

Sounding Board

The European employment strategy and opportunities for occupational therapy

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1. Introduction

Europe is one of the world's seven continents consisting of approximately 50 states. Precisely where the division between Europe and Asia lies is still a matter of some debate. Sometimes the word "Europe" is used in a geopolitical way to refer only to the European Union. The European Union is composed of 27 Member States. The enlargement of the European Union is the process of expanding through the accession of new Member States. This process began with the Inner Six, who founded the European Coal and Steel Community (the EU's predecessor) in 1952. Since then, the EU's membership has grown to twenty-seven with the most recent expansion to Bulgaria and Romania in 2007.

Europe is multilayered, multi-centred and complex. It is not surprising that the process of providing it with a constitution is long and difficult. Fortunately Europe has found ways of going forward on the basis of its desire to go forward, whether or not all the rules are in place to make things happen. Europe exists because many people want it to exist and are building it, working together toward common goals [1].

Building Europe, defining its constitution and strengthening its citizenship is not a yes/no matter, but an on-going activity. Europe is and it is becoming. Europe is a learning and developing process.

The idea of Europe is underpinned in practice as well as in theory by shared political, economic and social values. Insofar as these are concretely protected, enhanced and developed, they will become real rights. The European Charter of Fundamental Rights contains six sections: dignity; freedoms; equality; solidarity; citizens' rights; justice [2].

2. Objectives of the European Union

The main objectives of the European Union are to promote peace, the Union's values and the well-being of its peoples.

The general objectives are supplemented by more detailed objectives:

- an area of freedom (including religious freedom), security and justice without internal frontiers;
- an internal market where competition is free and undistorted;
- sustainable development, based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment;
- the promotion of scientific and technological advance;
- the combating of social exclusion and discrimination, and the promotion of social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child;
- the promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States.

In addition, the Union respects cultural and linguistic diversity and ensures that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced [12,13].

Unfortunately the technical or bureaucratic aspect of Europe often seems to overshadow the reasons for which it exists. Often the technical means rather than the central aims and values dominate the 'Images of Europe'.

The Treaty guarantees respect for certain values such as freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, human dignity and human rights and advocates a society based on pluralism, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination.

It also enshrines basic freedoms such as free movement of people, goods, services and capital and non-discrimination on the basis of nationality. European citizenship supplements national citizenship and confers additional rights: the right to move freely and reside anywhere in the Union's territory, the right to vote in and eligibility for the elections of the European Parliament and municipal elections, and the right to consult the European institutions and advisory bodies in one's own language and to receive a reply in the same language.

3. Occupational therapy addressing the key values of Europe

Occupational therapy practice and education is addressing the above mentioned key values by:

- Strategies/interventions to limit the impact of occupational injustices experienced by individuals or groups
- Promotion of equal opportunities for all or full participation in all life areas (leisure, productivity and self-care)
- Advocacy for groups who are occupationally deprived (elderly, migrants, street-children, persons with disabilities)
- Full accessible environments (combat physical and attitudinal barriers)

One of the underlying conditions for free movement is mutual recognition of academic degrees and professional recognition. Through the TUNING project (Designing compatible curricula) the European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher education (ENOTHE) is improving this basic freedom of mobility of the occupational therapists themselves throughout Europe (www.enothe.eu [10]).

The European Treaty devotes also one section to employment and one section to social policy.

ENOTHE has incorporated the social policy of the EU in several of its projects and received grants for the contribution to shaping society in an inclusive way, by enhancing individual rights; making the environment more accessible through elimination of barriers; encouraging inclusion through employment; fostering

social integration; empowering and enhancing structures in society which sustain participation and by implementing these strategies at the same time in the occupational therapy curricula. An expert from the European Commission in Brussels commented on one of the applications: "It is obvious that the societal demand is great for developing an academic based discipline as Occupational Therapy with impact on a European scale".

The European Treaty consolidates European regional policy, which is based on solidarity and caters for the public's concerns. It promotes economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity between Member States.

The European Treaty provides that the "The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring states, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation" [12].

Within this frame ENOTHE applied successfully in the European Year for Disability (2003) for two large projects: one in the region Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria and one in the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia) aiming for participation of persons with disabilities in society/ labour market through the establishment of occupational therapy education services. These projects resulted in the establishment of 4 Bachelor degree programmes in Occupational Therapy, the first 100 graduates and the creation of services, employment and legal regulations of the profession in the different countries.

4. The European labour market

58% of the EU 27 population aged 15 and more is considered "active". The northern countries, Netherlands, Austria and Germany have high employment rates; the lowest activity levels are recorded in a few Mediterranean and recent member states. Though they differ very widely from one country to another, unemployment rates have increased everywhere since 2008. Higher education levels are consistently pushing employment rates up throughout Europe [11].

Unemployment still affects 20.3% of young people who are active in labour market, and remains a major challenge in nearly all Member States, together with an increased risk of long-term unemployment.

The impact of the crisis on the risk of poverty or exclusion is beginning to appear in some Member States. Material deprivation and especially those aspects relat-

ing to financial stress faced by the households reflect the social impact of the crisis.

Hourly labour costs increased slightly in 2010 in nominal terms, reflecting an increase in growth in wages and salaries. This was accompanied by a growth of 2.1% in labour productivity in the first quarter of 2011. According to the European Commission Spring economic forecasts, the EU economy is speeding up, but the outlook remains that of a rather jobless recovery with unemployment stubbornly high both in 2011 and 2012 [8].

The key challenges that countries of the European Union are facing with respect to people with disabilities are low employment rates among the people concerned but also a high dependency on benefits, high and increasing public spending on sickness and/or disability benefits as well as an increased poverty risk among those with disabilities.

- Disabled people are two to three times more unemployed than non-disabled people.
- Only 16% of those who face work restrictions are provided with some assistance to work.
- Many disabled persons are ‘discouraged workers’ and don’t even attempt to enter the labour force. They are therefore classified as inactive.
- The more severe the degree of disability, the lower the participation in the labour force. Only 20% of people with severe disabilities, compared to 68% for those without disabilities.
- Persons with disabilities are less likely by more than 50% to reach third level education as non disabled persons.
- 38% of disabled people aged 16–34 across Europe have an earned income, compared to 64% of non-disabled people. Disabled people’s income is dramatically lower than the income of non-disabled people [9].

Besides the figures of disabled people one more important figure of vulnerable and often occupational deprived people will be mentioned here: the migrants.

Due to the effect of the crisis, one active migrant from non-EU countries in five is unemployed. . .

5. Employment Strategy

The Lisbon Strategy, also known as the Lisbon Agenda or Lisbon Process, was an action and development plan for the economy of the European Union between 2000 and 2010.

The Lisbon Strategy intended to deal with the low productivity and stagnation of economic growth in the EU, through the formulation of various policy initiatives to be taken by all EU Member States. The broader objectives set out by the Lisbon Strategy were to be attained by 2010 as there were: The achievement of a general employment rate of 70% by 2010 (see annexed chart) and the new EU directives referring explicitly to a greater employment amongst people with disabilities. However, employment increases have not sufficiently reached those furthest away from the labour market, and jobs have not always succeeded in lifting people out of poverty. Some groups still face specific hurdles such as poor access to training for the low-skilled jobs or lack of enabling services. Labour market segmentation persists in some Member States. So does child poverty at a high level in some Member States. Lessons need to be drawn from these facts [6].

The new employment guidelines (“*Europe 2020*”) defined by the European Commission since October 2010 are: (i) increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality; (ii) developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting lifelong learning; (iii) improving the quality and performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education and (iv) promoting social inclusion and combating poverty [7].

Member States’ efforts to reduce poverty should be aimed at promoting full participation in society and economy and extending employment opportunities, making full use of the European Social Fund. Efforts should also concentrate on ensuring equal opportunities, including through access to affordable, sustainable and high quality services and public services (including online services) and in particular health care.

The guidelines identify some headline targets the European Union should take to boost employment. These are:

- To raise the employment rate of the population aged 20–64 from the current 69% to at least 75%.
- To reduce the share of early school leavers to 10% from the current 15% and increase the share of the population aged 30–34 having completed tertiary from 31% to at least 40%.
- To reduce the number of Europeans living below national poverty lines by 25%, lifting 20 million people out of poverty.

Regardless that the European Union “Europe 2020” strategy has made social inclusion one of the three pillars bringing Europe out the crisis, the European Disability Forum (EDF) denounces that current economic, social and political policies adopted by Member States and the European Union may lead to an increase in the numbers of people experiencing social exclusion in Europe.

The current actions undertaken by EU governments in Europe will undermine progress towards the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities, the social targets of the Europe 2020 strategy and the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020.

Poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, marginalisation, illiteracy and negative stereotypes of people with disabilities can be the sad legacy of the current economic, social and political reforms implemented by some governments of the European Union [9].

6. EU ‘flagship’ initiatives on inclusive growth and Occupational Therapy

‘Inclusive growth means empowering people through high levels of employment, investing in skills, fighting poverty and modernising labour markets, training and social protection systems so as to help people anticipate and manage change, and build a cohesive society’ [7]. It is about ensuring access and opportunities for *all* throughout the lifecycle.

Europe must act:

- Employment: Due to demographic change, the workforce is shrinking. Only two-thirds of the working age population is currently employed, compared to over 70% in the US and Japan. The employment rates of women, older workers, migrants and persons with disabilities are particularly low. Young people have been severely hit by the crisis, with an unemployment rate over 21%.
- Skills: About 80 million people have low or basic skills, but lifelong learning benefits mostly the more educated. By 2020, 16 million more jobs will require high qualifications, while the demand for low skills will drop by 12 million jobs. Achieving longer working lives will also require the possibility to acquire and develop new skills throughout the lifetime.
- Fighting poverty: 80 million people were at risk of poverty prior to the crisis. Unemployed people are particularly exposed.

Action under this priority will require modernising, strengthening employment education and training policies and social protection systems by increasing labour participation and reducing structural unemployment, as well as raising corporate social responsibility among the business community. A major effort will be needed to combat poverty and social exclusion and reduce health inequalities to ensure that everybody can benefit from growth. Equally important will be the ability to meet the challenge of promoting a healthy and active ageing population to allow for social cohesion and higher productivity [7].

European Funding is helping to support more and better jobs and innovative research under different funding programmes. Hereafter some of the main Occupational Therapy projects supported by European funding will be discussed:

Two large scale projects in Poland and Romania are funded by the **European Social Fund (ESF)**. This fund is the European Union’s main financial instrument for supporting employment in the Member States as well as promoting economic and social cohesion. ESF spending amounts to around 10% of the EU’s total budget. The particular aim of ESF is to support national, regional and local projects that improve the levels of employment, the quality of jobs, and the inclusiveness of the labour market in the Member States and their regions.

The project ‘Terapia Zajęciowa’ (Occupational Therapy) in Poland will be implemented by four Polish universities, the Association “Education for Entrepreneurship” and ENOTHE during the period 2009–2012.

Implementation of the project is the first step towards adapting the Polish system of education in occupational therapy to existing WFOT and European standards. Currently in Poland, occupational therapists are trained exclusively in post-secondary schools, while in most European countries, their education takes place at tertiary level. This results in a situation where their qualifications are not sufficient to practice. In addition, a much smaller number of specialists in this field in Poland provides services related to social and health care than is the case in western Europe. In connection with the aging of the Polish society, the need for occupational therapy are not being met. According to GUS (Polish Central Statistical Office) estimates, in 2002, Poland had 5.5 million people with disabilities. As provided by Eurostat, in 2010, about 13% of the population (about 5 million people) will be aged over 65 years, while by 2020 this proportion will increase to 17.4%. So

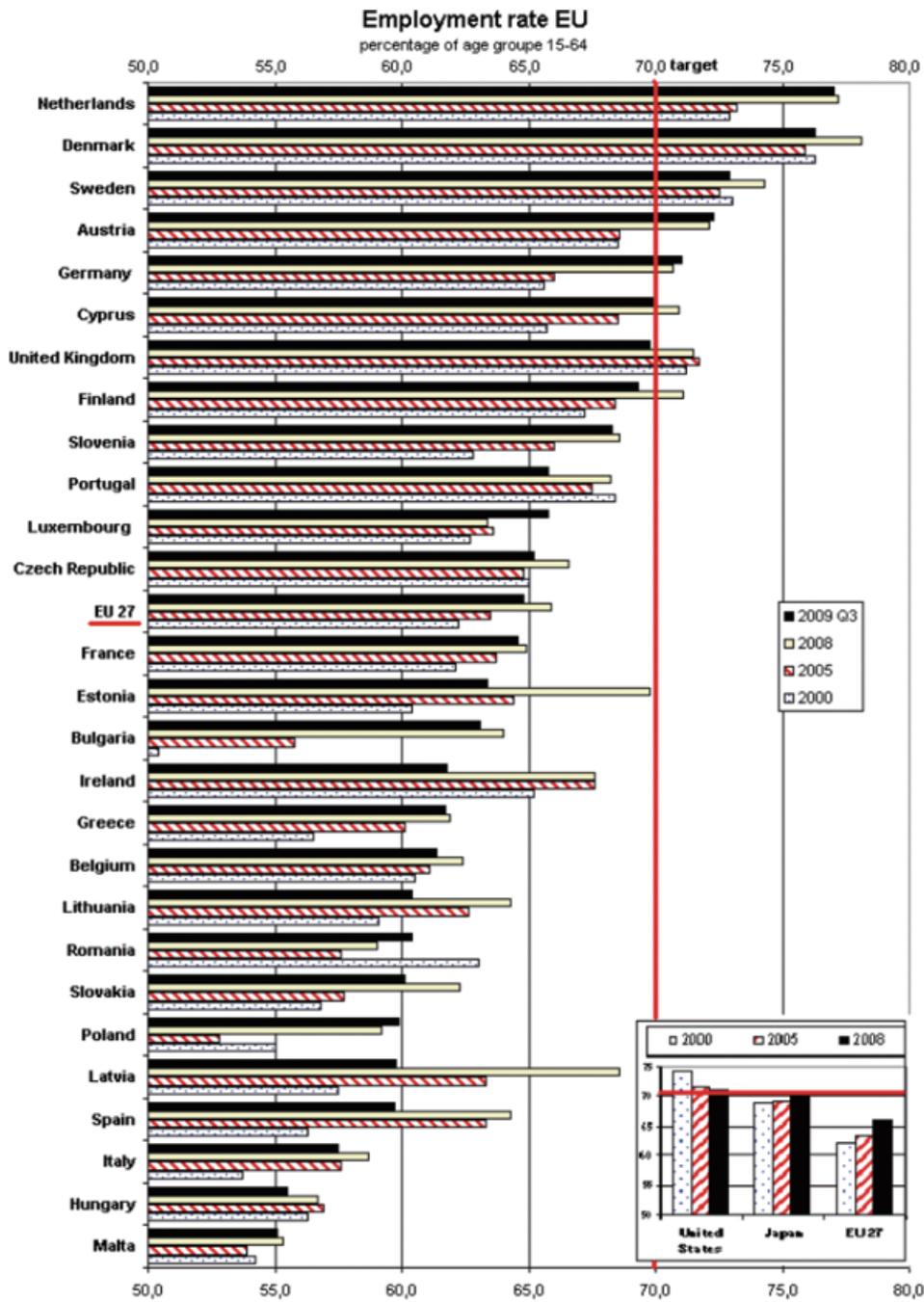


Chart from: European Commission 2010, Commission Staff Working Document, Lisbon Strategy Evaluation Document, Brussels, SEC 2010,114 Final.

it becomes necessary to effectively assist the elderly and disabled.

In this project ENOTHE is providing teacher training in occupational therapy for 32 teachers of the four Polish universities as well as organising placements and

study visits abroad and offering opportunities for establishing partnerships between Polish universities and foreign partner institutions.

In collaboration with all stakeholders the minimum standards for Polish Occupational Therapy have been

developed and it is expected that in 2012 the first academic occupational therapy education is starting. The final goal is the establishment of 4 Occupational Therapy units in the participating universities, the creation of approximately 200 graduate employment opportunities for occupational therapists and developing services which aim for social inclusion of persons with disabilities and elderly within 3 years.

The second project is TEORO (Occupational Therapy and Applied Engineering and Assistive Technology) in Romania funded as well by the ESF for the period 2010–2013. The aim is also to establish Occupational Therapy education at academic level as well as a special engineering education in Rehabilitation and Assistive Technology in four regions of Romania.

The specific objectives match with the headline targets of 'Europe 2020':

- Increasing the capacity of universities in four regions of the country to provide higher qualifications, by implementing programmes of study, that strongly focus on labour market needs and by training personnel involved in the programmes.
- Increase learning opportunities by facilitating access to university education, including socially disadvantaged groups with special needs, for 335 students, which will be subsidized under the two programmes of study, Occupational Therapy (BA-3 years) and Applied Engineering in Rehabilitation and Assistive Technology (MA-2 years).
- Developing exchange of best practices between the partner universities and specialist transnational partners.

The final goal is again smart, sustainable and inclusive growth through higher education in occupational therapy and rehabilitation engineering in assistive technology.

Other European projects funded under 'the agenda for new skills and jobs' and Life Long Learning (LLL) Programmes, which support learning opportunities from childhood to old age in every single life situation, are:

COPORE (Competences for Poverty Reduction)

In the frame of the European Year 2010 ENOTHE coordinated a LLL-project of a consortium of health, social science and educational networks with the main aim:

To develop a shared set of competences, specific learning outcomes and teaching/ learning and assessment approaches focused on poverty reduction through quality health and social care.

This consortium wanted to draw the attention on health inequalities, related to disadvantaged groups and aimed to develop new competences and approaches in higher education focusing on affordable health care, health literacy and empowerment of the client and their community to reduce poverty. Specific competences were developed around the theme: work and worklessness. The study included as well good practice of tailored prevention and health promotion for people at risk of social exclusion as integrated care models (www.enothe.hva.nl/copore [3]).

One of the projects selected as good practice and also funded by the LLL programme was called Empowering Social Inclusion through Occupation (ELSITO).

The overall aim of this project is to contribute to the social inclusion of persons with mental health problems, immigrants and refugees. More specifically the partnership aims to identify and exchange good practice in existing projects and to develop new projects that support participation in the community through economic, social, cultural and civic occupations (activities). These projects are community based and developed in partnership with persons from vulnerable groups. In this special issue you find a paper with a more detailed program description (<http://elsito.net/> [4]).

As far as teaching/Learning and Assessment methods was concerned the COPORE project worked in close collaboration with the project Euro Education Employability for all (EEE4ALL).

EEE4all has been a two year European funded project focusing on strategies to promote employment for those furthest removed from the labour market. It has developed a curriculum (4 modules) that is beneficial to users, employers, policy makers, students and educators.

Many persons from occupational disadvantaged groups are not able to return to work or obtain new work due to poverty and lower education. In the context of prosperity and solidarity objectives of the EU commission, strategies to include these individuals in the labour market are of great importance. One approach to address this problem is to equip future health and social care work force with the skills necessary to support such disadvantaged groups by age, gender, disability and ethnicity/ migrational background. New pedagogical strategies combined with modern technology deliver unique educational models developed within an international, interdisciplinary and multilateral (i.e. clients, employers, experts, etc.) context (<http://www.isv.liu.se/eee4all?l=en> [5]).

Two papers concerning this project are selected in this special issue.

7. Conclusion

Almost all European Union Member States are hit by the crisis between 2008 till present, after a period of general growth and stability. In almost all European countries the economic and financial crisis has been characterized by a strong increase of government deficit and public debts.

The reduction in wages and the increase of unemployment lowered the resources produced by taxes and social insurance contributions. This had a serious impact on the health systems' capacity and sustainability.

Hospitals and healthcare services have been at the core of many measures aimed at cutting costs and gaining efficiency. The economic and financial crisis in some cases hit directly the resources available.

The main consequences of the resources restrictions on healthcare professionals/ occupational therapists are visible in employment policies and retirement reforms adopted by most European Member States.

Although the crises hit health care workers and those furthest removed from the labour market, at the same time the Euro 2020 Strategy offers also opportunities and challenges to develop new approaches for occupational therapist to contribute to increasing labour market participation, develop skills responding to labour market needs, increase participation in inclusive education and promote social inclusion. Health care professionals need to work in line with system level policy and governments i.e. changes in the transformative world of work. There is a need to be pro-active or at least responsive to such changes, otherwise there is a risk that others will fill the gaps in society.

The aim is to refocus on the challenges facing our society, such as health, ageing, demographic changes and

social in/exclusion. Partnerships in innovative practice, education and research will be needed to make fully use of the European funding systems and to participate in the European labour market.

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