



Supported Employment for Key Policy Makers



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

Introduction

The key challenges of national and European policies relating to people with disabilities are low employment rates, high unemployment rates and a rather high dependency on welfare benefits. For people with disabilities it is often hard to enter the labour market where they are at higher risk of being ousted from it easily. The future challenge is to promote policies which are able to encourage and empower people with disabilities to enter or remain in the open labour market.

This paper provides the position of the European Union for Supported Employment on the most important aspects of Supported Employment, a methodology that has proven successful in promoting and increasing the labour market participation of people with disabilities. This paper explains the approach, methods and effects of Supported Employment as a proactive policy to further employment and social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Background

The United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, is a legally binding treaty and national legislation has therefore to refer to it. States have to ensure legal consistency with the principles of the Convention, such as the obligation to ensure participation of persons with disabilities in social, political and cultural life – and their equal right to work and gain a living.

Labour market participation of people with disabilities is also a key issue in the European Commission Disability Action Plan for 2008 and 2009 and EU directives and the European Disability Strategy also refer explicitly to increased employment amongst people with disabilities and the elimination of discrimination. Moreover, the Common Principles of Flexicurity endorsed by the European Council on 14 December 2007 constitute the common framework for the integration of Flexicurity strategies in the EU Member States¹.

¹ European Commission (2007): COM(2007) 359 final - Towards Common Principles of Flexicurity: More and better jobs through flexibility and security. European Commission, Brussels.

Therefore, key policy makers are more than ever challenged to implement legislative measures and labour market policies which mirror these developments.

The Issues

Supported Employment is a method of working with people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups to access and maintain employment through providing appropriate and on-going support. Therefore, it is an individual-orientated method to promote labour market participation of this target group. Supported Employment addresses all people with disabilities, regardless of their handicap. The concept was developed in the 1970's in North America and found its way to Europe in the 1980's. This individual based working method is defined by a 5 stage process following the principle of "place-train-maintain" which has been acknowledged as a model of good practice during the last two decades²:

1. Client Engagement: Providing all information to enable the individual to make an informed decision as to whether or not they wish to use supported employment
2. Vocational Profiling: Helping individuals to identify their skills and preferences for work
3. Job Finding: Searching for a job considering the needs of all parties involved
4. Employer Engagement: Working with employers and job seekers to discuss several areas including terms and conditions of employment, required skills, support needed from service providers and/or available at the work place, etc.
5. On/Off Job Support³: Support for the client and the employer according to their needs

Methods and activities that are, by definition, not seen as part of Supported Employment include; sheltered workshops, voluntary work and vocational training⁴. The approaches and the extent to which the service providers are able to put the ideal of Supported Employment into practice vary throughout Europe but they all commit to the three following main principles of Supported Employment:

1. Paid Work - Individuals should receive commensurate pay for work carried out – if a country operates a national minimum wage then the individual must be paid at least this rate or the going rate for the job
2. Open Labour Market – People with disabilities should be regular employees with the same wages, terms and conditions as other employees who are employed in businesses/ organisations within the public, private or voluntary sectors

² European Union of Supported Employment – Information Booklet and Quality Standards (2005)

³ See also the respective EUSE Position Papers on each of the 5 stages for further details

⁴ See also the EUSE Position Paper on Values and Standards of Supported Employment.

3. Ongoing Support - This refers to job support in its widest concept whilst in paid employment. Support is individualised and is on a needs basis for both the employee and the employer.

In terms of disability policies related to labour market participation of people with disability and Supported Employment services, the following areas of discussion can be identified:

- Despite the growth in the provision of Supported Employment during the last two decades it is not delivering its full potential in many countries. Labour market participation of people with disabilities is still unsatisfactory, as higher non-employment rates and lower labour earnings of this group show⁵. As recent research points out, sheltered employment is still the measure of first choice in many countries where certain approaches of “special and separate employment” remain even though the benefits of Supported Employment for job seekers, employers and society are obvious. Statistics show that the number of people with disabilities participating in sheltered employment has increased in many countries throughout Europe since the year 2000. Promoting Supported Employment activities in these countries implies a paradigm shift towards a “mainstreaming disability model” which implies not just special employment services but employment measures for persons with disabilities in all policy domains (cross-sectoral policy)⁶
- The issue of incentives for job seekers to take part in active labour market measures is an area that requires careful consideration. The fear of welfare benefit loss (which might be the result of the measures in many countries) may not attract people with disabilities to consider paid employment as a viable option and, as evaluation shows, regulations may make it difficult for benefit recipients to try to work/enter the labour market without facing financial losses. However, there is evidence that this can be reduced when cross-sectoral policies are promoted in a country (e.g. co-operation of government departments)⁷
- Disability policies normally target a large and heterogeneous group. The diversity of this group is one challenge when working age disability policies are to be implemented successfully. An effective policy has therefore to reach/include all persons with disabilities whilst also ensuring that individual needs are addressed in order to raise the likelihood of labour market integration for as many disabled people as possible

⁵ OECD (2003): Transforming Disability into Ability – Policies to promote work and income secure for disabled people. OECD, Paris.

⁶ European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (2008): The Labour Market Situation of People with Disabilities in EU 25. European Centre, Vienna.

⁷ OECD (2003): Transforming Disability into Ability – Policies to promote work and income secure for disabled people. OECD, Paris.

- As recent research shows, active labour market programmes are increasingly seen as a strategy to tackle the negative impacts of the demographic shift such as a medium term expected labour shortage. Increasing the labour force participation of disabled people seems to be an appropriate strategy to make better use of so far under-utilised human resources

The Common Principles of Flexicurity have been endorsed by the European Council and the European Commission is committed to exploring opportunities for disabled people under the Flexicurity framework. Flexicurity is seen by the European Commission as a means to reinforce the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, create more and better jobs, modernise labour markets and promote good work through new forms of flexibility and security to increase adaptability, employment and social cohesion. Flexicurity involves the deliberate combination of:

- Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements from the perspective of the employer and the employee, of “insiders” and “outsiders” through modern labour laws, collective agreements and work organisation
- Comprehensive lifelong learning strategies to ensure the continual adaptability and employability of workers, particularly the most vulnerable
- Effective active labour market policies that help people cope with rapid change, reduce unemployment spells and ease transitions to new jobs
- Modern social security systems that provide adequate income support, encourage employment and facilitate labour market mobility

Whilst Flexicurity is explicitly called upon to support gender equality, the European Commission must develop the link to ensure that equal rights for persons with disabilities are more explicit within Flexicurity.

Position of the European Union of Supported Employment

The European Union of Supported Employment promotes Supported Employment as a proactive, individual-orientated method to enable people with disabilities access their right to work. Supported Employment has proven to be a successful approach to increase the labour market participation due to:

- Supported Employment is based on and respects the individual’s needs, desires and aspirations for work, following the principles of individuality, respect, self-determination, informed choice, empowerment, confidentiality, flexibility and accessibility

- Supported Employment is concerned with addressing some of the social, attitudinal, policy and practice barriers that exclude people with disabilities from the labour market and paid work
- Supported Employment is about securing and maintaining 'real jobs' in the open labour market, ensuring sustainable integration and income security and therefore reducing dependency on welfare benefits⁸

The personal income and financial security of people with disabilities depends primarily on their labour status and is the condition for full participation in social and economic life. Therefore, as a policy, Supported Employment has positive implications for social inclusion and full participation in society which are both linked to paid employment in the open labour market. Therefore this approach is seen as completely consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Moreover, the European model of Supported Employment addresses the common principles of Flexicurity and is an excellent methodology to deliver many components of a Flexicurity framework.

Legal frameworks, welfare state systems and funding structures differ throughout Europe but there is strong evidence that only long-term funding structures ensure quality of services, innovation and development of the sector⁹. Inappropriate funding structures are likely to have negative impacts: either when funding sources intended for other measures such as vocational training or qualification have to be used or when funding structures are dominated by unrealistic outcomes. Both result in short-term funding, even year-to-year funding in some countries¹⁰ which is entirely inappropriate to deliver Supported Employment.

Key policy makers should, where possible, take the necessary measures to ensure a legal framework, structure and regulations that show consistency to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, the European Commission's Flexicurity approach and to promote growth and innovation within the sector of Supported Employment services. National strategies for mainstreaming Supported Employment are necessary and must take into account the values, principles and process of the Supported Employment model. Legislation, structures and funding systems should mirror the impact of active labour market measures in general and Supported Employment in particular.

⁸ European Union of Supported Employment – Information Booklet and Quality Standards (2005)

⁹ Corden, A./Thornton, P. (2002): Employment Programmes for Disabled People – Lessons from research evaluations. Department for Work and Pensions In-house Report, Social Research Branch, Department for Work and Pensions, London.

¹⁰ Spjelkavik/Evans (2007): Impressions of Supported Employment – A study of some European Supported Employment Services and their activities; p. 16. Work Research Institute, Oslo

Conclusion

Income security and individual autonomy, equality and full inclusion of people with disability in society can only be reached through labour market participation because employment is crucial for securing income resources. National and European policies should ensure both the development of Supported Employment as a proactive strategy to employment and income security for people with disabilities and provide an appropriate legal and structural framework to ensure that persons with disabilities exercise their right to engage in work.

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