Editorial
2003: European Year of People with Disabilities

As Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner responsible for education and culture (1) reminds us in the press dossier of June 2003 on the European Year of People with Disabilities, ‘in 2003, 37 million Europeans are living with a disability, that is, one citizen in ten.’

Europe responded to this situation early on. In its founding treaty, the European Community made a commitment to carry out appropriate actions to combat various forms of discrimination, especially towards those with disabilities, and to guarantee them equality of access to training and employment. This intention was reaffirmed in 2000 at the Lisbon European Council, and then incorporated in 2001 into the employment guidelines.

The starting point for this concern is without a doubt to be found in the democratic and egalitarian ideals that underpinned the creation of the European Union. The fundamental idea is that in response to disability, which may be perceived as a random injustice afflicting certain members of the social corpus, society must react collectively in order to overcome such mischance in accordance with the principle of mutual risk, by overcompensating for disability through positive discrimination.

However, in the context of an ageing society, the age pyramid of which is precariously balanced on a very narrow base, and a population of working age that is continually falling in relation to the overall population which it supports through its work, the issue of employing people with disabilities goes beyond the simple matter of fine principles and human rights. It becomes an economic and social necessity. It is increasingly obvious that while society must do all in its power to integrate people with disabilities, this is not simply because they need society, but more particularly because society needs their contribution to the collective effort to produce commercial and non-commercial goods and services, as is made clear in the OECD report entitled Transforming Disability into Ability (2), whose authors recommend in particular that individual support schemes should be developed, combining retraining with vocational training, help with finding jobs, financial allowances and access to different types of employment.

It would nonetheless appear, as is said by Murielle Timmermans, a young blind woman who spent some time as a trainee at the DG Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission in Brussels, that ‘Member States do not regard the issue of disability as a priority’ (3). It was in order to put the issue under the spotlight that the European Commission and the European Disability Forum (EDF) (4) organised the Year of People with Disabilities in 2003, carrying Member States along with them, with the intention of revealing the difficulties and discrimination which such people face, and emphasising their contribution to society and their right to have a chance to improve their lives and to see attitudes towards them change.

The choice made by the European Union is very clear: it is that of integration. In the field of education, and specifically in that of vocational training, this means seeking as far as possible to integrate young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs into ordinary educational establishments and reducing enrolment in specialised establishments to a minimum.

The issue merits debate, however. Integration into the ordinary school system unquestionably has positive effects in terms of socialisation, as Annet De Vroey argues in the article published here. She prepares young people with disabilities to integrate with their peers with no experience of disability, and non-disabled young people to get along every day with their disabled peers. However, the fact remains that protected systems often respond better to the specific educational needs of young people with disabilities and also have the advantage of

(3) 2003: European Year of People with Disabilities, op. cit., page 35.
(4) The European Disability Forum / Forum européen des personnes handicapées is an EU umbrella organisation representing a large number of associations of people with disabilities. The purpose of EDF is to guarantee full access for disabled citizens to fundamental rights through their active participation in development and policy implementation within the European Union. The Forum has a website in English and French: English: http://www.edf-feph.org/en/welcome.htm French: http://www.edf-feph.org/fr/welcome.htm
providing reassurance for the young people and their families, thereby reducing the level of stress and hence raising their immediate quality of life. It is therefore vital to work in close collaboration with the families and with associations of people with disabilities, and above all to give specific training to the trainers and other specialists called upon to help young people with disabilities to move into an open environment, as Cristina Milagre, João Passeiro and Victor Almeida, who work as part of the INOFOR team, point out in their article on new actors in the training of disadvantaged social groups.

We publish four articles in this issue on vocational training for people with special educational needs.

The first article, Vocational training for disabled pupils in an inclusive setting, by Annet De Vroey, comes from Belgium and is an expression of opinion. It argues in favour of integrated initial vocational training in ordinary educational establishments. The author calls for the appointment of specialist teachers to every ordinary school rather than their concentration in specialist institutions, and stresses the need for specialist support for young people with disabilities during their school careers in the ordinary environment. Annet De Vroey lectures at the École supérieure catholique in Louvain, where she teaches a supplementary specialist course as part of teacher training for students who will then teach young people with disabilities in the ordinary environment.

The second article on secondary leaving certificates and vocational skills qualifications for disadvantaged young people, is the outcome of a research study conducted by three Norwegian academic researchers, Karl Johan Skårbrevik of the University of Ålesund, and Randi Bergem and Finn Ove Bátevik of the More Research Institute in Volda. This article reports on the measures needed in the ordinary education system at the level of upper secondary education and apprenticeship in order to ensure that young people with disabilities succeed in obtaining an upper secondary leaving certificate and vocational qualifications. One of these measures is the provision of close support for students, a conclusion which echoes that of the preceding article.

The third element of this mini-report is a Portuguese article by Cristina Milagre, João Passeiro and Victor Almeida, three senior technicians in the ‘Training Methodology’ unit of the Institute for Innovation in Training (INOFOR). The article is entitled new trainer profiles for socially disadvantaged group, and is a case study carried out in five public and voluntary institutions working to train and integrate disadvantaged groups into society and the labour market. It clearly shows how the need to take into account the new training requirements of disadvantaged sections of the population has resulted in new ways of organising training, the main focus being training support, and hence in the emergence of new actors involved in training.

Finally, the fourth and last article in this report, Special needs students in vocational education and training in Norway - a longitudinal study, is the result of a research study conducted by an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Volda, Jon Olav Myklebust. His longitudinal analysis confirms the argument, put forward particularly by Annet De Vroey, that integrating students with disabilities into ordinary classes rather than placing them in special small groups or classes is still the best way of enabling them to obtain the desired skills.

Some readers will no doubt consider that the articles published here only give a very limited view of the issue of vocational training for people with disabilities. We would not disagree, and we feel it is obvious the debate must continue in these columns. We are fully aware that the European Journal ‘Vocational Training’ has to date published only a very small number of articles on vocational training for people with disabilities and/or special educational needs. For that reason, the Editorial Committee of the European Journal has taken advantage of the Year of People with Disabilities to relaunch the topic of vocational training for people with disabilities.

A number of factors explain why this topic occupies so little space in these columns:

- our procedure for selecting articles, the rigour of which guarantees the quality of the Journal, often frightens off men and women working hard on the ground to promote and implement appropriate social and occupational guidance, education and training, and integration into society and the
labour market. They are reluctant to spend time writing articles which may then ultimately be rejected on ‘academic’ grounds. When they do overcome their initial reticence and submit articles, they are too often discouraged by the considerable work entailed in the revisions required by the Editorial Committee. They do not follow up their articles, so that these remain unpublished, even though it would sometimes require only modest effort to produce a text that would be of interest to our readers;

- the specialist journals which are the first choice of academic researchers garner the bulk of the good articles submitted because they are immediately recognised by the bodies making decisions on careers.

We nonetheless think it crucial that vocational guidance and training, lifelong education and training, and social and labour market integration for people with disabilities should cease to be a specialist area. This journal has a varied readership - academic researchers of course, but also the social partners, political decision-makers, and men and women at the grassroots, and it is published in five languages (5). It sets out to disseminate information about vocational training, guidance and labour market access, wherever possible from a European and comparative perspective. In other words, it deals generally with all matters concerned with the relationship between training and employment, with the aim of contributing to the development of vocational training in Europe by supplying the various parties involved with arguments, tools and examples which will be of use to them in their everyday work. We therefore hope that this first small report on vocational training for people with disabilities will help to open up the debate and will encourage other authors to send us their contributions on a subject which will obviously not come to an end on 31 December 2003. With this in mind, we cannot resist quoting the reply from the young trainee at the DG Employment and Social Affairs mentioned earlier to a question posed by a member of the DG Education and Culture:

What do you think of the European Year of People with Disabilities? Do you think that Europe can play a part in making society in general more aware of this issue?

It’s a good thing that Europe is taking this type of initiative. It makes it possible to present people with disabilities in the media and to the public. But the problem lies at the level of the Member States, which do not regard it as a priority and whose actions are completely invisible. Perhaps the EU should set precise targets, with concrete projects to be undertaken. And it would also be good if the European Year of People with Disabilities were not restricted to one year!