Description of an example of successful national/local VET programmes for learners with SEN in Denmark

1) Short abstract

The AspIT programme was initiated 6 years ago through the SASTS- pulje a 3 year government grant dedicated to funding innovative projects. Following this period the programme was financed on ordinary terms. It came about as a response to the "STU "USB"(2007) regulation, which required that people with special needs who can not follow mainstream educational system should have the right to 3 years of tailored upper secondary education. This requirement would realise the objective of "education for all".

The programme takes as its point of departure the appreciation of the strengths of people with Asperger's Syndrome. It provides the learners with the opportunity to develop high level IT skills that meet the demands of the labour market for highly skilled IT workers, with a view to enabling learners to find a job in this market.

The AspIT develops learners' talents whilst taking into account the special learning needs of the group, as part of a method entitled "focused talent" (fokuseret talent). The programme is provided by five vocational colleges in Denmark who cooperate closely with a number of selected IT companies.

2) Highlights / Uniqueness

The AspIT programme is unique in that it is specifically designed for young people with Asperger's Syndrome. It is, according to its providers, the first IT programme of its kind in the world. It grew out of strong collaboration among many different stakeholders in the Danish VET system: the Danish Ministry of Education, the National Centre for VET, Vejle Regional Development, the National Institute for Evaluation (EVA), the national interest organisation for autism (Landsforeningen Autisme), the national knowledge centre for autism (Videnscenter for Autisme), Region Southern Denmark and E-learning Børsen (a private company), families and schools. The AspIT programme is learner- centred personalised education/ training; it stresses the importance of the physical environment by adapting the classroom and, in some cases, the work place, to the needs of students; it provides structured teaching in small classes where each student has its own working station, learns to use new technologies and can choose a physical activity to carry out twice a week.

In the academic year 2010-11 there were 45 learners enrolled the school, aged between 16 and 25 years old, making up 8 classes of 5 - 6 students. The majority of learners have either Aspergers or ADHD. The programme combines school-based teaching and work placements in a company, which is supported by continuous guidance of the individual learner in the form of education counselling. The feeder schools are both mainstream and special schools, from which learners are pre-selected on the basis of their capabilities, competences and the needs of the labour market. Before the learner is admitted to the programme, a committee of persons from the municipality assesses suitability. This committee also provides the funding necessary for the learner's enrolment in the programme. Following the committee stage, the learner's abilities are assessed over the course of 6 weeks to see if they fit the AspIT criteria. After the learner has been selected, the programme commences. Terms of 6 weeks are followed by end-of-term evaluations.

The programme follows the Dual training system, i.e. training at school, training in the company and "Hothouses" (real job tasks carried out by the students in school). The learners' work placements follow the "SCRUM model", whereby they work on projects in two week blocks, following which their progress in the project is assessed. As is normal in the Danish VET dual system, each employee learner has a mentor who works alongside the pupil and can take on the more tedious and routine tasks. This also benefits the colleagues; only up to a maximum of 30 minutes support from colleagues is needed per day. There is continuous follow up with the students and information meetings with parents are held on a regular basis. These meetings help parents to cooperate with the municipality and can provide them with the assistance required to effectively support their child's education. A governmental body complaints board is also available for pupils and parents to lodge complaints if and when they disagree with the decisions of the municipal committee.

The teachers/staff either have an educational background in IT or have received training on supporting learners with special needs; these competences do overlap to some extent as the IT teachers are informed on special needs and vice versa. There is also ongoing in-service training for all teachers. The underlying principles adhered to by the teachers are the recognition of learners' strengths, the appreciation of the individual learner and respect and dialogue. By the end of the programme, the young people have acquired both IT skills and further skills, with a strong focus on social competences, which should help enable them to live independently and participate as full citizens. In turn this will make it possible for them to complete an IT qualification at a higher level.

3) Availability of evaluation data

The AspIT was launched as a pilot project funded by the Ministry of Education. The National Centre for Evaluation (EVA) evaluated the project throughout the project phase. The evaluation dealt with the process and the content of the project, aimed at providing feedback on the project. Three evaluation reports are accessible (in Danish only) at (www.eva.dk/projekter/2006/aspit) and describe how the project developed over the three years. Overall, the evaluation was positive and the companies, learners and parents provided positive feedback. On the basis of the EVA evaluation, the Ministry of Education has extended the programme. The aim is that all learners succeed in either finding a job or going into further education after completing their training. 80% of former students are currently employed in the company where they completed their training.