
Addressing Disability Inequalities in a Post-COVID Digital Europe

The global crisis of COVID-19 has deepened pre-existing inequalities, exposing the extent of exclusion and underscoring the urgent need for disability inclusion. According to EUD Policy Review, in 2022, there were 193,458,000 employed individuals aged 20-64 in the European Union. This figure represents 74.6% of the population in this age group and indicates a rising trend in employment rates since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, for people with disabilities, out of 47.2 million aged 16-64, only about 50.7% were employed. This means that 1 out of 2 people with a disability in Europe are unemployed and from those employed, most exercise low-skilled and low-paid jobs. As there is no further disaggregated data available on how deaf people count in this numbers, commitment for future changing perspectives is doubtful.

Over time, the EU has aimed to pay closer attention to the situation of disabled people, raising the question of the appropriate legal basis for a genuine EU disability policy. The right to work and employment is a fundamental right outlined in Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which the EU is a signatory. By ratifying the UN CRPD in 2010, the EU associated itself with the efforts agreed at the international level to guarantee the fundamental rights of disabled people. Moreover, a provision on the integration of disabled people was incorporated into Article 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

However, the European Commission's actions do not fully align with its obligations for two main reasons: the first, is that there is a lack of understanding in the EU of the importance of national sign language-inclusive environments to ensure a fully accessible labour market. The second, and probably, most complex, as much as the EU pursues to establish clear criteria's, in the end, it is up to member States to guarantee or not compliance with the Charter.

In token of its commitment, the EU has aimed to address growing disabilities through its Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, published in March 2021. The ten-year strategy sets out key initiatives around three main themes: EU Rights, Independent living and autonomy, and non-discrimination.

Regarding the first, the EU legal framework including European Accessibility Act (that requires key products and services such as phones, computers, e-books, banking services and electronic communications to be accessible and usable for persons with a variety of disabilities), Web Accessibility Directive, Passenger Rights are intending to contribute to a more accessibility in this sense.

Regarding the second, and more specific to the case of deaf people, the aim is to push for more national sign language inclusive spaces where the specific cultural and linguistic identity of deaf people are respected and valued in all steps of the process: recruitment, training to professional development and right to exercise autonomously collective rights (right to strike and to be part of a union). Here, the commission calls on Member States to unlock the potential of persons with disabilities and improve their position on the labour market, including them in other relevant strategies as that of digitally competent labour.

Although words still feel like big challenges, European funds are intending to accelerate the process, by directly targeting education and digitalisation as important targets were to start working for a better inclusion that will lead to curve the unemployment rates. Erasmus+ projects as “Quality Standard for Distance Apprenticeship for Disability-QSA4Disability”, aim to promote a more inclusive apprenticeship program in VET (Vocational Education and Training) and business environments for deaf students approaching labour market in Europe. By designing and releasing a quality standard for distance apprenticeships, it aims to create more inclusive environments that foster equity and equality, improving the job placement of young deaf people and dispelling the myth of their low employability and low professional contribution.

The project will be running for 24 months in collaboration with 7 contributing partners from Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Greece, and Austria, and 1 supranational organization on the European level, based in Belgium.