

Comparison of the policy of integration of people with disabilities and special educational needs in the labor market in Greece with other European countries. Differences and similarities

Georgios O. Tsobanoglou ¹, Taxiarchis Vouglanis ^{1,*} and Khdiya Abdulla ²

¹ *Department of Sociology, University of the Aegean, Greece, & Net Media Lab, IIT-NCSR Demokritos, Athens, Greece.*

² *B.Sc. Physics, Faculty of Science, University of Aleppo, Syria.*

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Abstract

There is a need to improve the policies and practices implemented by Higher Education Institutions to enhance the transition of graduates with disabilities to the labour market. There needs to be a more direct and closer connection between universities and the labour market by developing partnerships for a smoother transition of graduates to the labour market. In the preparation of this article, good practices from universities were recorded. It was observed that the provision of services by universities such as internship offices are important and very useful, as, as has been established, professional experience contributes greatly to the professional rehabilitation of graduates with disabilities. Also, career offices, which provide support in terms of employment, support from mentors and seminars that develop skills for finding a job are considered to be quite helpful.

Keywords: Employment; People with Disabilities; Special Educational Needs; European Union

1. Introduction

The social exclusion of people with disabilities is based on two important and closely related areas: education and work, as people with disabilities sometimes do not have equal access to education, health, labour market opportunities or social relations, the exclusion they experience translates into difficulties or even inability to actively participate in economic, social, political and cultural life (Banu, 2018). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that people with disabilities have the right to access employment. In the European Union, policies aimed at equality, fairness, accessibility and inclusion have been developed since the 1980s and have influenced the way society treats people with disabilities (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize the importance of vocational education, thus the Convention speaks of inclusive education (Article 24) and in Article 27 calls for measures to be taken to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to technical and vocational guidance, placement services and continuing training (UN, 2019). Specifically, Goal 4.5 aims to ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training, and Goal 8 to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full, productive and decent work for all (UN, 2019).

Since the mid-1990s, emphasis has been placed on the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education through legislation, financial investments and a range of services from universities (Bellacicco & Pavone, 2020). The population of people with disabilities studying in higher education has increased in the last decade, however there is concern that

* Corresponding author: Taxiarchis Vouglanis

at the European level the European Social Fund focuses on access to higher education and not enough attention is given to employment (OECD, 2011).

2. Linking education and employment

Creating an inclusive environment for different social groups of people with disabilities requires legal and structural reforms to change their lifestyles, but equally important to create an inclusive culture (Chordiya, 2022). In line with the UN Recommendation to ensure access for all to higher education, lifelong learning and vocational training, research highlights the increasing proportion of students with disabilities studying in higher education (Gillies, 2012). Despite the fact that the percentage of students with disabilities is steadily increasing, the difficulty remains for many students after completing their studies (Pitman et al., 2019).

Finding a job is a vital issue (Ellenkamp et al., 2016) and is a determining factor in the development of an individual's self-confidence (Jahoda et al., 2008). It is an important factor of social inclusion (Tsobanoglou, 2011; Vouglanis & Tsobanoglou, 2022) and is directly linked to quality of life, increases economic benefits and a sense of purpose and belonging (Cocks et al., 2015). It is beneficial not only because of financial and personal fulfillment, but also for maintaining health and happiness (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). On the contrary, unemployment is directly linked to poverty, depression and increased levels of stress (Cocks et al., 2015). However, unfortunately, international literature shows that people with disabilities are less than half as likely to find work as people without disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). At the same time, it has been shown that university education has positive effects on the employment of graduates and job satisfaction (Morina et al., 2022). However, based on research, it has been found that the percentage of people with disabilities who complete their studies in Higher Education is lower than that of students without disabilities (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). The success of Higher Education graduates with disabilities in integrating into the labor market is a matter of utmost importance due to the impact on their emotional, economic and social well-being (Cocks et al., 2015). According to people with disabilities themselves, the social exclusion they experience is created by society, by the way it is organized, and thus obstacles are created to their participation in education, work and social life (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Also according to Banu (2018) society often does not recognize the real needs of people with disabilities. Therefore, there needs to be a change in society and by extension in the policies implemented for the equal participation of people with disabilities in education and work (Vouglanis, 2020; 2023; 2024; 2025; Vouglanis & Drigas, 2022; Vouglanis & Driga, 2023; 2024; Vouglanis, & Raftopoulos, 2023; Vouglanis & Salapata, 2024; Vouglanis, Driga, & Drigas, 2022).

Policymakers in strategies to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities include the correlation of social inclusion and access to education and employment, as they are two variables that are directly linked (Banu, 2018). The inequalities experienced by students with disabilities during their entry into Higher Education and the labor market are of fundamental importance for policymakers (Vouglanis, & Abdulla, 2025). The difficulties faced by people with developmental disorders in employment create the need to find and implement policy solutions that fall under the responsibility of various sectors for implementation (Khayatzaideh – Mahani et al., 2020).

An essential element for making appropriate political decisions is the knowledge of policies for inclusive employment, the study of the contribution of Universities and the work context of inclusion (Khayatzaideh – Mahani et al., 2020). Thus, in recent years, the policies implemented at the European Union level as well as at the national level, the National Action Plans, for employment have been developed as a result of the change in the direction of disability policies, from focusing on subsidies and sheltered employment, to the implementation of an employment policy as an essential element for achieving social inclusion (Portillo-Navarro et al., 2022).

The importance of all digital technologies in the field of education and employment is highlighted in this point. ICTs support universal access to education, provide innovative approaches for effective teacher training, enhance learning retention, promote cooperation, increase openness, develop learner-centered approaches, and hasten the process of learning. Additionally, by using virtualization, mobilization, artificial intelligence, and new learning environments like virtual worlds, support educational activities and methodologies. More specifically, ICTs are very effective and productive in ADHD training, facilitating and improving the assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [67] and through a variety of ICT applications that serve as the backbone of education [68-73]. While games turn education into a multimodal, incredibly amiable, and enjoyable interaction, the use of AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS raise educational procedures into new levers of adaptation, creativity, and performance [74-77]. Furthermore, the adoption, improvement, and fusion of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence cultivation [78-91] places the development of mental abilities at the center of educational procedures and policies, which accelerates and improves educational practices and outcomes, particularly for SEN employability.

3. Institutional Framework

Over the years, several changes have taken place in the institutional framework at international, European and by extension national levels regarding both the education and living conditions of people with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Since the 1940s, declarations, conventions, treaties, recommendations and resolutions have been submitted by international organizations with the aim of improving the living and educational conditions of people with disabilities and/or special educational needs.

Key milestones for the development of the international and European framework for Special Needs Education and Training were the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the UNESCO Declaration on Special Needs Education in 1994, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 by the European Union as well as the establishment of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASIE) as well as the contribution of the NESSE (Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training) network of experts with the report it published in 2012.

In the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, in addition to the declaration of fundamental human rights, the value of the human personality, of the equal rights of men and women was established and the important role of education as a compass for a society without discrimination of any kind, imbued with values such as freedom, equality, dignity and respect. Specifically, according to article 26, everyone has the right to education and each state is committed to implementing it.

In 1960, UNESCO, with the "Convention against Discrimination in Education", promotes the abolition of provisions that contribute to discrimination in education and the adoption of national policies that promote equality and equal access to education for all. The contracting states have an obligation to provide equal, free and compulsory primary education as well as to create secondary education more accessible to all. They are also obliged to create equality of educational institutions. The policies adopted are based on the development of the human personality and respect for human rights and freedoms. Minorities should be recognized and each person should be able to receive an education that is not contrary to their beliefs.

The Council of Europe in 1961 signed the European Social Charter, where the contracting states are obliged to adopt policies that promote the right of every person to have access to social services. In the European area, everyone should have access to free basic education and people with mental or physical disabilities should have the right to vocational training and rehabilitation. More generally, member states must adopt national policies that promote access to work for everyone and the creation of favorable conditions for the recruitment of people with disabilities as well as the creation of sheltered employment. Not only access to education is promoted, but also to the labor market.

In 1989, the United Nations Organization, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, promotes the recognition of the dignified and autonomous life of mentally or spiritually disabled children. The need is recognized and provided free of charge to the extent economically possible to children of this social group so that they have access to education and their comprehensive rehabilitation with the aim of optimal social integration.

With the Treaty of the European Union in 1992, the Member States are committed to fundamental human rights and freedoms and a single reference framework is set for education, vocational and non-vocational and youth. Specifically, the community contributes to the development of high-level education through the exchange of experiences and information on the issues to be resolved. The UNESCO Declaration on Special Education in Salamanca in 1994, signed by 92 governments and 25 international organizations, was a milestone in the policy framework that states will follow regarding the education of people with disabilities and/or special educational needs. It recognized the uniqueness of each student, along with the need to provide them with a specialized support framework.

At the same time, inclusive education was promoted as an effective way of educating students with disabilities in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 1994). This text formed the basis for the implementation of "inclusive education" for equal access to education for all and the creation of an inclusive society. The year 2000 also marks a milestone at the international and European level. At the UNESCO World Forum on Education in Dakar, 164 countries committed to Education for All. The objectives set are to expand and improve the quality of basic education for all, reduce adult illiteracy and eliminate gender inequalities in access to education. Access to lifelong learning programmes was also strengthened. In the same year, the Charter of Fundamental Rights was submitted to the European Union, which states the prohibition of any discrimination between individuals based on sex, ethnicity, colour, religion, political opinion or disability. The same Charter recognises the rights of people with disabilities to live independently and to be included in society and work, and the measures taken at national level will be consistent with these objectives.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006 and entered into force in 2008, is the first international binding instrument on the rights of persons with disabilities. This Convention filled the gap that existed as there was no single framework for disability and discrimination. It advocates equal access for all citizens and sets a standard of minimum rights in all areas for persons with disabilities. It prohibits any kind of discrimination, promotes respect for the autonomy of each individual, their full access, integration and participation in society, equality of opportunities regardless of gender and respect for the special needs of children with disabilities. It guarantees their access to general education with adaptation to the needs of the individual and the provision of personalized measures and alternative ways of learning and communication. The United Nations Convention is an important document not only for its binding nature but also because it introduces the social model as an approach to disability and changes the landscape for disability, moving it from the individual to society as a whole.

The European Union is moving along the same path. With the REC Convention in 2006, it recognizes the access of people with disabilities to education as a factor of social integration and autonomy. In 2010, the European Disability Strategy (EU 2010-2020) was announced. The Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibited discrimination of any kind on the grounds of disability and recognized the right to independent living and professional and social integration.

The European Strategy aims to ensure these rights by ensuring goods in eight key areas. Regarding accessibility, the goal is equal access for all to means of transport, infrastructure, the natural environment and information technologies. People with disabilities should truly enjoy equal participation in all areas of life, which means free movement, choice of place and lifestyle and equal participation in sports and recreational events. Equality is promoted through the respective EU institutional framework, which ensures protection against discrimination and awareness-raising actions aimed at eliminating discrimination. Also, an important goal is the professional rehabilitation of people with disabilities through the creation of appropriate conditions for them to gain financial independence, a key factor in autonomous living. Regarding education, the goal is equal access for all to education and lifelong learning. Also, a priority is the integration of students with disabilities into general education schools and the provision of personalized programs according to the abilities of each student, where necessary.

The fact that many people with disabilities are outside the educational context implies their position outside the labor market, which is necessary for their economic autonomy and livelihood. The objective of the European Strategy is therefore the area of social protection with measures to strengthen these people in order to ensure their autonomous livelihood. To achieve these goals, awareness-raising, EU funding to combat discrimination and enhance accessibility, data collection and monitoring of their development are promoted. Finally, in 2015, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the "collective effort to build a fair globalization" as stated by the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. Goal 4 emphasizes the importance of the participation of all, regardless of gender and vulnerable social groups, in education at all levels. It also refers to strengthening inclusive education and equal access to vocational training for all. Goal 8 in the 2030 Agenda refers to productive employment and decent work for all, including persons with disabilities and young people, and ensuring equal pay. These goals commit Member States, developed and developing, to adopt policies in this direction, taking into account national priorities (UN, 2015).

The European Union therefore aims to combat discrimination on the grounds of disability. It adopts policies that promote independent living and professional and social inclusion. The European Disability Strategy 2010 - 2020 calls on Member States to promote the rights of persons with disabilities (European Commission, 2019). The European Union is characterized by disparities in economic performance within it between Northern and Northwestern Europe and Southern, Central and Eastern Europe where lower performance is shown. For this reason, the EU uses various tools to allow the weaker members to achieve the goals that have been set. The goals of the European Strategy are related to inequalities, since higher education leads to finding a job and thus helps to increase employment by reducing poverty levels. Over time, the development of the field of special education and training is in the same direction at the international and European level. International organizations and states are working towards a common direction for an inclusive society, without exclusions and inequalities for any social group. Greece is also moving in this direction with the decisions and texts in which it is committed to following the goals at the international level.

4. Participation in employment

There are differences per country regarding the definition of disability and the interpretation of the statistical definition for people with disabilities and therefore comparative research cannot be conducted in order to produce the corresponding conclusions (Adam, 2012). Also, according to her, the fact that there is no database for all countries and when there is, the data are not always comparable makes it difficult to obtain a more accurate picture. Another fact that makes research on the issue under study more difficult is the confusion that exists around the definitions of the forms

of employment of people with disabilities. In sheltered employment, people with disabilities are mainly placed in groups in jobs, while in supported employment, these terms are not common in all EU countries (Logaras, 2013).

In the process of integrating a person's personality, vocational rehabilitation also plays an important role. Employment offers economic autonomy and contributes to the well-being and quality of life of people with disabilities (Jahoda et al., 2008). Access to work and the opportunity for success, according to research, can be associated with good physical and mental health (Bond & Drake, 2014). Vocational rehabilitation is a way to combat social stereotypes that want people with disabilities to not succeed in professional life. All people need support for their development, accessibility to public life and the workplace for people with disabilities represents an important mechanism for their freedom of movement (Banu, 2018). Unfortunately, people with disabilities are at greater risk of being outside the labor market, as they have lower employment rates and a higher risk of living on the edge of poverty (Echarti et al., 2020). There is a risk of finding themselves in difficult living conditions as they face more difficulties in finding a job. The unemployment rate for these people is twice as high as for people without disabilities, while the percentage of people with disabilities living in poverty is 70% higher than the average population, while employment rates are low (Banu, 2018). However, the dignity of a person should not be determined by their employment status in the labor market when that person is unable to work due to disability (Chordiya, 2022).

It becomes clear how important it is to provide access to the labor market for people with disabilities. Employment and decent work are a necessary condition for well-being and dignity and are the way to break the vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization. The profession that young people with disabilities will choose is directly related to the type and degree of their disability, but the difficulties in their professional rehabilitation are related to prejudices and stereotypes that exist in society as a whole, as well as to misconceptions held by employers (Hevvard & Orlansky, 2011).

People with multiple disabilities appear to have lower employment rates than people with a single disability. A United Nations study, based on data from 12 countries between 2002 and 2004, found that in all but one country, the employment rate of people with multiple disabilities was lower than that of people with a single disability (UN, 2019).

The professional potential of people with disabilities often remains untapped due to misconceptions about their abilities, negative social attitudes, the lack of vocational skills development centers and job placement services, and lack of access to workplaces (UN, 2019). The rehabilitation of people with disabilities is made difficult either due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure in the workplace or due to entrenched beliefs about their difficulty in finding work and employers about their productivity, which leads to abstention from the job search process as they believe that they will be rejected or employed in reduced-hours positions and do not want the disability benefit granted by the state to be discontinued. Indeed, a survey conducted in the United Kingdom found that people with disabilities faced discrimination in the workplace, bullying and unequal treatment more often (27%) than people without disabilities where the corresponding percentage was 17% (Coleman et al., 2013).

5. Good practices

Since the 1980s, access to higher education for people with disabilities has been promoted and there have been trends towards policy decisions to create support programs in education and the labor market. Then, in the following decade, researchers observed the need to improve these programs in order to promote academic success through the development of professional skills. In the 2000s, service provision for students with disabilities increased, while at the same time, students themselves wanted to invest in their education and exercise their professional skills in a professional environment (Carter et al., 2012). This created the need to improve the policies and practices of higher education institutions to support people with disabilities and make their transition to the labor market (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

However, the transition of people with disabilities from university to the labor market is lower compared to the general population, which highlights the need to strengthen the relationship between universities and the labor market by developing partnerships in order to achieve a smoother transition of graduates to the labor market and consequently social inclusion (OECD, 2011). According to OECD data in the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark and France, half of the population of people who attended the first cycle of studies in Tertiary education had a job after graduation, while more than 1/3 continued their studies in the second cycle of studies. It also appears that more than 50% of people continued their studies in Tertiary education and 31% of them entered the labor market (Ebersold, 2012).

There is therefore an urgent need to link education with the labor market and guide people with disabilities for professional integration within a context where professional skills are becoming essential for the development of nations (Cabral et al., 2015). Morina & Biagiotti (2022) emphasize the importance of connecting universities, businesses

and students with the aim of managing the connection of services for students with disabilities and continuous support for their recruitment. The existence of career offices is also necessary for graduates of higher education because they can strengthen their work skills, have developed professional interests and have the required skills to approach employers (Roessler et al., 2007).

A study conducted in Italy found that registering people with disabilities in the University Employment Center has shown very positive results as they can offer career guidance services and inform people with disabilities about available positions (Bellacicco & Pavone, 2020). Counseling has been associated with a reduction in academic difficulties and retention in the student community (Fleming et al., 2018). However, a study by Roessler et al. (2007) found that career offices had limited experience in disability issues and disability offices had limited experience in career guidance issues, so they suggest developing cooperation between the two services, involving parents in career preparation workshops and involving employers in university career events. Career services should promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities as experience appears to have a very significant impact on entry into the job market (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017).

Morina & Biagiotti (2022) agree that one of the key factors for students with disabilities to continue their studies and integrate into the job market is universities that facilitate their studies, guide them and prepare them through the professional experience they gain. This process is carried out according to students with interview practice, CV writing workshops and conferences with company managers (Morina & Biagiotti, 2022).

In a study on the good practices of European Universities, specifically in universities in Italy, France, England, Ireland and Denmark, it was found that in terms of career guidance, students are involved with professors in all countries, but in the Universities of England, France, Italy and Ireland, professors from other university institutions and regions are also involved. Internship offices and career offices use specific tools to evaluate and monitor the student throughout his studies. As for vocational rehabilitation, the majority of companies are disconnected from the career guidance initiatives of students with disabilities, so the involvement of politicians in this issue, according to the study, is considered necessary in order for companies to move in this direction. There must also be information on opportunities to access the labor market and internship opportunities in order to familiarize the student with work requirements. All this highlights the importance of building a specific career plan that meets the requirements of the work context and concerns each student based on their academic and social skills, self-determination and professional experience (Lamb, 2007).

According to international practices, mentors have a very important role in the professional rehabilitation of students. They can monitor and support students (Morina & Biagiotti, 2022) as through relationships of trust with students they contribute to addressing marginalization and discrimination, to their active participation in the academic process, and to strengthening their self-confidence. In order to develop orientation programs, the student should feel part of the human resource and a changing space and be given a way to be informed (Cabral et al., 2015).

The Vocational Rehabilitation system aims to provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in society. People with disabilities supported by a Vocational Rehabilitation program have been shown to have increased productivity, better understand their work role, and are more likely to operate within the policies and rules of the organization they are employed by (Heron et al., 2020). The National Agency on Disability in a survey conducted in 1998 found that 50% of adults with disabilities have completed some college and the Vocational Rehabilitation system contributed to 21% of these (Hong et al., 2011).

Also, to improve the transition to the labor market, Universities should take seriously the vocational rehabilitation of students with disabilities as well as students without, create effective networks and formal contacts with people who exercise economic and political influence on employment policies in order to be able to promote initiatives for companies to hire graduates with disabilities and finally strengthen job placement services for people with disabilities (OECD, 2011). Another practice that seems to have a direct impact on the vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities after graduation is work experience during their studies or a high level of ICT knowledge (Portillo-Navarrom et al., 2022). This improves the readiness of graduates, they participate in integrated learning programs, the internship experience facilitates their subsequent decisions regarding their professional path, thus, all of the above contribute to their transition from university to employment.

Work experience has been identified as one of the key factors in the employment of graduates with disabilities, and in a study by Nolan & Gleeson (2017), a large number of students encourage future students to engage in some type of employment, either internships or volunteer work. Work experience contributes not only because employers want to

hire people with experience, but also for the students themselves as they gain greater confidence in their abilities and develop a sense of purpose and role (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017).

6. Discussion

In recent years, inclusion has been at the center of education and society in general at a global level. Inclusion is prioritized in all aspects of society, so that there is no discrimination and no individuals are excluded. In this context, the percentages of people with disabilities studying in Higher Education have increased in the last decade, and according to Goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development, it is a process that is ongoing. However, an inclusive society also concerns the autonomous living of people and by extension their professional rehabilitation. According to Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Agenda, society must provide full and decent work for people with disabilities. People with disabilities who study and complete Higher Education have greater chances of entering the labor market, compared to people with disabilities who do not have a Higher Education degree. The higher the level of education a person has completed, the greater the chances of vocational rehabilitation. According to research, people with disabilities who are graduates of higher education have a 63% greater chance of vocational rehabilitation (Dutta et al., 2009).

Despite the fact that the number of people with disabilities entering higher education is increasing, they have a lower rate of vocational rehabilitation and employment compared to the general population. The obstacles that graduates with disabilities face in employment create the need to find and implement policy solutions that fall under the responsibility of various sectors for implementation. The large differentiation that exists in employment between people with and without disabilities has led to the adoption of political decisions such as labor market activation programs, welfare reforms and equality laws aimed at reducing these differences.

At the European Union level, decisions and actions are taken for the introduction and vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities in the labor market. The European Union countries must follow and promote the integration of people with disabilities into the labor market through policies and actions. So far, the REC Action Plan and the Europe 2020 Strategy have been implemented, which promote the employment of people with disabilities, and now the Disability Strategy 2021-2030 has come into force, which is a continuation of the previous ones. Through various initiatives, it aims at dignified and independent living, as well as the prohibition of discrimination at work. Within the framework of the Strategy, a toolbox has been developed with practical instructions on how Public Employment Services promote the employment of people with disabilities. The European Network of Public Employment Services has undertaken the compilation and dissemination of these practices among EU countries. The quota system is also applied by several countries.

7. Conclusions

The European Union creates opportunities through which European disability advocates can participate in global networks of activists and influence global political agendas. On the other hand, international UN declarations have enabled those who support the rights of people with disabilities to promote a Europeanization project through other means. At the same time, at the global level, international organizations set goals for the successful introduction to education and vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities. Therefore, if states adopt policies and implement actions based on these goals, graduates of higher education with disabilities can have a successful academic career and vocational rehabilitation.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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