

Spain should help disabled workers enter the labour market, finds OECD

Spain should give better employment support for people with disabilities, according to a new OECD report. This is among a series of recommendations in *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers (Vol.2) – Australia, Luxembourg, Spain and the United Kingdom* that analyses sickness and disability policies of these countries. It offers governments policy recommendations to reduce the number of people claiming benefits and help them back into the labour market.

Disability benefits are not excessively used in Spain. The rate of claims has been stable over the past 15 years – at 3.5% of the working-age population it is significantly below the OECD average of around 6%. Even the sharp drop in the overall unemployment rate in the past decade, from almost 20% in the mid-1990s to 9.2% in 2005, has *not* translated into an increase in claims for disability benefits. However, the unemployment rate of people with disabilities remained unchanged at over 15%.

Only 35% of people with disabilities in Spain are employed. Reasons for this include low work motivation; a widespread stigma concerning the work ability of people with disability; and the ineffectiveness of employment regulations and supports. Only very recently has overall employment growth, driven by economic growth of over 3% annually, started to affect the employment of people with disability as well.

The key issue for Spain is to reduce unemployment and increase employment of people with disability. Given the strong economy, which created some 700,000 jobs annually in the past five years, the timing for further reform is good. The European Union's focus on raising employment in general and that of older workers and people with disability in particular, has helped increase the funds available for employment support. This in turn has helped Spain establish a policy framework based on non-discrimination, participation and universal accessibility. To harvest the fruits of this new approach, three issues in particular must be addressed in the future.

1. People with disabilities are not readily signing up to employment programmes because the system is too complex with a number of decentralised and centralised actors, including the Public Employment Service and the Institute of Social Security:
 - The current focus on mainstreaming has not sufficiently helped people with disability get jobs and should be reconsidered, emphasising vocational rehabilitation and training.
 - Institutions responsible for employment, vocational rehabilitation and training, and benefit matters should co-operate better and responsibilities should be streamlined.
2. The Spanish labour law contains a series of obligations for employers but these regulations are not stringently enforced:
 - Disability policies in collective agreements should be stronger and employers should be controlled and sanctioned if they don't comply.
 - Employers should take some financial responsibility for preventing illness and retaining workers (Luxembourg's effort to lengthen the employer's wage-payment period for sick workers is one example of this type of reform).
3. Some elements of the disability benefit system need to be adjusted to today's medical, economic and labour market realities:
 - Granting incapacity benefits to workers who cannot return to their old job is an outdated policy in today's increasingly mobile and well-trained workforce.
 - The 20% supplement to a "partial" disability benefit for unemployed people aged 55 and over is a strong incentive not to seek work. More employment support for this group of people would be a better alternative.

Journalists can obtain a copy of **Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers (Vol. 2) – Australia, Luxembourg, Spain and the United Kingdom** by contacting the OECD's [Media Relations Division](#) (tel. +331 4524 9700). For further information, please contact one of the authors in OECD's Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs: [Christopher Prinz](#) (tel. +331 4524 9483) and [Michael Förster](#) (tel. +331 4524 9280).