



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity

**CREID BRIEFING 24**

# **DISABILITY, SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT**

**A review of recent statistics and literature  
on policy and initiatives,  
based on research undertaken for the  
Equality and Human Rights Commission**

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## Introduction

This review of recent statistics and literature on policy and initiatives relating to disability, skills and employment, undertaken between December 2009 and April 2010, was commissioned from CREID by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The report seeks to inform the Commission's work aimed at narrowing the employment and skills gap between disabled and non-disabled people.

## Background

In 2009, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) commissioned a review of the current literature, statistics and debates around disability, skills and employment. The EHRC recognises that many disabled people experience barriers in entering and succeeding in employment, and wishes to take a strategic and evidence-based approach to influencing policy and practice.

Disabled people have seen some encouraging legislation on equalities in recent years, including the Disability Discrimination Acts (1995 & 2005), the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009) and the establishment of the Office for Disability Issues (ODI). Change has also characterised employment policy for disabled people, both in terms of benefits for those who cannot work and support for those who wish to work. Important features include the *New Deal for Disabled People* (NDDP); the introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) with the requirement of a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and sanctions for those who do not attend WCA and other interviews; and increased personal help through *Pathways to Work* and a range of specialist support and programmes. Nevertheless the report of the National Equality Panel (NEP, 2010) found that employment rates for disabled people were still less than half those of non-disabled people. Throughout this review we have tried to keep in mind the heterogeneity within the community of disabled people and the wide range of needs, recognising that while many seek to develop their skills and find employment, others may feel threatened by legislation which could force them into the workplace or remove their benefits before they feel ready to return to work.

The review was completed before the General Election and change of government in May 2010 and does not therefore take account of any changes which may be proposed or implemented after that date. We also note that, although concerns are beginning to emerge in the media about the efficacy of WCA system as a means of discriminating between those who are capable of work and those who are not, no clear research evidence on this topic was available at the time of writing.

## Findings

The report is based primarily on desk research, but was enriched by a series of interviews with ten key informants who work closely with disabled people, whose insights have influenced the team's approach to the literature review. We present our findings here in four areas, with related literature: statistics; equality and skills policy and legislation; employment policy and programmes; and specific groupings of disabled people, both by medical condition and by age and stage of career.

## ***Disability and Employment Statistics***

Analysis of statistics demonstrated that, overall, disabled people have much lower employment rates and are more likely to be economically inactive than non-disabled people. There has, however, been a slight improvement in employment rates over recent years, coupled with a decline in the proportion of people claiming Incapacity Benefit (IB) or ESA. There are important intersections between area deprivation and disability benefits status, with a high proportion of men in areas of long term industrial decline claiming IB/ESA.

Educational qualifications appear to be of critical importance to disabled people in terms of influencing future life chances. Data on qualifications, educational outcomes and skills all show a disadvantage for those disabled at an early age. Across Great Britain, pupils with special needs achieve fewer qualifications than those with no special needs and pupils in more deprived areas in England and Scotland are more likely to be identified as having additional needs but less access to targeted support. They are also more likely to have other types of social disadvantage, such as being looked after by the local authority.

Disabled undergraduates supported by the Disabled Student Allowance are least likely to drop out, whilst disabled students lacking such support are most likely to drop out. Those that graduate achieve similar degree and labour market outcomes overall compared with those of non-disabled students. There are, however, considerable differences in labour market outcomes depending on impairment. Graduates with dyslexia (by far the largest group) have employment rates close to those of non-disabled students; those with mental health difficulties or those who are mobility impaired/wheelchair users have the lowest employment rates.

Disabled people with no qualifications fare particularly badly in the labour market and their position has worsened in the period 1974 to 2003. Clearly, there are important intersections between social class, disability and gender with regard to educational and employment outcomes. Disabled HE students are significantly more likely to be male and from middle class backgrounds than non-disabled students.

There are concerns about the impact of the recession on disabled people, since previous recessions have affected this group particularly badly. Recent analysis conducted by the Government Equalities Office ([National Equality Panel, 2010](#)) suggested that disabled people have so far not been affected more adversely than non-disabled people, possibly as a result of the protective effect of anti-discrimination legislation. However, it was also noted that disabled people may be more vulnerable to future job losses should the economy be slow to recover.

## ***Equality and Skills Policy and Legislation***

Responsibilities for equality, employment and skills are shared between Westminster and the devolved administrations. The Disability Discrimination Acts (1995 & 2005) cover England, Scotland and Wales: the power to pass equality legislation is reserved to Westminster, but the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government have a duty to encourage equal opportunities and meet the requirements of equality law. Some aspects of responsibility for skills, training and local economic development are devolved to Scotland, Wales and the English regions. The skills and training framework is extremely

complicated, making comparisons between the countries difficult. However, it is evident that disabled people's participation rates on some programmes, such as the Skillseekers Programme in Scotland, and Modern Apprenticeships and Adult Modern Apprenticeships, are very low ([Edward et al., 2008](#)).

The provisions of the DDA (2005), with the Disability Equality Duty coming into force in 2006, the ratification by the UK Government in 2009 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2008), the cross-government report, *Improving the life chances of disabled people* ([PMSU, 2005](#)) and the establishment of the Office for Disability Issues all mark progress on the equality policy front.

Skills policies throughout Great Britain have been heavily influenced by the Leitch ([2006](#)) review, urging the development of higher level skills to ensure economic growth and competitiveness. The new UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) is supplemented by local Employment and Skills Boards, and local employment partnerships, with knowledge of local labour markets; but it has also called for a radical simplification of the skills landscape ([UKCES, 2009](#)).

Although the Leitch review acknowledged that some programmes, such as those for disabled adults with learning difficulties, cannot become 'demand-led', there is perhaps need for continuing vigilance to ensure that provision for higher level, economically valuable skills does not threaten provision for those who are disadvantaged in the labour market.

The impact of the recent replacement of the Learning and Skills Council by the Young People's Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency cannot yet be fully assessed, but it will be important in future to ensure that training opportunities, especially apprenticeships, are equally available to disabled people. The Welsh Assembly Government and Skills Development Scotland have their own programmes of careers advice and skills development for disabled people moving into the labour market or to further training.

### ***Employment Policy and Programmes***

Developments in employment policy and programmes in the last few years include the introduction of ESA and related requirements, including WCA, and appears to have been driven by three main factors: the need for the UK to move closer to full employment, the belief that work is good for everyone, and the personalisation agenda, linked to conditionality. The aim to offer personalised support for disabled people to return to the workforce is linked to sanctions for those who do not cooperate.

In the critical literature, such as Meager & Hill ([2006](#)), Beatty & Fothergill ([2005](#)) and Grover & Piggott ([2005](#)), tensions between the social inclusion agenda and the country's economic needs are highlighted. The concentration of interventions on the supply side, rather than the demand side, of the labour market is also questioned, suggesting that there is a need for more engagement with employers in order to change their attitudes to employing disabled people. The influence of reports from Gregg ([2008](#)) on conditionality and from Black ([2008](#)) and the Marmot Review ([DoH, 2010a](#)) on links between employment and health policies is also noted.

We also reviewed the roles, programmes and initiatives in place to put these policies into action, such as *Access to Work*, *Work Preparation*, and *Workstep*. Evaluations suggest that these initiatives may be helpful in supporting disabled people to enter, or re-enter, the labour market, but also that DEAs and Personal Advisers in Jobcentre Plus may sometimes be constrained in their pivotal role of supporting and advising disabled people, acting as gatekeepers to *Pathways to Work* and other options available to customers. Literature about these initiatives also expresses concerns about increased conditionality and the privatisation of job placement services. Payment by results regimes tend to incentivise work with clients who are closest to the labour market, whilst disincentivising work with those requiring longer term support.

### ***Specific Groupings of Disabled People***

We were asked to consider the impact of policy and initiatives on specific groups of disabled people. We note first the limitations of considering disabled people in groupings, despite the fact that some policy initiatives are targeted at specific groups. Bearing in mind that any group sharing the same medical diagnosis will contain very different individuals, with differences in their skill levels, experience, severity of illness or disability, levels of support and other factors which may affect their readiness to work, we then consider in turn two sets of groupings, by medical diagnosis and by ‘age and stage’ of working life.

For the **medical groupings**, we first note the impact of the DDA 1995 and 2005 on employees with physical and sensory impairments, in terms of employer awareness of the requirement to accommodate their needs. We turn then to three groups who are severely disadvantaged in the labour market, for whom specific strategies have been developed: people with mental health difficulties, people with learning difficulties and adults with autism.

The Perkins ([2009](#)) review of employment support for people with mental health conditions makes important suggestions for improving support to enable those with fluctuating conditions to enter, and remain in employment, through, for example, building more effective links between DWP and health and social services and addressing misunderstandings among employers.

For people with learning disabilities, the ODI ([Department of Health, 2009](#)) strategy, *Valuing employment now*, also stresses the need to demonstrate to employers the value of employing people with learning difficulties; to improve support, especially for young people in transitions; and to encourage people with learning disabilities and the agencies who work with them to raise their expectations of the work they might do.

The third and final medical grouping considered is adults with autism, who, as reported in the new DoH ([2010b](#)) strategy, *Fulfilling and rewarding lives*, may have been ‘missing out because they don’t fall into either the learning disability or mental health ‘box’’. ([2010b: 19](#)). Research suggests that people with autistic spectrum disorders may be particularly disadvantaged in finding even supported employment and may also suffer from the negative attitudes and low expectations of those who support them.

Finally, we review support strategies for three ‘**age and stage**’ groups: school leavers, young people in higher education, and older people attempting to remain in the labour market after the onset of ill-health or a progressive disease.

Disabled school leavers, at risk of being not in education, employment or training, may be helped by policies in place to cover all potentially NEET groups, although they may need additional support to review their options and keep their expectations high. Research suggests that preparation should begin while they are still in school, to avoid 'stalled transitions' ([Weedon & Riddell, 2010](#)).

Disabled young people who progress to higher education are supported by the introduction of the Disabled Students' Allowance, although some may discard their 'disabled' identities when they begin to seek employment, which makes it harder to track their subsequent career progress. We note, however, recent research ([Sayce, 2009](#)) into high-earning disabled employees, who cite mentoring and support from senior staff as factors which allowed them to progress.

Our final example is of older people of working age who require support, understanding, adjustments and flexibility from their employer to remain in work after the onset of ill health or a progressive disease, or to return to the workforce after a prolonged absence. Research into their experiences (e.g. [Goldstone & Meager, 2002](#); [Mercer, 2005](#)) suggests that they face considerable barriers. Employers may fail to accommodate their needs or allow them to work flexibly; and those who are in work may fail to access the advice about their options which is available through Jobcentre Plus. Older people who are seeking to re-enter the workforce may find their problems are exacerbated by lack of skills wanted by employers, even in times of labour market buoyancy, and although they may qualify for the New Deal on two counts, both NDDP and New Deal 50 Plus, they may face even greater challenges than young people in gaining the skills and confidence to work again.

Common themes across these groups include the importance of high expectations, both for disabled people and for those who support them; the need for good information about possible options, and appropriate transitional support when embarking on a new life phase, be it entry to university, taking on a new role in supported or open employment, or adapting to coping with the onset of a disabling disease while still trying to remain in employment. The last, and most important theme, is the need for understanding and flexibility from employers.

## Conclusions

Four key themes emerged from the literature and are discussed:

- the heterogeneous nature of the disabled population and the significance of intersectionality. As pointed out by the National Equality Panel (2010), while there are marked differences between disabled people and non-disabled people, the differences among disabled people across a range of dimensions are much greater;
- the need for harmonisation of categories, since disabled people are defined differently by a range of agencies and for different administrative purposes;
- the importance of supporting disabled people through transitions, not only on leaving school or university and entering the workplace, but also when they face changes in circumstances, which may require adjustments in the workplace or support to increase or decrease their hours of work;
- the need for joined-up working between agencies to maximise the impact of skills, employment, welfare and health policies. There is still room for more progress on co-



ordination of programmes and in developing greater flexibility in the benefits system to allow disabled people to move in and out of employment.

We also highlight some tensions in employment policy, including:

- the tension between the social inclusion agenda and the needs of the UK economy;
- the question of whether unemployment for disabled people arises because of a problem in labour supply or in labour demand;
- the tension between the desire to create a clear and fair benefits system, with carefully specified rules, responsibilities and conditionality for claimants, and the desire to demonstrate personalisation, with flexibility, to take into account the needs and aspirations of individuals;
- the tension between a centralised system and devolution of responsibilities – devolution not just to the Welsh Assembly Government and the Scottish Government, but also at regional and sub-regional levels throughout Great Britain;
- tension between offering Jobcentre Plus disabled customers a personalised service, and the target-driven culture of the organisation if local managers insist on limiting time for each intervention to meet targets. Similar tensions may arise in provider organisations, since the system of funding rewards those who move customers through training into jobs quickly – at a speed which some disabled customers may find hard to achieve.

Some of these tensions might be lessened, if not removed, by better information for employers and Jobcentre Plus staff, both Advisers and their managers, about the benefits of employing disabled people and the flexibility and/or support they may need to cope with their conditions.

Future priorities for monitoring and research include the impact of new equality policy and legislation, especially the Equality Act 2010; social mobility and the position of disabled people; the aftermath of the recession and the public spending squeeze; and the impact of future tax and benefits policies.

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## Further information

The full report is published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and available on their website:

[http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1984/1/disability\\_skills\\_and\\_employment.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1984/1/disability_skills_and_employment.pdf)

Further information about the project is available from Professor Sheila Riddell, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, [sheila.riddell@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sheila.riddell@ed.ac.uk). All publications and information about this project are available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/disabled-employment>

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