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Policy Document 1: Policy Guidelines for Decision Makers in Sheltered Workshops VET

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Introduction

The aim of **sheltered workshops is to prepare and support people with disabilities in transitioning to regular employment**. However, many individuals with disabilities end up staying in sheltered workshops for **extended periods or their entire working lives, particularly those with cognitive disabilities**. This indicates a failure to achieve the inclusion goals outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a recent directive from the European Parliament.

Table: Disability Statistics & Employment Rates in Partner Country

Country	Population with Disabilities (%)	Employment Rate (%)
Belgium	9%	26%
Cyprus	24%	48.5%
Germany	n/a	53%
Slovenia	1%	n/a

To facilitate a sustainable transition, it is crucial to **align the needs of individuals with disabilities with the requirements of the labor market**. **Counseling** plays a central role in this process by **identifying strengths, interests, and training needs of individuals seeking advice**. Counselors in sheltered

workshops also maintain contact with employers, serving as intermediaries. Proper guidance ensures that vocational training is tailored to individual learning needs, skills, and goals, as well as the demands and support opportunities within the labor market.

The "Include³" project aims to **develop resources and a participatory curriculum** through collaboration between guidance practitioners, individuals with intellectual disabilities, employers, and vocational training professionals. The goal is to **create pathways from targeted training to sustainable and suitable employment in regular work settings**. This process involves reorienting vocational education in an individualized manner to prepare individuals for specific labor market opportunities.

This policy document highlights the main findings from the partner countries Belgium, Cyprus, Germany and Slovenia. The policy document refers to the national report by picking up examples of good practice and summarizing the outcomes from the national report. It also derives practical guidelines for policy makers in Sheltered Workshop VET. Four to five practical guidelines for implementation are given for specific topics, such as collaborative partnerships. The policy document ends with a conclusion.

Policy Document 1: Policy Guidelines for Decision Makers in Sheltered Workshops VET

Introduction

This policy document aims to **provide guidance and recommendations for decision-makers in the field of vocational education and training (VET) related to the sheltered workshops initiatives and activities**. It addresses the importance of inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, in the labor market. It also addresses the need for raising awareness about the diverse role that the VET sector can play in initiating and sustaining the education and consequent employment of people with disabilities that are often ignored when designing large scale or local interventions. The document highlights key findings from the National report and emphasizes the need for improvements in integration programs, support measures, and financial assistance.

Summary of Partner Countries

This section provides a brief overview of the partner countries.

Belgium:

- Vocational training in sheltered workshops prepares people with disabilities for **gainful employment**.
- Training departments in sheltered workshops help **identify individuals' interests and abilities**.
- Training includes teaching vocational and social skills necessary for working life.
- The internship duration can last up to three years.
- Funding is provided by the DSL or the pension fund.
- Transition to the general labor market or production department is possible.

Cyprus:

- Vocational training is supported by **legislation and programs by the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities**.
- Vocational Training Grants Program funds vocational training activities for people with disabilities.
- Programs aim to train professionals who support vocational training for individuals with disabilities.
- Training courses can receive **funding of up to 5,000 euros per program**.

Germany:

- Legal requirements for support in recognized sheltered workshops are outlined in SGB IX and the Workshop Regulation (Werkstättenverordnung - WVO).
- Entrance procedures and vocational training areas help develop or improve the performance and earning capacity of individuals with disabilities.
- Support is provided through **individual measures and training courses**.
- Training allowances and other necessary costs are covered by social benefits.
- People in sheltered workshops have the status of rehabilitates, not employees.

Slovenia:

- **Vocational rehabilitation is divided into two phases**.
- The first phase **assesses the individual's abilities, potential, and barriers to inclusion**.

- The second phase focuses on **improving social skills and behavior patterns**.
- Evaluation of employment possibilities is conducted after vocational rehabilitation.
- Different employment options are available based on the individual's working capacity.

Example of Good Practice

Among the various examples of good practice in vocational training and transition to the general labor market, one particularly noteworthy example is the vocational training concept **implemented by the Service for Self-Determined Living (DSL) in German-speaking Belgium**. This concept offers innovative approaches and successful strategies for individuals with disabilities.

The **DSL's vocational training concept stands out due to its on-the-job training approach**, which allows training to take place **directly in the general labor market within companies**. This provides young people with intellectual disabilities with real working conditions and valuable opportunities for skill development. The training contracts are typically one year long and can be extended, and the trainees receive a training allowance and insurance coverage.

This **vocational training concept is attractive to both individuals with disabilities and the training companies involved, as it offers training under protected conditions, financial incentives, and low risks for the companies**. It provides flexibility for trainees to discontinue their training if needed, either returning to the workshop for people with disabilities or starting a new training program in another company.

The DSL's vocational training concept showcases the importance of inclusive approaches, practical training experiences, and collaboration between vocational training providers and the general labor market. It serves as an excellent example of best practices in vocational training, counseling, and transition to the general labor market, providing valuable insights for the Include³ project.

Excerpt from the Conclusion of the Transnational Report

There are several areas that could benefit from improvement in terms of supporting people with disabilities in employment and enhancing their integration into the general labor market:

1. Statistical coverage: There is a need for **enhanced statistical coverage of people with disabilities in employment**. Accurate and up-to-date data on the employment rate, types of jobs, and employment conditions for individuals with disabilities would provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and employers. This data can help **identify gaps and track progress in improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities**.
2. Transitions from sheltered employment: **Research on transitions from sheltered employment to the general labor market is necessary**. Sheltered workshops have traditionally provided employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, but there is a growing recognition that transitioning to integrated, mainstream employment is often more desirable. More research is needed to **understand the challenges faced during these transitions and to develop effective strategies** and programs to support individuals in successfully moving from sheltered employment to the general labor market.
3. Integration programs and measures: There is a call for **improved integration programs and measures**. These initiatives should focus on creating inclusive workplaces that accommodate the needs of individuals with disabilities. This can **involve implementing accessibility accommodations, promoting inclusive hiring practices, and fostering a supportive work environment**. Enhancing integration programs can help break down barriers and create equal opportunities for people with disabilities to participate fully in the labor market.
4. Financial support: Adequate financial support is crucial for individuals with disabilities to access employment opportunities. This can include **funding for assistive technologies, workplace accommodations, vocational training, and other resources that facilitate their participation in the labor market**. Policies and programs should ensure that financial support is available and accessible to all individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment.
5. Employer training and empowerment: **Employers should receive training and support to effectively recruit, hire, and retain individuals with disabilities**. Education on disability awareness, reasonable accommodations, and inclusive practices can help employers create inclusive

workplaces that value diversity. Empowering employers with the necessary knowledge and tools can lead to more inclusive hiring practices and improved job opportunities for people with disabilities.

6. Counseling and vocational training: **Counseling services and vocational training programs play a vital role in supporting individuals with disabilities in their employment journey.** Access to career counseling and guidance can help individuals explore career options, set goals, and develop the necessary skills for employment. Vocational training programs can provide specialized training to enhance the employability of individuals with disabilities and prepare them for specific job roles.

Guidelines for Decision Makers in Sheltered Workshops VET

Guidelines for Creating Inclusive and Empowering Vocational Training Programs in Sheltered Workshops

VET:

Accessibility and Universal Design:

- Ensure that **all vocational training facilities are fully accessible**, including physical accessibility, assistive technologies, and accommodations for individuals with different types of disabilities.
- **Incorporate universal design principles in the curriculum development process**, making the materials and learning environments accessible to a diverse range of learners.
- Provide **alternative formats for instructional materials, such as Braille, large print, and digital formats**, to accommodate different learning styles and abilities.
- Train instructors and staff on **inclusive teaching practices, creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all participants**.

Collaborative Partnerships:

- **Foster partnerships with disability advocacy organizations, vocational rehabilitation agencies, employers, and community-based organizations** to ensure holistic support and opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
- **Engage employers from various industries in the curriculum development process** to align vocational training programs with the skills and competencies needed in the job market.

- **Establish internship and apprenticeship programs in collaboration with local businesses**, allowing participants to gain hands-on experience and develop industry-specific skills.
- **Create a network of mentors and role models from the community who can provide guidance, inspiration, and support to individuals** with disabilities throughout their vocational training journey.

Personalized Support and Accommodations:

- Conduct comprehensive assessments of individual needs and abilities to **develop personalized training plans and accommodations** that foster generic and vocational competencies.
- **Provide individualized support services**, such as assistive technologies, personal aides, and sign language interpreters, based on the specific requirements of each participant.
- **Offer flexible scheduling options to accommodate diverse needs**, including part-time, evening, and online training opportunities.
- Establish a system for **ongoing evaluation and feedback to identify areas for improvement** and adjust support services accordingly.

Social and Emotional Development:

- **Incorporate social and emotional learning components** into the vocational training curriculum, promoting self-awareness, self-advocacy, teamwork, and interpersonal skills.
- **Provide counseling and mental health support services**, addressing the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and **fostering resilience, confidence, and emotional well-being**.
- **Organize social activities, peer support groups, and networking events** to encourage social interaction, community integration, and the development of a **support network**.

Transition and Job Placement Support:

- Develop **comprehensive transition programs** that prepare individuals for the transition from sheltered workshops to the general labor market.
- **Offer job placement assistance**, including job matching, resume building, interview preparation, and networking opportunities.
- Provide **ongoing job coaching and support during the initial stages** of employment to ensure a smooth transition and successful integration into the workplace.

- Collaborate with employers to **create inclusive work environments, raising awareness about disability rights, and accommodations**, and fostering a culture of inclusion and diversity.
- Encourage employers to work and collaborate with inclusive educational institutions.
- **Inform parents and legal guardians** that vocational education opens pathways into the general labor market.
- **Offer counseling services for employers** who want to hire people with disabilities.

Examples of Best Practices:

Establish a Diversity and Inclusion Committee: Form a committee comprising representatives from diverse backgrounds, **including individuals with disabilities, to provide guidance** and ensure the implementation of inclusive practices.

Create a Mentorship Exchange Program: **Partner with other vocational training organizations to facilitate cross-training and mentorship opportunities**, promoting knowledge sharing and professional growth.

Develop Entrepreneurship Training:

Offer especially designed programs that prepare the individuals with disabilities for jobs in the general labor market. In addition, provide entrepreneurship programs that **equip individuals with disabilities with the skills and knowledge to start their own businesses** or pursue self-employment opportunities.

Establish Alumni Networks: **Create platforms for program graduates to connect, share experiences, and provide support** to current participants, fostering a sense of community and ongoing learning.

By incorporating these comprehensive and inclusive guidelines into sheltered workshops VET, decision-makers can **create programs that promote equal opportunities, empowers individuals with disabilities, and prepares them for successful careers and meaningful participation in society.**

Conclusion for Decision Makers in Sheltered Workshops VET

In conclusion, the creation of an inclusive and accessible vocational education and training environment for individuals with intellectual disabilities is an **essential step toward building a society that values diversity and equal opportunities**. By implementing the guidelines presented here, decision-makers in sheltered workshops Vocational Education and Training (VET) can make a profound impact in fostering empowerment, participation, and inclusivity.

The significance of inclusivity goes **beyond legal obligations**; it encompasses economic growth, social responsibility, and the realization of human rights. In an inclusive labor market, individuals with intellectual disabilities are seen as valuable contributors, capable of making meaningful contributions to their communities and employers. By **embracing diversity and providing equal opportunities for skill development and employment**, we create a society that thrives on the strengths and talents of all its members.

Empowerment lies at the core of this endeavor. By empowering individuals with disabilities through self-advocacy, decision-making, and active involvement in their own career development, we can break down barriers and foster independence. When **equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate their vocational journeys, individuals can make informed choices aligned with their aspirations**.

Empowerment leads to increased self-esteem, improved social inclusion, and an enhanced quality of life.

The participation of people with intellectual disabilities is not only a matter of social justice but also a **catalyst for societal transformation**. Actively involving individuals with disabilities in vocational training programs unlocks their potential, creativity, and unique perspectives. Their participation enriches the **learning environment, promotes diversity, and challenges societal misconceptions**. **Inclusive participation** ensures that decisions are made collectively, with input from all stakeholders, **leading to innovative solutions that benefit society as a whole**.

The **guidelines provided serve as a roadmap for transforming sheltered workshops VET into inclusive and accessible spaces that celebrate the abilities and aspirations of individuals with intellectual disabilities**.

By enhancing vocational training programs, promoting empowerment and participation, and strengthening counseling services, decision-makers can create an environment where every individual has equal access to opportunities, practical work experiences, and comprehensive guidance.

It is our **shared responsibility to embrace inclusivity and empower individuals with disabilities to overcome obstacles and reach their full potential.** By implementing these guidelines, decision-makers hold the power to shape a brighter future—one where individuals with intellectual disabilities thrive, contribute meaningfully to the workforce, and experience the dignity and fulfillment that comes with independent living and inclusive participation.