



# LIFELONG GUIDANCE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

## Cedefop has reviewed recent policies and practices improving education, training and labour market outcomes for all

An estimated 87 million people with disabilities live in the European Union <sup>(1)</sup> <sup>(2)</sup>. The many barriers they encounter daily in a world lacking inclusive and accessibly designed services include limited access to education and training, career support and jobs fitting their interests and abilities. Across all EU Member States, in 2021, the [employment gap between those with disabilities and those without was 23 percentage points](#). Few people with disabilities complete a tertiary degree. Those who are enrolled in vocational education and training (VET) are often referred to specific-needs institutions. Their participation in adult learning is below average, while their rate of early leaving or poor education outcomes is above.

### Recent European policy developments

This is why the EU has reinforced its focus on inclusive education and training and labour market access for those with disabilities. Together with the [European Pillar for Social Rights action plan](#), the European Commission adopted in March 2021 the [EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-30](#). It spells out priority areas for action which include strengthening services that help people with disabilities find and keep jobs. This includes opening more pathways into employment, designing workplaces for the needs of people with disabilities ([reasonable accommodation](#)) and developing career management skills from a young age. The Council, with its 2022 [Conclusions on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market](#), has invited the Commission and EU Member

States to take further action in this direction <sup>(3)</sup>.

### What's happening on the ground

To accompany this renewed policy process, Cedefop, together with its [CareersNet](#) partners in EU Member States and beyond, has collected examples of lifelong guidance policies and practices that support the rights and opportunities of people with disabilities. They are presented in Cedefop's online [Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices](#), which monitors progress in key policy areas and offers information on different approaches to policy-makers, practitioners and researchers <sup>(4)</sup>.

This briefing note showcases some of these initiatives in EU Member States and beyond, and presents policy pointers for further action <sup>(5)</sup>. Career guidance for people with disabilities has evolved in recent years to link in with a widening range of career support measures: skills assessment and development, job coaching, confidence building, career planning, reasonable accommodation of workplaces and 'supported employment' <sup>(6)</sup>. They all aim at enabling people with specific needs to participate in learning opportunities and, ultimately, the open labour market. Sheltered employment is seen, as far as possible, as a transitional step on their road towards this goal. So-called twin-track approaches offer services specifically adapted to the needs of people with disabilities

<sup>(1)</sup> As cited in the [European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2023](#), drawing on data from Eurostat sources, i.a. [EU SILC](#) (Statistics on income and living conditions) and [LFS](#) (labour force survey) 2020.

<sup>(2)</sup> Of those with disabilities aged 16 and above, [24.7% are limited in their activities, 17.7% have moderate and 7% severe limitations](#).

<sup>(3)</sup> Projects in the area of social inclusion and access to services such as career support are funded by [European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\)](#). Projects showcasing good practices in career guidance include the [Youth Transition project](#) (SI) supporting the labour market transition of young people with disabilities, and [De Groeneweg](#) (BE) centre for autism coaching. The ESF+ budget amounts to almost EUR 99.3 billion for the period 2021-27.

<sup>(4)</sup> It is complemented by [Cedefop's transferability tool](#) supporting decision-making in the field.

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<sup>(6)</sup> It was reviewed by the [Disability Platform](#) and its [expert group](#).

alongside more universally oriented measures, inclusive by design, in mainstream settings.

## Accessible career guidance for all

As well as easily available on-site services for all, career guidance and support is offered in different virtual formats. Increasingly, single-access portals serve clients with disabilities as well as their trainers, employers and career practitioners. The portals often include self-help videos in national sign language or with plain language subtitles. Some offer specifically tailored digital resources and tools to family members who support those with disabilities.

To strengthen such inclusive virtual services, the Commission recently reviewed its [Web Accessibility Directive](#) <sup>(7)</sup>. Potential discrimination risks that self-help career services and other digital tools may pose are addressed in the [European Artificial Intelligence Act](#).

Some guidance tools are developed with or by persons with disabilities, e.g. under civil society projects funded by national or European programmes. This helps build trust in the tools' user-friendliness and relevance.

### Box 1. Career paths in Austria and other countries

[CareersPaths Inclusive](#) is an online platform offering young people with hearing impairments career orientation tests, tutorials on how to apply for a job, and job information videos recorded by hearing-impaired persons who explain their own job experiences in the national sign language. The project also develops teaching resources tailored to the needs of hearing-impaired learners and provides sign language interpretation for its own and other organisations' events.

To expand its reach, the platform content has been integrated in the [central occupational information portal of the Austrian industrial and crafts chambers](#); used by employers, job seekers and public institutions this offers a wide range of job opportunities.

[Ireland's Deaf Society](#) has developed similar activities, ranging from advocacy to education and training, sign language interpretation and awareness raising.

### Box 2. The Piarist Outlook Centre in Hungary

The [Piarist Outlook Centre in Vac, Hungary](#) provides career guidance, individual skills and needs analyses, labour market information and education and training opportunities to young people with disabilities. Its user-centred approach focuses on community development. Located in a monastery of the Piarist Order, the

Centre also acts as a research and documentation hub. It cooperates with teachers, trainers, career consultants and employers. To maximise support, the Centre opens its training sessions to the beneficiaries' family members. Its premises are wheelchair-accessible, while transportation and parking spaces are available.

### Box 3. Virtual Eures consultancy services in Greece

The Greek Employment Service (D.Y.P.A) offers career counselling to vulnerable unemployed, businesses and specialised staff via its [MyOAEDlive](#) platform. Eures advisors provide job mobility counselling and business consultancy on the platform, which also features videos, audio descriptions and colour-coded information. Services for people with disabilities are available in Greek sign language, and text size can be increased to 200% without scrolling.

## Development of career management skills

Empowering people to manage their learning and working careers and to take meaningful decisions for their future is at the core of career guidance services. To offer a long-term perspective also to people with disabilities, the EU Strategy provides for training and individually tailored services preparing people with disabilities for employment and/or accompanying them while working. Skills building and employability are central.

Structures such as job clubs offer members, including those with high-level needs, training and coaching opportunities, contacts with employers and help with individual plans, applications, etc. They are popular in quite a few countries, including [Germany](#) and [Greece](#).

### Box 4. VASTE: a comprehensive labour market inclusion programme from Malta

The [Maltese VASTE Programme](#) (Vocational Assessment, Training and Employability, ended in 2022) offered people with disabilities guidance, personal skills assessments, training and job exposure in a sheltered environment, with the ultimate goal of helping them into the open labour market or self-employment. Help with job applications and social skills training, deepening clients' understanding of work processes, and on-the-job coaching were also offered.

### Box 5. An organisation in flanders supporting people with mental health issues

[GTB \(Gespecialiseerd Team Bemiddeling\)](#) is a network organisation headquartered in Gent helping mental health service users find jobs, either in the open labour

<sup>(7)</sup> [Summary review](#).

market or sheltered employment, depending on their needs. Thanks to its guidance services, delivered by well-trained counsellors/ mentors and based on careful matching and an established methodology, its cooperation with employers and its comprehensive services, GTB enjoys an excellent local reputation and employer trust. This is also because by design it supports both its clients and the companies that hired them during their job integration process.

## High-quality support provision

Career guidance systems development requires strategic leadership. Cooperation of key players and coordination of policies and services play an important role.

It is critical to involve people with disabilities, and organisations representing them in the design of services, policies and practices affecting them, as they know best. Specialist disability coordinator and other career guidance staff profiles could be developed, to the recruit people with disability.

Employers, education and training providers and career practitioners need continuous capacity-building, enabling them to innovate and to work towards integrated and coordinated service provision and life-long guidance system development.

At client level, services should be easily accessible and efficient, for example through one-stop shops.

### Box 6. Agefiph: bringing together different actors

Agefiph is a French State-funded organisation supporting the labour market integration and career development of people with disabilities. Its employment counsellors work in 14 regional offices across the country and cooperate with a vast network of public services and private companies. Agefiph offers its clients various financial assistance schemes and links them to guidance services and potential employers, including through its single access ICT platform. Activities focus on:

- managing corporate contributions;
  - allocating financial aid;
  - coordinating/moderating the partner network;
  - increasing the impact of public policies for its clients.
- Agefiph also helps employers who want to adapt their work environment to accommodate people with disability. It provides them with legal advice as needed, for example with its initiative [#activeurdeprogrès](#) supporting companies that want to promote diversity and hire people with disabilities. The initiative is designed to gather all public and private enterprises, associations and institutions wishing to take an active stance in making the labour market more inclusive.

## Targeted training empowering key actors

With rising labour market uncertainty and local impact of global developments, career practitioners need advanced tools and frequent relevant training, allowing them to react swiftly to changing requirements. Anyone working with people with disabilities must be knowledgeable about local skill demand, labour market barriers and service landscape, companies hiring people with disabilities, the importance of improving career skills for life, the relevant evidence-based methods, career theories and legislative frameworks, including clients' rights to financial and non-financial support, and the possibilities of referrals to other services. Depending on client needs, communication skills such as (sign) language skills may also be required from career professionals.

Cedefop has collected examples of recent innovative practices focused on strengthening the personal qualities, communication skills and labour market knowledge of key actors, such as workplace supervisors or mentors who play a crucial role in integrating persons with disabilities in their work environment.

### Box 7. Ik ben Harrie in the Netherlands

*Ik ben Harrie* ('I am Harry') is a 2-day training module recently initiated by [CNV Jongeren](#), a think-tank and trade association, and [Enspiratie](#), a private company, both based in Utrecht and supporting vulnerable young people's labour market participation. 'Harrie' is the personification of the ideal colleague-employee who helps those with specific needs in the workplace. The training is addressed to in-company mentors and other 'Harries' tasked with integrating young people with disabilities in their workplaces.

The idea for the training is based on evidence showing that the active workplace participation of an employee with an occupational disability is stronger and more successful when he/she is supported by a Harrie. This has led to the development of this hands-on in-company training which comprises:

- an analysis of the competences required from a Harrie (\*) and how they play out in the workplace practice;
- an introduction to a practical 'toolbox' to be used by colleagues responsible for integrating newcomers;
- conversation and interaction techniques.

(\*) 'Harrie' stands for: helpful, alert, realistic, calm, instructive, honest.

## Universal coverage and twin-track systems

Many activities in European countries are aimed at developing comprehensive lifelong guidance systems. For systems offering universal coverage for

all, a general emphasis on systemic change can help build sustainable guidance which is independent of government changes or ad hoc solutions.

Twin-track systems <sup>(8)</sup>, offering targeted career guidance to people with disabilities while supporting their equal access to the open labour market and mainstream guidance services, may be best at responding to the many different needs of those with disabilities, including individually, at different points in their career. Approaches will differ depending on resources, service landscapes and context, but a strategy is called for across the system.

Career guidance policy must also address discrimination in the broadest sense, as people's social identities are based on multiple characteristics which, besides disability, can include ethnicity, age, migration background, or gender (discriminatory intersectionality) <sup>(9)</sup>.

### Box 8. Sweden's universal inclusion strategy

The Swedish Employment Service has adopted a universal design approach that supports all jobseekers from 18 to 65, with or without special needs: it helps them prepare for work, apply for jobs, and get support while working, depending on their individual needs. Addressing career guidance through enabling career management skills, e.g. self-awareness of barriers, is seen as a way to empower individuals to handle discrimination based on functionality, gender, social or cultural background, and to deal with decisions and challenges related to their work pathways.

The Employment Service website offers dedicated self-help guidance resources, with instructions and videos in plain Swedish; it also features text in different languages. Targeted resources include videos informing people with disabilities about the main difficulties that can hinder full participation in working life, and the support available to them.

### Box 9. Working capacity coordinators in Finland

Finland has stepped up its inclusive employment support with the innovative function of 'working capacity coordinators', senior specialists from various fields of expertise such as occupational health, HR management, education, VET or career guidance. Their training focuses on the employment and working capacity service system, recognition and mitigation of work capacity risks and challenges, knowledge of guidance tools and techniques, and awareness of the

complexities of working as part of a cooperation network. It is delivered online by the [Open University of Applied Sciences](#). Working capacity coordinators work in [Employment and Economic Development \(TE\) offices](#) and help jobseekers with partial work capacity to find employers who want to hire them.

- Jobseekers with disabilities can obtain, alongside allowances, services such as career guidance and support, rehabilitation, education and training, job coaching, help with applications, legal support, a job or training try-out.
- Employers are offered an 'employ with competence' scheme (information on hiring those with partial work capacity or on joining EURES), help with recruitment of workers with disabilities, and pay subsidies when hiring such an employee.

The Finnish State has also created the intermediate labour market company [Työkanava Ltd.](#) which employs those people with disabilities who face the greatest labour market barriers and need a high level of support. Työkanava, a unique initiative in the country, sells goods and services produced by its employees to its customers. Beyond a job, it provides career development support and training to its workers. Its goal is to help in this way improve their skills to make them fit for recruitment in the open labour market. It is the working capacity coordinators in the TE offices who propose people for a job with Työkanava.

## Lessons learned and ways forward

In spite of the many initiatives countries have taken, the employment – and education and training – gap for persons with disabilities persists and progress on European strategies has been sluggish. Investment in career development and guidance support is designed to close this gap and enable meaningful access to career planning and learning pathways for all. Some initial suggestions for further action can be drawn from recent developments.

The sharing, upscaling and mainstreaming of successful policies and practices across regions and countries should be encouraged and promoted more systematically. Partnerships must be well-coordinated and in tune with client requirements and provide integrated measures for complex needs, to safeguard client rights.

Attention should be paid to integrating diversity policies with a clear concept of disability across guidance providers and partner organisations. The accessibility of physical and virtual services must be ensured. This comprises inclusive, accessible communication means for people with disabilities, including those with visual or hearing impairments and

<sup>(8)</sup> 'A twin-track approach requires the systematic integration of disability into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all programmatic and operational policies, strategies and actions, as well as targeted initiatives to support the empowerment of people with disability' (WHO, 2021).

<sup>(9)</sup> Intersectionality is an analytical concept referred to in the EU Strategy (see Footnote 1) which designates the combination of multiple, intersecting discrimination factors (see also [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, general comment No 8, 2022](#)).

mental health service users <sup>(10)</sup>.

Research and practice have shown that building career management skills in connection with key competences must begin early in life. Such skills support building of career identity, shed light on stereotypes and counter misconceptions about occupations that frequently limit career options. Fostering self-awareness and confidence, adaptability and meaningful decision-making serves as a bridge to adult career experiences and employability, particularly where complex barriers are likely to arise. This applies to all people.

To support the further development of career guidance policy, more work at EU and cross-country level is needed.

- **Strengthening knowledge and information:** in spite of the improved coherence of Eurostat's national data sourcing, there is a need to collect more evidence to identify and address the gaps in cross-country knowledge and research on the learning and labour market careers of people with disabilities. Data collection is critical for improving services, for comparability and for sharing knowledge and good practices across the EU.
- **Establishing a common terminology across the EU:** the lack of a common, unified vocabulary in Europe impairs research, monitoring, take-up and comparability of good practices, and hence their transferability and mainstreaming. It is time to develop a common terminology to facilitate cross-country research, evidence collection, policy development and knowledge sharing.

<sup>(10)</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and the Council on the accessibility requirements for products and services.

Additional pointers apply to the national level.

- **Promoting research on the role of discrimination based on disability and intersectionality** in work-places, education and training, and support services. A better knowledge of discrimination mechanisms can contribute to strengthening the preventive and enabling role of career guidance and to easing participation of people with disabilities in mainstream VET and adult learning. It can help raise informed awareness.
- **Improved user-centred approaches, feedback, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.** Cedefop's review of policies and practices in EU countries suggests that the user/client perspective is not always addressed in the design and delivery of measures. More could be done to develop monitoring and evaluation approaches that account for client goals and steps in career guidance (increasing self-awareness, self-efficacy, career control and autonomy; sourcing career information) as well as their career progress. Feedback loops should work with improved monitoring and evaluation, including involvement of career practitioners and nearby professionals, and service users where relevant.

These conclusions and policy pointers concerning the development of sustainable lifelong guidance systems are based on a first exploration of the evidence collected. There are signs that national career guidance policy and practice are changing in tandem with the strengthening of the EU policy and monitoring frameworks, including data collection, policies governing accessibility and the use of artificial intelligence. **Cedefop's inventory** is currently being updated with examples of practices in countries reflecting the most recent trends in lifelong guidance.



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