

Disability and labour market integration: Policy trends and support in EU Member States

Introduction

This report investigates policy developments in EU Member States supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities in the open labour market. It comes at a time of important change: the end of the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020, the launch of the new strategy and the evolving situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite legislation prohibiting discrimination, people with disabilities participate less often in the open labour market and are more at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Their integration into the world of work is a dynamic process involving interactions between organisational (demand side), personal (supply side) and contextual (institutional) factors. This research focuses on entry into, retention in and return to the open labour market.

Over 150 policy measures that were in place in the Member States before the onset of COVID-19 were analysed. They belong to four key groups: support for job creation (supply and demand); support for individuals with disabilities (employees, jobseekers) (supply side); support for employing organisations (demand side); and support for the institutional environment (context).

This analysis was complemented with a case study on Ireland and additional examples of policies adopted during the pandemic.

Policy context

The European Commission has put forward a strengthened disability strategy for the period 2021–2030, building on the previous strategy, which succeeded in mainstreaming disability issues in EU legislation and in moving disability up the EU policy agenda.

The European Pillar of Social Rights addresses disability rights (Principles 3 and 17). As part of the European Semester process, the European Commission monitors actions taken by Member States to enhance the participation of people with disabilities in the labour market.

Key findings

- Despite progress at policy level, participation in the labour market remains a major challenge for people with disabilities; this is compounded by the economic and employment uncertainty caused by COVID-19.
- Key obstacles to the employment of people with disabilities include disability-related stereotypes, bureaucratic difficulties in accessing the available services, lack of strategic vision in governance, insufficient monitoring of policy implementation, limited training resources for employers and lack of specialist support.
- EU governments are increasingly focusing on a capacity-based approach that supports the full integration of people with disabilities into the open labour market.
- Although a multi-disciplinary response is needed to improve the labour market situation of people with disabilities, there is room for improvement as regards the involvement of different actors, who often operate in silos.
- Employers play a crucial role in hiring, managing and retaining employees with disabilities. Their attitudes and openness to diversity and flexibility are prerequisites for the successful inclusion of people with disabilities.
- During the pandemic, employment-related responses have played a key role in protecting people with disabilities from becoming unemployed. However, the support provided is often limited and it remains difficult for those who are not working to find a job.

Policy pointers

Policy needs data, information and clear definitions

- Member States should reflect on the legal definition of disability to reach a shared understanding.
- To enable well-informed policy action, Member States should collect comparable, robust and granular data, broken down by disability type.
- Rigorous and systematic evaluation and monitoring of interventions supporting people with disabilities are needed to feed back into policymaking.

People should be at the centre

- Policy support should promote a person-centred approach, focusing on the potential and capacity to work.
- Policies should address the interconnectedness of issues experienced by people with disabilities.
- The type and degree of support should reflect the different labour market situations of people with disabilities.
- All measures providing labour market support should have a disability inclusion perspective. Tailored policy responses should also be available for specific groups.
- Policymakers should ensure the right mix of measures to tackle job creation, labour demand and supply, and contextual factors.

Support is useful when it is visible, inclusive and accessible

- The voices of people with disabilities need to be heard when formulating policies affecting them.
- Awareness of available measures must be raised, ensuring high levels of accessibility and visibility and the targeting of every potential beneficiary.
- Reasonable accommodation should be made available to people with disabilities to enable them to perform their work, in the workplace and at home.

Coordination between policy areas based on a life-cycle approach must be at the core of service design and provision

- Integration between policy areas must be ensured, including between the generosity of disability benefits and incentives for employment.
- While the labour market participation of people with disabilities should be supported and promoted, adequate and inclusive social protection mechanisms must be in place.

- Systems and institutions should have sufficient capacity to provide coordinated, effective and disability-inclusive responses.
- A lifelong, preventive and long-term perspective is needed to ensure support is available throughout all stages of employment.
- Labour market practices must be accessible and inclusive of disability across all stages of the job life cycle.
- Policy actions should not neglect any of the three dimensions of entry into, retention in and return to the labour market.

Results come about through strategic and financial commitments

- Developing a shared purpose requires a strategic commitment at all levels of the employment system and across public services.
- While ensuring their commitment to the full implementation of international and EU disability strategies, Member States should also go beyond these objectives through ambitious policy actions.
- Financial resources should be made available by the EU and within each Member State in line with a disability rights perspective, while fostering coordination between European and national actions, funds and policies.
- Organisations representing people with disabilities and NGOs should be assisted in providing full support for labour market inclusion through adequate training, financing and staffing.
- Pilot projects should be encouraged to test the effectiveness of measures, and funds should be provided to scale them up if successful.

Responses must be relevant to the present but ensure a forward-looking perspective

- As forms of work evolve, attention is needed to ensure that people with disabilities can access them equally, with inclusive technology at the core of policy responses.
- People with disabilities should be supported in the recovery following the COVID-19 crisis, and not left behind due to the lack of accessible solutions, decrease in recruitment and increased competition in the labour market.

Further information

The report *Disability and labour market integration: Policy trends and support in EU Member States* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20013>

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