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**ERASMUS+ REFORM PROJESİ KAPSAMINDA ÖZEL GEREKSİNİMLİ
BİREYLER İÇİN 21. YÜZYIL BECERİLERİ***

Öz

REFORM Projesi, Erasmus+ programı tarafından desteklenen, özel gereksinimli bireylerin 21. yüzyılın hızla değişen koşullarına uyum sağlamalarını hedefleyen bir girişimdir. Proje, sadece bilgi sunmakla kalmayıp, bu bilgiyi gerçek hayatta uygulama becerilerini de geliştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Harmanlanmış öğrenim yaklaşımıyla, iş gücü piyasası ve toplumsal katılım için gerekli beceriler kapsamlı bir şekilde ele alınmıştır. REFORM El Kitabı, eğitimcilerin mesleki gelişimini desteklerken, REFORM Harmanlanmış Öğrenim Eğitim Programı, özel gereksinimli bireylerin çeşitli becerilerini geliştirmelerine katkı sağlamıştır.

Projenin etkisi, yüz yüze ve çevrim içi toplantılar, iyi uygulama örnekleri ve yaygınlaştırma çalışmalarıyla genişletilmiş ve farklı topluluklara ulaşılmıştır. Uluslararası iş birlikleri ve yerel uygulamalarla proje çıktılarının uzun vadeli sürdürülebilir etkisi desteklenmiştir. REFORM Projesi, yenilikçi eğitim yaklaşımları ve kapsayıcı modelleriyle, toplumsal dönüşüm ve sürdürülebilir

- Bu makale, Erasmus+ KA210-ADU Programı Yetişkin Eğitimi Alanında Küçük Ölçekli Ortaklıklar tarafından desteklenen REFORM projesinin tanıtımı için üretilmiştir.

kalkınma hedeflerine katkı sağlayarak önemli bir kilometre taşı oluşturmıştır. Bu başarılar, bireylerin ve toplumun geleceğini şekillendirmede kritik bir adım olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: REFORM Projesi, Özel gereksinimli bireyler, 21. yüzyıl becerileri, Harmanlanmış öğrenim, Kapsayıcı eğitim

21ST CENTURY SKILLS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE ERASMUS+ REFORM PROJECT

Abstract

The REFORM Project, supported by the Erasmus+ program, aims to help individuals with disabilities adapt to the rapidly changing conditions of the 21st century. The project goes beyond traditional education by not only providing knowledge but also enhancing life skills necessary for real-world application. Through a blended learning approach, it addresses essential competencies for the labor market and social participation. The REFORM Handbook has contributed to the professional development of educators, while the REFORM Blended Learning Training Program has helped individuals with disabilities develop a wide range of skills.

The project's impact has been broadened through face-to-face and online meetings, good practice sharing, and dissemination efforts, reaching a diverse audience. With the support of international collaborations and local implementations, the project's outcomes have the potential for long-term sustainability. The REFORM Project, with its innovative educational methods and inclusive models, goes beyond being just a project, contributing to social transformation and sustainable development goals. These achievements mark a key milestone in shaping the future of individuals and society.

Keywords: REFORM Project, Individuals with Special Needs, 21st Century Skills, Blended Learning, Inclusive Education

Introduction

1. Individuals with special needs

An individual with special needs is defined as a person who requires additional support due to physical, developmental, intellectual, sensory, behavioral, cognitive, or emotional limitations. These limitations may be congenital or arise after birth due to developmental processes, illness, trauma, or environmental factors. These conditions lead to significant limitations in the individual's ability to meet daily self-care needs or perform basic life functions (Swathi & Maragathavalli, 2019). Individuals with special needs have various characteristics that require support in different areas. For example, individuals with behavioral or emotional disorders struggle to manage their emotions and behaviors; this leads to limitations in fulfilling daily tasks and engaging in social interactions (Gomes et al., 2016). Physical disabilities cause limitations in mobility, dexterity, or physical functionality,

while intellectual disabilities involve limitations in mental functioning and adaptive behaviors that affect learning and problem-solving abilities. On the other hand, sensory impairments, such as visual and hearing loss, hinder communication and learning, while speech and language disorders may create communication difficulties. Chronic illnesses impact daily life due to the need for long-term medical care. Learning disabilities manifest as difficulties in specific learning areas, such as dyslexia or dyscalculia. Autism spectrum disorder is described as a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects communication and behavior. Additionally, gifted individuals may have special educational needs due to exceptional abilities in one or more areas (Aral, 2020; Karabulut, 2022).

2. Challenges faced by individuals with special needs

Individuals with special needs face numerous challenges across various areas, including daily life, education, healthcare, and employment. For instance, environmental factors such as labeling and discrimination hinder their participation in areas like education and employment, while physical and systemic accessibility issues lead to limitations in public spaces and workplaces (Scherer et al., 2024; Yeo et al., 2011). In particular, in the education sector, there is a lack of adequate resources and educator support for individuals with special needs. These deficiencies arise not only from inadequate infrastructure and budget issues but also from the lack of priority given to individuals' overall health and oral hygiene. In terms of employment, discrimination and negative stereotypes restrict individuals' participation in the workforce, while the lack of proper accommodations in workplaces makes sustainable employment difficult for individuals with mobility limitations. To overcome these challenges, more inclusive policies and effective support mechanisms are required (Dong et al., 2022). Additionally, in the healthcare field, the long-term care needs of individuals with special needs create a significant burden on medical staff and family members, while functional difficulties negatively affect their daily life and educational experiences (Zabeli et al., 2021). Furthermore, not only the individuals with disabilities themselves but also their caregivers may face various difficulties, such as social isolation and uncertainties in their marriages (Matambanadzo & Rhoda, 2024).

3. 21st century skills and individuals with special needs

In recent years, efforts to prepare students for success in a rapidly changing and technology-driven economy have become central to education policies. Public education has particularly focused on equipping students with 21st-century skills and ensuring that graduates are ready for college and careers (Achieve, 2013; Bruett, 2006; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). These efforts have been supported by new curriculum standards and learning outcomes, with reforms being further strengthened by policies such as incentives and sanctions (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; No Child Left Behind, 2002). However, despite these initiatives, achievement gaps have continued to grow, and many students have failed to meet the expected standards (Cole, 2006; McLaughlin, 2010). Individuals with disabilities, in particular, remain distant from the goal of graduating with the 21st-century skills targeted by these reforms. While reform efforts generally aim to support success for all students, there has been limited discussion about accommodations for the needs of students with disabilities (Fulton et al., 2014).

In the U.S. Department of Labor's 1991 report *"What Work Requires of Schools"*, it was emphasized that high school students must possess fundamental skills and competencies for a productive and fulfilling life. These skills included basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics; critical thinking and problem-solving; and personal qualities such as individual responsibility and integrity (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). However, significant challenges persist in ensuring that 21st-century skills are equally provided to all students. Rotherham and Willingham (2009) pointed out that these skills should be acquired by all students, not just a minority. Despite this, there is a lack of alignment between policies addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities (e.g., IDEA, 2004) and the integration of 21st-century skills (Ludlow, 2011). This issue could be better addressed through frameworks that focus on improving the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

The rapidly changing structure of the 21st century requires individuals to possess a comprehensive set of life skills to succeed. Competencies in personal, interpersonal, financial, and health domains enable individuals to cope with the challenges they encounter in daily life. Skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation enhance individuals' capacity to generate solutions to difficulties (Awwal & Griffin, 2018; Susilo et al., 2020; Whorton et al., 2017). Interpersonal skills such as effective communication, empathy, and collaboration stand out. These skills enable individuals to succeed in both social and professional contexts. Financial literacy helps individuals manage their financial resources effectively, while health literacy contributes to improving their overall health (Banerjee, 2015; Basile et al., 2024). As a result, life skills are fundamental elements that strengthen both personal and professional lives, forming an indispensable part of creating an inclusive and accessible living environment. The development of these skills can enhance the quality of life for individuals with special needs, enabling their full participation in society.

The 21st century presents a significant challenge that requires the restructuring of education and rehabilitation programs to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. It is crucial for young people with disabilities to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to succeed in an increasingly complex world (Ryan, 1995). Success in education means that these individuals should have equal enrollment and completion rates in college and other higher education programs as their non-disabled peers. However, past studies have shown that equality has not been achieved in this area (Edgar & Polloway, 1994; Levine & Nourse, 1998; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). Success in the vocational field is defined by the fact that individuals with disabilities do not have significantly higher rates of unemployment or underemployment compared to their non-disabled peers (Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1992).

In order to achieve success in education and vocational fields, students with disabilities need to develop the skills, self-confidence, and positive career-related intentions that enable other students to succeed. Herr (1993) defined the personal attributes required for success under the term "personal flexibility" and associated it with concepts such as self-knowledge, self-confidence, and educational and social skills. He also noted that the term "personal flexibility" could be used synonymously with "career maturity." Given the strong relationship between career maturity and vocational success and

satisfaction (Carson & Mowseian, 1993; Savickas, 1990), it is crucial for teachers and rehabilitation specialists to prioritize enhancing the career maturity of young people with disabilities.

However, past research has revealed that the career maturity levels of students with disabilities are significantly lower compared to their non-disabled peers. These differences have been observed regardless of the tools used to measure career maturity and even as early as sixth grade. For example, in a study using subscales from the Career Maturity Inventory (CMI; Crites, 1978), Sitlington, Wimmer ve Mori (1982) found that individuals with special education needs had significantly less knowledge about job tasks compared to typically developing individuals. As a result, it is essential to develop strategies aimed at increasing the career maturity and personal flexibility of individuals with disabilities. Helping these individuals achieve success in education and vocational fields will not only enhance their individual quality of life but also strengthen their societal participation. Educators and rehabilitation specialists must prioritize efforts in this area to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to more equal opportunities.

4. REFORM Project: Preparing Individuals with Special Needs for the Future with 21st Century Skills

4.1. What is the REFORM Project?

The REFORM Project, with its full name *"We Want to Be Ready for Today's Ever-Changing Life- Developing Skills of Persons with Disabilities for the 21st Century"* and Turkish title *"Bugünün Sürekli Değişen Hayatına Hazır Olmak İstiyoruz - Özel Gereksinimli Bireyler İçin 21. Yüzyıl Becerilerinin Geliştirilmesi"*, is an Erasmus+ project supported by the European Union Education and Youth Programs Directorate (Turkey National Agency) under the Adult Education category. The project applicant is the *"Gelenekten Geleceğe Eğitim Kültür ve Sanat Derneği"* from Turkey. The project partners are *"Sosyolojik Araştırmalar Merkezi Derneği"* from Turkey and *"Spolupracou pre Lepšiu Budúcnosť- Veľký Meder"* from Slovakia. The project aims to equip individuals with special needs with skills that will facilitate their adaptation to the changing living conditions of the 21st century.

The REFORM Project focuses on helping individuals with special needs acquire the skills needed to adapt to the changing living conditions of the 21st century. The main goal of the project is to enhance the competencies of professionals working with these individuals in preparing them for the realities of the 21st-century life and work environment, bringing them to a level where they can provide better services. Additionally, the project aims to equip individuals with special needs with modern educational tools and activities through blended learning methods, supporting their integration into society and the labor market. The project also seeks to encourage the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities, their active participation in lifelong learning processes, and a more active role in societal life.

4.2. Target Groups of the REFORM Project

REFORM Project has both primary and indirect target groups. The primary target group consists of individuals with special needs. These individuals will actively participate in the pilot testing and evaluation processes of innovative educational programs designed based on the blended

learning model. This process is significant as it allows individuals with special needs to experience educational materials and provide feedback from the learning activities, contributing to the progress of the project. The pilot tests will be conducted with the participation of 10-12 individuals with special needs from each project partner, with a total of 30-36 participants involved in these tests.

The REFORM Project also offers significant opportunities for professionals working with individuals with special needs and various institutions. The indirect target groups encompass a wide range, from professionals providing services to individuals with disabilities to educational institutions, employers, and non-governmental organizations. The indirect target groups can be listed as follows:

- Professional staff working with individuals with special needs (counselors, trainers, teachers, mentors, social service specialists)
- Educational institutions
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- Employment and labor offices
- Supported employment agencies
- Consulting organizations
- Partner organizations
- Employers
- Professional organizations
- Organizations providing counseling for individuals with special needs
- Local governments
- Umbrella organizations for individuals with special needs

These groups will play a critical role in the dissemination of the REFORM Project's innovative educational approaches and the implementation of these approaches. In particular, professionals working with individuals with special needs will have the opportunity to enhance their professional capacities through the new methodologies and educational tools presented in the project. This development will not only improve the quality of service provided by professionals but also support individuals with special needs in acquiring 21st-century skills and participating effectively in society. The REFORM Project offers an important model by strengthening collaboration among the indirect target groups, ensuring the social inclusion of individuals with special needs, and enabling them to play a more active role in the learning processes. With this multifaceted approach, the interaction between individuals and institutions will be increased, laying a strong foundation for social transformation.

4.3. Expected Outcomes of the REFORM Project

The REFORM Project aims to develop innovative tools and programs tailored to the needs of individuals with special needs and the professionals working with them, enabling the target groups

to acquire skills that align with the requirements of the 21st century. The main outcomes of the project are as follows:

4.3.1. REFORM Handbook

The REFORM Handbook, titled "What Professionals Working with Individuals with Special Needs Should Know About 21st Century Skills," provides a comprehensive guide for professionals working with these individuals. The handbook enables professionals to understand modern educational approaches, acquire the skills required by the 21st century, and effectively transfer these skills to individuals with special needs. The REFORM Handbook consists of 6 sub-modules. These modules cover topics such as the acquisition of 21st-century skills, the support of lifelong learning processes, and the enhancement of professionals' vocational competencies. The modules are as follows:

1. The Importance of Lifelong Learning in a Continuously Changing World and the Specificities of Working with Individuals with Special Needs
2. Strategies for Supporting Professionals Working with Individuals with Special Needs: Acquiring 21st Century Skills
3. Strategies for Supporting Professionals: Empowering Life Skills
4. Dimensions of Working with Individuals with Special Needs: Developing 21st Century Workforce Skills
5. The Motivational Role and Strategies of Professionals Working with Individuals with Special Needs
6. New Approaches, Methods, and Tools for 21st Century Adult Educators

4.3.2. REFORM Blended Learning Training Program

Titled "We Want to Be Ready for Life in the 21st Century," this training program aims to help individuals with special needs acquire the necessary skills for personal life, the workforce, and social participation. By offering innovative content and methods through a blended learning model, the program facilitates participants' better adaptation to the modern world. The REFORM Blended Learning Training Program is designed to support individuals with special needs in adapting to the rapidly changing conditions of the 21st century. The program provides a comprehensive framework to develop individuals' life skills, ensure their success in the labor market, and help them take an active citizenship role within society. The training program consists of three main modules, each with three sub-modules, totaling nine modules. The modules and sub-modules are as follows:

1. Life Skills for Individuals in the 21st Century
 - a. Self-Care and Daily Life Skills (Personal Care and Hygiene, Home Management and Independent Living, Health and Safety, Transportation and Mobility)
 - b. Personal and Interpersonal Competencies, Social and Communication Skills
 - c. Education and Learning Skills, Financial Literacy

2. Skills for the 21st Century Workforce

- a. Job Search Skills and Interview Preparation
- b. Workplace Skills and Adaptability (Compliance and Problem-Solving Skills)
- c. Entrepreneurship and Starting Your Own Business

3. Living in the World in the 21st Century

- a. Social Participation and Active Citizenship (Community Engagement, Volunteering, Civil Participation, Cultural Competency)
- b. Sustainable Development (Environmental Responsibility, Global Communication and Cooperation)
- c. Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

These two core outcomes have been specifically designed to meet the needs of the target groups of the REFORM Project, showcasing an innovative approach in practice. In particular, the tools that facilitate the inclusion of individuals with disabilities (İWDs) in educational processes and enhance the capacities of professionals play a crucial role in achieving the overall objectives of the project. The tools developed within the REFORM Project not only serve İWDs and professionals but also provide valuable resources for educational institutions, employers, and other indirect target groups. In this way, through the project's outputs, the aim is to make a meaningful contribution to social inclusion and equality.

Conclusion

The REFORM Project, implemented within the framework of the Erasmus+ program, is an innovative initiative aimed at supporting individuals with disabilities in adapting to the rapidly changing living and working conditions of the 21st century. The project has enriched individuals' educational journeys not only with knowledge but also with the skills to apply that knowledge in real life. The life skills, competencies needed for the labor market, and the skills required for social participation of these individuals have been comprehensively addressed through a blended learning approach. Furthermore, the REFORM Handbook has supported the professional development of educators, while the REFORM Blended Learning Training Program has contributed to the development of various skills in individuals with disabilities. The face-to-face and online partner meetings, good practice examples, and dissemination activities have expanded the project's impact and reached diverse segments of society.

The sustainable impact of the project's outputs has the potential to reach a wider audience in the long term, supported by international collaborations and local implementations. The REFORM Project has gone beyond being just a project, creating a framework that contributes to social transformation and sustainable development goals with innovative learning approaches and inclusive education models. These outcomes represent a significant milestone in shaping both individuals' and society's future.

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