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Belgium

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European Disability Expertise (EDE) provides independent scientific support to the Commission's policy Unit responsible for disability issues. It aims to mainstream disability equality in EU policy processes, including implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

This country report has been prepared as input for the European Semester in 2022.¹

¹ For an introduction to the Semester process, see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-semester/how-european-semester-works/>.

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Table of contents

1	Executive summary and recommendations	4
1.1	Key points and main challenges for Belgium in 2022	4
1.2	Recommendations for Belgium	5
2	Mainstreaming disability equality in the Semester documents.....	6
2.1	Recovery and Resilience Plan for Belgium (RRP).....	6
2.2	Semester links to CRPD and national disability action plans.....	7
3	Disability and the labour market - analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies.....	9
3.1	Summary of the labour market situation of persons with disabilities	9
3.2	Analysis of labour market policies relevant to the Semester	10
4	Disability, social policies and healthcare – analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies.....	14
4.1	Summary of the social situation of persons with disabilities	15
4.2	Analysis of social policies relevant to the Semester	15
5	Disability, education and skills – analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies.....	21
5.1	Summary of the educational situation of persons with disabilities	21
5.2	Analysis of education policies relevant to the Semester.....	21
6	Investment priorities in relation to disability.....	24
6.1	Updates on use of existing EU funds (up to 2021)	24
6.2	Priorities for future investment (after 2021)	24
7	Annex: disability data relevant to the Semester	26
7.1	Data relevant to disability and the labour market.....	27
7.1.1	Unemployment.....	28
7.1.2	Economic activity	29
7.1.3	Alternative sources of labour market data in Belgium.....	30
7.2	EU data relevant to disability, social policies and healthcare (2019)	31
7.2.1	Alternative sources of poverty or health care data in Belgium	32
7.3	EU data relevant to disability and education.....	33
7.3.1	Alternative sources of education data in Belgium	33

1 Executive summary and recommendations

1.1 Key points and main challenges for Belgium in 2022

Belgium adopted a new Federal Action Plan on Disability 2021-2024 in July 2021 (Actieplan handicap / Plan d'action handicap), including 145 measures covering all aspects of life. This is a welcome development but needs to be integrated in the NRP.

Disability and the labour market

The disability employment gap is wide, and reforms of the disability assessment system and employment support services are needed to address this. It is also necessary to replace segmentation in the labour market (such as sheltered work) with inclusion. The RRP and the Action Plan promote digital skills to help close the disability employment gap but making e-inclusion programmes sufficiently accessible to persons with disabilities remains a challenge, and many of the most marginalised persons in residential facilities are not guaranteed access to ICT/Internet.

Disability, social policies and healthcare

There is a high risk of poverty or social inclusion for persons with disabilities in Belgium, which reflects the wide disability employment gap (as shown in the annexed tables). The poverty gap is notably wider among working age persons (age 16-64), as well as gaps in unmet needs for medical examination. Institutionalised long term care and social housing remains a challenge. The government takes seriously the exacerbation of discrimination in access to health care and, in the new Action Plan, foresees actions on inaccessibility in health care. The COVID pandemic showed that continuity of long-term care and support for people with disabilities remains precarious.

Disability, education and skills

If, on the one hand, the government tries to reorient education and training as much as possible in favour of support programmes to prevent early school leaving and a better flow to lifelong learning, then we find at the same time that the reversal of the M-Decree is on the agenda in Flanders (and reduces the chance of complying with Article 24 UNCPRD). Recent figures (e.g. in Flanders) show an increase of pupils with disabilities in special education. There has been increasing attention to mental health among children and young people (magnified by the COVID crisis) and some groups of pupils (e.g. those diagnosed with autism) have rapidly entered the newly formed type 9/0V4 Special schools.

Investment priorities for inclusion and accessibility

In addition to the above challenges, the RRP for Belgium foresees investments in the areas of transport and social housing. Accessibility of public transport and the built environment is challenging in Belgium and it is vital that this is addressed in the planned infrastructure investments, both longer and short term. Similarly, investment in social housing stock must be matched by inclusive design and social support for deinstitutionalisation.

1.2 Recommendations for Belgium

These recommendations are based on the evidence and analysis presented in the following chapters of our report.

Recommendation: address the segmentation of persons with disabilities from the mainstream labour market and promote more inclusive employment support systems. Rationale: for example, parallel labour markets (such as sheltered workshops and social economy enterprises) still hinders inclusion (as illustrated by the persistence of a twin track approach in segregated education).

Recommendation: promote and support reasonable accommodation by employers in open labour market.

Rationale: adjustments offer high potential to narrow the employment gap but remain underused due to lack of information and vision. Communication between actors is often a problem (e.g. between medical and employment focused organisations).

Recommendation: prioritise poverty reduction among working age persons with disabilities

Rationale: the disability poverty gap is wider among working age people and closely associated with exclusion from decent work in the open labour market. Action on job creation and training may contribute to this, but the adequacy of social protection must be considered (e.g. in relation to the additional disability costs of living and working).

Recommendation: ensure accessibility and address the needs of persons with disabilities when funding major programmes for transport and social housing.

Rationale: The inaccessibility of social housing and public transport has been denounced repeatedly with little evidence of significant progress. Major new investments from the RRF must address this.

Recommendation: keep all possibilities for inclusive education open when amending the M-Decree from 2022-2023.

Rationale: the new plans of the Flemish Government, the emphasis on cognition and learning gains, and putting more emphasis on strengthening the quality and position of special schools, creates tension with Article 24 UNCRPD.

Recommendation: closely monitor the implementation of the Federal Action Plan 2021-2024 so that the mid-term review in 2022 is well prepared.

Rationale: It is also important to coordinate the Federal Plan with the Flemish, Walloon, Brussels and German-speaking Governments so that the Federal Plan acquires an inter-federal character. Appropriate data collection and disaggregation is also needed in line with UN guidelines.

2 Mainstreaming disability equality in the Semester documents

Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendation of direct relevance to disability policy were not published in this exceptional policy cycle. For a commentary on the last published documents please see our country fiche for the previous Semester 2020-21.

2.1 [Recovery and Resilience Plan](#) for Belgium (RRP)

The following key points highlight where the situation of disabled people or disability policies was considered in these plans. We address the most relevant of these and other issues arising from the RRP/NRP in the next chapters.

Belgium's National Recovery and Resilience Plan² describes and analyses the situation of persons with disabilities and does so more specifically in the following areas.³

Concerning mobility, the Government of Belgium plans to invest massively in collective and sustainable transport infrastructure, both for goods and for passengers. One of the aims is to improve the supply of public transport services so that public transport becomes an attractive alternative. These investments will improve public health through reduced pollution and noise, increased safety, and a more active lifestyle. Transport infrastructure will also become increasingly accessible and adapted to users with disabilities. The accessibility of the reception facilities for all persons, and particularly for persons with reduced mobility (persons with permanent or temporary disabilities, families with children, travellers with suitcases, ...) is a key element in the development of the train services in Belgium. Currently, only 14 % of the network's stations (where 29 % of train passengers board) are accessible to persons with reduced mobility.

The Government of Belgium gives a lot of attention to education and training within this National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Concerning persons with disabilities we know that the labour market participation in Belgium is low for certain categories of the population, including the low-skilled, people with a migrant background (especially women) and people with a disability: these citizens are confronted with massive discrimination. We learn in the NRRP that the Government aims to increase the inclusiveness of education systems (giving extra attention to those at risk for digital exclusion) while improving their performance to ensure a better match between the skills taught and the skills in demand on the labour market. The Government wants to establish projects to equip the workforce with skills that match current and future labour market needs, including green and digital transitions. Certain measures will promote the social and labour market inclusion of so-called vulnerable groups (people with a migrant background, women, young people, people with disabilities, prisoners, people at risk of digital exclusion). From the COVID crisis it was learned that existing

² https://dermine.belgium.be/sites/default/files/articles/NL%20-%20Nationaal%20plan%20voor%20herstel%20een%20veerkracht_1.pdf.

³ You can find information about persons with disabilities in the NRRP on pages: 14-21-23-31-222-258-283-285-302-361-368-369-370-373-374-381-382-383-384-385-386-389-390-397-398-399-400-401-405-463-482-487-488-573-591-680-687-688-690-691.

inequalities were exacerbated, which leads to the fact that extra attention will be paid to e.g., women belonging to vulnerable groups (e.g., women with a migrant background, women with disabilities).

To contribute to the European pillar of social rights, the NRRP foresees investments in social housing. These should directly benefit the housing quality of vulnerable groups. Additional social housing for dependent elderly or disabled people thus meets a structural need for access to adequate and affordable social housing. Finally, the improved energy efficiency of (social) housing will reduce energy consumption, including for vulnerable groups, which will improve their economic and social position.

In the context of making a great leap forward in the digitization of public services, the Belgian Government and some of its constituent governments want to focus on the relationship with users, administrative simplification, and operational excellence. Mapping, simplifying (360° approach) and digitising services aimed at external users therefore becomes crucial. For example, the Walloon policy makers want to focus on developing the accessibility of sites and administrative steps for people with disabilities and European citizens (Single Digital Gateway).

2.2 Semester links to CRPD and national disability action plans

Relevant recommendations and issues arising from participation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) are highlighted in each chapter.

It is also important that Semester plans align with national disability strategy too. In Belgium, this refers to⁴ the brand new 'Federal Action Plan concerning persons with disabilities. (2021-2024)'.

In 2009, Belgium ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We can observe that 12 years later Belgium still has a long way to go to meet its obligations towards its citizens with disabilities. Persons with disabilities face special challenges and discrimination in society, which are especially reflected in the higher risk for poverty, social exclusion, and exclusion on the labour market.

To tackle these multiple discriminations the Federal Action Plan 2021-2024 is established, based on a cross-cutting (transversal) approach, in other words an approach that addresses all areas of life of persons with disabilities. This plan is in line with the sustainable development goals of Agenda 2030. Achieving these sustainable development goals, whose slogan is 'Leave no one behind', for the whole of society, requires an integrated and indivisible approach to economic, social, and environmental goals, with attention to the specific needs of persons with disabilities (p. 5).

The Federal Parliament also enshrined the right 'for every person with a disability [...] to full inclusion in society, including the right to reasonable accommodations' in the constitution in 2021 (30/03/2021, Article 22ter of the Constitution).

Fully in line with the UNCRPD (nothing about us without us), Unia and the Federal Advisory Council on Persons with Disabilities were asked to formulate policy priorities.

⁴ <https://handicap.belgium.be/docs/nl/federaal-plan-handicap-2021-2024.pdf>.

After all the federal government members had also formulated their policy proposals, the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities⁵ was instructed to give its opinion on the preliminary plans. On 16 July 2021, the final plan was adopted by the Federal Government.

The following elements are central to the elaboration of this action plan and to the general policy of the Federal Government (p. 7):

1. Human rights approach to disability
2. Involvement of persons with disabilities
3. Handstreaming
4. Cooperation and transversality across policies

The follow-up and implementation of this plan will be organized as follows (p. 8): Each Minister is responsible for the implementation of the measures decided upon and regularly reports on this to the Minister responsible for persons with disabilities and to the whole Government. The Minister responsible for persons with disabilities will ensure that civil society, and in particular the National High Council of Disabled Persons (NHRPH) and Unia, will be involved in the follow-up of the action plan. It is fundamental for the Government that the progress of the Action Plan remains well framed and monitored. The Federal Network Disability will develop a monitoring framework based on the principles of cooperation and co-creation. The UNCRPD coordination mechanism within the Federal Administration for Social Security is responsible for the secretariat.

It is a priority for the Government that progress in the implementation of the Action Plan be evaluated. A first report to the Council of Ministers is foreseen mid-way through the process (end of 2022). This mid-term report will be discussed in advance with civil society and will include a status report on the implementation of the different measures of the Plan as well as a request for advice from the NHRPH and UNIA on the progress made.

At the end of the legislature, beginning of 2024, a final report of the Federal Action Plan will be submitted to the Council of Ministers. This report will give an update on the implementation of the different measures of the plan and will also be preceded by a discussion with civil society and by an opinion from the NHRPH and UNIA. This final evaluation will also consider the new recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to Belgium, expected in 2023.

⁵ The advice can be found on: <http://ph.belgium.be/nl/adviezen/adviezen-2021.html>.

3 Disability and the labour market - analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies

In 2014, the UN CRPD Committee made the following recommendations to Belgium:

Article 27 UN CRPD addresses Work and Employment.

'39. The Committee recommends that the State party take all necessary regulatory measures and incentives to guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to employment, in both the private sector and the public sector. It should ensure that they have effective protection against discrimination, vocational training, adequate accessibility and the necessary reasonable accommodation.'

More recently, the 2019 List of Issues requested the following:

'25. Please provide information on measures taken to: (a) Enhance programmes to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, in both the private and the public sectors; (b) Facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities from unemployment or from employment in sheltered workshops to employment in the open labour market; (c) Tackle barriers and discrimination against persons with disabilities in the recruitment process and the workplace, including instances involving a lack of reasonable accommodation; (d) Adhere to the Convention when implementing target 8.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.'

3.1 Summary of the labour market situation of persons with disabilities

Data from EU-SILC indicate an employment rate for persons with disabilities in Belgium of 44.0 % in 2019, compared to 77.3 % for other persons against a national employment target of 73 % and approximately -7.2 points below the EU27 average. This results in an estimated disability employment gap of approximately 33 percentage points (EU27 average gap 24.2, see Tables 2-4) or an employment chances ratio of 0.6.

The same data indicate unemployment rates of 16.4 % and 5.3 %, respectively in 2019 (see Tables 5-7) and the economic activity rate for persons with disabilities in Belgium was 52.7 %, compared to 81.6 % for other persons (see Tables 8-10). These indications are broken down by gender and age in the respective tables in annex.

From the figures of Statbel,⁶ the Belgian statistical office, based on the Labour Force Survey 2019, we learn that one quarter (26 %) of people aged 15-64 in Belgium who are severely hampered by a disability or long-standing health problems have a job (for the total population the figure is 65 % for age groups 15 to 64). Almost half of them (48 %) receive special assistance in their workplace. This mainly involves an adapted range of tasks. Their unemployment rate (8 %) is also higher than that of the total population (5 %). However, the large majority (72 %) of people severely hampered are inactive. This means that they do not have a job, are not looking for a job and/or are not available for work. Of those who work, 39 % work part-time, compared to one quarter of the total Belgian population. Of the women among them, 55 % work part-

⁶ <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/people-disability-or-long-standing-health-problem-have-less-job-autonomy>.

time. This is 42 % of women in the total Belgian population aged 15-64. People with a disability or long-standing health problems are more likely to report that they have little or no autonomy in their job. This concerns 38 % compared to 30 % of the total working population aged 15 to 64.

3.2 Analysis of labour market policies relevant to the Semester

The 2021 Recovery and Resilience Plan for Belgium starts from following observation:

‘...As the 2019 Country Report⁷ indicates (p. 368), labour market participation in Belgium is low for certain categories of the population, including the low-skilled, people with a migrant background (especially women) and people with disabilities...’

To address these inequalities, the RRP proposes reforms and investments under the component ‘Training and employment of vulnerable groups’. With this component, the following objectives are pursued: (p. 368) ‘... *Promoting the social and labour market integration of so-called vulnerable groups (people with a migrant background, women, young people, people with disabilities, prisoners, people at risk of digital exclusion)...*’

To achieve this objective, a number of reforms and investments are envisaged on the level of the Federal state (for e.g. Brussels and Flanders see later on in this section) with a specific focus on the target group of persons with disabilities: the aim is to combat discrimination in the labour market. It is assumed that this harms the economy and that if we want to increase the employment rate, there is a need for strong measures for people who are discriminated against on the basis of origin, age, disability or gender. In concrete terms, the Federal Government will enable scientific monitoring of diversity and discrimination at the sectoral level. In order to map out the sectoral challenges of the market in terms of discrimination, a public contract will be organised for the development of a scientific monitoring.

In a second part, the aim is to improve discrimination testing. This requires the adaptation of the regulatory framework, the development of available tools and databases, as well as the training and strengthening of the services responsible for monitoring social legislation. (pp. 370-372)

As for specific projects within the RRP that seek to address the precarious position of women with disabilities, the Federal Government starts from the observation (p.389) that in 2019 the employment rate of women (66.5 %) appeared to be lower than that of men (74.5 %). Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis particularly affected sectors with an over-representation of women, exacerbating existing inequalities and reversing progress in gender equality. This inequality is even greater for women with a migrant background (37.3 %, compared to 75.4 % for men), or for people with disabilities.

- After a thorough analysis by the Institute for Gender Equality, project calls will be made to companies that can serve as case studies to collect good practices and can help to better understand specific barriers. The aim is to reach at least 250

⁷ Europese Commissie (2019), *Landverslag België*, SWD(2019) 1000 final.

'vulnerable women' (single women, women with physical or cognitive impairments, women from migrant backgrounds, etc.) and to launch an awareness-raising campaign based on the fieldwork.

The Government of the Brussels-Capital Region reports within the RRP (p. 373) that in terms of the employment rate of disabled workers, 9 % of 15-64-year-olds have a disability or health problem that severely limits their daily activities. Only 23 % of them have a job. More than half (51 %) of these workers are entitled to specific assistance or adaptations at the workplace. In order to find a job, 57 % of severely disabled unemployed people think that the type of work should be adapted to them. A third of them also think that the amount of work should be adapted so that they can work again. The objective of the Brussels Government is to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities, in order to reach the European average and to contribute to the Belgian strategy of de-institutionalisation of people with disabilities. (p. 374)

- In order to increase the participation of people with disabilities in the labour market, the Brussels Government wants to introduce a new legal framework with a specific premium scheme to support employers in the recruitment and sustainable integration of job-seekers with disabilities.

The Flemish Government wants to support the training funds for sheltered and social workshops in order to strengthen the skills and competences of target group employees. (pp. 462-463)

- In order to realise these targets the Flemish Government is looking for actions to anchor lifelong learning in the sector and to develop a 'tailored' training offer for employees.

Belgium's national disability action plan, The Federal Plan Handicap 2021-2024, points out the important competences of the federal states regarding employment of persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, three very important themes are registered in the plan and set out in actions:

1. Realising and supporting quality employment for persons with disabilities within the administration of the Federal Government itself. The Government wants to Develop an action plan to pursue the increase of employment of persons with disabilities towards 3 % in the management contracts or strategic plans of BPost and Proximis and the National Lottery.
2. Informing about and giving concrete form to the principle of 'reasonable accommodation', which has still not been properly implemented. The Federal Government wants to facilitate the use of reasonable accommodations in the working environment of the Federal Government itself by:
 - a. (Exceptional) funding to support employers and federal employees with disabilities to establish telework stations.
 - b. (Co-)funding of diversity projects that enable traditional workplace accommodations or disability awareness or coaching initiatives.
3. Removing possible obstacles to the possible inclusion of a self-employed status for persons with disabilities. The Federal Government wants to consider and support ways to make it easier to start up a self-employed activity, in particular by reducing the financial conditions for access to the social status of the self-

employed for people with disabilities; or by combining a self-employed secondary activity status with allowances for people with disabilities.

In a recent research report on the situation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, researchers of the KU.Leuven (Van Herreweghe and Lamberts, 2020⁸) (based on focus group research with essential stakeholders) put forward a number of critical points that show that, despite all well-intentioned plans and future perspectives, there is still a lot lacking to be able to speak of labour participation of persons with disabilities. We outline a number of those essential critical points:

First of all, for Belgium complexity of the labour market organization remains an issue. The division of certain responsibilities over regions and communities makes it often difficult for employees/ jobseekers/non-professionals with a work-limiting disability as well as employers to know where to turn for certain information and support.

The provision of reasonable accommodation is a concrete example of a measure that holds a lot of potential but often remains underused due to lack of information and vision. Certainly, in the area of adjustments to the organisation of work, there is often not enough creative thinking to make and keep the work sustainable. In addition, it appears that communication and the flow of information between the various actors is often a problem. On the one hand, this is because of privacy reasons. On the other hand, some of these communication problems appear to stem from a difference of starting point or culture within organisations. Certainly, between medical service providers and organisations that focus on employment, there still seems to be a gap.

Despite several good examples, not all employers today think in inclusive terms during their recruitment process. Despite the growing labour shortage, the unused potential of the large group of non-active and unemployed persons with disabilities has not yet been sufficiently tapped. It is therefore important to bring about a 'mind shift' among the broad group of employers, to make them reflexively consider people with a work-limiting disability as potential employees.

Another problem is that - partly due to a lack of information - retention does not seem to be sufficiently addressed when employees are confronted with a work-limiting disability during their career. It appears that, for the time being, there is still too little focus on a well-developed re-integration plan and that too often the choice is made to replace the employee in question.

Also for jobseekers/non-professionals and employees there is still room for growth when it comes to information. Today, online information is still often highly fragmented between all the different actors and their competences.

This makes it difficult for the person in question to work independently and proactively and they remain more dependent on their service provider/supervisor, while own responsibility and participation are very important.

For certain target groups of persons with disabilities, sheltered workshops and tailor-made companies play an important role.

⁸ <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/39105>.

important role. Within this operation, the idea should grow that for people with sufficient working capacities, this does not have to be the end of their path to employment.

Finally, technological innovation and digitalisation will only have a greater impact on labour in general but also for people with a work-limiting disability. This offers opportunities but also challenges now and in the future. In particular, the link between technology and persons with disabilities is not made often enough in the regular economy.

4 Disability, social policies and healthcare – analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies

In 2014, the UN CRPD Committee made the following recommendations to Belgium:

Article 28 UN CRPD addresses Adequate standard of living and social protection.

‘There was no recommendation on Article 28.’

More recently the 2019 List of Issues requested the following:

‘25. Please provide information on measures taken to: (a) Enhance programmes to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, in both the private and the public sectors; (b) Facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities from unemployment or from employment in sheltered workshops to employment in the open labour market; (c) Tackle barriers and discrimination against persons with disabilities in the recruitment process and the workplace, including instances involving a lack of reasonable accommodation; (d) Adhere to the Convention when implementing target 8.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.’

Article 19 UN CRPD addresses Living independently in the community.

‘There was no recommendation on Article 19.’

33. The Committee recommends that the State party work towards deinstitutionalization by reducing investment in collective infrastructure and promoting personal choice. The Committee urges the State party to implement a disability action plan at all levels of the State to guarantee access to services and an independent life for persons with disabilities so that they are able to live in the community. The action plan must eliminate current waiting lists and ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sufficient financial resources and that communities are accessible for persons with disabilities. The Committee recommends that the State party devise international cooperation programmes that respect the right of persons with disabilities to live in the community and involve disabled persons’ representatives and their families in their preparation.’

More recently the 2019 List of Issues requested the following:

‘25. Please provide information on measures taken to: (a) Enhance programmes to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, in both the private and the public sectors; (b) Facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities from unemployment or from employment in sheltered workshops to employment in the open labour market; (c) Tackle barriers and discrimination against persons with disabilities in the recruitment process and the workplace, including instances involving a lack of reasonable accommodation; (d) Adhere to the Convention when implementing target 8.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.’

Article 25 UN CRPD addresses Health.

The 2019 List of Issues requested the following:

‘25. Please provide information on measures taken to: (a) Enhance programmes to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, in both the private and the public sectors; (b) Facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities from

unemployment or from employment in sheltered workshops to employment in the open labour market; (c) Tackle barriers and discrimination against persons with disabilities in the recruitment process and the workplace, including instances involving a lack of reasonable accommodation; (d) Adhere to the Convention when implementing target 8.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.'

4.1 Summary of the social situation of persons with disabilities

Data from EU-SILC 2019 indicate the poverty risk rate for working age persons with disabilities in Belgium was 21.3 % in 2019, compared to 11.0 % for other persons of similar age - an estimated disability poverty gap of approximately 10 percentage points (see Table 14). For people aged over 65, the disability poverty gap was 5.7 points (18.8 % for older persons with disabilities and 13.1 % for other persons of similar age). The tables in annex also indicate the respective rates of risk of poverty or social exclusion and break these down by gender as well age.

For persons with disabilities of working age in Belgium (age 16-64) the risk of poverty before social transfers was 54.7 % and 21.3 % after transfers. The in-work poverty rate for persons with disabilities aged under 60 was 6.6 %.

Of interest to health policy are the data on self-reported unmet needs for medical examination (too expensive or too far to travel or waiting list). Disability equality gaps are evident here too and, on this basis, the rate for disabled persons in Belgium was 4.2%, compared to 0.9 % for other persons, which is above the EU27 average of 1.7 %.

4.2 Analysis of social policies relevant to the Semester

Regarding the recurrently observed relationship between disability and poverty among Belgian citizens, several governments in the country have planned specific actions in the RRP.

These actions are linked (p. 680) to the Sustainable Development Goals 1 (elimination of all forms of poverty) SDG5 (gender equality is pursued and specific attention is paid to girls and women) SDG4 (equal access to lifelong learning is pursued). When analysing the actions - which we briefly present below - a focus on digital and e-inclusion stands out.

In the RRP, the Federal Government starts from an analysis made by the King Baudouin Foundation⁹ in its annual Barometer of Digital Inclusion. Three 'types' of inequality emerge: (p. 384)

- Inequality in access to digital technologies: The Digital Inclusion Barometer (2020) shows that 10% (or 650,000) of Belgian households do not have access to the Internet at home. In the low-income group, this share rises to 29 %.

⁹ Koning Boudewijnstichting (2020), *Barometer Digitale Inclusie*, <https://www.kbs-frb.be/fr/Activities/Publications/2020/20200827ND>.

- Inequality in digital competences: According to the above-mentioned study, a total of 40 % of the Belgian population is vulnerable in the use of digital technologies: 32 % have limited competences and 8 % are non-internet users. The lower the level of income and education, the less digital competencies are available (75 %).
- Inequalities in the use of essential digital services for obtaining social rights or health care, as well as for online banking and e-commerce. The lack of skills and the complexity of the platforms for these services are at the root of some of the inequalities.

With a call for projects, the Federal Government wants to target organisations (non-profit organisations, associations, NGOs, cities and municipalities, social partners, etc.) that support people in a state of digital vulnerability. (Including people with disabilities). Special attention will be paid to the digital integration of women. Projects may therefore include actions inspired by the European 'Women in Digital' strategy, within which a Belgian plan has been approved. The call also notes that special attention will be given to the people providing support (through teaching aids, training, etc.). These 'digital buddies' or 'stewards' are seen as an important link in achieving digital inclusion for vulnerable groups.

In the RRP the Walloon Government (p. 591) is planning to introduce the resources of the ESF+ to realise:

- full employment by effectively putting the most excluded groups and people with disabilities to work and concretely reintegrating them into the labour market;
- deinstitutionalisation of people with disabilities.

As for ways to promote the employment rate, the following are examples of ways to do so will get most attention: entrepreneurship, including job creation; training alternated with practical experience; education and the quality of education (quality and inclusion in education); social inclusion; socio-professional reintegration in the labour market.

In the RRP the Brussels Government (p. 373) starts from following analysis: the mastery of language and digital competences in the Brussels Region is a cause for concern. A significant proportion of jobseekers in Brussels do not know either of the national languages: 17.5 % of this group have little or no knowledge of the language of their administrative file held by the regional public employment service.

As far as digital competences are concerned, a significant proportion of jobseekers, especially those under 30, face the digital divide. This jeopardises the employability of young people in a changing economy (digitalisation of the economy, development of artificial intelligence, emergence of new professions) which requires the mastery of digital competences.

- As one of the actions, the development of a new legal framework for the introduction of a competence balance and a systematic career guidance is foreseen. The emphasis will be placed on the language and digital competences

of unemployed jobseekers in the support provided by the regional public employment service. (p. 373)

The Federal Disability Action Plan draws lessons from the COVID crisis and the way persons with disabilities seem to have suffered more than other groups from unequal treatment and unequal access to health services. The Federal Government wants to work towards a 'disability inclusive crisis management'. (p. 9)

- An inter-federal and multidisciplinary working group is charged with the evaluation and updating of existing emergency plans (energy supply, food supply, food disasters, ozone and heat, retirement home, nuclear, etc.). The working group also examines which additional emergency plans are appropriate. We draw lessons from the covid-19 health crisis to make our crisis management disability-inclusive.

The Federal Government also starts from the premise that persons with disabilities must have access to the highest possible standard of health care without discrimination based on disability. This means both access to regular care and access to care that is specifically tailored. Reference is made to the UNCRPD and the UN Committee that make the provision of health care to persons with disabilities subject to the free and informed consent of the patient to medical treatment. In order to avoid violations of the patient's integrity, all coercive practices should be abolished, according to the UN Committee.^{10 11}

The risk of stereotypes in health care may lead to direct or indirect discrimination because of a view of disability that is strongly based on a medical approach or on ableism (persons with disabilities do not have enough decision-making capacity, they have a reduced quality of life,)¹² This leads to following actions (p. 10):

- In consultation with the Federal States, the special thresholds for access to health care for people with disabilities that are situated on the border of the competence division for public health and welfare are being mapped out (e.g., the nomenclature for speech therapy and physical therapy situated on the border of responsibilities between the Federal Government and the States).
- Investigating how the rights to interpretation in sign language of persons with a sensory handicap are guaranteed within health care are guaranteed.
- Ensuring access of persons with disabilities to health insurance and health insurance funds on an equal basis with others: addressing the issue of pre-existing conditions.

Critical analysis concerning lack of (local-close) support for citizens with disabilities within a complex field of information and bureaucratic expectations.

¹⁰ E.g. Forced sterilisation of girls and women with disabilities in an institution, p. 10.

¹¹ Connection with articles 15, 16 and 17 of the Convention, and the axis of equality and discrimination. See also §15-17 List of Issues of the UN Committee for Belgium (2019), doc. CRPD/C/BEL/QPR/2-3.

¹² Unia, *Bevraging van personen met een handicap over de naleving van hun rechten*, 2020, p. 55.

One of the indicators that current policy efforts are insufficient is the large number of people with disabilities who fail to complete the necessary formalities to apply for support. Despite all the plans at all the different government levels, it appears that many citizens with disabilities still do not take up all their rights, and therefore risk ending up in poverty situations (in times of covid this phenomenon became even clearer). The federal government has therefore developed a country wide action to combat poverty and non-take-up. The DG People with Disabilities of the FPS Social Security launched the project City H@ndi.¹³ With this project, the administration wants to help the municipalities to help persons with disabilities.

Statistics show that the municipal authorities have become less and less involved – although local social policies are introduced to get closer to the citizens - in the reception and assistance of persons with disabilities (and that the pandemic has reinforced this trend). However, many applications for ‘disability benefits’ are rejected, which generally leads to increasing insecurity among disabled people, as shown in the Disability and Poverty Report (2019).¹⁴ The City H@ndi team is convinced that some of the negative decisions could be avoided thanks to better guidance and therefore wondered how best to support the municipal authorities.

All the mayors, all the social council’s presidents, all the general managers of the municipalities and social services and all the aldermen in charge of social affairs received an awareness-raising letter with a survey attached. The letter was sent to draw their attention to the importance of welcoming people with disabilities in the municipality where they live, where neighbourhood services are of great importance.

The survey will make it possible to update the list of contact persons for the DG and to know the specific needs of all the Belgian municipalities. These needs will be the basis for the elaboration of the (global, regional and specific) action plans. The 11 regional action plans will be consulted with the 11 basic teams of the DG Persons with Disabilities.

The CityH@ndi project is part of an objective to offer a very good service to persons with disabilities, with the emphasis on a greater accessibility of rights, an active fight against non-take-up, an inclusive communication (taking more account of the expectations and abilities of the person with a disability) and a stronger coordinating role towards the local actors.

The first results of the survey of the municipalities' needs will be known in early November. The action plans will be developed by the end of this year. The first support actions to the municipalities are planned for the beginning of 2022.

Critical analysis concerning the recently introduced (especially in Flanders) individual funding policies and the opportunities for clients and their close relatives to change/improve their care arrangements by facilitating flexible choice opportunities.

¹³ <https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/nl/nieuws/cityhndi-gemeenten-en-ocmws-helpen-om-personen-met-een-handicap-te-helpen-11-10-2021>.

¹⁴ <https://www.mi-is.be/nl/studies-publicaties-statistieken/armoede-en-handicap-belgie-2019>.

In a recent study¹⁵ Dursin et. al. (2021) found that (pp. 10-11)¹⁶ ...on average the overall intention to change the support arrangement towards the new preferences of the client was moderate at best. This suggests that flexibility in support arrangements will not come about spontaneously. Even when dissatisfied, many clients may not exercise control to change their support arrangements. Short-term switching costs might put off users and their network to change their care arrangements and especially in the context of disability policy, decision fatigue might result in a status quo bias in decision.

The level of support available can also influence choice. Support through the social network has a positive impact on the intention to change. However, there was no evidence for the hypothesis that professional support to change services from the incumbent provider would facilitate change. This suggests that it is important to be cautious when introducing systems of individual funding with the intent to achieve more effective care for all by means of market forces. Clients and their close relatives surrounded by a competent network may be more likely to end up with flexible care, more centred on the actual preferences of the individual compared to their counterparts without such networks. The findings illustrate that support from a competent network goes beyond the important role in supporting clients throughout the process of assessment and allocation of care budgets. These findings concur with previous claims that market mechanisms resulting from individual funding risk widening inequality. The non-significant results for support by the provider contrast with findings concerning support by the network. This could indicate that the role of the care provider in a setting of client choice is more ambiguous. While care providers can be an important source of information and support for clients and their network to navigate through the complex system of marketized care provision, they also, to some extent, have vested interest to retain clients.

The authors could not find a significant interaction between the perceived behavioural control and the treatments of this study on the intention to change support arrangements. This could indicate that support from the personal network of individual matters for the decision to be made in a social policy context, regardless of how well equipped an individual feels to actually make a certain decision. These findings have implications for policymakers and practitioners. Bearing in mind that social capital is unevenly distributed in society and that professional support cannot fully compensate for a lack of informal support, public authorities have some responsibility to compensate for a lack of social capital some clients suffer from in a marketized public service context. This goes for services related to care for vulnerable people, as our

¹⁵ Dursin, W., Benoot, T., Roose, R., & Verschuere, B. (2021). Choice and opportunity on the welfare care market: an experimental evaluation of decision-making in a context of individual funding policy. *SOCIAL POLICY & ADMINISTRATION*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12723>.

¹⁶ Dursin et.al. designed a vignette experiment in which close relatives of individuals with an intellectual disability in a residential care setting in Flanders (Belgium) were confronted with a hypothetical situation in which clients desired to change their care arrangement. The authors tested the impact of dissatisfaction, the available support by the informal network, and the support provided by the incumbent care provider, on the decision that these close relatives would make together with the client to partially opt-out and choose alternative care provision that better fits the clients' demands and needs.

case shows, but probably also for other public services: different people have different opportunities for genuine choice and exit strategies...”

5 Disability, education and skills – analysis of the situation and the effectiveness of policies

In 2014, the UN CRPD Committee made the following recommendations to Belgium:

Article 24 UN CRPD addresses Education.

‘37. The Committee requests that the State party implement a coherent inclusive education strategy for children with disabilities in the mainstream system and ensure the provision of adequate financial, material and human resources. It recommends that the State party ensure that children with disabilities receive the educational support they need, in particular through the provision of accessible school environments, reasonable accommodation, individual learning plans, assistive technology in classrooms, and accessible and adapted materials and curricula, and guarantee that all teachers, including teachers with disabilities, receive comprehensive training on the use of Braille and sign language with a view to improving the education of all children with disabilities, including boys and girls who are blind, deaf-blind, deaf or hard of hearing. The Committee also recommends that inclusive education should form an integral part of teacher training at university and during continuing professional development.’

The 2019 List of Issues requested the following:

‘25. Please provide information on measures taken to: (a) Enhance programmes to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, in both the private and the public sectors; (b) Facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities from unemployment or from employment in sheltered workshops to employment in the open labour market; (c) Tackle barriers and discrimination against persons with disabilities in the recruitment process and the workplace, including instances involving a lack of reasonable accommodation; (d) Adhere to the Convention when implementing target 8.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.’

5.1 Summary of the educational situation of persons with disabilities

The EU-SILC 2019 estimates concerning educational attainment should be treated with additional caution due to relatively wide confidence intervals, but they consistently indicate disability equality gaps (an average of 2-3 years provides a more stable indication). Table 16 indicates early school leaving rates disaggregated by disability status in Belgium. Youth with disabilities (aged 18-24) tend to leave school significantly more than non-disabled peers of the same age groups (and this is reinforced by widening the sample size to age 18-29). Table 17 shows completion rate of tertiary education disaggregated by disability and age group. Persons with disabilities (age 30-34) are less likely to complete tertiary education than their peers (and this is reinforced in the wider age range 30-39).

5.2 Analysis of education policies relevant to the Semester

Early school leaving.

Within the RRP (p. 345) the Walloon Government starts from the following analysis linked to the recent COVID crisis: ‘...due to a combination of the effects of the first lockdown, the start of the school year disrupted by the second wave of covid-19 and

the stricter health measures applied since November 2020, we see that the number of pupils in a confirmed absence situation (20 days of unjustified absence) has risen sharply compared to the indicators before the covid-19 crisis. As a result, an increasing number of pupils are at risk of learning disadvantage. Indeed, several recent surveys and opinion polls show the difficulty of distance learning for some pupils....'

- The plan (p. 346) is to organize reforms to be able to take into account the different causes of early school leaving: academic, family, relational, economic, psychosocial, etc. Some will focus on first-line intervention within the school, others on the social and cultural aspects. Some will focus on first-line intervention within the school, others on support and connection facilities more outside of school and finally some will focus on compensation measures. All of this will enable the various levels of dropout to be addressed to prevent disruption to young people.

In a recent audit on early school leaving by the Flemish Court of Audit,¹⁷ we learned the following (p. 5): ...In 2019, according to the European EAK- indicator, there were 6.2 % early school leavers in Flanders. Although this is a good result compared to the international average (10.3 %), it does not meet the European target (5.2 %) or the Flemish target from the Pact 2020 (4.3 %). The overall figure hides large differences per type of education, which the EAK indicator does not show. The ESL indicator of the Education Department does provide this information. According to this indicator, 12.1 % of Flemish youngsters left school early in the 2018-2019 school year. The BSO and especially the DBSO have many early school leavers, 17.8 % and 59.4 % respectively. The action plan 'Together against school dropout', which the Flemish Government launched in 2016 and which contains many actions for pupil guidance, did not yet sufficiently lead to the realisation of the objectives and has not yet been evaluated. The vision paper Vizier 2030 reiterates the ambition to reduce early school leaving, but no longer sets any concrete targets...' It is striking that in this report there is almost no mention of the situation of children and youngsters with disabilities.

Inclusive education

In Flanders, the Government has given a first overview¹⁸ of its new plans concerning the replacement of the M-Decree, starting in the schoolyear 2022-2023.

It is the ambition of the Flemish Government to ensure that all pupils can develop optimally with maximum learning gains. The new decree wants to increase the quality of education, but also guarantee workability within schools and for teachers.

It does so by focusing on strengthening mainstream education schools, learning support and special schools. The Flemish Government:

- a strong care culture in mainstream education;
- a sustainable learning support model with appropriate employment conditions for support staff;

¹⁷ Vlaams Parlement (2021), Voorkomen van vroegtijdig schoolverlaten, <https://www.ccrek.be/NL/Publicaties/Fiche.html?id=fc038045-654c-41e5-a39b-e6352f9acc63>.

¹⁸ <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/naar-een-decreet-leersteun-voor-leerlingen-met-specifieke-onderwijsbehoeften>.

- a fully-fledged place and a strengthening of the quality of special needs education (special schools).

It seems that the governments (and more specifically the Flemish Government) are trying to reverse the movement towards more inclusive education. The M-Decree is seen as a failure. The government is planning to give more decision-making power back in the hands of schools to admit pupils or not. (A plan that threatens to put many families in the 'defensive corner' again).

At the same time, one discovers that the increasing attention to the mental health problems of children and young people (problem magnified by the COVID crisis) exposes the lack of basic care for pupils in mainstream schools. The (Flemish) government is therefore looking for a policy whereby it wants to strengthen basic care on the one hand. On the other hand, the high pressure placed on mainstream schools by the need for increased basic care is being used to put the expertise of special education back into the spotlight for pupils with specific support needs. Certain groups of pupils (e.g., those diagnosed with autism/'normal intelligence') enter en masse, in the newly formed type 9/0V4 Special schools.

6 Investment priorities in relation to disability

6.1 Updates on use of existing EU funds (up to 2021)

A very important EU investment Programme is ESF, in its last yearly evaluation¹⁹ a lot of attention was going to the funds that have been used to activate the inactive (labour-related) part of the population and to bring them into the labour market. People with disabilities are hidden in this group and, through these subsidies (which were allocated to specific training centres for people with disabilities via the VDAB), have received support in preparing their entry into the labour market.

6.2 Priorities for future investment (after 2021)

In Belgium's RRP two areas of future investment attract our attention:

Concerning Mobility (p. 31): '...Increasing the provision of public transport in certain disadvantaged areas will improve the mobility of certain categories of citizens with reduced mobility opportunities and access to employment, services, etc. Furthermore, investments in the accessibility of railway stations will help improve the mobility of people with disabilities....'.

We observe²⁰ that several governments are committed to the principle of basic accessibility, which will thoroughly change the organisation of public transport. They want to focus on combi mobility (combining several means of transport). This brings with it great challenges for people with disabilities. Switching is often complex. Not all means of (public) transport are accessible. For many disabled citizens, basic accessibility threatens to make a journey by public transport more difficult.

Concerning Social Housing and the renovation of social rented housing (p.397) future investments will give extra opportunities for deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities and this investment programme will make sure people with disabilities will no longer have to face long waiting lists, given that many social housing units are not accessible to these citizens.

In a recent analysis,²¹ Prof.dr. Koen Hermans (KU Leuven) is bringing three elements on the table to underline the sense of urgency and the complexity of the housing issue for persons with disabilities in Belgium:

- Today, about 70 percent of Belgians are homeowners. In itself, that need not be a problem, but for more and more people, given the scarcity, owning their own home has become unaffordable.
- Also the lack of quality and accessibility creates barriers. On the private rental market, a large segment of houses - something like 45 percent – has to be

¹⁹ <https://www.esf-vlaanderen.be/nl/persberichten/jaarverslag-2019-operationeel-programma-esf-2014-2020>.

²⁰ Advice NOOZO: <https://www.noozo.be/nl/adviezen/basisbereikbaarheid-naar-een-vraaggericht-openbaar-vervoer-voor-iedereen>.

²¹ <https://www.gripvzw.be/nl/artikel/469/over-drempels-op-de-woonmarkt-voor-personen-met-een-handicap>.

described as 'of very poor quality' that does not meet the quality requirements. So, citizens often pay a lot for little, if people can find anything at all, because the competition is fierce.

- Practical tests about housing in Belgium are mostly focused on racism, but this type of research also highlights the disadvantage of people with disabilities. Landlords assess the certainty that people can pay and then there are a lot of stereotypes that are still very strong in society. A foreign name, but certainly also a disability, turn out to be very good motives for house owners to refuse candidates.

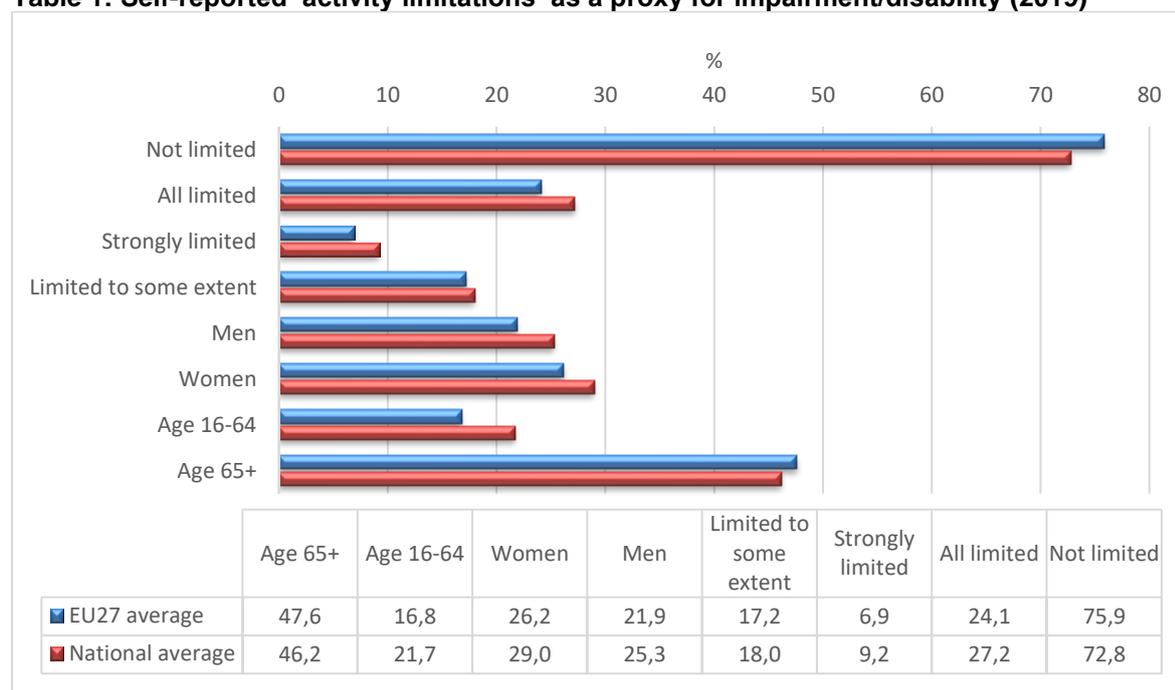
7 Annex: disability data relevant to the Semester

See also disability data published in the Eurostat database²² and statistical reports.²³

Unless specified, the summary statistics are drawn from the most recent EU-SILC data available to researchers from Eurostat. The EU-SILC sample includes people living in private households and does not include people living in institutions (congregative households). The sampling methods vary somewhat in each country.

The proxy used to identify people with disabilities (impairments) is whether ‘for at least the past 6 months’ the respondent reports that they have been ‘limited because of a health problem in activities people usually do’.²⁴

Table 1: Self-reported ‘activity limitations’ as a proxy for impairment/disability (2019)



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1.

In subsequent tables, these data are used to indicate ‘disability’ equality gaps and trends relevant to the analytical chapters – for the labour market, social policies and healthcare, and education – by comparing outcomes for persons who report and do not report ‘activity limitations’.²⁵ National estimates for Belgium are compared with EU27 mean averages for the most recent year.²⁶

²² Eurostat health Database, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/health/data/database>.

²³ Eurostat (2019) *Disability Statistics* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Disability_statistics.

²⁴ The SILC survey questions are contained in the Minimum European Health Module (MEHM) [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Special:WhatLinksHere/Glossary:Minimum_European_Health_Module_\(MEHM\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Special:WhatLinksHere/Glossary:Minimum_European_Health_Module_(MEHM)).

²⁵ This methodology was developed in the annual statistical reports of ANED, available at <http://www.disability-europe.net/theme/statistical-indicators>.

²⁶ The exit of the United Kingdom from the EU changes the EU average. Averages were also affected in 2015 by a discontinuity in the German disability data due to a definitional change.

7.1 Data relevant to disability and the labour market

Table 2: EU and Belgium employment rates, by disability and gender (aged 20-64) (2019)

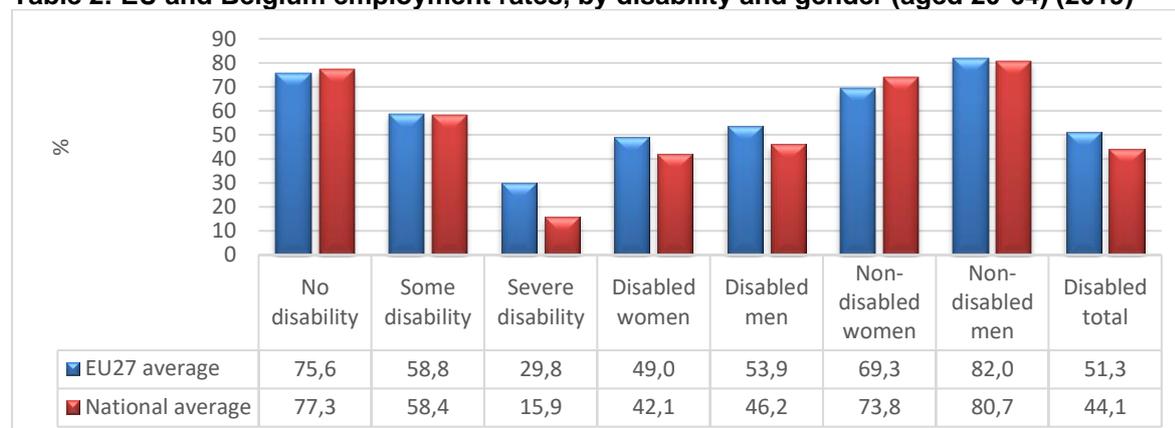


Table 3: Employment rates in Belgium, by disability and age group (2019)

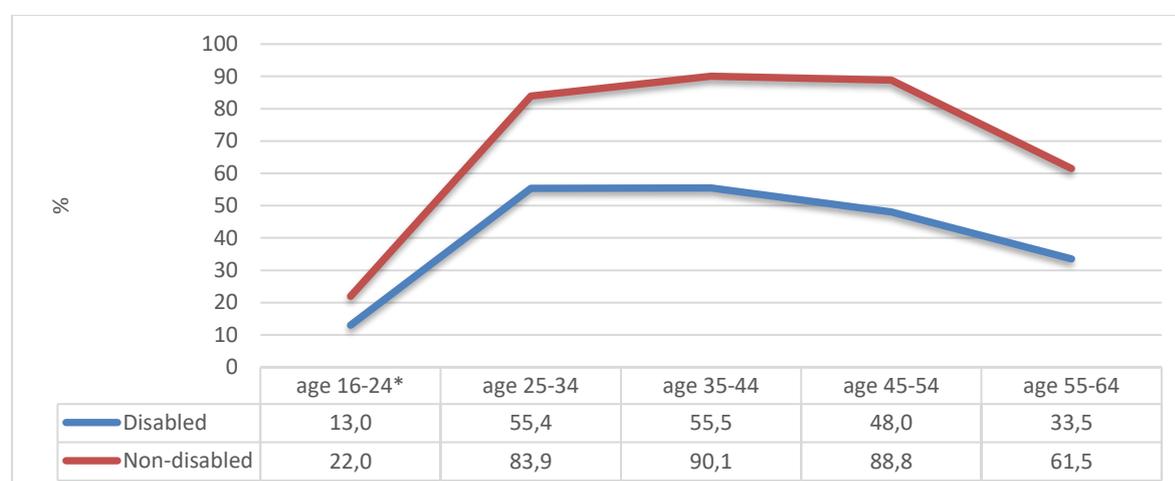
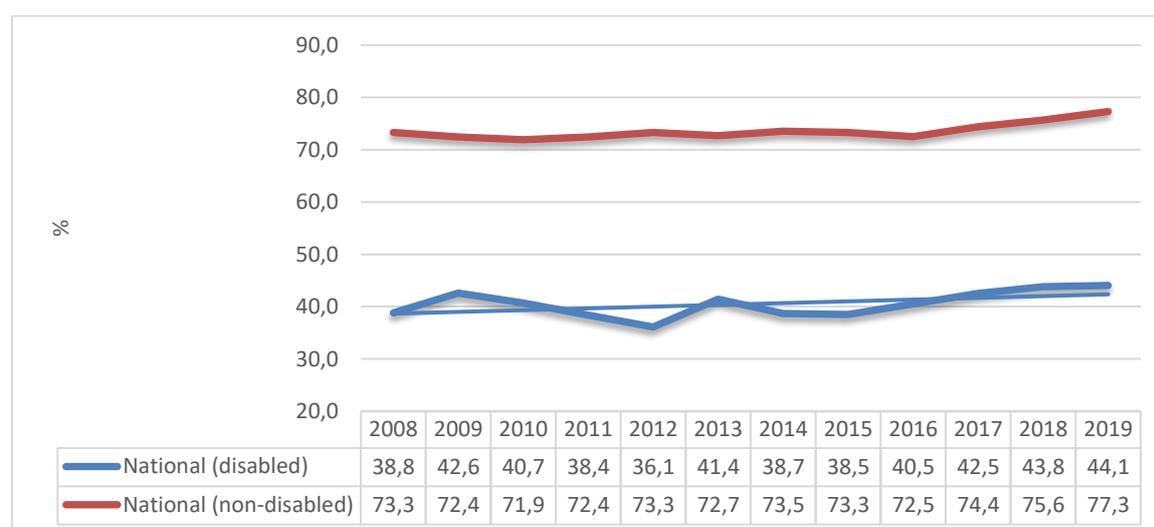


Table 4: National trends in employment rates, by disability status (aged 20-64) (2019)



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

7.1.1 Unemployment

Table 5: Unemployment rates by disability and gender (aged 20-64) (2019)

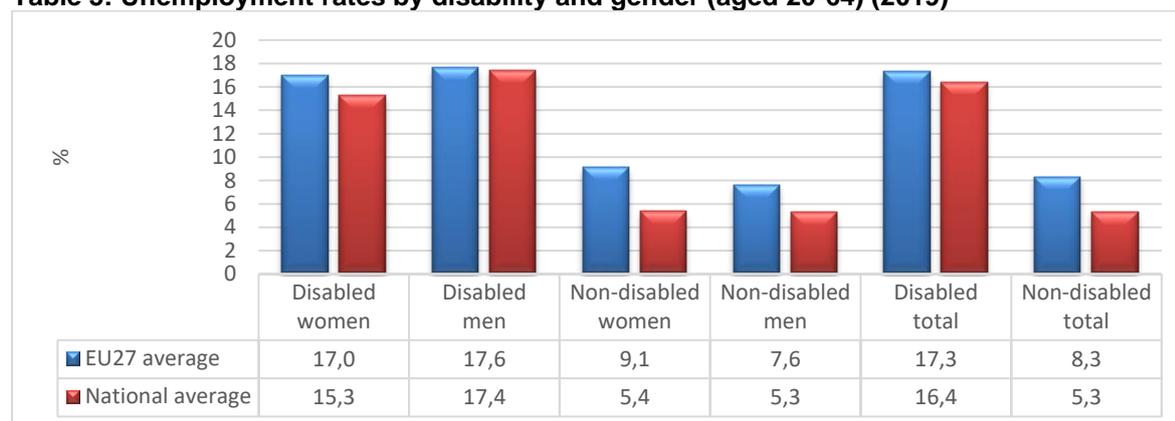


Table 6: Unemployment rates in Belgium, by disability and age group (2019)

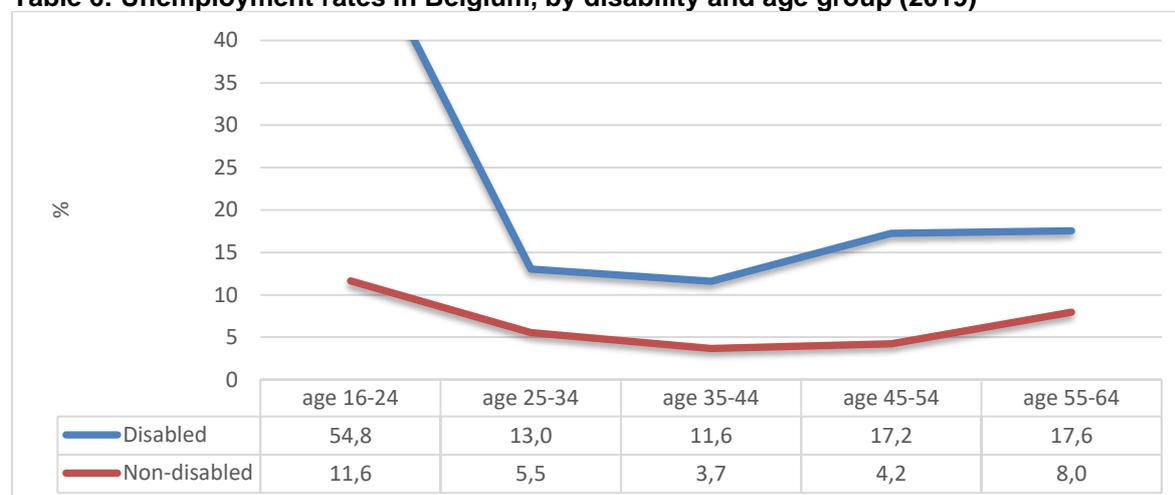
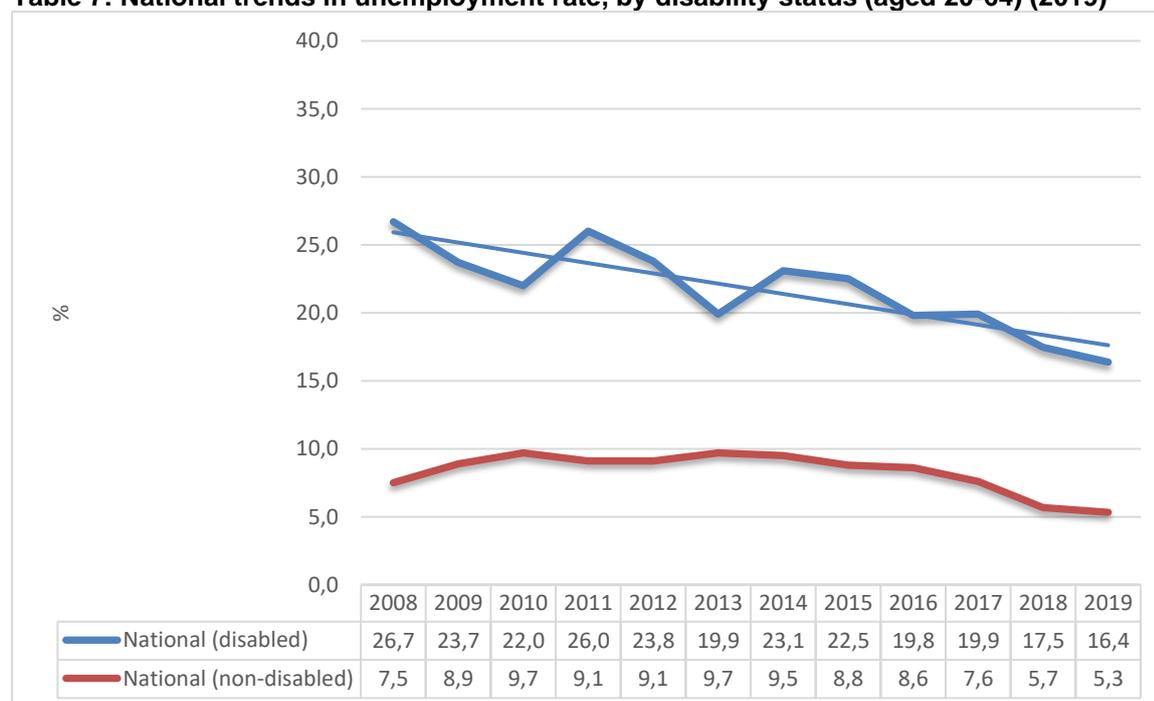


Table 7: National trends in unemployment rate, by disability status (aged 20-64) (2019)



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

7.1.2 Economic activity

Table 8: Activity rates in Belgium, by disability and gender (aged 20-64) (2019)

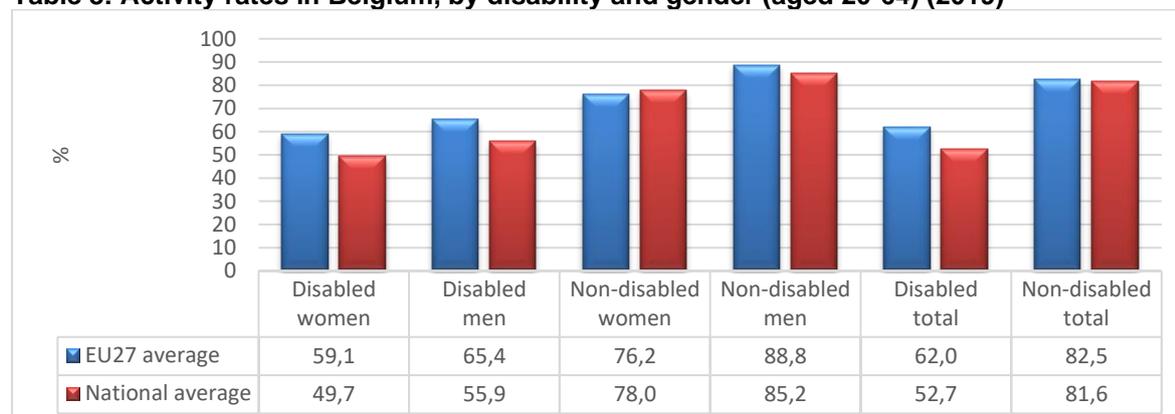


Table 9: Activity rates in Belgium, by age group (2019)

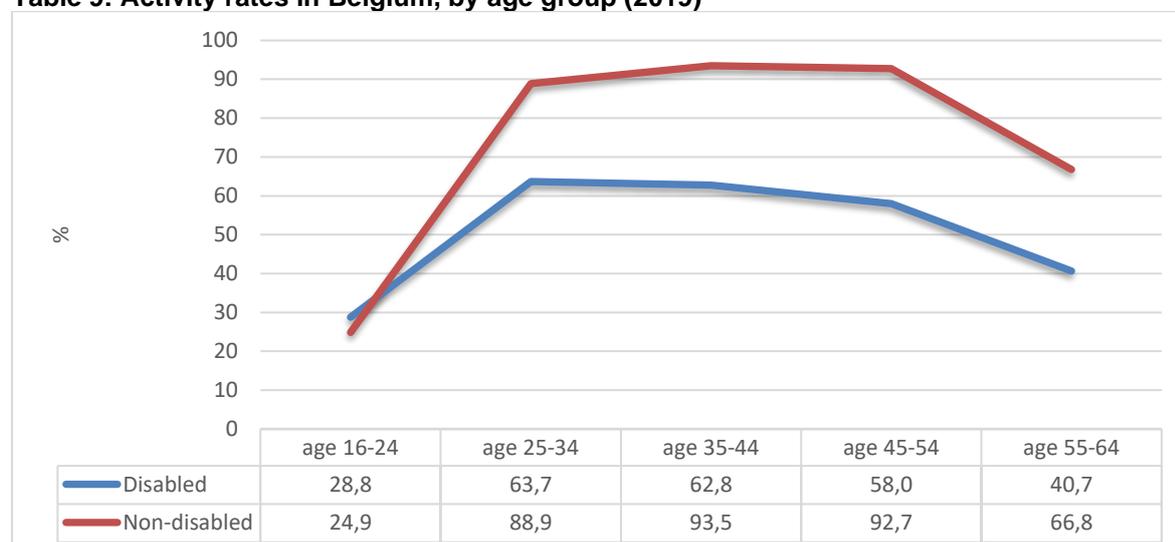
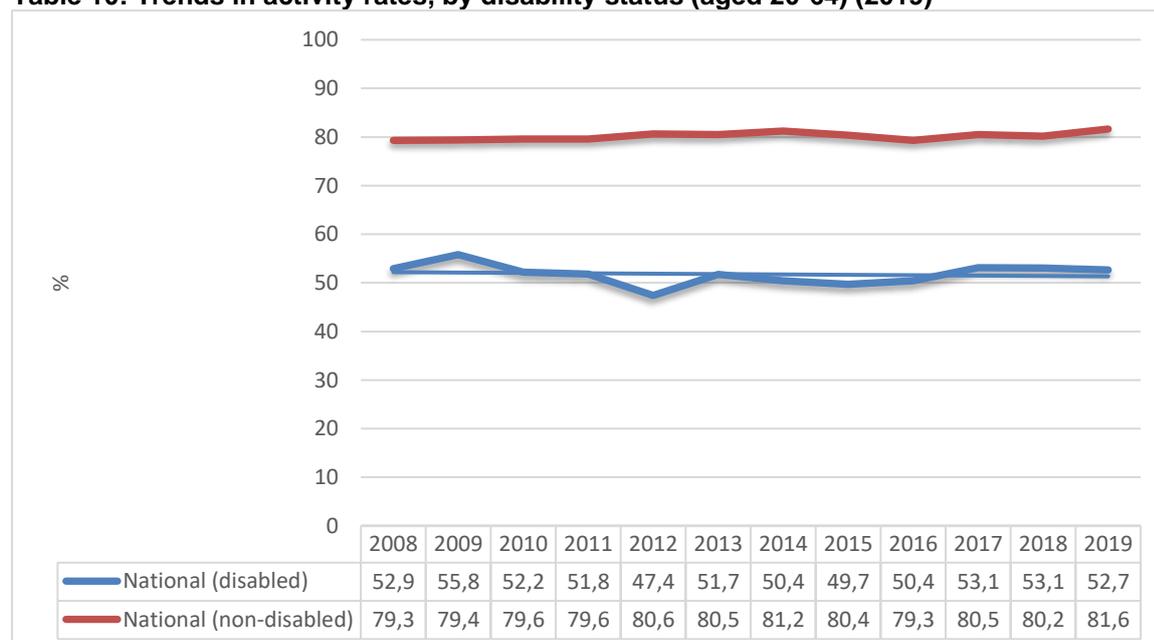


Table 10: Trends in activity rates, by disability status (aged 20-64) (2019)



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

7.1.3 Alternative sources of labour market data in Belgium

Disability data is not yet available from the core European Labour Force Survey but labour market indicators for Belgium were disaggregated from ad modules conducted in 2001 and 2011. These can be found in the Eurostat disability database.²⁷

The following summary statistics concerning people 'severely hampered' in working were released by Statbel, based on data from the national Labour Force Survey 2019.

Table A: overview of the labour market situation disabled persons in 2019

Situation in relation to the labour market				
15-64	Severely hampered	Total population		
Unemployment rate	8%	5%		
Employment rate	26%	65%		
Percentage inactive people	72%	31%		
Working population: Full-time/part-time				
15-64	Severely hampered	Total population		
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
men	78%	22%	90%	10%
women	45%	55%	58%	42%
total	61%	39%	75%	25%
Working population per professional status				
15-64	Severely hampered	Total population		
Private sector	64%	66%		
Public sector	24%	20%		
Self-employed people	11%	14%		

Source: Statbel.²⁸

²⁷ Eurostat Health Database: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/health/data/database>.

²⁸ Statbel (2020) People with a disability or long-standing health problem have less job autonomy, <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/people-disability-or-long-standing-health-problem-have-less-job-autonomy>.

7.2 EU data relevant to disability, social policies and healthcare (2019)

Table 11: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, by disability and risk (aged 16-59)

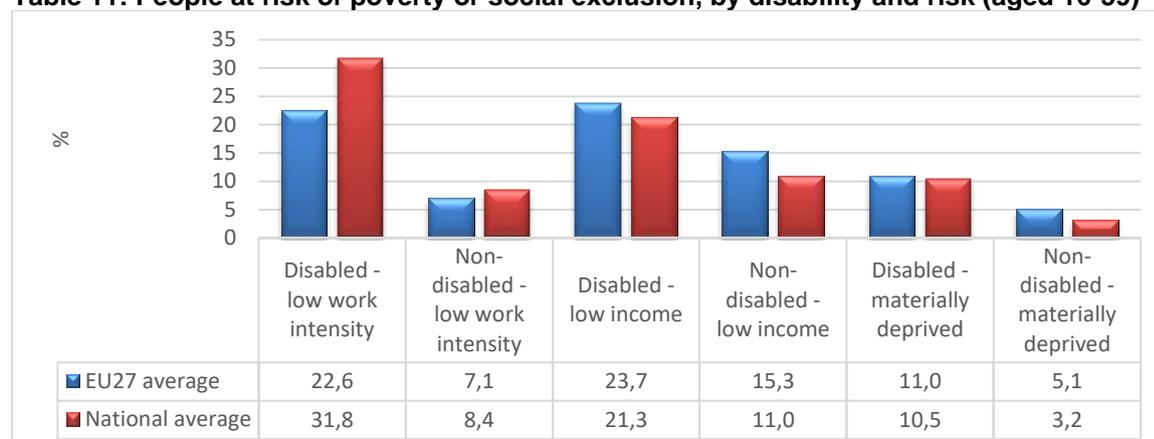


Table 12: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, by disability and gender (aged 16+)

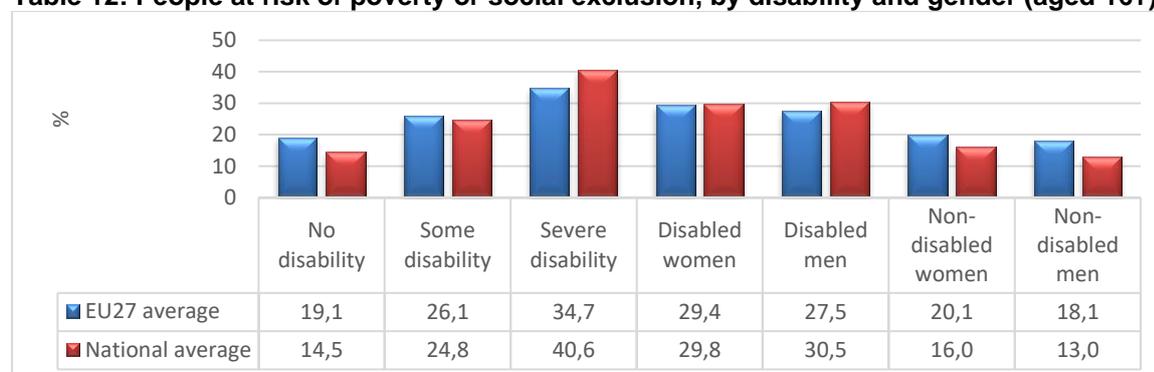
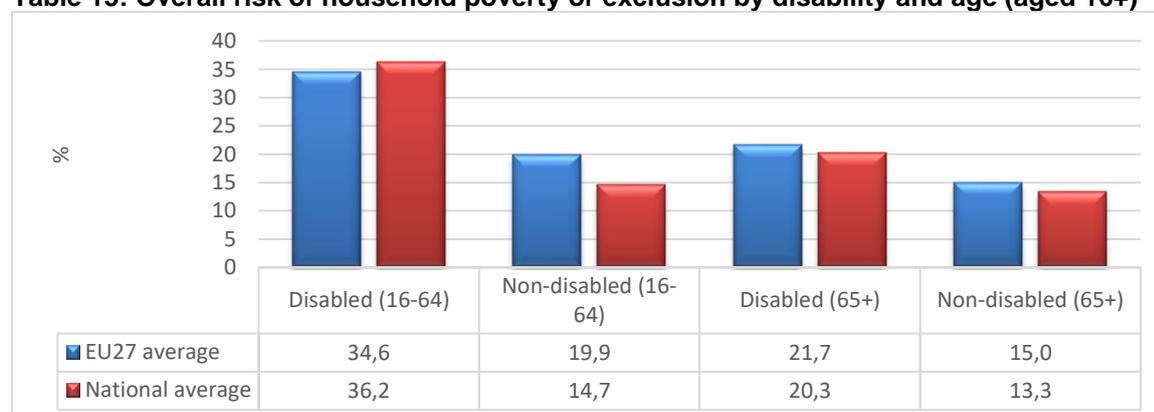
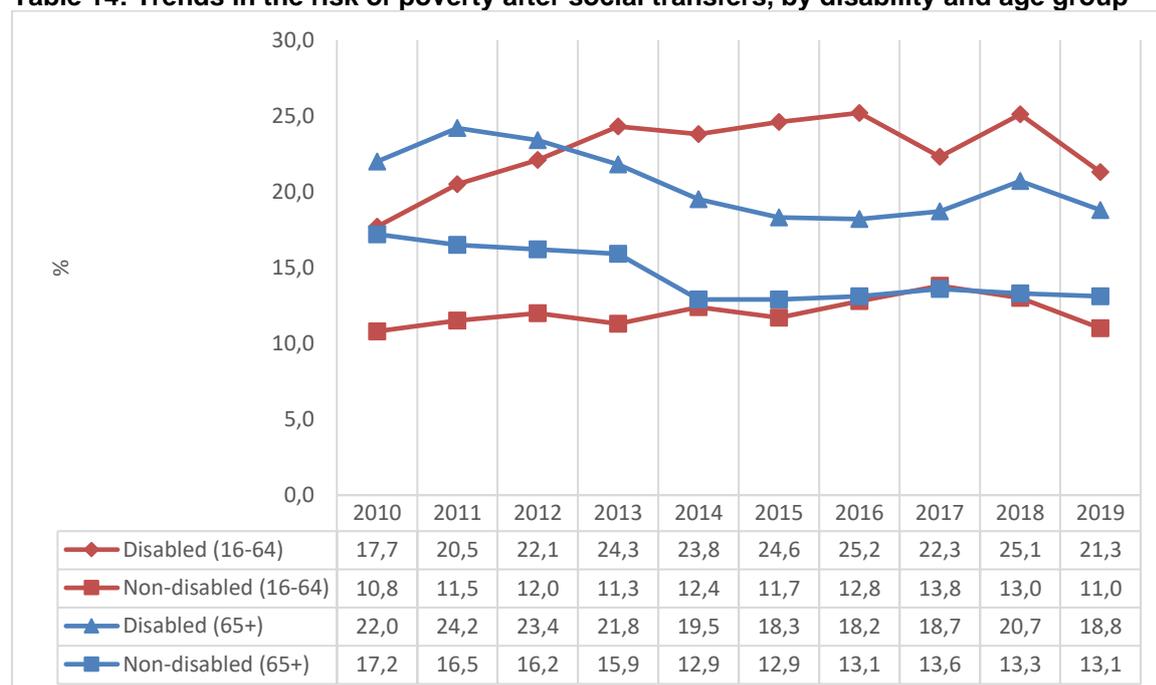


Table 13: Overall risk of household poverty or exclusion by disability and age (aged 16+)

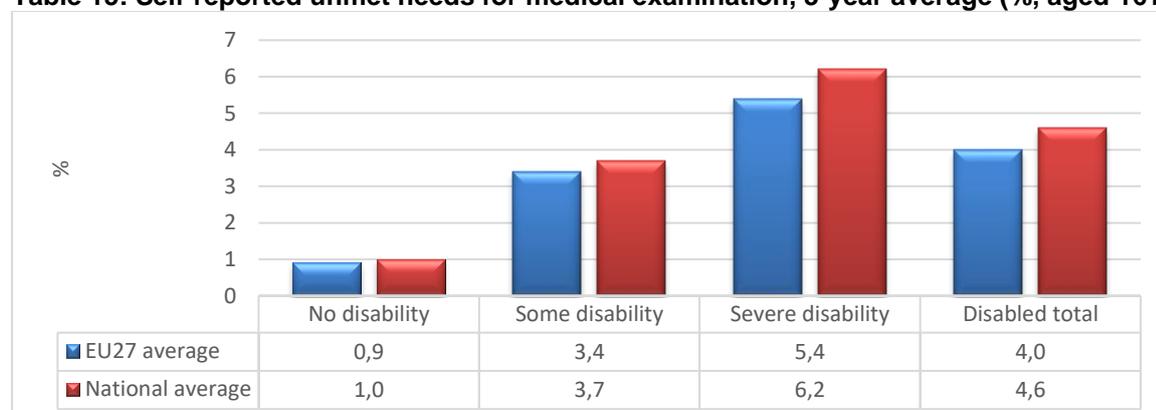


Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and previous UDB).

Table 14: Trends in the risk of poverty after social transfers, by disability and age group

Source: Eurostat Health Database [hlth_dpe020] - People at risk of poverty.

Note: this table shows national trends in financial poverty risk, rather than the general AROPE indicator (which is not as comparable between age groups due to the effect of paid employment); the survey does not distinguish 'activity limitation' for children under 16.

Table 15: Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination, 3-year average (% , aged 16+)

Source: Eurostat Health Database [hlth_dh030] - 'Too expensive or too far to travel or waiting list'.

Note: due to large variations an average of three years is indicated. EU mean averages are also skewed by high values in a minority of countries within disability groups but median averages for the total disability and no disability groups in 2019 are consistent with the 3-year mean values.

7.2.1 Alternative sources of poverty or health care data in Belgium

The EU-SILC data provides a comprehensive and reliable source concerning poverty or social exclusion rates. In addition to the summary tables presented so far, the Eurostat disability database also contains breakdowns concerning disability and poverty before and after social transfers, as well as in-work-poverty.²⁹

²⁹ Eurostat Health Database, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/health/data/database>.

To follow up the social situation of citizens with disabilities it is necessary to make use of the Handbook³⁰ 'Poverty and Disability in Belgium'. The sense of urgency is linked to following major conclusion of this book: ... In 2018, 23.1 % of people whose disability 'has a slight or serious impact on daily activities' were threatened by a situation of poverty or social exclusion. This is significantly higher than the overall poverty risk of 16.4 %. This percentage is also above the EU average for this group (20.9 %).

7.3 EU data relevant to disability and education

Table 24: Early school leaving rates, by disability status (aged 18-24 and 18-29)³¹

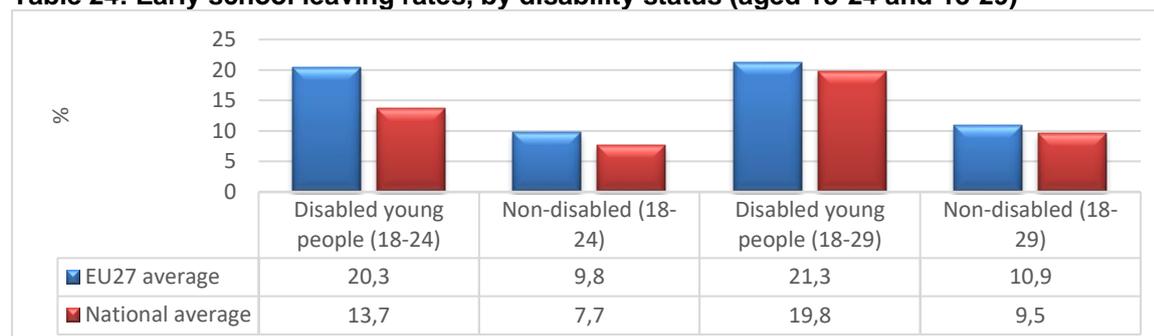
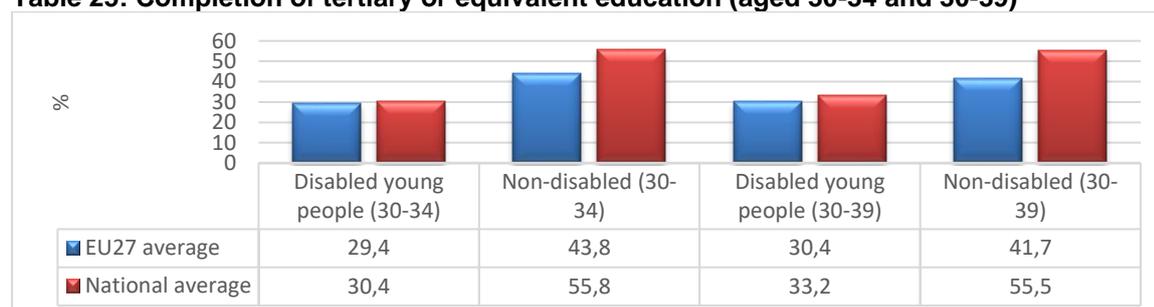


Table 25: Completion of tertiary or equivalent education (aged 30-34 and 30-39)



Source: EU-SILC 2019 Release 2021 version 1 (and preceding UDBs).

Note: Confidence intervals for the disability group are large and reliability low (due to the small sample size in the target age group). An average of several years may be needed to establish trends or to compare breakdowns by gender.

7.3.1 Alternative sources of education data in Belgium

To follow up on the success of the M-Decree in Flanders (goal: more inclusive education), it is useful to analyse the data in the statistical yearbooks of the Flemish government regarding Education. The last two yearbooks³² can now be consulted.

Concerning 'early school leaving', statistics³³ in and analysis of the recent report of the Flemish Court of Audit have to be seen as an excellent source of information. We know

³⁰ <https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/docs/nl/publicaties/boek-armoede-en-handicap-in-belgie-2019-nl.pdf>.

³¹ There was a change from ISCED 1997 to ISCED 2011 qualification definitions in 2014 although some Member States continued to use the older definition after this time.

³² <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/statistisch-jaarboek-van-het-vlaams-onderwijs-2020-2021>; <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/statistisch-jaarboek-van-het-vlaams-onderwijs-2019-2020>.

³³ https://www.ccrek.be/Docs/2021_16_VoorVroegSchoolVerlaten.pdf.

that one of the major risk factors for dropping out of school is the 'psychological vulnerability' of pupils (mental health problems is a major topic within the educational system at the moment - in addition to language barriers and living in poverty-). Behaviour is seen as an important factor on the pupil side. Lack of flexibility on the part of the school system to develop individual pathways is seen as the limiting factor on the system side.

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