Special and Mainstream Services in Europe, and the Case of the United Kingdom

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Introduction

Special employment services and programmes for disabled people are deeply entrenched in labour-market provision in all European countries, and this article will examine some of the reasons. There is now, however, a growing debate about the merits and demerits of labour-market programmes targeted exclusively at the disabled that aim to help people enter and sustain employment.

“Mainstreaming” has entered the policy vocabulary following its advocacy by the European Commission. It refers to the integration of disability issues into all policies, avoidance of separate service structures and elimination of segregation in the labour market (Commission of the European Communities, 1996; 1998). The aspiration was that “people with disabilities should have equal access to mainstream services which serve the whole population, while ensuring that these services are delivered in a way that recognises and accommodates the special needs of disabled people” (Commission of the European Communities, 1998, original emphasis). However, compromises in the negotiation of the European Framework Employment Directive, which aimed to put into effect the principle of equal treatment in the field of employment, occupation and vocational training and prohibit discrimination on grounds of disability as well as other grounds, mean that special provision for disabled people on grounds of need remains legitimate.

The “mainstreaming” concept is closely tied to the social model of disability, endorsed by the Council and member states in a resolution on equality of opportunity for disabled people. The most striking evidence of the Commission’s commitment to the social model is a statement in 2003. It recognises that the circumstances of disabled people and the discrimination they face are “socially created phenomena which are not directly related to their impairments per se”, that the problem “results from the structures, practices and attitudes” that prevent the person from doing what they are capable of and that the move away from the medical model is a “critical reorientation of perspective” (European Commission, 2003). In making this statement the European Commission has travelled some distance from the 1998 emphasis on the “special needs” of disabled people.

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This article first considers why it is that special employment programmes for disabled people exist. It then provides an overview of special and mainstream programmes in Europe. The remainder of the article refers to the rise of new kinds of specialist programme designed specifically for recipients of disability benefits, with particular reference to developments in the United Kingdom.

**Why do special programmes still exist?**

A number of factors conspire to support the continuation of special employment services for disabled people.

Historical reasons predominate. The origins of many segregated vocational rehabilitation programmes can be traced back to the aftermath of wars. In many European countries remedial programmes were put in place for injured war veterans, enabling them to regain fitness for, and fill shortages in, the post-war labour market, and as a form of compensation for the harm society had caused them. Separate facilities were set up to deal with the large numbers of injured servicemen, and institutional structures were assembled such as departments of veteran affairs.

Also a product of war, and dating back to post-war eras in many instances, are legislative structures such as quota systems to promote and protect employment of disabled people. A segregated approach is reinforced in quota-levy systems, where the funds accumulated are necessarily dedicated only to reintegration of disabled people.

The power of interest groups is another factor. Associations emerged to look after the interests of people with specific impairments (for example, visual impairment, hearing impairment, spinal injuries, intellectual impairments). Such associations in many countries grew into powerful employment service providers as well as lobby groups. Similarly, professional groups in the disability industry defend their realms.

Despite the spread of awareness of the social model of disability, the medical model interpretation of needs dominates. There are still pervasive beliefs that people with impairments require specific interventions and treatment to prepare them for work. Rarely do national policies categorise need in relation to the correlation between the person’s other characteristics or circumstances and the labour market; for example, women returning to work after a period of maternity leave, young people with little employment history, long-term unemployed people needing to re-skill. In most countries the existence of impairment seems to be seen as a need in itself, divorced from other considerations. The European Equal programme nevertheless recognises communalities, replacing employment projects targeted at
discrete groups such as disabled people (the HORIZON programme),
women and young people.

New special programmes for disabled people are being set up even now.
The prime example comes from the UK, where there are now special
return-to-work programmes for people receiving benefit on grounds of
incapacity for work. In other words, categorisation by benefit type is dri-
ving further specialisation. As the final section of this article will discuss, in
the UK the needs of staff providing such programmes seem to take priority
over a consideration of whether a segregated programme is in the best inte-
rests of participants. With the rise of the tailor-made approach, with case
managers providing advice, support and guidance through the return-to-
work maze, it appears difficult for the adviser to deal with the variety, as
well as the complexity, of individual circumstances. The apparent solution
has been to set up a separate programme rather support within existing pro-
grammes for unemployed people.

The prime argument against special programmes is that of rights: disabled
people are as capable as non-disabled people if the societal and environ-
mental barriers to their economic participation are overcome. It has been
suggested that disabled people feel tainted by association with specialist
programmes or that participation in them suppresses their, and potential
employers, assessments of their capabilities (van Lin et al., 2002). There
appears to be no research evidence to support or refute these suppositions.
Indeed, very little appears to be known about disabled people’s preferences
for specialist or generic services.

Regardless of ideological arguments or individual preferences, there is no
evidence that special programmes are more effective than mainstream pro-
grammes, or vice versa. Where they co-exist there is no evidence to say
which is more effective; indeed, there is often no reliable information on
outcomes of a single programme. Often entry criteria differ, so the popula-
tions are not comparable, and in some countries such as the UK, gatekee-
pers to programmes exercise discretion over where to send people, which
interferes with comparison of outcomes.

### An overview of special and mainstream programmes

What special employment programmes for disabled people exist and what
are their participation rates? How do their prevalence and participation
rates compare with mainstream programmes? What trends, if any, can be
detected? This section draws on comparative studies to piece together the
evidence. Particular attention is paid to how policy approaches in the UK
compare.
Special programmes

There are considerable differences across countries in the extent to which special programmes are available, how they are distributed and their size in terms of participation rates relative to the wider working-age population.

In a study of 15 European Union (EU) member states, with data referring to 1998 or 1999, van Lin et al. (2002) found that all countries had implemented at least five of their six categories of publicly financed, specialist programmes, and seven countries, including France, had implemented all six. Interpretation of any data depends on how it is categorised, and a Swedish study came up with rather different results. Bergeskog (2001) looks at how participation is distributed across publicly financed, nationwide programmes in 11 OECD countries, not including France. He looks at work experience, vocational training, vocational rehabilitation and public job creation in addition to subsidised, supported and sheltered employment, and also includes quota schemes and preferential rights. The analysis serves to highlight not only the narrow range of special programmes in the UK but also that its special measures are strongly biased towards sheltered/supported employment, compared with other countries. Nine out of ten participants in UK programmes targeted at disabled people are in sheltered/supported employment, 7 per cent in vocational rehabilitation (work preparation) and 2 per cent in the subsidised job introduction programme.

As part of a study of the relationship between disability benefit and employment policies (OECD, 2003) the OECD compared data from 20 countries on three special programmes for disabled people: subsidised employment, supported employment and sheltered employment. Of interest here are rates of participation. In the year 1999, participation rates in these programmes range from 16.2 per thousand of the working-age population in Sweden to just 0.2 per thousand in Portugal, with an overall average of 5.2. France is third-highest at 9.5 per thousand. At 1.2 per thousand, the UK has one of the lowest rates, though some data is missing and the figure does not include the large number of supported and sheltered employment projects that are not publicly financed (see Arksey et al., 2002).

According to the OECD, subsidised employment participation rates were highest in Sweden, followed by France. The reasoning behind paying employers wage subsidies is not always made explicit but can be thought of as an incentive to hire a disabled person rather than a non-disabled person, providing help with accommodation and in-work support costs, or compensation for reduced productivity (Thornton and Lunt, 1995; 1997). In some countries, subsidies are available only to employers of people assessed as occupationally disabled, while in others, such as France, they can cover recognised disabled people who have an impairment that does not necessarily affect their work. Subsidies can be temporary, fluctuating or permanent. The OECD found three approaches: phasing subsidies to employers over a period of years; varying subsidy levels in accordance with changes in
the degree of work capacity; and, in four countries including France and Belgium, providing permanent or repeatedly renewable wage subsidies. The rationale for permanent subsidies is hard to understand, unless the individual concerned needs on-going support in the workplace or the employer needs to pay additional labour costs to meet the gap between what the person is capable of and the duties of the job. Permanent subsidies may have a role to play in protecting the job in the absence of strong employment protection legislation for disabled people, however.

The UK is unusual, comparatively speaking, in having avoided heavy use of financial incentives to employers as a mechanism for regulating the labour market. The Disabled Persons Employment Act of 1944, the first such act in Britain, which introduced a quota scheme since abandoned, was underpinned by the principle that disabled people should be employed on merit and in equal competition. A review in 1956 rejected the suggestion that employers should receive wage supplements, because of the implication that disabled people were less capable and a form of cheap labour. Deep-rooted objections are that the existence of subsidies may signal to the employer that disabled people have less to offer than others and contradicts the notion that they have the same right to a job as anyone else (Lonsdale, 1985). While wage subsidies were introduced in supported employment, designed for people most disadvantaged in finding and keeping a job, they are now being phased out in favour of job-coaching and other provisions for support on the job. One very small scheme provides a grant towards wages for the first six weeks of employment, and is promoted as an opportunity to discover disabled people’s skills and potential and to deal with any practical concerns. This rhetoric is in line with the policy message, dating from the 1950s, that it makes “good business sense” to employ disabled people.

According to the OECD, in the Netherlands and Poland as many as one in a hundred people of working age are in sheltered employment, and rather over half that rate in Sweden and Switzerland. The rate in France is just over 3 per thousand people of working age, and the bottom of the range is 0.1 per thousand in Portugal. A rather different picture is painted by another study, covering the EU-15 (van Lin, 2002), illustrating the problems of accurate data collection and its categorisation. That study found 4 per cent of the labour force in France working in “sheltered workshops”, with the Netherlands highest at 11.5 per cent.

A 1996 review of 18 countries’ policies (Thornton and Lunt, 1997) found that in almost half of the 15 EU member states the policy had been to enhance sheltered employment provision, with notable expansion in France, Portugal and Spain. The later OECD report comments that there are no signs of a reduction in sheltered employment, despite the fact that “most countries prefer to see it replaced by supported-employment-type initiatives” (OECD, 2003, p. 114), that is, where people work in the open market. Not noted by the OECD are structures in countries that serve to support sheltered employment institutions; for example, in France employers can
meet their employment quota in part by concluding supply or service contracts with sheltered workshops or centres d’aide par le travail (CAT).

Of the countries for which data was available to the OECD, only Australia has a participation rate in supported employment higher than that in sheltered employment. This is true too of the UK. In the second half of the 1990s, participation in supported employment came to outstrip that in sheltered employment. The driving force behind UK policy change was primarily cost, as supported placements had been found to be considerably cheaper than sheltered factories, as confirmed by a cost: benefit analysis in 2001 (Beyer et al., 2003). By contrast, the USA model of supported employment has been governed by a clear philosophy of rights and inclusion. There it is akin to “a national civil rights movement on the part of people with severe disabilities who have been excluded, devalued and disenfranchised on the basis of their lack of vocational competence” (Wehman, 1988, p. 357).

**Mainstream programmes**

Looking at trends in EU member states since 1998, van Lin et al. (2001) report in some countries a decreased emphasis on specific target groups in favour of inclusion in mainstream programmes. Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands are exemplified here. On the other hand an opposing tendency is noted, with Austria and Ireland given as examples of countries continuing or introducing specific measures for disabled people.

Bergeskog (2001) provides data on the participation of disabled people in mainstream programmes. He demonstrates that the UK is one of only three countries that do not have special vocational training programmes for disabled people, and that vocational training is the most prominent mainstream programme serving disabled people, closely followed by the multi-purpose “New Deal” programmes for long-term unemployed people aged 18 to 24 and over 25. UK analysis finds almost one in three of those starting the New Deal 25 Plus programme and 12 per cent of those starting the New Deal 18-24 are self-defined as disabled (Bivand, 2004).

Bergeskog (2001) usefully notes that some countries are unable to provide statistics on the number of disabled participants in mainstream programmes as they are not distinguished in the administrative records, and van Lin et al. (2002) note the same difficulty is relation to identifying outcomes for disabled people. These observations prompt the question of whether it is right in principle to aim to distinguish disabled people in mainstream programmes. Why count disabled participants in a mainstream programme if the point of mainstreaming is inclusion, to reduce differences and make disabled people less visible? On the other hand, counting the flow into mainstream programmes might be justified on equity grounds, to discover whether disabled and non-disabled people are equally represented. The UK counts disabled participants in its mainstream programmes because there is a
three-year public sector agreement target, recently renewed, to reduce significantly the difference between the employment rate of disabled people and the overall rate, taking account of the economic cycle (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 2005).

**Developments in the United Kingdom**

As noted, special employment programmes for disabled people in the UK are comparatively minor in the European context. Sheltered/supported employment is by far the largest of UK special services, though by no means significant in European terms. It and the small, short-term vocational rehabilitation programme, known as Work Preparation, date from the end of World War II. They have undergone modifications over time, primarily contestability among work-preparation services and the move towards supported placements in ordinary jobs, in the sheltered/supported employment programme now known as WORKSTEP. Not so far mentioned is another programme that provides help towards the costs of travel to work, human support and environmental adaptations, and that mainly supports disabled people already established in a job.

Registered unemployed disabled people are served primarily through mainstream training and through “New Deal” programmes that provide return-to-work support services guided by a personal adviser. These programmes are designed for long-term unemployed people but there are no waiting periods for disabled people. The New Deals have proved successful in reducing unemployment and increasing employment rates, so much so that Government recently announced a five-year plan to increase the employment rate by five points to an unprecedented 80 per cent (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 2005). The target groups in this plan are lone-parent benefit claimants and people in receipt of benefits on grounds of incapacity for work.

Before the New Labour Government came to power in 1997 there was no specific return-to-work programme for people receiving incapacity benefits. The system was characterised as “sick or fit” and, as Government spokespersons put it, people were written-off to a life on benefits. The rhetoric of social inclusion is pronounced, as is the motif that work is the best route out of poverty. Not covered in the OECD (2003) and Bergeskog (2001) analyses are two further lines of intervention: what are known as “work-focused interviews” carried out by the public employment and benefits service at around the time of claiming an incapacity benefit; and the New Deal for Disabled People, a voluntary return-to-work service for incapacity-benefit recipients provided by “job brokers” contracted to government, which people may approach directly or on the advice of the public employment and benefits service.
Work-focused interviews

It is illuminating to chronicle the history of the work-focused interview approach, as it demonstrates the inability of the public employment service to mainstream this type of advisory provision for disabled people. A form of compulsory work-focused interview already existed for unemployed claimants, disabled or not, as a condition of claiming unemployment benefit. A research pilot of a mandatory interview with a personal adviser about work prospects included incapacity-benefit claimants as well other inactive groups and unemployed claimants. The research on the first pilot areas, and on the subsequent initial rollout to other parts of the country of integrated work and benefits advice, found that personal advisors failed to engage with claimants of incapacity benefits. Personal advisers, who typically dealt with a range of claimant groups, did not want to cause upset by introducing the topic of work with incapacity-benefit claimants, and felt fearful and ill equipped. They were particularly anxious about discussing work with people with mental health problems and about asking personal questions regarding conditions. They lacked information on external sources of advice and support for this group.

The Government’s response was to move towards specialist training of personal advisers to work specifically with incapacity-benefit claimants. The generic approach, where an adviser worked across claimant groups, was scaled down. Subsequently, a further set of pilots was established just for incapacity-benefit claimants, and this approach is being extended to cover one-third of the country. A recently published policy plan proposes that it becomes nationwide (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 2005). It is worth noting here that conditionality is being strengthened considerably. It is proposed that people who participate in the work-focused interview regime will be granted an enhanced benefit while those who decline to take part, despite being judged capable of doing so, will receive a benefit equivalent to the lower amount paid to registered jobseekers.

So far, research evidence from incapacity-benefit recipients participating in the work-focused interview regime is ambivalent as regards preferences for specialist or generic services. They appear to welcome empathic advisers and disability specialists, but questions in government-sponsored research have not directly explored their views on participating in generic or specialist services.

New Deal for Disabled People

The New Deal for Disabled People was first introduced in 12 pilot schemes and then extended nationwide, still with pilot status. Like other New Deals, it is designed for people in receipt of particular benefits. There are also New Deal programmes for lone parents, who do not necessarily have to be in receipt of benefit, and for people aged 50 plus regardless of benefit status.
provided by public—, private – and voluntary-sector organisations solely for incapacity-benefit recipients. A minority of provider organisations also have services for other labour-market groups, but their New Deal for Disabled People provision is not integrated with them. This results from a funding system in which the Government lets contracts for discrete services for different benefit groups. Thus, incapacity-benefit recipients associated with the New Deal for Disabled People do not mix with other people who experience disadvantage in the labour market, and do not benefit from common experiences. This pattern is in line with the other New Deal programmes, which all contract separate services for different claimant groups. However, there are promising signs that the Government is planning to integrate the New Deals into a single service.

## Conclusion

Despite the EU desire to mainstream employment services for disabled people, there is little evidence of this in practice. International trends suggest that the UK initiative to return people receiving disability benefits to the labour market is likely to be emulated in other European countries, along with influential activation policies elsewhere (see Corden and Thornton, 2002). This is likely to lead to an increase in specialist programmes for disabled people, as such initiatives are bound to the benefit status of recipients. The case for specialist services is not proven and, in the UK at least, the requirements of efficient programme management are likely to take precedence over mainstreaming aspirations. There is little acknowledgment of the need to build generic skills that take account of the multiple disadvantages disabled people face in the labour market.
References


