

POLICY BRIEF

Disability Inclusion in EU Youth Policies

Assessing the Reinforced Youth Guarantee in Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Poland



NEETcraft Initiative: Innovations for Empowering Youth with Disabilities

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Assessing the Reinforced Youth Guarantee in Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Poland

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Executive Summary

This policy brief assesses how disability inclusion is addressed within the Reinforced Youth Guarantee (RYG) and the broader legislative framework in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Poland. The analysis shows that EU-level commitments have strengthened the visibility of young persons with disabilities within youth employment policies, but national implementation remains uneven. Across the four countries, disability is formally recognised as a vulnerability factor; however, access to tailored, accessible and continuous school-to-work support is still limited.

A recurrent implementation gap emerges between policy recognition and effective inclusion. Young persons with disabilities continue to face barriers or uneven opportunities linked to inaccessible education and training pathways, weak personalised support, fragmented coordination between employment, education and social services, and persistent labour market discrimination. These barriers are reinforced by territorial inequalities and by limited data and monitoring systems capable of tracking disability-disaggregated outcomes within Youth Guarantee (YG) schemes.

Key Messages

- All four countries formally recognise disability within Youth Guarantee-related frameworks, supported by EU funding instruments such as ESF+ and Recovery funds.
- Despite policy recognition, tailored pathways and personalised support for young persons with disabilities remain limited.
- Structural barriers persist, particularly regarding accessibility, education-to-employment transitions and labour market discrimination.
- Fragmented coordination between employment, education, and social services weakens the effectiveness of support measures.
- Monitoring systems continue to lack robust disability-disaggregated indicators and comparable evidence.

The analysis shows that the RYG remains an important policy lever for promoting youth inclusion, but stronger disability mainstreaming is needed to ensure effective implementation. Key priorities include improving cross-sector coordination, developing personalised support pathways, and strengthening disability-sensitive monitoring and accessibility measures.

1. Policy Context and Rationale

1.1 EU Framework on Disability

Disability inclusion has become an increasingly central dimension of European social and employment policy. The EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 establishes a comprehensive framework aimed at promoting equal participation, accessibility, independent living and labour market inclusion for persons with disabilities across Member States. The Strategy aligns closely with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), to which both the European Union and all Member States are signatories. Its objectives emphasise the removal of physical, digital, institutional and social barriers that continue to restrict participation in education, employment and community life.

The relevance of disability inclusion is particularly significant given demographic trends within Europe. Approximately one quarter of the EU population reports some level of disability, making disability rights and accessibility a major cross-cutting policy concern affecting employment, education, social inclusion, and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2021).

1.2 Reinforced Youth Guarantee (RYG)

The RYG, introduced in 2020 as an update of the original 2013 YG initiative, represents one of the European Union's key policy instruments for combating youth unemployment and social exclusion. The initiative aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.

The RYG places stronger emphasis on vulnerable youth groups than the original framework, explicitly recognising young persons with disabilities as a priority target group. Its implementation occurs through national action plans supported by European funding instruments, particularly the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and national implementation plans that adapt the framework to different labour market contexts (Council of the European Union, 2020).

1.3 Why Disability Matters in Youth Policies

Young persons with disabilities remain disproportionately exposed to risks of unemployment, inactivity and social exclusion across Europe. Compared to their peers, they face more difficult transitions from education to employment due to structural barriers such as limited accessibility, unequal access to education and training opportunities, lower participation in higher education, and persistent labour market discrimination.

These disadvantages contribute to significantly higher risks of becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), often resulting in long-term exclusion trajectories beginning early in adulthood (Eurostat, 2025). Although the RYG formally recognises disability as a vulnerability factor requiring targeted support, important implementation gaps remain across Member States regarding accessibility, tailored activation pathways, personalised support, and cross-sector coordination. Consequently, analysing how disability inclusion is operationalised within national YG frameworks provides important insights into the broader effectiveness and equity of EU youth employment policies.

2. Comparative Country Analysis

2.1 The employment gap

Young people with disabilities face significant barriers in entering the labour market, including more difficult school-to-work transitions, limited workplace accessibility, weaker tailored support services, and persistent employer discrimination and stigma. As a result, disability remains a major source of early labour market disadvantage, increasing the risk of long-term inactivity and social exclusion.

The most recent data, referred to 2024, show a clear gap between young people aged 20–29 overall and those reporting difficulties in basic activities. At the EU level, the labour force participation rate is 74.0% for young people overall, compared with 73.5% for those with disabilities, a gap of 0.5 percentage points. The gap is much wider in several countries, including Poland (1.9 points), Spain (1.3), Portugal (1.1), and Italy (0.6). Italy stands out for its particularly low participation rate among young people with disabilities (57.0%), pointing to a double disadvantage: weak youth participation overall and an additional penalty associated with disability. These figures highlight the need for stronger inclusive labour market policies, with greater attention to accessibility, targeted activation measures, and anti-discrimination interventions.

**Labour force participation in 2024 for young people 20–29 years old
with (total) and without (none) disability (%)**

	With disability	Without disability	GAP
EU	73.5	74.0	1.00
Portugal	74.3	75.4	1.10
Italy	57.0	57.6	0.60
Spain	70.8	72.1	1.30
Poland	74.0	75.9	1.90

Source: Eurostat *lfsa_argaedd1*

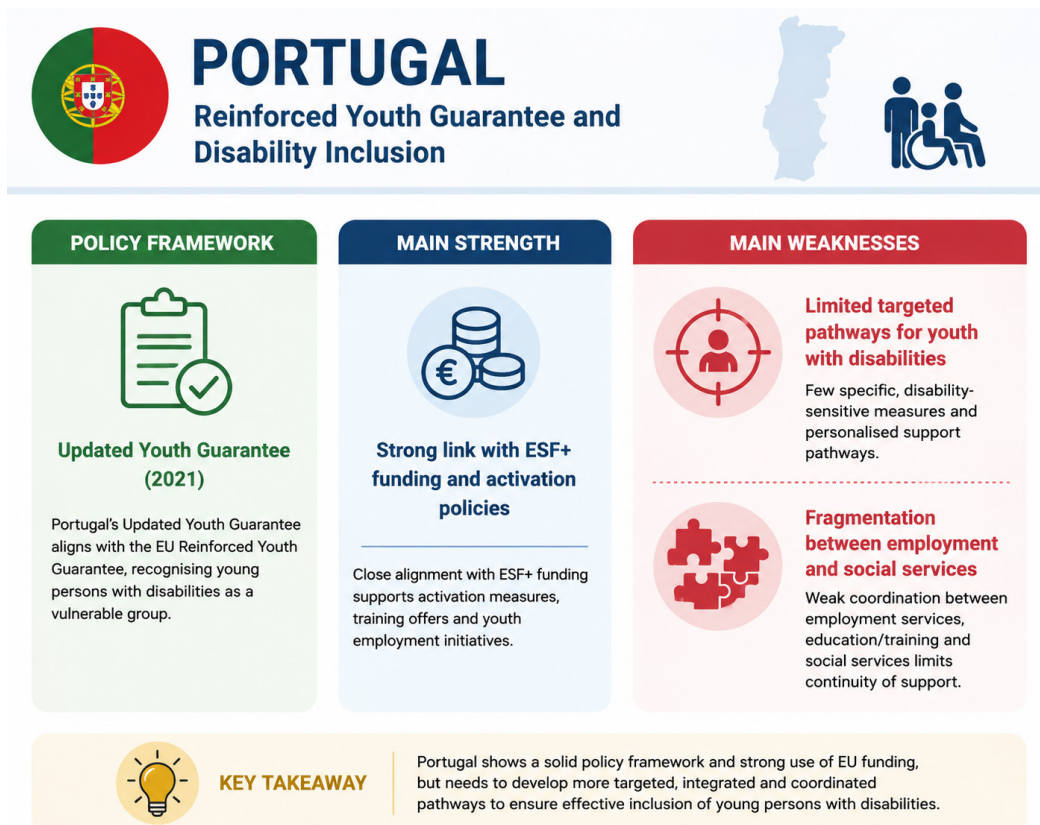
2.2 Country Snapshots

Portugal

Portugal's Updated Youth Guarantee (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2021; Council of the European Union, 2020) aligns closely with the objectives of the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, combining activation measures with the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding to support young people transition into employment. While the overall framework is well established, with the proportion of young people aged 15–29 who are NEET estimated at around 8.7%, below the EU average, evidence suggests that disability-specific pathways remain comparatively underdeveloped, limiting the programmes capacity to address the complex barriers faced by young persons with disabilities.

Recent data from the Disability and Humans Rights Observatory in Portugal shows that people with disabilities remain considerably more exposed to educational and labour market exclusion. According to Eurostat (2025), 32.4% of young persons with disabilities

in Portugal were NEET in 2024, compared with 8.1% of young people without disabilities, representing a gap of more than 24 percentage points. Quantitative evidence suggests cumulative disadvantage trajectories in which educational inequalities are reproduced through labour market exclusion. Despite gradual improvements in employment outcomes, persons with disabilities continue to experience lower employment rates and higher unemployment than the general population. According to the latest Disability and Humans Rights Observatory report (2025), in 2023 persons with disabilities represented only 0.81% of employees in private-sector companies with more than ten workers and 3.4% of public-sector employees (data from 2024). Furthermore, employees with disabilities in the private sector were predominantly women and older workers: 68% were aged 45 years or over, whereas only 11.8% were aged 34 years or younger, highlighting the persistent underrepresentation of younger persons with disabilities in paid employment. These findings raise important concerns regarding the effectiveness of quota systems, supported employment schemes and workplace accommodation measures in facilitating labour market entry for young people with disabilities (Observatório da Deficiência e Direitos Humanos, 2025).



A further structural limitation concerns the fragmentation between employment, education, health, and social support services. Although the Youth Guarantee formally promotes integrated pathways, coordination mechanisms between institutions remain weak and often dependent on local implementation capacity. This institutional fragmentation reduces the effectiveness of personalised interventions and creates discontinuities in support trajectories, particularly for young people with disabilities, whose transitions often require simultaneous assistance in skills development, vocational guidance, accessibility, health support, and social inclusion. As highlighted

by the OECD (2022), the absence of coordinated and person-centred approaches undermines the capacity of activation policies to address complex and multidimensional forms of exclusion. Consequently, although Portugal performs well on aggregate youth employment indicators, the significant challenges remain in ensuring that the Youth Guarantee effectively reaches those facing the greatest structural disadvantages.

Spain

Spain's YG Plus 2021–2027 represents a significant evolution of the previous YG framework, placing stronger emphasis on the inclusion of vulnerable groups, including young people with disabilities, migrants, low-qualified youth, and those at risk of social exclusion. The programme adopts a more comprehensive and person-centred approach, combining employment activation with training, guidance, and social inclusion measures. Its implementation is strongly supported through ESF+ funding and coordinated with broader active labour market policies.



One of the main strengths of the Spanish model lies in its decentralised structure, which allows Autonomous Communities to develop regional-level interventions adapted to local labour market realities. This has enabled the emergence of innovative practices and targeted support measures in several regions, particularly regarding vocational training, supported employment, and youth transition programmes. Spain has also reinforced partnerships between public employment services, social entities, and third-sector organisations working with vulnerable youth populations.

However, significant territorial disparities continue to affect the consistency and accessibility of support services across the country. Differences in institutional capacity, funding allocation, and regional policy priorities result in uneven implementation of YG measures, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. Consequently, access to specialised services for young people with disabilities varies substantially between regions, creating inequalities in support quality and labour market opportunities (OECD, 2023).

Structural challenges also persist regarding the transition from education to employment for young persons with disabilities. Although Spain has expanded inclusive vocational education and supported employment initiatives, employment rates among persons with disabilities remain considerably below those of the general population, while inactivity and temporary employment remain disproportionately high. These patterns suggest that activation measures alone are insufficient without stronger coordination between education systems, employment services, social protection mechanisms, and accessibility policies.

Furthermore, fragmentation between regional administrations and national coordination frameworks can reduce policy coherence and limit the scalability of successful practices.

While the YG Plus framework formally recognises the multidimensional barriers faced by vulnerable youth, implementation gaps continue to constrain the effectiveness of integrated and long-term inclusion pathways (OECD, 2022).

Italy

Italy's approach to supporting young people with disabilities in accessing employment reflects a relatively developed but only partially targeted policy design. While the country has aligned with the RYG through programmes such as the Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori (GOL) and the National Programme Giovani, donne e lavoro (2021–2027), these initiatives primarily address broad vulnerable groups rather than explicitly focusing on youth with disabilities (Council of the European Union, 2020).

Disability-specific employment support continues to rely mainly on Law No. 68/1999 on targeted placement (*collocamento mirato*), complemented by more recent reforms, including the 2022 national guidelines and the 2024 disability reform introducing a personalised “life project” approach.

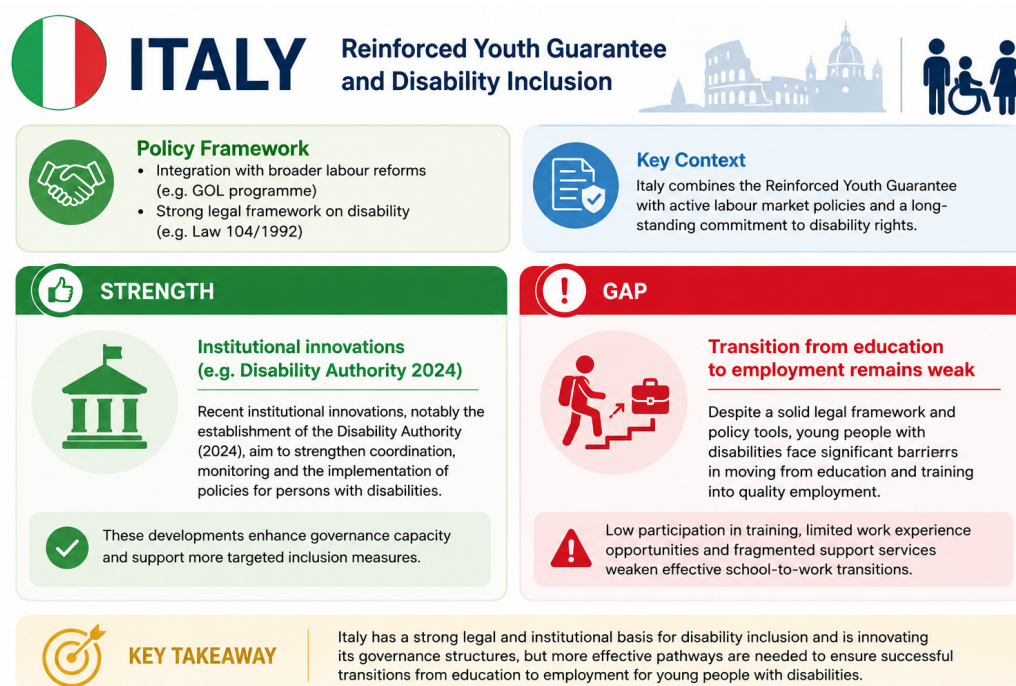
Indeed, the Legislative Decree No. 20/2024 introduced the National Guarantee Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is responsible for monitoring compliance with rights, combating discrimination, and promoting inclusion, in line with the UN Convention. However, the absence of a clearly defined youth-disability nexus within activation policies limits the system's capacity to address transition-specific barriers.

Implementation mechanisms are formally comprehensive but operationally fragmented. The system combines quota obligations for employers, financial incentives, targeted placement services, and increasingly structured profiling and personalised pathways under GOL.

Nonetheless, coordination across employment services, education systems, health services and social assistance remains weak, with strong regional disparities in delivery capacity (OECD, 2022). Multiple assessment procedures and administrative complexity

further hinder access, particularly for young people requiring integrated and continuous support. As a result, pathways into employment often lack continuity, and personalised interventions remain unevenly implemented.

Outcomes point to persistent structural gaps. Italy's NEET rate among 15–29 year-olds declined to around 15% in recent years yet remains above the EU average and conceals wider inequalities affecting persons with disabilities (Eurostat, 2025). Their employment rate remains substantially lower while inactivity is significantly higher (OECD, 2022).



Evidence on targeted placement highlights limited effectiveness: only a small share of eligible individuals is registered with employment services, hiring rates remain low, and a large proportion of contracts are temporary (INAPP, 2023). In addition, incomplete compliance with quota obligations and the limited scale of supported employment measures suggest that existing instruments are not fully translating into stable labour market integration. Overall, the Italian case illustrates a gap between a relatively advanced legislative framework and its effective implementation, particularly in supporting young people with disabilities in their transition from education to employment.

Poland

Poland's approach to supporting young people with disabilities in accessing employment reflects an early adoption of EU activation frameworks combined with a comparatively limited disability-specific targeting. The country implemented the YG in 2013 and subsequently aligned with its reinforced version, with a strong emphasis on labour market activation delivered through public employment services and ESF-funded programmes (Council of the European Union, 2020). At the strategic level, the Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 provides a comprehensive and cross-sectoral

framework aimed at social and labour market inclusion, promoting a transition towards a rights-based approach. However, similarly to other policy areas, youth-disability linkages remain only weakly specified, and key planned instruments—such as a national employment programme for persons with disabilities—have not been fully implemented (Government of Poland, 2021).

Implementation mechanisms are extensive but fragmented. The system combines employer quotas (6% threshold), wage subsidies, vocational rehabilitation and activation measures coordinated through the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities (PFRON). However, administrative complexity remains high due to parallel certification systems (disability status vs incapacity for work), fragmented benefit schemes and reliance on programme-based service provision. Coordination across policy domains, particularly between labour market, education and social services, is limited, and services are unevenly distributed territorially. While activation is a central policy objective, the system does not consistently provide integrated and personalised pathways, especially for young people transitioning from education to employment.



Outcomes highlight persistent structural gaps despite strong activation efforts. Poland exhibits a large disability employment gap, which increased from around 31 percentage points in 2020 to 36 percentage points in 2024, widening the distance from the EU average. Educational inequalities play a key role: the gap in tertiary attainment between persons with and without disabilities reaches approximately 28 percentage points, significantly above the EU average, and contributes substantially to labour market disparities. At the same time, barriers related to accessibility, transport and workplace

conditions continue to limit effective inclusion. Overall, the Polish case illustrates a strong activation-oriented policy model with early YG adoption, but also a significant gap in the systemic integration of disability-specific measures, particularly in supporting young people with disabilities in their school-to-work transition.

2.3. Key Cross-Country Findings

The comparative analysis of Portugal, Spain, Italy and Poland reveals a common pattern across national implementations of the RYG: while disability is increasingly recognised within policy frameworks, the operationalisation of inclusive support mechanisms remains uneven and fragmented. Across countries, there is a visible gap between EU-level commitments regarding disability inclusion and the practical capacity of national systems to ensure accessible, coordinated and personalised transitions into employment for young persons with disabilities.

One important common strength concerns the formal integration of disability within broader youth employment and social inclusion strategies. All four countries explicitly recognise persons with disabilities as a vulnerable target group within Youth Guarantee-related frameworks or associated labour market policies. In Portugal and Spain, YG reforms are strongly connected to European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding and activation-oriented approaches.

Italy combines YG implementation with broader labour market reforms such as the GOL programme and maintains a comparatively advanced legislative framework on disability rights. Poland, despite a more activation-centred model, has also developed a comprehensive strategic framework through the Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030. In all cases, EU funding instruments, particularly ESF+ and Recovery and Resilience Facility resources, have played an important role in supporting reforms and activation measures.

However, the analysis also identifies several common gaps. First, tailored pathways specifically adapted to the needs of young persons with disabilities remain limited across all countries. Activation measures often prioritise general employability objectives without sufficiently addressing accessibility, supported employment, personalised counselling or long-term transition support. As a result, many young people with disabilities continue to experience unstable school-to-work transitions, higher inactivity rates and weaker labour market integration.

A second cross-country challenge concerns insufficient coordination between education systems, employment services and social protection structures. In Portugal and Poland, fragmentation between institutional actors weakens continuity of support and reduces the effectiveness of integrated interventions. In Spain and Italy, decentralised or regionally differentiated governance structures create additional territorial disparities in implementation capacity and service provision. Across all countries, governance fragmentation limits the development of multidimensional support models capable of addressing the complex barriers faced by young persons with disabilities.

Finally, all four countries face significant limitations regarding monitoring and evidence systems. Disability-disaggregated indicators within YG monitoring frameworks remain limited, inconsistent or insufficiently comparable. Existing Eurostat disability-

disaggregated indicators illustrate important inequalities but remain limited in scope and are not systematically integrated into Youth Guarantee monitoring systems (Eurostat, 2025). Consequently, policymakers often lack robust evidence regarding participation rates, quality of offers, employment outcomes and long-term trajectories of young persons with disabilities. This weakens evidence-based policymaking and limits the capacity to evaluate the real effectiveness of disability inclusion measures within YG implementation.

COMPARATIVE COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Reinforced Youth Guarantee and Disability Inclusion

PORTUGAL POLICY FRAMEWORK - Updated Youth Guarantee (2021) - Strong alignment with EU priorities - Strong ESF+ linkage - Disability formally recognised as a vulnerable group IMPLEMENTATION - IEFP activation measures - Vocational education and training - Employment incentives - ESF+-funded youth transition programmes MAIN GAPS - Limited disability-specific pathways - Weak personalisation - Fragmented coordination between employment, education and social services	SPAIN POLICY FRAMEWORK - Youth Guarantee Plus 2021–2027 - Stronger focus on vulnerable youth - Disability integrated within broader social inclusion policies IMPLEMENTATION - Regional implementation - Autonomous Communities adapt services - Partnerships with third-sector organisations - Supported employment initiatives MAIN GAPS - Territorial disparities - Uneven implementation capacity - Limited policy coherence across regions
ITALY POLICY FRAMEWORK - Labour market reforms (GOL Programme) - Strong disability legislation (Law 68/1999; 2024 reforms) - Rights-based approach IMPLEMENTATION - Quota system - Targeted placement services - Financial incentives - Personalised pathways under GOL MAIN GAPS - Weak education-to-employment transitions - Regional disparities - Administrative complexity - Fragmented coordination	POLAND POLICY FRAMEWORK - Early Youth Guarantee adoption - Labour activation approach - Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 IMPLEMENTATION - Employer quotas - Wage subsidies - Vocational rehabilitation - PFRON activation programmes MAIN GAPS - Limited integration of disability-specific measures - Fragmented certification and support systems - Persistent disability employment gap

3. Key Challenges

Across Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Poland, the implementation of the RYG continues to face significant challenges in ensuring the effective inclusion of young persons with disabilities. Although disability is increasingly recognised within national YG frameworks, this recognition is not consistently translated into accessible, coordinated and tailored support pathways. Evidence from all four countries points to persistent structural, governance and monitoring limitations affecting school-to-work transitions and long-term labour market inclusion.

1		Structural and Accessibility Barriers	• Limited access to education, training and employment. • Accessibility gaps in transport, digital services and workplaces. • Territorial inequalities reduce access to inclusive services.
2		Weak School-to-Work Transitions and Limited Personalisation	• Fragmented transition pathways across education and employment. • Limited personalised support and mentoring. • Disability-specific measures remain weakly integrated.
3		Governance and Coordination Challenges	• Fragmented responsibilities across institutions. • Administrative complexity limits continuity of support. • Weak cross-sector coordination reduces effectiveness.
4		Labour Market Inclusion Challenges	• Employment outcomes remain below expectations. • Inclusive recruitment and workplace adaptations are insufficient. • Temporary and unstable employment remains common.
5		Data and Evidence Gaps	• Limited disability-disaggregated data. • Inconsistent monitoring and evaluation systems. • Weak evidence for assessing long-term policy impact.

4. Policy Recommendations

The cross-country comparison shows that disability inclusion within the RYG should move from formal recognition to operational mainstreaming. The following recommendations are intended to strengthen the capacity of youth employment systems to provide accessible, coordinated and effective support for young persons with disabilities.

4.1 Strengthen Disability Mainstreaming in RYG

- Mandatory disability inclusion benchmarks in national plans
- Integrate disability indicators in monitoring systems making greater use of disability-disaggregated indicators already available through Eurostat (Eurostat, 2025).

4.2 Develop Tailored and continuous transition Pathways

- Personalised employment support models
- Supported employment & transition programmes
- Include explicit disability inclusion benchmarks in national YG and youth employment plans, covering outreach, registration, offer quality, accessibility and employment outcomes.
- Require disability-sensitive indicators within monitoring frameworks, including participation rates, type and quality of offers, completion of training, transitions to employment and sustainability of employment outcomes.
- Ensure that disability mainstreaming is embedded in all stages of implementation rather than treated as a separate or residual measure for vulnerable groups.

4.3 Improve cross-sector and territorial Coordination Mechanisms

- Cross-sector governance (education–employment–social services)
- Local-level integrated service delivery
- Establish integrated governance mechanisms linking public employment services, schools, VET providers, higher education institutions, social services, disability agencies and employers.
- Develop local one-stop or case-management models to reduce fragmentation and administrative burden for young persons with disabilities and their families.
- Address regional disparities by supporting weaker local delivery systems, especially in rural, peripheral and economically disadvantaged areas.

4.4 Invest in Skills and Accessibility, and employers' engagement

- Inclusive VET and digital skills programmes
- Accessibility as labour market infrastructure
- Increase access to inclusive VET, digital skills and green skills programmes, ensuring that training environments, curricula and digital platforms are accessible.
- Treat accessibility as labour market infrastructure, covering transport, digital services, training facilities, public employment services and workplaces.
- Strengthen employer engagement through incentives, technical assistance, workplace adaptation support and anti-discrimination measures, while improving enforcement of quota or targeted placement obligations where they exist.

4.5 Enhance Data and Evidence Systems

- Develop and improve the release of disaggregated data by disability type
- Link administrative and survey data on disability and build ad hoc information on education and labour market outcome for sound comparisons between people with and without disabilities

Across the countries considered, the evidence shows that the RYG still falls short in addressing the specific barriers faced by young people with disabilities. Although

some progress has been made in recognising vulnerability within broader activation frameworks, disability is rarely mainstreamed in a systematic way, and targeted support remains limited, fragmented, and unevenly implemented. Weak school-to-work transitions, insufficient coordination across services, persistent accessibility barriers, and the lack of robust disability-sensitive monitoring continue to undermine effective inclusion. Strengthening disability mainstreaming, developing tailored pathways, improving cross-sector coordination, investing in inclusive skills and accessibility, and enhancing data systems should therefore be seen as key priorities for making youth employment policies more equitable and effective

5. Conclusion

The EU provides a strong normative framework, but

- Implementation remains uneven and insufficiently targeted
- The RYG represents a key policy lever, but requires systematic integration of disability inclusion to be effective

The EU provides a strong normative and financial framework for disability inclusion in youth employment policy. The RYG explicitly recognises young persons with disabilities as a priority group and offers an important platform for reducing exclusion during the transition from education to work. However, the comparison of Portugal, Spain, Italy and Poland shows that implementation remains uneven and often insufficiently tailored to disability-specific barriers.

Across the four countries, the main challenge is not the absence of policy recognition, but the limited translation of this recognition into accessible, personalised and coordinated pathways. Fragmented governance, weak links between education and employment services, territorial disparities, administrative complexity and insufficient employer engagement continue to limit effective labour market inclusion. Data gaps further constrain the capacity to monitor whether YG measures are reaching young persons with disabilities and improving their long-term outcomes.

To reach a more inclusive RYG, there is a need for systematic disability mainstreaming, stronger cross-sector coordination, investment in accessibility and skills, and robust disability-disaggregated monitoring. Without these elements, youth employment policies risk reproducing existing inequalities rather than reducing them. Strengthening disability inclusion is essential not only for the credibility of the RYG, but also for the broader EU commitment to equal participation, social rights and inclusive labour markets.

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