



I
can
LEARN
I
can
WORK

I can learn. I can work

Campaign Manifesto for World Autism Awareness Day

It is estimated that 7 million people are on the autism spectrum in Europe.

Access to education and employment is a right and is a cornerstone of social inclusion. They are intrinsically linked and many autistic people experience many barriers in both areas.

Autism-Europe (AE) and its members have thus decided to conduct a campaign 'I can LEARN. I can WORK' to raise awareness about how to create the conditions to make education and the world of work more accessible to autistic people.

Promoting access to lifelong education for autistic learners

At the International level, the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD) has provisions in relation to education. All of the EU member states, as well as the EU itself, have ratified the UNCRPD, which outlines in Article 24 'Education,' that "*States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.*"

Moreover, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular SDG4, highlights the necessity to "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*". At the EU level, in 'Chapter I: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market' of the European Pillar of Social Rights, it outlines that '*everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market*'.

As a consequence, over the past several years, education systems across the European Union have evolved, to move towards inclusive models. Despite changes in the legislation of many countries, there has been a lack of change in mind-sets reported. Many autistic learners struggle with inclusive education, as they experience a lack of understanding of their individual needs and of adapted support. They are faced with a lack of flexibility in their educational curriculum and infrastructure to make the best use of their strengths. Bullying is also experienced by many. Therefore, autistic children tend to face a higher rate of school drop-out and exclusion compared to their non-autistic peers.



AE calls on key decision-makers to promote access to adequate support for autistic learners in the education system, by:

- **Establishing an individualised educational plan (IEP)** for each autistic learner based on the assessment of their support needs and strengths, with ability-appropriate learning objectives. It should be designed after careful consultation with autistic learners and their families - using alternative and augmentative means of communications whenever needed. It should also take into consideration the desired outcomes of autistic learners for their adult life.
- **Promoting a flexible curriculum in education** as autistic learners find the rigid structure of curricula challenging. Their curriculum should be adapted according to individual strengths and interests. Autistic learners should also be supported in acquiring some specific skills such as organisational, social, and life skills.
- **Enabling educational staff to understand autistic thinking and learning across the spectrum of ability and gender.** For this purpose, teachers need initial and continuous professional development with practical and field-based experiences, as well as access to current research and best practice teaching strategies. Educational staff should be trained in a range of appropriate eclectic strategies to cater for the diversity of the profiles and of the learners' needs, as there is no one-size-fits-all method of learning. Educational staff should also be adequately supported in their professional practice.
- **Providing autistic learners with adequate reasonable accommodation.** It is important to adapt the built environment, and notably the lighting and soundproofing: classrooms and other part of schools should be designed to have a low echo or good acoustics as well as suitable lighting. It is important to provide access to quiet space and a sensory room to avoid sensory overload. Autistic learners should be supported with visual support and assistive technology in classrooms as much as possible. They should also receive support during unstructured times, such as lunch breaks. Also, an effort to reduce class sizes would benefit autistic learners from more individual attention which would improve outcomes.
- **Making all educational establishments, including vocational training providers and universities accessible** to autistic people. It is only through lifelong education that people with autism will be able to maximise their participation in society.
- **Developing an understanding and acceptance of autism, and to tackle bullying** as it has been evidenced that people on the autism spectrum are more likely to be victims of harassment. There should be a zero-tolerance policy to bullying and adequate support should be at hand.



Promoting equal opportunities to access employment for autistic people

The employment rate of autistic people is still very low. Across the EU, 73.9% of the general population are employed but it falls to only 48.1% for persons with disabilities (European Labour Force Survey). There is no official data available disaggregated by impairment types regarding employment rates, but a survey conducted in the United Kingdom by the National Autistic Society indicates that 16% of autistic people are in full-time work (no change since 2007) and 16% in part-time work. It is estimated that across the European Union less than 10% people on the autism spectrum are employed, mostly in low-paid jobs or in sheltered settings. Most autistic people with high support needs are neither in education nor in employment nor in training (NEETs) nor counted in statistics as they live in institutions or in unsupported families. Unemployment also affects disproportionately autistic people with above-average level of general education as evidenced by research.

Lack of access to all levels of education and vocational training constitutes a barrier to accessing employment. It is compounded by prejudices among employers and a lack of accessibility and support to access the world of work and stay employed.

The UNCRPD Article 27 on work and employment outlines that persons with disabilities need to have the “opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible”. The SDG 8 calls for the promotion of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all including for (...) persons with disabilities.

At the EU-level, the European Union Employment Equality Directive 2000/78/EC prohibits discrimination on the ground of disability in the field of employment and occupation, vocational training, membership of employer and employee organizations, and calls for the provision of reasonable accommodation.

The European Pillar of Social Rights’ principle 4 points to active support to employment as everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects. Principle 17 foresees that people with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs.

Autism-Europe calls on key decision-makers to promote access to employment for autistic people in cooperation with their representative organisations, by:

- **Collecting data and monitoring** the number of autistic people in employment and setting targets to improve employment rates.
- **Developing autism employment pathways in a variety of fields**, including end-to-end specialist support, and monitoring outcomes.
- **Developing programs to promote the employment potential of autistic people to employers**, including matching their skills with the labour market.



- **Running pilot programs for apprenticeships** to foster **gold standards**.
- **Leading by example and increasing work experience schemes for autistic adults** in public administration.
- **Addressing the issue of the ‘benefits trap’**, as some people on the autism spectrum cannot access proper employment without losing all their vital benefits.
- **Supporting research and social investment and initiatives to foster inclusion** at work for autistic people.
- **Support awareness-raising actions** regarding the skills and competences of autistic people as well as their specific needs in terms of reasonable accommodation, starting from the recruitment phase.

Published with the support of the DG EMPL — Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission, under the European Community Programme – Rights, Equality and Citizenship.



Published with the support of the European Commission. The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or opinion of the European Commission.

