

# Creating a Future: School-to-Work Transition Program for Students with Disabilities Evaluation Study

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# Abstract

## Background

The transition from high school to adulthood is an important, complex stage. Departure from the structured framework of school is challenging and demands personal and environmental resources. For young people with disabilities, it is even more challenging due to the additional difficulties related to their disabilities. To help navigate the change, transition programs offer youth in school preparatory programs for their integration into adulthood in such areas as leisure, education, and employment.

Creating a Future (Yotzrim Atid) is a school-to-work transition program for students with various disabilities in special education. The program was operated by the Occupational Rehabilitation Service of the Rehabilitation Division at the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services (MOLSA) in collaboration with the Special Education Division at the Ministry of Education. It was implemented in special education schools and in special education classes at regular schools. Its goal was to expose students to the job market, and foster in them a future orientation and an ability to make positive decisions about their future. The program consisted of two components: Theoretical and practical. The theoretical component aimed to familiarize students with the job market, both on a personal level and in general; the practical component aimed to provide them with hands-on employment experience in the open job market. The study was conducted for MOLSA.

## Study Goal

The study addressed the implementation of the program, examined its operation, and evaluated its impact in the short and long terms. The goal of the study was to evaluate the program and assist with its continued development.

## Methodology

The study combined qualitative and quantitative approaches, applying various research methods. In the first stage of the study, site visits were made to program schools and to internship workplaces where students did their practical work. The visits included individual and group interview sessions with the supervisors and interns. In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the school educational staff involved in the program, with the program implementers, and with

key figures at MOLSA and the Ministry of Education. In the third stage, quantitative questionnaires were distributed to the program coordinators, students, teachers, and workplace supervisors. The quantitative data were collected from the interns and from a comparison group of students with similar characteristics who did not participate in the program. For the examination of long-term results, parents completed questionnaires two years after the initial quantitative data had been collected.

## **Main Findings**

Program implementation – The program was implemented by two non-profit organizations: Israel Elwyn was the primary organization, Shema – the secondary one. An implementation model was developed specifically for the program and included several components. Some of these components were not fully applied, which may have influenced the program’s impact.

Satisfaction with the program of all the stakeholders was very high: 98% of the interns’ supervisors reported high or very high satisfaction with their participation in the program; 85% voiced a desire to continue to do so, and some even expressed themselves favorably about hiring students as regular employees in the future. Of the parents, 91% reported satisfaction or great satisfaction with the program. Of the teachers, 92% believed that the experience had contributed or greatly contributed to the students’ ability to participate in the labor market and 88% of the parents felt similarly.

One of the main goals of the program was the integration of students into normative frameworks such as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), (voluntary) National Service, higher-education institutions or employment in the open market. The study found that most program participants did integrate into at least some of these frameworks after their graduation from high school although no significant differences were found between them and the comparison group. The program benefited participants by familiarizing them with the job market, allowed them to acquire professional knowledge and experience, and helped them improve their employment skills.

Another contribution to participants, which was found to be significant, was greater familiarization with the welfare system and the services it offers to young adults with disabilities.

# Executive Summary

## Background

The transition from high school to adulthood is an important, complex development stage, a time when young people (age 15-29) in western countries make decisions that impact their future development in such areas as: Education, employment, housing, leisure, and so forth (Vrășmaș & Vrășmaș, 2012). Graduation from high school and the move to independent, adult life is challenging for all young people, but even more so for those with disabilities. For young people with disabilities, it is especially difficult to acquire higher education, secure profitable employment, and attain a sense of independence (Newman et al., 2011; Sanford et al., 2011). Participation in the job market is especially challenging for young adults with disabilities and their low employment rate, in Israel and abroad, is a testament to that. The main factors that contribute to the success of this group in the job market are positive expectations by parents and family support, a sense of self-direction, and employment experience gained during their high school years.

Transition programs are designed to help young people with disabilities navigate their way to adulthood in various areas. The programs are conducted at school and lend students tools and rich experiences to deal with adult life after graduation. Participation in such programs has been found to be an indicator of success in adulthood (Mazzotti et al., 2016).

Transition programs usually include components that foster a heightened sense of self-direction and the development of a future orientation. Self-direction, comprised of a sense of belonging, self-efficacy and autonomy, increases the chances of integration into the job market (Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Future orientation is the ability of an individual to imagine and plan one's future, and to take the necessary actions to follow through (Nurmi, 1991). The ability to imagine goals for the future raises the expectation that they will be realized and can contribute to greater personal well-being (Webster et al., 2014).

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decisions about their future. The program consisted of two components: Theoretical and practical. The theoretical component aimed to familiarize students with the job market, both on the personal level and in general; the practical component aimed to provide them with hands-on employment experience in the open job market. The study was conducted for MOLSA.

## **Study Goals**

The study addressed the implementation of the program, examined its operation, and evaluated its impact in the short and long terms. The goal of the study was to evaluate the program and assist with its continued development.

## **Methodology**

The study combined qualitative and quantitative research methods and consisted of several stages.

### **Qualitative data collection, 2013-14:**

Site visits were made to the program schools and included personal interviews with the student participants. Visits were also made to the internship workplaces where interviews were held with students as well as their job supervisors. In total, there were visits to eight schools and 10 workplaces. These included 14 personal interviews with student participants, four focus groups, and eight personal interviews with job supervisors. In addition, unidentified data were analyzed from the students' personal files.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the educational staff involved in the program, with the program implementers, and with key figures at MOLSA and at the Ministry of Education (a total of 31 interviews).

### **Quantitative data collection, 2016-17:**

Aggregate data on the participants were collected from program coordinators; 102 structured telephone interviews were conducted with job supervisors; 102 face-to-face structured interviews were held with program students, and an additional 56 such interviews were held with students in the comparison group. An on-line questionnaire was completed by educational staff for 92 program students and for 44 students in the comparison group.

### **Quantitative data collection 2018-19:**

Structured telephone interviews were conducted with 94 parents of program participants and 45 parents of students in the comparison group two years after their graduation from high school.

# Findings

## a. Program implementation

The program was implemented by two non-profit organizations: Israel Elwyn was the primary organization, Shema – the secondary one.

An implementation model was developed specifically for the program and consisted of several components. Some of these components were not fully applied.

The duration of a student’s participation in the program was set at two-and-a-half years. In practice, this was not observed, some students participated for less than that time, others participated for only 12 months.

The implementation model included a structured set of questionnaires designed to develop a personal program for each student participant and to follow up on them after implementation. The questionnaires were completed by the job placement coordinators together with the students. The response rate of Elwyn coordinators was high – 89% in 2016 and 93% in 2017. At Shema, the response rate was lower although it improved significantly over time – 52% in 2016 and 81% in 2017. Coordinators reported that the completion of the questionnaires was complicated, and that the questionnaires were not accessible to some students due to their particular disability. As the program progressed, MOLSA saw to the provision of accessible, multi-language questionnaires.

Additionally, the target population of the program was defined as students with high potential to integrate into the job market. However, the indicators of what qualifies as “high potential” were not defined nor the designated party determining which students qualify. In practice, not all participants met the criteria.

Most student participants took part in the job internship, which was the main component of the program. Here, too, there was improvement over time – in 2016, 53% of the students at Shema and 81% of the students at Elwyn interned. In 2017, 54% of the students at Shema and 90% of the students at Elwyn interned. Most of the students (74%) interned in the open job market, others did so in non-profit organizations (25%). The students expressed satisfaction with their employment experience and how they were treated at the workplaces.

Most of the workplaces (92%) made various accommodations for the interns, adjusting their tasks and providing personal treatment. Most of the job supervisors (80%) encountered no problems concerning

the students' employment. Of those who did, 75% turned to the coordinators for help. The supervisors commended the work with the coordinators; 89% reported that the coordinators had been available immediately when required, that they had displayed concern and involvement in the program and, that in general, there had been mutual collaboration.

Of the supervisors, 98% were satisfied or very satisfied with the decision to include practical work in the program; 92% graded the extent of their satisfaction with the interns under their supervision as great or very great; 70% said they appreciated the interns' output and contribution to the output of the workplace; 60% were of the opinion that the interns' work had contributed to the other employees and taught them to be more tolerant. Most of the supervisors (96%) were either sure or thought that they would like to continue to employ students as part of the program, and more than half (58%) noted that they would consider hiring the students as salaried employees.

On the whole, all the stakeholders showed high satisfaction with the program; 91% of the parents were satisfied or very satisfied, 92% of the educational staff thought that the practical work had contributed or contributed greatly to the students, and 82% of the student participants thought that the preparation for employment they had received in the program would help them in life, in contrast to the comparison group (44%).

## **b. Program impact**

The study sought to examine the impact of the program in the short and long terms.

**In the short term:** Program participation, especially the practical work, contributed to the students' knowledge of, and familiarization with, the job market and the acquisition of professional skills; 47% of the students responded that the practical work had contributed to their professional skills and 30% – to their interpersonal skills; 50% of the students and 38% of the parents believed that program participation contributed knowledge, professional experience, and familiarization with the world of employment.

As regards planning for the future, more student participants than non-participants engaged in talks about the future with teachers and parents. There was a significant gap between the groups; according to the teachers' reports, 82% of the program participants had attended a meeting about their plans for the future in the presence of the teachers vs. 57% of the students in the comparison group. However, when the students themselves were asked if they had received an explanation at school about their options for the future, only 54% responded that they had, with no significant difference between the program and the comparison groups.

The students' perceptions of their future was positive; 92% of the participants said they believed they would be able to be good employees, 85% were prepared to make an effort and study in order to find a good job, and 77% said they thought they would succeed in finding a good job. There was no significant difference between the program and the comparison groups.

**In the long term:** According to the parents' reports, most of the participants (85%) in the two years since graduation from high school had or were integrated into at least one of the following frameworks – the IDF, National Service, higher education or a regular workplace.

Of the students working in the open job market in the two years since high-school completion, 20% were program graduates and 30% were graduates of the comparison group, with no significant difference between the groups. In other words, contrary to the program goals, the study did not show that in the long term, the likelihood of employment was greater for program participants than for the comparison group. About half of the parents (45% of the program group and 54% of the comparison group) reported that the students had encountered difficulty in finding a job. The main difficulty reported was the students' health, their physical or mental state (40% of the program group and 50% of the comparison group).

Another issue examined was the impact of the expectations of the students' environments on their development. At the end of their studies, the students were asked about their expectations of themselves concerning integration into the IDF, National Service, employment, further studies and so forth, as well as their parents' expectations in these respects.

A gap was found between the students' self-perception and what they thought their parents expected of them. For example, 79% of the program participants and 76% of the comparison group thought that they would work at regular employment in the future, but only 49% and 50% respectively thought that their parents expected them to do so. The comparison between the students' perception of parental expectations and their own experience in the two years since high school showed a significant positive relationship ( $p=0.000$ ) between students who thought that their parents expected them to enlist in the IDF or volunteer for National Service and students who in fact did so. The other options examined (such as employment in the open market or further studies) showed no significant relationship. Or, to put it differently: The significant relationship found between parental expectations and the realization of those expectations applied only to enlistment in the IDF or National Service. Note, however, that at the point in time when the study was conducted, two years after high school, most students do serve in the IDF or volunteer for National Service, these being the most suitable options for this stage of life.

The examination of the teachers' expectations showed a similar trend to that of the parents. A significant positive relationship was found between their reports of a student's ability to enlist in or volunteer for the IDF and the students who actually do or did serve (or volunteer ( $p=0.008$ ) / ( $p=0.001$ )). Similarly, a significant positive relationship was found between the teachers' perception of the students' ability to volunteer for National Service and students who do or did volunteer for National Service ( $p=0.007$ ). For the other parameters examined, no significant relationship was found between the teachers' perception of the students' ability and the students' experiences after high school,

One important finding was the gap between the students' sense of self-efficacy to integrate into various normative frameworks in the future and the teachers' expectations of them. More students than teachers thought that they would be able to integrate into normative frameworks. Thus, for example, only 39% of the teachers of the program group and 51% of the comparison group thought that the students would be able to find regular employment vs. 79% and 76% of the students, respectively. Furthermore, whereas 63% of the teachers of the program group and 61% of the comparison group thought that the students would be able to integrate into a sheltered workplace, only 21% and 13% of the students in these groups, respectively, thought so.

With respect to the students' expectations of themselves vs. their actual experience, we found among all the study participants a significant positive relationship between those who thought they would enlist in the army and those who do or did serve in the IDF ( $p=0.001$ ). Similarly, a significant positive relationship was found between students who thought they would serve in National Service and students who do or did serve in National Service ( $p=0.001$ ).

Another long-term program impact relates to the students' relationship with the welfare authorities. As part of the program, welfare representatives met with student participants to strengthen their relationship and inform them and their parents of the services available to them after graduation. More program students than students in the comparison group met with the local authority's social service representatives, to a significant extent. According to the teachers' reports, 54% of the program students met with a social worker from welfare services to talk about their future plans vs. 18% of students in the comparison group. Indeed, two years after graduation, the families of program participants had a significantly better understanding of the rehabilitation and employment programs available (42% of the program group vs. 17% of the comparison group). Nevertheless, only 27% of the parents of the program group and 33% of the parents of the comparison group reported participation in these programs.

## Study Limitations

- The small samples make it difficult to identify significant differences between the program and comparison groups. There were various difficulties in the recruitment of participants for the study, particularly for the comparison group, which was considerably smaller than the program group. In addition, some of the parents could not be located or refused to be interviewed at the end of the program or at the time of follow-up two years later. As a result, the number of study participants was too small to yield statistically significant differences, even if the program did have an impact.
- There were differences in the characteristics of the program and comparison groups. The students in the comparison group appeared to be higher functioning than those in the program group.
- Some of the students in the comparison group attended schools in which the program functioned, some participated in the program's theoretical portion and, some, in other programs of preparation for work. Thus, the comparison group was comprised solely of students who had participated in some form of preparation for work, although in most cases it differed from that of the program participants. Moreover, the preparatory programs of the comparison group were neither uniform nor orderly; each student was exposed to different components according to a process defined in each school. This fact may well have affected the examination of differences between the groups.
- It was not possible to conduct telephone interviews with some of the students due to their disabilities. As a result, adjustments were necessary to the study design, the original plan of which was to conduct telephone interviews with the students both at the end of the program and two years after graduation. Whereas face-to-face interviews were conducted with students upon their graduation, the two-year follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone with parents rather than with students due to budgetary constraints. Since the parents' knowledge of the program and its implementation was limited, the information they provided was limited as well and based on their attitudes towards the program.

## Recommendations

- Participation in the program and the practical experience it offered introduced participants to the world of employment and enhanced their skills. Most participants later served in the IDF or National Service, pursued further education or found employment at a regular workplace. Yet, there are still many difficulties and barriers to the employment of young people with disabilities, which require long-term planning and policy.

- The implementation model of the program was only partially implemented. To fully exhaust the potential of the program, there is a need to re-examine the program's target population, determine clear criteria for participation, better adjust the program to the participants, and add several components such as mentoring during internship.
- Training should be expanded along with the provision of tools to strengthen the students' self-direction during school. The involvement of parents and teachers should be considered to help reinforce self-direction and create a support system for the students' development.
- A support system should also be established for the students' integration into employment after they finish school. There is a need to raise student and parental awareness of the existing employment programs offered by the welfare system to adults with disabilities.
- The program can be an opportunity to raise employer awareness and commitment to the employment of people with disabilities. As part of the program, employers could be exposed to the difficulties of people with disabilities in the open job market and the importance of hiring them, for the benefit of both the individual and society.