

WIN

Workplace Inclusion: Neurodiversity

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

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LOCAL/REGIONAL/NATIONAL POLICIES/STRATEGIES/STATISTICS REGARDING DISABILITY AND NEURODIVERSITY

NATIONAL SITUATION REGARDING THE EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT OF NEURODIVERSE PERSONS

CYPRUS

The national situation in Cyprus regarding the education, training, and employment of neurodiverse individuals—including those with autism, ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia and similar issues—reflects both progress made in recent years, as well as ongoing challenges.

Prevalence and Awareness of Neurodiversity

Cyprus currently lacks an official registry to document the longitudinal prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or other neurodiverse conditions. However, efforts are underway to address this gap. Since 2023, researchers have been systematically working towards implementing the first national screening program for ASD, a critical step in understanding the scope and specific needs of the neurodiverse population (Petinou, Vogindroukas, Christopoulou, 2024).

A recent cross sectional study ¹in Cyprus on 10.000 students aged between 5 and 12 indicated the prevalence of ASD to be around 2% of the population, with a significant male predominance (approximately 80.3%, with a gender ratio of 4:1) (Kilili-Lesta, Giannakou, & Voniati, 2024; Petinou, Vogindroukas, Christopoulou, 2024). In 2022², official records noted 1,190 minors diagnosed with ASD, with 228 individuals aged 18 and older. Based on data from the Cyprus Ministry of Health from approximately 936 cases of ASD, 426 people presented with variable

¹ The national situation in Cyprus regarding the education, training, and employment of neurodiverse individuals—including those with autism, ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia and similar issues—reflects both progress made in recent years, as well as ongoing challenges

² Kades A. MPs demand comprehensive care for autistic children. The Cyprus Mail. 6. [Google Scholar]
34.Cyprus National ASD Strategic Committee. Cyprus Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare; 2024.

clinical characteristics across the spectrum, and 105 fit the clinical profile of high-functioning ASD profiles (details were missing for the remaining cases).

Despite these data points, the absence of comprehensive registries and studies limits the understanding of other neurodiverse conditions, such as ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. This lack underscores the need for robust data collection systems to inform effective policy and intervention strategies.

Education and Training of Neurodiverse Individuals

Education for neurodiverse individuals in Cyprus reflects both advancements and systemic challenges. While there is a growing recognition of the importance of supporting neurodiverse students, specific data on their participation and success rates in education and training programs in Cyprus is limited. This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive data collection and targeted support measures.

In 2023, among 858 school-aged children with an ASD diagnosis:

- 184 were enrolled in special schools,
- 250 received support in resource rooms,
- 424 attended mainstream schools under inclusive education models (Petinou, Vogindroukas, Christopoulou, 2024 / Cyprus Ministry of Education, Religion and Athletics).

Special schools and mainstream education systems have adopted varying degrees of integration. In mainstream classes, children follow the typical curriculum with potential modifications decided by the District Committee of Special Education and Training, with the overall study path of the student overviewed by the Special Education Coordinators. Students are organically placed in a specific reference class in the school, but also attend classes in specially designed classrooms for special education. These classrooms include a small number of learners (usually up to six) and are taught by a specialist teacher. This way, children's needs are catered for, without being segregated from neurotypical students.

Nine special schools across the country cater to 406 students with significant disabilities, providing specialized support for complex cases. According to the Statistical Service of Cyprus (2019), the majority of students in special education (75%) were students with intellectual disability, with smaller numbers with other types of disability, such as motor disabilities, as well as complex cases of visual or hearing impairments necessitating occupational and speech

therapy services. Persons with disabilities who attend special schools can study until they reach 21 years of age, if considered necessary (United Nations, 2015).

Table 1. Summary of Special schools in Cyprus, 2017-2018 school year (adapted from EASPD factsheet, based on data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Youth (2019a), Ministry of Education and Culture (2019), and individual schools' websites).

Province	Name of School	Number of Students	Target Group
Nicosia	Evangelismos	77	Students aged 7-21 years, with various disabilities
	Nicosia Special School (Eidiko Scholeio Lefkosias)	49	Students aged 6-18/21 years, with psychomotor, learning, and emotional-adaptive problems
	School for the Deaf (Scholi Kofon)	9	Students with hearing impairment
	St. Barnabas School for the Blind	7	Students with visual impairment, from nursery (0) to 21 years
Limassol	Apostolos Loukas	70	Students aged 6-21 years, with developmental disorders, autism, cerebral palsy, sensory, and motor problems
	Red Cross Children's Convalescence School	18	Students with multiple disabilities
Larnaca	St. Spyridonas (Agios Spyridonas)	83	Students aged 5-21 years, with various disabilities
Ammochostos	Apostolos Varnavas	47	Students aged 6-21 years, mostly with cerebral palsy or intellectual disabilities, with additional emotional or sensory problems
Paphos	Theoskepasti	46	Students with multiple physical and mental disabilities

ICT in Education

The need to adapt teaching methods and curricula to meet the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals is significant. Cyprus has made strides in integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into education, which can particularly benefit some neurodiverse students. ICT is a compulsory subject at the lower secondary level, with one of the highest numbers of annual hours allocated in Europe. However, challenges such as limited Greek-language digital resources and content-heavy curricula hinder its effective integration into classrooms ([European Commission, 2020](#)).

Like neurotypicals, neurodiverse populations in Cyprus have access to Adult Education Centres, which function as life-long learning centres in all non-occupied areas of the country. These programs are open to individuals with disabilities aged 15 and older, promoting social inclusion and skill development. Every year, they offer free of charge learning activities, such as teaching of foreign languages, arts and crafts, cultural programmes, health and other issues of general interest (European Commission, 2019a).

Employment Challenges and Opportunities

Despite detailed employment and unemployment data from the Labour Force Survey by CYSTAT that includes information on economic activity, occupation, working hours, and education level, no specific data exists regarding the employment of neurodiverse individuals. This lack of information makes it difficult to assess the participation and challenges that neurodiverse individuals face in the labour market.

General labour statistics indicate an employment rate of 83.9% among tertiary-educated individuals aged 20–34, slightly below the EU average (85.3%), and an employment rate of 72.3% among secondary educated young people, slightly below the EU average (76.4%) ([Education and training monitor 2020 – Cyprus](#)). However, systemic barriers - such as stigma, lack of employer awareness, and limited support structures (mentoring / job coaching) - constrain opportunities for neurodiverse job seekers. Globally, unemployment rates for neurodivergent individuals can reach as high as 40%, a rate around eight times that of neurotypical individuals, underscoring the need for targeted interventions ([Collier, September 2024](#)).

Awareness and Initiatives

The lack of specific data and statistics makes it difficult to evaluate the level of societal understanding and awareness on the topic. While trends show that societal awareness of neurodiversity has been growing, anecdotal evidence suggests lingering stigma and limited public engagement. Families of neurodiverse individuals often report isolation, with withdrawal and limited exposure to public spaces. Individuals are hesitant to disclose their neurodiversity, in fear of facing barriers in their access to the job market, and/or facing discrimination in social circles.

Even though not many, there have been initiatives aimed at increasing awareness on such topics. For example, educational institutions such as the American Academy have introduced immersive lessons on neurodiversity, fostering more inclusive environments ([American Academy, 2024](#)).

International initiatives such as the [Centre of Neurodiversity at Work in Birkbeck, University of London](#), include useful resources that can also be used in the local context of Cyprus. Research on this topic conducted on a sample of 1436 neurodivergent people with one or more neurodiversity diagnosis, as well as neurotypical colleagues and employers, highlights the key strengths that ADHD, autistic neurotypes and other types of neurodivergence can bring to the workplace. These include high levels of empathy and fairness, critical thinking and strong analytic skills, creativity, innovative thinking and resilience. Highlighting the advantages of neurodiverse employees is an important step for promoting interest for employers to invest in inclusiveness.

Conclusion

Cyprus is making commendable progress in supporting neurodiverse individuals through education, training, and awareness initiatives. However, gaps in data collection, tailored educational programs, and workplace inclusivity remain significant. Comprehensive national strategies, combined with sustained efforts from public and private sectors, are essential for fostering an inclusive society that values and harnesses the strengths of neurodiverse individuals.

The key challenges that need to be overcome, to achieve this goal, include limited awareness, educational barriers and employment obstacles. Societal misunderstanding and insufficient public education on neurodiversity contribute to inadequate support. Adapting teaching methods and curricula to diverse learning needs remains a challenge. Workplace environments often lack the necessary accommodations, and policies to support neurodiverse individuals are underdeveloped. WIN project, aspires to systematically address these challenges faced by neurodivergent adults and promote inclusivity in the workplace in Cyprus ([OUC, 2024](#)).

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, WORK LEADERS, EXPERTS, LIFELONG LEARNING STATE OFFICIALS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

- Neurodiverse individuals are a heterogeneous group (high and lower functioning, e.g. autistic spectrum, dyslexia, dysgraphia, Down syndrome, etc.). Different people in this group have different needs. It is therefore very difficult to cater for the needs of all, with a unitary approach.

- Education and vocational training tailored specifically to the needs of neurodiverse persons (such as individuals with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia) remain significantly underdeveloped or insufficiently specialized.
- There is a critical need to bridge the gap between educational institutions and employment through structured pathways and targeted career guidance. However, such structured transitional planning and vocational support are currently inadequate or limited in Cyprus.

Main Needs, Challenges, and Obstacles Identified:

- **Awareness and Training:** Employers generally have low awareness about neurodiversity, which poses significant barriers to employment for neurodiverse individuals. There is a call for regular educational programs targeting employers to increase sensitivity and understanding.
- **Transportation and Accessibility:** Issues related to transport to workplaces and adaptations in workplace settings were identified as significant practical barriers.

Importance, Urgency, and Need:

The challenges identified were ranked implicitly in terms of importance and urgency as follows:

1. Career Guidance and Transition Support: Seen as the most critical immediate need to ensure long-term employability and integration of neurodiverse individuals into the labour market.
2. Employer and Workplace Education: Identified as highly urgent, aiming to remove prejudices, foster inclusive environments, and leverage existing economic incentives provided by state policies.
3. Workplace Adaptations and Accessibility: Urgent practical issue that affects immediate employability and workplace integration.
4. Transportation Solutions: Critical practical obstacle that directly impacts the feasibility of employment.

These insights highlight substantial gaps and priorities for action at a national level in Cyprus, aligning with the broader objectives of enhancing workplace inclusivity and improving the employability of neurodiverse individuals as outlined by the WIN project's goals.

GREECE

In Greece, education for neurodivergent individuals is characterized by significant gaps in resources and accessibility. Special education programs exist, but there are not enough trained teachers, and many schools lack the infrastructure to support neurodiverse students. While inclusive education initiatives have gained traction, most mainstream schools do not have specialized programs or tools to assist students with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia effectively.

Vocational training for neurodivergent individuals remains underdeveloped. Programs tailored to neurodiverse needs are scarce, leaving many without practical pathways to transition from education to employment.

In the employment field in Greece, employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals are limited, with many facing workplace discrimination and inflexible environments. A recent Greek law (5053/2023) provides incentives for businesses to hire neurodivergent individuals and mandates workplace accommodations. Despite this, stigma and lack of awareness among employers continue to create barriers.

Greece's NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rate for individuals aged 15–29 is one of the highest in the EU, particularly for those with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions. Among those with tertiary education, the NEET rate was 20.2% in 2023, underscoring systemic obstacles to employment even for highly educated individuals

Additionally, societal awareness of neurodiversity in Greece is low. Misconceptions about neurodivergent individuals contribute to social stigma, while efforts to increase awareness through public campaigns or NGO programs have been limited. Some organizations, like Autism Speaks Greece and ARGO (an autism support network), have stepped in to promote awareness and workplace inclusion but face funding and scale challenges.

Across the EU, the European Disability Strategy 2021–2030 emphasizes inclusive education and vocational training for neurodivergent individuals. However, implementation varies by country. For example, Erasmus+ projects support training programs focused on neurodiversity, but national-level uptake remains inconsistent. Data from Eurostat highlights that NEET rates are generally lower in countries with special education frameworks.

Also, the EU NEET rate for young people aged 15–29 was 12.9% in 2023, with Greece among the countries reporting the highest rates. Neurodivergent individuals are overrepresented in these statistics due to inadequate workplace support and bias during hiring processes. At the EU level,

initiatives like the Disability Employment Package aims to improve employment rates for neurodiverse individuals by encouraging companies to adopt inclusive practices.

Undoubtedly, EU-level awareness of neurodiversity is growing, partly due to campaigns and research funded by the EU. Programs such as the Horizon Europe framework include projects to explore neurodiverse inclusion in education and employment. Despite these efforts, societal understanding of neurodiversity varies significantly across member states.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

During the discussion on National Situation – Needs and Challenges, following the presentation of the project and its objectives, a participant who is self-diagnosed on the autism spectrum, artist, employer, and activist on autism-related issues, initiated the conversation. She stated that neurodiversity is considered a disability, but only when intellectual disability is present (and not “hidden”) does any mobilization occur, leading to some formal procedures. In her opinion, there is a bad institutional approach toward these individuals. Some state support exists in a broader framework, and there has been progress in the Greek educational system, such as the implementation of parallel support—providing an assistant with special educators to students who need it. However, the state does not offer the necessary support at the level it should.

Regarding the workplace environment, she argued that there is a form of “fake-charity,” primarily in Social Cooperative Enterprises (KINSEP). She emphasized the need for a more inclusive workspace, as neurodivergent individuals are not given employment recognition. She mentioned that only large multinational companies, such as Google, or call centres in Greece, might provide employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals. She further added that teachers should understand what neurodiversity is, as many, especially older teachers, lack knowledge on the subject. She compared neurodiversity to physical disabilities, stating that while mobility issues are visible and can be accommodated (e.g., with ramps), neurodivergent individuals have different, individualized needs that are often overlooked.

Another participant, working as a parallel support educator for a child on the autism spectrum, shared her perspective. She stated that the state does not provide adequate support for autistic individuals or those with special needs. She emphasized the importance of focusing on the talents and strengths of neurodivergent individuals so they can be productive in the workplace. She also noted that efforts in Greece are not at the level they should be, especially compared to

other countries. She pointed out that hiring neurodivergent individuals typically occurs through mandatory employment designated positions for people with disabilities, enforced by the government, without employers having an actual say in the hiring process.

Another participant, diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, who has studied Special Education and completed a teaching internship in a special education school, stated that support is lacking, and the needs of neurodivergent individuals have not been fully recognized.

Then, an educator from the Theatre Department of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), also artist and researcher focusing on inclusivity, spoke about the lack of awareness, suspicion, and stereotypes surrounding neurodiversity. While there is knowledge available, she explained, neurotypical individuals rarely take the initiative to understand neurodivergence. She also highlighted dysfunctions within the educational system. For example, parents often feel ashamed if their child has learning difficulties, reinforcing stigma and limiting open discussion. According to her, a major need is establishing effective channels of communication between neurodivergent individuals, educators, parents, and society.

Finally, another participant, drawing from personal experiences with neurodivergent individuals, acknowledged some improvements, such as parallel support in schools. However, she identified three major challenges that remain: lack of resources, social stigma, and limited public understanding of neurodiversity.

IRELAND

Public Affairs Ireland: (<https://pai.ie/the-importance-of-neurodiversity-2/>) In Ireland, an estimated 4% (some worldwide figures suggest this figure is closer to 15%-20%) of the population are considered neurodiverse. The concept of neurodiversity encompasses a wide range of neurodiverse conditions, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, Tourette syndrome, and others. Please refer to the link for more details.

Neurodiversity Ireland has launched two educational videos (<https://neurodiversityireland.com/news/letsbefriends-launch>), encouraging greater understanding for and inclusion of children who are neurodivergent. The charity is also calling for more support for the parents and families of neurodivergent children. The videos, which can be downloaded (links below) and shown in schools or at home, were launched in the company of Anne Rabbitte TD, Minister of State for Disability at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Founded by a group of neurodivergent parents of neurodivergent children in early 2022, Neurodiversity Ireland aims to create a truly inclusive society where children can access the necessary support to participate in their community without barriers, to reach their full potential. The group started in the Dublin village of Sandymount but has become a nationwide movement.

AUTICON: <https://auticon.com/ie/neuroinclusion-services/neurodiversity-elearning/>
eLearning from auticon, the leader in neurodiversity: This interactive and engaging learning experience delivers insightful content from auticon's neurodiversity subject matter experts and neurodivergent colleagues. eLearning is designed to raise awareness of a changing neurodiverse workplace. It educates managers and employees on understanding what it means to be neurodivergent in the workplace and how to best work with their neurodivergent colleagues. Their CPD-accredited course certifies anyone taking the course as achieving "NeuroAware" status. Students will receive a digital credential to showcase their achievements across social channels. The Irish Times (22-03-2024) stated that one-quarter of over-18s say they are neurodivergent, with almost 1 in 10 adults identifying, though only half of those who do identify have a diagnosis. Only half of neurodivergent people who are working have disclosed their condition to their employer, while 45 per cent feel their workplace is not inclusive, their survey found.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

In general, the situation in Ireland is that there are a lot of initiatives for creating awareness of neurodiversity starting at an early age. This will have a long term impact on awareness for future employers and neurodiverse workers. An example of this is the ground-breaking work carried out by Neurodiversity Ireland (<https://neurodiversityireland.com/>). Since 2024, other communities in Ireland have been in touch to see how they can set up in their own local area. Other groups are supported by MEET UP such as NeuroGamers Ireland (394 Members). Family involvement is seen as key to supporting the 85% of those on the neurodiverse spectrum that are unemployed.

ASPIRE IRELAND: operate a Social Enterprise, called Aspire Designs. This aims to provide meaningful work experience and progression, skills and training to autistic adults. They have a talented team of autistic graphic designers who are creating unique greeting cards, utilising their skillset and interests. Aspire Designs is supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Pobal the Community Services Programme.

The main needs, challenges and obstacles faced by neurodiverse people:

- A danger in seeing the autism first, rather than seeing the person that is behind it.
- HR professionals in Irish enterprises lack fundamental understanding on what Autism is really about. They call out the imperative need not only to educate HR professionals for more knowledge and understanding on Autism, but also to devise innovative recruitment processes for unleashing their strengths, abilities and potential.
- People with Autism have limited physical and mental capacities to coping with neurotypical dominated social and physical environment due to the challenges they face with social interaction and sensory sensitivities. Understanding and acknowledging the inherent limitations is important in order for the employers to provide reasonable accommodations for autistic employees to fulfil their full potential in workplace.
- Irish disability policies do create structural barriers that discourage people with disabilities to take up employment. If policy makers do not fundamentally understand or intentionally ignore the limited physical or/and mental capacities that people with disabilities have, then the policies will not only become ineffective, actually become the disabling barrier.
- The need to separate mental health problem from Autism. They are two different things by nature. The causes of developing mental health problems among autistic adults are

complex and multifaceted. As identified by other emerging themes, societal misconception about what Autism is really about is one of influential factors which creates a barrier for providing right support that autistic adults need in order to unleash their potential and abilities. Lack of right support is the prevailing reason for social exclusion. It is the root cause of developing mental health issues.

- Enabling support practices that worked to remove barriers so that vocational support staff consider the fundamental support tasks they do on the daily basis, including functional assessment of job skills, suggesting career and educational path based on assessed skills, strength-based job matching and on the job survival skills coaching.

ITALY

In Italy, the education, training, and employment of neurodivergent individuals are supported by various policies and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusion and equal opportunities.

Education and employment

Italy emphasizes inclusive education, ensuring that students with disabilities, including neurodiverse individuals, attend mainstream schools. Legislation such as Law 104/1992 guarantees the rights of individuals with disabilities to education and training, promoting their integration into society. Support measures include specialized teaching staff, individualized education plans, and accessible learning materials. Despite these efforts, challenges persist. A study on teachers' knowledge and attitudes about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) highlights the need for ongoing professional development to effectively support neurodiverse students. Employment rates for neurodiverse individuals in Italy are not comprehensively documented. However, initiatives like the DXC Dandelion Program have been introduced to improve employment outcomes.

Launched in Italy in 2024, this program aims to empower neurodivergent individuals by providing employment opportunities in the IT sector. The program has reported a 92% employment retention rate and a 30-40% increase in team productivity when including neurodivergent participants. Additionally, organizations like Specialisterne operate in Italy to facilitate the employment of neurodiverse individuals, particularly in roles that benefit from high attention to detail, such as software testing and data analysis.

Statistics and challenges

A nationwide study estimated the prevalence of ASD in Italy at 13.4 per 1,000 children aged 7–9 years, with a male-to-female ratio of 4.4:1. This data underscores the importance of tailored services to meet the specific needs of autistic children. Challenges for neurodiverse individuals in Italy include limited access to specialized services, societal stigma, and a need for greater awareness and understanding of neurodiversity. Efforts are ongoing to address these issues through public awareness campaigns and policy reforms.

Awareness and societal perception

Awareness of neurodiversity in Italy is growing, with increased recognition of conditions like autism and ADHD. Public initiatives and educational programs aim to enhance understanding and acceptance. However, misconceptions and barriers to full inclusion remain, necessitating continued advocacy and education to foster a more inclusive society.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (EXPERTS, EDUCATORS, THERAPISTS, COORDINATORS, MANAGERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

- The Italian system shows progress in inclusion efforts, but there are still significant gaps in implementation.
- Education policies are in place, but access to tailored support in schools and universities remains inconsistent.
- Employment rates for neurodiverse persons are low, with employers often lacking awareness and structured support systems.
- Vocational training programs exist, but they are often underfunded and not widely promoted.
- Lack of widespread awareness and understanding of neurodiversity in workplaces and educational institutions.
- Limited access to personalized learning and working accommodations.
- Social stigma and biases that hinder equal opportunities.
- Difficulty in transitioning from education to employment.
- Inadequate mental health support and counselling services.

POLAND

In Poland, neurodivergent individuals face significant challenges especially in terms of education and employment. The employment rate for neurodivergent persons is notably lower compared to the general population. According to EY Poland, nearly 85% of neurodivergent individuals worldwide remain unemployed or underemployed. This statistic likely holds true for Poland as well, given the lack of tailored support and inclusive practices in workplaces. According to a report by the JiM Foundation in cooperation with the Polish Economic Institute, only about 2% of the estimated 400,000 autistic individuals in Poland are professionally employed. This figure highlights the significant underemployment and unemployment rates among neurodivergent individuals in the country.

Challenges and Needs: Neurodivergent individuals in Poland encounter several barriers, including limited access to systematic support in education or vocational training. The Polish education system has been gradually moving towards inclusivity, but students with more severe disabilities or clinical pattern of symptoms resulting from neurodiversity often remain in segregated settings. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness and understanding among teachers about the unique talents and specific needs of neurodivergent individuals.

Awareness: The general awareness of neurodivergence in Poland is still developing, mostly in the business field. Initiatives like the Neurodiversity Center of Excellence at EY Poland are working to increase awareness and provide training for effective communication with neurodivergent individuals. However, there is still a long way to go in terms of societal understanding and acceptance of neurodivergence, especially in public body and educational system – national and higher education.

Improvements: Poland definitely lacks in adapting the Neurodiversity Movement, which recognizes neurodivergence as a broader spectrum, not limited only to clinical conditions. Conditions such as ADHD, ASD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia are mostly viewed as neurodevelopmental disorders that need to be treated, even among professionals such as psychotherapists, diagnosticians, and psychologists. There is a need for raising awareness in public bodies, universities, governmental institutions, and most importantly in schools.

One of the most important priorities should be adapting educational conditions, teaching methods, and support for students based on their specific sensory or cognitive needs, as well as their unique talents and natural predispositions resulting from an alternatively functioning brain. This should be combined with an individualized approach to students, strengthening their talents rather than a clinical approach to treating neurodiversity. There is also a great need to support the parents of neurodivergent children, both in terms of emotional support and, most importantly, systemic solutions that support the proper development of children and youth with alternatively functioning brains.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

The current state of support for neurodivergent individuals in Poland shows significant gaps compared to other countries, especially in education, training, and employment. Stakeholders consistently highlight how Poland lags behind other nations in this area. This becomes particularly evident when compared to countries like the UK, where structured programs exist for various institutions, including local governments and law enforcement.

A key challenge lies in establishing appropriate support systems and classification methods. Fundamental questions remain: Should neurodiversity be linked to disability status? How can we build support infrastructure from the ground up? While basic support exists, implementing more sophisticated, interactive training programs has proven challenging.

The knowledge gap in Poland is especially noticeable among professionals. As one focus group participant observed, "Poland lacks depth in this subject area, which becomes apparent when international speakers demonstrate more advanced understanding at conferences."

A concerning trend is the scepticism shown by some medical professionals toward neurodevelopmental conditions. When professionals dismiss concerns by saying "everyone has ADHD now," it reveals a troubling lack of understanding. This attitude diminishes real challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals and treats legitimate conditions as mere trends, contributing to societal misconceptions and stigma.

Higher education faces unique challenges in balancing individual needs with group dynamics. As one observer noted, "It's more difficult at university than in the workplace. When we try to offer individualized arrangements for neurodivergent students, others might question why some

students are allowed to work alone, while the rest must work in groups." This highlights the ongoing tension between providing necessary accommodations and maintaining perceived fairness.

In conclusion, Poland significantly lags behind other countries in supporting neurodivergent individuals, with major gaps in education, healthcare, and professional training. While basic support exists, the country lacks sophisticated programs and faces scepticism from medical professionals. The challenges are particularly evident in higher education, where balancing individual needs with group dynamics remains problematic. This situation highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reform and professional development to reach international standards.

The main needs, challenges and obstacles faced by neurodiverse people

The main needs, challenges, and obstacles faced by neurodivergent individuals span multiple areas, with particular emphasis on organizational settings. A fundamental challenge lies in appropriately addressing neurodiversity in workplace environments. As one participant emphasized, "We don't want to scare others with this, the awareness is to help you know how to use your talents and unique skills in the right way." This statement reflects the importance of avoiding both favouritism and isolation of neurodivergent individuals within teams.

Participant narratives revealed two primary support needs. The first concerns the work environment and its direct impact on employee functioning. The second, recurring throughout many statements, focuses on the necessity of formal support structures, exemplified by proposals for internal employee support groups (HUBs) and specialized consulting bodies for managers.

The discussion also surfaced interesting perspectives on social adaptation. One participant's experience provided particular insight: "I, as a neurodivergent person, was forced in my childhood by parents or teachers to adapt socially, and now I am satisfied that I function/perform better this way." This reflection raises important questions about the balance between social adaptation and individual needs.

In higher education, significant challenges emerge around group dynamics. As one participant noted, "The university faces challenges related to large groups of 30 people, which makes it difficult to conduct classes and provide individualized attention to students." This structural barrier significantly impacts the effectiveness of support for neurodivergent individuals in academic settings.

A comprehensive approach to supporting neurodivergent individuals must combine structural elements, such as establishing support HUBs, with cultural elements that focus on changing organizational attitudes toward neurodiversity. The key challenge lies in finding the balance between providing necessary support while avoiding stigmatization, all while creating conditions that enable neurodivergent individuals to utilize their unique talents and skills effectively. Group size in educational settings remains a particular barrier to implementing individualized approaches, highlighting the need for structural changes in these environments.

SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, there is limited data on employment rates specifically for neurodiverse persons, such as those with autism, ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. However, there are approximately 170,000 persons with disabilities and 230,000 individuals with chronic illnesses in the country (SURs, 2020). In 2018, there were 14,038 registered unemployed persons with disabilities at the Employment Service of Slovenia. Unfortunately, specific statistics for neurodiverse individuals are unavailable.

Compared to December 2022, the number of working persons with disabilities increased by slightly less than 300 or by 0.7%, to approximately 35,800 persons. The most pronounced growth was observed in the construction industry (by almost 100 persons or by 5.0% more), and the largest decline in manufacturing activities (by just under 200 or by 1.5% less) (SURs, 2024).

Research highlights that neurodiverse persons face challenges in employment due to sensory sensitivities, difficulties understanding instructions, communication barriers, and relationship issues at the workplace. Slovenia's educational system has made strides toward inclusivity for students with special educational needs. The Placement of Children with Special Needs Act categorizes children into various groups, including those with autistic spectrum disorders, and outlines tailored educational programs to meet their specific needs. These programs range from modified curricula within mainstream schools to specialized institutions offering individualized support. The Act Regulating the Integrated Early Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs, effective from January 2019, emphasizes early intervention, aiming to provide comprehensive support to both children and their families to enhance development and social inclusion.

Despite these legislative measures, challenges persist. A study comparing small EU states, including Slovenia, indicates that while there is a commitment to inclusive education, the system often remains segregated, with neurodiverse students placed in specialized programs rather than integrated into mainstream classrooms. This segregation can limit opportunities for social interaction and equal participation ([Oxford Academic, 2024](#)).

Based on our experience in the field of employment rehabilitation, professionals have observed that individuals with autism often face unique challenges when integrating into the work environment. These challenges are multifaceted, stemming from both individual needs and systemic barriers within workplaces.

Persons with autism often require tailored support to succeed in the workplace. Key needs include clear communication, structured environments, and predictable routines, as these factors help reduce stress and improve focus. Many individuals with autism have exceptional skills in areas such as attention to detail, problem-solving, and creativity, but these talents can remain untapped without proper accommodation and understanding from employers. Challenges arise when workplaces lack awareness or resources to create inclusive environments. Social interactions, unspoken workplace norms, and sensory sensitivities are common hurdles for individuals with autism. For instance, job interviews that rely heavily on social cues may inadvertently disadvantage autistic candidates. Furthermore, open-plan offices or noisy environments can be overwhelming, affecting productivity and well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a two-fold approach: empowering individuals with autism through training and support, while also educating employers to foster inclusivity. Simple adjustments, such as offering alternative communication methods or creating quiet workspaces, can significantly enhance the integration process.

By bridging the gap between individual needs and organizational readiness, we can pave the way for meaningful employment opportunities for persons with autism, ultimately enriching workplaces with their unique perspectives and abilities.

Within the framework of the VIS A VIS project, a study was conducted on the needs of employers in employment individuals with autism. The review and analysis of the current state of the support environment for the employment of individuals with autism revealed significant gaps in the areas of information and awareness, education and training, as well as the provision of support and assistance. At the same time, previous studies have demonstrated employers' need and motivation to acquire the knowledge, experience, and support required to facilitate and enhance the inclusion of individuals with autism in the work environment. The research

conducted among employers within the project largely confirmed findings from prior analyses of the employment of individuals with autism in Slovenia, as well as practical experiences. Most participating organizations lack experience with employing and training individuals with autism and are unfamiliar with the specific requirements of hiring them. The knowledge and information they do possess are typically acquired through training sessions. While the majority of employers believe individuals with autism are employable, nearly half of the mainstream companies had never considered hiring an individual with autism. The biggest obstacles identified were: unsuitable work environments, a lack of knowledge and information, prejudice and stigma. However, the most significant advantages noted included respect for diversity and equal opportunities, and hiring based on skills and abilities rather than diagnosis. Interestingly, the specific characteristics of individuals with autism were perceived as both strengths and challenges. Alarmingly, nearly one-third of participating mainstream companies did not know whom to contact if they wanted to employ a person with autism, and over one-third were unaware of state subsidies available for such employment. Nevertheless, most participating organizations expressed interest in attending training on integrating individuals with autism into work and employment. Based on the collected data, opinions, expressed interests, and identified needs, we conclude that employers in Slovenia urgently require a support model tailored to autism employment, focusing on:

- Information, awareness, and consultation on integrating individuals with autism into work and training programs.
- Specific adaptations of workplaces and work environments for individuals with autism.
- Formalized onboarding processes and workplace training for new employees.
- Developing mentoring schemes and implementing mentorship programs.
- Legislation and financial incentives provided by the state for employing individuals with autism.

Additionally, consistent support from external experts or support teams is needed to provide assistance, guidance, and directions to individuals with autism, colleagues, and management. Collaboration with families and all other relevant organizations and individuals is also crucial.

The emerging model addresses the specifics of Slovenian employers and the opportunities offered by the Slovenian labour market for employing individuals with autism. It outlines the challenges that may arise when hiring individuals with autism while offering practical solutions. Its purpose is to provide support and guidelines for employers to facilitate the successful inclusion of individuals with autism into the workplace.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Participants discuss the challenges and needs of neurodiverse individuals, particularly those with autism, in education, training, and employment. It emphasizes a lack of awareness and understanding of autism as a significant obstacle.

Challenges and Needs

Lack of Awareness: A primary issue is the lack of understanding about autism among employers and educators. This leads to difficulties in communication, interactions, and creating suitable work or learning environments.

Unstructured Environments: Workplaces and educational settings often lack structure, which can be detrimental for individuals with autism. This lack of structure can cause confusion and distress, making it difficult for them to function effectively.

Inflexibility and Black-and-White Thinking: Some individuals with autism have a tendency towards rigid thinking and perfectionism.

Sensory Sensitivities: Sensory issues, such as sensitivities to light and sound, are also highlighted as a factor that can impact the well-being of individuals with autism in the workplace.

Difficulty in Self-Advocacy: Individuals with autism may struggle to articulate their needs or recognize the reasons for their distress. They may find it difficult to express how their environment impacts them or to communicate what they need to succeed.

Personalization: They emphasize that each individual with autism is different, and their needs vary significantly. Therefore, support and accommodations need to be personalized.

Misinterpretation of Needs: Sometimes, the needs of individuals with autism are misinterpreted by employers or mentors as personal preferences or whims rather than genuine needs.

Lack of Support in Education: There is a lack of adequate support for students with autism within mainstream educational settings.

- Transition support between educational institutions is lacking.
- Support systems in higher education are unclear and difficult to navigate for both the students and the professionals.
- Educational materials and information are often unclear and unstructured.

Stereotyping: Stereotypes from media portrayals of individuals with autism negatively impact understanding.

Limited Job Opportunities: There's a lack of diverse job opportunities for young adults with autism who have varying skill sets. Current options are limited to sheltered workshops, which don't cater to their diverse talents.

Recommendations and Insights

Increased Awareness and Education: They call for greater awareness and education among employers regarding autism.

Minimal Adjustments Can Make a Big Difference: Simple adjustments can make a big impact on the well-being and success of individuals with autism. These do not necessarily require large financial investments or major structural changes.

Importance of Understanding Individual Needs: They emphasize the importance of taking the time to understand each individual's specific needs. This is a process of learning what is important and necessary on an individual basis.

The Role of a Dedicated Mentor: They suggest that having a single point of contact or mentor is crucial for providing support and ensuring individuals have the resources they need. This individual would be responsible for coordinating support and providing necessary materials.

Addressing Prejudice: They highlight a need to address prejudices and negative attitudes that exist within educational settings towards individuals with autism.

Need for Transition Support: There should be support for the transition between educational institutions, for example, from high school to university. This is needed to ensure that individuals with autism have the information they need, as well as a point of contact at their new institution.

The participants assessing the challenges faced by neurodiverse individuals, specifically focusing on autistic individuals, in education, training, and employment. They highlight a significant lack of awareness and understanding of autism among employers and educators, leading to difficulties in creating supportive and structured work and learning environments. The lack of appropriate support and the prevalence of unstructured environments are identified as major obstacles. They discuss the need for improved communication, better support systems during transitions between educational institutions, and more diverse job opportunities for neurodiverse individuals. Ultimately, they advocate for greater awareness and more tailored support to improve the outcomes for neurodiverse individuals.

Overall, they stress the need for a more informed and empathetic approach to supporting neurodiverse individuals in both educational and employment sphere, emphasizing the benefits of even small, well-considered adaptations, the importance of individualized support, and the need for ongoing support and understanding.

THE EXISTING NATIONAL LEGISLATION, POLICIES, STRATEGIES IN THE AREA OF EQUAL INCLUSION OF NEURODIVERSE PERSONS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

CYPRUS

Compatibility with International Conventions and Regulations

The optional protocol to the “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” (CRPD) was adopted by the United Nations on December 13, 2006, and entered into force on May 3, 2008. Cyprus signed the protocol on March 30, 2007, and ratified and incorporated it into its national legislation on July 27, 2011 (Ratification Law of 2011, L. 8(III)/2011). By ratifying the optional protocol, Cyprus has committed to these mechanisms, thereby reinforcing the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities within its jurisdiction.

CRPD focuses on the following general principles:

- **Respect for inherent dignity:** Recognition of the equal worth and dignity of all individuals with disabilities.
- **Non-discrimination:** Ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equal access to rights and services without prejudice.
- **Full and effective participation:** Enabling individuals with disabilities to participate fully in society.
- **Equality of opportunity:** Providing fair opportunities in all areas of life, including education, work, and social participation.
- **Accessibility:** Promoting access to physical environments, transportation, information, and communication technologies.
- **Equality between men and women:** Addressing specific challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities.
- **Respect for children with disabilities:** Ensuring that children with disabilities have rights equal to other children, including protection and access to education.

Key Rights Covered Under the Convention include:

- Education: Right to inclusive education at all levels. Accessibility of educational institutions and programs for individuals with disabilities.

- Health: Equal access to quality health care, including rehabilitation services. Prohibition of discrimination in the provision of health services.
- Employment: Promotion of employment opportunities in inclusive workplaces. Equal pay for work of equal value and protection against discrimination in hiring.
- Independent Living and Inclusion in Society: Right to choose where and with whom to live. Access to support services that enable individuals to live independently.
- Accessibility: Development of minimum standards for accessibility in physical spaces, technology, and communication.
- Legal Capacity: Recognition of individuals with disabilities as equal before the law. Right to make decisions regarding personal, financial, and other matters, with appropriate support.
- Protection from Exploitation and Abuse: Measures to prevent violence, abuse, and exploitation. Provision of rehabilitation and support services for victims.
- Participation in Cultural Life, Recreation, and Sports: Equal opportunities to participate in cultural activities, sports, and leisure. Accessibility of cultural venues and materials.

States, including Cyprus, are required to enact legislation, raise public awareness, and monitor implementation. Cyprus established national mechanisms to oversee progress and aligned its legal frameworks to promote accessibility and inclusivity across various sectors. The Optional Protocol to the CRPD, which Cyprus also ratified, enables individuals to submit complaints about violations of their rights directly to the CRPD Committee. This strengthens accountability and ensures that individuals with disabilities have recourse to justice when their rights are not upheld.

Legal Framework for Education and Inclusion

The education of children with disabilities in Cyprus is governed by the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Laws of 1999–2014 and the accompanying Regulations of 2001–2013 ([European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education](#)). These laws emphasize the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education whenever possible, with special education reserved for exceptional cases (Pancyprian Alliance for Disability, 2017).

The legal framework (Law for the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs [113\(I\) 1999](#) and law [69\(I\)/2001](#), [Regulations K Δ Π 185/2001](#) and [K Δ Π 186/2001](#)) mandates the right for all children, including neurodiverse individuals, to attend mainstream schools starting at age three. Tuition is free for children aged four and above in public pre-primary schools, while tuition fees apply for children aged 3-4 (with or without disabilities) attending public

kindergartens. Families receiving public assistance or low-income benefits may receive subsidies of up to 80% for tuition fees for younger children, with priority given to children with special educational needs (irrespective of age), and low-income families with four children and more and other socioeconomic criteria (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016).

At the tertiary education level, Regulation 266/2009 reserves up to 6% of public university admissions for students with significant health or disability-related challenges (special category “Cypriot candidates with serious health problems or other serious problems”), including neurodiverse individuals. However, eligibility requires an entry grade at least 80% of the grade of the last admitted student.

Supplementary to the above, the anti-racist policy of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth named “Code of Conduct against Racism and Guide for Managing and Recording Racist Incidents” has been promoted and implemented by schools at all levels of education since the school year 2015/2016. This policy follows a broad definition and includes policies against all sorts of discrimination, from racism, to discrimination, stereotypes, diversity, etc. The Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus conducts several actions (e.g., workshops, conferences, seminars) every school year to support teachers and schools implementing the anti-racist policy.

Inclusive Education and Special Schools

The topic of inclusive education for neurodivergent students often creates discussions among parents and educational authorities in Cyprus. There is an ongoing debate regarding the implementation of inclusive practices that cater to all children, including those who are neurodivergent. State officials such as the Commissioner for Children’s Rights, are also involved in such debates.

Cyprus has made strides in promoting inclusive education, reflected in policies favoring the placement of neurodiverse students in mainstream classrooms over special schools. In 2022, the Minister of Education stated in a radio interview at [CyBC](#) that around 400 students were enrolled in special schools, while most children with special needs were integrated into mainstream classrooms. Indeed statistics suggest that only approximately 5–6% of students with special needs attend separate public schools for special education ([Eurydice, 2023](#)). Families often prefer inclusive education settings to avoid stigma and because of skepticism regarding the effectiveness of special schools. While families wish to avoid special classes, they also want specialized support for neurodivergent students within the mainstream class. Consequently,

special education classes cater primarily to individuals with severe disabilities or significant educational needs that cannot be met in mainstream settings.

Critics argue that the current model requires enhanced funding and better allocation of resources. Effective policies should involve specialized professionals and tailored interventions, where needed, rather than relying on ad hoc mentoring roles or simple school escort assignments, a role undertaken by non-experts with the responsibility to help neurodivergent students in the classroom.

National Action Plans and Committees

In response to the need for comprehensive strategies, the Cypriot government has introduced several initiatives that align with international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Cyprus ratified in 2011:

Committee for the Protection Of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: This is a ten-member council in Cyprus, established in 1989 (Laws 117/89 and 11(I)/2018) dedicated to safeguarding the rights of individuals with intellectual disabilities, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Committee offers services such as early childhood intervention, liaises between families and service providers, and maintains registries for institutions and individuals with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, it provides consulting services, handles complaints, and oversees a fund to finance specific needs. The Committee collaborates with various national and international organizations to promote the inclusion and well-being of persons with intellectual disabilities.

National Committee for Autism (2022): This multidisciplinary body addresses deficiencies in education, early intervention, diagnosis, and social welfare services for individuals with ASD. It was approved by the Cyprus governmental cabinet in order to provide and support a long-term and sustainable strategic plan for the implementation of specific actions for individuals with ASD and their families.

National Autism Strategy and Action Plan (2024–2028): Approved in 2024 by the Cyprus Cabinet, the strategy includes 53 actions across seven thematic pillars that are envisioned to “follow the course of the life of a child and adult with autism”. The pillars concern matters such as research, early detection and diagnosis, health and medical intervention, early child and family intervention, education, social protection and independent living, work, and participation in entertainment, culture and society.

National Disability Action Plans: As part of the broader National Disability Strategy 2018–2028, these plans incorporate neurodivergence-specific actions and focus on independent living, employment, accessibility, and education. The Department for Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities co-ordinated, with the state services responsible for disability issues, the preparation of the First National Disability Strategy 2018-2028 and the Second (2018-2020) and Third (2021-2023) National Action Plan for Disability, based on the recommendations made to the Republic of Cyprus by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and the Council of Europe's Disability Strategy 2017-2023. The Action Plan contains 86 actions (46 running actions and 40 new ones) and focuses primarily on independent living, employment, education, health and rehabilitation services, and accessibility (ANED, 2019a). Neurodivergence consists a separate action in the [Third National Disability Action Plan](#) 2021-2023.

Employment Legislation and Support

Under Law N. 146(I)/2009, public sector organizations must reserve 10% of vacant posts for individuals with disabilities who meet specific criteria, such as the necessary skills for the particular position and passing oral or written exams. However, individuals with disabilities without recognized secondary education qualifications are often excluded from applying to such positions, given that graduation from special schools, special units or mainstream schools under the status of observer is not recognised and equal to secondary education. The medical approach to assessing functionality further limits the number of eligible applicants, creating additional barriers ([ANED, 2019a](#)). In 2017, 30 people with disabilities were recruited in the wider public sector, thus bringing the total number of persons with disabilities recruited in the public sector for the 2010-2017 period to 155.

The Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities also provides grants for hiring social assistants. This scheme provides a grant up to EUR 10,000 per year to organisations of persons with severe disabilities for hiring social assistants for their members, and provides a maximum of 70% of the salary costs of the social assistant (the remaining 30% is covered through the organisations' own sources). In 2018, this program supported 821 individuals with severe disabilities through 15 programs funded with €121,079 ([EASPD](#)).

Financial Assistance and Accessibility

The Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) scheme, established under the Social Benefits Laws of 2014 and 2015, supports individuals requiring home or institutional care. Monthly subsidies for institutional care range from €625 to €745 (depending on the individual's situation, for instance, bedridden, with or without mobility difficulties), while home care assistance is capped at €400 per month (Regulation 162/2016). In some cases, the state even covers the cost of home care provided by a domestic helper.

Additionally, the EU Disability Card offers discounts and free access to services including culture, tourism, entertainment, sports, and transport, in Cyprus and seven more participating EU countries. Benefits include discounts on bus fares and free or reduced entry to festivals, museums, theatres, sport events, and swimming pools for individuals with disabilities and their personal assistants (Ministry of Labour, Welfare, and Social Insurance, 2017).

Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) in the field of Neurodiversity

The ["Cyprus Tomorrow" Recovery and Resilience Plan \(RRP\)](#) outlines several initiatives aimed at supporting neurodiverse populations, focusing on enhancing inclusivity in education, training, and employment. 13.4% of the RRP budget (approx. 163.5 million Euros) is allocated to Employment, Social Inclusion, Education and Human Resources, that are expected to benefit also neurodivergent populations. Key provisions of the RRP include:

Inclusive Education Reforms: The plan emphasizes reforms to promote inclusive education, ensuring that students with diverse needs, including neurodiverse individuals, have access to quality education tailored to their requirements.

Vocational Training and Employment Support: Investments are directed towards vocational training programs designed to equip neurodiverse individuals with the necessary skills for the labour market. This includes the development of specialized training centers and the implementation of employment support schemes to facilitate their integration into the workforce.

Digital Accessibility Initiatives: The RRP includes measures to enhance digital accessibility, ensuring that digital platforms and services are user-friendly for neurodiverse individuals. This involves the development of accessible digital tools and resources to support their participation in the digital economy.

Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns: The plan proposes campaigns to raise awareness and sensitize the public and employers about neurodiversity. These initiatives aim to reduce stigma, promote understanding, and foster inclusive environments in educational institutions and workplaces.

These provisions reflect Cyprus's commitment to fostering an inclusive society that supports the needs and potentials of neurodiverse individuals.

Best Practices and Areas of Improvement

Overall, numerous legislations, policies and strategies put in effect in Cyprus, to promote inclusiveness and awareness of neurodiversity in education, training and employment, have so far been presented. All the above can be assessed to pinpoint the best practices used in the Cypriot context, but also discover and highlight areas that need further improvement.

Best Practices

- *Inclusive Education Policies:* Mainstream schools are prioritized for students with special needs, supported by special education units in major cities. This is a priority for both the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Youth as well as the families of neurodivergent populations. The common goal is to ensure they are educated in public schools equipped with suitable infrastructure ([European Commission](#)).
- *Special Education Units:* Nine special education units have been established in major cities across the country, usually within big mainstream schools. These units cater to students with a wide range of special needs, aiming to help them develop academic but also social skills.
- *Teacher Training:* Educators in Cyprus receive professional development in special needs education, equipping them with the skills to effectively teach students with diverse needs and foster inclusive learning environments. Active attempts are made to constantly train school staff on topics relevant to special education ([Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus](#)).
- *Advocacy and Awareness:* Organizations, NGOs, and parent associations actively advocate for the rights of individuals with special needs, raising awareness and influencing public policies to better support these individuals.

Areas for Improvement

- *Early Intervention:* Expanding early intervention is crucial for identifying and addressing developmental challenges at a young age, improving outcomes for neurodiverse children.
- *Funding:* Increased investment in resources, assistive technologies, and specialized staff is essential to cover special needs education and create more inclusive classrooms.
- *Accessibility and Accommodations:* Ensure that all schools and educational facilities are physically accessible to individuals with disabilities. Additionally, provide necessary accommodations, such as accessible materials and assistive technology, to cater to specific needs. These accessibility provisions also need to expand above and beyond schools, in other aspects of the local society such as governmental services, common spaces, sport venues etc.
- *Teacher Collaboration:* Encouraging collaboration between general and special education teachers can offer more individualized instruction and support for students with diverse needs.
- *Parent Involvement:* Strengthening collaboration between families and educators, promoting active involvement and communication, can create a more supportive learning environment for neurodiverse students.
- *Individualized Education Plans (IEPs):* Develop and implement effective IEPs for neurodiverse students. These personalized plans can help tailor education to each student's unique needs, ensuring that they receive the support required for their academic and personal growth.
- *Post-secondary Support:* In Cyprus, there seems to be more support at the initial years of school, gradually decreasing for later life stages of neurodiverse populations, such as secondary / tertiary education and vocational training. Therefore, enhancing opportunities for neurodivergent individuals in higher education, vocational training, and employment is needed, as this support should continue throughout the development of neurodivergent individuals, not only during primary education.

Conclusion

Cyprus has developed a robust legal and strategic framework to support neurodiverse individuals, but significant challenges remain in implementation and resource allocation. Ongoing efforts are needed to address existing challenges and ensure equal opportunities in education, training, and employment. Continued collaboration between government bodies, educators, and civil society is essential to achieve a more inclusive and supportive society for neurodiverse individuals.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, WORK LEADERS, EXPERTS, LIFELONG LEARNING STATE OFFICIALS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Awareness and Implementation Gaps: Although there are some legislative frameworks promoting the employment of people with disabilities in general, participants pointed out the absence of specific legislation explicitly targeting neurodiverse individuals (such as those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia). Neurodiverse people often fall within broader disability categories, potentially causing their specific needs to remain inadequately addressed by existing laws and strategies.

Good Practices Identified as Potential Models:

- Cyprus could benefit from adopting similar explicit measures tailored specifically for neurodivergent conditions.
- **Tax Incentives:** Financial incentives to employers who hire neurodiverse individuals have proven effective in encouraging inclusive hiring practices in other EU countries.
- **Workplace Accommodations:** Structured regulations ensuring workplace adjustments are considered necessary, including modifications to the physical workspace and work schedules tailored to individual needs.
- **Training and Employer Education:** Emphasis on regular training for employers and staff to foster understanding and supportive workplace environments.

Areas for Improvement Specifically Identified:

- **Explicit Legislative Recognition:** There is a need for Cyprus to establish clear, specific legislative frameworks explicitly addressing the employment of neurodiverse individuals, separate from broader disability laws, to better meet their unique needs.
- **Workplace Support and Accommodations:** Participants highlighted a substantial gap in explicit guidelines and incentives for workplace adaptations necessary to accommodate neurodiverse employees adequately.
- **Financial Incentives:** There's a need for clearer, well-publicized financial incentives for employers to hire neurodiverse individuals.
- **Cross-sectoral Collaboration:** Participants emphasized the necessity for greater collaboration between educational institutions, employers, vocational training centers, and non-governmental organizations to improve support systems and pathways into employment.

Recommended Areas for Improvement:

- Introduce explicit references to neurodiversity within disability employment laws.
- Enhance financial incentives to promote hiring and retaining neurodiverse employees.
- Foster structured cooperation between employers, educational institutions, and specialized support organizations to facilitate better employment outcomes.

In conclusion, participants indicated a clear need for dedicated legislative initiatives in Cyprus tailored explicitly to the employment and inclusion of neurodiverse individuals, complemented by robust financial incentives, widespread employer training, and structured support systems informed by existing EU best practices.

GREECE

Inclusive Employment Law 5053 of 2023

The Inclusive Employment Law 5053 of 2023 in Greece was introduced by the Greek Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs as part of a broader strategy to enhance employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals. Regarding the key details about the law, its practices, and its impact, it's worth to say that the law was established by the Greek government under the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to promote inclusivity in the workplace, particularly for individuals with disabilities, including neurodivergent conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. The law was enacted in 2023 as part of Greece's commitment to improving employment rates for neurodivergent individuals and fulfilling its obligations under various European Union directives regarding equal opportunities.

Practices Implemented by the Law

⇒ Tax Incentives for Employers:

Companies that hire neurodivergent individuals are eligible for tax reductions and financial incentives. These incentives encourage businesses to adopt inclusive hiring practices and create supportive environments for neurodivergent employees.

⇒ Workplace Adjustments:

The law mandates that both private and public employers must provide necessary workplace adjustments.

This includes:

- **Flexible Working Hours:** Allowing employees to work at times that suit their individual needs.
- **Quiet Workspaces:** Creating environments that minimize distractions for neurodivergent individuals.
- **Sensory-Friendly Accommodations:** Providing tools and resources that help neurodivergent individuals perform their tasks effectively.

⇒ Training and Awareness Programs:

Employers are encouraged to participate in training programs that enhance understanding of neurodiversity among staff, thereby providing a more inclusive workplace culture. This includes training on communication styles and strategies that support neurodivergent employees.

⇒ Collaboration with NGOs:

The law promotes partnerships between employers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that specialize in neurodiversity. This collaboration helps businesses implement best practices and access resources for training and support.

Impact on Neurodivergent Individuals

- **Increased Job Opportunities:** By providing financial incentives and promoting inclusive practices, the law aims to increase the hiring rates of neurodivergent individuals, offering them more job opportunities.
- **Supportive Work Environments:** The requirement for workplace adjustments means that neurodivergent employees can work in environments tailored to their needs, which can significantly enhance their job satisfaction and productivity.
- **Empowerment and Advocacy:** By mandating awareness training, the law empowers neurodivergent individuals by promoting a more accepting and supportive work culture. This not only aids in their professional development but also encourages advocacy for further rights and inclusivity.

Link for more information: [Law 5053/2023](#)

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

The discussion began with a participant mentioning that the legislation generally protects people with disabilities to some extent, but only with disabilities that are recognized. In universities, for example, there are different examination methods for such individuals. However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the extent of the legislation non-visible, usually mental disabilities. She emphasized the need for individual needs to be recognized—for instance, someone who functions well in an office setting but requires ten hours of decompression at home due to burnout.

The next participant spoke about the lack of clarity on the criteria used to determine whether a child is placed in a general school, a special school or receives parallel support from KEDASY (the Greek Center for Educational and Counselling Support). She pointed out that it is ultimately up to the parent to push for recognition and decide whether to hire parallel support. A question was then raised about whether a child with moderate autism should attend a special or general

school. The participant responded that, whatever is better for the child. She recounted an instance where a student on the autism spectrum was having severe meltdowns in a class of general school. The assigned support assistant created a designated space outside the classroom with playdough and other activities to help the student regulate emotions. However, she questioned whether this setup truly reflected an inclusive education system.

Another participant took the floor, stating that the current educational system works against the student—it is structured around linguistic and academic difficulty, failing even neurotypical students. She shared insights from a study visit to Denmark, where youth schools provide non-formal education with adapted curricula, including 3D printing and environmental education. These schools serve as transitional spaces, allowing students with ADHD, autism, and social difficulties to develop skills before returning to general education. Unlike the general system, where students sit through seven hours of lessons daily, youth schools operate more effectively in just two hours. However, their major downside is their high cost.

Another participant, who had studied in Cyprus, noted differences between the two education systems. In Cyprus, students are only placed in special schools for severe disabilities. However, upon moving to Greece, she observed different societal reactions—for example, she felt that her Greek peers displayed discomfort when encountering someone in a wheelchair, because they are used to not encountering such individuals in general schools. She stressed that whether a school is inclusive or not often depends on the principal's attitude—some schools embrace inclusivity, while others tend to "hide" children with disabilities.

A participant on the autism spectrum then shared his personal experience. Some professors were supportive, offering accommodations such as allowing both written and oral exams, while others refused to help, insisting he take oral exams without further assistance. He emphasized that the best approach for neurodivergent students is adequate support, parallel assistance, and a collaborative effort between general and special education teachers to ensure true inclusivity.

Lastly, a participant highlighted the major issue of oral examinations in universities, where there is no standardized protocol—each professor decides subjectively how to assess students. Another participant added that what is intended as an accommodation can sometimes have the opposite effect, making things worse. She cited an example of a dyslexic student whose difficulties were evident in written work, yet the professor failed to recognize them, and the student herself did not communicate her needs—highlighting a broader issue of lack of communication.

Various personal experiences followed, all pointing to a common theme: the absence of awareness and standardized procedures, leaving each educator to act based on personal judgment. The consensus was that the primary responsibility lies with the state, followed by schools. One of the most notable examples was that of a participant's sister, who has quadriplegia but was still required to sign documents herself to receive government financial support.

The discussion concluded with a unanimous agreement that what is needed is patience, persistence, recognition, respect, understanding, and a well-structured toolkit for educators to better support neurodivergent students.

IRELAND

Ireland has several laws and policies that promote equal inclusion for people with disabilities including those with neurodiverse conditions.

Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 Requires schools to create policies that don't discriminate in admissions

Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 Prohibits discrimination based on disability in employment, training, and recruitment

EPSEN Act Aims to educate children with special educational needs in inclusive environments

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Promotes the equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms by people with disabilities

Employers' obligations Employers are required to make reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. This can include: • Providing access to employment • Enabling people to participate in employment and training • Providing quiet spaces • Providing access to software for dyslexic employees • Providing written lists of important information • Allowing for flexible start and finish times

Other considerations The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister on the education of all learners.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

As stated above: Irish disability policies do create structural barriers that discourage people with disabilities to take up employment. If policy makers do not fundamentally understand or intentionally ignore the limited physical or/and mental capacities that people with disabilities have, then the policies will not only become ineffective, actually become the disabling barrier.

ITALY

Italy has implemented several legislative measures and policies to promote the inclusion of neurodiverse individuals in education, training, and employment:

- **Law 104/1992.** This law establishes the framework for assistance, social integration, and the rights of persons with disabilities, ensuring support in education and employment.
- **Law 68/1999.** This legislation mandates the employment of individuals with disabilities, requiring public and private employers with more than 15 employees to hire a specified percentage of disabled workers. The quota increases with company size, promoting workforce inclusion.
- **Legislative Decree 151/2015.** This decree strengthens targeted employment measures, focusing on assessing the work skills of persons with disabilities to place them in suitable positions through support services.
- **Recent Amendments (2023).** Italy has introduced significant changes to its disability laws, including the establishment of a National Guarantor Authority for the rights of persons with disabilities, effective from January 1, 2025. This authority will monitor and promote the effective enjoyment of rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities.

Good practices and areas for improvement

Italy has a longstanding commitment to **inclusive education**, integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. This approach fosters social integration and equal learning opportunities. Many Italian **companies** have adopted diversity and inclusion charters, promoting workplace policies that reduce inequality and support neurodiverse employees. These initiatives often involve tailored training programs and the creation of supportive work environments. Despite existing policies, there is a need for **increased awareness and training** among educators and employers to effectively support neurodiverse individuals. Teacher education programs vary widely in addressing neurodiversity, indicating a gap in consistent training. Although laws mandate the employment of individuals with disabilities, practical barriers persist. There is a need for more targeted support to help neurodiverse individuals find and retain suitable employment, as well as for employers to recognize and accommodate their unique strengths. In summary, Italy has established a robust legislative framework to support the inclusion of neurodiverse individuals in education and employment. However, ongoing efforts are necessary to enhance awareness, ensure consistent policy implementation, and create more employment opportunities tailored to the strengths of neurodiverse individuals.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (EXPERTS, EDUCATORS, THERAPISTS, COORDINATORS, MANAGERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

- Italy has strong anti-discrimination laws, such as Law 68/99, promoting workplace inclusion of disabled individuals, including neurodiverse persons.
- Some public and private organizations implement inclusive hiring strategies and accommodations.
- Need for stronger enforcement and monitoring of policies.
- Greater incentives for businesses to employ neurodiverse individuals.
- More structured pathways for inclusive vocational training.
- Streamlining bureaucratic processes to access accommodations and support.

POLAND

- Poland has adopted the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities, which is a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities, including neurodivergent individuals. However, this strategy is limited to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which can be recognized as a disability under Polish law, but only in specific cases. The strategy focuses on areas such as independent living, accessibility, educational accommodations, work, social protection, and awareness building.
- In Poland, there are no existing policies tailored directly towards neurodivergent individuals. Neurodivergency is considered a mental disorder, diagnosed based on ICD-10 classifications as Neurodevelopmental Disorders, and is protected under Polish law according to the Mental Health Law. This means that neurodivergent individuals in Poland are not required to inform employers or government officials of their diagnosis and cannot be compelled to do so in any way.
- Additionally, organizations like Fundacja JiM and Fundacja Atypika play a significant role in advocating for the rights and inclusion of neurodivergent individuals, providing support services, and raising awareness about neurodiversity in Poland. Their efforts contribute to the broader goals of the National Strategy by promoting inclusive practices and supporting the neurodivergent community.

SLOVENIA

Employment opportunities for neurodiverse individuals in Slovenia are influenced by policies designed to promote inclusion. The Social Inclusion of Disabled Persons Act, which came into force on January 1, 2019, replaced previous legislation to better address the needs of individuals with disabilities, including those with neurodevelopmental disorders. This Act aims to provide social assistance services that encourage independent living and integration into the community (<https://www.gov.si/en/policies/social-security/protection-of-persons-with-special-needs/>)

Neurodiverse individuals in Slovenia have equal employment rights as other citizens. Fundamental employment rights are guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, neurodiverse individuals are not explicitly addressed within legislation pertaining to the employment of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups (Brecelj, Demšar, Zovko, and Bratuš, 2020).

Slovenian legislation recognizes several disability statuses, which are granted through various processes and institutions. Key laws governing the employment of neurodiverse individuals include:

- The Employment Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons Act (ZZRZI), which facilitates employment through supported employment, sheltered employment, integration into the open labour market, and participation in social inclusion programs if deemed unemployable by official decision.
- The Pension and Disability Insurance Act (ZPIZ-2).
- The Personal Assistance Act (ZOA).
- The Social Inclusion of Disabled Persons Act (ZSVI).

These laws ensure rights and provide support for individuals with long-term impairments or the consequences of physical or mental health conditions, which significantly limit their employment opportunities.

To address employment challenges for neurodiverse individuals, the Social Inclusion of Disabled Persons Act plays a crucial role. This law supports the employment of individuals with severe maladaptive behaviours that hinder independent living and income generation. Under the Pension and Disability Insurance Act, neurodiverse individuals are entitled to specific rights based on disability status and other statutory conditions.

Neurodiverse individuals with associated intellectual disabilities can also access training through social care services, such as employment under special conditions. Those with the most severe impairments may work in small groups with an occupational instructor. Social care services are regulated by the Social Assistance Act. According to the National Social Protection Program Resolution (2022–2030), 3,617 individuals, including neurodiverse persons, utilized these services in 2020.

The social care service "Guidance, Protection, and Employment under Special Conditions" is a structured form of care that ensures fundamental human rights for adults with disabilities. It enables these individuals to actively participate in societal and work environments and engage in meaningful, ability-appropriate work. The service is designed to help users retain and expand their knowledge, develop new skills and social habits, fulfil creative potential, and gain a sense of purpose and self-worth. It also offers other forms of care that support the work and social engagement of users and their families.

Eligible recipients include adults with intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities. The National Social Protection Program Resolution (2022–2030) outlines upgrades and goals, such as:

- Enhancing existing services to develop and strengthen individual abilities, creativity, skills, and knowledge.
- Providing specialized services for specific target groups, including neurodiverse individuals, older adults, and those with acquired brain injuries or mental health challenges.
- Expanding supportive services, such as remote assistance and mobile help, to promote independence and community integration.
- Establishing sufficient decentralized facilities and increasing regional availability for specialized services.

The goal by 2030 is to secure approximately 4,500 places for services under "Guidance, Protection, and Employment under Special Conditions." The Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Social Protection monitors progress and reports on achieving these goals.

In Slovenia, obtaining disability status offers neurodiverse individuals certain opportunities and rights. Employment for neurodiverse individuals with disability status is systematically addressed under the Employment Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons Act. This Act ensures comprehensive treatment and assistance for those struggling to find employment due to disabilities. Services include on-the-job training, learning specific skills, and undergoing

work ability assessments, resulting in decisions on supported employment, sheltered employment, or unemployability. Vocational rehabilitation is provided as a public service, funded by the Ministry of Labour, Family, and Social Affairs.

Persons with disabilities represent a significant portion of the population, with approximately 170,000 individuals with disabilities and 230,000 with chronic illnesses in Slovenia (SURS, 2020). In 2018, the Employment Service of Slovenia recorded 14,038 unemployed individuals with disability status across various regional offices. Programs to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities include public works, subsidized employment in personal assistance and home help, and initiatives supporting long-term unemployed individuals and social entrepreneurship.

These efforts highlight Slovenia's commitment to fostering employment opportunities and inclusivity for neurodiverse individuals. However, further steps are needed to fully address their unique challenges and unlock their potential in the workplace.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Current Legislation and its Implementation

- There is a general consensus that **existing legislation is good but needs improvement**. However, the legislation **does not always function effectively in practice**.
- One issue is the **interpretation of the legislation**, which can vary, leading to inconsistencies in who is considered eligible for support and what support they receive.

Challenges in Diagnosis and Assessment

- There are **difficulties in accessing diagnostic services for adults with autism**, with a lack of clarity about who can provide these services. Even when individuals are willing to pay, it can be hard to find someone to conduct the assessment. This lack of diagnosis prevents people from accessing their rights.
- The **assessment process for getting the status by social inclusion Act** of people with autism, particularly by the commission at URI Soča, is seen as **inadequate** due to a lack of knowledge and experience in autism.
- Centres for social work report that they would often grant status to individuals, but the commission does not.

- The criteria for obtaining status have become stricter over time. A diagnosis of autism alone is not enough.
- There is a practice of requesting additional opinions from employment rehabilitation providers, which can cause delays due to long waiting lists.

Education

- While students with special needs may receive a status, **the practical implementation of support is lacking.**
- There are **unclear structures and coordination** between different entities within the education system.
- Students are often left to navigate the system on their own, even at the secondary and university levels.
- There is a **lack of support** for students with autism at the university level.

Employment

- There is a need to open up employment opportunities for neurodiverse people with **various potentials.**
- **Companies need preparation** to create an inclusive environment.
- Currently, individuals risk developing negative experiences at work because the **environment is not prepared for their needs.**

Social Inclusion

- There are issues with the social inclusion of individuals with autism.
- Some centres that are the entry point for individuals with autism lack the necessary expertise.

Other Key Points

- **Lack of awareness:** The rights of people with autism are not well-known, and even medical professionals may not be sufficiently informed.
- **Funding:** There are issues with how funds are distributed to neurodiverse people, with a lack of consistency and clarity.
- There are inconsistent practices in how benefits and support are provided. Some funds are later reclaimed, even after a person has been told they were entitled to them.
- **Accessibility:** There is a need for legal documents to be made more accessible, using 'easy to read' language.

- **Length of rehabilitation programs:** The duration of rehabilitation programs is too long and there should be a way to enable individuals to enter employment sooner.
- There is a **lack of trust and understanding** between employers and neurodiverse individuals. Employers fear that a neurodiverse employee will make mistakes.
- **Lack of knowledge** and **fear** among employers are a barrier to hiring neurodiverse people.
- There needs to be greater awareness about the reality of employing people with disabilities rather than preconceived notions about their abilities.
- Employers are often unwilling to even try employing someone with disabilities.
- **Collaboration:** The importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and communication is emphasized.

In conclusion, while legislation exists, there are significant challenges in its implementation, particularly in diagnosis, assessment, education, and employment. A lack of awareness, expertise, and proper structures are contributing to the issues, which also require improved access to information, better coordination between institutions, and a shift in societal attitudes towards neurodiversity.

SUPPORT SERVICES FOR NEURODIVERSE PERSONS AND EMPLOYERS IN THE FIELD OF EQUAL INCLUSION IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

CYPRUS

Support Services for Neurodiverse Individuals in Cyprus

Cyprus provides a variety of support services for neurodiverse individuals, focusing on education, early intervention and support for families, vocational training, and employment integration. These services are delivered through public institutions, NGOs, private initiatives, and international funding programs. Most support is provided by the government, primarily through the education system during schooling years.

Public Support Services: Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

Established in 2009, the [Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities](#) (as per Ministerial Decision 66.763 dated 6.2.2008) promotes social protection, inclusion, and employment for individuals with disabilities. It is a relatively new Department of the Ministry and Social Insurance, with its main responsibilities including:

- Conducting assessments and certifications of disability and functioning.
- Administering social benefits to persons with disabilities.
- Providing direct and indirect vocational rehabilitation services.
- Coordinating the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Disability Action Plan.

Early Intervention and Diagnostic Services

Early intervention is crucial for children with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Diagnosis of ASD in Cyprus is guided by the standard procedures, guidelines and measures provided by the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) and the Modified Checklist Assessment for Toddlers (M-CHAT). Diagnoses are officially given by child psychiatrists, and interdisciplinary teams are involved in the management of clinical symptomatology (e.g., speech, language, and communication profiles).

Public Services: The Ministry of Health oversees the identification and diagnosis of children with disabilities up to the age of three, after which the Ministry of Education's District Committees of Special Education take over. These committees, one per each province of Cyprus, assess children and, based on the expertise of a multidisciplinary committee, recommend placements in suitable educational settings (United Nations, 2015).

The Coordinating Early Childhood Intervention Service (SYEPP) that falls under the jurisdiction of the Committee for the Protection of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, supports children with intellectual disabilities or developmental disorders from birth to six years. It consists of a ten-member committee, five from the public sector and five from the Pancyprrian Association of Parents of Persons with Mental Disabilities. SYEPP links families to public and private resources but is limited by capacity, with only three childhood intervention officers available nationwide (covering Nicosia, Limassol/Paphos, and Larnaca/Ammochostos). Its services are free and fully funded by the government. Their goal is to ensure that parents are empowered in decision-making regarding their children's care (Committee for the Protection of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, 2017).

The Family Intervention and Support Centre for Autism (established in 2021, by the [Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities](#)) is a key public service initiative designed to help individuals on the autistic spectrum, by offering early intervention for preschool-aged children with ASD and enhancing the quality of life for children with autism and their caregivers. It is located in Nicosia, it has been co-funded by the EU and the Republic of Cyprus (under the Cohesion Policy Programme), and serves around 300 families annually with home-based training, social support services through social workers, and guidance from international organizations.

Nevertheless, public-sector therapy services are limited for children under three years old, leaving families reliant on costly private or NGO services, which are not evenly distributed geographically ([European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities, 2018](#)).

Private and NGO Contributions: Early childhood intervention services are also provided by the private sector (for example, private clinics, treatment and rehabilitation centres, or private physicians / therapists), as well as not-for-profit / voluntary organisations (usually co-funded by the state and/or by parents' associations). Organizations like the 'To Alma' Child Skills Development Centre, Theotokos Foundation (Limassol) and the 'Kivotos' Foundation (Paphos) offer early diagnosis, therapy, and parent counselling. The 'Kivotos' Foundation intervention programmes include an initial assessment for infant (also for child and adolescent)

developmental disorders, based on which individual treatment plans are proposed. Treatments include 45 minute training sessions in areas such as speech therapy, physiotherapy, and occupational therapy (Noesi, 2017).

An example of an NGO support provider is the family service-based program for ASD “AKTIDA”, currently providing home-based service to more than 300 pre-schoolers and their families. Similarly, the [Cyprus Association for People with Autism](#), founded in 1990 as a charitable non-profit organization, operates a Support and Counselling Programme that connects families with professional social workers across various regions in Cyprus. The program focuses on evaluating family needs, providing emotional support, and connecting families with relevant services and resources.

1. Educational Inclusion

Legal Framework

The **Law for the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs (113(I)/1999)** ensures the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education. For children who cannot participate in mainstream schools, special education services are provided.

Special Schools and Daycare Centers

Special schools provide tailored programs for neurodiverse students, supplemented by therapies like speech and occupational therapy. Daycare centers are also run by public and private organizations for children with severe disabilities who cannot attend school. Examples include:

- **Agios Georgios – Christakis Hassapis Daycare Centre** for children with severe disabilities.
- **The Limassol Adult Centre**, which offers afternoon programs for children with autism, including therapy and leisure activities.

NGO and Private Contributions

The Child Skills Development Centre ‘**To Alma**’ in Limassol provides early diagnosis of developmental disorders in infants, offers information and counselling to parents, runs a nursery and kindergarten for children a few months old to 8 years of age, and provides other services, including psychological, speech, and occupational therapy. The Centre receives financing from the Parents’ Association and donations (Noesi, 2017).

The Limassol Adult Centre, managed by the Cyprus Association for Persons with Disabilities also offers an afternoon programme for children with autism of pre-school and school age, who engage in various education, therapy, and leisure activities (the centre has an additional morning programme for teenagers over 16-years-of-age and adults with autism, who take part in individual and group activities, therapy, and outside-the-centre socialisation activities).

Programs like these address gaps in public-sector services.

Challenges

Public schools often lack sufficient staff and therapeutic resources, particularly in rural areas. On the contrary, public schools rely heavily on teacher collaboration and parent involvement to support neurodiverse students effectively. Such collaboration between teachers, parents, and specialized staff is critical, but it needs coordination and support by centralized state bodies.

2. Subsidies and Therapy Support

Public Sector Support

Through public hospitals, the government offers limited therapy services, including physiotherapy, speech therapy (with only four speech therapists for children and adults in the public sector) and occupational therapy (offered solely at the Departments of Mental Health Services for Children and Adolescents). However, the services provided in the public sector are often insufficient, with long waiting lists and uneven geographic availability. For instance, the Paphos Public Hospital offers speech therapy only for adults, not children (EASPD). Even in schools, occupational therapy is offered only at special schools, while speech therapy to all types of schools. Therefore, the public often has to overtake the burden and cost of private therapy sessions (Independent Authority for the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

Financial Assistance

Families meeting eligibility criteria under the [Guaranteed Minimum Income \(GMI\) scheme](#) can receive monthly contributions to partially cover therapy expenses, contingent upon certain eligibility criteria (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018a). For institutional care, subsidies range from €625 to €745 per month, while home care assistance is capped at €400 per month. Paraplegic and quadriplegic persons receive a care benefit irrespective of their financial situation. Financial assistance is awarded on a case by case

evaluation, based on the assessment of the Welfare Benefits Management Service (Independent Authority for the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

Adult Day Centers

Adult day centers in each district provide services such as food, laundry, entertainment, and workshops on cultural activities and soft skills. See Table 2 for a list of day care centres operating in Cyprus.

Table 2. Summary of Day Care centres in Cyprus (adapted from EASPD factsheet, based on data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Youth, 2019b).

Province	Name of Center	Organisation in Charge	Target Group
Nicosia	Nicosia Adult Centre	Cyprus Association for Persons with Autism	Persons with autism
	Strovolos, Fabieros, Eleousa tou Kykkou	Associations for the Welfare of Persons with Mental Disability	Persons with mental disabilities
	Peristeronas Adult Centre	Community Council Partnership of Western Nicosia	Persons with disabilities
	Adult Centers	Skapaneas and Iliaktida Unions	Persons with disabilities
Limassol	Limassol Adult Centre	Cyprus Association for Persons with Autism	Persons with autism
	Adult Centre	Agios Stefanos Foundation	Persons with intellectual disabilities
	Adult Centre	Theotokos Foundation	Persons with mental and physical disabilities
	Mario's House, & Panagia Pandanassa Adult Centres	Limassol Family and Friends Association for Persons with Disabilities	Persons with disabilities

A full list of private initiatives such as voluntary organizations and parental associations can be found in the Appendix.

3. Vocational Training and Rehabilitation

Vocational training is a vital component of inclusion for neurodiverse individuals in Cyprus, offered through public special schools, NGOs, and private initiatives.

Government Programs

The Department for Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities (DSID) offers several vocational rehabilitation schemes. Individuals with any disability who experience difficulty in finding employment are eligible for these schemes, independent of their level of education, but priority is given to unemployed individuals with severe disabilities.

Such schemes include:

- a) **Vocational Training Scheme:** Provides up to €1,708 for training at appropriate training institution and public or private companies. Training courses are monitored by the DSID. From 2012-2016, there were 36 beneficiaries nationally, with a total amount of funding of EUR 53,623 (ANED, 2017). In 2028 there was only one approved application (€1,500).
- b) **Self-Employment Scheme:** Supports the creation and operation of small self-employment units. Individuals aged 18-63, with physical, sensory, mental or other disabilities are eligible to apply. In 2018, five beneficiaries were supported with a cost of €20,227.
- c) **Supported Employment Scheme:** Allocates €13,500 annually to NGOs for programs that assist individuals with disabilities (physical, mental, intellectual or sensory disability) in securing and maintaining employment. These programmes aim at helping groups of at least five persons with disabilities to get and maintain a job in the labour market. In 2018, 23 such programs supported 300 individuals, at an annual cost of €328,375 (Department for Social Inclusion for People with Disabilities, 2019b; Ministry of Labour, Welfare, and Social Insurance, 2018).

Vocational Training at Special Schools

Vocational training is provided by public special schools, offered either as part of the school curriculum (e.g., in special schools), through afternoon sessions outside regular school hours (e.g., at the School for the Blind), or via national employment and rehabilitation programmes, often run by non-governmental organizations.

NGO and Private Training

Various foundations for persons with disabilities, which are established by parents' associations and co-funded by the State and donations, play an important role in vocational training, supplementing public schools. Foundations like the **Christos Stelios Ioannou Foundation** offer practical workshops in jewellery-making and soap production, equipping individuals with practical employment skills that could help them enter the labour market. Similarly, citizen initiatives such as [Voice for Autism](#) aim to empower individuals with autism through social entrepreneurship, significantly promoting inclusivity by providing opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to engage in meaningful work.

Challenges

However, funding for vocational training in non-governmental organizations or foundations is capped at 70% of program costs (€5,000 per program, or €10,000 for EU-co-funded programs), limiting their reach (Department for Social Inclusion for People with Disabilities, 2019b). Vocational training programs are underutilized, with relatively few beneficiaries annually. Additional funding and outreach are needed to expand participation.

4. Employment Support and Sheltered Workshops

Employment Incentive Scheme

Since 2016, the **Employment Incentive Scheme**, co-funded by the European Social Fund, has covered 75% of the gross salaries of neurodiverse individuals employed in the private sector for up to 24 months (capped at €20,000 per organization), in order to encourage private sector participation in inclusive employment and promote the hiring of people with disabilities (Pancyprian Alliance for Disability, 2017). This scheme is overseen by the Department of Labour, a department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance and is part of the National Strategy of Social Policy 2014-2020.

Sheltered Workshops

Sheltered workshops run by NGOs, charities, and private organizations provide skills training and symbolic payments for individuals not ready for the open labor market. These workshops are normally funded by the state, at least partially, provide training opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to develop skills and engage in productive activities. They target individuals who are not yet ready to join the open labor market, as well as those seeking employment. For example, the workshops at the Christos Stelios Ioannou Foundation function

as sheltered environments for people with intellectual disabilities, who receive a small symbolic payment for their work. However, there are no formal guidelines for dismissal protection, trade unions, or health and safety standards, highlighting the need for regulatory improvements (ANED, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Cyprus has made commendable progress in supporting neurodiverse individuals, particularly through the implementation of inclusive education policies, the establishment of a number special education units aiming to cover all prefectures, and the contributions of NGOs. Inclusive education policies have ensured that public schools are better equipped to accommodate neurodiverse students, while nine specialized education units across Cyprus provide tailored support for those with complex needs. Additionally, NGO initiatives have played a critical role in delivering family and therapy support services.

Overall, there is a general trend – albeit slow, according to disability organisations – towards de-institutionalisation in Cyprus, which is indicated by efforts on the part of the Department of Social Welfare Service to close down institutions and increase the number of community living residences for assisted and/or independent living (ANED, 2019b). Also, legislation is under way for the creation of social enterprises that will provide income generation opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Despite these advancements, significant gaps persist in the current system. One of the most pressing issues is the need for capacity building, including increasing the number of early intervention officers and expanding geographic coverage to underserved areas. Funding also remains a critical challenge, as enhanced financial support is essential for therapy, vocational training, and employment schemes. Furthermore, the lack of formal regulations for sheltered workshops, particularly regarding worker protections and health standards, underscores the necessity of improving employment conditions for neurodiverse individuals.

Access to services in rural areas is another area that requires urgent attention, as geographic disparities continue to limit equal opportunities. Families navigating private therapy costs face considerable financial burdens, highlighting the need for greater counseling and financial support to alleviate these challenges.

In conclusion, while Cyprus has demonstrated a commitment to fostering inclusivity for neurodiverse individuals, it must address the existing shortcomings to create a more equitable system. Strengthened policies, sustained investments, and a focus on capacity building are imperative to ensure that all neurodiverse individuals have access to basic education, training, and employment opportunities.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, WORK LEADERS, EXPERTS, LIFELONG LEARNING STATE OFFICIALS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Current Situation and Available Support Services:

- There is an identified lack of centrally coordinated support services specifically designed for neurodiverse individuals in Cyprus, especially when it comes to education, training, and employment. Existing support is fragmented, delivered through various separate initiatives rather than a coherent national strategy.
- Some supportive structures exist through protected employment programs and vocational rehabilitation services provided by foundations, institutions and NGOs such as the Christos Stelios Ioannou Foundation and Apostolos Loukas, which collaborate with several prominent businesses (supermarkets, municipalities, fast food chains). These institutions provide protected workshops and help place neurodiverse persons into employment in external work placements.
- The **Human Resource Development Authority (ANAD)** offers various vocational training schemes including multi-business and customized training programs. These programs can be tailored specifically for businesses or provided in seminar format to multiple organizations simultaneously. The collaboration among the advisory committee of WIN, other stakeholders and OUC ignited by this project could provide the seed for a series of seminars aimed at equipping employers and staff to better support neurodiverse individuals in the workplace. OUC includes a subsidiary VET organization (KEDMA) certified by ANAD, so such an initiative could be realized by OUC with support from ANAD.
- The Cypriot Ministry of Labor provides subsidies intended to incentivize employers who hire neurodiverse individuals. However, these subsidies might be inadequate, failing to cover sufficiently the actual costs incurred by employers for workplace adaptations, training, and employment integration.

Good Practices Highlighted:

- **Protected Workshops and Employment Integration Programs:** NGOs such as the Christos Stelios Ioannou Foundation, Apostolos Loukas, and Margarita Liasidou Foundation stand out as good practice examples, integrating neurodiverse individuals into the regular labor market with support from stable, sensitized employers.
- **Public-private Partnerships:** Active collaboration between vocational rehabilitation services, private businesses (e.g., supermarkets, municipalities), and public institutions is considered a strength, facilitating successful integration and sustainable employment opportunities for neurodiverse individuals.
- **ANAD Training Initiatives:** Customized employer training sessions can be potentially provided by relevant trainers or approved centres such as KEDMA (OUC) and supported by ANAD. This would represent a potentially effective practice that is currently underutilized, improving employer understanding of neurodiversity and enhancing workplace inclusion efforts.

Areas for Improvement:

- **Coordination and Systematization:** There is a critical need for better coordination of services and clearer communication pathways between service providers, employers, and neurodiverse individuals and their families. A centralized information and matching system, such as the skills matching website/app to be developed as part of WIN, was strongly recommended by stakeholders.
- **Financial Support:** Current financial subsidies for organizations from the Ministry of Labor were criticized as insufficient. There's a need for a more substantial and clearly structured financial support system to encourage employers to make necessary adaptations and commit to hiring neurodiverse individuals long-term.
- **Specialized Training:** Stakeholders identified a significant gap in specialized training for professionals directly involved with employment and vocational rehabilitation. They highlighted the importance of regular, focused training to enhance professional competencies in effectively supporting neurodiverse employees.
- **Accessibility and Practical Support:** Issues such as transportation and the practicality of integrating new neurodiverse employees into workplaces were emphasized. Stakeholders recommended improvements to logistical support mechanisms and dedicated resources to ease initial workplace integration.

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Broadening employer awareness and education was highlighted as a priority. Increasing understanding among employers about the benefits of hiring neurodiverse individuals and how to access existing support schemes is essential.

Overall, stakeholders emphasized the need for stronger governmental leadership and clearer policy frameworks to streamline support services, enhance their impact, and improve outcomes for neurodiverse individuals and their employers in Cyprus.

GREECE

Autism Speaks Greece

Autism Speaks Greece is a prominent organization dedicated to supporting individuals with autism and their families in Greece. Autism Speaks Greece was established in 2012 as part of Autism Speaks, an international organization aimed at promoting understanding and acceptance of autism, advocating for individuals on the autism spectrum, and supporting research and services. The Greek branch works specifically to address the needs of individuals and families affected by autism in Greece. The organization is based in Athens, Greece, where it coordinates various programs and services for the local community.

Practices and Methodologies

- **Awareness and Education:**
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Autism Speaks Greece engages in campaigns to raise awareness about autism, helping to educate the public and reduce stigma. These campaigns often include community events, informational seminars, and online resources aimed at increasing understanding of autism spectrum disorders.
- **Training Programs:** The organization provides training for educators, healthcare professionals, and families on best practices for supporting individuals with autism. This includes understanding communication styles, behavioural strategies, and effective intervention methods.
- **Support Services:**
- **Family Support Programs:** Autism Speaks Greece offers a variety of resources for families, including counselling services, peer support groups, and informational resources to help navigate the challenges associated with autism

- **Advocacy:** The organization actively advocates for policies that support individuals with autism, working to influence government policies and practices related to autism care, education, and employment.
- **Research and Collaboration:**
- **Research Initiatives:** Autism Speaks Greece collaborates with researchers and academic institutions to promote research on autism and its related challenges. This includes participation in international studies and dissemination of research findings.
- **Partnerships:** The organization works with various stakeholders, including educational institutions, healthcare providers, and other non-profits, to create a supportive ecosystem for individuals with autism.
- **Community Engagement:**
- **Events and Activities:** Regularly organized community events, such as workshops, awareness days, and fundraising activities, aim to bring together individuals with autism, their families, and the broader community to promote understanding and inclusion

Practical Impact

- **Improving Quality of Life:** Through its various programs and resources, Autism Speaks Greece aims to improve the quality of life for individuals with autism and their families by providing the necessary support, information, and community connections.
- **Building Inclusive Communities:** The organization actively works to create more inclusive communities by advocating for changes in public policy, promoting educational inclusivity, and raising awareness among the general public.

Link for more information: [Autism Speaks Greece](#)

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Regarding the topic of Good Practices of Employers, it was mentioned that mentoring and coaching for employers and companies would be beneficial, even through projects such as WIN.

In Greece, the employment landscape for neurodiverse individuals, including those with autism, has seen legislative advancements embracing a human rights-based approach to disability over the past 35 years. However, full participation and equality in employment remain significant challenges, with participation rates notably lower than the European Union average. The Public Employment Service (DYPA, formerly OAED) offers specialized services aimed at supporting unemployed individuals from special and vulnerable social groups, which encompass

neurodiverse persons. DYPA implements subsidy programs to promote the employment of people with disabilities, including those with autism. These programs provide financial incentives to employers for hiring individuals from vulnerable social groups. For example, the subsidy program for businesses employing unemployed persons with disabilities covers part of the salary costs for a specific period.

KEDASY (Centres for Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counselling, and Support) in Greece, also supports students with disabilities, including autism and neurodiversity, by providing assessments, educational accommodations, and counselling. While it does not directly offer employment programs, its evaluations help individuals access support for inclusive education and later transition to the workforce. KEDASY also collaborates with schools, families, and institutions like DYPA to promote workplace inclusion and accessibility.

Once again however, for both of the above, the boundaries of how somebody is recognized as “special group”, especially when somebody is neurodivergent and does not have visible disabilities, remain quite unclear in the Greek system.

IRELAND

The National Council for Special Education has published a 146 page PDF document (3rd January 2024): <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inclusive-Education-for-an-Inclusive-Society.pdf>

Evershields Sutherland published information regarding neurodiversity in the workplace on 12 March 2024: <https://www.eversheds-sutherland.com/en/ireland/insights/ireland-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace> This provides tips and other links for employers and family members of those with a neurodiverse condition.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

As already mentioned, there are many support services available, mostly by charities and community groups. Others, such as the Special Interest Group Neurodiversity, are professionals led and unless a psychology graduate, there is little scope for membership.

ITALY

In Italy, support services for neurodiverse individuals in education, training, and employment are provided by both public and private organizations, aiming to promote equal inclusion.

Public support services

Public schools offer inclusive education, providing specialized support teachers and individualized education plans to accommodate neurodiverse students. These services are funded by the government and are integral to Italy's commitment to inclusive education. Under Law 68/1999, **public employment centers** assess the work skills of individuals with disabilities to facilitate appropriate job placements through targeted employment measures. These services are publicly funded and aim to integrate neurodiverse individuals into the workforce.

Private support services

Operating since 2017, **Specialisterne** focuses on assessing and building the skills of neurodiverse individuals, particularly those on the autism spectrum, to facilitate their employment in sectors such as IT and data analysis. This organization collaborates with businesses to create inclusive work environments. Launched in Italy in 2024, the **DXC Dandelion Program** aims to empower neurodivergent individuals by providing employment opportunities in the IT sector. Participants receive technical and vocational training, along with professional support from specialized consultants. The program has successfully created IT employment pathways and careers for more than 350 neurodivergent people across seven countries. Programs like the DXC Dandelion Program and Specialisterne Italy exemplify effective models for integrating neurodiverse individuals into the workforce by providing tailored training and support, leading to successful employment outcomes.

Areas for improvement

There is a need for increased awareness and training among employers and educators to effectively support neurodiverse individuals. Enhanced understanding can lead to better accommodation and inclusion in both educational settings and the workplace. While services exist, their availability and quality can vary by region. Ensuring consistent access to support services across the country is essential for equitable inclusion. Sustained funding and resource allocation are crucial to maintain and expand support services. Advocacy for increased investment in these areas can help address current gaps and meet the growing needs of the neurodiverse population.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (EXPERTS, EDUCATORS, THERAPISTS, COORDINATORS, MANAGERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

- Public services: INPS benefits, job placement support through employment centers.
- Private services: NGOs and organizations offering mentoring, coaching, and employment programs.
- Financial Support: Some funding available, but often inadequate and not easily accessible.
- Need for more specialized support staff in employment centers.

- Expansion of funding for continuous employment support.
- Development of national guidelines for employer support services.
- Collaboration between NGOs and companies in job coaching programs.
- Some universities providing dedicated neurodiversity support centers.

POLAND

In Poland NGOs play a crucial role in providing support services for neurodiverse individuals and promoting equal inclusion in education, training, and employment. These organizations work to create awareness, offer specialized training, diagnosis or therapy and provide resources to both neurodiverse individuals and employer:

1. Fundacja JiM

Fundacja JiM is dedicated to creating a better world for autistic and neurodivergent individuals. The foundation's mission is to improve the quality of life for these individuals by providing access to diagnosis, therapy, education, and advocacy. Fundacja JiM aims to raise awareness and promote acceptance of neurodiversity in society, also by collaborating and advocating within public and governmental sector.

Diagnosis and Therapy: Autism and ADHD Centers: Fundacja JiM operates modern centers for the diagnosis and therapy of autism and ADHD. These centers provide comprehensive services, including psychological assessments, therapeutic interventions, and support for families.

Educational Facilities: The foundation runs preschools and schools tailored to the needs of neurodivergent children. These institutions offer specialized educational programs and therapeutic support to help children thrive.

Awareness Campaigns: "Jestem neuroróżnorodn_" (*I am neurodivergent Campaign*): This nationwide campaign aims to highlight the professional potential of neurodivergent individuals, including those with ADHD, autism, and dyslexia. The campaign encourages employers to recognize and develop the unique talents of neurodivergent employees.

Parent Support: The foundation provides resources and training for parents of neurodivergent children, helping them to better support their children's development and navigate the educational system.

Support Groups: Fundacja JiM organizes support groups for neurodivergent individuals and their families. These groups provide a platform for sharing experiences, gaining support, and building a sense of community.

Resource Centers: The foundation operates resource centers that offer information, guidance, and support to neurodivergent individuals and their families. These centers serve as hubs for accessing services and connecting with other community members.

Professional Training: Fundacja JiM offers online training and webinars for professionals working with neurodivergent individuals. These programs cover topics such as diagnosis, therapy, and inclusive education practices.

Public Advocacy: Fundacja JiM actively engages in advocacy efforts to influence public policy and improve the rights and opportunities for neurodivergent individuals. This includes lobbying for legislative changes and raising public awareness through various media channels.

2. Fundacja Atypika

Fundacja Atypika is dedicated to promoting and supporting neurodiversity. The foundation's mission is to enhance the social position of neurodivergent individuals by increasing public awareness, educating professionals, and fostering inclusivity in schools and workplaces. Fundacja Atypika aims to create a society where neurodivergent individuals can thrive without stigma or discrimination, also collaborates with business in terms of promoting and co-creating neuroinclusive workplaces.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Fundacja Atypika runs campaigns to dispel myths and misinformation about neurodiversity. These campaigns aim to educate the public about the strengths and potential of neurodivergent individuals.

Educational Programs: The foundation collaborates with academic institutions, such as Uniwersytet SWPS, to offer postgraduate programs focused on neurodiversity in the workplace. These programs provide practical knowledge and tools for managing diverse teams and creating inclusive work environments.

Academic Research: Fundacja Atypika supports and conducts research on neurodiversity, contributing to the academic understanding of neurodivergent conditions and effective support strategies.

Innovative Projects: The foundation engages in projects that explore new ways to support neurodivergent individuals, such as sensory-friendly design and inclusive technology.

Professional Training: Fundacja Atypika offers training programs for employers, educators, and healthcare professionals. These programs cover topics such as inclusive recruitment, neurodiversity in the workplace, and effective communication with neurodivergent individuals.

eLearning Courses: The foundation provides interactive eLearning courses that raise awareness about neurodiversity and offer practical advice for creating inclusive environments. These courses are designed for a wide audience, including HR professionals, managers, and educators.

Information and Guidance: Fundacja Atypika operates resource centers that serve as hubs for information and guidance. These centers provide access to a wide range of resources, including educational materials, therapeutic tools, and information about local services and support networks.

Workshops and Seminars: The resource centers host workshops and seminars on various topics related to neurodiversity. These events are designed to educate both neurodivergent individuals and their families on topics such as self-advocacy, navigating the educational system, and accessing employment opportunities.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

The state of support for neurodivergent individuals in Poland presents a complex picture, with both positive initiatives and significant systemic challenges. Several discussion participants emphasized that while various support options exist at the basic level, the situation becomes significantly more complicated when implementing more advanced and interactive forms of assistance.

A key theme that emerged in at least three participants' statements was the clear gap between support levels in Poland and international standards. As one participant noted: "In Poland, there is a lack of discovery in the subject, I see this at conferences where speakers from abroad

represent a higher level". This observation leads to a broader conclusion about the necessity of drawing from foreign experiences when building local solutions.

Regarding available forms of support in Poland, discussion participants highlighted several noteworthy initiatives already operating in the market. Particular attention was paid to external experts providing specialized training. In this context, they cited the example of one of the experts, who specializes in training recruiters on how to effectively identify and manage the talents of neurodivergent individuals.

In higher education, Accessibility Centers [Centra Dostępności] at universities play an important role. These units, though sometimes operating under different names, systematically work to increase the accessibility of education for all students. Also noteworthy is the emergence of specialized organizations, such as Atypika Foundation [Fundacja Atypika], which offer professional support in the area of neurodiversity.

A significant step in educational development is the creation of dedicated academic programs. An example is the launch of postgraduate studies at SWPS University in Warsaw [Uniwersytet SWPS w Warszawie] titled "Neurodiversity in the Workplace – Inclusive Recruitment and Management" ["Neuroróżnorodność w miejscu pracy – inkluzywna rekrutacja i zarządzanie"]. This initiative demonstrates a growing understanding of the need for professional preparation of staff to work with neurodivergent individuals.

One significant problem is the insufficient number of qualified specialists and lack of a comprehensive support system at the national level. In this context, a participant raised a crucial question: "We face a key question in building a support system: should we tie it to the existing disability support system, or build it from scratch as a separate system?".

In conclusion, Poland's approach to neurodiversity support presents a mixed landscape of promising initiatives alongside substantial systemic gaps. While pockets of innovation exist through university programs, specialized training, and dedicated organizations, the country lacks a cohesive national framework for supporting neurodivergent individuals. The critical decision of whether to integrate neurodiversity support within existing disability structures or create an independent system remains unresolved. Nevertheless, emerging educational programs and growing professional awareness signal a positive shift toward more comprehensive support, though significant work remains to bridge the gap between current services and international standards.

SLOVENIA

Employment rehabilitation in Slovenia is regulated by the Employment Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities Act (ZZRZI). This law provides services for both employed and unemployed individuals and defines employment rehabilitation as a public service delivered through a network of providers.

The ZZRZI (Official Gazette of RS, No. 16/2007) defines employment rehabilitation as: The right of persons with disabilities to receive specific rehabilitation services as outlined in an individual rehabilitation plan (Article 13). These services aim to prepare individuals for suitable work, enable them to secure and retain employment, advance in their jobs, or change their career paths (Article 4).

Funding: Services are financed by the Republic of Slovenia – Ministry of Labour if referred by the Employment Service of Slovenia. If referred by the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute, employers, or other entities, services are financed according to the applicable fee schedule, effective June 1, 2006.

The Act's stated purpose (Article 2) is to increase the employability of persons with disabilities, remove barriers, and establish equal opportunities for their participation in the labour market.

Key Provisions for Employment Rehabilitation

The law grants employment rehabilitation as a right for persons with disabilities, which means they must first acquire disability status. This status is typically determined through a comprehensive assessment of an individual's work abilities, knowledge, habits, and vocational interests. The evaluation involves a multidisciplinary team (bio – psycho – social model) analysing medical, educational, social, and environmental factors, along with cognitive functions and learning capabilities. Based on the team's findings, an individualized rehabilitation plan is created, specifying the type, scope, and duration of services. This plan can be adjusted as needed during the rehabilitation process.

Referrals to employment rehabilitation services are made by the Employment Service of Slovenia. Employment counsellors may identify barriers to employment and refer individuals to a rehabilitation advisor for further assistance and motivation. However, both counsellors and rehabilitation providers report significant challenges in encouraging individuals to participate in rehabilitation programs. Long-term unemployment and social exclusion often exacerbate resistance, compounded by reluctance to accept disability status, as many individuals do not view themselves as disabled. Currently, acquiring disability status is the only pathway to access

rehabilitation services. Stakeholders have called for alternatives, such as granting access to rehabilitation without requiring formal disability status.

Supported Employment

Supported employment is a form of employment within the open labour market, accompanied by psychological, technical, or organizational support. The Employment Service of Slovenia issues supported employment decisions for individuals deemed capable of integrating into a work environment with such support. Employers are eligible for wage subsidies if supported employees meet at least 70% of job performance expectations despite workplace adjustments and supportive services.

Supported employment offers various financial and other incentives to employers, such as wage subsidies, reimbursement for workplace adaptations, and exemption from pension and disability insurance contributions. Employers who exceed quota requirements may also receive annual awards for best practices in employing persons with disabilities.

Sheltered Employment in Employment Centres

Sheltered employment provides jobs tailored to the abilities and needs of individuals with disabilities, along with professional assistance and ongoing support. Employment centres primarily provide these opportunities, but other employers, including enterprises for persons with disabilities, can establish sheltered jobs if properly structured within their organizational framework.

Social Inclusion Programs and Unemployability Decisions

Social inclusion programs support and maintain the work abilities of individuals with disabilities deemed unemployable by the Employment Service of Slovenia after completing employment rehabilitation. These programs are also available for persons classified as Category I disabled under the Pension and Disability Insurance Act or those with intellectual and developmental disabilities lacking access to appropriate social care services. Programs are co-financed by the national budget, and eligibility is determined based on unemployability assessments by rehabilitation providers.

The Disability Fund of the Republic of Slovenia encourages the employment of people with disabilities through subsidies. These financial incentives are designed to support employers who hire individuals with disabilities, making it easier for them to integrate into the work environment.

The subsidies cover various costs associated with employing persons with disabilities, such as workplace adaptations, special training, or salary contributions.

The fund aims to promote equal opportunities and social inclusion for people with disabilities by reducing the barriers to their employment. Employers can apply for subsidies to help offset the additional costs of hiring and accommodating employees with disabilities, creating a more accessible and inclusive job market. The overall goal is to enhance the participation of persons with disabilities in the workplace and support their professional development.

To improve employment and support for neurodiverse individuals facing barriers to integration into work environment in Slovenia, several areas could be enhanced. One key improvement would be the implementation of more comprehensive career path planning from an early age, offering personalized guidance to help neurodiverse individuals identify suitable career options aligned with their skills and interests. This could be complemented by better workplace preparation during their school years, such as tailored internships or apprenticeships that would involve employers early on, offering real-world experience and potential job opportunities upon graduation. Furthermore, targeted programs that provide customized support for employers would be beneficial, ensuring they are equipped with the training and resources needed to create accessible and supportive work environments for neurodiverse employees. In addition, expanding access to job coaching and ongoing support within the workplace would help neurodiverse individuals successfully adapt to their roles, fostering long-term success. Raising awareness and offering training programs for employers is equally important, as it would increase understanding of neurodiversity and the unique strengths neurodiverse individuals bring to the workplace. Legislative and financial incentives could also play a crucial role, encouraging employers to create inclusive workplaces by supporting necessary workplace adjustments. Finally, fostering better collaboration between educational institutions, vocational training centres, and employers would ensure a smoother transition from education to employment, providing continuous support and improving the chances of successful integration into work environment for neurodiverse individuals.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Current State of Support Services

Lack of Public Support: There is a perceived absence of public organizations providing support services for people with autism in education, training, and employment.

NGOs as Primary Providers: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the main providers of support services. These NGOs offer support in various aspects of life, including navigating school, family, relationships, and society.

Funding Challenges: NGOs rely on funding from ministries, projects, and local communities, which can be inconsistent. Services are offered both free of charge and on a paid basis, depending on funding.

Inadequate Awareness: There's a significant lack of awareness and understanding among decision-makers (legislators and those who control funding) regarding the needs of individuals with autism. This lack of awareness contributes to insufficient funding and inadequate legislation.

Frustration with System: NGOs and parents express frustration with the need to constantly justify the need for support services for individuals with autism.

Fatigue: NGOs are tired of having to explain and justify the need for services for people with autism.

Areas for Improvement

Improved Funding: There is a need for changes in funding mechanisms and increased resources for support services.

Local Community Involvement: There is a need for more consistent and substantial funding from local communities. Some communities do not offer any relevant grants.

Systemic Change: There is a need for changes in legislation to better support individuals with autism.

Transition Support: There is a need for a better system to support young people transitioning from school to employment, not just for those with neurodiversity but for anyone with challenges.

Personal Assistance: There is a need for a better-structured personal assistance program, adapted to the specific needs of people with autism, who often require only a few hours of assistance per day. The current personal assistance law is not working for this group because it mandates 30 hours per week.

Training and Support for Mentors/Professionals: There is a need for better training and support for mentors, educators, and professionals working with individuals with autism. Some mentors lack understanding and sensitivity, despite having theoretical knowledge.

Implementation of Individualized Plans (IPs): There are inconsistencies in the implementation of IPs (Individualized Plans) in schools, particularly in secondary schools, despite the fact that they are required.

Good Practices

Empowerment through NGOs: NGOs empower individuals with autism, and their families, through support and guidance.

Valuable Feedback: When users say they've received the support they need, it is considered a good practice; however, they often express regret about not finding it sooner.

Supported Employment: Supported employment and employment rehabilitation are beneficial for adults with autism, providing education for employers and support for employees.

Specific Issues

Personal Experiences: There is some discussion of issues regarding mentors, particularly, that some mentors are not very good at their jobs or are insensitive or difficult to work with.

The focus on respect: There is a call for greater respect for people in general, regardless of whether they have a disability.

The overall tone is somewhat pessimistic about the ability to bring about significant change in the near future, despite the clear need for improvements.

NATIONAL SITUATION REGARDING EMPLOYMENT OF NEURODIVERSE PERSONS - GOOD PRACTICES OF EMPLOYERS IN THE FIELD OF INCLUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

CYPRUS

In Cyprus, employment of neurodiverse persons is a pressing issue. Unfortunately, there are not many examples of employer good practices where information is public and easily accessible. Below are provided briefly some examples from governmental policies, as well as NGO and parent associations' initiatives that can be considered best case examples of inclusive work environments in Cyprus.

Public Sector and the Pan-Cyprian Association of Job Coaches initiative

As mentioned earlier, the obligation for public sector organizations to reserve 10% of vacant posts for individuals with disabilities who possess the necessary skills for the particular position under Law N. 146(I)/2009 has led to the employment of numerous neurodivergent individuals. In various posts, from municipal services to hospitals, neurodivergent individuals are employed and through their role, contribute back to the community. More than 150 neurodivergent individuals are employed currently in the public sector. Similarly, in the private sector, there is a worthwhile initiative to increase the absorption of neurodivergent individuals. The effectiveness of such initiatives though remains to be assessed.

An example comes from the Federation of Employers and Industry Administrators (OEB) in Cyprus, and their initiative to provide vocational placement services for neurodivergent individuals. The Pan-Cyprian Association of Job Coaches initiative aims to facilitate vocational placement and sustained employment for individuals with disabilities, including neurodivergent persons. This initiative focuses on the smooth transition of individuals into the workforce by matching suitable job opportunities with their preferences, abilities, and skills. Job coaches also ensure the ongoing monitoring of employee progress to maximize job retention. These employment programs operate under the Department of Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (DSIPD), which collaborates closely with the association. A good practice in this program is that job coaches are required to submit quarterly progress reports to DSIPD, for further evaluation of the initiative's impact.

NGO vocational programs

Another case of best practices is that of the creation of social enterprise initiatives from NGOs and philanthropic institutions that provide vocational training and employment opportunities for neurodivergent populations. A good example of such an initiative operating within Christos Stelios Ioannou Foundation is the confectionery workshop in named "Π ε ς τ ο μ ε έ ν α γ λ υ κ ό" ("Say it with a Sweet") and The View Café. Launched in October 2021, the confectionery workshop trains participants aged 21 and above in baking and pastry-making skills, emphasizing hygiene standards and fostering self-confidence. The trainees prepare various sweets, including cookies and muffins, which are available for purchase through orders placed directly with the foundation. The program aims to equip individuals with the necessary skills to potentially secure employment in external bakeries or pastry shops.

Complementing this initiative, The View Cafe offers a serene environment where trainees engage in tasks such as cleaning, material handling, serving, and delivering beverages to the foundation's staff. The cafe operates daily from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM, providing trainees with practical experience in the hospitality sector. These endeavors are designed to promote the professional and social integration of individuals with intellectual disabilities, enabling them to lead more independent lives.

This is a very good initiative to help neurodivergent populations assimilate with the community work force. The disadvantage of such an approach is that the operation of this enterprise within the premises of the foundation, limiting the influence of the initiative in promoting awareness of neurodiversity in the general population. The foundation encourages the public to support these initiatives by purchasing products from the confectionery workshop and visiting The View Cafe, thereby contributing to the empowerment and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce. Nevertheless, similar good practices in other European countries include the operation of enterprises such as cafes or restaurants outside the confined spaces of institutions for the intellectually challenged, in central locations of popular entertainment hubs within European cities. Such locations allow for more extensive interactions of neurodivergent individuals with neurotypical populations, and subsequent sensitization and awareness on the topics of diversity in employment. An interesting ongoing effort towards this direction is the attempt of the [Voice for Autism association](#) to create a social enterprise where the neurodivergent community are shareholders in a café where they will be working. The goal is to create a community center with a café that will employ people with autism and other disabilities,

in collaboration with the Municipality of Aglanjia, The University of Cyprus Architecture Department and The Alkinoos Foundation.

Large Corporation Social Responsibility Initiatives

There are some local and international large scale corporations that have established social responsibility programs with the goal of inclusion of neurodivergent populations in employment in Cyprus.

One such example is Alpha Mega supermarkets, whose Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program focuses on various societal needs, including support for children, environmental initiatives, and broader community assistance. Their CSR efforts are structured around three main pillars: Children, Environment, and Society. Within this CSR program, Alpha Mega also employs neurodivergent individuals within their workforce as a provision of giving back to the local community. The corporation supports neurodivergent employees aiming to help them better assimilate to the society, socialize with neurotypical staff and customers, and make them feel proud for their contribution, important and productive. Another example is McDonald's, which has demonstrated a commitment to inclusivity and diversity within its workforce. The company provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities during the application and hiring processes, as well as in performing essential job functions. This approach aligns with McDonald's broader goal of fostering an inclusive work environment³.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, WORK LEADERS, EXPERTS, LIFELONG LEARNING STATE OFFICIALS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Good Practices of Employers in Cyprus:

1. Christos Stelios Ioannou Foundation.

- Actively employs neurodiverse persons in protected workshops (about 42 individuals).
- Facilitates employment in the open labour market (69 individuals supported).
- Roughly 144 individuals in total serviced in the Foundation.
- Long-term cooperation with approximately 30 employers, notably supermarkets (e.g., Alpha Mega, Sklavenitis), bakeries (e.g. Zorpas, Papantoniou, Thimonia), fast-food

³ Kilili-Lesta M, Giannakou K, Voniati L. The Childhood Prevalence, Gender Ratio, and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Cyprus Using School Report: a Cross-Sectional Study. Adv Neurodev Disord. 2024. doi: 10.1007/s41252-024-00412-33

restaurants (McDonalds), small businesses and municipal institutions, reflecting sustainability and consistency.

2. Apostolos Loukas.

- Operate nine programs that serve a total of 70 residents (mostly adults with mental deficiencies).
- 37 people, in three different employment support programs.
- 20 year experience and good connections to local businesses and municipalities in Limassol area.
- Well supported procedures for smooth integration to employment.

3. Municipalities and Supermarkets:

- Notable examples mentioned include Limassol Municipality (zoo, municipal library) and supermarkets actively integrating neurodiverse employees.
- Many workplaces provide tailored positions aligned with the capabilities of neurodiverse individuals and ensure satisfactory compensation.

Inclusive Workplace Strategies Implemented:

- Customized job roles aligning with individuals' capabilities.
- Employers demonstrate sensitivity and long-term commitment, often resulting from ongoing partnerships and training provided by foundations and public bodies.
- Employers involved receive consistent support from specialized institutions, making the employment sustainable and effective.

Areas for Improvement Identified:

- **Structured Onboarding and Mentoring:** Currently insufficient; structured induction and mentoring programs for neurodiverse employees need improvement. Some NGOs and other private organizations (such as Christos Stelios Ioannou, Apostolos Loukas) have a lot of experience in this field and could help smaller organizations and employers.
- **Position Allocation According to Skills:** There is often underutilization of individual skills and talents, with roles not always reflecting the true capabilities and potential of neurodiverse employees.
- **Career Advancement Opportunities:** Stakeholders identified a lack of clear career paths and progression opportunities for neurodiverse individuals within organizations.
- **Awareness and Training Deficits:** Employers require further training and awareness initiatives to foster inclusive environments, enhance understanding of neurodiversity, and ensure adequate workplace adjustments.

- Need for a standardized, structured mentoring scheme explicitly targeting neurodiverse employees to facilitate their professional growth and stability within the workplace.

Overall Areas for Improvement:

- Formalized employer training and awareness-raising programs.
- Comprehensive onboarding processes and career planning tailored to neurodiverse persons.
- Increased advocacy promoting awareness of the strengths and potential benefits neurodiverse individuals bring to workplaces.
- Clearer regulatory guidelines or incentives to encourage sustainable hiring and integration practices within the private sector.

In summary, while notable employer initiatives and good practices exist, particularly through foundations and collaborations with public entities, substantial gaps remain regarding structured employer training, mentoring programs, and broader employer engagement and education about neurodiversity in Cyprus.

GREECE

Sklavenitis super market chain

Sklavenitis has been proactive in creating **inclusive hiring practices** aimed at integrating neurodivergent individuals into their workforce. They collaborate with organizations focused on autism and ADHD to train staff in best practices for supporting neurodivergent colleagues. In recent years, Sklavenitis has implemented specific initiatives aimed at improving workplace inclusivity for neurodivergent employees. These efforts focus on creating accessible job opportunities, providing tailored support systems, and adjusting work environments to better accommodate individuals with conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. A key part of Sklavenitis' strategy involves training managers and staff to recognize and address the needs of neurodivergent employees, enhancing overall workplace awareness about neurodiversity. These initiatives support neurodivergent staff by facilitating comfortable and productive workspaces, including quieter work environments and flexible work hours. The impact of these practices has been positive, promoting employee well-being and engagement, while also providing a sense of belonging within the organization. Studies highlight that such inclusive practices help neurodivergent employees leverage their strengths, boosting overall team creativity and problem-solving skills, which contribute to the company's operational effectiveness and innovation.

For example, it has adjusted the interview format to reduce reliance on traditional, socially intensive formats, which can disadvantage neurodivergent candidates. Instead, Sklavenitis has integrated task-based evaluations and pre-interview information sharing, making it easier for neurodivergent individuals to showcase their skills and reduce the potential stress of the interview process. Furthermore, these efforts are part of a broader corporate social responsibility strategy that includes collaboration with specialized organizations for recruitment and support services, aiming to make neurodivergent inclusion an ongoing, sustainable practice.

Additionally, the company has introduced sensory-friendly environments in their stores, allowing employees with sensory sensitivities to have designated quiet spaces during their shifts. Of course, regular workshops are held for staff to help them understand the unique challenges faced by neurodivergent colleagues and how to promote a supportive team environment.

Link for more information: [Sklavenitis - Corporate Social Responsibility](#)

OTE Group

OTE Group (Hellenic Telecommunications Organization) is the largest telecommunications provider in Greece and a leading company in Southeast Europe. It offers a wide range of services, including fixed-line and mobile telephony, broadband internet, and television services, under its flagship brand COSMOTE. Owned by Deutsche Telekom, OTE plays a significant role in advancing digital transformation in Greece through innovative technologies and a strong commitment to sustainability and inclusivity.

OTE Group has established a comprehensive diversity strategy that explicitly includes neurodiversity. They focus on creating an inclusive work environment that values the unique perspectives of all employees, including those with neurodivergent conditions. Their hiring process has been adapted to minimize stress for neurodivergent candidates. OTE emphasizes skills-based assessments rather than traditional interviews, making it easier for individuals with conditions like ADHD or autism to showcase their abilities without the pressures of conventional interview settings. Additionally, OTE offers mentorship programs specifically designed to assist neurodivergent employees in navigating workplace challenges. They provide ongoing support through coaching and tailored training to enhance workplace integration.

To accommodate sensory sensitivities and different working styles, OTE has implemented flexible working hours and remote work options, allowing employees to create environments that best suit their needs.

OTE's diversity initiatives: [OTE](#), [OTE GROUP Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Policy](#)

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Regarding the topic of Good Practices of Employers, one participant, who is herself on the spectrum, shared her experience with an NGO where she has an employment contract. In this organization, since the 9:00 - 17:00 schedule doesn't work for her, they use a hybrid work model, and when she doesn't feel able to do a face-to-face meeting, they hold online meetings instead. Another participant added that to reach a "good practice," it is important to first convince the employer to hire a person with a disability, as there is generally mistrust. Naturally, it should first be ensured that the structures are suitable, such as reducing sensory stimuli (e.g., noise-cancelling measures), making communication with the rest of the staff, avoiding interruptions when someone is in a hyper-focus state, and creating a sensory-friendly room with soft lighting

or with a chair for foot movement. There should be an understanding that someone may not make eye contact, but this is due to their focus. Additionally, the workplace should provide a computer with appropriate lighting and generally have a system that works for both the employer and the neurodivergent individual.

It was also discussed that a different training should be provided to employers of persons with disabilities and to staff members working with persons with disabilities as colleagues.

IRELAND

There are several publications providing tips for employers and to promote good practices of employers:

Evershields-Sutherland: <https://www.eversheds-sutherland.com/en/ireland/insights/ireland-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace> as stated above

IBEC: <https://www.ibec.ie/influencing-for-business/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-and-inclusion-blog/2022/10/27/creating-an-inclusive-workplace-for-the-neurodiverse> published 27 October 2022 an article entitled “Creating an inclusive workplace for the neurodiverse”.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

There are a number of support networks but relatively few that are attempting to find work placements for those on the neurodiverse spectrum. Ahead is one such organisation that seeks to help those with a disability into employment through mentoring and support. More enabling support practices are needed to upskill those working with people on the neurodiverse spectrum.

ITALY

Numero Zero (La Città del Sole Foundation)

Numero Zero is part of a large project of inclusion and innovation in the field of mental health called La Città del Sole Foundation. Numero Zero is a restaurant based in Perugia (Italy). Their workforce is more than 50 per cent neurodivergent people, supported by restaurant professionals and coordinated and supervised by clinical and project staff. A daycare centre by day and a restaurant by night, Numero Zero is designed to create not only an opportunity for socialisation for those kept on the margins, but also real inclusion through paid employment. Website: <https://www.numerozeroperugia.com/>

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/numerozeroperugia/?locale=it_IT

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/numerozeroperugia/?hl=en>

PizzAut

PizzAut is a social inclusion project founded in the province of Milan by a father of an autistic child. Main activities: - Two restaurants/pizzerias run by young people with autism supported by restaurant and educational professionals - Advocacy for the inclusion and rights of autistic people - AutAcademy, a training course that qualifies young people to enter the world of catering - “Gyms of independent living”, flats and spaces where autistic people can experience paths towards independent living

Website: <https://www.pizzaut.it/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pizzaut/>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/pizzaut_official/?hl=en

Neurodiversity at work (NEW)

NEW is an ongoing 30-month Erasmus+ project involving 6 European partners working to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro-enterprises in creating more inclusive working environments that enhance the talents of neurodivergent people. The project will demonstrate how inclusive practices around neurodiversity are an asset for companies, with the potential to guide them towards a more ethical and prosperous future. 6 partners from Italy (coordinator), Belgium, Austria, Bulgaria and Ireland. Three main project outputs: - Neurodiversity Awareness Raising Strategy - (R)Evolutionary Inclusion Model - Neurodiverse Workplaces in Europe Community of Practice

Website: <https://www.neurodiverseworkplaces.eu/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NeurodiverseWorkplaces/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/neurodiverse-workplaces/>

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (EXPERTS, EDUCATORS, THERAPISTS, COORDINATORS, MANAGERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

- Some multinational companies (e.g., tech and creative industries) implementing inclusive recruitment processes.
- Adapted work environments in certain sectors (e.g., flexible work schedules, quiet spaces).
- Job coaching and mentorship programs showing positive results.
- Lack of widespread corporate training on neurodiversity.
- Limited employment opportunities outside of niche fields.
- Need for clearer frameworks for career advancement of neurodiverse employees.

POLAND

1. Accenture Poland

Accenture Poland actively builds a neuroinclusive work environment that integrates neurodivergent individuals. The company implements training programs for managers and employees to increase awareness about neurodiversity and promote inclusive practices:

Training for Employees and Managers: Accenture Poland organizes regular training sessions aimed at increasing awareness about neurodiversity. These trainings cover information about different types of neurodivergence, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and how these differences impact functioning in the workplace.

Information Campaigns: The company runs information campaigns to promote understanding and acceptance of neurodivergent individuals. These campaigns are directed at all employees and aim to build a culture of inclusivity.

Adapted Recruitment Processes: Accenture Poland has made changes to its recruitment processes to be more friendly to neurodivergent individuals. This includes adapting the format of job interviews and recruitment tests to accommodate diverse needs of candidates.

Collaboration with Supporting Organizations: The company collaborates with NGOs and foundations that support neurodivergent individuals in finding employment. This helps Accenture Poland reach potential candidates and offer them appropriate support.

Individual Support Plans: For each neurodivergent employee, individual support plans are created, taking into account their specific needs and strengths. These plans are regularly updated and adjusted as needed.

Mentoring and Coaching: The company offers mentoring and coaching programs to help neurodivergent employees adapt to the work environment and develop their professional skills.

Adapted Office Spaces: Accenture Poland ensures that office spaces are friendly to neurodivergent individuals. This includes quiet work zones, appropriate lighting, and ergonomic workstations.

Flexible Working Hours: The company offers flexible working hours and the possibility of remote work, allowing neurodivergent employees to better adjust to their individual needs and work rhythms.

2. Auticon Poland

Auticon Poland is a social enterprise with a mission to improve employment prospects for neurodivergent individuals. The company aims to reduce the employment gap mostly for people with Autism Spectrum by offering meaningful and tailored job opportunities that match their skills. The company is a consulting enterprise that prepares neurodivergent people for work and mediates their employment.

Hiring Neurodivergent Specialists: Auticon Poland employs individuals with autism as technology consultants. These specialists possess exceptional cognitive abilities that provide unique value in the technology space, such as logic, precision, sustained concentration, and an intuitive ability to detect errors.

Adapting Recruitment Processes: The company uses an inclusive approach to recruitment, taking into account the needs of neurodivergent individuals. Recruitment processes are designed to be friendly for candidates with autism, including adjustments to the format of job interviews.

Collaboration with Supporting Organizations: Auticon Poland collaborates with various organizations to better support neurodivergent candidates and provide them with appropriate working conditions, including business and NGOs.

Job Coaching: The company offers support from job coaches who help neurodivergent employees fully utilize their professional potential. Coaches promote inclusion and well-being and provide support and information about autism in the workplace.

Individual Approach: Auticon Poland uses a person-centered approach, adapting the work environment to the individual needs of neurodivergent employees. The company designs autism-friendly offices that consider the specific needs of neurodivergent workers.

Neurodiversity Training: The company offers training programs on neurodiversity, developed in collaboration with neurodivergent employees. These trainings are aimed at all employees but are particularly important for leaders, HR departments, recruiters, and managers.

eLearning courses: Auticon Poland has also introduced interactive eLearning courses that raise awareness about neurodiversity in the workplace. These courses are CPD accredited and result in obtaining a “Neuro Aware” certificate.

3. SAP Poland

Aims to create an inclusive work environment that leverages the potential of neurodivergent individuals to enhance innovation and productivity. The company believes that diversity is a key driver of organizational success and innovation.

Tailored Interviews: SAP Poland adapts its interview processes to be more inclusive for neurodivergent candidates. This includes providing clear, structured interview formats and offering support throughout the recruitment process to ensure candidates feel comfortable and can perform at their best.

Partnerships with NGOs: SAP collaborates with organizations that specialize in supporting neurodivergent individuals, such as Fundacja JiM and Fundacja Atypika. These partnerships help SAP reach potential candidates and provide them with the necessary support during the recruitment and onboarding phases.

Dedicated Job Coaches: SAP Poland provides job coaches who offer continuous support to neurodivergent employees. These coaches assist with onboarding, career development, and day-to-day challenges, ensuring that employees can fully utilize their skills and integrate smoothly into the workplace.

Mentorship Programs: Experienced employees at SAP mentor neurodivergent colleagues, helping them navigate the corporate environment and develop their careers. This mentorship fosters a supportive and inclusive work culture.

Customized Workspaces: SAP designs workspaces that cater to the sensory needs of neurodivergent employees. This includes creating quiet zones, providing adjustable lighting, and ensuring ergonomic furniture is available.

Flexible Work Arrangements: The company offers flexible working hours and remote work options to accommodate the diverse needs of neurodivergent employees. This flexibility helps employees manage their work-life balance more effectively.

Employee Training: SAP conducts regular training sessions for all employees to raise awareness about neurodiversity and promote inclusive practices. These sessions cover topics such as effective communication and understanding the strengths of neurodivergent individuals.

Leadership Training: Special training programs are provided for managers to equip them with the skills needed to support and manage neurodivergent team members effectively. This training ensures that leaders are prepared to foster an inclusive work environment.

4. EY Poland

EY Poland aims to create an inclusive work environment that supports neurodiversity. The company believes that diversity is a key driver of innovation and organizational success. EY Poland is committed to recognizing and developing the unique talents of neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with autism and ADHD.

EY Neurodiversity Center of Excellence (NCoE): EY Poland launched the Neurodiversity Center of Excellence (NCoE) to focus on recruiting and supporting neurodivergent individuals, especially in the field of cybersecurity. This initiative is part of a global effort to leverage the unique skills of neurodivergent employees.

Career Development: Neurodivergent employees in the NCoE have clear career paths and receive continuous support to develop their skills in areas such as machine learning, security management, and system administration.

Collaboration with AsperIT: EY Poland collaborates with Fundacja AsperIT to develop recruitment and onboarding processes tailored to the needs of neurodivergent individuals.

Employee Training: Over 50 EY employees have been trained on effective communication with neurodivergent individuals. These training sessions aim to increase awareness and promote inclusive practices within the organization.

Managerial Training: Special training programs are provided for managers to equip them with the skills needed to support and manage neurodivergent team members effectively.

E-book on Neurodiversity: EY Poland partnered with Fundacja Atypika to create an e-book on neurodiversity in the workplace. This resource provides valuable insights and practical advice on creating inclusive work environments and leveraging the potential of neurodivergent employees.

Tailored Recruitment: EY Poland has adapted its recruitment processes to be more inclusive for neurodivergent candidates. This includes providing clear and structured interview formats and offering support throughout the recruitment process.

Therapist Support: During recruitment interviews, candidates receive support from therapists to ensure they feel comfortable and can perform at their best.

Customized Workspaces: EY Poland designs workspaces that cater to the sensory needs of neurodivergent employees. This includes creating quiet zones, providing adjustable lighting, and ensuring ergonomic furniture is available.

Dedicated Job Coaches: EY Poland provides job coaches who offer continuous support to neurodivergent employees. These coaches assist with onboarding, career development, and day-to-day challenges.

Mentorship Programs: Experienced employees mentor neurodivergent colleagues, helping them navigate the corporate environment and develop their careers.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Companies in Poland are at various stages of implementing inclusive practices for neurodivergent individuals. Among the employer practices described during the meeting, the initiatives undertaken by Motorola Solutions stand out particularly. Although the company admits they are "just beginning our journey in the area of neurodiversity," they distinguish themselves through a systematic and multidimensional approach. Through their Neurodiversity Hub team, the company develops several parallel initiatives: from educational and awareness activities to specific infrastructure solutions and HR process adaptations.

What particularly distinguishes Motorola's approach is their attempt to take a holistic view of neurodivergent individuals' needs in the workplace. The company doesn't limit itself to isolated, single actions but strives to consider various aspects of employee functioning within the organization. Notable also is that implemented solutions, such as quiet zones and adapted company events, are designed with all employees in mind, promoting a truly inclusive organizational culture without stigmatization or singling out specific groups.

In terms of practical actions, the company organizes educational and awareness initiatives, such as a wellbeing week where employees can better understand the perspective of neurodivergent individuals. They use innovative methods, including VR technology to simulate the experiences of people on the autism spectrum, and special cards and overlays showing how people with different types of neurodiversity perceive the world. Importantly, the company systematically trains its management - within the Leadership Training Program, managers can choose neurodiversity training, which 10 people utilized in the past year.

Motorola consciously develops its support program based on market best practices. In this context, it's worth noting a solution used by Capgemini that Motorola plans to adopt - their recruitment form includes a direct question about special needs, giving candidates the option to indicate if they are neuroatypical or have a certification. This simple but effective tool allows for early identification of candidates' needs and better adaptation of the recruitment process.

Research participants also identified key elements of good recruitment practices that should be widely implemented. These primarily include precise and inclusive job descriptions, free from excess information noise that might distract neuroatypical individuals, and clear communication about the company's openness to neurodivergent individuals. Transparency in the recruitment and onboarding process is particularly important, including practical information like transit maps and detailed onboarding process descriptions.

In the educational sector, specific challenges arise related to balancing the needs of different student groups. As one participant noted: "In the context of neurodiversity, studying can be more difficult than work, because even if we want to adapt our approach to students' individual needs, we often encounter the reaction: 'why can this person work alone while I have to work in a group?'" This demonstrates the importance of developing a balanced approach that supports neurodivergent individuals while maintaining fair principles for everyone.

Key conclusions for employers emerge from these discussions: a systematic approach to implementing inclusive practices is necessary, as is balancing individual needs with equal treatment of all employees. Education and awareness-raising at all organizational levels play a crucial role, as does appropriate adaptation of physical work spaces. Particular attention should be paid to precise and clear communication in recruitment processes and long-term planning of support program development. The foundation for success is involving all employees in building an inclusive culture, which helps avoid feelings of exclusion or favouritism toward any group.

SLOVENIA

In recent years, the number of neurodiverse individuals participating in employment rehabilitation services has increased. Practical experience indicates that these individuals often require specialized guidance and structured support due to their unique characteristics. Such support necessitates additional training for rehabilitation professionals, employers, and colleagues to ensure effective inclusion and success in the labour market (Brecelj, Demšar, Zovko, and Bratuš, 2020). The employment challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals highlight the need for targeted specialized treatment and support in their employment. Below are some examples of good domestic practices in the employment of neurodivergent individuals.

To address the employment issues of neurodivergent individuals, it is important to plan their career path even before entering the labour market, that is, during their education, as the transition from the school system to the employment system is an important and often challenging step for every young person. For young people with special needs, including neurodivergent individuals, this is particularly difficult.

A good example of such career guidance during schooling is the project "Development and Implementation of the Transition of Youth with Special Needs to the Labor Market," which aims to provide professional support to young people transitioning from school to employment. According to the Law on the Guidance of Children with Special Needs, anyone with an appropriate decision from the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Education and who is under 29 years old can be included. Participants in the project are provided with various activities based on an individual transition plan, and professionals collaborate with parents, counsellors, teachers, social work centres, health institutions, and other institutions that can influence the success of the transition to employment. According to discussions with the project coordinators, it has been found in the first two years of the project that one of the groups needing the most help and professional support in this area are young neurodivergent individuals. Professionals in this project report successful cases of helping young neurodivergent individuals. The project is thus increasingly recognized as a good linking element between the education system and the employment system for young people with special needs (more at <https://prehodmladih.si/>) (Brecelj, Demšar, Zovko, and Bratuš, 2020).

A good example of supporting the employment of neurodiverse individuals in Slovenia is the employment rehabilitation system. This system provides a comprehensive support framework for both employers and employees with neurodiversity, ensuring that individuals facing

challenges in integrating into the work environment are given the necessary tools and opportunities to succeed.

In this system, employers receive guidance and assistance in creating an inclusive work environment. They are provided with resources, training, and financial support to help them accommodate neurodiverse employees, ensuring that the workplace is accessible and that any necessary adjustments are made. Employers are also educated on neurodiversity, which helps them better understand the strengths and challenges of these individuals, leading to more effective integration and support.

For individuals with neurodiversity, employment rehabilitation offers personalized assistance in finding and retaining employment. This includes job coaching, workplace modifications, and on-the-job support, ensuring that employees can adapt to their roles successfully. They are also provided with career counselling, which helps them identify suitable job opportunities based on their skills and interests. The system ensures that neurodiverse individuals are not only employed but are also given the ongoing support they need to thrive in the workplace. This collaborative approach between employers and employees with neurodiversity is a strong example of how Slovenia supports the integration of neurodiverse individuals into the work environment, creating an environment where both parties can succeed.

OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS (NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS, RELATIVES, EXPERTS, EMPLOYERS) FROM THE FOCUS GROUP:

Key Issues and Challenges

Lack of Structure: Many employers do not understand the importance of a structured work environment, which is crucial for individuals with autism. They may not know how to create such a structure.

Inadequate Work Environments: Workspaces, such as open-plan offices with bright lights and lots of people, can be unsuitable for neurodiverse individuals.

Misunderstanding of Learning: Employers may not understand that learning is an ongoing process and may not be willing to learn about the specific needs of neurodiverse employees.

Underestimation of Effort: There's often a failure to recognize the effort and cost that neurodiverse individuals pay to achieve success, leading to a lack of support. This can lead to good practices being abandoned over time.

Need for Consistency: Good practices should be ongoing, not one-time efforts.

Lack of Understanding: Some people in the workplace, such as mentors, may not fully understand the needs of neurodiverse individuals. They may think they do understand, but they don't.

Good Practices and Solutions

Structured Environment: Creating a structured work environment is essential. This involves clarity and consistency.

Employer Education: Employers need to educate themselves about the needs of neurodiverse employees and be open to learning.

Individualized Spaces: Some neurodiverse individuals, particularly those sensitive to noise or visual clutter, need their own quiet workspace.

Support and Mentoring: Ongoing support from mentors and communication with employers is crucial. A good relationship between employee, mentor, and employer is essential.

Appropriate Work: Some neurodiverse individuals prefer simple, repetitive tasks that might be considered more visual or artistic. Providing opportunities for these kinds of jobs can be beneficial.

Focus on Process: See inclusion as a process rather than a one-time event.

Recognition of effort: Recognize that high-achieving neurodiverse individuals may be expending considerable effort to perform successfully, even if they don't show outward signs of struggle.

Clear Instructions: Neurodiverse employees may benefit from clear instructions and procedures. Not giving these may cause the employee to feel as if they are not supported.

Areas for Improvement

Focus on What Not to Do: Education should emphasize what not to do when working with neurodiverse individuals.

Long-Term Commitment: Good practices should be part of a long-term, ongoing process.

Finding the right fit: It is important to take the time to find the right employer, mentor, and job for the individual.

Understanding the Internal Experience: Those supporting neurodiverse individuals should try to understand how the individual experiences the world and their environment, rather than applying a rational or neurotypical lens.

In summary, they stress the need for employers to learn, adapt, and commit to long-term support in order to create truly inclusive work environments for neurodiverse individuals. It identifies structure, understanding, and personalized approaches as key factors in this process.

FOCUS GROUPS – SIDE ISSUES AND OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

CYPRUS

Side issues discussed, not included in the list above:

- **Heterogeneity of Neurodiverse Groups:**

Participants emphasized the diversity within neurodiverse populations (high and lower functioning individuals, autism spectrum, dyslexia, dysgraphia, Down Syndrome, etc.), noting significant differences in needs and capabilities. They highlighted the difficulty in addressing these varied needs through a singular approach and stressed the importance of individualized support.

- **Potential Underutilization of Skills:**

A recurring concern was that neurodiverse individuals often get assigned repetitive, low-skilled tasks irrespective of their talents or capabilities. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of identifying and harnessing individual strengths more effectively, ensuring roles assigned reflect each person's true potential rather than merely filling available positions.

- **Safety Issues in the Workplace and Family Fears/Insecurities:**

Concerns were raised regarding the potential fear of both employers and parents/family of neurodivergent individuals for employee safety in workplace settings. The former might hesitate to employ individuals for this reason, whereas the latter might object to work placement of low functioning individuals even when they are deemed suitable for work by specialists.

- **Practical Barriers (Transportation and Access):**

Transportation emerged as a crucial but overlooked issue affecting employment opportunities for neurodiverse individuals. Participants called for practical solutions to transportation barriers as a prerequisite for sustainable employment.

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the session:

- **Legislative and Policy Improvement:**

Participants called for explicit and targeted legislative frameworks that specifically recognize neurodiversity and provide dedicated guidelines for workplace inclusion and accommodations.

- **Financial Incentives and Clarity:**

The focus group emphasized a need for significantly clearer, well-publicized, and more substantial financial incentives for employers, making it easier and more attractive to hire and retain neurodiverse individuals.

- **Structured and Regular Training:**

A clear and strong recommendation was made for continuous, structured training programs for employers, adult educators, and workplace mentors. These programs should foster comprehensive understanding, sensitivity, and practical integration strategies.

- **Cross-sectoral Coordination and Centralized Support:**

There was consensus on the need for improved coordination among educational institutions, governmental bodies, employers, NGOs, and families. Recommendations included establishing a centralized information and matching platform to streamline the integration process.

- **Awareness and Advocacy:**

Enhancing public and employer awareness about neurodiversity, its benefits, and how to integrate neurodiverse individuals effectively was identified as crucial. Increased advocacy was recommended to change attitudes and encourage inclusivity in workplaces.

- **Tailored Employment and Career Development Pathways:**

Recommendations stressed the need for clear, structured onboarding processes and ongoing mentoring schemes explicitly designed for neurodiverse individuals. Clearer pathways for career progression and advancement were also highlighted as essential for long-term workplace retention.

Overall, the stakeholders concluded that a comprehensive, coordinated, and multi-dimensional approach was necessary, combining clearer legislation, financial incentives, structured training, enhanced awareness campaigns, and practical support solutions to significantly improve the inclusion and employability of neurodiverse individuals in Cyprus.

GREECE

Side issues discussed, not included in the list above:

Personal examples were shared by the participants, such as the participant with Asperger's syndrome, who mentioned that a professor at university had given him only an oral exam, while another professor allowed him 20 minutes for an oral exam and then provided a different exam for the same subject. This highlighted the lack of awareness, as each professor was acting based on their subjective judgment. Another participant shared the case of her cousin with Asperger's syndrome, who is in secondary education. Her aunt has to fight every year to secure parallel support for him. It has happened that the school year started in September, but the specialist didn't arrive until November or December.

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the session:

All participants agreed and concluded that there should be alternative communication systems, some psychological support strategies, clear legislation, and rights that are properly implemented for individuals on the neurodiversity spectrum. They emphasized the need for awareness, understanding, respect, education, and support from schools, employers, and society in general.

Lastly, they graded positively the focus group experience and declared their availability for other future meetings when needed – we informed that we will have more when the project progresses and the training materials are being developed.

IRELAND

Side issues discussed, not included in the list above:

When presented with the following research, all participants agreed with the findings: “Support staffs profoundly acknowledged the individualistic nature of neurodiversity. In other words, people in autistic communities often say if you have met one autistic person then you have met one autistic person. One fundamental barrier that participants have the consensus on is that autistic person face more challenges than an average person in neuro-typical dominated workplace because the social and physical environment is not built for them. One challenge is sensory sensitivity problem they often encounter with noise, lights and smell in neuro-typical dominated physical environment. The other challenge is they need more physical and mental efforts than neuro-typical persons in order to socially fit in neuro-typical dominated workplace due to challenges they face with social interaction. The second barrier that is prevalent in Irish society is a lot of misconceptions on what Autism is about. Misrepresenting and stereo-typing people in autistic communities by the global mainstream media played an influential role in promoting misconceptions. Irish enterprises HR professionals have not got fundamental understandings on what Autism is about. Therefore, there are no common autism candidates recruitment enabling infrastructure, such as Autism friendly interviews and work trials, built in Irish enterprises. Thirdly, structural barriers In Ireland created employment barrier. There are two main barriers. One is social protection schemes have disincentivized people with disabilities to take up employment. The other is greater disparity exists between policy development and governmental actions for supporting autistic students to transition from schools to employment. the importance of distinguishing between mental health issues and Autism. Moreover, it is argued that the success that support staffs have had in enabling many more autistic young adults to engage in mainstream employment is due to the provision of right support that can unleash their strengths and potentials. It is the ultimate solution to combat social exclusion. Social exclusion is the main cause for autistic person to develop depression and anxieties.”

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the session:

For all the participants who closely work with autistic candidates for a long period of time, they acknowledge there is inherent strength that lies in the neuro-divergent way of thinking and perceiving the world around them. If they were given right type of work and were given right support and environment, they can unleash their unique strength and excel in workplace. Quotes: M1: whenever he is coming across problems it has to be fixed right now, certain time when that way of thinking provides challenge but at the same time, I guess it is a strength in

that, his standard of work is very high (...) there are several cases and scenarios where he offers more than a neurotypical person would.

M2: it is case that within their nature the person would be very fastidious, and they would like to spend 8 hours to doing this task (...) These core QA and system testers. They are conscientious, you know they are very rigorous, stick to the details.

ITALY

Side issues discussed, not included in the list above:

Below a list of the additional factors/issues discussed during the focus group held in Italy:

- The role of family support in education and employment transitions for neurodiverse individuals.
- Challenges related to co-occurring mental health conditions and lack of adequate psychological support.
- The digital divide and its impact on neurodiverse individuals in accessing online training and job opportunities.
- Ethical concerns regarding disclosure of neurodiversity in job applications and potential discrimination.
- The role of artificial intelligence and assistive technologies in supporting neurodiverse individuals in education and the workplace.

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the session:

The focus group in Italy highlighted significant gaps in awareness, policy implementation, and access to tailored support for neurodiverse individuals in Italy. A well-structured training program for adult educators and workplace support staff can play a critical role in bridging these gaps. Collaboration between government institutions, private enterprises, and educational institutions is essential to foster long-term inclusion and equal opportunities.

There is a strong need for structured, widespread neurodiversity training for educators, employers, and policymakers to bridge gaps in awareness and implementation. Legal frameworks exist but require stronger enforcement, better incentives for businesses, and more

accessible accommodations for neurodiverse individuals. Training should focus on practical application, including hands-on workshops, real-life case studies, and ongoing mentorship support.

POLAND

Side issues discussed, not included in the list above:

An interesting additional thread emerged from the discussion regarding the fundamental understanding of neurodiversity. Participants emphasized a broader perspective of this phenomenon, extending beyond traditional views that limit it to specific diagnoses or disorders.

The conversations revealed an approach highlighting neurodiversity as a universal trait - every person processes information and functions in slightly different ways. Participants observed that while all people have varying preferences in communication and learning styles, these differences are more pronounced in neuroatypical individuals and have a more significant impact on their daily functioning.

This broader view of neurodiversity has important practical implications - it suggests that in creating support solutions for neurodivergent individuals, we are actually building an environment that can be more friendly and effective for all employees. This approach also helps break down barriers and stereotypes by presenting neurodiversity not as a "problem to solve" but as a natural part of human diversity that should be considered in workplace design.

This perspective shifts the conversation from focusing solely on accommodations for specific individuals to creating universally beneficial workplace environments that recognize and value different ways of thinking and working.

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the session:

From the conducted focus session, several key conclusions and recommendations emerged for organizations planning to implement neurodiversity support programs. These insights provide a comprehensive framework for creating effective and inclusive workplace environments.

The first significant recommendation emphasizes the development of concrete, tangible solutions in both physical spaces and organizational processes. A partnership approach in

designing these solutions is crucial - neurodivergent individuals should be active participants in creating support systems that will directly affect them. This collaborative approach ensures that solutions are both practical and truly beneficial for those they aim to serve.

Due to limited solutions available in the domestic market, participants strongly recommended learning from international experiences and best practices. However, they also identified an important tension within organizations - the challenge of balancing appropriate support provision while avoiding the perception of favoring one employee group over others. This delicate balance requires careful consideration in program design and implementation.

A key recommendation focuses on shaping appropriate organizational narrative. Rather than concentrating on deficits or challenges associated with neurodiversity, organizations should build a "neuro-friendly" culture that emphasizes and utilizes the unique capabilities and talents of neurodivergent individuals. This shift in perspective helps create a more positive and inclusive environment that benefits everyone.

A fundamental recommendation that appeared consistently throughout many statements advocates for changing how we think about workplace adjustments. Instead of expecting employees to adapt to the existing environment, the workplace itself should be designed to unlock and utilize each employee's potential. This approach represents a significant shift from traditional workplace design and management practices, creating an environment that not only supports neurodivergent individuals but improves working conditions for all organization members.

These recommendations collectively emphasize the importance of creating truly inclusive environments that acknowledge and support neurodivergent individuals while benefiting the entire organization through improved workplace design and cultural practices.

SLOVENIA

Overall conclusions and recommendations from the session:

Challenges and Needs

- **Lack of Understanding:** A major issue is a lack of awareness and understanding of neurodiversity, especially autism, among employers and educators. This leads to difficulties in communication, creating suitable work and learning environments, and misinterpretations of needs.
- **Inadequate Environments:** Many work and educational settings lack the structure and consistency needed by neurodiverse individuals. Open-plan offices, for example, can be unsuitable.
- **Difficulties in Diagnosis and Assessment:** There are challenges in accessing diagnostic services for adults, which prevents them from accessing necessary support. The assessment process is sometimes inadequate due to a lack of knowledge about autism.
- **Lack of Support in Education:** Despite some students receiving a special needs status, practical support is lacking, especially at the secondary and university levels. There is also a lack of clear coordination between different entities within the education system.
- **Limited Job Opportunities:** There is a lack of diverse job opportunities for neurodiverse individuals, and current options are limited.
- **Inconsistent Funding and Support:** Funding for support services is inconsistent, often relying on NGOs, and there is a lack of awareness among decision-makers about the need for these services.
- **Negative Attitudes:** Prejudices and negative attitudes towards neurodiverse individuals exist within educational settings. There's a lack of trust and understanding between employers and neurodiverse individuals, with employers fearing mistakes from neurodiverse employees.

Good Practices and Solutions

- **Structured Environments:** Creating structured work environments with clear and consistent instructions is essential.
- **Employer Education:** Employers need to educate themselves about the specific needs of neurodiverse employees.

- **Individualized Approaches:** It is important to understand each individual's unique needs and provide personalized support and accommodations. This includes providing quiet workspaces for those sensitive to noise.
- **Mentoring and Support:** Ongoing support from mentors and clear communication between the employee, mentor, and employer are crucial. A dedicated mentor can act as a point of contact to coordinate support.
- **Supported Employment:** Supported employment and employment rehabilitation are beneficial, offering education for employers and support for employees.
- **Training and Awareness Programs:** Training programs should provide knowledge and skills to those who support neurodiverse individuals and employers. These programs should cover the basics of neurodiversity, co-occurring conditions, and emphasize empathy and patience. They should also include practical, hands-on activities, and first-person accounts.
- **Focus on Process:** Inclusion should be viewed as an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

Areas for Improvement

- **Long-Term Commitment:** Good practices should be ongoing and part of a long-term commitment.
- **Systemic Change:** There's a need for changes in legislation, funding mechanisms, and increased resources for support services.
- **Transition Support:** Better support is needed for young people transitioning from school to employment, and between educational institutions.
- **Accessibility:** Legal documents need to be more accessible, using 'easy to read' language.
- **Addressing Prejudice:** There is a need to address prejudices and negative attitudes towards neurodiverse individuals.
- **Personalized Assistance:** Personal assistance programs should be adapted to the specific needs of people with autism.

- **Implementation of Individualized Plans:** There is a need for consistent implementation of Individualized Plans in schools.

In conclusion, while some good practices exist, there are significant systemic and attitudinal barriers to the inclusion of neurodiverse individuals. Addressing these issues requires increased awareness, better understanding of individual needs, consistent support, and changes in legislation and funding.