

## **European Programmes to Support the Social Inclusion of Youth. Study Case on ISOSTUD Project**

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### **Abstract**

*Social inclusion, a relatively new concern on European level, has become a rather sizeable dimension of sustainable development approach. In this context, a special attention is paid to youth integration, category particularly affected by economic crisis; its support require a cross coordination between educational, social and economic policies. Our paper present the results of a programme addressed to social integration of students from vulnerable categories. The illustration of university contribution as an actor of social inclusion is preceded by a brief presentation of the European frame of social integration of youth, with a special attention to the specific programmes and grants results.*

**Keywords:** *EEA grants; labour market integration; social inclusion; young people.*

**JEL Classification:** *I25, I38.*

### **Introduction**

Interest in the development of policies for social inclusion although quite recently at the European institutions has evolved particularly accentuated in recent years through the economic crisis.

Among the first acts at European level which addresses the relationship between education drop-out, lack of professional skills and social exclusion must be remembered the two acts of the European Commission, the Green Book on the European dimension of education and the White Book on social policy published in 1993 and 1994. Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) signed by the foreign ministers of the 15 EU Member States stipulates among others that employment is a common goal, so that social policy in Europe needs coherence and the responsibility lies with both the EU and each Member State individually. Also, the Treaty of Amsterdam sustainable development becomes one of the central goals of the EU. Subsequently, the Lisbon Strategy adopted by the European Council in 2000 with the publication by the European Commission in the same year, of the Social Policy Agenda, program of action underlying the current social policy.

## **Inclusion of Young People, European Concern and an Essential Component of Sustainable Development**

In 2005, EU Member States signed the European Youth Pact (European Youth Pact) to improve education, training, mobility, vocational integration and social inclusion of young people in Europe. Pact reinforces the importance given to young people in creating jobs and sustainable development, mainly through research capabilities, innovation and entrepreneurship available.

The Council of Europe includes insertion of young people among its three major priorities, specified in the Agenda 2020. Among the actions and instruments that enable the implementation of Agenda 2020 there are proposals on employment, education and training.

The relationship between employment, social inclusion and sustainable development is obvious in the EU Treaty explicitly assumed. According to art. 3, paragraph 3, sustainable development is based on balanced economic growth, price stability, a competitive social market economy capable of sustaining employment and social progress, protection and improvement of the environment.

Addressing sustainable development therefore requires both cutting programs aimed at education, social policy and employment, health, environment and transport policies, trade, agriculture, energy.

In this context, EU has adopted a number of initiatives to support youth education and their social integration. According to numerous studies conducted at European level, education puts its mark not only on the ability to integrate on the labour market but also on other indicators specific to sustainable development such as those in health care. There are, for example, clear differences in terms of mortality rates by level of education as evidenced for example by Marmot Michael for Sweden, where life expectancy is lower for people with low education or Russia where between 1989 and 2011 the mortality rate has been declining in people with higher education and increasing at those with elementary education.

*The Europe 2020 strategy* has relaunched EU's concern for social inclusion of young people setting out a series of concrete objectives on reducing the dropout rate, the number of people at risk and raising young graduates. Youth on the Move, an initiative of the Europe 2020 strategy was implemented between 2010-2014 with four courses of action, both on education and on youth employment: lifelong learning, support for higher education, promoting mobility, improving employment among young people. Among the concrete measures of the initiative are "Your first EURES job" initiative launched in 2012 and Youth Opportunities Initiative - YOI, launched in 2011.

*"Your first EURES job"* program targets young people aged up to 35 who wish to find a job, an internship or a job as an apprentice in another Member State and employers who want to cover positions for which it is difficult to find employees with appropriate skills. Developed initially as pilot action between 2012 and mid-2015 in the EU-28 countries, Norway and Iceland, the program was budget funded between 2011 and 2013.

Starting from the objectives of the European strategy for 2020 the *EU Youth Strategy* 2010-2018 was defined as aiming to promote equal opportunities in education and employment for young people and encouraging them to participate as active citizens in society. The eight action areas proposed refers to education and training; employment and entrepreneurship; health and wellbeing; participation; volunteering; social inclusion; youth and the world; creativity and culture.

*Youth in Action program* started in 2007 and aims at developing European citizenship among young people through projects to encourage the active involvement of young people in work for the European future cooperation in the youth field. *Youth in Action program* was conducted on

five operational actions: Youth for Europe; European Voluntary Service; Youth in the World; Youth support systems; Support for European cooperation in the youth field. Between 2007 and 2013 the program had a budget of 885 million euros and in 2014 was included in Erasmus +. Consequently, the Erasmus + budget increased with 40%.

We mention the fact that within the *Youth in Action* program was created the Youthpass Certificate which was distributed to the young participants of the program for certain activities. Through the Youthpass the European Commission wanted to ensure the recognition of experience of the program as educational experience and period of non-formal and informal learning.

In the context of the economic crisis and its effects on youth employment, the European Commission launched the *Youth Employment package* (2014-2020) to contribute to reducing youth unemployment. The central element of this package is *Youth Guarantee*. The main objective of the *Youth Guarantee* is to combat unemployment and prevent exclusion from the labour market of young people, through their inclusion in the first four months of job loss or leaving the education system. The initiative aims to ensure any young person under 25, regardless of whether he/ her is registered as unemployed, an offer of quality, within four months of leaving school or job loss. The offer must refer to a contract of employment, apprenticeship or internship or a course of training and adapted to their needs and situation.

## **"Social and Professional Inclusion of Young People in Risk Situations" - a Project of EEA Grants**

To the programs initiated by the European Commission for education and social inclusion of young people there have been added programs of some countries that are not EU members. For example, if EEA Grants awarded by Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein and Norway Grants whose overall objective is to reduce economic and social disparities between European countries and strengthen bilateral cooperation.

### **EEA and Norway Grants contribution to social inclusion of disadvantaged groups**

Although the European Economic Area (EEA) was created as an alternative to EFTA countries (European Free Trade Association) that have not joined the European Community, the EEA evolution is intertwined with that of the Community and later the European Union. EEA Agreement (1984) aims to provide a space of free movement of goods, persons, services and capital that is largely equivalent to the Treaty of Rome (1957). Subsequent regulations have allowed an expansion of cooperation between EU Member States and EEA countries, such as those relating to the Schengen Area or trade in agricultural and fish products.

Meanwhile, through the EEA Agreement the parties agreed on strengthening certain areas of cooperation, particularly research and development, environment, education and social policy and the financial mechanism established by this agreement is to help reducing economic and social disparities between parts.

The contribution of donor countries to the EEA grants depends on their size, so that Norway was the largest donor (95.8% of funds 2009-2014), the two states with smaller participation: Iceland-3%, Liechtenstein 1.2 %. Norway Grants, funded exclusively by that country amounted to 804 million euros in the mentioned period.

Grantees may be the NGOs, academic or research institutions, public or private organizations. The allocation of grants is based on population and the GDP of each of the 16 beneficiary states, so that the largest grants are going to Poland, followed by Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

For the period 2009-2014 for instance, Poland has received grants totalling 578.1 million euro (32% of the total) and Romania 306 million euros, or 17% of the total grants. Meanwhile, the total budget of the EEA and Norway Grants for the period indicated amounted to 1798 billion euros of which 998 million EEA grants.

Funding programs are agreed with the beneficiary countries according to their specific needs and priorities identified. Particular attention is paid to minorities and improves the situation of Roma, as well as environmental protection and sustainable development.

Due to the special interest of these grants for human and social development, as a priority area of intervention, one of the directions of action includes programs for children and young people in risk situations.

The inclusion of this area within the EEA and Norway Grants funding meets the European Union and Council of Europe initiatives on the rights of children and young people, ensuring access to decent living conditions, education, health services and social protection.

General Directorates of action defined for these programs covers:

- policies, regulations and measures concerning the rights of children and youth in risk situations;
- improving the living conditions of these groups both by encouraging participation and debate of all stakeholders, and through concrete action steps;
- supporting access to school and school education;
- measures to prevent abuse, violence and exploitation and supporting victims of such treatments;
- access to social and health services.

For the period 2009-2014 the allocated budget through the EEA Grants to this area amounted to 63 million euros for the seven beneficiary countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary.

A special category of beneficiaries of these grants is the Roma people. In this case priority initiatives respond grants from the European Commission on the National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020. Particular attention is given to the EEA and Norway Grants for Roma minorities in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. In the 13 countries receiving grants (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Hungary) there are a total of 47 programs that identify the Roma minority as a target group.

In Romania EEA Grants are awarded based on the Memorandum of understanding between the Romanian Government and the governments of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein for the implementation of the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area (EEA) 2009 - 2014. One of the four priorities of the EEA and Norwegian Grants in Romania is, improving the situation of vulnerable groups, including Roma. As a result, one of 15 areas of intervention covered by the EEA Financial Mechanism in Romania refers to "Children and young people in risk situations and local and regional initiatives to reduce inequalities national and promote social inclusion" program operator being Romanian Fund of Social Development. FRDS partner for this program is the Council of Europe through the Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation.

This program with the acronym RO10-CORAI aims to improve the situation of children and young people at risk by promoting initiatives to help reduce social inequality, eliminate discrimination of vulnerable groups, particularly the Roma population and facilitate social and economic inclusion. The program has a total of 31,764,706 euros for 2013-2017 of which EEA grants were worth 27 million euros.

## **Presentation of ISOSTUD project**

The project "Social inclusion and training of young people at risk" (ISOSTUD) is run by "Valahia" University of Targoviste, as promoter and is financially supported by the RO10 - CORAI program financed by the EEA Grants 2009 - 2014 and managed by the Romanian Fund of Social Development.

The overall goal of the project is to reduce school drop caused by specific difficulties and supporting access to education and to the labour market for young people at risk.

The direct beneficiaries of the project are students of the "Valahia" University coming from vulnerable groups. Established risk categories were: orphan students; students come from single-parent families; students with disabilities; Roma students; students at risk of abandoning their studies for family reasons, financial or otherwise. The project had indirect beneficiaries, namely the teachers involved in the project (as tutors or members of the management team) for the project aimed at developing skills for working with vulnerable young people: support and counselling (for tutors), implementation and management of specific projects (for management team).

Among the most important achievements in the 15 months of the project are worth mentioning:

- 195 students held internships in the agreements concluded with 41 private and public entities;
- 4 study visits to institutions, companies and local or national organizations;
- 4 awareness campaigns: "Social and labour market inclusion", "Intercultural Cooperation", "Harmfulness of drugs and alcohol", "Entrepreneurship";
- 4 modules of training in IT and foreign languages;
- 2 workshops: "Environmental protection and sustainable development", "Increasing absorption degree on labour market";
- 183 students benefited from the incentives distributed in book form;
- personalized counselling and assistance for a total of 222 students;
- 2 exchanges and two training sessions for professionals involved in the project.

## **Isostud Project's Contribution to Social and Professional Inclusion for Students from Vulnerable Groups**

Evaluation of project results did not confined to the summation of activities and beneficiaries involved, but involved the analysis of the extent to which the project contributed to increasing the chances of social and professional inclusion of students in the target group. In this regard it was undertaken an impact study which included two quantitative analyses based on questionnaires (one to 182 students enrolled in the project, another to 12 tutors) and the study of internal data. Analysis of secondary sources aimed, in addition to observing to meet the indicators under the contract, the wording of complementary indicators able to express the fullest impact of the project.

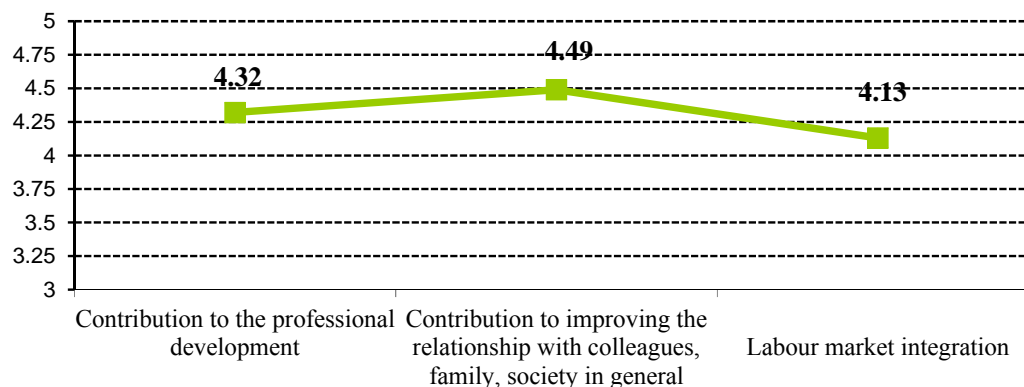
Limitations of the study are related primarily to the quantitative survey: only students present in the project, at the time of the survey, responded to questionnaire (although the total number of beneficiaries is higher). Nevertheless, these limits are not likely to alter the outcome of the conclusions reached: for students who have withdrawn from the project, the evaluation was based on indicators assumed under the project or complementary.

The conclusions of the impact assessment indicates that the project ISOSTUD has contributed "high" or "very high" to changing the situation of young vulnerable people in terms of their professional development, social integration and employment, reduce discrimination and social exclusion, insuring services tailored to their needs.

○ *Social and professional integration*

Starting from the global grade attributed to the project by the students, it can be observed the significant contribution to the project on a scale from 1 (minimum contribution) to 5 (maximum contribution): the highest score is obtained for social integration (expressed by contributing to an improved relationship with primary groups – family, colleagues and society in general): 4.49 indicate very high importance to the achievement of this objective.

A project of great importance is recognized in professional development (score 4.32) and labour market integration (score 4.13).



**Chart no.1.** Overall evaluation of the project by students regarding social and professional integration support (score)

Each of the three components includes detailed results on indicators which were the basis for their evaluation.

Thus, the project has a significant contribution to professional development of student beneficiaries, the most appreciated activities in this respect are (in order of scores) practice, study visits, awareness ("Entrepreneurship", "Harmfulness of drugs and alcohol", "Social and employment inclusion") and workshops.

The next chart explains the contribution that students recognized to 9 individual activities linked to professional development. For example, when asked about the contribution of practice to the professional development (on a 5 levels scale from "very low" to "very high"), 76,1% students attributed a "high contribution" and 19,3% a "very high contribution"; finally 95,5% of beneficiaries considered that practice had a "high" or "very high" contribution to professional development (chart no. 2). The same 5 levels scale was used for the evaluation of all items who express the contribution of the project to professional development (chart no. 2) and also for the evaluation of the contribution to the labour market integration (chart no. 3), to the social integration (chart no. 4) and to the integration in educational process (chart no. 5), in order to ensure a results comparison.

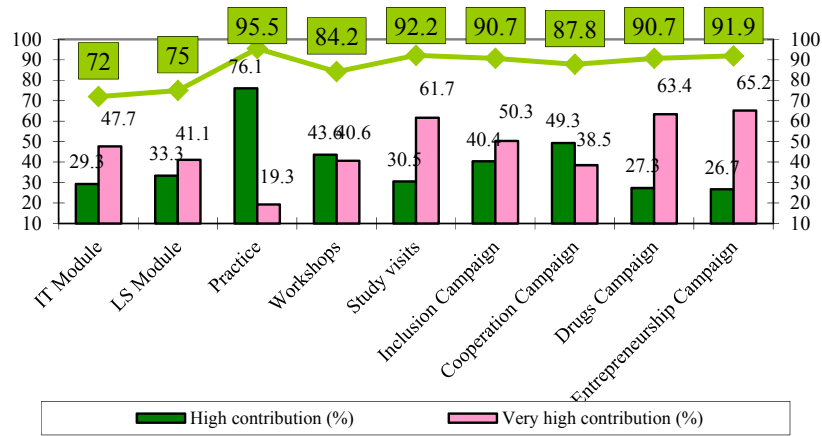


Chart no. 2. "High" and "very high" contribution of project activities to student's professional development (%)

Project's contribution to increasing the capacity of labour market integration was "high" because of the pieces of information about the labour market and employers, career guidance, knowledge about the development of their own businesses. Employability of students stated had already materialized at the time of the study, 1 of 4 project beneficiaries was employed.

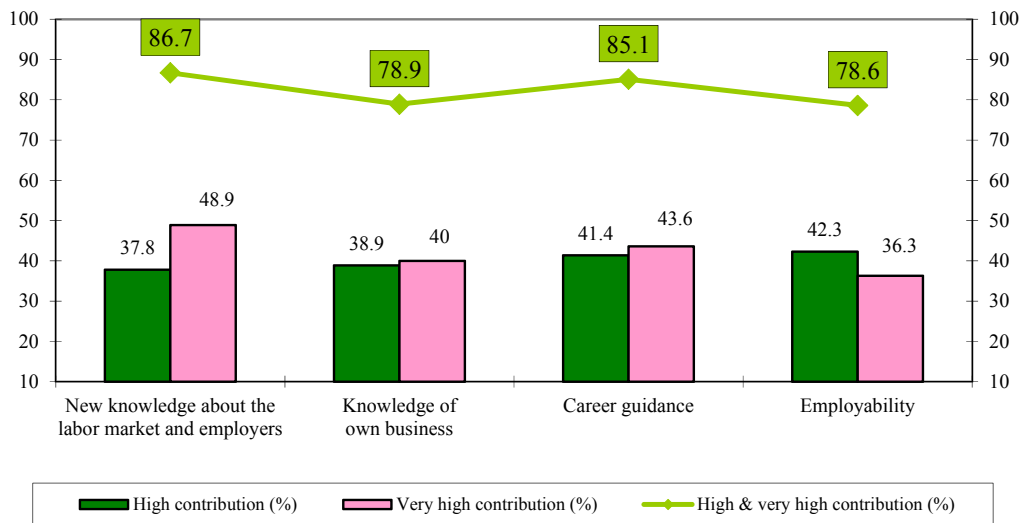
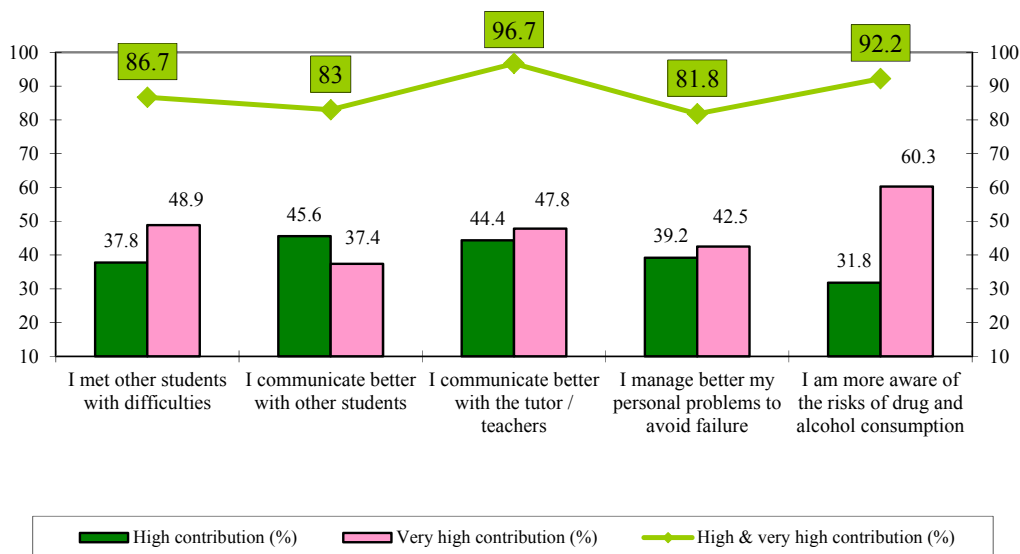


Chart no. 3. "High" and "very high" contribution of the project to the labour market inclusion

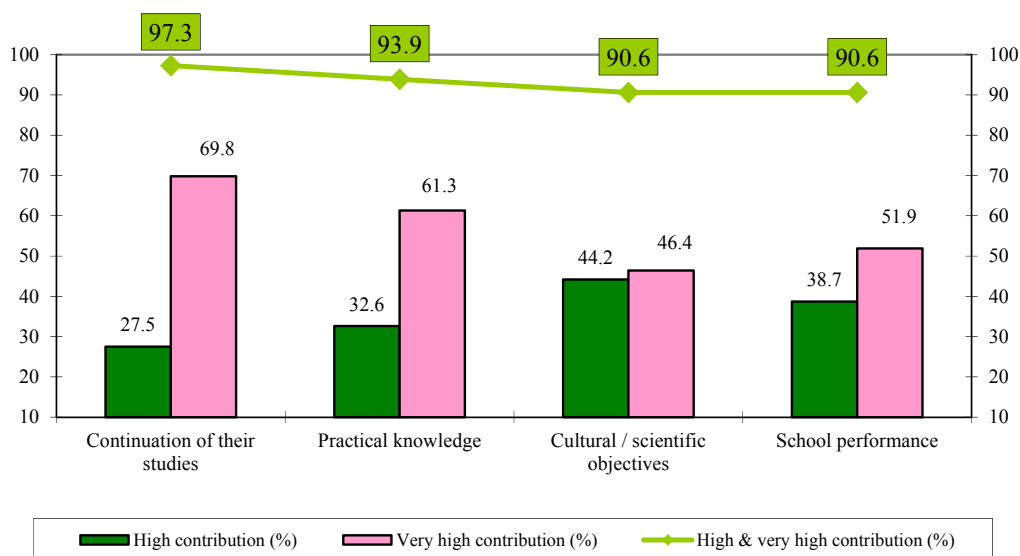
A "high" to "very high" contribution is also assigned to the project ISOSTUD in terms of social integration of students by improving communication with tutors and other teachers and with other students, awareness of the risks of drug and alcohol abuse, identifying other vulnerable students and better management of personal issues to avoid failure. (items presented in the chart no. 4)



**Chart no.4.** "High" and "very high" contribution of the project at social integration of disadvantaged youth (%)

o *Integration in the educational process*

The largest contribution to the project is attributed to integration in the educational process by encouraging continued education, acquiring practical knowledge, improving school performance, knowledge of cultural or scientific objectives.



**Chart no.5.** "High" and "very high" contribution of the project for integration in the educational process (%)

The percentages obtained in this case by those who recognized "high" or "very high" contribution are exceeding 90% reaching even 97% when it comes to reducing school dropout key objective of the project.



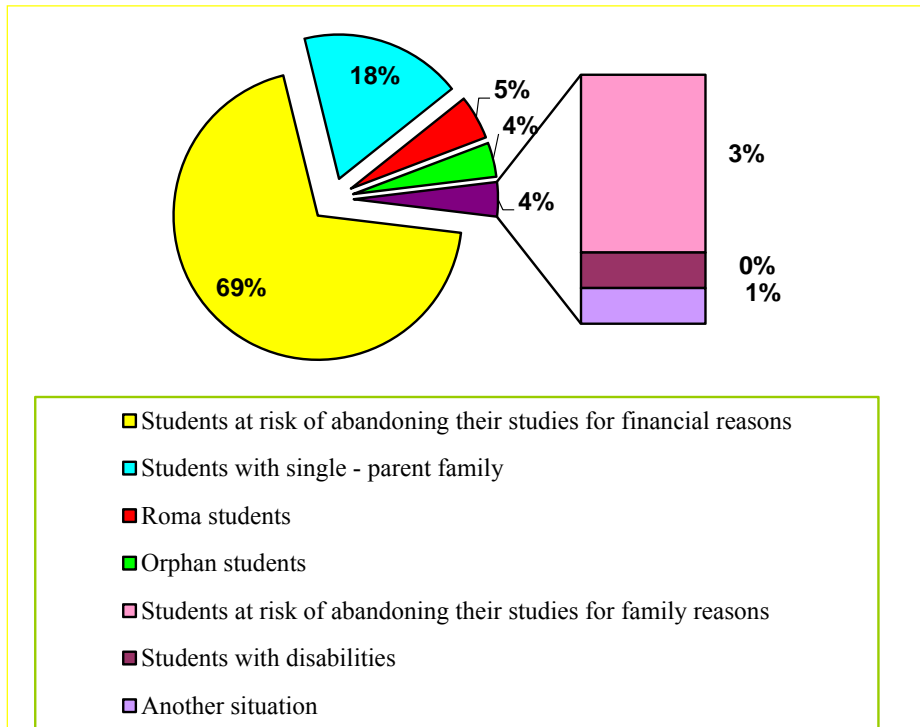
o *Reduction of discrimination and social and economic exclusion*

The contribution of the project to reduce discrimination and social and economic exclusion has been evaluated by the coverage of the project (in terms of specialization, level of study and categories of vulnerability), accessibility for all vulnerable groups and reduce disparities between these categories as a result of participation to the project.

The structure of the group of beneficiaries is composed by students in bachelor or master degree; the proportions are relatively similar throughout the project: according to the results of the quantitative study, 76% of current beneficiaries are students from bachelor and 24% from master.

As regards the fields of study, beneficiaries come from all major universities, which ensure from this point of view a good coverage of the project. As regards the categories of vulnerability which includes young people drawn into the project, they are fully represented in the structure of the target group.

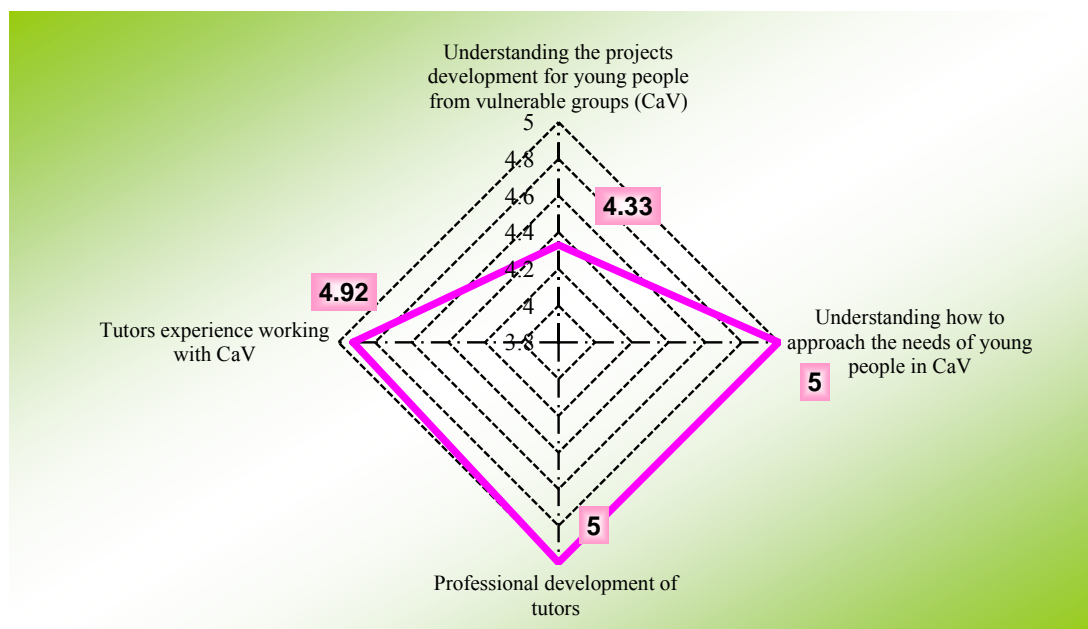
To analyse discrepancies between the vulnerable categories, the study is focused on two subgroups ("girl students" and "Roma students"). The results show that there are differences between the situation on the subset girls and the whole situation of beneficiaries. In the subgroup of Roma scores are similar to the global for 12 of the 22 items analysed, higher for 2 of the 22 items (contribution of the campaign "Entrepreneurship 'professional development and the role of knowledge about the labour market and employers at labour market integration) and lower for 8 of the items analysed. In this last case, although lower than overall scores, scores on the Roma segment are closed to level 4 who indicates a "high" contribution; the situation can obviously be improved.



**Graph 6.** The current structure of the target group according to the category of vulnerability (%)

- *Services adapted to the needs of young people in risk situations*

Another significant contribution of the project concerns the development of specific services for young people in risk situations. This result is particularly highlighted by the quantitative study among tutors in conjunction with the evaluation indicators assumed through the project.



**Graph 7.**The global assessment of the project by tutors (score)

We evoke "very high" contribution of the tutors assigned to the project for the development of services adapted to the needs of the young people in risk situations primarily through the formation of teachers experienced in working with these students through specific activities. It is added the acquired skills in managing projects for these target groups and improve technical facilities of the promoter institution.

In addition, by the actions of communication and promotion undertaken, the project managed to ensure a significant contribution to the reputation of EEA Grants among the indirect and direct beneficiaries, the academic environment, but also among local media, partner companies and institutions.

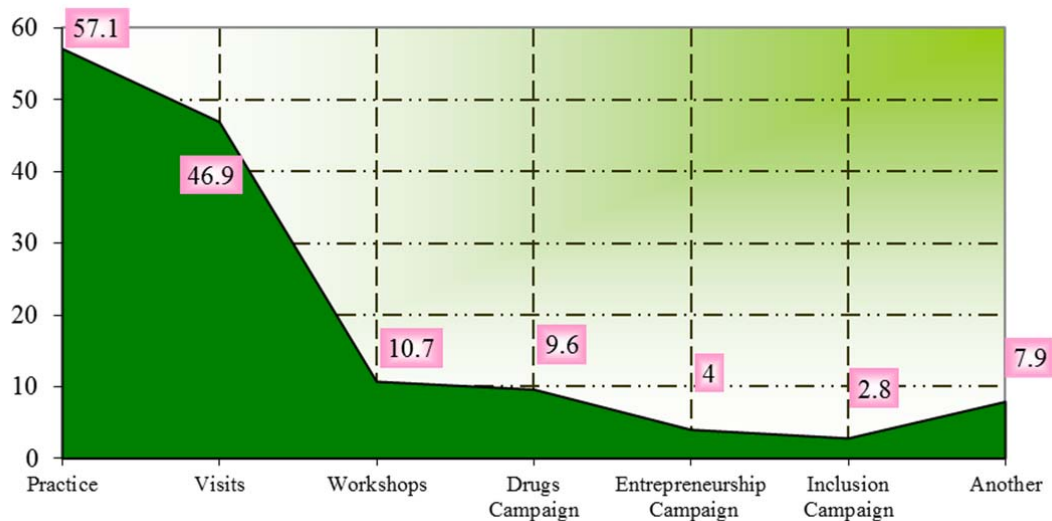
## Conclusions

Finally we wish to analyse out a hierarchy made by participating students in the project on the most appreciated activities in which they participated. Of the 182 students participating in the survey, 95% reported at least one activity of the project that valued it particularly. Of these, 57% evoked the internship program as one of the most appreciated activities. Practice is assessed through the opportunity to do an internship in the field of interest of the student, by being able to associate the theoretical knowledge acquired in school to a practical dimension by contributing to the professional development and especially to the labour market, but also by the contribution to personal and social development.

A particular appreciation was obtained by the action of project regarding the study visits (46,9%). It is about organized visits to 12 institutions and organizations from Bucharest and Dambovita county, in various fields: legal, accounting, financial, industrial, social assistance,

cultural and humanitarian. The purpose of the visits was to complete formal education through informal and contribute to the personal development of young people.

Freely expressed appreciation by students from vulnerable categories regarding the contribution of the various activities of the project shows once again the importance that must be given to the relationship with the economic environment for the development of internships and negligible role of informal education.



**Graph 8.** The most popular activities of the project (%)

We are not surprised that students' expectations on a future project for young people at risk are mostly related to activities they appreciated most about the project ISOSTUD: study visits and internships. Students have suggested, however, and other activities, such as volunteering, summer school, job fair, meetings with economic operators in some workshops for knowledge of the expectations of employers and concrete examples of operating companies or institutions. Summer school as an alternative to traditional methods of learning, volunteering, courses for personal development and social activities are ways that young people, especially those at risk can learn to overcome the difficulties faced by professional development, and evolving personally, through a better knowledge of self, gaining trust and building sustainable social relations.

We cannot conclude without emphasizing the major contribution of European programs initiated on social integration of young people. The project ISOSTUD is the result of objectives for social inclusion of young people from vulnerable groups undertaken by European acts and pursued by specific programs as is the case of EEA Grants. But it is also an example of direct action through which the social inclusion of young people is passing from the sphere of the community desiderata to tangible effects.

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