

# ADAPTABILITY OF YOUNG ADULTS WHO GREW UP IN CHILDREN'S HOMES ON LABOUR MARKET – THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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## Abstract

The common opinion states that people who grew up in the institutional care instead of in their own families possess lower capabilities to reach higher levels of education, integrate into society, find and maintain employment, and start their own families. The project “Integration of children from foster care into society and their adaptation to the labor market” aims to verify these assumptions and to identify factors that help children to integrate successfully. This article presents the above-mentioned project, its structure, methodology and partial results. It highlights the cooperation between research institutions, public sector, and non-profit associations in all project phases – setting the research methods based on literature analysis and discussions with experts, collecting qualitative and quantitative data from the whole Czech Republic, implementing research results into children's education and training, and disseminating results among relevant stakeholders. The article also notes a complementary project, which is under the evaluation process at the time of the conference. This second project focuses on the system of education, training, and support for people working with children in foster care, such as children's homes employees, tutors and mentors, social workers, and volunteers cooperating through non-profit sector.

Key words: cross-sectoral cooperation, triple helix, young adults leaving foster care.

## 1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This article describes two complementary projects. The first one started in November 2018 and focuses on the integration of children from foster care into society and their adaptation on labour market. The second project should add data on people who work with children in foster care (it was submitted for evaluation and, if successful, should start in spring 2020). Both projects deal with the system of education, training, and support of the observed target groups (children and people working with them). This article pays the primary attention to how the projects were designed in terms of cross-sectoral cooperation, and how such design helps to strengthen the education and training of target groups as well as of individual project partners. It shows the roles of project partners' knowledge, potentials to influence the core issue, and mutual learning.

The text below provides a brief theoretical background on cross-sectoral cooperation and data available in the Czech Republic. Afterwards, the two projects are introduced. The last section of this article connects practice to theory as the two projects are explored in the context of their cross-sectoral nature.

### 1.1 Cross-sectoral cooperation

The cooperation across sectors is the well-established and further strengthening phenomenon (see e.g. [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]). At the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cooperation between public sector, enterprises, and universities (so-called *triple helix*) formed the base of *knowledge economy*. This viewpoint stressed the importance of knowledge, innovations, and research which were produced at research institutions and utilised through market or public services. In the 21st century, it was understood that knowledge can be found anywhere, and attention shifted towards *knowledge society*. The triple cooperation was enlarged by the fourth dimension – general public, which was represented by non-profit organisations or by individuals (so-called *quadruple helix*). The latest debate suggests that many new ideas reflect the failures of systems, such as environmental damage, the non-sustainability of resources, social injustice, etc. Hence, cross-sectoral cooperation became the base to invent, test and promote new ideas aiming to improve natural and living environment. Those ideas are framed by the systems of external influences and re-frame those systems (so-called *quintuple helix*). Nowadays, subjects across public bodies and offices, private enterprises, universities and research institutions, non-

profit organisations, and general public comprehend, accept and promote cooperation, networking and the co-creation of goods and services.

Yet, cross-sectoral cooperation is rather difficult to be maintained. According to Christoffersen ([9]; see also [10], [11], [12], [13]), four types of factors influence if cooperation works successfully or fails: a) partners' attitudes (such as striving for mutual goals, trust, commitment, communication, and conflicts solving), b) the rate of differences between individual partners, c) past experience, and d) possibility to control what happens (including formalised rules, procedures, and network structure). Speaking about cross-sectoral cooperation, the heterogeneity of partners is usually high (e.g. diverse motives, aims, and working methods); therefore, the importance of remaining three factors – partners' attitudes, past experience, and possibility to control – increases. Therefore, leaders working under the conditions of cross-sectoral cooperation need to be mature, skilled, and generally respected to cover both formalised processes and soft attitudes.

Cross sectoral cooperation as a tool for enhancing the quality of projects is encouraged also by European Union. Partnership principle in programming has been applied and promoted by EU since 1994, and, since then, it has developed to be the integral part of preparation of EU policies, including social policy dealing with the social inclusion of children leaving foster care. Using partnership principle in dealing with social issues, including those of children leaving foster care, has been even more empowered by allowing interventions from Operational Program Employment into the agenda of Local Action Groups. Hence, projects focusing on the integration of children leaving foster care into society are taken not only on central level but also on regional and local levels [14]. Nevertheless, the cooperation between NGOs and state institutions in preparing European policies beyond EU Cohesion Policy (where such cooperation is obligatory) is still not common in the Czech Republic [15].

## **1.2 Preliminary researches on children in/leaving foster care in the Czech Republic and practical endeavours reflecting this challenge**

In the Czech Republic, there is the shortage of data on children who grew up in children's homes and young adults who leave foster care. The Czech Statistical Office [16] publishes the number of children living in children's homes, their age, the percentage of boys and girls, and the level of their education. The number of children coming to and leaving foster care is known annually; however, information about what happens next to those who left (about their integration and factors that influenced it) is missing.

Internationally, the topic is addressed in the increasing number of publications (see [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27] and others). In the Czech Republic, however, research on factors that influence young adults when they leave children's homes is rather limited. When we look at the last years, Staněk [28] listed factors that influence so-called endangered children generally: close relationship with a social worker, motivation for education and pre-professional training, contact with people outside the institution, contact with biological family, learning practical life skills, long term (continuous) preparation for leaving institutional care, developing social skills, personal development, and financial support. Běhouneková [29, 30] specified factors which influence the moment of leaving foster care negatively: social unpreparedness, economic dependence, and the lack of emotional support. According to the IPSOS agency, and its research commissioned by the association Mimo domov [31], the integration of young adults into society often fails due to three factors: strong fixation on tutors, the lack of practical information about life (including the lack of knowledge on non-profit organisations that might help), and systematic disadvantage in education. The latest research conducted by the Tereza Maxová Foundation [32] proposes to modify legislation, improve children's attitudes (by psychological and therapeutic support), and assign less children to one tutor. In the publications above, the role of young adults' education and training appears as one of the factors influencing integration; however, the publications did not examine this factor much further.

Vteřina poté in cooperation with Lumos [33] conducted inquiry among young people from children's homes who attended the festival Out of Home. Even though this research was not representative, it offered insights on how respondents saw their future education and professional lives. For instance, respondents were mostly involved in education which did not require graduation and was practical, especially gastronomy. However, when asked about their future aspirations, respondents preferred graduation. This might be a positive turn. On the other hand, less than 20% mentioned higher education than graduation. In terms of professional ambitions, most girls noted gastronomy, social work, or pedagogy. Boys preferred gastronomy and crafts. This research showed an interesting correlation between children's expectations and whom they consulted when making decisions. Children who picked a school/profession alone or with their parents had higher aspirations than children consulting with

children's homes employees. However, the research did not answer the question of whether employees were more realistic or if they undervalued the children.

The lack of data on the special needs of young adults who leave foster care is supplemented by the endeavours of many non-profit organisations. Only three largest activities which cover the whole Czech Republic and focus on young adults' education and training are noted here (more activities will be addressed elsewhere). First, yourchance, o.p.s. [34] carries out the project "Start right". Since 2010, over 500 young adults benefited from mentoring, education in various fields, and financial support. Second, the association Mimo domov [35] provides two projects. "Life trial" consists of several adventure classes, in which children learn financial literacy, the basics of labour legislation, and independence, and the adventure game which simulates real-life conditions connected to diverse professions, schools, or organizations, and in which children have to fulfil tasks on their own and without any help from adults. Third, the project "Patron" run by the Liga otevřených mužů [36] assigns young men leaving children's homes to men-mentors. The idea is that men can help boys to deal with real-life male-oriented challenges; thus posing as male figures in boys' lives. Unfortunately, these organisations offer neither data on their beneficiaries nor the evaluations of their results or impact. They act independently from each other and the rate of cooperation is rather low (especially across diverse sectors).

A notable fact is that the listed preliminary researches done in the Czech Republic were provided by one sector only – by public bodies (official data), by scientists, or by non-profit organisations. Cross-sectoral cooperation during research was missing. Below, two current cross-sectoral projects are introduced.

## **2 PROJECT "INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN FROM FOSTER CARE INTO SOCIETY AND THEIR ADAPTATION TO THE LABOR MARKET" AND ITS EXTENSION**

### **2.1 Running project – basic information, goals, and methods**

During seminars at the Masaryk Institute of Advanced Studies, the Czech Technical University in Prague, students presented their voluntary work in children's homes. They expressed their interest to support young adults who were about to leave foster care. Teachers liked the idea and wished to support active students. Therefore, teachers suggested to create the project of applied research at which students, researchers, and non-profit organisations focusing on children's homes could participate. Students nominated the non-profit organisation yourchance, o.p.s. because it worked with young adults leaving foster care for almost 10 years and cooperated as experts in state bodies, the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, and the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

The first meeting of the future project team was held in spring 2018. Participants discussed alternative research goals, applicable outcomes, and approaches. They agreed on the following:

- Aims and expected outcomes: The aim is to analyse factors (and their combinations) which influence the integration of young adults leaving foster care into society and their adaptation on labour market. The key outcome should be the list of those factors and their combinations. Factors that play the crucial role in successful integration versus failure will be stressed. The project partner yourchance, o.p.s. will use the findings for several purposes. It will update its own methods, tools, and working materials which are and/or will be used to strengthen practical education, training and support of young adults before and after they leave foster care. Also, thanks to its cooperation with state bodies, yourchance, o.p.s. might use data from research to re-evaluate, discuss and possibly modify the system of foster care in the Czech Republic.
- Three groups of respondents: To gather relevant data, three core levels need to be explored. First, adults who left foster care approx. 10 and more years ago and integrated successfully might provide key factors which helped them. Second, young adults who left foster care recently (up to three years ago) might provide their opinion on what they truly needed as well as help to verify the factors provided by the first group of respondents. Third, young adults who are about to leave foster care in the near future (in a year or two) might provide their own expectations on what they think they will need. Also, this third group of respondents is available for: a) two rounds of inquiries – before and after leaving children's homes, and b) in-depth evaluations to see which psychological, cognitive, and behavioural aspects play role in their expectations (before leaving) as well as in real life (approx. two years after leaving).

- Qualitative and quantitative methods: Statistical analysis, multi-factor analysis and qualitative content analysis will be used as the primary methods. The first group of respondents will consist of approx. 15-20 respondents; therefore, they will be interviewed. Additionally, respondents will be asked if they mind participating at psychological evaluations. The second group will be addressed via questionnaires. Approx. 400 respondents are expected to take part in the survey. The third group will be analysed twice. Before they leave foster care, they will fill in the tests focusing on psychological, cognitive, and behavioural aspects. Approx. two years after they left, they will be asked to fill in the same questionnaire as the second group. In this way, results from all three groups can be interconnected and compared to each other. Factors will be verified, and their progress in time will be uncovered.

The project was submitted to the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic in May 2018. It was approved and started in November 2018. For more details about the project and its background, see [37], [38] and [39].

## 2.2 Running project – structure of cooperation and mutual learning

The project is carried on by two official project partners – the Masaryk Institute of Advanced Studies at the Czech Technical University in Prague and the non-profit organisation yourchance, o.p.s. Yet, it involves several groups of team members and partners and their mutual cooperation.

- Universities: Researchers from the Czech Technical University in Prague cover the entire project, guarantee its process and supervise the project team. Students from two universities, the Czech Technical University in Prague and the Charles University in Prague, who inspired the project, were involved to write the applications form, collect and analyse data, be the co-authors of academic papers, and administrate the project. In this way, students improve their knowledge of relevant topics (e.g. social care, psychology, and statistics) as well as their skills in project management and academic writing.
- Non-profit sector: Practitioners from yourchance, o.p.s. guarantee the applicability of project results and provide contacts to other non-profit organisations and public bodies. Also, coordinators who take part at yourchance's own projects too will be involved to collect data from across the whole Czech Republic. Project team is also enriched by the representatives of the Czech Federation of Children's Homes, the professional association uniting primarily the staff of state-run childcare. Hence, the existing networks, relationships, and knowledge are used. Additionally, the involved students take advantage of events organised by the association Mimo domov, which provide complementary experience and data.
- Public bodies: Among the cooperating subjects belong children's homes (the state-run members of the Czech Federation of Children's Homes), the self-governing regions (the founders of children's homes), the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (it governs the affairs of children's homes), and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Most of these subjects are involved thanks to the professional networks of yourchance, o.p.s. and the Czech Federation of Children's Homes. Organisations representing public sector could use the gathered statistical data to improve their products, services, and processes; hence, they ensure that research findings would be applicable and applied in practice.

The structure of cooperating subjects reflects the diversity of the needed knowledge, experience, and focus of individual organisations as well as of individual people. It allows the appropriate appointments of tasks, the quality of results, and mutual learning. Not only the project deals with the education and training of young adults leaving children's homes, also individual team members improve their knowledge and skills, especially university students.

## 2.3 Forthcoming complementary project – information and structure

The project presented above deals with young adults who leave foster care and analysis factors which might help those young adults to integrate into society and adapt on labour market. As suggested by diverse authors (e.g. [18], [20], [25], [26], [28], [31], [32], [40], [41]), one of those factors is people with whom the young adults established relationships – people who worked with young adults and supported them, such as children's homes employees, tutors and mentors, social workers, volunteers cooperating through non-profit sector, and similar. Yet, the position, competences, and working conditions of these people is neglected in contemporary studies. Therefore, the project team agreed to design a complementary project that would focus especially on people who work with young adults leaving foster

care or immediately after they left. So far, following features of the future complementary project were agreed:

- Key idea: Supporting people who work with young adults leaving foster care in terms of increasing their knowledge, skills, and competences could have positive effect on young adults.
- Aims, project phases and expected outcomes: The project aim should be to analyse the system of life-long education and training of people who work with young adults leaving foster care, to compare this system with the needs of their positions, and to suggest the system of increasing their knowledge, skills, and competences. To do so, four phases will be needed. First, project team will collect the diverse types of data on those people (the needed data is yet to be agreed). Afterwards, pilot programs (e.g. thematic seminars, Balint groups, and self-development courses) will be suggested and tested. Findings from the pilot programs will be compared with the findings from the first project described above (factors that influence children's integration into the society). This comparison will help to connect the needs of young adults with the needs of people who work with them. Finally, recommendations for the official system and its sustainability will be provided.
- Groups of respondents: Respondents should cover a) children's homes employees, such as principals, tutors, and assistants, b) social workers who perform under the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, self-governing regions, and/or individual municipalities, c) volunteers cooperating through non-profit sector, e.g. coordinators, mentors, and volunteers, and d) others as identified during the project. The estimated number of the target group in the Czech Republic is two thousands.
- Expected structure of cooperation: Unlike the currently running project, this second project should connect all sectors. The official project partners will be the Masaryk Institute of Advanced Studies at the Czech Technical University in Prague (researchers and students) and the Czech Federation of Children's Homes (non-profit subject that represents state bodies – children's homes and their founders). Organisations representing public and non-profit sectors are expected to participate as other partners and/or consultants since they might use the gathered data to improve the system of education, training, and support of people working with children in foster care. Additionally, project team will contract trainers, supervisors, psychologists, coaches, etc. coming from pro-profit as well as non-profit subjects to conduct the pilot programs.

The project should be submitted to the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic in October 2019 and, if approved, start in spring 2020.

### 3 CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE

As noted in the theoretical background above, the success or failure of cross-sectoral cooperation is rooted in four types of factors: partners' attitudes, the rate of differences between individual partners, past experience, and possibility to control what happens [9]. In more details, authors point on common goals, individual commitment, partners' mutual trust and interdependency, fairness, respected leader, opened dialogue, formal yet flexible structure, procedures, and rules, etc. (see e.g. [12], [13], [42]). Here, these recommended aspects will be connected to the settings of the two introduced projects. The following text evaluates present situation and identifies the crucial strengths and weaknesses of the established networks.

- Past experience: The two official project partners – the university and yourchance, o.p.s. – had not worked together before the current project started. Therefore, the common goal and mutual trust in each other's good intentions played key role at the beginning. On the other hand, yourchance had good relationships with the involved public bodies as well as with other non-profit organisations. This could have been the core reason of why, once the project was launched, the network of cooperated subjects enlarged rather quickly. As for the forthcoming project, the past experience was already positive and played significant role in how the complementary focus, aims, and methods were structured.
- Partners' attitudes: As noted above, partners' attitudes were crucial in case of the first project, when project partners did not know each other. Common aims, mutual trust in each other's good intentions, and experienced leaders on both sides enabled opened discussions and agreements. As for the key features of the two official project partners, the strong commitment to the research topic played role especially in case of yourchance, o.p.s., whereas people representing the

university were less committed but deeply aware of their dependency on the networks of yourchance, o.p.s. In the case of the forthcoming project, the situation is similar.

- Possibility to control what happens: As described above, the two official project partners were involved in all project phases, including the design of both projects. Therefore, their control over the aims, processes, and results is high. Also, it was agreed from the beginning that all project findings should be applied via the education materials and activities of yourchance, o.p.s. and, possibly, via its network of public bodies.
- The rate of differences between individual partners: The involved organisations differ from each other (academia, non-profit sector, and public bodies); yet, the differences are not critical. All subjects strive for public good rather than economic profit. So far, pro-profit sector was included only in the role of respondents. The forthcoming project might involve pro-profit subjects as contractors to test the proposed pilot training programmes.

The text above suggests that both projects follow the findings of scientific discourse on which factors help cross-sectoral networks to perform; hence, the probability that the two projects will be carried out successfully is high. Partners' knowledge, professional skills, and mutual learning played the key role in the settings of both projects. The weak point can be seen in the absence of pro-profit sector, which might decrease the applicability of project findings to practice.

In terms of mutual learning, the situation is questionable. All project partners (official and cooperating) possess specific knowledge, skills, and willingness to share with others. Yet, the wide network of involved individuals (researchers, students, the representatives of non-profit and public bodies, the network of coordinators working with young adults leaving foster care, etc.) makes it difficult to exchange all information. Therefore, most project activities focus on using the knowledge of individual partners rather than increasing it. An exception is the role of students, who are expected to gain new skills under researchers' supervision. Unfortunately, the miscorrelation between researchers' possibilities and students' expectations happen too often. A better way of communication needs to be found.

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