



EUCIS-LLL



Comité économique et social européen

“ACCESS TO LIFELONG LEARNING FOR DISABLED PEOPLE”

1 JULY 2008, BRUSSELS (2 PM-5 PM)

GENERAL SYNTHESIS

EUCIS-LLL organised a public hearing on July 1st in Brussels in partnership with the European Economic and Social Committee on the “*Access to lifelong learning for disabled people*”. It gave the opportunity of gathering thirty participants representing national associations, European organisations and networks and representatives of European and national institutions. The participants could share their points of view on the various practices and policies that favour the access to lifelong learning for disabled people.

The participants talked about the various policies launched by the European and international institutions, especially the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and the European Commission’s Action Plan. According to the participants, it is important that the EU adopts the same approach as the United Nations’ i.e. it should consider more in-depth the issue of disability in the frame of human rights. The participants also deplored the fact that education and training barely appear in the EU legislation, which is mostly focused on the labour market. It is clear that the powers of the European Union remain limited in that field and are mostly limited to the exchange of good practices between member states.

The participants expressed their wish of strengthening this cooperation between member states but also between civil society organisations. It was, among other, asked to the DG EAC to set up a study group on the issue of access to lifelong learning for disabled people and to mention the acknowledgement of the specific needs these persons have in the guide for candidates to community programs. At last, the participants insisted on the crucial need of statistics that could be compared between member states via Eurostat.

Beyond policies, the actors of education and training have an important role to play. It has appeared clearly that disabled people should be integrated in mainstream systems of education and training. The problem has to be reversed: we have to adapt the labour market / traditional schools to disabled people and not the other way round. All the education community has to commit to it. But, as it was highlighted by the participants, this involves additional costs, in terms of specific training for teachers, but also with regard to infrastructures, equipment and transportation. Public authorities have to invest to support these integration actions. Moreover, the participants highly supported the need for a change of our approach of disability: disabled people are not only beneficiaries, they also have to be actors.

SYNTHESIS OF THE INTERVENTIONS

Meelis JOOST, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), rapporteur of the opinion of the EESC on “Harmonised indicators in the field of disability as an instrument for monitoring European policies” (SOC/270) and on “Equal opportunities for the disabled” (SOC/249)

Meelis JOOST insisted on the necessity of maintaining up-to-date and standardised data on disability in Europe; it is thought that disabled people represent 13% to 15% of the population. However, the pieces of information we receive are never completely sure, especially because the European Union does not force countries to keep statistics in that field. Eurostat could though include this aspect in their data collection.

In addition, Mr. Joost said it is important to make education and training accessible to everyone, especially through more investments. Education should be a mean for disabled people to fight against barriers in their everyday life. Among other things, this has to be done through a more equal dispersion of the offer of education all over the country. At last, Mr. Joost evoked the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, and more specifically the article 24 of the Convention, dealing with education, and the article 19.

David LOPEZ, secretary general of the FEEC (European Federation for Education and Culture), added that the issue of employability was too often the main concern when acting for disabled people, when this is only a part of their integration and of their access to social life.

Arnold WESSELS, president of a specialised centre, president of l’Entraide Universitaire, an association member of UNALG (National Union for Secular Management Associations), member of the European network SOLIDAR (France).

Arnold WESSELS presented a concrete example of the VAE (validation of prior learning) for disabled people in the specialised centres of Entraide Universitaire in France. The VAE was set up by the law on social modernisation effective since January 17th 2002; it consists in the acknowledgement of the advantages of learning by experiencing. A decree clarifies the rules for the implementation of this measure: everyone (employees, volunteers, etc.) may initiate a VAE if they have been exercising an activity linked to the object of the requested VAE for more than 3 years.

Moreover, the companies with more than 20 employees have to hire more than 6% of disabled people. The VAE then represents a better and more adapted way of acknowledging professional qualifications for people who could not obtain them at school. It widens the possibilities of receiving education and it is a way for disabled people to be considered as any other person. The VAE represents a very important progress although its implementation remains limited.

Mr. Wessels then presented the activity of Entraide Universitaire, an association that has been active for more than 40 years and which initiated the first CAMSP (Centre of early medico-social action) of Paris. It manages, among others, services of support through work (ESAT) to favour the access to professional training for disabled people. Two of the ESAT of Entraide Universitaire implemented an experimentation of VAE with adults, which should be extended to all the centres (cook degree, clothing training, etc.). It enables the insertion of disabled workers in regular environments.

Michel BAELEN, director of the Fédération médico-sociale des Vosges (medico-social federation of the French Vosges department), quickly presented his association and showed the similarities between its actions and those led by Entraide Universitaire. He insisted on the fact that in lifelong training, the disabled person has to be both an actor and a beneficiary. The VAE meets that demand;

this is why the Fédération médico-sociale is particularly interested in it. At last, he mentioned an action established in Senegal, involving the technical training of Senegalese learners by French disabled persons.

David LOPEZ, secretary general of the FEEC (European Federation for Education and Culture), added that it would be useful to exchange those practices at European level, especially in the frame of European programmes.

Luk ZELDERLOO, secretary general of the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), former director of a specialised centre for disabled children (Belgium).

Mr. Zelderloo presented data concerning lifelong learning for disabled people: 8 million professionals work in that field, as well as 8 million informal workers. Nevertheless, there are staff shortages in the field of health and education of disabled people in the member states of the EU.

He presented the main European texts on lifelong learning for disabled people: the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (2008), the CoE Action Plan on Disability (2006) and the Salamanca Declaration (1994). The approaches are different, as the EU bases its actions in the frame of economic development whereas the United Nations bases them in the frame of human rights. This latter approach should also be chosen in the EU.

He insisted on the main challenges to meet to open the access to lifelong learning to all, especially availability, accessibility, adaptability, cooperation, etc. It is crucial to enable all these persons to go to mainstream schools. With regard to work, it is important not to think only in terms of access to work but to think in terms of careers. We have to make sure that the market and schools adapt to disabled people's special needs and not the other way round.

At last, Luk ZELDERLOO invited the European Commission, and more specifically the DG EAC to facilitate the exchange of data and of good practices in the field of education between member states, by setting up a high level group on education for people with special needs, involving representatives from the civil society and by adopting a long-term plan to fight against discriminations in the field of education and training. He then invited the EU to think about highly disabled people, who represent between 0.6% and 1.5% of the population. How to manage their special needs?

Dominique BESNARD, director of the department of Social policies and practices of the CEMEA added that although it is very useful to act for primary schools, it is not enough; we also have to favour integration during early childhood. In France, the law on that was adopted in 1975; we have to go further, a real cultural revolution is necessary. The issue of competences hides the issue of capacities. Moreover, if the main part of the policy is based on the adaptation of workers to companies, a few of them remains employed for a long time.

Marcella TURNER, communication officer in the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (Belgium).

Marcella TURNER presented the activities of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency). Independent and autonomous organisation created by its member states, it proposes them a platform of cooperation in the field of education for people with special needs in order to improve their practices and policies. This aim takes into account questions such as the achievement of equal opportunities, accessibility, inclusive education, the promotion of quality of education and respect of differences, whilst recognising that countries' policies, practices and educational contexts also differ.

Ms Turner presented the European hearing organised by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and the Agency within the framework of the 2007 Portuguese Presidency of the European Union. During this event, young people from various countries had discussed on professional training, secondary and higher education in the premises of the Portuguese Parliament, in front of national and European leaders. This event had resulted in the Lisbon Declaration on Inclusive Education and was an important moment for young disabled people who could express their special needs. It is essential to take those people into account and to involve them in political decision making.

Gina EBNER, secretary general of the EAEA, said she considers the idea of encouraging collaborations between disabled people and non-disabled people to be a very good one. Researches proved that both disabled people and non-disabled people can benefit from that.

Maria ZUBER, of the Unit 3 “Integration of people with disabilities” of the DG Employment, social affairs and equal opportunities of the European Commission.

Maria ZUBER presented the various actions led by the DG despite limited competences as well as the financial instruments the European Commission is using e.g. the European Social Fund and the programme PROGRESS.

On the political side, she talked about the European year of disabled people in 2003, which was followed by the adoption of the European Action Plan 2004-2010. The Action plan is not very explicit on the issue of lifelong learning and remains more general. The Action Plan is mainly focused on two issues: accessibility and rights. With regard to the rights of disabled people, the European Community signed the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The Community is nevertheless competent in accordance with the Treaty, which means supporting member states notably by encouraging the exchange of good practices. With regard to accessibility, it deals with the physical access to schools and information. The directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (27 November 2000) completes that disposal.

Lifelong learning is linked to employment; it is necessary to favour training and social inclusion. Article 13 of the EC Treaty declares that *“without prejudice to the other provisions of this Treaty and within the limits of the powers conferred by it upon the Community, the Council, acting unanimously on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the European Parliament, may take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation”*. The role of her unit consists in sensitising and encouraging the other DGs to take into account the issue of disability in their policies. The unit also set up a high level group of reflection and exchange of good practices.

Meelis JOOST added that the breathing space of the European Commission remains limited because, although the General Rules stipulate that *“in the frame of its action for economic and social cohesion, the Community shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women, in accordance with the articles 2 and 3 of the treaty, as well as to fight any discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation at all stages of the use of the funds”*, member states decide how they want to allocate community funds.

He insisted on the fact that it would be interesting to collect data on education and training by adpating the “optiwork” method, which consists in measuring the investment and the cost it would represent for the society. It seems to be more profitable to invest in access to training than to compensate with social benefits.

André JOURDES, vice-president of the Ligue de l’enseignement (which is member of SOLIDAR), insisted on the fact that the issue of accessibility was also linked to the language issue. More and

more of the websites of the European Commission are only available in English: this is creating new difficulties and limiting the accessibility to Europe.

Audrey FRITH, coordinator of the platform EUCIS-LLL asked how to favour the access of disabled people to the DG EAC community programmes as it implies supplementary and specific costs linked to their participation in the projects. She gave the example of a Grundtvig seminar organised in France: a blind woman had to pay for the travel costs of her husband who accompanied her.

Frank PIEROBON, member of the unit « Equality of chances » of the DG EAC indicated that the European Commission has organised specific tools for disabled people. It is true that those who have projects have to face the complexity of the rules and have to know how much it will cost as soon as they submit the project. These strict rules can be explained by equity constraints. Moreover, with regard to article 13, it has to be said that the European Commission has limited powers. The main obstacles to the implementation of European actions are the rule of subsidiarity (the Commission can only encourage member states) and the use of European funds, which is mainly under the responsibility of member states.

Geraldine LIBREAU, of the unit « Grundtvig » of the DG EAC said that she would submit the idea of adding a specific mention of the issue of disability in the guide of the candidate.