

How to support disadvantaged young people to become  
successful in education and work

# A GUIDE

## FOR SUCCESSFUL MENTORING



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# INTRODUCTION

This guide is based on the methodologies of different organisations and activities they have implemented in their common initiative in the project *'Find your way to the world of work'*. The aim of the project was to support and enable equal access to quality education and employment for disadvantaged youth in four European countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Spain). Quality employment is interpreted as legal employment in the primary labour market, in positions matching the educational level of the individual. The aim was to share various practices of the organisations, further develop the methodology of each partner and develop new and innovative methodologies. The target group of the project was disadvantaged youth aged 15-29, who have completed their primary education.

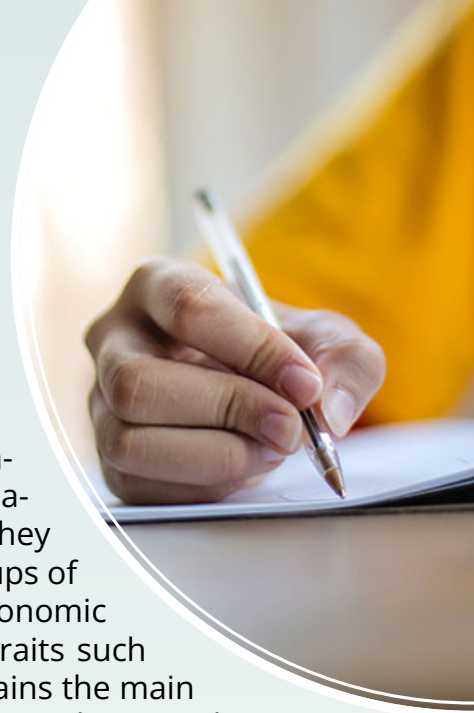
Disadvantaged youth, especially Roma face multiple disadvantages in accessing secondary education and employment: weak soft skills and professional knowledge/skills, poor career orientation, lack of access to marketable professions and quality secondary education, high drop-out rate at secondary school level, access to only low-quality vocational education, lack of geographic mobility, low motivation, self-esteem and other soft skills, discrimination in the labour market, and a lack of social capital among employers and employed peers.

The project aimed to support young people to better access and complete secondary school education, with a focus on post-compulsory education and vocational training, the transition from school to work, as well as encouraging employers to diversify their workforce with disadvantaged employees and helping schools to better support disadvantaged students.

The development work was strongly though not exclusively built on mentoring. Mentors focused on building real partnerships with the communities, families and individuals, as opposed to the often hierarchical and oppressive relations disadvantaged youth experience from many social actors. Many of the activities for the youth have been based on less formal educational methods, and have been motivating and joyful, ensuring very different experiences than what the formal educational institutions can provide. We strongly believe that employability skills can be improved also by indirect methods that are tailored to the interest of these marginalised young people.

This manual is aimed at transferring the knowledge and experience collected during the 4.5 years of project implementation. We would like to contribute

to the professional development of everyone who works or plans to work with disadvantaged youth, helping them to be successful in their education, to achieve their dreams of acquiring a profession they like and a job that provides decent income, joy and satisfaction.



Chapter 2 briefly summarises our opinion on the main obstacles disadvantaged young people face in accessing good educational opportunities and searching for quality jobs and why they need support in these processes. It describes the target groups of our project in terms of age, educational level, social and economic background, geographic location and touches upon softer traits such as soft skills and competencies. The chapter also briefly explains the main barriers and difficulties disadvantaged youth experience in their educational and early employment career.

Chapter 3 describes the profiles of mentors involved in the project in terms of educational background, skills, attitudes and competencies. We have outlined the initial expectations of our partnership towards the mentors when hired, how they were selected and what professional support they received during the project.

Chapter 4 describes in detail the various interventions and actions of the long-term mentoring process applied in the project: The approaches, methods and tools that were applied to recruit and motivate the mentees of the project are explained, as well as the methods and channels of communication when reaching out to potential participants.

The most important characteristics of the mentor-mentee relationship are also explained here, including recurring dilemmas in the mentoring work.

As the development of skills appeared in many forms, mentors played an important role in this field. Individual and group mentoring, free-time and other informal activities for skill development are described in addition to new forms and approaches in the work of the mentor when answering challenges associated with the COVID -19 pandemic.

You can learn about how and why mentors established partnerships with various local parties, such as schools, families and employers.

Mentors supported the educational careers of participants by facilitating the choice of secondary schools, preventing drop-outs, providing learning support for improved school performance, and motivating participants to continue post-compulsory studies. They also facilitated employment opportunities by channelling participants into further studies, including hard and soft skill training.

Career orientation by the mentors developed realistic self-evaluation, facilitated career planning, and supported the choice of schools and training courses. They organised other tools for career orientation, such as company visits, open days and networking with employed peers.

Job seeking was supported by mentors in various forms: identifying relevant jobs, looking for job openings, facilitating job applications as well as helping with the selection, contracting and initial phase of employment.

Mentors also helped in a range of other issues hindering education or employment.

We hope this material and the shared methods, good practices and lessons learnt will help the work of other colleagues and organisations working in similar fields, supporting young people.



# 1. WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO WORK WITH DISADVANTAGED YOUTH TO IMPROVE THEIR ACCESS TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND LABOUR MARKET?

The target group of the *'Find your way to the world of work'* project was 15-29-year-old disadvantaged youth, who have completed primary education, in the four countries covered by the project (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Spain). Among them, the project paid particular attention to Roma youngsters, which make up a significant proportion of the NEETs<sup>1</sup> and disadvantaged youth in the participating countries.

Disadvantaged youth, and especially Roma, face multiple barriers and disadvantages concerning education and employment.

Their participation in education is hindered by geographical disadvantages since many live in underdeveloped regions and settlements that do not provide a wide range of good quality educational services. Disadvantaged regions and small settlements mean access to quality secondary education is also difficult – in rural, smaller towns, the vocational schools available only offer education in a limited range of professions. Further aggravating the situation, these are the schools that often teach less marketable, less competitive professions. Schools further away, which would necessitate daily travel or dormitory placement are less accessible due to financial reasons and poor public transportation. They are also often perceived by Roma and disadvantaged youngsters and their families as frightening, alien and distant. Facilitating conscious choice of profession and providing orientation in career choice in such circumstances is often rather challenging.

Differences in participation rates are already noticeable by the significantly lower rate of kindergarten/preschool attendance of Roma children for example in Bulgaria. Undoubtedly, weaker early childhood development leads to less developed key skills when entering primary education. In other countries, such as Spain and Hungary, Roma children tend to drop out of education prematurely, around the age of 15-16, when they reach the compulsory education age. Teenage mothers also drop out of education before they acquire a profession - a significant issue for example in Romania.



Family background can also contribute to low motivation for schooling and failures in education. Poorly-educated parents and peers provide little support when youngsters need to overcome challenges in school. Parents sometimes build less effective cooperation with teachers and other educational staff, therefore the support network behind these youngsters is not strong enough. The Covid pandemic also exacerbated the difficulties of low-educated parents in helping their home-schooling children in their studies.

Public education in the participating countries tends to focus on skills - such as linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities - that often require more effort to develop for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, while other competencies (e.g.: artistic, social, etc) are not valued by the formal education system. In some countries, the mother tongue of children from different ethnic backgrounds differs from that of the mainstream or official teaching languages - such as Romani in Bulgaria and Romania, or Hungarian in Romania.

Teachers usually do not receive adequate training to work in a multicultural environment and teach diverse classes, often further compounding the failures and frustrations of their disadvantaged students.

Roma children and youth attend segregated schools in a rather high ratio, a fact, that not only raises serious human rights issues but leads to significantly worse learning outcomes.

The Covid pandemic highlighted another, increasingly important aspect - the access to and use of new technologies. Having IT equipment, internet access and knowledge of the use of IT tools proved to be an indispensable element in participation in education and also in being able to exploit many labour market opportunities.

Going through such a difficult path in education leads to weaker hard skills in the main subjects and insufficient professional knowledge. But other, soft skills - valued highly by the labour market - such as cooperation, motivation, self-esteem, communication, etc. are not only insufficiently developed properly in school but weakened by failures in studies, conflicts with peers and teachers, random choices of professions, and so on.

Consequently, these youngsters face multiple challenges when entering the labour market, reflected by the significantly higher unemployment rates of disadvantaged youth, especially those of Roma origin.

Discrimination towards Roma as well as weak diversity inclusion measures affecting Roma are still very strong factors in the labour market of these countries.

Disadvantaged youth very often enter the labour market at an earlier age than the general population, which already implies a lower educational level as compared to their mainstream peers. The fact that many of them leave school before completing secondary studies. i.e. before acquiring at least a

professional qualification highlights one of the major setbacks as regards their competitiveness in the labour market.

Young people might have strong social networks – family, friends and acquaintances -, however, these networks reflect the social reality they live in and usually do not build links to people who have good quality, stable jobs, work in competitive industries or who have completed post-compulsory education. Conscious career choice and job search are hindered by the lack of role models and even more by the lack of social network capital.

Another tendency – more specific to Romania and Bulgaria – is the outward migration of the better-skilled labour force - including disadvantaged and Roma youth - to more developed European countries, exacerbating the problems employers and support organisations face in their home countries.

It is probably rather obvious from the aforementioned data why the situation of vulnerability and inequality of Roma and disadvantaged youth requires intervention in the field of education and employment and therefore why we work with these target groups. Our general objectives are further supported by overall European policy aims, such as e.g.: reflected by the EU Roma Strategic Framework stating that “promoting their equality and inclusion is not only important in terms of fundamental rights but also has clear economic significance” and “ensuring that Roma people can deploy their potential to contribute to the economy and society, in general, will lead to better social and economic outcomes for all.” However, most of the countries participating in the present projects are not pioneers in this field, for example, Hungary and Bulgaria are among the European countries with the lowest GDP proportion dedicated to labour market policies.

All project partners have broad and relevant experience concerning improving the educational and employment chances of disadvantaged youth, especially the Roma. Against this background, partners from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Spain worked hand in hand in this project to address the challenges faced by the target group by supporting and enabling their equal access to quality education and employment.

This publication focuses on the mentoring process. So why is mentoring so important and what does mentoring focus on?

Mentors aim to provide support that other actors around these young people cannot fulfil.

- personalised approach: focusing on the personal needs, values, and potentials of the young people, creating an open, honest environment in which discussion is possible without external expectations
- bridging the two worlds – the worlds of the school and the workplace often seem distant and demotivating for many of our mentees. Their



peers and family members have similar perceptions. So, someone coming from a different environment might understand and respect their circumstances, challenges, joys and values but at the same time translate the expectations, values, needs and interests of the schools and employers

- ensuring positive feedback, the experience of success for young people who previously encountered more failures and negative feedback than positive, therefore developing self-esteem and realistic self-knowledge
- support in practical issues, such as applying for a course or searching for a job,
- facilitating such experiences, which develop the competencies, strengthen empowerment, and widen their knowledge of the labour market as well as their perspectives.



## 2. MENTOR PROFILES

This chapter describes the main qualities project partners found essential for mentors working with disadvantaged youth. It also briefly describes their main scope of work, the selection process leading to their hiring as well as the preparation and support they have received during the project

### Main duties of the mentors

While the actual work environment of the mentors and organisational setup were quite different for each partner, the main duties of the mentors were rather similar.

One of the main responsibilities of all mentors was to disseminate the programme on a local level and recruit potential participants. Recruitment was usually followed by a preliminary assessment of the needs, interests, motivation and skills of the new mentees.

Mentors designed individualised mentoring plans, development plans, goal definitions in the mentoring process and the action plan leading to their achievement. They had to monitor and regularly assess progress.

Mentors could decide if their mentees would need and are motivated to take part in informal skill development activities and/or more formal training sessions, either for soft or hard skill development. Mentors had the autonomy to search for such courses and to organise some soft skill development processes within their scope of work.

Mentors had an important role in supporting career orientation, job search and employment of their mentees, so having up-to-date knowledge of the local labour market was very important. In some localities, it was the mentors' task to contact and establish relationships with potential employers and organise or facilitate company visits. They also had to search for job offers and support mentees to do it on their own.

Mentors also worked hard to prevent school drop-outs and to help drop-outs return to education through building cooperation with schools and teachers. Since the participants' family background played an important role in facilitating or impeding their educational success and employment, most mentors had the important task of building trustful cooperation with the families.

They organised a broad range of activities and programme: leisure-time activities for recruitment, motivation and trust-building, soft-skill development events, and individual and group mentoring activities.

Mentors often had to help mentees with life issues not strictly connected to their education or employment, such as family conflicts, housing, mobility, etc. while having to maintain the boundaries of their established mentoring role.

### Main expectations towards the mentors

The main expectations towards the mentors had been described in the open call each partner launched when looking for new colleagues to be hired as mentors.

Regarding education, most organisations required higher education in relevant fields of Humanities (such as Psychology, Pedagogy, HR, etc.), some required only secondary education, focusing more on field experience. Regarding the mentors' quality of professional work, there seems to be no significant difference between those with a higher academic degree and those with secondary education in case the latter possessed sufficient skills and had ample field experience.

Possession of various skills, attitudes and personality traits is essential for the mentors.

The ability to communicate effectively with a wide range of audience is essential, as mentors need to establish trustful relationships with parents and teenagers, young adults, as well as with teachers, school management, employers and other professionals.

Mentors must be able to build trustworthy relationships with a variety of people and be open and understanding toward different opinions, problems, interests and aims of their mentees.

Working with disadvantaged and/or Roma beneficiaries necessitates the mentors to have a positive attitude towards diversity, to understand the differences between the value systems of different groups, and to show curiosity and respect for the traditions and habits of mentees and their families.

They must be able to react sincerely and genuinely to the challenges, behaviours, and achievements of their mentees, with a non-judgmental approach.

Flexibility is very important both in being mobile, being open to working flexible hours and most of all being able to flexibly react to the changing needs and motivation of the mentees. Furthermore, they have an important role in defining and safeguarding the basic framework of the mentor-mentee relationship, thereby modelling responsible relationships in the labour market.

Mentors should have a nice, enthusiastic, and balanced, personality that is attractive and approachable to young people and have genuine trust in the potential success of the mentees. Humour, empathy, credibility, honesty and kindness are appreciated by young people.

Mentors should be able to empower young people and distinguish situations where help and support are needed and where building mentee autonomy and empowerment is the adequate response.

It is beneficial if mentors have some knowledge of the specifics of the mental development of young people aged 15 and above as well as experience and knowledge concerning the situation, problems and challenges of Roma in their respective localities.

Mentors must be able to plan, analyse and control their work and identify the individual and group needs of the young people they work with. They should also show coherent behaviour - although every situation and person is different, mentors should behave coherently in similar events with different mentees. Coherence supports the emotional safety and the responsibility of the young people as well as the credibility of the mentor.

Successful mentors have a natural inclination to engage in young people's lives, help them make difficult decisions and to support them in realising their potential. Mentors should be prepared to engage in a mentoring relationship for the duration of their mentoring contract, and neither abruptly end it, nor prolong it endlessly.

Mentors who demonstrate respect towards the young person and acknowledge their abilities and right to make choices gain the trust of their mentees and the privilege of providing guidance and advice. The ability to give positive feedback in a relevant and sufficient manner is also important.

Mentors should be active listeners, making a conscious and concerted effort to be fully engaged in the moment, to really understand each other.

Mentors must be innovative and practical in reaching out to and supporting mentees. The ability to work with interactive methodologies is an important factor in the engagement and motivation of disadvantaged youth.

### Previous experience needed

Most organisations required or appreciated some previous experience of mentor candidates.

It was essential in all cases to have sufficient experience in a relevant field, such as youth work, mentoring, individual or group development, or non-formal education. Experience in working with young people and in particular with young people from vulnerable backgrounds was also required.

Other experience was also advantageous. Knowledge of the local educational system and its stakeholders, and previous cooperation with local schools obviously helped establish the necessary network in the project. Knowledge of the local labour market, its needs and opportunities, having established links to local employers, and having worked with employment services and adult education organisations were all valuable assets.

Prior experience in providing mentoring services, career guidance or counselling helped the fast adaptation to the project expectations. Experience in career orientation and in supporting the job search and employment of disadvantaged young people is definitely an advantage. It is not essential but has an added value if the mentor is familiar with specific methods of helping professions, and if they have experience with non-formal or informal training methods.

The profession of the mentor could also play an important role in their mentoring work. In Hungary, some mentors also worked as teachers in secondary schools. Some of them recruited mentees from their network of students while others refused this because they did not want to mix their roles of mentor and teacher. Having worked in fields that are relevant for their mentees or having established connections with employers is certainly a good base for facilitating the mentees' job searches.

### Language skills

Depending on the country-specific environment, some organisations preferred mentors with specific language skills. Mentors in Romania, hired by a Hungarian-speaking organisation had to also speak the majority language of Romanian, while Romani-speaking mentors had been preferred in Bulgaria.

Since the project had been implemented in a transnational framework, it was useful but not required for mentors to speak English.

### Method of selection

All partners launched an open call for finding and selecting new colleagues. The selection followed the usual process of evaluation of CVs and interviews. One partner also asked for short written materials from shortlisted candidates to assess their experience in conducting mentoring and their approach to recruiting disadvantaged participants.

### Supporting the work of the mentors

Initial preparation of mentors took place in various formats, such as training, consultations with senior staff, and receiving written guidelines. Ongoing support of the mentors' work received great emphasis in the work of all partners. All partners held regular consultations between senior staff and the mentors, some organisations held semi-formal training sessions



on certain topics, monthly workshops with mentors and other members of the team, had regular case consultations, and provided internal or external supervision. Some of these were focused on specific topics, for example how to help mentees to write CVs, search and apply for relevant positions or developing new methods for online mentoring during lockdowns.





# 3. INTERVENTIONS AND ACTIONS IN THE MENTORING PROCESS

## 3.1 RECRUITMENT OF MENTEES

The recruitment aimed to establish the connection to the potential target groups, provided information about the project, established interest towards the activities of the project and motivation to join and finally recruit participants to the project.

### Channels and means of communication with potential participants

The project used a variety of channels and means to spread information about the project among its potential target groups. The intention was to explain simply and clearly what the project consists of, its benefits for the mentees and the requirements to be able to participate. The recruitment phase aimed to show the whole project and its content, starting with the focus of interest of the potential participants. It was also important to:

- make the project visible through social media and social networks
- understand the motivation and expectations of the potential mentees toward the project and their employment or educational goals
- establish cooperation with various stakeholders to help recruitment and referral.

Partnership building with vocational high schools was one of the main methods to involve relevant stakeholders in the project. Class visits were used in all localities to present and promote the project by providing information to students about the services offered, and opportunities to work with a mentor, career counsellor and employers. These short events usually offered the opportunity for the potential participants to meet and get to know the mentors personally and understand the main approach of the project. In some cases, schools could also connect the project with their alumni, therefore helping to reach out to older participants who had already completed their education and were working in the labour market.

Partnerships were built with other stakeholders such as educational or labour offices, community centres, childcare homes and municipalities, to present the project, distribute promotional materials (brochures, business cards and posters) and call for cooperation and referral of potential participants.

It was also effective to cooperate with community organisations in the targeted (ethnic) neighbourhoods or with organisations working with a similar target population. Recruitment activities were sometimes organised at venues of leisure activities as well.

Contact with the families and a trustful partnership with parents was very important in the recruitment of younger – school age – participants.

Activating the network of the local mentors was one of the most effective methods since most of the mentors had previous experience working with young people in their localities.

Similarly, peer recruitment or the snowball effect was very effective. Members of vulnerable communities who were already participating in the project were encouraged to promote it among their peers and in their communities and to invite potential participants to it. In some localities it was the most effective method to involve participants, as the mentees themselves promoted the project opportunity to their peers, for whom they were the most credible persons. Friends, classmates, and family members were invited.

Group dynamics had a somewhat unexpected role in recruitment. When a more-or-less random group of young people were invited from a locality, often the sympathy-aversion relationships, friendships and unfriendly relations made the organisation of events and group formation difficult. Some people would not come to an event they previously considered attractive if somebody they did not like was in attendance or would only want to attend with a friend.

However, this phenomenon also helped recruitment to a certain point, where young people recommended the programme to each other and they themselves brought in people they knew. Of course, this made it much easier to organise the groups, because it was a pull factor for the participants. This is how we ended up slowly recruiting all three brothers from one family, as they gradually all reached the age of eligibility because they saw the opportunity the mentoring process had given the older brothers. Or whole groups of friends were mentored because they had recommended the project to each other.

However, the mentors need to be aware that this method could easily deprive the mentees of the opportunity to develop by learning to adapt to new terrains, and to be especially careful in ensuring the mentoring events focus on mentee development and not on their friendships.

Various recruitment events have been organised within the framework of the project, such as free or pilot training sessions. In some localities, 1–2-day job seeking courses were organised for final-year high school students with free access for any student. After the training, participants who needed support in their job search joined the programme for further services. Similar open events were also organised where various soft skill methods were piloted, so young people had the opportunity to experience an interactive, joyful skill-development activity, gain insight into the approach of the project and then decide whether to join as a participant. Events organised in a given community are often aimed at involving well-known key people in the community, such as a respected student, sportsperson, journalist or priest.

Some leisure activities and excursions served as very low threshold opportunities for getting to know the programme, and the staff, gaining positive experiences and boosting the engagement of potential mentees.

The project organisations also aimed at publishing the basic information about the project by various means. Featuring it on various social media platforms – Facebook pages of partner organisations or on those of particular neighbourhoods in cities where the project was implemented, in Facebook groups that focus on job seeking in the respective regions. Publishing information in other online or printed media and placing informational/advertising materials at public places (snack bars, cafes, grocery stores) in the respective local neighbourhoods to be picked up by the visitors.

Some organisations attended public events organised by other organisations working with people from vulnerable communities and promoted the project among them or provided information materials for them to distribute among their users.

Since the implementing organisations usually ran several projects in parallel, recruiting participants from other projects was also possible.

### Important features of communication

- Clarity about the personal benefits that can be obtained from the programme, adapted to the information channel (virtual or face-to-face) and the type of activity (group or individual).
- Clear information on the functioning of the programme and what can be expected of it, the requirements and expectations regarding the participants, as well as logistical aspects
- Direct language, avoiding technicalities, and adapted to the people addressed.
- Transmitting confidence and trust, mainly from the mentors assigned to the project. – Participants are guaranteed that they will be assisted by ex-

perienced professionals who know and understand the needs of Roma/ disadvantaged youth.

- Clear role of each of the actors involved in the project (mentees, families, schools, NGO professionals).
- Mutual responsibilities – the mentees should be active in the partnership.

### Content of the recruitment materials

The specific content of information on the programme to share in the recruitment process had to be fully understandable by the potential mentees. It included the following aspects:

- The mentors accompany the mentees on their employment or education pathway: searching for a job, training to get a profession or access to certain positions, support for completing secondary education or re-entering the official education system.
- The characteristics and objectives of the project are explained as a response to the current employment situation and the social and economic demand for at least basic and preferably higher levels of education, development of skills and specific vocational training.
- The importance of formal salaried jobs is emphasised.
- Information that the project cooperates with employers, schools and other employment programmes.
- Information that participation in the project is free and voluntary service is available, and there are visible benefits in participating (possibility of accessing tailor-made training, being able to prepare for selection interviews, being called for different job offers, etc.).
- Besides the practical information these materials also included visual elements – such as photos – and used youth-friendly language to be attractive for potential mentees.

### Strengthening motivation

One of the most serious problems in working with disadvantaged young people is their low self-esteem, weak social/transferable skills and unrealistic expectations towards the labour market. Therefore, it is of key importance to organise motivational meetings with successful young people from the community (both mentees in the project and others), bringing together current and potential future mentees.

It's important to see what the motivation of each mentee is when joining the programme. It can be a clear employment goal – to find an appropriate job –,

and an educational aim – to reach better school performance – but this can also be less articulated – the need for someone who listens and cares about their personal problems, the wish to join a community, the possibility to take part in interesting programme, etc.

Individual and/or group counselling and mentoring, intended at building a realistic image and self-esteem, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and building a vision for personal and professional development are necessary and mandatory prerequisites for further work with young people. Building mentees' motivation takes place in several stages, with many agents of change being involved in the process - mentors, local coordinators, and other stakeholders, each of them providing expert help and psychological support to ensure optimal opportunity for graduation and more successful job retention.

Different types of motivations should be distinguished. Some participants arrived in the programme with clear, articulated goals – such as finding a job, successfully finishing school, participating in a training course etc. However, such aims might be far away for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They might be attracted to the programme by enjoyable activities – such as leisure activities, community building programmes, or summer camps as the first step. These activities play important roles in strengthening engagement, building trust, boosting motivation or as a reward for fulfilling certain tasks. When the involvement of the participant is strong, more serious development goals are easier to set and reached by long-term mentoring, training, etc.

## 3.2. IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

Mentoring is a relationship between the mentor and the mentee, which is conceived as a planned process, agreed upon between the mentor and mentee. Its actions respond to the needs and expectations of each participant. The path is conceived as a pedagogical process designed to bring about a change from the existing to the desired situation. The mentoring relationship might develop and change during an extended period and therefore it needs constant cooperation of the parties.

An essential characteristic of the mentor-mentee relationship is to provide the mentee skills, confidence and motivation to achieve better results in their personal and professional development. Strong emphasis is placed on the mentor-mentee relationship in building trusting relationships and developing a mentoring process that aims to develop skills and combine them with personal and professional development.

Our experience shows that mentoring provides the most effective results when it is based on an ongoing, long-term relationship; when it is built on an atmosphere of trust, support and mutual understanding that enables the mentee to develop their potential in a safe environment. Clear frameworks and rules of the process which are understood and respected by both the mentor and the mentee contribute to this protected milieu.

Mentoring should always aim for the mentees to reach autonomy in their activities. In this sense, the mentors must avoid creating dependence that hinders the progress of the mentees and rather put them in the position of taking responsibility to act and make decisions.

The content of the mentorship, how the cooperation works, the tasks and responsibilities of both parties and the timeframe of the mentoring are fixed in mentorship agreements.

In our project two types of mentoring have been used:

- individual mentoring between one mentor and one mentee, and
- group mentoring, where one mentor works with several mentees.

### Duration and phases of the mentoring

The timeframe of the mentoring could be decided by the mentor and the mentee quite flexibly, depending on various factors. The timeframe of the mentoring should be tailored to several factors that are determined as the two parties get to know each other – such as personal characteristics, abilities, interests, goals, expectations, decision-making skills, accountability/responsibility, etc.



In some cases, when the aim was clear and focused, a short mentoring session could support for example the finding of a suitable job, while in other cases the process might have taken years.

In the case of school-aged mentees, where the main aim was related to educational achievement, the school year was usually a clear time frame. Career guidance and mentoring for employment could also last several months but such cooperation is usually shorter.

The originally set time frame should be managed with considerable flexibility. In cases where important aspects change in the life of the mentee, the originally set goals are modified, and the strategy needs to be altered – in these cases, the framework of the mentoring should be flexibly adapted, including its time frame.

Mentoring work should focus on the mentee and/or group of mentees and should be based on several milestones:

- Analysing together the situations and aims of the mentees and fixing the tasks of the mentees and the interventions the project can ensure for them
- Active and regular participation in mentoring and other development programme
- Regular evaluation of activities, results and mutual feedback. And if necessary, altering the aims or the activities the mentee/mentor will do, and the interventions the mentee participates in
- Closing the cooperation.

Within these frameworks mentors have very diverse duties.

### The main tasks of the mentor

The mentor's responsibilities include a wide range of activities, including:

- Organising meetings and activities for the mentees. During the first meetings, they discuss interests, expectations, and experiences and negotiate basic issues such as confidentiality and frequency of meetings.
- Setting mutual expectations with the mentee/group;
- Encouraging the mentee(s) for dialogue and equal attitude;
- Preparing a development plan with clear and achievable goals. Involving the mentee in decision-making by aligning the individual plan with the mentee. Mentoring can define short, medium and long-term goals, as well as differentiate between urgent and important goals.
- Planning activities related to the development of the interests and abilities of the mentee/group. It is very important for the mentors to know the competency approach and to be able to identify strengths, weaknesses,

and demands of the mentees using a range of techniques and tools for information gathering and assessment - formal and informal

- Organising hard- and soft skill training sessions and free time activities. Organising employment training and supporting mentee job searches—according to their needs, interests and the aims fixed in the development plan. Getting feedback from other service-providers regarding the mentee and also from the mentee regarding the service they received;
- Monitoring the dynamics and changes in the development of the mentee(s); giving feedback
- Motivating and providing emotional support for the mentees
- Setting specific tasks related to the achievement of certain goals in the various stages of the collaborative work
- Monitoring compliance with the mentoring rules. An important point here is setting boundaries in the mentor-mentee relationship. It is also very important for the mentor to ensure that mentees also have clear responsibilities and tasks (e.g.: punctuality, involvement, active participation, etc.) and to provide feedback and reflection if these are not followed
- Experiencing real-life situations with the mentees. Having fun together is the key to building a successful relationship, as it enables young people at risk to have access to opportunities they did not have before (e.g.: cinema, theatre). In addition,, it provides the mentor with the opportunity to model behaviour through personal example and observe the behaviour of the mentees in real-life situations. It is one thing to talk about various topics with your mentees and another to see something in action.
- Analysing the change in situation and aims of the mentee and agreeing new aims, if needed. Living circumstances might have changed (moving from family to a partner, from one town to another, from an institution to independent living), changing their activities (started a new school, dropped out of school, started a course, searched for a job, etc.). It is important that in these changing situations the mentors are open to discussing the framework and aims of their cooperation with mentees. They could define new goals and tasks or suspend the mentoring for a while. It is important to communicate openly about these changes and redefine the aims and tasks of both parties.

### Closing of the cooperation

Closing of the mentoring process takes place when the mentor and mentee agree on achieving the set goals and the mentee can continue on their own to reach further life goals. They can define and set goals, prioritise them, create strategies and turn these into actions. This agreement must be based on clear indicators of the objectives achieved and on a truly consensual basis. In certain cases, a follow-up phase can be set up, when interactions and meetings are much less frequent.

If mentees have perceived the practical advice as beneficial, have developed self-esteem, developed their knowledge and skills, are able to share their problems; which speaks of trust, have developed social contacts and feel personally satisfied, then it can be said that mentoring has been successful and beneficial for both parties. In other words, good mentoring ends when the mentor sees that the mentees are ready to use their potential to successfully complete their education and find employment.

Closing of the cooperation is usually harder in cases where there is a close and long-term relationship between the mentor and the mentee. However, the mentors cannot keep the mentees for extended periods as they are required to continuously recruit and work with new mentees and a long mentoring process can lead to a mentee's dependency on the mentor.

There is, of course, the possibility that the mentoring relationship ends not as planned – e.g.: the mentees drop out or don't do the minimal tasks agreed upon - which is a lesson learnt for both mentor and mentee. In these cases, it is advisable to close the cooperation with a discussion, where both parties can give feedback and the mentee can reflect on the developments, successes and failures they experienced, and how their responsibilities and competencies have transformed. In some cases, the cooperation wasn't closed but suspended for a given timeframe, as the circumstances of the mentee or their activity did not allow for the mentoring process to continue. Such a suspension was often followed by the successful continuation of the mentoring process after a few months break.

Based on our experiences, we will share some suggestions that ***the mentors should not do:***

- They shouldn't transfer their own personal ambitions onto the youth. Mentors who are highly focused on their task and whose focus is on the expected change often feel frustrated by their lack of receptivity. These mentors make the mistake of putting too much pressure on mentees - talking about sensitive topics before the mentees are ready to discuss them and ignoring the mentees' desire to determine when this should happen.
- They shouldn't support unrealistic aims of the mentee and shouldn't reinforce the mentee's unrealistic self-assessment.
- They shouldn't use a paternalistic and/or technical approach, shouldn't communicate or act in an authoritarian way.
- They shouldn't forget about the common frameworks agreed on with the mentee, and in cases where the mentee has not completed their tasks or upset the commonly accepted framework, there should be consequences initiated by the mentor.
- They shouldn't stick to previously established structures in cases where the situation or aims of the mentee have changed.

- They shouldn't be involved in an overly close personal relationship with the mentee, which would harm the professional manner of their cooperation.
- They shouldn't do the tasks of the mentee instead of them.
- They shouldn't share information about the mentee with other stakeholders without their permission.
- They should be prepared for potential conflict situations with the mentees and be able to provide give constructive feedback when necessary.

***Potential problems and dilemmas*** in the mentoring process might occur. Below, we have shared some of our experiences and related suggestions.

- Especially when working with mentees in education, avoid labelling Roma/ disadvantaged mentees as problematic and having greater chances of failing at school. This may provoke stigmatisation that may lead to what is called the 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.
- Avoid imposing changes from your professional perspective, judging the mentee's and family's attitude and behaviour, and underestimating their reasons and points of view.
- Avoid attitudes of professional despotism which make the mentee or their family feel questioned or that their authority is undermined by the professional, instead of feeling recognised and legitimised.
- Avoid creating false expectations about the programme or making promises that cannot be kept. For example, "Don't you worry; I'll fix this for you". This kind of attitude is against the empowerment and search for autonomy that should guide the whole process.
- The rigidity of mentors or mentoring approaches can lead to the drop-out of mentees. However, limitless flexibility, no responsibility required from the mentees, and no consequences could lead to weak development impacts. A gradual, step-by-step learning process can illustrate how both traps can be avoided. Take for example a simple situation - how long the mentor waits for a mentee at a scheduled meeting. On the first occasion the mentee is late, the mentor waits for the mentee and then discusses the framework of their agreement. The second time the mentor waits 10-15 minutes, and the third time maybe less. Through mutual agreement, feedback and open discussion - without tensions and authoritative communication - the mentee starts to respect the work and the time of the mentor and becomes more punctual.
- A step-by-step development is important in many other aspects as well. Establishing tasks and responsibilities at the beginning, giving mutual feedback, listening to and understanding the problems of the mentees, and helping them to find their answers leads to strengthening self-confidence, competencies and empowerment. At the beginning of a mentoring process

the mentors might do some things on behalf of the mentees (e.g., looking for job ads, writing applications) but gradually give more and more responsibility to the mentees themselves.

- Ensure correct understanding of the mentorship, the programme and adjustment of the mentees' expectations. On some occasions the mentees may have an unrealistic understanding of the programme, expecting for example to be directly offered a job, instead of the process to improve their employability and help in the job search. In this sense, it is essential to ensure that the mentees are aware of the actual objectives and activities of the programme, and for their expectations to be realistic.
- Manage the motivation of the mentees to participate in activities that might not be perceived as directly related to a clear and immediate outcome. Vocational training or tutoring in their education may not have an obvious outcome from the mentee's perspective and therefore they could have low motivation to attend. The link between those activities and the final objective must be clearly established and the assistance and level of motivation regularly assessed to avoid dropout.
- When the mentee loses motivation or is ready to give up, the mentor must be adaptive and help the mentee find other solutions and move forward.
- Challenges can occur when there are differences regarding the goals or expectations, or there are differences in the efforts and time invested by the two parties. There may be personal problems or misunderstandings. These issues may be noticed by the mentor, mentee, or someone external to the relationship, but must be addressed by the mentor and mentee together.
- Mentees often brought problems to the mentoring process which weren't in the focus of the programme (education and employment), but if these problems had a fundamental impact on the development of the young people (e.g.: relationship issues, family problems, housing challenges, drug issues), the mentors usually perceived the complex situations and tried to help the mentees in these issues as well. Mentors had considerable freedom to decide if and how to intervene in such issues. However, it must be highlighted that it can take up an unexpected amount of the mentors' time and energy, creating imbalance between the resources available for the mentees. It can also raise a predicament: which crisis can the mentor solve, how much extra capacity could he/she provide for one given mentee, where are his/her professional boundaries and what are the boundaries set by the overall objectives of the programme.

## 3.3 DEVELOPING VARIOUS SKILLS

Skill development by mentoring is a tool used to develop the competencies of the mentees to become more autonomous and effective in his/her life in general, but exceptionally in reaching better educational results or finding an adequate job.

Soft and hard skills are differentiated. Hard skills are specific competencies and knowledge related to certain tasks or professions and are usually improved by education, training or work practice. Soft skills on the other hand, are more transversal and many are related to how we manage our relationships with other people and how we behave in different situations. Mentoring focuses on soft skill development among other areas and these will be discussed in the following section.

From a general perspective we carry out rather lengthy skill development processes with the mentees, which preferably should include the following phases:

1. Assessment of skills
2. Design of skill development tools within the mentoring plan
3. Implementation of these development activities
4. Final assessment of skills

### The most relevant skills and competencies for education and employment

Since the list of potentially important competencies is very long, we have specified a manageable group of skills that were considered as being the most important for employability and education from the viewpoint of disadvantaged youth.

Mentors were required to assess, develop and evaluate these skills during the activities of our programme.

The selected skills were the following:

- Cooperation, communication, teamwork and conflict resolution skills are exceptionally important in most work environments, while the formal education system focuses more on individual performance.
- Self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-assertion are essential for young people to be able to choose relevant work, positions or careers for themselves, and also to be able to “sell themselves” in the labour market, and to convince potential employers of their strengths.
- Punctuality, time management, and precision seem to be obvious qualities, but many lower-level vocational schools expect low-level performance and set rather loose expectations regarding these aspects.



- Responsibility, trustworthiness, problem-solving, decision-making, and organisational skills are required in many positions, leading to autonomy and employee ownership of tasks. Schools often focus more on their students' ability to follow instructions, which do not develop these skills.
- Concentration, endurance, diligence, resistance to failure and monotony, stress tolerance, and flexibility are required in most positions in the long run. Disadvantaged young people who have weak self-esteem and self-knowledge due to negative feedback throughout their life might deal with such factors less efficiently and might suffer as passive victims, turning to inappropriate, sometimes aggressive means or quitting jobs without trying to resolve these problems.

Mentors also focused on some further competencies which were related to the mental development, activity and cooperativity of their mentees. Self-knowledge and cooperation are closely related to the ability to recognise and handle one's emotions, reflect on them, analyse situations from different viewpoints, and to be able to build trustful relationships with adults. Flexibility and good cooperation can be strengthened by learning to accept and tolerate various people and adapt to different situations.

### Skill development approaches

As mentioned in the previous section, the approach of mentoring is greatly defined by the needs and expectations of the target group. With students, it is more likely for the mentor to spend more time on bonding exercises, confidence building, etc. before the actual development work begins. Similarly, with school-aged dropouts, the approach focuses on building trust and exploring the most pressing needs in small steps. Non-pressure approaches are used to gradually overcome resistance. The work is often delicate and unsustainable, and very often rather social. With young adults, the approach is more proactive and oriented towards quick solutions.

Mentors can organise activities to improve the mentees' skills through specific individual counselling sessions or by targeted group activities.

A few specific development tools are described below.

The Emplea+ methodology is used in Spain in mentoring for employment goals. This system is based on a Soft Skills Dictionary that defines 6 basic skills (those that are demanded and considered a must, although with different levels of intensity, in every position nowadays) and 14 professional skills (those skills that can be demanded in specific positions, but not in others). Communication or basic mathematics skills are, for example, considered basic skills, while negotiation or teamwork are considered professional skills. For every skill a comprehensive description and a progressive scale defines the kind of behaviour that should be expected from an employee, depending on how skilled they are. In addition, there are a series of job profiles that describe

the usual tasks, responsibilities and skills required in those positions. In this way, it is possible to compare the mentees' skill profiles with the occupational profiles and determine what skills should be developed depending on the mentee's professional objective.

The skills in this system are initially assessed through a digital self-evaluation tool in which the mentees respond to a series of questions related to certain situations. At the end of the exercise, the system offers a profile of every skill evaluated. Besides this, mentors also conduct skills interviews, obtaining their perspective on the level of skills of the mentees. The combination of these two assessments, the self-assessment and the skills interview, offers a final result, that must be agreed upon with the mentee and that will be the basis of the activities to develop their skills.

Another assessment tool has been developed and used in Bulgaria. Abilitator is a wheel that facilitates the assessment of various life areas of young persons. It combines the multidimensional and biopsychosocial models of employability and functioning. It evaluates aspects of social inclusion, psychological, cognitive and physical functioning, and the ability to cope with everyday life. Young persons can self-assess themselves and the results can be discussed with the mentors to plan options for development.

More general approaches are described as the following:

- Soft-skill training
- Career orientation sessions for groups
- Personality development methods applied in groups
- Individual mentoring activities that focus on personality development and self-knowledge or career orientation.

These methods are usually built on activities that improve self-reflection, attention, empathy, cooperation and problem-solving.

Often the mentor serves as a role model or the activities organised by the mentor have a planned indirect effect. Some examples:

- Respect and tolerance can be greatly influenced by the personal example of the mentor and by cooperative situations created by the mentor between persons who lacked respect for each other. For example, in Hungary an extremist person was invited to a cycling excursion where a refugee also took part. Consequently his attitude changed because of this positive intercultural experience.
- Self-reflection/self-knowledge was improved by mentors' open communication. They avoided authoritarian pressure and reprehension and focused on self-messages and regular, honest feedback. This approach made the mentees more open to accepting external views and feedback and they were able to consider and internalise these messages.

- Self-confidence developed through regular positive feedback as well as by successes gained, for example in soft-skill training with some creative output or positive changes achieved in their studies or subsequent jobs.
- Partnership, cooperation and conflict handling skills were improved by the actual framework of the mentor-mentee relationship, which was based on partnership, mutually agreed expectations and contributions. Some of the soft-skill training sessions which required cooperative work also contributed to similar developments.
- Time management and respect for the work and time of other people often needed to be strengthened. As mentioned in the previous part, mentors agreed on punctuality with the mentees and gradually achieved better time-keeping through transparent frameworks, applied sensitively and flexibly but coherently and with open communication.
- Overcoming resistance and improving openness towards new experiences is a very important task for mentors working with disadvantaged youth. Stepping out of one's comfort zone and experiencing new situations might often be frightening for youth with low self-esteem. Most of the soft-skill training contributed to this development, where mentees participated in an activity (e.g. video making) that was new for them. In the beginning, they showed resistance but were gradually able to engage and try the activity. They became braver and experienced the joy and success of a new activity. Some of the free time activities – excursions, camps – required physical mobility which also broadened their comfort zone by going to a new place and meeting new people.
- Active participation, trustworthiness and responsibility were all improved by mentees gradually getting more and more autonomous tasks, requiring responsibility, offering help to their peers, and organising programs or activities.

### Informal, low threshold and leisure-time activities

Some young people are very sensitive and if they don't see a cordial relationship, with tight boundaries and a personal touch, they often lose interest or the lack of rapport makes activities quite cumbersome. Therefore, mentors often spent time with their mentees in an informal environment outside of the project context - playing games, going to the theatre, on excursions, etc. Even during such informal activities, one can convey basic lessons about life and work.

Open-air excursions offered opportunities for group development and team cohesion, relaxation, lowering of tensions, improved self-knowledge or even the development of planning competencies. Informal group activities, such as playing board games, watching films, theatre or cinema visits, creative activities, sports games or discussions also build important bonds between the mentees and the mentors, and reveal skills, behaviours, and attitudes in

an everyday, informal context. If mentees are involved in the organisation, planning, and follow-up activities, important life skills are developed. A more specific method has been also applied in Romania, where participants who came from rural backgrounds took part in special 'city tours' where they had to solve orientation and other tasks. It aimed to lessen their fear of the urban environment, to be able to adapt to it on the long-term as well as to improve their self-esteem through group work.

## 3.4 COOPERATION WITH ALL INTERESTED PARTIES

Several stakeholders have been involved in our work throughout the lifetime of the project. Why was it so important to cooperate with many different agents?

Firstly, because our mentees live in conditions where many stakeholders have important effects on their lives, on their decisions and development. We need to know these people and institutions and preferably coordinate our activities with them to achieve converging effects. In an optimal situation family members, friends, teachers and other community members all support the mentees' skill development, self-awareness and conscious decision making. One of the most important tasks of the mentor is to build cooperation among these stakeholders, which leads to more positive outcomes in the life of the mentees.

There are other aims for which we have worked with people and institutions close to our mentees. We have worked with schools, NGOs and labour offices in order to reach a broad pool of potential participants and recruit our mentees. Working with schools, families, and various service providers has helped us to get to know our participants better and to learn about other support they receive in parallel to our programme. Often other organisations were able to provide services that were complementary to our work, therefore it not only made the work of the mentors easier but contributed to the holistic, complex development of the participants. Finally, our dissemination and communication activities have reached a wider audience and have had an additional impact on mainstream society.

A very important aspect in building our cooperation with stakeholders around a given mentee is to organise it in agreement with them, with clear and explicit understanding and consent of the mentee concerning every contact building exercise. It is especially relevant when working with adult participants, since with minors, the minimum requirement is to obtain parental consent at the start of the mentoring process.

## Schools

Schools were very important forums for recruitment – as mentioned above – but more importantly major partners in achieving better educational outcomes – such as preventing early dropout, supporting re-entry into education, achieving better school performance and skill development for successful entry into the labour market.

School directors played an important role in agreeing on the cooperation with our project and ensuring access to the school. However, teachers and headmasters had a much more substantial role in the life of the mentees, therefore a good working relationship between the mentors and the teachers could really boost the effectiveness of the mentoring. Mentors assessed those issues in the education of their mentees where they had tasks themselves or where additional extracurricular services might have supported the mentee. Often the mentor had to take up a mediating role between the mentee and the teachers in cases of conflict, poor performance, and risk of dropout. Schools and teachers provided essential feedback on the progress of the mentees in regard to their educational performance.

The project offered capacity-building and sensitisation activities for teachers as well, aiming to facilitate the introduction of new methodological approaches and attitudes in institutions of public education. In some cases, the project offered services for mentees, within a school framework, which were not related to education, such as labour-market skill development or other soft skill development. In these cases, the school functioned rather as a sort of recruitment forum.

## Families

When working with younger participants, it is essential to establish a 'working alliance' between the professional team - such as mentors, teachers and families. In the case of marginalised families, it is particularly important that they give the intervention the green light and support the professionals.

The mentor aims to:

- Generate a relationship of trust and a positive working atmosphere with the families
- Listen carefully to the family's needs: their expectations and difficulties, establishing a relationship of respect, empathy and cooperation between family members and the mentor
- Ask questions about their lives and backgrounds to establish interest and shared values. If you are not interested in their life and don't value it, why would they value the horizons you want to highlight for their children?

- Explain carefully and in an understandable way the role as a mentor and adjust the services of the programme to the demand.
- When necessary, help the family to understand and deal with the concept of 'parental responsibility', for example, that the family has the obligation to bring their children to school.
- Act as a mediator if needed between the family, the mentee and the school and aim to develop an attitude among school professionals that is not paternalistic and prejudiced towards the Roma students.

It is key to clearly define the responsibilities of the family members and those of the professionals, and be transparent about what the project means, the objectives, the limits, the people involved, etc., to avoid confusion and misleading messages.

Some key messages and ideas to facilitate cooperation with the family are as follows:

- Find the right interlocutor within the family, who sometimes may not only be the parents. If appropriate, involve several members of the family, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, older siblings, etc. In this respect, it is usually important to be cautious in order to avoid 'empowering' other family members over the parents. For example, although it may be interesting to involve a grandparent in the process to deal with certain aspects, this must be subdued in relation to the role of the parents. Their responsibility for their children's education must be highlighted and must be perceived as such by all members of the family.
- Guarantee the confidentiality of the information and data collected.
- Establish objectives and specific actions focused on the motivation of families and students.
- Enable the family to disagree and to face the pressures of their close environment, mainly regarding the continuity of girls in the educational system.
- The more prestigious and credible the messenger, the more influential the information is. A messenger is reliable when they have prestige because of their preparation and closeness to the people who listen to them. Sometimes messages can be better accepted and produce less resistance when 'messengers' are relevant to the community itself.

In some cases – when the mentees faced personal or existential challenges, which hindered their school performance or employability – the mentors cooperated with the family to resolve problems together. For example, if a major housing problem occurred, it couldn't have been ignored because no further achievements were possible while the acute crisis existed.



## Employers

One of the main aims of the project was to support the employability and employment of the participants; therefore, potential employers were key stakeholders. The initiative has to establish a positive relationship with employers, based on mutual trust. The initiative needs to be a useful service for companies and to offer them good potential employees: the argument is not for companies to hire 'Roma' or vulnerable people or to strengthen their CSR activities but to perceive the project as a potentially effective recruitment tool. The relationship with employers must be based on mutual benefit, not on requesting solidarity by hiring a Roma person. It must be a win-win situation where a combination of interests converge.

Mentors had to be able to establish a close relationship with representatives of employers and

- understand the requirements of various employers with regard to various professional profiles
- collect job ads, and select those relevant for a given mentee
- present the programme as a resource for recruiting personnel
- create and open channels of collaboration for training and on-the-job internships.

The programme provided various forms of support both for job-seeking participants and for employer partners.

Mentees participated in company visits and brief on-the-job training to learn about various workplaces and positions. In this way, higher quality employers and more prestigious workplaces were accessible than those usually available in the network of mentees. These visits shaped their career perspectives and strengthened their motivation.

In cooperation with our business partners, we continuously exchanged information on current vacancies, their requirements for the open positions and the conditions they offer to their employees (working hours, salary level, availability of official transport, additional social benefits, career opportunities, etc.).

In some cases, networking events and webinars were conducted, as well as Diversity & Inclusion Training especially adapted for HR specialists and (senior) managers which prepare them for work with disadvantaged youth. Some interviews were published with HR experts working in partner companies in order to show good examples and practices.

## Other stakeholders

Some other stakeholders helped the project in its recruitment effort. We exchanged information on target groups and areas of potential interest with

experts and organisations who work in similar fields. In our webinars and training courses, we invite representatives of partner NGOs, and we continuously work with mediators/community leaders who help us improve our reach to young people in need of our services. In Romania, the state child-care institutions also served as recruitment channels. Other stakeholders in the community, such as the church, youth clubs, and community spaces could also help in recruitment. In Hungary youth organisations and NGOs also helped to recruit mentees. These organisations usually provide free time activities, soft skill development or tutoring, therefore our mentoring, hard skill training and employment support had a complementary effect.

The establishment of partnerships with other stakeholders in the municipality is key for the overall development of the mentees. While our programme focused on employment, mentees often have other needs, not directly related to employment, but which could be barriers or conditionalities (e.g.: housing, health). It is important for the mentor to be able to help in these situations, e.g.: referring mentees to adequate services outside of the project. Therefore, mentors must contact and establish referral protocols with other NGOs, with public services in the municipality (housing, health, education) and comprehensively explain the employment programme, its objectives, and the relevance of the cooperation.

Since the project has limited resources, it is also very important to cooperate with institutions that run similar or complementary services to refer Roma candidates to their resources, such as soft or hard skill training. The same applies to public employment services and social service providers.

In Spain cooperation was built with the Meridianos Foundation, which focuses on employment, education and social justice for young people at risk and in social exclusion. The coordinated cooperation with Meridianos helped young mentees through vocational training courses. The first step – after the given mentee had indicated their interest in the opportunity offered – they visited the employment guidance service of Meridianos with their mentors. After evaluating relevant courses for the mentee together, they were able to participate in the selected training and their mentor also followed up the training process. Mentees were often able to find relevant jobs after successfully completing the vocational training.

## 3.5 SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS' SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

### Preconditions for efficient support of school performance

Support in studying and improving the school performance of vulnerable youth facing numerous failures in their school career can be a difficult and sensitive task for the mentor.

The first precondition is to establish a trustful relationship between the mentor and mentee, where the mentor is available and accessible, in order for the mentees to accept support, feedback, suggestions, and services from the mentors. Having clear aims for the mentoring process which include the mutually agreed goal of achieving better school performance is a must, to avoid support being perceived as external pressure. Open discussion regarding challenges, responsibilities, feedback, aims and accurate support convinces the mentee that all interventions are done according to their interest and their decisions. Beside mutual trust, involvement in all relevant decisions is also important so that the mentee understands the expectations, the framework of the mentoring, their responsibilities and the consequences of their decisions.

### Supporting and motivating mentees

Some of the mentors followed the theoretical approach of strengthening intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The former could be improved by strengthening the mentees' autonomy, competencies and feeling of belonging. There are various approaches to improve extrinsic motivation, such as experience-based educational methods, peer mentoring, volunteer support and organising meaningful encounters between the mentees and various employer stakeholders.

A very important aspect of helping mentees improve their school performance and preventing drop-out is individual tutorship. The individualised tutoring of students is an essential component of the project, which allows working with each student, detecting the difficulties that may emerge and adapting the tutoring to their needs. The tutorship must be understood as a process, and the mentee being the centre of the action. The process might include the improvement of various skills and habits necessary for good performance (such as time management, spatial arrangements for studying at home, studying techniques, skills, etc.) as well as academic help to be able to keep up with the expectations of the school in various subjects. Both functions can be arranged as individual sessions as well as small-group work. These activities can be done by the mentors but in some cases, part of this activity is delegated to volunteers. Furthermore, in group work, peer mentorship might also work, where some mentees can be role models or helpers for others.

Academic, extracurricular tutoring can be arranged in a much more flexible and individualised way as compared to school education. It can more easily adapt to the learning preferences, styles and needs of the mentees.

Another very important mentoring task is to provide support for participants who return to the education system. They might be adults who have expressed their will to return to the education system, but they do not know the system well and are generally lost in terms of the processes necessary to return (tests, available centres, subjects) or students who have graduated from compulsory secondary education and decide to continue in post-compulsory studies. Usually, a lack of knowledge about the educational system and a lack of personalised information for vulnerable people, mean that these are both mentoring functions and tasks that our mentors carry out.

### Activities in Bulgarian Schools

Joint group activities have been organised for mentees from three partner schools in Bulgaria. The selection of practical (life) topics/sessions has been done in line with their interests and what they found useful. Participants' motivation increased when they could relate the material from school and project activities to real life, so emphasis was given to simulations, role-plays, watching videos, sharing experiences or looking for experiences in the form of homework assignments. The students were presented with decision-making tools instead of specific guidance. The mentor stimulated the mentees' ability to carry out harm-benefit analysis, analyse their personal strengths and weaknesses, and think about the consequences of the choices they make. In addition, mentees were provided with opportunities to attend events outside school. In this way, being part of training and events in other partner organisations, participants also gained experience interacting with different people, expanding their social skills and culture.

In all the above methods, it is important to consider the age, gender and field of study of the students, in order to make a careful selection of exercises corresponding to the relevant individual needs, group needs and group dynamics. Some needed more socio-economic support, others needed strengthening of motivation, self-confidence and guidance for development, while some needed support to get out of the limited framework of the environment/community that impaired their personal, educational and career perspectives.

## Relationship with families

An important element is the relationship with the families of students who are at risk of dropping out. For some ethnic minority youths, parents not only do not perceive education as a value but might actually hinder their children's success. Therefore, it is important to invest effort in the development of relationships within the families so that the necessary values and competencies are formed in both the parents and children.

## Relationship with schools

The relationship with the school and with the teachers is also an important factor in preventing school drop-out. Mutual communication opens up opportunities to find approaches to help where the difficulties are the greatest because very often, they are a stumbling block and a motive for dropping out of education.

Regular communication between the mentor and the teachers of the mentee is also important for the mentor to get a clear picture of the school performance and challenges of the mentees, and also to see the development.

## Career orientation and school performance

Many of our participants had low performance in school or lost motivation to find work in their chosen profession due to a mistaken choice of school. In these cases, the project was able to offer various services.

The mentor could help the mentee to find a new school or training opportunity in order to learn a new profession. To prevent another inappropriate educational choice, it was very important to understand the process and reasons leading to the previous mistaken choice.

What are the competencies and interests of the mentee? Why did the mentee choose the previous school/profession? Is the new school/profession closer to their competencies and interests?

Can the motivation of the student be strengthened by career orientation? Does the mentee know enough about their chosen profession? Do they know successful professionals and have they ever seen an attractive workplace in that field? If not, the project could in some cases organise encounters that strengthened the prestige and attractiveness of the chosen profession.

What were the external circumstances, which led to the failure? Are they still prevailing? Can these circumstances be managed, and if so, how?

Are there any specific factors related to the chosen school that can impede or support the potential success of the mentee – e.g.: distance from home, the availability of a dormitory, the level of inclusiveness of the institution towards vulnerable students, etc?

By giving answers to these questions the mentors might provide effective support for the mentees.

### Innovative support forms during Covid

Most of the mentoring work had to be reorganised into online formats for extended periods of lockdowns in each country. Work in the online space involved more 1:1 sessions than group work, therefore the number of hours per mentee had to be increased. Support also had to include the improvement of the mentees' digital skills, such as the use of email, access to online training platforms and online communication in general.

Online work with mentees was more effective in academic tutoring than general mentoring. The Covid lockdowns also contributed to the development of online tutoring practices that can also be efficient in connecting tutors and mentees living far from each other.

While group work was rarely effective in the online environment, new opportunities opened up in 1:1 work, in terms of the personal development of the young people who previously were embarrassed to share issues in a group setting. A disadvantage of this approach is that students are more selective in their attendance, while the advantage is that virtual work gives more flexibility in terms of time slots and independence from the presence of school staff.

More individual work offered the potential for mentors to work more on the CVs of mentees, look for scholarship opportunities and alternative jobs, explore online opportunities for continuous education/training and make a career plan for the post-pandemic period.

Some mentors experimented with websites offering career development assessment tools for free, which contributed to the mentees acquiring a broader insight into their personal and professional needs.

COVID-19 played a somewhat positive role for a large number of youths who did not perceive school as a priority and often did not attend classes. Their dependence on different types of electronic devices and the internet made it easier for mentors to reach them and establish communication. In addition, online communication helped the more introverted participants to participate and communicate, which in face-to-face interaction is unachievable. Setting tasks in the form of games, tests and questionnaires facilitates the participation of these young people as this type of communication is not deemed a direct 'threat of failure', as they often perceive and interpret failures at school.



## 3.6 SUPPORTING FURTHER STUDIES AND TRAININGS

Employability, in general, depends on several key factors – core hard skills and soft skills, relevant education and opportunities for lifelong learning and training, motivation and continuous support by professionals in the transition from education to work

### MOTIVATION

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have generally low motivation for further studies, training, and career planning. One very important factor in this aspect is the repeated, often early, school failures, sometimes from very beginning of their schooling. The learning deficit does not decrease during education, but as in most countries, it can actually increase significantly during the school career. It was important to find out the main reasons for this deficit in learning motivation in the mentoring process, since learning motivation has a strong impact on job search and career orientation as well. In Romania the following four main stages of motivational work with mentees were focused on:

#### *1. Exploration and information gathering stage*

We consider it important to explore realistic opportunities for the mentee. During the exploration period, even before soft and hard skill development begins, the mentee needs to get a realistic picture of their existing abilities and their levels in different areas of life. Then the set of development activities aimed at soft skills and hard skills can reflect this profile. The phase of exploration and getting to know each other is a long period that is different for every mentee. The mentor should not rush this stage, as this would put pressure and personal expectations on the mentee and thereby, they would experience failure again, the feeling of “I’m not good enough”, further reducing the motivation to take part in the mentoring and the mentor-mentee relationship would also suffer. Taking into account the above, the mentor should develop and continuously monitor an individual development plan, which is created together with the mentee.

#### *2. Differentiation and personalisation in the group*

School education is information-centred, and often works towards establishing performance differences and does not support individualised development paths. During the mentoring process we wanted to avoid such processes, especially to further increase the feeling of failure. The atmosphere of the mentoring group must be accepting, inclusive and cooperative, where the young person can experience being accepted, and show both their shortcomings and their values. The mentor has a critical

role in the group creation and development process. The mentees must also be differentiated in the groups and special attention must be paid to the unique characteristics of the members, not only to the group as a whole. The Romanian partner employed two mentors and at least two volunteers for each group, so that the group and the members received the necessary personal attention.

### *3. Individual differentiation*

Finding the right coping strategies through mentoring also serves as a motivational activity in the life of the young person. It can reveal ways to meet aims that seemed unachievable before the development process. Goals planned at a cognitive level can be broken down into actual, doable steps, paying attention to the current cognitive, emotional and social development level of the mentee. During mentoring, special emphasis is placed on the individual. A personalised development process is planned together with the mentor, in which the mentor plays a supporting and encouraging role in the achievement of the mentee's goals.

### *4. The stage of self-development*

The goal of mentoring is to support the development of a personality capable of independent decisions, life management and cooperation. It is one of the most important resources of a person nowadays. The mentoring activities were aimed at young people achieving the feeling of the 'flow experience'. Flow is the phenomenon where we become so absorbed in an activity that everything else is dwarfed, the experience itself becomes so enjoyable that we want to continue the activity at any cost, just for its own sake. When experiencing flow, the primary consideration is that personal goals are precisely formulated. We found that some young people stop at this step, since they have not learnt how to set personal goals; they mostly operate on the level of desires and dreams, e.g. "When I'm old enough, I'll have a luxury car". They formulated dream-like goals that were far removed from reality. The goals had to be adjusted to reality. The mentor has a very important role and responsibility in this process.

We also found that the mentees, in their everyday lives, often cannot cite events from their lives during which they experienced joy. So, another important factor is developing awareness, i.e., assigning feelings to a given event that is connected to the experience. Awareness requires practice, which can be learnt in a safe environment in the mentoring programme.

The project also provided financial support for the achievement of certain goals for disadvantaged mentees, which in many cases increased their motivation to complete training and obtain an official, state-recognised diploma. An outstanding motivational value in the young person's life is the acceptance and understanding of their financial situation and the appreciation of their internal motivation to complete training.

## EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND RE-ENTERING EDUCATION

Young women and men who have either dropped out of school, never attended, or are working in the informal economy under poor conditions often do not have the opportunities to learn. Often, they also lack personal role models to nurture the employability skills that are essential for success in the workplace. One of the main barriers to quality employment for Roma is the lower rates of success in finishing compulsory education.

The main factors contributing to early drop-out from education:

- The most common reason is the lack of motivation and a vision for their future. When confronted with the question of why should one complete school, mentees very often reply “I don’t want to work in this profession anyway”, “No one will hire me”, “I don’t know anyone who has studied this profession or completed this school and prospered successfully afterwards”.
- Low evaluation of teachers and the school they attend, they don’t like it and do not feel they are supported by the school.
- Lack of self-knowledge and low self-esteem. Mentees often do not know what they are good at or what they are interested in, and they do not believe that they can be successful.
- They do not want to continue their studies due to previous failures (e.g., interrupted studies, poor results, negative feedback from teachers or peers).
- In some cases, there is a really low chance of finishing the given course due to incomplete knowledge, poor learning results, and lagging behind.
- Pressure to have income and other family expectations (e.g., taking care of siblings) take priority in the lives of many young people, which can lead to the interruption of studies.
- Fundamental existential difficulties prevent the continuation of studies (e.g., housing problems).
- Drug abuse and peer group pressure might also distract young people from education.
- A special group of mentees are young people committed to their profession but where there is high competition, for example in the case of musicians. In several cases, the challenge was met, when after 10-12 years of conscious preparation and practice, some had to face the fact that they will not be able to make a living from their profession, or they will not be admitted to the higher education institute. So, in contrast to their internal motivation, they had to think about what other profession they could imagine and what steps are needed to be taken for this new career path.

Various efforts are made in this area to assure that the mentees graduate at the level of secondary compulsory education. Beyond that, one of the main educative objectives of the project is that the mentees can continue through post-compulsory education, achieving higher degrees that will result in better employment chances in the future. Through mentoring support and re-enrolment in school, we aim at young people completing post-secondary education, which is essential for further skills training and the prospects of getting a decent job.

The methodological approach to the work with mentees that goes beyond compulsory education is similar to the pathways developed to obtain secondary education and it involves: closely collaborating with all the key agents in the educational process of the mentees (including the families and the schools) at three levels: individual (which receives a bigger focus in this case), group and socio-community. A specific pathway adjusted to every participant allows us to personalise the intervention and ensure that our mentees have a tailor-made plan.

The Spanish partner developed a detailed plan with a series of activities that are specifically designed and implemented to support the incorporation of the mentees into post-compulsory education and their continuation and success in such studies:

Support and accompaniment in the bureaucratic processes to enrol in post-compulsory education and to access financing instruments that facilitate their pathway in these studies.

- Meetings between current mentees of the programme and university students to facilitate the creation of clear role models and to boost the mentees' inspiration to be able to picture themselves in different realities that include the continuation of their education.
- The mentees, and especially those particularly young without secondary education, are regularly encouraged to consider the return to the official educative system. They receive support and guidance to facilitate the process of returning to school, in the case of minors, and they can be referred to alternative programmes that deal with adult education to obtain the compulsory secondary diploma and then be followed up on their development.
- Reinforcement classroom for the mentees in post-compulsory education. In this space, mentees take the opportunity to review and study class curricula, as well as solve specific doubts that may arise.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring: meetings between mentees from the project with participants from other education programmes; from FSG or other entities. These sessions contribute to the motivation of the mentees and the creation of role models. These types of sessions are very inspiring and offer a motivating result for the beneficiaries of the project. We have carried out these actions through former beneficiaries of other educational projects who have

successfully completed their educational cycle and have returned to the entity as volunteers and collaborated in these types of motivational talks/ meetings.

Other possible tools to support the completion of secondary education and continue further studies/training:

- The development of self-knowledge and self-evaluation, to raise awareness of what the mentee is good at and what they are interested in. Skill development sessions and conversations with mentors are useful in this process. In some cases, going back to what they were interested in when they were young, and exploring childhood memories helped to find the profession they could be interested in.
- Raising awareness that any qualification is better than none. For those young people who were not interested in the profession they were studying, and who may have already quit studying several different professions, an important argument was that it is worth finishing one course, even if they do not want to work in this field, as one diploma is better than none. They might also prove to themselves that they can actually finish something they have started. For other young people, completing several professional training courses the school might be a kind of safety net: while they are in school, they don't have to work. In these cases, it might be worth supporting the completion of yet another new professional course if their motivation is really strong, otherwise it might be more important to orient them towards the labour market.
- It is important to realise both for the mentor and the mentee that school might be important for some mentees living in extreme poverty, as it can be a supportive environment providing shelter, food and company.
- Although school very often means having company, it might not mean such a positive environment for some. Some mentees' learning results were good but they did not get along well with their peers, so it might be worth suggesting an individual curriculum/ home-schooling with little actual school attendance.
- There is often conflict between the mentee and a teacher. The mentor can sometimes help, for example by assisting the learning process or offering joint consultations with the teacher and the student. In other cases, the mentee might be helped by just accepting the situation and strengthening resilience.
- In cases where the mentee attends a very poor quality school, the goal of the mentoring process might be to facilitate the change and start of a new course, ensuring the background motivation is well explored and maintained.
- Workplace visits can really improve career guidance. Students get to know workplaces related to their profession (or even other professions), and find

out whether these could be attractive and learn the realistic expectations related to their profession.

- Visiting schools also helped the mentees in choosing their profession/school and also if they met professionals/peers who have attended or graduated from there.
- Tutoring by mentors or volunteers often provided individual focus and development according to their learning style and helped many to pass exams and achieve good results.

Many vocational schools have established partnerships with employers in the region and have developed programmes for dual education that align the professional preparation of the youth in school with the needs of the employer. In their last year of study, school graduates gain real-world, hand-on-skills as part of their professional practice with the employer.

Another approach, mostly applied by FSG in Spain is to organise vocational training in collaboration with companies. This is carried out in a complementary manner to the transversal skills training that is carried out along a participant's path. The vocational training responds directly to the specific needs of the company, to train candidates according to the profiles they demand and, on the other hand, to bring the labour market closer to the participants through real training, adapted to labour market requirements, and generating a space for training skills and work habits. In summary, this training model has the following values:

- Training adapted to a specific company's needs
- Incorporation of content specifically related to the company, which brings practical knowledge of the labour market to a greater extent
- Explicit or implicit commitments of subsequent contracting
- Opportunity to bring Roma population closer to the reality of companies' environment, fostering reciprocal awareness and empathy
- Skills training space and evaluation of employability in a real work environment
- Selection process for future needs of company personnel

The involvement of the company in this training model is essential for the success and effectiveness of the training. Although each case requires an adaptation, the model aims to involve the company in all phases of the process:

- Planning of the contents of the theoretical training, whether they are taught by the company itself or by a third (specialised) company
- Temporary adaptation of the training, adjusting to periods of need for personnel.



- Planning of practical training or non-work placements (as part of a training course): number of hours, timing, tasks to be performed, tutoring figures inside the company, distribution in different work centres, number of students in each centre, evaluation and monitoring system
- Participation in the selection of mentees.
- Tutoring and monitoring of mentees through a designated person during practical training, ensuring the acquisition of knowledge and support and reinforcement of work habits.
- Coordination and joint evaluation with the professionals, according to the plan that has been established previously on the use of practical training and the acquired competence level.

The professional profiles to which the training with companies is directed are related to the demands of the market at the local level and the skill and knowledge level of the mentees: trade (e.g. cashier, clerk), hotels and food services (both those related to catering and accommodation), cleaning and services (cleaning of offices, health centres, hotels, ...), logistics, food handling.

A mentee in Spain was able to obtain her secondary education certificate and was enrolled in post-compulsory education. She continued her studies in intermediary vocational training in Health Emergencies. The tutoring and reinforcement sessions of the project helped her to be able to keep studying and fulfil her dreams, even though she went through difficult personal moments in 2019. She spent her free time at weekends as a volunteer in the ambulance system in her municipality, which also contributed to her professional development.

In 2022 she could still receive educational support to reinforce her studies on a weekly basis. She finished the intermediary vocational training with very good grades, which allowed her to choose her internship within the Erasmus programme in Italy for the next term. In the future, she plans to do advanced vocational training to continue her education and finally get the job she longs for.

Another approach to providing hard-skill development was applied in Hungary, which financed hard-skill training courses available on the market. According to their experience, the main success factors in completing these courses are the motivation of the mentees and the existence of a stable, supporting environment and less so the length of the preparatory mentoring process. Though an important aspect has to be emphasised: since hard skill training is usually costly, it was only offered to mentees who had previously shown good cooperation, actively participated in the mentoring, and proved to be motivated.

## 3.7 FACILITATING CAREER ORIENTATION

One of the main roles of the mentor is to give practical advice, encouragement and support. Because most disadvantaged young people have no realistic self-evaluation, the mentor helps the mentees get a real perspective and understanding of themselves that corresponds to the knowledge and skills of the young person and teaches them to self-respect, which will give them self-confidence and motivation for future professional and personal development.

In the eyes of the mentees, the mentor is a leader, a trainer, a friend, an experienced person who guides them. Mentors get to know the strengths and weaknesses of young people and seek to open up opportunities for development and fulfilment that match both their desires and their abilities.

The mentor has an extremely important and responsible role in the future development of young people because very often they make hasty and rash decisions about their professional development, based on stereotypes and unrealistic ideas which they have heard from somewhere or under pressure from family and friends.

Realistic career planning for Roma is further obstructed by the heritage of the 'historical', 'traditional' roles the Roma communities filled, working self-employed or in family businesses in trade, in seasonal jobs in the agriculture sector or in other low-prestige fields.

Career orientation has been described by Caritas as a complex procedure including four main stages:

- Improving self-knowledge: to obtain a realistic image about ourselves by raising awareness of personality traits, competencies and skills relevant to future career goals.
- Realistic knowledge of diverse professions: to gain broad knowledge about accessible professions

- Labour market knowledge: various information about the local labour market and training opportunities, job opportunities, labour shortages, employment trends, etc.
- Knowledge about educational and training possibilities.

Career orientation is a wide-ranging educational and development process: it actually means the acquisition of those personal competencies and skills that prepare a person-career-environment match. In addition to the acquisition of self-knowledge, it also entails the acquisition and processing of career and labour-market knowledge. Career guidance includes knowledge gained not only about the various professions but also about ourselves and the social environment that surrounds us. Thus, career guidance helps align individual skills with social needs and the chosen profession. It is not a one-time event, but rather a process and like all informative processes, it facilitates good decisions.

Regarding the support of career orientation, we specified diverse tools in the work of their mentors. One important aspect is realistic self-knowledge – when the mentees get to know their strengths and weaknesses and also their personal preferences, i.e., what kind of activities and tasks are attractive to them. Insufficient competencies can be developed to a certain extent, as the preferences of the mentees might also be altered. However, there are limits to these developments, so it is important not to support the personal aims of the mentee which are unrealistic, taking into account their profile and aspirations.

Self-knowledge includes all the interests of the young person - at school, at home, and among friends. In addition, a very important element of self-knowledge is the values they possess, and the skills they have, including specific hard and soft skills, motivation, learning ability and strategies, internal and external barriers and obstacles, and attitudes. There are many tests, interactive games and methods to get to the 'real me' of each young person and determine their abilities and attitudes.

Leisure-time activities organised in the framework of mentoring facilitated the improvement of self-knowledge and in some cases career orientation by engaging mentees in previously unknown fields, revealing activities bringing enjoyment, turning into hobbies or even potential career paths. In one Hungarian case, a mentee was studying to become a baker but wasn't interested in this profession. In his free time, he regularly wrote poems. He was much more intellectually oriented than the profession he was studying required, so finally he changed school, from a vocational school he continued his studies in a high school, after which he can study at a university in the future.

In the scope of the project, we have met many young people, who studied professional courses which were not attractive to them, or for which their personality or competencies profile was not sufficient. In these cases, the

mentors' role is not to find specific career aims inside the given profession they're studying for or have studied but rather to help them find new possible career paths.

Another challenge we often experienced is that the career outlook of the mentees is quite narrow. They know very few professions and they also know only limited opportunities inside a given profession. Since many internships, dual education sites or practice work provide low-skilled tasks, often not requiring any of the professional skills the mentee has learned in the vocational school, these opportunities do not broaden the horizon. It is therefore important to show the mentees diverse workplaces related to their learned professions. For example, we organized company visits for hospitality students to an artisan bakery where they could see that the work of a baker can be much more creative and prestigious than how they perceived it during their practical work.

Some of the mentees learned a profession that they weren't interested in at all. For example, one mentee who studied to become a pastry chef realised that he wanted to be a train driver. It was realised through personal discussions with his mentor, who asked him what he wanted to be as a small child. Many young people choose a profession and secondary school studies not because of their personal interests, but due to the pressure of their parents or teachers, role models or common professions in their environment. Discussing the mentees' childhood dreams or preferences sometimes led to changes in career orientation, for example many young women changed their course to study early childhood education based on their preference of working with children.

Company visits were an important career orientation tool in all localities of the project. During company visits, young people could see the different work processes and roles in the working environment. Similar results can be achieved by organising meetings with representatives of the given profession, who can serve as role models and give useful information and share relevant experiences. In these cases, it was also important to involve professionals with a similar ethnic or social background to the mentees because it is more convincing for disadvantaged young people that they are able to achieve the same success. In Romania, Caritas introduced the 'Meet your future boss' activity where mentees met managers or HR professionals, who not only provided insight into the expectations of the company towards their employees but could also break down the preconceptions of the mentees towards e.g., the accessibility of the given company.

The company visit can be a very effective tool because it allows for the youths and for the employers to meet in an environment where there is no hierarchy. Apart from having the possibility to look inside the company and to learn about positions, there is also the possibility to chat and to ask questions. It can be interesting from the employer's side as well, because they can spot those youths who are motivated, or have the required skills for their positions.

During one of the company visits organised in Romania 10 young people were able to try out different professions a partner company was working with. The participants were very enthusiastic about the tasks and worked with enthusiasm. The manager of the company also participated in the programme and at the end of the session, when the youths had left, he had a discussion with the mentor about one of the girls who had worked very well, after noticing that she was motivated. The company head asked the mentor to invite the girl for a job interview.

She took the opportunity, went for an interview and was finally hired and now has a good chance of advancing her career in the near future.

FSG emphasised the role of peer-to-peer mentoring in the conscious choice of educational and professional careers. Through this activity, mentees can meet students who are studying in relevant degrees, to better understand what those specific studies entail. Meeting role models who are already working is an optimal way to gather information and boost motivation of the mentees by explaining their own experiences and speaking about their first-hand reality and the steps and efforts they had made to achieve success.

Individual and group career orientation often presented different training pathways and studies to be carried out, as well as job opportunities for future employment. Individual career orientation can be conducted with the mentees and their families, particularly in those critical moments when they have to decide which studies to follow after compulsory education or which particular sector or occupation would be of interest when they are about to enter the labour market. It can also help in searching for specific information on the education and training opportunities preferred by the mentees (job opportunities, training plans, duration of studies, places of study).

Our project organised, offered or financed various training opportunities. The mentors supported the mentees to enrol in hard-skill training, which helped them to start their careers in a new profession. The project supported the participation of the mentees in such courses if their interest in the given profession/course was long-standing and they had proved their motivation to complete the course.

As many of the young mentees did not have positive work experience or did not have realistic perceptions of their competencies, the soft skills training was relevant in this regard too. During these training sessions, the mentees gave and received feedback regarding their competencies and there were many activities which highlighted their strengths. Some of this training included project work so they could experience their personal importance, responsibilities and tasks related to a common aim. These processes often

led to common creative output, with all participants having a relevant role in planning and realisation so that they experienced ownership of group work and the joy and pride during the realisation and presentation of the result. These experiences also helped them to believe that work can be enjoyable and that they can be useful and happy employees.

Working with companies and involving them in the career orientation activities also helped the project staff to learn about the training opportunities offered by employers, while engaging teachers in the same process helped educational staff to broaden their career orientation skills for their students.

In Hungary older mentees were also involved as role models for the younger ones. They discussed how they chose their profession, what was the school like, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the given profession, and for whom they would suggest choosing this profession. Sometimes they also involved the younger ones in activities related to their profession so they could discover if it was really attractive for them and if they had the necessary skills. Such actions not only provided development opportunity for the younger mentees, but also empowered the older ones.

In Hungary the mentees often got active roles in organising activities for each other, in tutoring their peers or organising a campaign for collecting donations for disadvantaged children. Putting the mentees in active situations on the one hand develops their competences, and on the other hand provides them with the experience of success and responsibility, which can be very empowering.

## 3.8 FACILITATING JOB SEEKING

One of the most important phases of the mentoring process is the facilitation of mentee employment.

Before actively taking action on facilitating the job-seeking process, mentors and mentees agree on a plan with clear goals. Every case is treated individually by the mentors, based on the current situation of each participant – completed education level, additional hard and soft skills, language competencies, relevant work experience, and personal career development plan. Additional details such as driver's license and a car, additional knowledge, hobbies and skills that were not acquired during formal education (art, graphic design, programming, photography and others) are also frequently discussed in these first meetings. That's because it is important to cover the whole set of interests and skills that young people possess, and combine them with the information, such as completed education and work experience, to determine the type of job that we will be looking for together. We also take into consideration the place where the young person



is currently living since mobility is sometimes an issue when participants come from a small village near big cities where we operate.

Some type of focused skill and competence development was applied by all partners of the consortium. Autonomia Foundation followed this agenda for preparing mentees for job seeking and employment:

The first step helps the mentees to clarify their preferences and priorities about their 'ideal job'. Without being aware of one's priorities, it is very difficult to conduct a conscious, personalised job search. Aspects such as the preferred type of job (e.g.: physical or intellectual, working with clients or with machines, level of responsibility etc.), working conditions (e.g., location, fixed or flexible working hours, working culture, etc.), benefits (salary, bonuses, fringe benefits, travel reimbursement, training, etc.) are reviewed.

After clarifying motivations and expectations, mentors and mentees can monitor job offers on job sites, in their informal network and also at employers partnering with the programme. After finding an attractive offer, the mentor might help in initialising communication with an employer, i.e., compiling a CV and cover letter. Interview preparation is needed in most cases, even if employers do not conduct typical interviews for some low-skilled positions. The mentors have a very important role in the follow-up phase after the job application, mainly to manage the stress and effects of repeated unsuccessful applications on the self-esteem of the mentees. When the mentee gets the job, the mentor can also support the contracting period and preparation for the work (e.g., travel, expectation, potential conflicts etc.). It is often important to maintain regular communication between the mentor and the mentee in the first months of employment and discuss the problems that might arise, such as conflicts, tasks that the mentee is unprepared for, regular attendance, etc.

Throughout the process, the mentor needs to support the mentee to be as autonomous as possible.

FSG followed a well-established pathway to facilitate employment:

One of the key phases of the personalised employment path is the 'Employment Guidance'. A combination of individual actions and group activities (sessions dealing with basic and transversal competencies such as digital skills for job search, job-search workshops (elaboration of CV, mock interviews...), financial education (as a complement to managing future salaries), informative sessions with trade unions about labour rights...) are carried out according to the specificities of the participant. It is also essential to form a realistic image about the requirements of the labour market, taking into account the situation of the mentee and to focus their efforts to increase their competencies and abilities.

The objectives in this phase are:

- To collect all required resources for job seeking

- To increase the self-confidence and autonomy of participants searching for jobs
- To raise awareness and motivation towards occupational training and employment action
- To strengthen core skills (communication, mathematical reasoning, self-control, self-confidence, compliance with rules and tasks and digital competence) and social-labour habits (punctuality, respect for authority)
- To become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of participants
- To get to know all the relevant resources in the locality to refer participants when suitable

This is a lengthier phase and is comprised of a variety of action points:

- Actions to learn how to use available resources (and refer participants to them when convenient)
- Actions related to domestic and labour conciliation
- Groups meetings about information on the labour market (general and by occupational sectors)
- Actions for job search techniques
- Self-candidacy
- Search for job offers in newspapers and on job-search websites
- Training in filling out employment forms and applications
- Analysis of lists of businesses and specific self-candidacy offers
- Training in telephone calls to get an interview
- Training in the use of public transportation
- Training in the interview selection process
- Group job seeking actions
- Internet job seeking workshops
- Workplace counselling sessions focusing on a specific professional sector
- Counselling and professional information modules included in the vocational training courses

Particular attention is given in this phase to Roma women and their particular situation. The degree of family support is assessed as a key element in their process to strengthen employability. Some endeavours to get to know their family members, for example, may be carried out with the support of the Mentor. For some Roma women, special support like accompaniment to the first job interview is provided (some Roma women travel outside their

neighbourhood for the first time when attending a job interview and hardly know their way around on public transport, for example).

Another relevant aspect is to improve access to the labour market for people at risk of exclusion and low employability thanks to the use of new technologies. This project has made it possible to work with vulnerable people addressing the digital gap, bringing technology and digital skills closer to the most disadvantaged groups, and promoting access to equal opportunities.

The ultimate goal is that new technologies do not represent another factor in social exclusion, but rather an opportunity for Roma people to develop their digital skills and improve their professional activities while facing the challenges present in the global digital economy.

TSA has put more emphasis on establishing a broad network of partner employers and exploiting this very important resource. Once the young person's professional and personal interests are determined, they and their mentor discuss types of jobs and occupations, working hours (part-time or full-time), salary range and other employment conditions. Based on this information, the mentor starts the job screening process by looking for suitable job opportunities at the companies they partner with. The reason why the mentor checks those vacancies first is to make sure the young person will be treated equally and with respect. Our partners know our target group and its specifics, so they are prepared that those young people often have different backgrounds and need some additional help initially..

Working together with some of these partner companies they also organised visits to their factories/offices. This is how they prepared the mentees for a better transition to employment, giving them the confidence boost and practical guidance they need to succeed at work. It has already occurred that a young person started working for a company they visited during one of these 'open days'.

In cases where the mentee does not find employment in the partner network, they continue the job search by other mainstream methods, on various job-search sites and on social media. A thorough preparation process for job interviews is followed, covering aspects such as learning about the profile of the company, the specific requirements of the position, role-playing the interview by going through common questions, working on nonverbal communication and body language, facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, and general reactions under stress.

This process is repeated until the young person is offered a job. Then the mentee and the mentor continue their joint work by discussing the conditions offered. This stage of the process helps the young person to develop negotiation and critical thinking skills. If everything goes as planned and the mentee starts working, they continue the mentoring intensely during

the probation period and afterwards only when needed. If throughout the process there are problems or dissatisfaction from anyone's side, the mentor helps by mediating. This, on the one hand, helps the employers to understand and communicate better with their employees, while on the other hand, such constructive feedback helps the young people to work on their skills and perform better in the future.

Caritas followed a similar process as described above, also putting great emphasis on establishing close cooperation with employers. They organised workshops with representatives of companies for the project staff to learn the specific expectations of the employers. Events called 'Meet your future boss' were organised for participants and employers to establish trustful cooperation and allow the mentees to gather all necessary information.

## 3.9 THE MENTORS' ROLE IN FACILITATING OTHER ISSUES HINDERING EDUCATION OR EMPLOYMENT

The project focused on supporting mentees in the fields of education, competence development, career orientation and employment. However, disadvantaged young people faced many other challenges in their lives that could inhibit reaching their goals in education and employment.

In Hungary we recognised the following additional problems many of our mentees faced – which were outside of the main focuses of our work:

- psychological or psychiatric problems
- addiction
- housing problems (families might be at risk of losing their homes, young people leaving state care without stable housing, etc.)
- dysfunctional family and partner relationships
- peers and friends who have a negative impact on the mentees
- health problems or disabilities
- teachers and other support professionals causing problems by unprofessional conduct
- lack of life strategy (constantly changing needs, lack of reliability, no respect for systems, lack of motivation)

- sporadic attendance at school
- lack of internet access and a home computer made school attendance particularly difficult during the Covid pandemic
- limited mobility and living in remote areas reducing the range of accessible jobs
- weak support and unrealistic expectations from the family can both hinder successful job searches, discouraging them from applying and undermining realistic self-esteem.

These factors and problems are sometimes very serious, sometimes manageable, sometimes temporary and sometimes constant. Some of the problems could be resolved by the mentors or by referring them to other professionals or service providers.

The first step is to acknowledge what factors in the life of the mentees may be hindering their employability or successful completion of their educational aims, be they related to housing, health, discrimination, legal, or social situation.

If mentors are not able to focus on resolving these issues that are clearly out of the scope and competencies, they certainly have to take them into consideration. Firstly, as part of the individual assessment and secondly, as part of the coordination activities with other actors.

Therefore, mentors should have a comprehensive knowledge of the existing resources in their locality to establish alliances and coordination mechanisms with those most relevant..

It is also important that in the initial assessment, mentors make a distinction between those potential mentees who have the right employment/educational capacities, coupled with difficulties that can be managed by the resources of the project, and those potential participants whose difficulties are clearly a barrier to any development process aiming at education or employment.

However, the experience of the programme revealed that in some cases not all such problems are identifiable at first, when the mentorship agreement is set up, they might only surface at a later stage. Usually, it is the mentors' decision whether to enrol the candidate or continue working with them. Since the mentoring work is a complex human interaction, whether the actual problems are manageable by the mentor-mentee pair depends to a large extent on their personalities as well. For example, one mentor recognised that it is very difficult for her to work with aggressive personalities, while another found it difficult to work with mentees who have such complex problems as drug addiction and psychological problems.

It is therefore very important for the mentors to have clear professional boundaries and scope of work. During the project implementation, we found that supervision helped the mentors monitor this framework and flexibly

adapt it to the issues they met. They often went back to the original mentoring contract with their mentees and modified it according to the altered life circumstances of the youth. However, the mentors need to pay attention not to accept roles in their mentees' life that clearly should belong to another actor, for example to their parents.



# CLOSING REMARKS

The writers of this material are professionals in the fields discussed with many years of experience. The project partner organisations they represented (*Autonomia Foundation – Hungary; Fundación Secretariado Gitano – Spain; Trust for Social Achievement and Arete Youth Foundation – Bulgaria and Caritas Alba Iulia – Romania*) work in different geographical, cultural and social contexts and often use different tools and approaches. They tried to highlight the differences in this material, but primarily focused on the general aspects, and methods used in this project.

It is assumed that the readers also work in different contexts and have various backgrounds and profiles. The authors hope that the ideas, considerations, suggestions, tools and examples shared will inspire and support the work of other colleagues and organisations, and in this way more disadvantaged young people can be successful in the field of education and employment in the future, across Europe.



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