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**REPORT OF INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN SZCZECIN
(POLAND) DEVOTED TO THE PROBLEM OF
“MENTALLY DISABLED PERSON ON LABOR MARKET”**

This international conference was organized in Szczecin on January 25th, 2005, by Szczecin Branch of Polish Association for Persons with Mental Handicap. The conference and a public debate were held as a part of the program “Promoting Integration of Disabled People” co-financed by The National Fund of Rehabilitation of Disabled People and as an aspect of a project “European Social Model – Employing Disabled People. Examples of Good Practice of UE Countries and Promoting Commonwealth Initiatives” co-financed by the European Committee – General Direction of the Department of Education and Culture in Brussels.

The goal of the conference was promotion of the idea of integrating mentally handicap people into the labor market and promotion of good practices related to this issue in EU countries. The event has attracted numerous professionals in the field of creating labor opportunities for mentally handicap people. The speakers – psychologists, pedagogues, sociologists and, above all, handicap people – represented Germany, Great Britain, France, Sweden and Poland.

The conference was opened by Barbara Jaskierska, Chairperson of the Board of PSOUU Association in Szczecin. The mentor of the debate was Professor Anna Firkowska-Mankiewicz. During this one-day event, 7 lectures were delivered by the invited speakers.

Krystyna Mrugalska (represented at the conference by Mirosław Jagiełła – Chairman of Association in Kołobrzeg) presented in the lecture entitled “Work and Employment of Mentally Handicap People in Poland. Barriers, conditions, forms, expectations” the issue of work and employment of mentally disabled people in relation to basic human rights, to psychosocial

needs of man and to his potential. Taking to account pragmatic viewpoint of the author, the information on the activities undertaken in favor of employment of mentally handicap people in Poland, including problems related to these issues, was particularly interesting.

The necessity of undertaking planned systematic and complex actions (such as an organized educational program, training, development of staff handling social and professional elicitation), which was emphasized several times, deserves a special attention. The implementation of such actions is blocked by an outdated approach to mentally handicap people who are seen as persons who need constant aid, while many of them (depending on individual development restrictions) is able to work.

The barriers making employment of mentally handicap people impossible referred to in the paper, were errors in legal statements on the level of handicap, unclear regulations related to employment of handicap people, and other legal and institutional obstacles. It was highlighted that there is a progressive improvement of these unfavorable conditions, e.g. the activity of various institutions including PSROUU.

Arnold Wessels (France) delivered a lecture entitled "Employment of Mentally Handicap People in France. The role of Entraide Universitaire in this endeavor". The speaker characterized institutions such as Center of Aid Through Work (CAT) and other units acting within Entraide Universitaire. He presented the operations of workshops employing the disabled and Centers of Distributions of Indoor Labor. A special attention was given to a model of remote labor, which offers new professional opportunities to handicap people (to people with movement, sight and hearing deficiencies and to people who require special medical treatment). Remote labor enables a flexible and individualized professional (re)integration. What is impressive, is seeing a handicap person in relation to social root causes of the handicap.

Hanno Latki (Germany) in his thesis "Policy of Employment of Mentally Handicap People in Germany" presented a program, whose basis is finding and maintaining employment. After a 2–3 years' individual preparation (with an aid of a trained assistant), a handicap person is directed to a workshop where s/he can develop professional skills. Having found employment (often with an aid of a local Labor Office), handicap people work 3 hrs a day for which they get remunerated. During the period of employment, which is also a period of professional stability, specially trained assistants help and accompany the disabled. As a part of this program, a hotel giving employment to 50 handicap people was opened.

Huw Daves (Great Britain), Chairman of the Employment Support Association, gave a lecture "Employment of Mentally Handicap People in Great Britain". He characterized numerous strategies and programs implemen-

ted in Great Britain, which either directly or indirectly help and support mentally handicap people.

The policy of employment of mentally handicap people depends on decisions made at cabinet-ministry level. The audience could learn of the system of operations of institutions such as Ministry of Health (which plays major role – nationally – in social and medical care planning, and which creates opportunities of labor for mentally handicap people), Ministry of Labor (the leading role in employment policy and in assignment of financial resources to the unemployed, and also in implementation of programs such as Welfare to Work, New Deal, Work Step and other), Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Education (which develops policy of education of youth and adults, and which finances youth guidance – e.g. “Connexions” program), Office of Prime Minister and Vice-premier. The final conclusion, however, was sad – in spite of numerous initiatives, less than 10% of mentally handicap people get employed.

Again, the role of supported employment, which is a model of support based on individualized help, was highlighted. The goal of such aid is enabling employment and providing any required help to enhance an effective contact of the employee and the employer, in spite of the existing institutional, legal, moral and social obstacles.

Key elements for supported employment are faith and patience, as problems which are being faced cannot be solved over one day.

Gunnar Sandstrom (Sweden) in his thesis “Employment and Preparation to Employment of Mentally Handicap People in Sweden” presented his experience of a psychologist employed at a labor office in Gotenburg, where he worked with people of IQ 50–70 and IQ 70–85. The procedures and systems operating in the labor office referred to are used in Sweden nationwide.

There are institutions which, focusing on small and medium companies, help the disabled to find work on free labor market. The selection of a proper profession for a given mentally handicap person is made taking to account this person’s interests, abilities, preferences and potential, and also basing on information provided by profession counselors employed by schools for the disabled.

The attendees of the conference were particularly interested by the notion of “supported employment”. The idea is to find a probationary employment for the disabled (contract of employment for the period of 6 months, which should be followed by an undetermined contract). A counselor supports the employer and the candidate. The counselor supports the person employed temporarily to enhance their performance during the probation period and to guide that person towards a stable employment. It was stressed that work is indispensable for handicap people to boost quality of their lives.

Peter Mattson (Sweden) gave a lecture on “Employment of Mentally Handicap People and Activity of Grunden Media (GM)”, where he presented an association which aims at enabling mentally disabled people to participate in social life in full dimension, and at implementing the idea of equal opportunities, meaning for the disabled life as good as that of all other people. The members of the association are only disabled people. The association acts with help of well trained assistants and of administrative staff experienced in the fields of education, employment, housing etc.

A special attention was given to educational activities and to training in radio and video technologies. The classes chosen by a disabled person are adjusted to their individual needs, disposition and interest; they enable a handicap person to exercise their potential while working. The only division is made taking to account the actions performed as work; what counts is what you do not who you are. As a sample of the activity of GM the speaker presented a video developed and turned only by disabled people, which amazed the audience.

The attendees were impressed by the idea of “supported employment” in Sweden; yet, even a greater enthusiasm and admiration was raised by a project of a Support Group Resort (Foerdergruppen) of Lebenshilfe. The project was presented by Sabine Noack (Volker Ahrens Germany) in the thesis “Workshop Activities of People with Limited and Serious Handicap on Free Labor Market”.

The goal of the project was to set the disabled participants in enterprises on free labor market, enabling them to undergo vocational training and to integrate them under labor conditions.

The authors of the project expected development of the participants in the areas of personality, social behavior, professional capabilities and skills, and modification of behaviors. Success was noted in all the above areas.

The enterprises were selected for the project taking to account their locations. The requirements posed by the companies were analyzed to accommodate the skills and needs of the participants of the project. The workshops were preceded by a thorough preparation of the participants to their prospective work (e.g. Getting them used to being outside their Resort). At work, their labor assistants aided the participants. In their feedback, the employees expressed their satisfaction resulting from work with the participants of the project and they declared a deeper understanding of handicap people.

What is worth noticing, is the fact that this was the only project of that kind implemented in Germany. Another important fact – the integration of the participants has exceeded the time framework of the project.

Most of the theses presented referred to legislation concerning disabled people. All the lectures stressed the role of approaching the disabled as

people who deserve life as good as the one we live. Another aspect highlighted was adjusting the labor site to the needs, possibilities, preferences, interest and potential of the disabled.

These interesting and moving lectures were followed by a debate, which was a great opportunity of presenting one's comments and conclusions related to the issues presented. The media patrons of the event were TVP 3 Szczecin and a local newspaper Kurier Szczeciński.

Taking to account the methodology and organization of the event, the conference and the debate were a great success. The tag line for the conference could be as follows: "The world is pushed forward by people who do not know that pushing it forth is impossible"¹.

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**SPRAWOZDANIE Z MIĘDZYKONFERENCJI W SZCZECINIE
(POLSKA) DOTYCZĄCEJ PROBLEMU "OSOBY Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ
INTELEKTUALNĄ NA RYNKU PRACY"**

Międzynarodowa Konferencja w Szczecinie zorganizowana została dnia 25 stycznia 2005 r. przez Polskie Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Osób z Upośledzeniem Umysłowym. Celem konferencji była popularyzacja idei integracji osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną na rynku pracy oraz promocja dobrych praktyk w tym zakresie wśród członków Unii Europejskiej.

Konferencja zgromadziła wielu specjalistów z zakresu tworzenia miejsc pracy dla osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną z Niemiec, Wielkiej Brytanii, Francji, Szwecji, Polski i, przede wszystkim, osoby niepełnosprawne.

Najbardziej interesujące prezentacje uwieńczone zostały debatą medialną, na której można było publicznie ustosunkować się do zagadnień poruszanych podczas konferencji.

¹ Materials of International Conference on "Mentally handicap Person on Labor Market", January 25th, 2005, Szczecin.