak in a calm tone of voice, as you would to anyone else, instead of shouting.

- **Use simple sentences.** Use clear and simple sentences, avoid complex words and phrases.
- **Provide clear guidance.** Be specific when you indicate the next steps so that the other person can easily understand what to do next. Make sure the person has understood the information you have provided.
- **Communicate directly**. Talk to people with impaired mobility in an age-appropriate way. Go directly to them, not to their assistant if they have one.
- **Offer help.** If you are not sure whether a person with impaired mobility needs help, ask directly.
- **Consider accessibility.** When giving directions to a particular place, take into account the distance and whether the recommended route is accessible for people with impaired mobility (check for obstacles, ramps).

Learning process:

- **Offer alternative methods.** Offer online or hybrid learning opportunities so learners have flexibility and can learn at their own pace.
- **Support measures.** Provide advice and support while developing individual learning plans for learners, if needed.
- **Physical activity.** Integrate light physical activities, such as movement therapy, tailored to each learner's abilities.

Persons with visual impairment

Adapting the environment

Contrasting colours. Use contrasting tones for the floors, walls, and adjacent surfaces so that they are easily recognisable. A person with a visual impairment does not always have a total loss of vision – they may have reduced visual acuity, an altered field of vision, impaired colour perception, or difficulty adjusting to lighting and lighting changes.

Labelling systems. Provide tactile and distinctive floor signs (e.g. stickers or curved surfaces) to help navigate the room.

Communication

- **Offer help**. First, ask if your help is needed.
- **Communication and relationships.** Meeting someone who is visually impaired or partially sighted doesn't necessarily mean you have to provide physical assistance – talking is often enough.

- **Introductions.** If you are talking to a visually impaired person who does not recognise you by your voice, introduce yourself by your name and briefly explain who you are. A visually impaired person wants to know who they are talking to and who is nearby.

- **Announce presence.** Inform the visually impaired person whether you are in the room or leaving.

- **Describe the environment.** Talk about what's going on around you: it can be hard for a visually impaired person to understand why everyone is suddenly laughing or where an unusual noise is coming from.

- **Speaking to the group.** If you want to speak to a visually impaired person who is with another person, speak directly to them, either by name (if you know it) or by lightly touching them. This will let the visually impaired person know that they are the one being addressed.

- **Use of language.** Visually impaired people use verbs like "see" or similar to describe their way of perceiving the world, for example, feel or touch.

- **Do not assess a person's visual impairment in relation to their intellectual abilities**, this will prevent many misunderstandings.

- **Conversation style.** Avoid the word "blind", as it can evoke negative emotions.

- **Timbre of voice.** Do not raise your voice when talking to a visually impaired person.

- **Communicating with people with visual and hearing impairments.** If the person is hard of hearing, draw their attention by gently touching their hand. Speak clearly and slowly, without raising your voice or shouting.

- **Accompaniment and orientation.** To help a visually impaired person navigate in the environment, give clear directions, for example: "One metre to your right is...".

- **When walking** with a person with a visual impairment, **be aware of obstacles**, such as thresholds, steps, and changes in direction.

- **Physical contact.** If you are accompanying a visually impaired person, grasp their arm above the elbow or put your hand on their shoulder. Do not push the person forward to prevent falls and injuries.

- **Reaching the destination.** When you arrive at your destination, tell the person about your location and the nearest objects. Inform them who to contact if they need help. Ask if you can leave the person alone.

Learning process

- **Digital resources.** Make sure your learning materials are adapted. Presentations and other texts should preferably be saved in text formats that can be read through a speech synthesis software (Word and PDF are the most common text formats).

Provide access to audiobooks and other digital resources that are adapted for people with visual impairments. Today there are many resources available, and the Latvian Library for the Blind provides great support.

- **Interactive activities.** Let learners explore topics through hands-on and sensory activities.

- **Tactile materials.** Create materials with tactile elements (e.g. curves, textures) and use models to help learners understand concepts.

- **Practical projects.** Initiate projects where students can work in groups and use their senses, including multimedia elements that stimulate the visual, auditory, and tactile senses.

- **A guide dog** is a specially trained dog that helps people with very severe visual impairments to move around and integrate into society. A guide dog can be identified by a special service harness with a red cross mark and a handle on the back for guiding a person. A guide dog has strict rules of behaviour that must be respected at all times by its visually impaired owner and everyone else. Do not disturb, speak to, pat, feed, look in the eyes, or otherwise distract a service dog from their owner while wearing a service harness.

Persons with mental disabilities

Adapting the environment

A peaceful environment. Create spaces with calm colours, warm lighting, and minimal noise to avoid stress.

Clear instructions. Provide clear, simple, and step-by-step instructions so that learners know exactly what to do.

Communication

- **Don't avoid communication.** Many people with mental disabilities have speech and language difficulties, which can manifest in long pauses or incorrect sentence structures. It is therefore important not to switch to other learners or stop the conversation if the answer does not come quickly. Patience and time are essential for effective communication.

- **Talk directly to the person.** Speak calmly and clearly. Ask what methods would help the learner to communicate. If you don't understand what the learner is saying, openly ask them to repeat or rephrase the questions in a simpler way. Avoid abstract words, speak clearly and in simple sentences.

- **Maintain eye contact.** Make eye contact and pay attention to your facial expressions while talking. A neutral facial expression is important, even if you have to wait for a reply. If the person becomes aggressive, it is better to look at his/her face at chin level to reduce tension.
- **Give hope and encouragement.** Be polite and patient, don't rush the conversation. Support the person by using positive phrases and visual cues. If the learner has language difficulties, drawing, for example, can be used.
- **Provide information in a way that is easy to understand.** During the teaching process or in other formal situations, provide information in plain language and clearly explain the material and rules. Speak more slowly and, if necessary, avoid professional terminology and instead explain concepts in a way that is easy to understand.

Learning process

- **Individual support.** Arrange individual meetings/consultations with the teacher or support staff to provide additional support and help.
- **Adjustments to the curriculum.** Offer flexible learning plans, tailored tasks, and work to meet learners' needs.
- **Social skills.** Include teaching topics and practical workshops on social skills and everyday interactions using social stories and role plays.
- **Recognition contexts.** Use learning materials that help learners recognise and respond to different social situations to develop skills and reduce anxiety.
- **Learning games.** Integrate games and play-based learning methods that are appropriate and adapted to learners' skills, therefore promoting positive interaction.

Persons with hearing impairment

Adapting the environment

Visual systems. Provide visual warning systems (e.g. illuminated signals for fire warnings) and/or visually communicate audible warning signals.

Subtitles. All video or audio material must be subtitled so that a person with a hearing impairment can understand the information.

Communication:

- **Communicate with the learner through a sign language interpreter**. The interpreter is a communication assistant, so it is important to make eye contact directly with the learner.

- **Location of the interpreter in the classroom**. It is best for the interpreter to be in front of the classroom, next to the teacher, so that the learner can follow both the teacher and the interpreter.

- **Sign language.** Promote the use of sign language and provide staff who can use it.

- **Teacher posture and lighting.** Standing directly in front of the learner provides better eye contact and the opportunity to see lip movements.

- **Lighting.** Make sure the room is sufficiently lit (the teacher's face, the interpreter's face, and hands are well lit).

- **Choose a comfortable seat.** Let the learner choose the place where they feel most comfortable in order to absorb the information more easily.

- **Speak clearly and slowly**. Use short phrases and pronounce the words clearly. Speaking too fast can make it harder to take in information.

- **Don't talk loudly**. If the learner is using an FM system, there is no need to speak louder – in fact, it can even be distracting.

- **Patience and repetition.** If the learner does not understand you, be patient and repeat the information in a simpler way. Do not lose patience – this is crucial for effective communication.

- **Social inclusion.** Include deaf learners in discussions and activities by asking questions and encouraging their participation without drawing too much attention to them.

- **Using the FM system.** These devices help reduce background noise and provide clearer sound directly into the hearing aid.

- **Using the acoustic loop.** This device allows hearing the sound directly from the microphone, which can enhance the listening experience.

Learning process

- **Supplement lessons with visual materials.** Use plain language, images, tables, and charts to make it easier to understand the information.

- **Virtual platforms.** Use virtual learning platforms that offer live video streaming with subtitles or a sign language interpreter.

- **Practical tasks.** Offer practical tasks and projects that help to understand the topics.

- **Written materials.** Provide learning materials in print or electronic format to make it easier for learners to understand and comprehend them.

- **Discussion groups.** Set up discussion groups using sign language or written recordings, encourage exchange of opinions.

- **Extra time.** The learner may need to be given extra time, written material on the topic prepared in advance, or subtitles when using video material. These solutions should be discussed with the learner before the start of the subject/module in order to find the best solution.

People with autism spectrum disorders and neurodiversity

Adapting the environment

Structured environment. Establish a clear classroom structure and routine to help learners understand the upcoming activities.

Safe zones. Provide rooms or areas where learners can relax and calm down if they feel stressed.

Communication

- **Transparency of information**. Provide learners with clear and structured information about timetables, facilities, and other relevant aspects. This will help them better orient themselves and prepare for their studies.
- **Coherence with other sources**. Make sure that the information provided is consistent with the information on the website and in the leaflets. Avoiding contradictions promotes trust and understanding.
- **Visually clear information**. Send out visually clear material, such as timetables and pictures of the rooms, before the start of the lesson. This will help learners to grasp the information they need more easily.
- **Making contact**. Don't avoid contact with learners. Early discussion about the learning arrangements and requirements facilitates cooperation and creates a sense of security.
- **Point of support**: Create a safe place where learners can go to calm down in case of anxiety. Inform them about these opportunities before the start their learning programme.
- **Trusted person**. It is recommended that one person is responsible for communication with the learner. This promotes more effective communication and helps the learner feel more secure.
- **Mentor's availability**. Provide a mentor at the start of the learning programme to help the learner settle into the learning process. A mentor can provide support and a sense of security.

- **Managing emotions**. Encourage learners' independence by teaching them techniques for managing anxiety and emotions. This will take patience on the part of the staff, but is essential for the development of the learner.

Learning process

- **Sensory processing sensitivity**. Learners with ASD and neurodiversity may be hypersensitive to light, sound, and other stimuli. It is important to adapt the learning environment, for example, by choosing rooms with less noise and less bright lighting.
- **Agenda and routine.** Learners need a clear daily routine, as sudden changes can cause anxiety. When planning the learning process, it is important to take into account possible changes and inform the learner in advance**.**
- **Extra time.** Allow extra time for the learner to get to know the environment and the tasks. This may include extra time to complete assignments or prepare for tests.
- **Clear communication**. Communication must be clear and understandable. Avoid figurative comparisons or jokes that may cause confusion. Give instructions using short, clear phrases.
- **Individual instructions**. Sometimes a learner needs to receive information individually, as information presented in a group setting can be difficult to understand. Provide opportunities to discuss tasks or tests before they are given.
- **Social integration**. Help the learner to develop social skills and engage in social life. This can include group activities or collaboration with other learners.
- **Information about tests**. Announce the dates and locations of tests as early as possible. Provide information on the content and format of the tests.
- **Exploring the environment**. Give the learner the opportunity to familiarise him/herself with the room where the test will take place to reduce anxiety.
- **Reducing anxiety**. Teach relaxation techniques that the learners can use before tests. It can help reduce stress and anxiety.

More information:
"Apeirons" organization of people with disabilities and their friends, www.apeirons.lv
Latvian Association of the Deaf, www.lns.lv
American Psychiatric Association, https://www.psychiatry.org/
National Autistic Society, www.autism.org.uk
Latvian Autism Association, www.autisms.lv
Service Dog Association "TEODORS", www.teodors.org
Recommendations for communication with people with disabilities, Ministry of Welfare of Latvia 2020 https://www.lm.gov.lv/lv/metodiskie-materiali/komunikacija_celvedis.pdf

Universal design for learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach that ensures that learning materials and methods are adapted to the needs of all learners, regardless of their skills or disabilities. Teachers need to use a variety of learning strategies so that every learner can find an appropriate way to learn. UDL promotes the personalisation of the learning process and strengthens learner engagement through a variety of resources, such as visual, audio, and practical materials. This approach not only improves accessibility, but also fosters innovation and creativity in the learning process, as it allows the use of different technologies and tools. As a result, learners feel engaged and motivated because their individual needs are taken into account. Universal design also ensures equity while achieving the learning objectives for all learners.

Recommendations for teachers

- **Evaluate current activities and methods**.
  What teaching methods are already in use? Identify the most effective methods and how they can be improved to meet the principles of UDL.
- **Identify learners' needs.** Explore which learners find it easier to learn and which may struggle. This will help you adapt your learning approach.
- **Flexibility in presenting the curriculum.**
  - **Diversity in teaching.** Provide multiple ways for learners to receive information (e.g. video, audio, written materials, practical activities). This will help to meet the different needs of learners.
  - **Offering choice.** Allow learners to choose from a variety of assignment topics, or even decide what percentage of their mark that will depend on specific assessment options. This increases learner engagement and motivation.
- **Learning and assessment methods.**
  - **Alternative forms of expression.** Offer learners different ways to show their understanding of the content (e.g. videos, comics, or essays). It encourages creativity and individual expression.
  - **Regular feedback.** Engage with learners to get their views on the learning process/pace. Feedback is essential for improvements in the following training period.
- **Think about teaching strategies.**
  - **Evaluate the results.** At the end of training, analyse whether learners achieved the learning outcomes for the module or subject. If not, make the necessary adjustments in the next training period.

- o **Involve learners in decision-making.** Give learners the opportunity to express their views on what they found useful and what could be improved. This approach builds a sense of belonging and fosters cooperation.
- **Use of technology.**
  - o **Use technology tools**. Integrate technology into your lessons to enhance learning (e.g. visual aids or interactive platforms). This can help to stimulate learners' interest and improve the quality of learning.
  - o **Digital tools**. Identify the digital solutions that will help you to facilitate and diversify the learning process in your specific case. Don't be afraid to introduce new solutions.

Physical accessibility

Physical accessibility refers to the adaptation of the physical environment to ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities or functional impairments, can easily access learning spaces and resources. Physical accessibility can include the introduction of features, such as elevators, wide doorways, adapted entrances and toilets, information available at eye level, clear and understandable signs, automatic doors, etc., which are essential for learners to be able to participate in all activities. This also includes providing transport to the learning facility. Physical accessibility also includes the provision of visual and auditory signals for learners with visual and hearing impairments. By ensuring physical accessibility, educational institutions demonstrate their commitment to an inclusive and supportive environment.

Assistive technologies

Assistive technologies are tools and software used to support people with disabilities and functional impairments, enabling them to access learning materials and improve their learning. Educational institutions need to choose appropriate technologies that meet the individual needs of learners, such as Braille displays and books, screen readers, and specialised adaptive tools. Such technologies can help learners with learning difficulties to learn better and improve their academic performance. Assistive technologies promote learners' independence and confidence by enabling them to communicate and participate more effectively in the learning process. In addition, training teachers on the use of assistive technologies creates an effective and supportive environment in which learners can achieve better learning outcomes.

Examples of assistive technologies in the classroom

Speechify and text-to-speech software that captures text and converts it into audio format. This is especially useful for textbooks, PDF reading assignments, and other textual materials.

The software is compatible with Chrome and works on iPhone, Mac, and Android devices. Speechify is commonly used by learners with ADHD and dyslexia.

Kurzweil Education 3000 is a literacy support system for Mac computers and various browsers, equipped with various assistive technologies. The "Speech" function turns text into speech and works in 13 languages. Among other things, it helps students with visual impairments and ADHD. Meanwhile, dyslexic learners benefit from the OpenDyslexic software, which reduces the likelihood of letters being mixed up.

Google Classroom has grown in popularity with the development of online learning and offers a range of performance tools, including speech-to-text, that improve accessibility and learning. The platform is compatible with Kurzweil 3000, as well as Hapara Student Dashboard, which helps learners organise their tools in one streamlined workspace. Google Classroom is currently also being integrated with apps, such as Kahoot!, Figma, and Adobe Express.

A 3D imaging printer is a portable printer often used in educational institutions. The printer heats up a special foam paper to create information in Braille (or other 3D image) in one to two minutes. The printer is also equipped with audio instructions to help visually impaired users.

The Microsoft app Seeing AI is designed for the visually impaired and offers audio playback for various situations. It reads the text as soon as it appears in front of the smartphone camera. For example, when shopping at a store, it identifies products by their barcodes and describes the surrounding environment and its colours. Over time, the app learns to recognise the user's friends and acquaintances, and describe their facial expressions.

Clicker by Crick Software is a writing and reading platform equipped with a complete set of assistive functions. Its mapping function, for example, allows primary school children to create "mind maps" and emoji-like pictograms or charts to help learners tackle reading and writing projects and independent assignments.

MathTalk is a speech recognition software for students with ADHD and physical disabilities who have difficulty using a keyboard. This software understands technical vocabulary and transcribes mathematical notations suitable for trigonometry, algebra, calculus, and even PhD-level courses.

Tobii offers eye-tracking devices that turn a person's gaze into a hands-free computer mouse. To use the technology, pupils with limited motor skills and verbal difficulties simply need to look at their screen, and the combination of an infra-red projector, camera, and machine learning algorithms will help with a variety of everyday learning difficulties.

GoTalk 9+ is a great example of how effective simple technologies can be. This device, developed by Attainment Company", uses a set of buttons and recordings to help people with speech impairments communicate. Each button can be programmed to share up to five different entries, so users can quickly share basic messages with parents at home, peers, during lessons, and with friends during breaks.

Flexible planning and pace

A flexible approach to planning and pace is essential, allowing learners to learn at their own pace and adapt their timetable to their individual needs and difficulties. This approach removes the pressure on learners that can come with a standard timetable and allows them to design a process that is efficient and accountable. Educational institutions should support learners who may struggle to keep up with the rest of the group by offering refocusing, extra time, or alternative learning materials. Flexibility also includes the possibility of using traditional pre- and post-lesson tutorials, online sessions, or combinations of several teaching methods. This approach promotes learners' self-confidence and motivation, as they feel in control of their learning process. As a result, learners who have the opportunity to learn in a more individual and flexible way can acquire knowledge and skills more effectively.

Developing an inclusive curriculum

Developing an inclusive curriculum is important to ensure that all learners have access to high quality and accessible learning content. This includes designing curricula that take into account learners' individual needs and learning styles, offering a variety of materials and activities. Educational institutions need to work together with teachers, professionals, and learners to create tailored learning plans that realise the potential of all learners. Inclusive programmes can include a variety of teaching methods that can help learners to better understand and acquire knowledge, as well as a variety of assessment options. This approach encourages active engagement, promotes social interaction, and helps to create a positive and supportive learning environment. As a result, all learners can receive optimal support and benefit from the learning process.

Designing an inclusive curriculum requires taking into account the structure of the curriculum, including both content and methods, to ensure that all learners are provided with an equitable and supportive learning experience that enables them to succeed, regardless of their background.

Education on functional disabilities

Educating the staff about persons with functional disabilities is critical as it helps educators understand and address the needs of learners. Such training includes an understanding of the different functional impairments and their impact on learning. Educational institutions should provide regular training to keep staff informed and up-to-date with the latest strategies and technologies in providing assistance. Education on these issues promotes a culture of inclusion and helps to create an environment where people with disabilities can participate and feel accepted. An educated staff is able to provide a supportive environment, face challenges, and provide the support needed to help learners succeed. It is important to raise awareness of disability and functional impairments in educational institutions, among both the staff and the learners, so that all learners and staff feel valued and respected.

Benefits of awareness of functional disabilities:

For staff - increases empathy, develops skills, strengthens relationships, promotes diversity.

For learners - helps them understand persons with functional impairments, improves problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills, understanding the needs of peers in the group, and prepares them for more diversity in the workplace and society.

For teaching staff - increases awareness of learners' needs and challenges, enhances pedagogical skills and knowledge about inclusive teaching practices, provides the opportunity to build more trusting relationships with their learners. Teachers feel more competent in managing the group and meeting the needs of all learners, which often leads to greater job satisfaction.

Individual support

Personalised support is an essential part of the learning process, giving each learner personalised help based on their individual abilities and needs. This can include tutorials, extra learning time, or adapted learning materials that are easier to understand and access. When providing individual support, teachers should work with learners to develop personalised learning plans that help them achieve specific goals. This promotes a better learning process and increases learners' motivation. In addition, providing regular feedback to learners on their progress is important to continually check and adapt the approach. As a result, learners feel supported and their full potential is realised as they receive more attention and the resources they need for their educational journey.

Communication and feedback from learners

Communication and feedback are important as they contribute to the effectiveness of the learning process and build trust between the learners and teachers. Regular communication helps learners to express their thoughts, questions, and concerns, ensuring they feel heard and understood. Feedback is necessary to assess the learners' progress and make recommendations for improvement. By offering constructive and positive feedback, educators can motivate learners and help them understand what skills and knowledge they need to achieve their goals. Communication should be open and accessible, allowing learners to participate actively throughout the learning process. This dynamic fosters an inclusive and supportive environment where every learner can express themselves and reach their potential.

Some myths about people with disabilities:

"Disabled means helpless", which can manifest itself in excessive respect, care, and concern, for example, from teachers, staff and the learner's family.

"Disabled means heroic", putting a disabled person on a pedestal and making it harder for them to assimilate and function.

"Unfair advantage" means that learners who have been given extra testing time receive an unfair advantage over others.

The "phenomenon of pervasiveness" is a generalisation arising from a single impairment and assumes that intellectual, social, or other physical impairments also exist.

Some recommendations to reduce barriers:

- Analyse your own experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of people with disabilities.
- Recognise and accept the challenges that learners face.
- When introducing your learning group, be sure to include a verbal, positive statement, explaining that creating an inclusive learning environment is your priority.
- Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration as you treat others.

Peer and fellow learner support

Peer and fellow learner support is an important element in promoting learners' social skills and creating a positive learning environment and culture. It involves learners interacting and working together to learn and solve problems, which creates a willingness to share information and learn new skills. Educational institutions should create opportunities for learners to build friendships. Peer and fellow learner support encourages learners to be confident in their

abilities and provides the necessary emotional support. It is important to stimulate collaboration that helps learners gain new perspectives and understand other ways of approaching the learning process. This kind of support not only promotes academic success, but also improves learners' social integration and emotional well-being, creating an active community where all learners feel accepted and supported.

There are three ways to use peer and fellow learner support to develop the educational and social needs of learners with disabilities in educational settings. Each of these models requires pre-planning, which includes choosing the right type of strategy, using it at the right time, possibly with personalised results that are aligned with the objectives of the lesson.

- Cooperative learning – a strategy used to reinforce skills taught by the teacher. This method of learning allows time for practice, revision, and enables learners to use higher-level thinking skills.
- Peer and fellow learner support is another strategy that helps people to learn in an educational environment. This approach usually involves older learners providing learning support to younger learners.
- Comparative modelling is another type of support that can be used to help learners master academic knowledge, processes, and group routines. It also provides the group teacher with opportunities to use peers and fellow learners to help give guidance, clarify instructions, and provide social reminders with little or no break in the lesson cycle. It is a great way for peers and fellow learners to provide appropriate behavioural models for learners who need to improve their social skills.

Benefits for all learners:

- Develops friendships.
- Increases appreciation and acceptance of individual differences.
- Increases awareness and acceptance of diversity.
- Respect for all people.
- Includes all learners in the society.
- Opportunities to learn activities by practising and teaching others.
- Improves academic performance.
- Meets the needs of all learners.

More information:
Rose, DH, Harbour, WA, Johnston, CS, Daley, SG and Abarbanell, L. (2006). Universal design for learning in postsecondary education: Reflections on principles and their applications *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19* (2), 135-151.

Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning. Inclusive curriculum design. https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/mind-gap-toolkit/what-works/examples/curriculum
Disability Awareness Activities for Students and Teachers: Enhancing Inclusivity in Education, 2024. https://top5accessibility.com/blog/disability-awareness-activities-for-students-teachers/
Communicating with students with disabilities. https://www.oswego.edu/accessibility-resources/communicating-students-disabilities
Inclusive Schools Network. Peers Supporting an Inclusive School Climate. https://inclusiveschools.org/resource/peers-supporting-an-inclusive-school-climate/

Case studies

In the previous chapters, we summarised the theoretical foundations and the practical tools for inclusive education, such as universal design for learning, assistive technology, and personalised support that can help ensure that every learner receives quality education. Now it's time to take a step further and be inspired by real stories that reveal the impact of these principles on the lives of learners. In the following pages you will read the stories told by learners and SISA staff who have faced different challenges but, thanks to the inclusive approach at SISA College, have managed to overcome these difficulties, develop their potential, and succeed. These stories are about personal growth and inspiration, but also about the realities and challenges faced by students and teachers. They are a reminder of the importance of continuing to improve and develop the work of SISA and the education system as a whole to ensure equal opportunities for every student in Latvia, taking into account their individual needs, interests, and abilities.

SISA employee story (1)

If you've read the Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren's book "The Adventures of Emil from Lenneberg" or seen the Riga Film Studio's film "Emil's Mischiefs", you may remember the episode with the birthday party for little Emil. During this scene, a great feast is already been prepared, and his parents have left to meet their distinguished guest in the city. Meanwhile, Emil has invited all the residents of the poor house to feast, only to find out that the evil commandant is mistreating them and taking away their food. I have a similar experience. I was about the same age as Emil (six years old) when I stayed with my aunt in Alsunga during the summer. She had made pancakes for the afternoon snack – they were big, delicious pancakes, fried on a special pan, similar to waffles, called "hunger pancakes". In the church garden next to the house, the residents of the local nursing home (like Emil's friends from the poor house) were doing some gardening. I thought they looked so sad and malnourished that I generously shared the delicious pancakes (none of the adults were there at that moment). I brought the pancakes out one by one and they were so eager to take and eat the pancakes that pretty soon there was nothing left from the big stack on the plate in the kitchen. Fortunately for me, this story, just like Emil's, had a happy ending and I did not get in trouble.

It is probably my first conscious moment of empathy and inability to look the other way. Is that how I got into social work? I don't know... Many other life situations followed. When I was younger, I worked in a completely different field. Though in the 90s I was working in the media, my colleagues used to joke that I was like a "social worker". I can't even tell it was a coincidence or a deliberate choice, but I learned about caritive social work as I expanded my knowledge. But I continued with my regular work in various media, as well as trying my hand at PR. Then 2020 came. I replied to a job listing and applied for a job as a social worker. I found myself in a great environment – the Social Integration State Agency – and got to apply my theoretical knowledge (and maybe my passion) in practice. At first I thought I would just give it a try, but my colleagues encouraged me. They said I was good at this job. This is my fifth year as a social worker. I am very proud of this institution and my work.

Most of all, I am inspired by my colleagues and the students themselves. I don't even remember if I have ever received so much attention, warmth, and kind words of gratitude. It pushes me to continue my work.

How does the role of a social worker help disabled learners feel supported and encouraged to learn? Many studies and lengthy publications could be written on this topic. There are many situations, and each one is different. One of the most important things, in my opinion, is loving people. Treating everyone with genuine love. As difficult as it may seem in some cases. It is no coincidence that the word "caritive" is linked to the word "love" and to "caritas", which means "charity". And love, just like charity, must not be burdensome, controlling, or cruelly demanding. This might be the essence of caritive social work – seeing the person who needs support at a given moment, being able to offer it in a non-intrusive way, and inspiring them to do something within their abilities.

I read once in some paper that the level of development and prosperity of a country is determined by the extent to which it is able to unleash the potential of each individual. Here at SISA College, we are exactly on this path of helping everyone who studies here to realise and develop their potential. That should be the main goal, and social workers are the ones who can provide the necessary support to the students. We must identify when motivation is decreasing, help restore it, or help learners understand what's getting in the way of moving forward.

We sometimes face difficulties, as support is often only effective if a systemic approach is taken. Positive change cannot be achieved by focusing only on the learner and ignoring the influence of his or her family. Often, it is the family that has problems, and this prevents us from achieving our goals. Whether it is a dysfunctional family or a complete lack of a family environment, forcing individuals to spend their lives in an institution. Family members are not

always ready to cooperate. Each case is very different. When they return to their previous environment, their situation may deteriorate again. It creates a vicious circle. It is gratifying when you have managed to break it. Sometimes we also help family members to see the disabled person from a different perspective.

When working with students in the education process, it is important to objectively assess when it is necessary to motivate them to not give up, and when it's best to work on their health in order to be able to continue. It is still difficult to measure success, as sometimes social work can take several years to bear fruit. And it can only be done in a team with other professionals and colleagues. Today, I am happy for each group of students who, despite various difficulties and setbacks, have come to tears of joy at graduation and have concrete plans for integrating into the labour market.

SISA social worker

SISA employee story (2)

How did you become a teacher?

My teaching career stated many years ago – I've been working at a school since 1987. I loved stem subjects at school, but I never thought I would become a teacher. But when our beloved maths teacher fell seriously ill, he said to me: "Diana, you will become a teacher!" At the time, I thought it was totally impossible. But after I visited him at the hospital, his words lingered in my mind. When I graduated, I chose to study at the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at the University of Latvia. In my final year, I had to decide whether to pursue a scientific career or work in a school. The opportunities were equal, but after weighing up the pros and cons, I decided that working in a school would be more exciting and interesting. That's how my teaching career began.

Experience working with students

Having worked in schools for more than 30 years, I have experienced countless situations. The work is very diverse because every day is different, every class is unique. Working with young people always makes me feel young. I have to keep up with the latest trends in order to understand their perceptions and goals in life. That way I keep my own momentum and am able to understand them better. To avoid being seen as a "dinosaur" by my students, I regularly learn about the latest technologies and creative approaches.

The most rewarding moments for me are when my students express their appreciation for how they have learned new skills. These are the real victories – the moments when I see the joy in their eyes and how proud they are of their achievements. Being able to help them discover their potential is the most rewarding thing for me.

Major challenges and solutions

Working with young people today is not easy, as they are used to digital tools and processing information very quickly. They have a different mindset and perception. One of the biggest challenges is to keep them interested and to create lessons that are not only useful, but also creative and exciting.

Adapting to learning materials and methods

With an increasing number of pupils with special needs, it is important to adapt the teaching materials and methods. This can mean using aids, such as larger text or special keyboards, as well as praise and encouragement to help pupils feel safe and confident. When adapting the learning materials, I try to ensure that they are accessible to all pupils, including those with special needs. This requires both adapting the material and developing an individual approach. Special needs students need to feel included, so I am always ready to adapt lessons to their individual needs. But the biggest challenge is to keep their attention and interest in the learning process.

Inspiration and motivation

While working at the College with disabled students, I have seen the power of human will and the ability to overcome obstacles. My dad was badly injured in a car crash and developed Group 1 disability when I was still young. This experience helps me to understand how people with limited physical abilities feel, and I use it in my work with students. Having experienced these challenges myself gives me strength and confidence that we can all overcome obstacles if we have the will and the support.

SISA teacher

SISA client story (1)

I was 42 when, after several surgeries, I was long-term unemployed, I had just been granted a disability benefit, and various training courses were being offered for the unemployed. I would never have thought of starting serious studies if it hadn't been for this offer to take a vocational aptitude test at the SISA College. That's how I enrolled in the "Human Resource Management" part-time study programme in 2008. I had very minimal computer skills, lost my maths skills, had to recall a lot of information and force myself to learn again. I would like to say a big thank you to my teacher Solveiga Serkova, who both renewed my maths skills and taught me advanced math, and helped me to learn everything regarding computers and writing a qualification paper. There were students of different ages, so Solveiga started with Year 7 math curriculum and quickly made us recall everything we had forgotten up to and including Year 12 so that we could fully learn advanced math. As a result of teacher Solveiga Serkova's

talented work, we were all able to learn the highest levels of advanced math. She is definitely my TEACHER, in all caps.

Studying at the SISA College made me look at my problems from a different perspective, because my peers all had different ages and health conditions. After graduating from the College in 2011, I didn't find a job in my profession, but the knowledge I gained at the SISA College helped me and I started working in a library. After that, I started my studies at the Latvian Culture College and graduated as a library information specialist. I now work as a librarian in a vocational school library, but all that might not have happened if it hadn't been for the push that SISA College gave me.

SISA client story (2)

I am a mother of five and a grandmother of two grandchildren. I have Group 3 disability since 2014. Most of my free time is spent with my children and my partner, but when I'm alone I like to walk with (or without) walking poles by the sea or in the woods. I also like to study, learn new things, read books, draw, make gifts for friends and family, and help others. I currently have two hobbies – floral design and esoterics. I would really like to learn English and learn gift wrapping, the skills to be able to work at a cash register, and graphic print. I used to study at the Eleja Secondary School, after Year 8 I studied at the Riga 2nd School of Food Industry to study as a deboner-sausage maker, but I didn't graduate because my mother was in poor health. Then I went back, except this time to the Eleja Night School, and graduated Year 11. I worked as a chef's assistant for two years. In 1994, I completed a men's hairdressing course at SIA "Feniks". In 2005, I took a beauty care course "Face and Body Skin Care", and in the same year I took a course "The Basics of Floral Design" and "Winter Floral Design". In 2006, I graduated from the Jelgava Secondary School of Crafts as an assistant baker-pastry cook. In 2012, I took a "Computer Science" course (no prior knowledge). From 2019 to 2020, I worked as an assistant for people with disabilities. In 2020, I studied at the International Tarot School and learned to read tarot cards. In 2021, I took a "Practical Magic" course at the same school, and in the same year, a course on "Pouring and making decorative, ritual, and esoteric candles". In 2022, I enrolled at the SISA Jūrmala Vocational Secondary School, and picked the florist profession. I loved studying at SISA. I encountered professional teachers, supportive staff, and caring educators. There is a very friendly and family-type atmosphere in the school. The most difficult thing for me was leaving home and getting to the school. Once I got over that, I realised that things were never going to be the same again. My life is about to change drastically and it changed very quickly. Throughout my studies, knowledge and development in all areas were the most important thing for me. I studied, took an active part in the school life, and organised events with others. It was all very difficult, but I always had people around

me who encouraged me, supported me, and believed in me. Of course, there were also challenges, like getting used to the schedule and settling into a new social environment. It was hard to sit all day from 9:00 to 21:00, especially since I had to go to driving school afterwards. The next day, it was hard to concentrate during the lessons because I was very sleepy. Days like these were particularly exhausting. When the practical driving lessons started, I had to skip college lessons and I didn't like it. Of course, there were other difficulties and unpleasant situations, but they were all part of the experience.

Many thanks to our teachers Ilze and Aiga for their support and encouragement! I would like to give special thanks to our social worker Inesīte: "Thank you so much for your support, encouragement, and for always being there for us – defending us, inspiring us, and always giving us good advice (and sometimes a well-deserved spanking). Thank you for motivating me to keep going and get my diploma, even when I thought I don't have the strength to continue."

Learning and living at SISA was not as easy as it might seem. Suddenly you are away from your normal environment, far away from home and family, and constantly thinking and worrying: *How are they doing over there?* You try to be in two places at once, but it's hard...

But there were also many beautiful, happy, and exciting moments, like events, parties, excursions, sports competitions, and much more. The bad is quickly forgotten, but the good is remembered forever. SISA will always be a place that will remain in my heart, because it is where I made new friends, grew and developed both personally and professionally by learning a new profession.

I am now a florist – I make bouquets, wreaths, decorations, and various floral arrangements to order. One of the highlights was when I was still at school, during my traineeship – that's when I met my partner. After graduation, at the end of October, I was already on a plane to Tenerife. I was beyond afraid of flying... But the desire to meet my other half was stronger. It was a great two-week tour around the whole island, and I got to see all the plants I'd only seen in the botanical gardens before. It was amazing!

Back home, I completed Latvian language courses and started studying law with a private tutor. I also learnt welding and pipe cutting, and in my spare time I helped a friend draw ventilation and install heated floors. I would never have thought I would be able to do something like this!

Thank you SISA for helping me discover so many different possibilities! My biggest dream is to open a small flower shop-workshop where people with disabilities can not only be employed, but also learn a profession and sell their creations. I am proud of every step I took, as each one brought me closer to my goal.

SISA client story, interview (3)

Please tell us a little about yourself – what are your interests and recent highlights?

I am 34 year-old man from Jūrmala. I am interested in psychology, science, and entrepreneurship. My latest highlight was the opportunity to travel to France, Spain, and Italy.

What are your hobbies, if any; how do you spend your free time? What skills would you like to develop, what would you like to learn?

My hobbies are computer systems and programming. In my spare time, I find new information on topics that interest me, learn new skills, and do sports. I want to develop my communication skills, learn how to present myself confidently and become more confident in myself.

What and where did you study before SISA? What did you study at SISA? What did you like and dislike most about your time at SISA? What do you remember most about life at SISA? What has been the most important thing for you during your time at SISA? What were your biggest challenges at SISA and how did you overcome them? Did you receive any help and support to deal with them?

Before SISA, I had received general secondary education. I took two training programmes at SISA. In 2021, I graduated as a computer systems technician. I chose this programme because it was short and I like building my own computers.

In 2024, I completed my Level 1 higher education qualification as a programmer.

During my studies, I highly appreciated the remote learning option, which helped me successfully complete my higher education. I appreciate the positive attitude of the teachers and the possibility to get the necessary support. However, there were also difficulties – in particular, uncertainty about the curriculum. Until the very last moment, it was not known how long the programme would take [author's note: at that time, the programme was awaiting accreditation, which changed the amount of credits and therefore the duration of the programme] and when I would graduate. I would have liked more support from the programme leader in the development of the qualification paper.

The most important thing in the learning process was the understanding and supportive attitude of the staff. Career counselling and support in finding traineeships helped.

My biggest problems are public speaking and establishing new relationships. I have tried and am still trying to overcome them, thanks to the support of the in-house psychologist. He helped me change my attitude and perception of many situations. Seeing a psychologist once a week helped me a lot, not only during my studies but also after I graduated.

What motivated you to continue your education to complete your studies and get your diploma?

After graduating as a computer systems technician and researching job offers, I realised that I didn't want to provide the constant customer service that was often required in this field. And I lacked the Russian language skills that many of the job postings required. I was motivated by my interest in programming, my desire to pursue higher education, and the hope that it would help me achieve my future goals and aspirations.

Was there a specific teacher or person who supported and inspired you throughout your learning process? How did they help?

All the teachers and SISA staff were supportive and competent in their areas of expertise. I had a lot of personal contact the in-house psychologist who helped me to understand myself better and taught me how to successfully overcome psychological difficulties.

Did the environment at SISA help you to develop and achieve your goals? How?

SISA helped me not only to acquire new technical skills, but also to develop my social skills and some of my coping skills. All of this enabled me to successfully complete my higher education.

What do you do professionally now? Do you work and where?

Given the current job crisis in IT and the fact that most job offers require at least two years' experience, I now work intermittently as a truck driver, which is not related to my professional training.

What are your goals and aspirations for the future? What are you most proud of, what have you achieved in your educational journey?

In the future, I plan to start my own business, where I can use the knowledge I have gained in programming. I have learnt a lot about business and psychology on my own.

Any comments on your current profession and training at SISA?

I recommend you take advantage of the SISA free training!

SISA client story (4)

Please tell us about yourself, your interests, your highlights!

I have always been a seeker of knowledge and a non-stop learner – I can't just sit still, I always have to be on the move. I have a dog that I take out for walks three times a day, and regardless of the weather, it ensures regular exercise. Currently I am a volunteer at the Liepāja Society for the Blind, where I teach classes for both children and adults with disabilities.

I was also offered a fellowship, but I refused because the pay is very low. I chose to volunteer because that way I can also take basket-weaving classes. And when I need to, I go to the Day Centre.

Last year I moved from Liepāja to Valka and started working for the Red Cross, as well as in the DayCentre, where I work with people with mental disabilities, including schizophrenia.

My main task was to lead the morning circle, which aimed to encourage thinking, movement, health, courage, and openness. Each day I would develop a specific topic and we would discuss topical issues. At first, people were not used to speaking up and resisted taking part, but eventually they started asking questions themselves: "When's the circle?"

I always conclude the morning circle with an exercise, focusing on particular on finger exercises to engage both hemispheres of the brain. We also did a lot of walking, but some found it difficult because their priority was food and it was not easy to persuade them to go outside.

In addition, I taught beading, which was difficult for many people because not everyone there could count. However, I take an individual approach to every individual, because I believe that we need to feel people, as each person needs their own approach. We also did felting and made paintings and animal figurines together.

Last year, I also learned about the psychology of numbers and learned that my number is 2. Geminis are people who feel with their entire body, perceive things deeply, and are natural diplomats and psychologists. Maybe that's why it was easier for me to work with people with mental disabilities.

Tell us about your education, where did you study?

For many years I worked in a kindergarten as head of the service department, and I was working at a computer. When my eyesight deteriorated, I retrained and started working as a masseuse. I studied at the Riga Stradins University for two years, learning massage techniques and doing internships in hospitals and rehabilitation centres in Riga, where I was very well prepared for the job.

I have now given up my job as a masseuse because it is affecting my eyesight. However, I really enjoyed giving massages – I also massaged children and babies, and worked in a clinic. My lifestyle is changing and I don't stay in one place; I'm always looking for new opportunities and challenges.

How was your time at SISA, was it valuable, what did you gain?

Even discovering this opportunity was very valuable. It's a shame I will soon retire and will no longer be able to attend SISA. I didn't go to SISA to learn specific skills, but to experience change and gain something valuable. During the vocational training, people were very supportive, but there were teachers who didn't trust me.

If there are two people with a visual impairment, each of them will be a completely different person. The same is true for other conditions – it is wrong to put everyone in the same category by saying they are not able. I wanted to train as a florist, but they wouldn't let me. However, later I realised on my own that this would be impossible, because in floristry you have to be able to match colours and make bouquets, which would be difficult for me. So I chose to learn gift wrapping.

At the beginning, it was very difficult for me to get into the learning process because I didn't know my surroundings. But my teacher Raimonda helped me by arranging how to get to the shop. The first month was difficult while I got to know the environment, but by the end I didn't even want to leave. We were also tought by Teacher Bāne [ed. note: floristry teacher] and I can give great feedback about her, she worked very hard with me, she accepted me the way I am, I think she saw my dedication, no matter how I see it, I paint and I try. I really liked Ilze Bāne's lessons – everything was well planned, there were no delays, no time was wasted. I wanted the programme to be longer [ed. note: the programme takes 818 hours to complete], as soon as you start something, it's over.

I received a lot of attention from all sides during the training, and I think it helped that I had my dog Sebastian with me. The carers were also very helpful. SISA is located in a very beautiful place, surrounded by beautiful nature, and that is a huge benefit – you don't have to worry about food or other daily needs, you just have to take what is given to you and appreciate it.

In my free time I sang in a vocal group [ed. note: SISA vocal group "Spārni"], I really liked it. Initially I was refused the pool, but when the training came to an end, I finally got the chance to use it.

Another thing I really liked about SISA was the psychologist Edvarts, talking to him was really valuable. I took advantage of this opportunity and he helped me a lot to deal with my fears and insecurities, especially about moving around.

What are your future goals, your next move?

I received a call yesterday [ed. note: the conversation took place in February 2025.] and got offered a job at the Red Cross in Valka, with an even higher salary. Now I am tempted, because I need to decide what to do by 1 March. It is difficult to find options here in Liepāja, and I think that the diagnosis often casts a shadow over the person. The first question is: can

you really do this job? There are two people with the same diagnosis – one can do it, the other cannot.

There are partially sighted and visually impaired people who don't leave home at all because they are afraid of not being accepted or they don't know how to get from point A to B. They need to find like-minded people to help them get around, even to go outside and turn a corner. I'm surrounded by people all the time, friends and relatives. I think that if I was withdrawn, disgruntled, and had no interests, then nobody would want to see me either. What matters is who you are as a person, how open and ready you are to be with others.

What are you most proud of, what are your achievements?

When I was younger, others often decided things for me – where I should study, what was good for me, and what wasn't. If I were starting over, I would definitely choose to go to university for a programme-related to working with people.

I am most proud of my children. All three of them have good families, they have their own children, I have grandchildren, they have a good education – what more could a mum ask for? It really is beautiful.

What is your suggestions or wishes?

It is very difficult, but we must not divide or isolate people. The teachers and staff need to be empathetic, feel for people, work hard, and give the best support to the person in front of them.

Conclusion

This e-book "Inclusive Strategies in Vocational Rehabilitation" is designed to serve as a practical and informative resource to help promote inclusive approaches in vocational rehabilitation. We hope that this resource, which covers both theoretical foundations and practical suggestions, will provide useful ideas and methods to support individuals with additional support needs to integrate into the labour market and society.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the students, teachers, and staff who shared their stories. Your honesty, views, and real-life examples provide invaluable insights into the challenges and successes of the vocational rehabilitation process. They serve as strong evidence of the importance of inclusive practice and a personalised approach.

We also thank everyone who contributed to the development of this e-book and implementation of the project. We hope that this material will be a useful resource for everyone working in the field of education, helping to build an inclusive and supportive society in which every individual can reach their full potential.