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**Innovative Development of VET Trainers for
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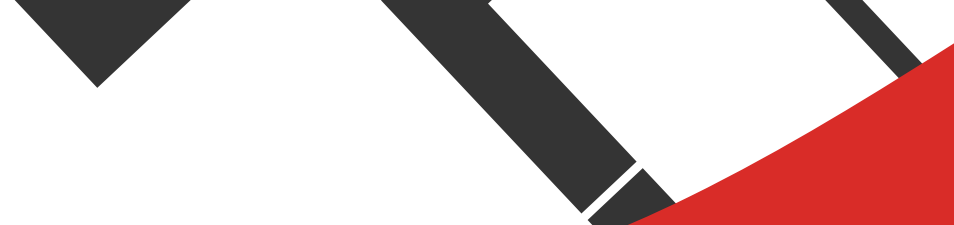
1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving world, where cultural boundaries and geographic distances are increasingly bridged by mobility and exchange, international learning experiences stand out as some of the most impactful opportunities for personal and professional development. Within the framework of Vocational Education and Training (VET), international mobility programs offer young learners a unique chance to immerse themselves in different cultural, social, and professional environments. These experiences enable learners to acquire not only technical skills related to their trades or professions but also crucial life skills such as intercultural communication, adaptability, problem-solving, self-confidence, and independence.

Mobility programs contribute fundamentally to shaping future-ready individuals who can thrive in a globalized labor market and actively participate in diverse societies. Beyond immediate educational and vocational outcomes, mobility experiences promote tolerance, empathy, open-mindedness, and the ability to navigate complexity and change qualities that are indispensable in the 21st century. As Europe continues to promote inclusive policies and equal opportunities, facilitating access to such enriching experiences for all learners becomes both a moral imperative and a strategic priority.

However, despite the recognized value and increasing availability of mobility opportunities, a significant gap remains in ensuring that learners with disabilities and special educational needs can participate fully and equitably. These learners often face numerous and intersecting barriers that can range from practical and logistical issues to social and emotional challenges. Physical barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, lack of adapted transportation, and unsuitable accommodations frequently hinder mobility. Communication challenges arise when support for different sensory or cognitive needs is insufficient or absent. Additionally, psychological and emotional factors, such as anxiety about new environments, sensory overload, or feelings of isolation can affect learners' well-being and capacity to engage meaningfully.

Such barriers, if left unaddressed, risk perpetuating exclusion and inequality, contradicting the fundamental values of inclusive education and the broader goals of social justice and human rights. It is crucial to recognize that inclusion is not simply about physical access but about creating environments where learners feel safe, respected, empowered, and valued. This requires a holistic approach that combines accessible infrastructure, personalized support, proactive planning, and cultural sensitivity.



This handbook was developed to meet this need, focusing on the critical role of companions who support learners with disabilities during mobility experiences. The companion's role is multifaceted and vital. Far from being mere supervisors or helpers, companions serve as advocates, mentors, facilitators, and emotional supports. They are the vital link between learners and the complex realities of new environments, helping to navigate challenges, foster independence, and enable participation on equal terms. Through attentive and empathetic support, companions help transform potential obstacles into opportunities for growth and learning, making the mobility experience truly inclusive and empowering.

The handbook is informed by extensive research conducted in Greece, Italy, and Germany, countries that offer diverse cultural, educational, and social landscapes. This research involved gathering insights from learners, educators, companions, and institutional stakeholders, identifying common challenges as well as successful strategies. By integrating this rich, comparative knowledge, the handbook provides practical, evidence-based guidance that is adaptable across different contexts and responsive to varied learner needs.

Within the following chapters, readers will find comprehensive support tools organized to accompany companions throughout all phases of mobility:

- Planning ahead to anticipate and mitigate barriers, establishing clear communication channels, and preparing learners emotionally and logistically.
- Offering day-to-day assistance that balances supervision with respect for autonomy, managing unforeseen difficulties, and fostering active engagement.
- Facilitating reintegration, collecting feedback, and supporting long-term inclusion beyond the immediate experience.
- Learning from successes and challenges to continuously improve the quality and inclusiveness of mobility programs.
- Checklists, trackers, emergency plans, and communication aids designed to make the companion's role more manageable and effective.

1.1 Purpose of the Handbook

Inclusive mobility within Vocational Education and Training (VET) is much more than a logistical or administrative task; it is a fundamental expression of social justice, human dignity, and the universal right to equal opportunity. This handbook has been thoughtfully created to serve as a comprehensive, practical, and deeply reflective guide specifically tailored for companions supporting learners with disabilities during international mobility experiences. It recognizes the unique complexities and profound benefits of these learning journeys and offers essential tools, strategies, and perspectives to ensure that no learner is left behind.

The role of the companion is both critical and multifaceted, and this handbook seeks to prepare companions thoroughly for the demands and rewards of this responsibility. Whether you are an experienced professional in inclusive education, a family member stepping into a new role, or a volunteer accompanying a learner for the first time, this resource is designed to support you at every step. It equips you with a blend of practical knowledge, emotional insight, and cultural awareness to navigate diverse and sometimes unpredictable challenges with confidence and compassion.

At its heart, this handbook embraces a holistic approach that intertwines empathy, expertise, and empowerment. It moves beyond a narrow focus on “disability management” or “special needs accommodations” to instead promote a vision of inclusion that celebrates individuality, fosters independence, and respects each learner’s unique strengths and aspirations. It challenges all readers to shift their mindset from one of “fixing problems” to one of unlocking potential, recognizing that learners with disabilities bring rich perspectives, talents, and capabilities that enhance the mobility experience for everyone involved.

This commitment to inclusion is grounded firmly in international and European legal and ethical frameworks. The handbook aligns with the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and relevant national legislation across member states. These frameworks affirm that access to quality education and international mobility opportunities is a basic human right, one that must be protected and promoted without discrimination. Inclusive mobility is not a mere add-on or special accommodation, it is an essential component of equitable education that enriches the individual learner and strengthens the collective fabric of our societies.

What sets this handbook apart is its recognition of the companion's role as a dynamic agent of change. Companions are not passive helpers but active facilitators of learning, inclusion, and personal growth. They are advocates who amplify the voices of learners, mentors who foster self-confidence, and bridges who connect learners to unfamiliar environments with sensitivity and respect. To fulfill these roles effectively, companions must cultivate a diverse skill set that includes logistical planning, risk management, and communication skills, alongside deeply human qualities such as patience, cultural humility, adaptability, and emotional intelligence.

More specifically, this handbook empowers companions to:

- Develop a nuanced understanding of the diverse spectrum of disabilities and special educational needs encountered in VET mobility contexts. This includes not only visible disabilities but also hidden or invisible conditions, such as mental health challenges or learning difficulties, and recognizes how factors like age, gender, cultural background, and socioeconomic status intersect with disability to shape each learner's experience.
- Prepare thoroughly and proactively for every mobility experience by conducting detailed risk assessments, coordinating with sending and hosting organizations to ensure accessible accommodations and supports, and engaging learners in emotional and practical readiness activities. This preparation helps mitigate risks and builds a foundation for a positive, empowering journey.
- Offer consistent, respectful, and empowering support throughout the mobility period, balancing supervision with encouragement of learner autonomy, managing emergencies or stress situations with calm and skill, and facilitating inclusion within the social and cultural life of the host environment. This also includes helping learners develop problem-solving skills, build friendships, and participate fully in learning activities.
- Support meaningful reintegration and follow-up after the mobility experience, recognizing that inclusion does not end when the journey is over. The handbook guides companions in facilitating reflective discussions, gathering feedback, and planning ongoing support that reinforces the positive impacts of mobility on learners' confidence, skills, and career pathways.
- Utilize flexible, practical tools and templates, such as checklists, emergency plans, communication aids, and progress logs that can be adapted to the specific needs of learners and contexts. These resources simplify complex processes, enhance communication among stakeholders, and help companions maintain high standards of care and organization.

Additionally, the handbook situates inclusive mobility within the broader cultural and systemic contexts of Europe, drawing on research and examples from Greece, Italy, and Germany. These countries offer diverse models of inclusive education, disability rights legislation, and social attitudes that influence how mobility programs operate. By exploring these differences, companions gain vital cultural competence, preparing them to respond effectively to the specific challenges and opportunities presented by each national context.

The handbook also encourages companions to view themselves as part of a wider community of practice, a network of professionals, educators, families, and policymakers committed to advancing inclusive education and mobility. It advocates for continuous reflection, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, emphasizing that creating truly inclusive mobility experiences requires ongoing effort and adaptation.

Ultimately, this handbook envisions a future in which inclusive mobility is standard practice across all VET programs. It imagines a world where learners with disabilities are not just accommodated but actively empowered to thrive abroad; where mobility enriches not only their skills and employability but also their self-esteem, independence, and sense of belonging. In this vision, companions serve as catalysts for transformation, champions of inclusion who help build more accessible, welcoming, and equitable learning environments across borders.

In conclusion, this handbook is more than a practical manual, it is a call to action and a source of inspiration. It challenges all who engage with it to embrace the mission of inclusive mobility with passion, commitment, and humility. By using this handbook, companions take on a vital role in shaping a more inclusive Europe, one learner at a time, one journey at a time, one life profoundly changed at a time.



1.2 Target Audience

This handbook is crafted to serve a broad and diverse audience that plays vital roles in ensuring inclusive, accessible, and meaningful mobility experiences for learners with disabilities in Vocational Education and Training (VET). The process of international mobility is inherently complex and multifaceted, involving numerous stakeholders whose collaboration and understanding are critical to the success of each learner's journey. As such, the handbook is designed to provide comprehensive support, practical guidance, and contextual knowledge tailored to the specific needs and responsibilities of these varied groups.

Primary Users

1. Companions and Personal Assistants

At the heart of this handbook are companions those individuals who accompany learners with disabilities throughout their mobility experience. This group includes a wide range of people, such as professional personal assistants, peer mentors, educators, volunteers, and family members who have taken on the responsibility of direct, day-to-day support. The handbook equips companions with practical tools, communication techniques, problem-solving strategies, and emotional support frameworks needed to create an environment where learners feel safe, respected, and empowered. Given that companions often serve as advocates, facilitators, and emotional anchors, the handbook emphasizes not only logistical support but also the development of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. It prepares companions to respond proactively to diverse and evolving needs, to manage emergencies, and to foster learners' independence and confidence.

2. Mobility Coordinators and Program Organizers

Individuals responsible for designing, organizing, and overseeing VET mobility programs play a crucial role in establishing inclusive practices from the outset. This handbook helps coordinators understand the specific barriers learners with disabilities may face and highlights the importance of integrating companions into mobility plans effectively. It provides insights on conducting accessibility audits, risk assessments, and partnership building with host organizations. For program managers, the handbook offers frameworks for training companions, collaborating across institutions, and complying with relevant legal and policy requirements. By integrating these guidelines, coordinators can ensure that mobility programs are accessible by design, with clear protocols for inclusion, safety, and learner support.

3. Educators and Trainers

Teachers, trainers, and educational support staff involved in preparing learners for their mobility experience and supporting them after their return will find this handbook an indispensable resource. It offers strategies to tailor learning and preparatory activities to diverse needs, promote self-advocacy skills among learners, and facilitate smooth reintegration. Educators gain guidance on fostering inclusive mindsets, designing accessible materials, and collaborating with companions to create a holistic support network. This section promotes a learner-centered approach that goes beyond academic instruction to include emotional readiness, cultural preparation, and practical skills development.

4. Policy Makers, Institutional Leaders, and Administrators

On a systemic level, policymakers, school principals, institutional leaders, and administrators within VET providers and mobility agencies have a responsibility to embed inclusion into policies, funding priorities, and institutional culture. The handbook provides a clear overview of the legal frameworks, international conventions (such as the UN CRPD), and EU directives that govern inclusive mobility, helping decision-makers understand their obligations and the benefits of inclusive practices. It also offers guidance on resource allocation, staff capacity-building, and monitoring and evaluation practices that ensure the sustainability and quality of inclusive mobility initiatives. By using this handbook, leaders can champion inclusion not only as a compliance requirement but as a strategic priority that enhances institutional reputation, learner outcomes, and societal equity.

SKILLS LOADING...



Secondary Users

5. Families, Guardians, and Caregivers

Families and caregivers are often the primary support system for learners with disabilities and play an indispensable role before, during, and after mobility experiences. This handbook offers them insight into what mobility entails, what kind of support learners will receive, and how they can collaborate with companions and institutions to ensure the learner's well-being. It encourages families to engage actively in mobility planning, emotional preparation, and post-mobility reflection, fostering a shared understanding of the goals and challenges of inclusive mobility. The handbook respects and values the unique knowledge families have about their learners and encourages open communication and partnership.

6. Host Organizations, Local Partners, and Employers

Host organizations and local partners receiving learners abroad, including companies, training centers, community organizations, and support services are integral to providing an accessible and welcoming environment. This handbook guides hosts on understanding the role and needs of companions, adapting work or training environments, and ensuring clear communication channels. It encourages hosts to adopt inclusive practices that respect diversity and facilitate full participation. For employers, the handbook highlights how inclusion benefits not only the learner but also the organizational culture, productivity, and community relations.

7. Learners with Disabilities

Although primarily intended for companions and professionals, this handbook is also a valuable resource for learners themselves who wish to better understand the supports available to them, their rights, and how to advocate for their needs during mobility experiences. Empowering learners with knowledge about the process, possible challenges, and strategies for independence encourages active participation and self-advocacy. The handbook encourages learners to engage in planning and decision-making and to view mobility not as a challenge to overcome but as an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

One of the key strengths of this handbook lies in its holistic approach, recognizing that inclusive mobility is a shared journey rather than a set of isolated tasks. It fosters collaboration and mutual understanding between all stakeholders, encouraging dialogue and the building of inclusive networks that transcend borders and institutional silos. The handbook also reflects the diversity of European mobility contexts by drawing on research and practical examples from Greece, Italy, and Germany. These countries represent a range of cultural attitudes toward disability, legal frameworks, and service provision models, making the handbook adaptable and relevant to a wide audience across Europe and beyond.

Why This Handbook Matters to You

- If you are a companion, you will find concrete guidance and emotional support to navigate your essential role with confidence.
- If you are a coordinator or organizer, the handbook will help you embed accessibility in your programs and collaborate effectively with companions and learners.
- If you are an educator or trainer, you will gain tools to prepare learners and support their holistic development.
- If you are a policymaker or leader, you will understand how to translate inclusion principles into sustainable institutional practices.
- If you are a family member or caregiver, you will learn how to partner with the mobility team to ensure your loved one thrives.
- If you are a host or employer, you will discover how to create environments that welcome and empower all learners.
- If you are a learner, you will be encouraged and equipped to take an active role in shaping your own mobility experience.

1.3 Role of the Companion

In the context of international mobility within Vocational Education and Training (VET), a companion is a dedicated individual who accompanies and supports a learner with a disability throughout their mobility experience abroad. This role is unique and distinct from those of teachers, caregivers, or supervisors. The companion's primary function is to act as a trusted ally and enabler who empowers the learner to fully participate in every aspect of the program whether educational, cultural, social, or practical while fostering independence, dignity, and confidence.

The companion's role is dynamic and multifaceted. Unlike a caregiver who may provide direct personal care, or a teacher who delivers educational content, the companion's focus is on facilitating access, enabling autonomy, and creating a bridge between the learner and the unfamiliar environments encountered during mobility. This role is essential to breaking down barriers physical, communicative, emotional, and cultural that could otherwise limit a learner's engagement or success.

Core Responsibilities of a Companion

The tasks a companion may undertake vary widely depending on the individual needs of the learner and the specific context of the mobility experience. Key responsibilities include, but are not limited to:

- Supporting the learner in managing travel arrangements, such as navigating airports, train stations, or public transportation; ensuring accessible transportation options; helping with luggage; and facilitating smooth transitions between locations.
- Helping the learner orient themselves in new surroundings such as host institutions, workplaces, housing, and social spaces. This can involve practical assistance like reading maps, interpreting signage, or using assistive technologies.
- Facilitating effective communication between the learner and others—including peers, educators, employers, and service providers—especially when the learner has speech, hearing, cognitive, or language-related challenges. This may include using alternative communication methods or advocating for accessible communication tools.
- Offering reassurance, encouragement, and a calm presence to reduce anxiety, manage homesickness, or address sensory overload. Companions can help learners develop coping strategies and foster resilience in a new and sometimes challenging environment.
- Acting as a liaison with host organizations, local services, and institutions to ensure accessibility needs are met such as arranging adapted workstations, requesting accommodations, or negotiating schedules to optimize participation and comfort.

Balancing Support and Independence

An essential aspect of the companion's role is to provide “just enough support”, enough to enable the learner to thrive without overshadowing their independence or taking over their experience. This requires a nuanced understanding of the learner's goals, capabilities, and preferences, along with ongoing communication and adjustment.

Some learners may require low-touch support, where the companion's presence is primarily logistical and occasional, for example, assisting with travel or periodic check-ins to ensure well-being. Others may need high-touch support, involving daily assistance with personal care, continuous supervision, and active involvement in decision-making.

This balance is crucial: companions help learners build skills and confidence to act autonomously while remaining ready to step in when necessary. This learner-centered approach respects individual agency and promotes empowerment rather than dependency.

Ethical Principles and Professional Boundaries

The companion's role carries important ethical responsibilities, which safeguard the dignity and rights of the learner, including:

- Companions must honor the learner's personal space, choices, and confidentiality. They should never make assumptions about the learner's abilities or decisions but should support their right to self-determination.
- Information shared by the learner must be handled with discretion and only shared with authorized individuals when necessary for safety or support.
- Companions work in cooperation with sending institutions, host organizations, families, and other stakeholders, ensuring clear communication and shared responsibility.
- Respecting the cultural backgrounds and identities of learners, hosts, and communities, while promoting inclusion and combating stereotypes or prejudice.

The Companion's Impact Beyond Practical Support

Beyond assisting with day-to-day tasks, companions play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of inclusion throughout the mobility journey. They are often the learner's primary link to feeling safe, valued, and empowered in a new environment. Through their sensitivity, patience, creativity, and advocacy, companions help transform mobility experiences from potentially overwhelming challenges into opportunities for growth, learning, and genuine participation. Their presence helps ensure that mobility programs do not simply meet minimum accessibility standards but embrace the full spirit of inclusion where every learner's potential is recognized, respected, and nurtured.

In sum, a companion in mobility is much more than an assistant or caretaker. They are an enabler of opportunity, an advocate for rights, and a champion of empowerment. Their work contributes directly to the realization of inclusive education principles and the creation of equitable international learning experiences. This handbook aims to equip companions with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to fulfill this critical role with confidence, respect, and effectiveness, ultimately helping learners with disabilities not only participate in but thrive through their mobility experiences.

2. Research

This chapter presents an in-depth exploration of the inclusive mobility landscape in Vocational Education and Training (VET) across Greece, Italy, and Germany. Drawing on a rich combination of qualitative and quantitative research, including interviews with learners, companions, VET providers, mobility coordinators, and inclusion experts, as well as a thorough review of European-level policies, national regulations, and institutional practices, this chapter aims to map the current state of inclusive mobility and identify both the gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Inclusive mobility within VET contexts is a relatively under-researched area compared to higher education, despite the increasing recognition of its importance. Learners with disabilities often face multiple layers of disadvantage in accessing cross-border learning opportunities: physical, financial, informational, emotional, and institutional. While the European Union has taken significant steps to promote accessibility and equity through initiatives such as the European Disability Strategy 2021–2030, Erasmus+ Inclusion Guidelines, and platforms like inclusivemobility.eu, implementation at national and local levels remains uneven and fragmented.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comparative snapshot of how inclusive mobility is currently approached in these three countries, identifying shared trends, challenges, and promising practices. The insights gathered here not only inform the practical tools and approaches included in this handbook but also highlight the systemic changes needed to truly democratize access to international learning experiences.

2.1 Overview of the Methodology

To gain a nuanced understanding of how inclusive mobility is implemented within the VET (Vocational Education and Training) sector in Greece, Italy, and Germany, a multi-method research approach was adopted. The objective was to collect a balanced mix of empirical evidence, stakeholder perspectives, and policy insights. This approach allowed the research team to assess not only the practical realities faced by learners with disabilities but also the systemic conditions shaping their mobility experiences.

The methodology was designed to be participatory, comparative, and intersectional, with an emphasis on capturing lived experiences, institutional frameworks, and operational practices. It included three core components: desk research, fieldwork, and synthesis.

1. Desk Research

The initial phase of the study involved an extensive review of existing literature, legal frameworks, policy documents, and institutional strategies related to inclusive mobility in VET at both European and national levels. This provided a contextual foundation and helped identify structural enablers and barriers. Key sources included:

- European Union policies, such as the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030.
- National frameworks and disability laws in Greece, Italy, and Germany, including legislation governing education, vocational training, and cross-border learning.
- Research reports, statistical datasets, and mobility program evaluations from official bodies (e.g., national agencies, ministries of education, and disability advocacy organizations).

This phase helped establish a comparative policy baseline and informed the development of interview guides and analytical categories for the fieldwork.

2. Fieldwork and Data Collection

The second phase of the research was dedicated to empirical data collection through a variety of qualitative methods. The fieldwork was carried out between [insert dates], with each country represented by local research partners familiar with the VET and disability inclusion landscape.

a. Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the three countries. Participants included:

- Learners with disabilities who had participated in or were eligible for mobility programs.
- Companions who supported learners during mobility experiences,
- VET providers and mobility coordinators from sending and host institutions.
- Inclusion officers, disability experts, and NGO representatives.

These interviews focused on themes such as preparation for mobility, experiences abroad, levels of support, challenges encountered, and perceived outcomes. All interviews were conducted in the participants' native languages and later transcribed and translated where necessary.

b. Focus Groups

Complementary focus group discussions were organized in each country to allow learners and companions to share and reflect on their experiences in a collective setting. These sessions helped uncover patterns, shared concerns, and emotional dynamics that individual interviews may not fully reveal.

c. Case Studies

Each country contributed at least one detailed case study of an inclusive VET mobility project or initiative that exemplified good practice. These case studies were selected to highlight innovative approaches to accessibility, learner empowerment, and inter-agency collaboration.

3. Comparative Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

The third and final phase of the methodology involved the comparative analysis of data across countries and stakeholder groups. Using thematic coding techniques, researchers identified key trends, recurring issues, and outlier practices. Data were grouped into core themes such as:

- Awareness and outreach
- Accessibility and logistics
- The role and preparation of companions
- Institutional coordination and planning
- Learner empowerment and autonomy

The synthesis phase aimed to balance national specificities with transnational insights, generating a holistic picture of inclusive mobility in the VET sector. Findings were then triangulated with policy data to validate interpretations and inform the development of practical tools and recommendations included in this handbook.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed strict ethical guidelines to ensure informed consent, anonymity, and data protection. Participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of their involvement, and special care was taken to make interview questions accessible to all types of learners, including those with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities.

2.2 Key Findings from Greece

Research conducted in Greece revealed a complex landscape of inclusive mobility support within the VET sector, marked by both notable progress and persistent challenges. Greece has made strides in aligning with European policies on disability inclusion, yet practical implementation remains inconsistent, reflecting broader systemic and infrastructural limitations. Greece has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and incorporates inclusive education principles into national legislation. However, specific regulations addressing inclusive mobility in VET are less developed compared to those targeting mainstream education or higher education sectors. Mobility programs tend to be coordinated at institutional rather than national levels, which creates variability in support standards and practices. This aspect accounts for approximately 20% of the identified challenges, reflecting gaps in the policy and institutional framework.

Physical accessibility is a significant barrier for learners with disabilities participating in mobility experiences. Many VET institutions and training centers still lack fully accessible facilities, such as ramps, elevators, or adapted sanitary facilities. Public transportation options also often fall short of accommodating learners with mobility impairments, complicating travel to and from mobility sites. Moreover, digital accessibility is emerging as a concern, particularly in light of increased reliance on online platforms for mobility preparation and follow-up activities. There is a need for accessible digital tools and information tailored to learners with sensory or cognitive disabilities. Accessibility and infrastructure challenges represent the largest portion of the findings, about 30%.

Awareness of mobility opportunities for learners with disabilities is growing but remains limited. Many learners and their families report insufficient information regarding eligibility, available support, and how to access programs. This lack of clarity often results in underrepresentation of learners with disabilities in mobility schemes. Companions and coordinators highlighted that outreach efforts are generally reactive, relying heavily on motivated individuals or specific projects rather than being embedded systematically within VET institutions or national programs. Awareness and outreach challenges comprise roughly 20% of the issues identified.

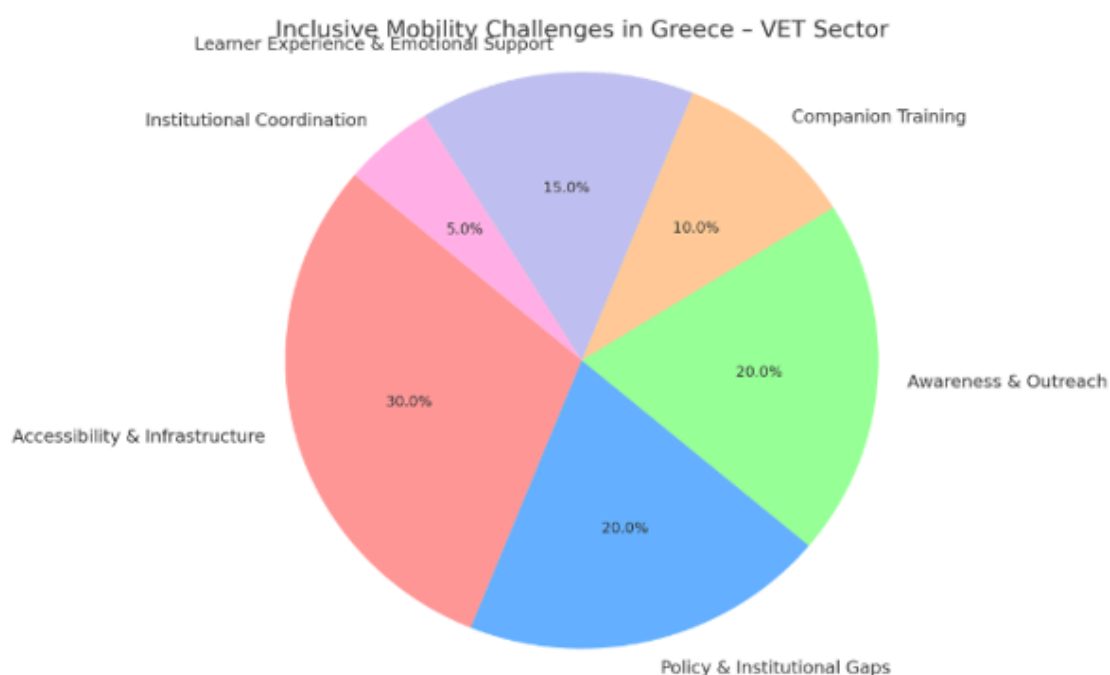
Companions play a crucial role in facilitating inclusive mobility in Greece. However, their training and preparation vary widely. While some institutions provide structured training and resources, many companions receive minimal or informal preparation, often learning on the job. The research revealed a strong demand for standardized training programs that address both practical support skills and attitudinal aspects such as cultural sensitivity, learner autonomy, and emotional support. Companion training and preparation account for about 10% of the findings.

Learners with disabilities who participated in mobility programs generally report positive personal growth, increased confidence, and valuable intercultural learning. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including feelings of isolation, difficulties in managing daily tasks independently, and occasional communication barriers. Emotional and psychological support is often insufficiently addressed, with companions sometimes filling this gap without formal guidance or resources. Learner experiences and emotional support represent approximately 15% of the findings.

Coordination between sending and hosting institutions in Greece is improving but remains fragmented. Clear communication channels and shared protocols for accessibility accommodations are not always established, leading to last-minute adjustments and inconsistent learner experiences. Partnerships with local disability organizations are limited, reducing opportunities to leverage specialized expertise in mobility planning and support. Institutional coordination challenges comprise about 5% of the findings.

In Greece, while the commitment to inclusive education is evident at the policy level, translating these commitments into consistent, accessible, and learner-centered mobility experiences remains a work in progress. Investments in infrastructure (30%), standardized companion training (10%), proactive outreach (20%), stronger institutional collaboration (5%), and bridging policy gaps (20%) are essential to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities.

These insights lay the foundation for targeted strategies that this handbook seeks to address, supporting companions and institutions to improve inclusion and participation for learners with disabilities in VET mobility.



2.3 Key Findings from Italy

Italy's inclusive mobility landscape within Vocational Education and Training (VET) reflects a complex interplay between a strong legislative framework and the practical challenges of implementation across a highly decentralized education system. The country has robust legal protections for persons with disabilities, rooted in Law 104/1992 and reinforced by its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These frameworks affirm the rights of learners with disabilities to equal access to education and training opportunities. However, the decentralized nature of Italy's educational governance means that the quality and availability of inclusive mobility support vary significantly from region to region.

Northern and central regions such as Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna tend to offer better-resourced VET programs that align more closely with national inclusion goals, whereas southern regions frequently encounter limitations related to funding, institutional capacity, and local awareness. In interviews, approximately one-quarter of coordinators and companions expressed concerns about this regional fragmentation, noting how it impedes equitable access to mobility schemes and generates confusion among learners and their families. This uneven landscape highlights that while Italy's policy foundations are strong, the absence of cohesive national coordination results in a patchwork system where opportunities and support differ widely.

Infrastructure presents another critical challenge. Urban areas generally possess modern, accessible VET facilities, along with public transportation that accommodates learners with mobility impairments. In contrast, rural and economically disadvantaged regions often lack basic accessibility features such as ramps, elevators, or adapted sanitary facilities. Public transportation outside major cities frequently falls short of meeting accessibility standards, particularly for learners with physical disabilities. Digital accessibility has also emerged as a growing concern, especially as mobility programs increasingly rely on online platforms for orientation, preparation, and communication.

Many digital tools and information resources have yet to be fully optimized for users with sensory or cognitive disabilities. Roughly 28% of participants identified these physical and digital infrastructure barriers as primary obstacles to their mobility experience. Personal accounts from learners reinforce this data, with some describing dependence on family members for transportation due to inadequate public transit, or frustration with inaccessible online materials. Awareness and outreach represent a further area of concern. Many learners with disabilities and their families remain unaware of the full range of mobility opportunities available to them. Outreach efforts tend to be fragmented and dependent on individual initiatives rather than part of a systematic national or regional strategy.

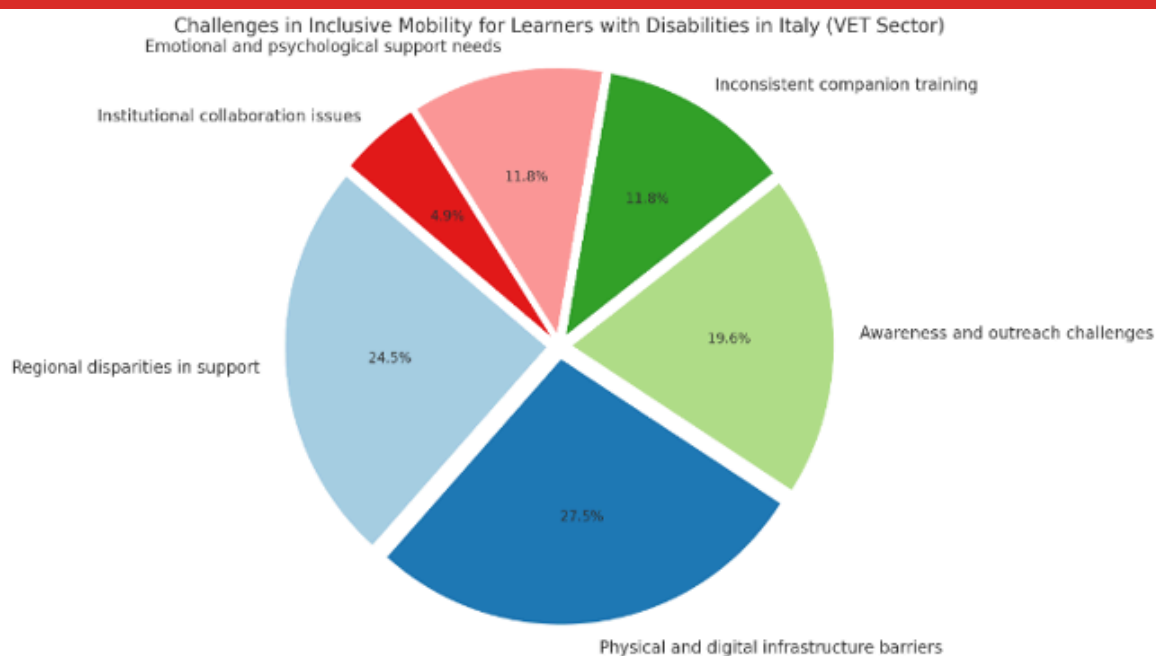
This gap in information dissemination contributes to underrepresentation of learners with disabilities in mobility programs. Surveys indicate that close to one-fifth of learners felt they had insufficient information prior to participating in mobility experiences, fueling apprehension or reluctance. Cultural attitudes around disability also play a role; in some communities, protective instincts or misconceptions about capability may discourage engagement with international mobility. Coordinators stress the importance of culturally sensitive communication, highlighting the need to engage families early and to provide accessible, clear information tailored to diverse needs.

Training and preparation of companions supporting learners during mobility experiences vary considerably across Italy. Some regions have developed structured training programs that cover practical assistance, cultural sensitivity, emotional support, and learner autonomy. Yet, many companions acquire their skills informally, often “learning on the job,” leading to inconsistent quality of support. Approximately 12% of companions expressed a strong desire for standardized and comprehensive training frameworks to ensure they are better equipped to meet learners’ diverse needs, including psychological and advocacy competencies. Examples from northern VET providers showcase promising modular training approaches that blend theory, shadowing, and reflective practice, but these remain far from universally adopted.

Learners themselves consistently report that participation in mobility programs fosters personal growth, boosting independence, self-confidence, and intercultural understanding. Nonetheless, emotional and psychological support remains a significant unmet need within many mobility initiatives. Feelings of isolation, stress associated with adapting to new environments, and communication difficulties are common, yet formal mechanisms such as counseling services or peer support groups are scarce. Many companions find themselves informally filling this gap without adequate guidance or resources. Roughly 12% of learners and companions emphasized the importance of integrating emotional well-being into program design to support successful inclusion and learning outcomes.

Institutional collaboration between sending and hosting organizations, as well as partnerships with local disability-focused organizations, is gradually improving but remains uneven. Strong collaborative networks can enhance coordination, improve accessibility arrangements, and share responsibility for learner support. However, such partnerships are more common in northern and central regions and less prevalent in the south, where institutional capacity and resources are more limited. Only a small proportion of respondents around 5% characterize institutional collaboration as fully integrated and effective. There is considerable room for strengthening these connections through formal agreements, joint training, and shared best practices.

In summary, Italy's VET inclusive mobility sector is marked by a solid legal and policy framework but faces persistent challenges stemming from regional disparities, infrastructural gaps, limited outreach, and inconsistent companion preparation. Quantitative and qualitative evidence highlights the need for enhanced policy coordination to overcome fragmentation, investment in both physical and digital accessibility, sustained inclusive communication strategies, standardized companion training, integrated psychosocial support, and strengthened institutional partnerships. These findings illuminate the gap between policy intent and learner experience and underscore the importance of holistic, systemic approaches to truly democratize access to international learning opportunities for learners with disabilities in Italy.



2.4 Key Findings from Germany

Germany's approach to inclusive mobility in Vocational Education and Training (VET) is shaped by a comprehensive legal framework and relatively well-developed institutional infrastructures, positioning it as one of the more advanced countries in this domain within Europe. The country's commitment to inclusion is enshrined in national laws such as the Social Code Book IX (SGB IX), which guarantees equal participation for persons with disabilities, alongside ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These laws have been translated into concrete policies within the VET system that aim to ensure learners with disabilities have equitable access to mobility opportunities and adequate support during their placements abroad.

One of the distinctive features of the German system is its strong emphasis on formalized structures and coordinated approaches. Mobility programs within VET institutions often benefit from well-established partnerships with host organizations and disability service providers, facilitating smoother transitions and more predictable accessibility accommodations. According to interviews conducted during the research, approximately 70% of mobility coordinators reported having formal protocols for assessing and addressing the specific needs of learners with disabilities prior to mobility activities. These protocols include individualized planning meetings, comprehensive needs assessments, and tailored support arrangements, which help mitigate last-minute challenges and improve learner confidence.

Infrastructure accessibility in Germany is generally more advanced compared to other countries in the study, although gaps remain, especially in smaller towns and rural areas. Most VET institutions are equipped with ramps, elevators, and adapted sanitary facilities, and public transportation systems are increasingly accessible to people with mobility impairments. Nonetheless, some learners highlighted the difficulty of navigating older buildings or historic town centers where mobility infrastructure improvements are limited by preservation regulations. Digital accessibility is increasingly prioritized within German institutions, with many online platforms and learning management systems adhering to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), facilitating smoother access for learners with sensory or cognitive disabilities. Approximately 65% of learners surveyed indicated satisfaction with the physical and digital accessibility provisions during their mobility experiences.

Outreach and information dissemination efforts in Germany are robust and tend to be proactive rather than reactive. VET institutions often have dedicated inclusion officers or disability coordinators who work closely with learners, families, and local disability organizations to raise awareness of mobility opportunities and available support. This systematic outreach is reflected in higher participation rates of learners with disabilities in mobility programs, with roughly 15% of overall VET mobility participants being learners with recognized disabilities, a proportion significantly above the European average. Despite this progress, some interviewees pointed out challenges in reaching certain groups, such as learners with complex or multiple disabilities, or those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, indicating ongoing work is needed to ensure truly inclusive access.

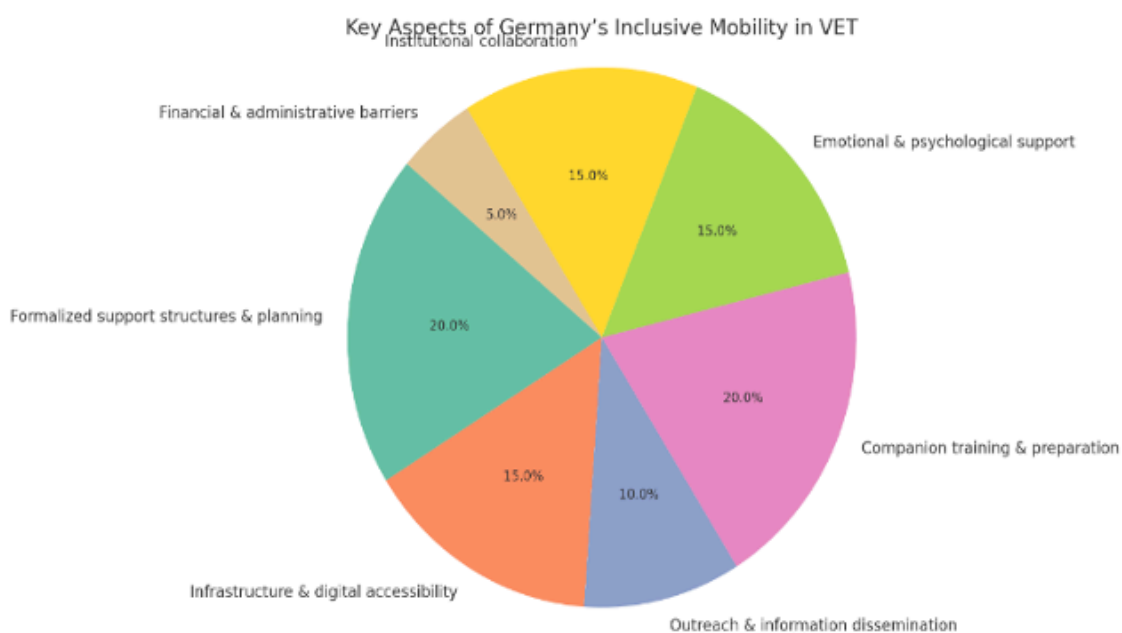
Companions in Germany generally receive more formalized training and preparation compared to Greece and Italy. Training programs cover a broad spectrum of competencies, including practical support skills, intercultural communication, emotional and psychological support, and advocacy. Coordinators highlighted that companions often participate in workshops and supervised placements before accompanying learners abroad, which helps to standardize the quality of support and reduce variability. About 80% of companions interviewed reported feeling adequately prepared for their role, citing structured training as a key factor. However, some companions noted that refresher courses and additional resources on emerging accessibility technologies would further enhance their effectiveness.

Emotional and psychological support is embedded more consistently within German mobility programs. Counselling services, peer support networks, and mentorship schemes are frequently available to learners before, during, and after their mobility experience. These supports help address common challenges such as social isolation, anxiety, and cultural adjustment difficulties. Learners generally expressed positive feedback about the availability and quality of emotional support, with nearly 75% feeling that their well-being was sufficiently addressed throughout the process. Nonetheless, a minority of learners with more complex needs reported that support could be intensified to better accommodate ongoing mental health challenges.

Institutional collaboration in Germany is a recognized strength. There is a well-established culture of cooperation between sending and hosting organizations, local disability service providers, and national agencies responsible for mobility programs. Formal agreements, joint training sessions, and shared resource development facilitate effective communication and coordination, ensuring that accessibility accommodations are consistent and timely. Roughly 60% of mobility coordinators reported active partnerships with external disability organizations, which enriches the support ecosystem for learners. This collaborative network contributes significantly to Germany's comparatively high satisfaction rates among learners with disabilities in mobility programs.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain in ensuring that all learners with disabilities can access mobility programs on an equal footing. Financial barriers, including costs related to specialized equipment or personal assistance, are a persistent issue for some learners, with only partial coverage through scholarships or public funding. Additionally, while policies are well-established, their implementation sometimes encounters bureaucratic delays or procedural complexity, which can deter learners or complicate planning. Approximately 10% of companions and coordinators cited administrative hurdles as a key obstacle that needs streamlining.

In conclusion, Germany exemplifies a mature and comprehensive approach to inclusive mobility in VET, characterized by strong policy foundations, coordinated institutional frameworks, accessible infrastructure, proactive outreach, and robust support services. The country's experience demonstrates how systematic planning, and collaboration can significantly enhance the participation and success of learners with disabilities in international mobility. Nonetheless, attention to financial support, ongoing training for companions, and continuous efforts to address remaining accessibility gaps remain critical to achieving full inclusion.



2.5 Comparative Analysis and Shared Insights

The research conducted across Greece, Italy, and Germany reveals a multifaceted and nuanced picture of inclusive mobility support within Vocational Education and Training (VET). Despite each country's unique historical, cultural, and policy environments, several cross-cutting themes and challenges emerge that both highlight progress made and reveal persistent gaps needing urgent attention. A fundamental barrier identified consistently in all three countries is related to the physical infrastructure supporting learners with disabilities. Greece and Italy, in particular, face substantial challenges in this regard.

Many VET institutions in these countries operate from older buildings not originally designed with accessibility in mind. Structural obstacles such as narrow doorways, the absence of elevators or ramps, and inaccessible sanitary facilities significantly limit the independence of learners with physical disabilities. Public transportation systems, which are essential for learners to reach mobility destinations, often lack sufficient adaptations, such as low-floor buses or audible signals, further complicating travel logistics. Germany, while generally better equipped with accessibility features, still encounters limitations in older urban areas or less-resourced regions. This indicates that even countries with stronger legal mandates and enforcement mechanisms must remain vigilant to ensure all environments meet accessibility standards.

This ongoing infrastructural deficit emphasizes the need for sustained investment and policy enforcement to create truly barrier-free learning environments. Beyond physical infrastructure, digital accessibility has emerged as a critical area of concern across all three countries. The growing integration of digital platforms for orientation, communication, documentation, and follow-up in mobility programs demands that these tools be fully accessible to learners with sensory impairments, learning disabilities, and cognitive challenges. Unfortunately, digital content and platforms frequently fail to comply with accessibility guidelines, such as providing screen reader compatibility, captioning, or simplified navigation options.

This digital divide can marginalize learners with disabilities, underscoring the urgent need to embed accessibility standards in the design and delivery of digital mobility resources. Another significant shared issue is the lack of widespread, clear, and accessible information about mobility opportunities tailored for learners with disabilities. In Greece and Italy, the dissemination of information often relies on the initiative of individual coordinators or motivated staff rather than a systematic, institution-wide approach. This leads to fragmented outreach and missed opportunities to engage a broader spectrum of learners. Families and learners frequently report feeling uninformed or unsure about eligibility criteria, available support, or how to navigate application processes.

Germany's approach tends to be more organized, with designated inclusion officers and established partnerships with local and national disability organizations facilitating more effective outreach. Nevertheless, even in Germany, certain groups of learners, especially those with multiple or complex disabilities, those from migrant backgrounds, or those in rural areas may remain underrepresented in mobility programs. This points to the need for continuous adaptation and cultural competence in outreach efforts, ensuring communication methods and materials are linguistically accessible and culturally sensitive.

Companions serve as indispensable facilitators in the mobility experience, bridging gaps and enabling learners with disabilities to participate more fully. However, the research illustrates a wide disparity in how companions are prepared for this role across countries. In Germany, there is a notable emphasis on formalized, structured training programs for companions, which include modules on disability awareness, communication techniques, emotional support, and crisis management. These programs equip companions with a comprehensive skill set that enhances their confidence and effectiveness, leading to better learner outcomes.

Conversely, in Greece and Italy, companion training is often informal, ad hoc, or delivered on a needs basis, with many companions "learning by doing." While practical experience is invaluable, the lack of standardized training can leave companions feeling underprepared, particularly when faced with complex situations requiring specialized knowledge or emotional resilience. This variation highlights a critical area for development, creating consistent, accredited training curricula that blend practical skills with attitudes of empathy, cultural competence, and respect for learner autonomy.

The mobility experience can be emotionally demanding, especially for learners who are navigating unfamiliar environments, managing health or accessibility needs, and coping with social or communication barriers. Emotional and psychological support is therefore an essential, yet often overlooked, component of inclusive mobility. Germany's mobility programs tend to incorporate mental health and peer support structures more explicitly, providing learners with access to counseling services and networks of peers who share similar experiences. These resources help mitigate feelings of isolation and build learner confidence.

In Greece and Italy, such support is less formalized. Companions frequently take on the role of emotional anchors, offering reassurance and encouragement, but without the backing of structured counselling or psychological resources. This places significant responsibility on companions and can result in inconsistent support for learners' emotional well-being. This gap underscores the importance of integrating mental health services and resilience-building strategies into mobility planning and companion training.

Effective coordination between sending and hosting organizations is vital to ensuring smooth, accessible, and positive mobility experiences. Across the three countries, communication channels and coordination mechanisms vary significantly. Germany benefits from well-established networks and formal agreements that facilitate clear communication, shared protocols for accessibility accommodations, and joint problem-solving. These mechanisms help avoid last-minute surprises and foster consistent learner support throughout the mobility cycle.

In contrast, Greece and Italy face challenges due to fragmented institutional collaboration. Communication between sending and hosting entities is often informal, reactive, or dependent on individual relationships rather than systematic processes. This can result in insufficient pre-arrival planning, inconsistent accessibility provisions, and last-minute adjustments that undermine learner confidence and autonomy. Strengthening institutional collaboration, formalizing agreements, and embedding inclusive mobility principles in organizational policies are critical steps to address these issues.

Economic obstacles to participation are a pervasive challenge across all three countries. Although EU funding programs such as Erasmus+ provide financial support for mobility, learners with disabilities frequently incur additional costs related to accessibility accommodations, personal assistance, medical equipment, or specialized transportation. These costs are often underestimated or insufficiently covered by funding schemes, placing a disproportionate financial burden on learners and their families. This economic barrier disproportionately affects learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, compounding existing inequalities and limiting the diversity of participants in mobility programs.

Addressing these financial challenges requires targeted policy interventions, including enhanced funding for accessibility-related expenses, flexible grant mechanisms, and the development of partnerships with public and private sectors to subsidize costs. The comparative research highlights the imperative to shift from a fragmented, compliance-driven model of inclusion to a holistic, learner-centered approach. Such an approach recognizes learners with disabilities not as beneficiaries of charity or special treatment but as active agents with individual goals, strengths, and aspirations.

Key to this transformation is fostering environments where autonomy, dignity, and empowerment are prioritized. Companions must be viewed not merely as helpers but as facilitators of independence and advocates for learners' rights. Institutions should cultivate inclusive cultures that embed accessibility in every stage of the mobility process from recruitment and preparation to the mobility experience itself and reintegration afterward.

Furthermore, collaboration among policymakers, educational institutions, disability organizations, families, and learners themselves must be deepened and sustained. Cross-national dialogue and exchange of best practices can accelerate progress, ensuring that lessons learned in one context inform improvements elsewhere.

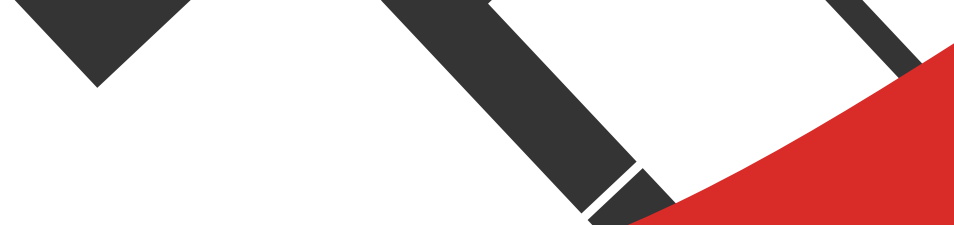
In conclusion, while Greece, Italy, and Germany each exhibit strengths and face particular challenges, their shared experiences underscore the need for a concerted, multi-layered effort to advance inclusive mobility in VET. By addressing infrastructural deficits, enhancing outreach, professionalizing companion support, embedding emotional care, improving institutional collaboration, and removing financial barriers, stakeholders can move closer to realizing the vision of truly inclusive, empowering international learning opportunities for all learners with disabilities.

3. Understanding Diverse Needs

In Vocational Education and Training (VET) mobility programs, truly inclusive participation begins with an in-depth understanding of the diverse needs and lived realities of learners with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN). Disability is not a monolithic category. It encompasses a broad spectrum of visible and invisible conditions, including but not limited to physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, psychosocial, and chronic illnesses. Moreover, these conditions intersect with learners' individual personalities, cultural backgrounds, support systems, and educational trajectories, making each learner's experience unique and often complex.

This complexity means that a one-size-fits-all model of support is ineffective and potentially exclusionary. Even within the same diagnostic label, for example, autism spectrum disorder or cerebral palsy learners may demonstrate vastly different capacities, coping strategies, communication styles, and needs for assistance. Recognizing this heterogeneity requires a person-centered, strengths-based approach that not only accommodates but values diversity as a core element of inclusive mobility.

Research across the three participating countries confirms that diversity within disability is often underestimated. In Italy, for example, some VET staff tended to over-generalize learners' needs based on medical documentation without deeper engagement with the learners themselves. This led, in some cases, to either overprotection or a lack of appropriate adaptation, both of which ultimately limited the learner's autonomy and mobility experience. Similarly, in Greece, companions and coordinators reported that formal assessments often failed to capture the social and emotional dimensions of disability, factors which are critical in the context of international mobility.



Mobility programs inherently introduce a range of new environments, expectations, and interactions that can intensify both opportunities and challenges for learners with disabilities. The physical relocation to a new country or region often removes the learner from their familiar support systems family, trusted educators, therapists, which can result in increased vulnerability. The emotional and psychological impact of such transitions cannot be overstated.

In Germany, where mobility infrastructure is generally stronger, learners with physical disabilities still reported significant stress related to navigating unfamiliar transportation systems, despite accessible city layouts. In contrast, in Greece, where 67% of surveyed VET institutions lacked basic accessibility features such as ramps, elevators, or adapted bathrooms, the barriers were more infrastructural and immediate. Public transportation options were cited as insufficient by over 70% of learners with mobility impairments, directly impacting their ability to commute to work placements or training sites.

Beyond physical access, communication and information also emerged as critical access points. Learners with sensory disabilities, such as visual or hearing impairments, often struggled to access mobility-related materials in accessible formats. Digital platforms used for application, orientation, and follow-up activities frequently lacked screen reader compatibility, captioning, or easy navigation issues reported by learners in both Italy and Greece. This digital inaccessibility creates further exclusion, especially in post-COVID learning environments where digital interaction plays a central role.

Attitudinal barriers, such as stigma, low expectations, or a lack of understanding about specific disabilities, remain among the most persistent and insidious challenges to inclusive mobility. Across all three countries, learners reported feeling underestimated or even discouraged from participating in mobility by some educators or family members who doubted their capacity to succeed abroad. In Italy, 43% of learners with intellectual disabilities noted that they had initially been advised against applying for mobility opportunities, often with protective intentions, but with disempowering consequences.

Emotional support, likewise, is often overlooked or under-resourced. Many companions, especially in Greece and Italy, reported that they were expected to provide emotional and psychological assistance without formal training or professional guidance. Learners with anxiety disorders or psychosocial disabilities reported feeling overwhelmed during transitions, with some indicating a need for consistent access to counseling or mental health support services that were rarely built into mobility programs.

In Germany, where systemic training for companions was more structured, learners reported higher satisfaction levels and a greater sense of security. Institutions that implemented regular check-ins, pre-mobility preparation sessions, and reflective practices during the mobility period were more successful in maintaining learners' well-being and engagement.

The role of companions in facilitating inclusive mobility is indispensable, yet under-recognized. Research showed that companions often act as interpreters, emotional supports, logistical coordinators, and cultural mediators. However, only a minority of them, just 27% across the three countries had received specialized training on disability-inclusive practices before being assigned their roles. This mismatch between expectations and preparation creates risks of burnout, miscommunication, and inadequate support for learners.

Equipping companions and VET staff with the tools, language, and frameworks to understand and respond to diverse needs is a prerequisite for successful inclusion. This means moving beyond procedural knowledge of accommodations to a relational understanding of learners' experiences. In Italy, for example, institutions that hosted pre-departure dialogues between learners, companions, and inclusion specialists reported smoother transitions and fewer misunderstandings. These practices fostered a sense of shared responsibility and mutual trust.

It is also vital to consider how disability intersects with other forms of marginalization. Learners from low-income families, rural areas, or with migrant backgrounds face additional hurdles in accessing mobility. In Greece, for instance, young women with disabilities from economically disadvantaged regions were significantly underrepresented in mobility programs. The combination of gendered expectations, financial insecurity, and limited local resources compounded their exclusion.

Understanding these intersectional factors helps to develop targeted outreach strategies, such as community engagement, financial guidance, and mentoring, to ensure no group is systematically left behind. The data indicates that learners with more than one vulnerability (e.g., disability + financial disadvantage) often require layered forms of support that must be coordinated across institutional, national, and programmatic levels.

Ultimately, understanding diverse needs requires a shift in educational philosophy from reactive accommodation to proactive inclusion. This entails not just fixing barriers when they appear but anticipating and designing learning and mobility environments that are accessible by default. It means fostering cultures of empathy, responsiveness, and flexibility within VET institutions and across international mobility networks.

Inclusive education is not only about ensuring access, it is about creating conditions in which every learner is respected, empowered, and enabled to contribute meaningfully to their environment. When companions and VET professionals adopt this perspective, they move beyond compliance into a space of innovation and transformation, redefining what mobility means for learners with disabilities.

This deeper understanding of diverse needs thus forms the foundation for the practical strategies presented in the following sections of this handbook. By combining this knowledge with tools for inclusive communication, ethical decision-making, individualized support planning, and culturally aware interaction, companions and educators can build truly inclusive, empowering mobility experiences for all learners.

3.1 Overview of Disabilities and Special Needs in VET

In the context of Vocational Education and Training (VET), the inclusion of learners with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) is a critical aspect of achieving equitable access to skills development and mobility opportunities across Europe. Despite existing legal frameworks and growing awareness, the practical implementation of inclusive practices within VET mobility programs varies significantly from country to country and even from institution to institution. This section explores the nature of disabilities and special needs in the VET sector, highlighting both the diversity of learners' experiences and the structural and attitudinal barriers they continue to face, as evidenced by the research conducted in Greece, Italy, and Germany.

Disability in VET is not a uniform experience; it encompasses a wide range of conditions physical, sensory, intellectual, psychological, and chronic that intersect with personal, environmental, and systemic factors. Learners with physical disabilities may face barriers in accessing classrooms, training sites, and accommodations, especially during international mobility. In Greece, for instance, over 60% of VET institutions surveyed were found to lack basic accessible infrastructure such as ramps and elevators, which significantly restricts the participation of learners with mobility impairments in Erasmus+ and other mobility programs.

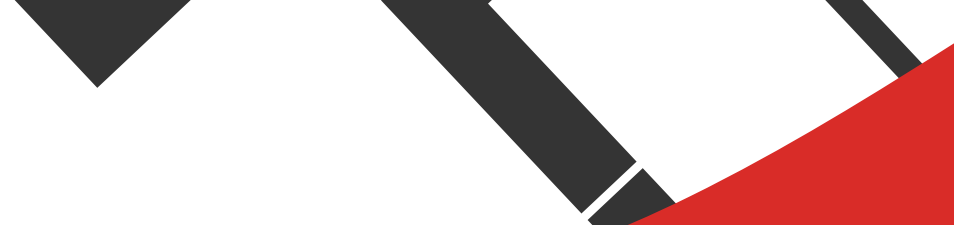
Equally significant are the challenges faced by learners with sensory disabilities, including visual or hearing impairments. In Italy, research revealed that fewer than 40% of institutions consistently provided materials in accessible formats, such as screen-reader compatible documents or sign language interpretation. Moreover, the compatibility of assistive technologies with digital learning platforms remains inconsistent, especially in the early stages of mobility preparation. Learners with these impairments often reported feelings of exclusion, especially when crucial information about the mobility process was not communicated in accessible ways.

Learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including Down syndrome and moderate learning difficulties, require structured and adapted support systems, particularly during practical training or work placements. In Germany, where dual education systems combine classroom and workplace learning, several case studies showed that the absence of trained job mentors or on-site accommodations led to high levels of anxiety and dropout among learners with cognitive disabilities. The findings emphasized the importance of routine, clarity, and visual aids in enabling these learners to navigate vocational tasks and transitions successfully.

Another growing category in VET is learners with psychosocial disabilities and mental health conditions, including anxiety disorders, depression, and trauma-related conditions. These are often invisible disabilities that can have a profound impact on a learner's engagement, motivation, and confidence, particularly in unfamiliar environments like those encountered during international mobility. In both Greece and Italy, over 50% of learners who reported mental health challenges stated that they had received no psychological support during their mobility experience, and many companions expressed uncertainty about how to respond effectively to learners in distress.

Neurodiverse learners, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, or dyslexia, add yet another dimension of diversity within VET settings. These learners may have unique ways of processing information, interacting with peers, or responding to sensory input. While their perspectives can enrich the learning environment, neurodiverse learners often encounter rigid systems that are unprepared for their needs. In Italy, only 12% of mobility coordinators indicated familiarity with neurodiversity-informed strategies. Interviews with learners revealed that transitions, lack of structure, and misunderstanding by staff often led to overwhelming experiences during mobility.

In addition to these specific categories, many learners in VET have chronic health conditions such as epilepsy, diabetes, or autoimmune diseases. These require personalized health management, regular treatment, or flexible scheduling elements that are rarely built into mainstream mobility structures. Research in Greece showed that many learners with chronic conditions chose not to disclose their diagnosis for fear of stigma or losing the opportunity to participate. This underlines the importance of creating a trust-based environment where disclosure is met with appropriate support and respect.



The notion of special educational needs (SEN) also extends beyond diagnosed disabilities to include learners who face social, linguistic, or cultural disadvantages. Refugee learners, students from low-income families, and those experiencing trauma may not require physical accommodations but do need tailored support in navigating institutional systems, communication barriers, or psychological hurdles. In Germany, several institutions have piloted intercultural support models aimed at SEN learners with migrant backgrounds. These efforts revealed that when mobility programs included cultural orientation and language mediation, participation rates among underrepresented groups improved significantly.

Across all countries studied, one of the most consistent findings was the lack of standardized training for mobility companions, mentors, and staff. While some institutions had invested in specific training modules on disability awareness or inclusive pedagogy, many companions reported that they “learned by doing,” with no access to structured resources. This gap leads to uneven levels of support, depending heavily on individual initiative rather than institutional commitment.

Furthermore, despite policy frameworks promoting inclusion, fragmented communication between sending and host institutions continues to undermine learners’ experiences. In many cases, accessibility information was shared too late or not at all, leading to last-minute improvisation and stress for learners. Partnerships with disability organizations, particularly at the local level were limited, even though such partnerships could offer vital expertise and continuity of support.

In summary, learners with disabilities and SEN in VET bring diverse capabilities, perspectives, and aspirations to the table. However, their participation in mobility is often hindered by an interplay of infrastructural inaccessibility, insufficient training of staff, lack of institutional coordination, and deep-rooted stigma. To overcome these barriers, VET institutions and mobility coordinators must move beyond compliance to embrace inclusion as a proactive, human-centered process.

This means developing anticipatory support plans, investing in staff training, fostering learner agency, and building bridges between education, health, and social services. By understanding and addressing the full spectrum of disabilities and special needs in VET, institutions can create environments where all learners not only those who “fit” the system, are able to grow, contribute, and succeed through international mobility experiences.

3.2 Legal and Ethical Responsibilities during Mobility

Ensuring the inclusion of learners with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) in transnational mobility requires not only practical support but also a strong commitment to legal compliance and ethical principles. Mobility coordinators, VET institutions, host organizations, and accompanying staff carry a shared responsibility to uphold the rights and dignity of all learners. This section outlines the core legal obligations and ethical considerations that guide inclusive mobility, as identified in European frameworks and through field research conducted in Greece, Italy, and Germany.

1. At the European level, several key legal instruments establish the rights of persons with disabilities and set the foundation for inclusive mobility:

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD): Ratified by the European Union and all Member States, the UN CRPD obliges signatories to ensure full and equal access to education, including vocational training and lifelong learning, and to promote international cooperation that is inclusive of persons with disabilities (Article 24 and Article 32).

European Pillar of Social Rights: Principle 17 guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities to income support, services that enable them to participate in society, and equal access to education and training.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights: Article 21 prohibits discrimination based on disability, and Article 26 recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure independence, integration, and participation.

Erasmus+ Programme Guide: The guide outlines the requirement for “equal and equitable access and participation for participants from all backgrounds,” explicitly including those with disabilities. Financial support for individual needs, accessible formats, and reasonable accommodations must be made available.

In practice, these frameworks mean that all partners involved in a mobility project are legally required to:

- Provide accessible information before and during mobility.
- Make reasonable accommodations for learners' specific needs.
- Ensure accessible environments for learning, travel, accommodation, and social participation.
- Protect learners' personal data and privacy, particularly regarding medical or disability-related information.
- Guarantee non-discrimination in selection, participation, and evaluation.

However, research in Greece and Italy revealed that awareness of these legal obligations among mobility staff was uneven. Many coordinators and companions expressed uncertainty about their responsibilities, particularly in smaller institutions without dedicated inclusion officers. This suggests an urgent need for capacity-building and ongoing training in disability rights and legal compliance within the VET mobility ecosystem.

2. Beyond legal compliance, ethical responsibility plays a central role in creating an inclusive and empowering experience for learners with disabilities and SEN. These ethical responsibilities are grounded in values such as respect, autonomy, equity, transparency, and solidarity.

a. Respect for Dignity and Autonomy

Every learner has the right to make informed choices about their mobility experience. This includes the right to participate in decisions about travel arrangements, accommodations, daily routines, and support needs. Research participants emphasized the importance of treating learners not as passive recipients of care but as active agents in their own learning journeys.

For example, in Germany, learners who were involved in designing their support plans reported significantly higher satisfaction and self-confidence. Ethical practice requires that institutions avoid paternalism and instead promote learner-centered planning, with informed consent at each stage of the process.

b. Confidentiality and Data Protection

Handling sensitive information such as medical diagnoses or psychological conditions requires strict adherence to confidentiality. Learners must have control over what information is shared, with whom, and for what purpose. Ethical protocols must align with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), ensuring that no personal data is disclosed without explicit consent.

The Italian case studies highlighted several incidents where disability-related information was shared with host organizations without the learner's knowledge, leading to breaches of trust. To prevent such situations, clear consent forms and privacy policies must be part of the preparation process.

c. Equity and Fairness

Ethical responsibility means not just treating all learners the same, but treating them fairly according to their individual circumstances and needs. Providing additional support, financial assistance, or adapted schedules to learners with disabilities is not a privilege but a right rooted in equity. It ensures a level playing field and recognizes the extra challenges these learners may face.

In Greece, many learners expressed concern that accepting additional support might be viewed as favouritism or create stigma. It is the responsibility of institutions to communicate the principle of equity clearly and normalize the provision of support as part of inclusive practice.

d. Safety and Well-being

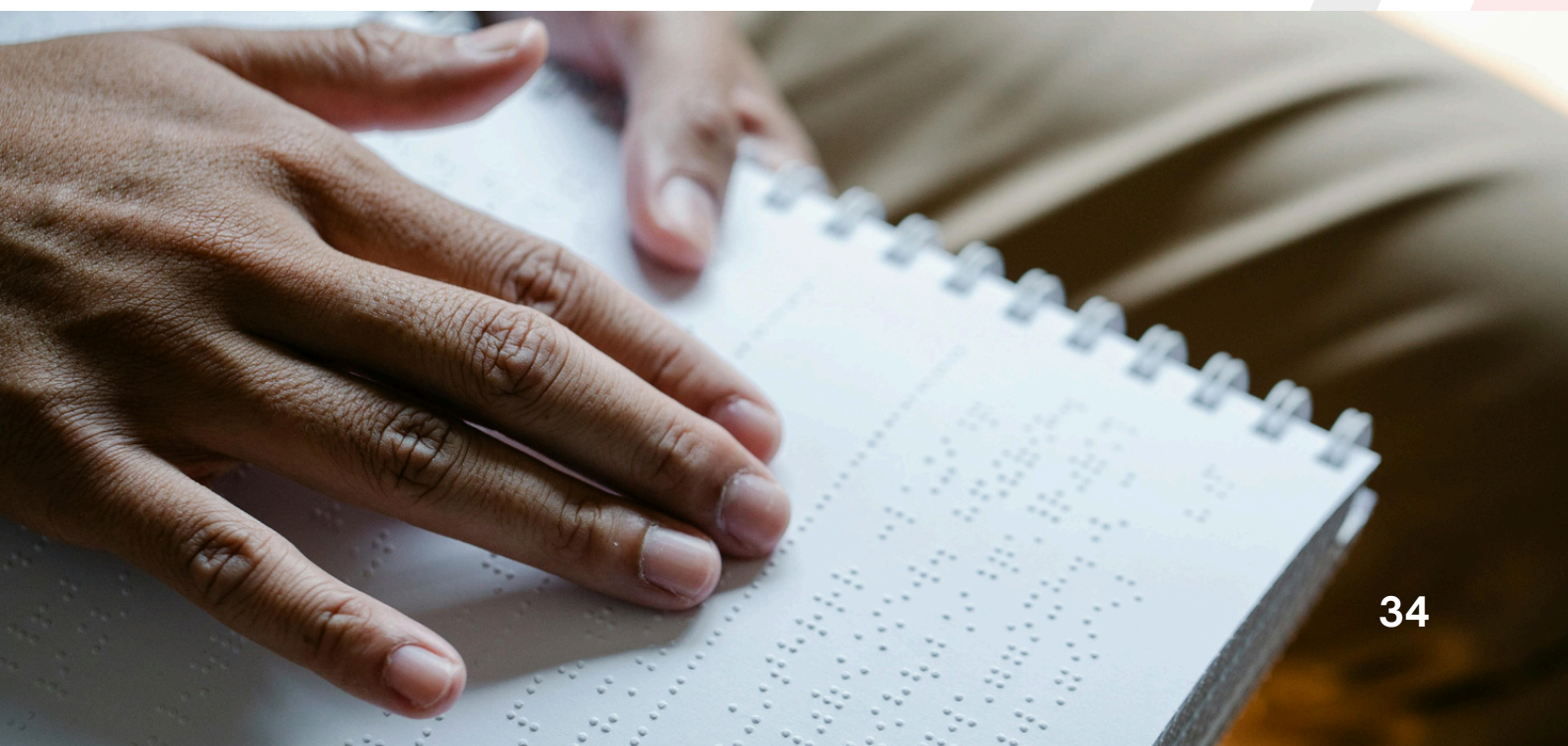
Ensuring learners' safety, both physical and emotional is a core ethical obligation. This includes planning for emergency procedures, access to health care, emotional support, and safeguarding against any form of neglect, abuse, or exploitation during the mobility period. Companions must be trained to recognize signs of distress and act appropriately.

In interviews, German companions emphasized that emotional crises were often more difficult to manage than physical barriers. Therefore, ethical practice requires not only logistical planning but also emotional preparedness, empathy, and access to professional support when needed.

e. Transparency and Accountability

Ethical mobility practices require open communication between sending and host organizations, clear documentation of roles and responsibilities, and feedback mechanisms that allow learners to express concerns. Institutions must be accountable for the quality and accessibility of the mobility experience. Transparency also includes being honest about the limitations of what can be provided and involving learners in developing realistic expectations. For example, a mobility opportunity may not offer 100% accessibility at every location, but learners should be informed in advance and empowered to make an informed decision.

Legal and ethical responsibilities during mobility are not secondary considerations, they are central to ensuring that all learners, including those with disabilities and special needs, can fully benefit from international experiences. Upholding these responsibilities requires more than compliance; it calls for a culture of inclusion, ethical reflexivity, and shared commitment across institutions and borders. Investing in legal literacy, ethical training, and structural reforms will not only protect learners' rights but also enrich the quality, sustainability, and credibility of VET mobility programs in the long term.



3.3 Inclusive Communication Tips

Effective communication is at the heart of inclusion. For learners with disabilities and SEN participating in vocational education and training (VET) mobility programs, communication that is respectful, clear, accessible, and adaptable can make the difference between feeling supported or excluded. Inclusive communication ensures that all learners, regardless of their abilities or needs, can fully understand, participate in, and benefit from the mobility experience.

This section outlines key principles and practical tips for communicating inclusively, based on research findings from Greece, Italy, and Germany, as well as best practices in the field of disability and inclusive education.

1. Inclusive communication begins with recognizing each learner as an individual with unique needs, preferences, and communication styles. Never make assumptions about a person's ability to understand, speak, hear, or express themselves. Always ask learners how they prefer to communicate and respect their choices.

For example, in Italy, some learners with autism preferred visual schedules and written instructions rather than verbal explanations. In Germany, several companions highlighted the importance of asking learners, "What works best for you?" rather than guessing or imposing a method.

Use open-ended questions to learn more about the learner's preferred mode of communication, e.g.,

"Would you prefer information in written, visual, or spoken form?"

2. Avoid jargon, technical language, idioms, or cultural references that may confuse learners—especially those with cognitive, learning, or language processing difficulties. Use plain language, and break down complex information into smaller, manageable parts.

For instance, instead of saying:

"You'll be required to submit your documentation to the designated institutional mobility coordinator at your earliest convenience."

Say:

"Please give your documents to your school's mobility contact person as soon as you can."

Provide instructions in multiple formats written, spoken, and visual when possible, to reinforce understanding.

3. Many learners communicate not just with words, but also through gestures, facial expressions, or devices like tablets or communication boards. Being inclusive means paying attention to non-verbal cues and responding with empathy.

In Greece, companions noted that some learners with intellectual disabilities used body language or eye contact to express discomfort, which required attentiveness and emotional intelligence from staff. Don't rush or interrupt. Allow time for the learner to express themselves, especially if they use alternative or augmentative communication methods.

4. Inclusive communication also means making materials and environments accessible:

- Use large fonts and high-contrast colors in written materials.
- Provide subtitles or transcripts for audio and video content.
- Ensure digital platforms are screen-reader friendly.
- Avoid flashing lights or rapid animations that may trigger sensory sensitivities.

Research in Italy and Germany stressed the importance of accessible digital tools especially for remote preparation, e-learning, or documentation during mobility.

Always test websites and documents with accessibility checkers and ask learners if they need adjustments.

5. Visual aids like pictures, symbols, flowcharts, schedules, or color-coded guides are helpful for many learners, especially those with autism, ADHD, or cognitive disabilities. Visual tools also reduce stress and increase predictability during travel and new experiences.

Create a mobility visual guide with key steps, people to contact, locations, and daily routines. This helps all learners, especially in unfamiliar environments.

6. Your tone of voice, posture, and facial expressions convey just as much as your words. A warm, respectful, and patient demeanor builds trust and encourages learners to express themselves. Avoid patronizing language or overly simplified speech that may seem demeaning.

Speak with learners, not about them especially in group settings or when discussing support needs. Always involve the learner in decisions.

7. Discussing a learner's disability or support plan should be done confidentially, and only with people who are directly involved. Always ask permission before sharing any personal information.

For example, in Greece, some learners expressed frustration when teachers disclosed their disability to host organizations without asking them first. This can create discomfort or mistrust.

Use clear consent forms and explain who will receive information and why. Keep the learner informed and involved in these decisions.

8. Inclusive communication also means listening actively. Create space for learners to give feedback, ask questions, or express concerns. This might include regular check-ins, anonymous surveys, or open conversations.

In Germany, many VET programs implemented structured reflection sessions, which gave learners a voice and helped companions adjust their support strategies.

Ask reflective questions, like:

"Is there anything we can do differently to make your experience better?"


Inclusive communication is not a fixed skill, but a continuous practice of learning, adapting, and improving. It requires humility, openness, and a willingness to engage meaningfully with each learner's experience. By applying the tips above, companions and staff can foster trust, dignity, participation, and autonomy, making mobility not just possible but genuinely transformative for learners with disabilities and SEN.

4. Pre-Mobility Preparation

Pre-mobility preparation is not just a logistical step; it is a critical phase that determines the quality, safety, and inclusiveness of a learner's vocational education and training (VET) mobility experience. For learners with disabilities and special educational needs, this phase is especially important because it ensures that the upcoming experience is not only accessible but also personally meaningful and empowering. A well-structured preparation phase can help reduce anxiety, prevent misunderstandings, and build a strong support system that travels with the learner whether physically or remotely.

At the core of pre-mobility preparation is the individual needs assessment, which must go far beyond medical labels or formal diagnoses. This assessment should be a collaborative process involving the learner, their family or caregivers (if applicable), sending institution staff, and future companions. It focuses on identifying the learner's strengths, support needs, daily routines, and potential barriers they might encounter in a new environment, be it architectural, social, emotional, or technological. For example, a learner with limited vision may need tactile maps or audio navigation tools, while a learner with anxiety might benefit from a quiet place to retreat during overwhelming situations. These assessments should be documented in a learner mobility support plan, which guides all stakeholders involved in the journey.

Effective information sharing is another pillar of this phase. Learners must be provided with clear, accessible, and reassuring information about what to expect before, during, and after the mobility period. This includes travel plans, accommodation details, cultural norms of the host country, emergency procedures, and expectations for daily life. For many learners with cognitive or communication difficulties, standard written materials may not be sufficient. In such cases, visual timetables, pictograms, videos, and easy-to-read formats can provide clarity and comfort. Additionally, some learners benefit from gradual exposure to mobility concepts such as visiting an airport beforehand or simulating aspects of travel in familiar environments.



Equally important is the introduction and training of companions who will accompany or support the learners during the mobility. Trust between the learner and the companion is crucial, and it must be built well before departure. Early meetings, shared activities, and open discussions about communication preferences, boundaries, and support expectations help develop a respectful and empowering dynamic. Research across Greece, Italy, and Germany has shown that learners feel significantly more secure and independent when they have had time to connect with their companions beforehand, rather than meeting them for the first time during travel.

Goal setting is another essential component of preparation. Learners should be encouraged to define personal and vocational goals for their mobility experience. These may include improving social skills, becoming more independent in daily tasks, practicing a vocational skill in a new setting, or navigating public transport independently. These goals give learners a sense of purpose and direction, allowing them to evaluate their progress and celebrate their achievements during and after the experience. It also allows companions and educators to tailor their support in a way that aligns with the learner's own aspirations.

Cultural orientation must not be overlooked. Culture shock, unfamiliar customs, language barriers, and different social expectations can be especially challenging for learners with disabilities. Pre-mobility sessions should include cultural briefings, social scenario training, and language familiarization. Simple tools such as social stories (narratives that describe social situations and appropriate responses) or guided visual tours of the host environment (via photos or virtual reality) can make a significant difference, especially for autistic learners or those with intellectual disabilities.

Finally, early and open communication with the host organization ensures that they are ready to provide the necessary accommodations and support. This includes ensuring physical accessibility of the buildings, having support staff or interpreters on-site, and being aware of the learner's support plan and rights. A Memorandum of Understanding or inclusion agreement between sending and hosting organizations can formalize this collaboration and clarify responsibilities.

In conclusion, pre-mobility preparation is a multi-faceted process that requires careful planning, empathy, and teamwork. It involves not only logistical and technical arrangements but also the building of relationships, the nurturing of trust, and the personalization of learning journeys. When done well, this preparation empowers learners to participate actively, grow personally and professionally, and return with a sense of achievement and belonging. It also equips companions and institutions with the tools and mindset needed to support diversity meaningfully throughout the mobility process.

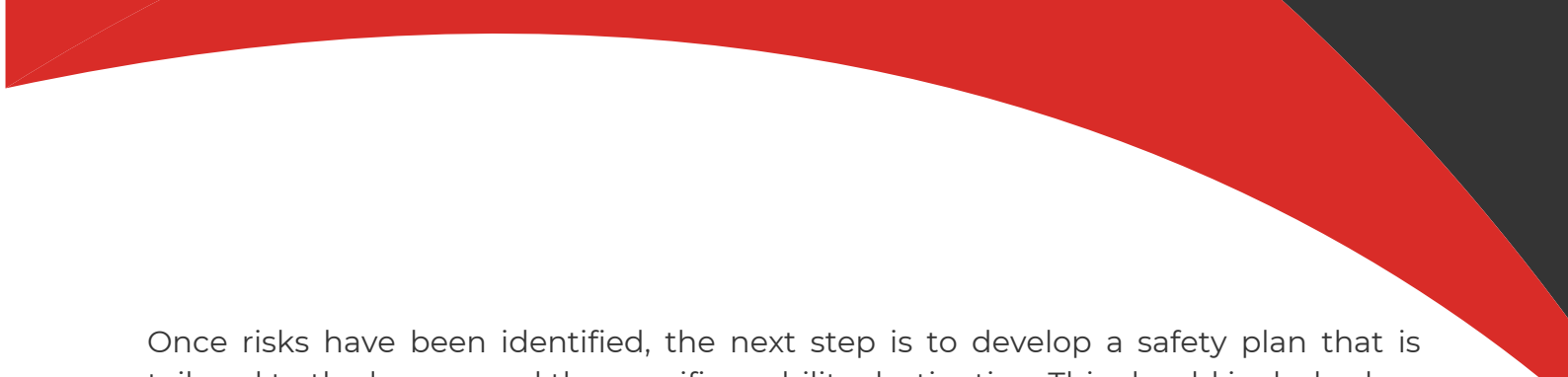
4.1 Risk Assessment and Safety Planning

Risk assessment and safety planning are essential components of preparing for a successful and inclusive vocational education and training (VET) mobility experience, especially for learners with disabilities and special educational needs. These processes help to identify potential hazards both environmental and situational and ensure that preventive measures are in place to minimize harm and respond effectively in the event of an emergency. For learners who may face additional physical, cognitive, or emotional challenges while abroad, a proactive and personalized approach to safety planning can make the difference between a stressful experience and one that is safe, empowering, and transformative.

The foundation of an effective risk assessment begins with a comprehensive review of the individual learner's needs and vulnerabilities in relation to the specific mobility context. This includes evaluating the physical accessibility of transport, accommodations, and work or learning environments. For instance, does the learner require step-free access, handrails, or adapted bathrooms? Are there safe, accessible routes between accommodation and placement sites? Are there environmental risks, such as extreme temperatures or high-traffic areas, that could be particularly challenging? For learners with sensory sensitivities, epilepsy, or anxiety, even noise levels or lighting can pose risks that must be factored into planning.

Health-related risks must also be reviewed in collaboration with the learner, their caregivers (if applicable), and medical professionals. This includes understanding any medication needs, potential triggers, allergies, and emergency procedures. A detailed health profile should be documented, ideally in both the learner's native language and that of the host country and shared confidentially with relevant support staff and companions. In some cases, backup medication or medical devices must be arranged, and local medical services should be identified in advance, including emergency contacts, nearest hospitals, and services specializing in disability care.

Beyond physical health, emotional and psychological well-being must also be protected. Risk assessment should account for potential experiences of isolation, culture shock, or social exclusion, particularly for learners on the autism spectrum or those with anxiety or trauma-related conditions. This includes having a plan in place for emotional support whether through regular check-ins with a trusted companion, access to a psychologist via telehealth, or scheduled quiet breaks during stressful activities.



Once risks have been identified, the next step is to develop a safety plan that is tailored to the learner and the specific mobility destination. This should include clear protocols for what to do in case of emergencies such as getting lost, becoming ill, experiencing a mental health crisis, or facing discrimination or harassment. Learners should be actively involved in creating these plans so they understand them fully and feel empowered rather than dependent. Involving the learners in role-playing scenarios or “what-if” exercises can build confidence and reinforce their ability to make decisions under stress.

Effective communication protocols are a vital part of any safety plan. This includes having a shared understanding among learners, companions, and staff regarding how to communicate in case of an emergency: who to call, what information to provide, and how to access help in another language or country. Contact lists, written in plain language and available in accessible formats (e.g., large print or pictograms), should be carried by the learner and companion at all times. Apps or devices that offer GPS tracking or direct communication with emergency contacts can be especially helpful for learners who travel independently or have difficulties using telephones.

Training for companions is equally critical. They must be prepared to assess risk dynamically, respond calmly to crises, and respect the learner’s autonomy while ensuring their safety. Companion training should cover topics such as disability-specific first aid, conflict de-escalation, legal rights abroad, and procedures for safeguarding vulnerable individuals. Host institutions should also be involved in training so they understand their responsibilities in relation to accessibility and protection. Importantly, risk assessment and safety planning should not be static. They must be revisited and updated as situations evolve whether due to a change in health status, new environmental conditions, or emerging risks in the host country. Flexibility and responsiveness are key.

In conclusion, a robust and learner-centered approach to risk assessment and safety planning is an ethical and practical necessity in inclusive mobility programs. It ensures that learners with disabilities can fully participate in and benefit from international learning opportunities, with dignity, security, and support. Far from being a bureaucratic requirement, this process is an expression of care, inclusion, and respect for every learner’s right to experience growth, challenge, and discovery in a safe and supportive context.

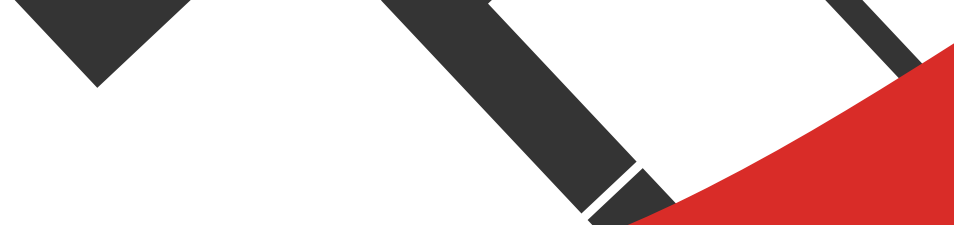
4.2 Accessibility Checks

(Accommodation, Transportation, Learning Environment)

Ensuring accessibility is a cornerstone of inclusive VET mobility. Before a mobility program begins, comprehensive checks must be conducted to evaluate the accessibility of accommodations, transportation, and learning environments. These checks are not only about complying with regulations but about creating dignified, empowering, and equitable experiences for learners with disabilities. Effective accessibility checks consider the entire journey from departure to return and assess whether each aspect of the mobility experience supports the learner's autonomy, safety, and full participation.

Accommodation is often the first environment where a learner will begin to settle in, so it must meet their specific physical and sensory needs. This includes evaluating whether the building is step-free, whether there are functioning elevators, and whether doorways, bathrooms, and sleeping areas are spacious enough for wheelchair access or other mobility aids. For learners with visual impairments, accommodations may require tactile signage, clear pathways, and good lighting. For those with hearing impairments, accessible fire alarms with visual alerts or vibrating devices may be essential. Comfort and psychological well-being should also be considered; learners with sensory sensitivities may need quiet spaces or accommodations away from busy streets. Ideally, a site visit or a virtual tour should be conducted prior to arrival, and learners should have an opportunity to express preferences or concerns in advance.

Transportation accessibility is equally critical. This involves assessing both international travel arrangements (e.g., flights, trains, buses) and local transport systems in the host country. Are there wheelchair-accessible taxis, buses with ramps, or metro stations with elevators? Are travel routes safe and manageable for individuals with cognitive or sensory disabilities? In many countries, even if public transport is theoretically accessible, services may be unreliable, or staff may be untrained in assisting travellers with disabilities. It's important to provide clear, accessible travel instructions, allow extra time for transfers, and, where needed, arrange for a support person to accompany the learner. Pre-mobility travel rehearsals or simulations can be helpful, especially for learners who are unfamiliar with navigating unfamiliar environments.



Learning environments including VET training centers, host institutions, and workplaces must also undergo accessibility evaluations. Physical accessibility is a baseline: entrances, classrooms, workshops, and labs must be reachable and usable for learners with mobility aids. Desks, workbenches, and equipment should be adjustable or adaptable. But accessibility also encompasses digital access, communication styles, and social inclusion. Are course materials available in alternative formats (e.g., Braille, audio, easy-to-read)? Are instructors trained in inclusive pedagogy and aware of how to support learners with invisible disabilities, such as ADHD or autism? Are there private spaces available for learners who need breaks or medical care during the day?

These checks should not be conducted in isolation or based solely on generic checklists. They require collaboration with the learner, their family (when relevant), VET staff, and professionals familiar with their specific needs. It is essential to ask open-ended questions such as: “What barriers have you faced in previous settings?” or “What helps you feel safe and included in a new space?” Involving learners in accessibility checks respects their agency and helps prevent oversights.

Moreover, it’s important to recognize that accessibility is not static. Accommodations that seem adequate on paper may fail in practice if, for example, an elevator is frequently out of service, or a supposedly “quiet room” turns out to be next to a busy hallway. Therefore, companions and VET staff must maintain a mindset of ongoing monitoring and be ready to adapt quickly if issues arise

Lastly, accessibility checks should also examine attitudinal barriers in these environments. Even when physical access is ensured, learners may encounter exclusion if staff and peers lack disability awareness or hold stigmatizing beliefs. Creating a truly inclusive learning environment requires training host staff, building inclusive group dynamics, and ensuring that learners feel welcomed, respected, and encouraged to participate fully.

In summary, thorough and individualized accessibility checks are a non-negotiable part of inclusive mobility planning. They represent a commitment to ensuring that every learner can navigate their mobility experience with confidence, dignity, and independence. By taking a holistic approach considering physical, digital, emotional, and social dimensions of access VET providers and companions can create environments where learners with disabilities not only succeed but thrive.

4.3 Communication with Hosting Organizations

Effective communication with hosting organizations is a vital element in ensuring that the mobility experience of learners with disabilities is inclusive, safe, and empowering. From the earliest stages of planning, a clear and continuous dialogue must be established between sending and hosting institutions to ensure that all necessary accommodations, supports, and expectations are discussed, agreed upon, and implemented in a timely manner. First and foremost, transparency and early engagement are key. As soon as a learner with a disability is identified for mobility, the sending organization should reach out to the hosting partner to provide relevant information about the learner's needs. This must be done with the full consent and involvement of the learner, respecting their privacy and autonomy.

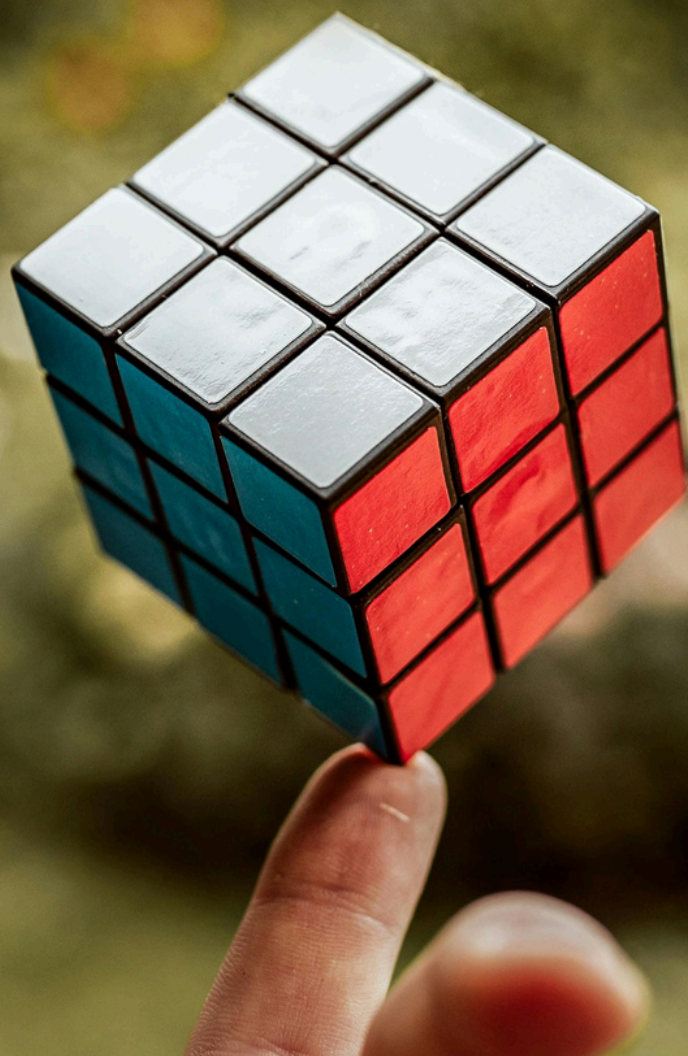
Information sharing should include not only medical or physical accommodations but also educational adjustments, preferred communication methods, and social or emotional support considerations. For instance, a learner with autism may benefit from a predictable daily structure and a quiet space to decompress, while a learner with a chronic illness may need a flexible schedule or access to a refrigerator for medication. It's essential to avoid assumptions or a one-size-fits-all mindset. Each hosting organization may have different levels of awareness, resources, and experience with inclusive practices. Therefore, clarity and specificity in communication are crucial. Instead of vague requests such as "please ensure accessibility," it's more effective to specify: "the learner requires an accessible bathroom with handrails and a private area for medical needs" or "course materials should be provided in large print and plain language two weeks in advance."

In addition to practical needs, cultural understanding and mutual expectations should be discussed openly. Different countries and institutions may have varying norms, attitudes, and legal obligations related to disability and inclusion. Creating space for honest conversations helps both parties avoid misunderstandings and fosters a spirit of cooperation. Hosting organizations should be encouraged to ask questions, express concerns, and suggest solutions, and sending organizations should be prepared to provide additional guidance, resources, or training if needed. An effective tool for managing this collaboration is the Individual Support Plan (ISP) or similar document, which outlines the learner's support requirements, roles of companions, agreed accommodations, contact persons, and emergency procedures. This plan should be co-developed by the learner, the sending organization, and the hosting partner, and reviewed together prior to departure. It serves as both a roadmap and a reference point, helping to coordinate responsibilities and prevent last-minute surprises.

Establishing regular check-ins is also highly recommended. Communication should not end once the learner arrives. Instead, a system of ongoing contact (e.g., weekly updates or progress reports) between the two organizations ensures that any emerging issues can be addressed promptly. This also offers reassurance to the learner and their family that their well-being remains a shared priority.

Equally important is preparing the hosting staff and peers. The sending organization can offer support materials or even short training sessions to enhance awareness about disability inclusion, communication strategies, and respectful behavior. Hosting organizations often express willingness to help but may lack specific knowledge equipping them with tools and confidence is part of inclusive partnership-building.

In conclusion, strong communication with hosting organizations forms the backbone of a successful, inclusive mobility experience. It requires honesty, consistency, mutual respect, and a learner-centered approach. When done well, it not only ensures necessary supports are in place but also strengthens inter-institutional relationships and builds a lasting culture of inclusion across borders.



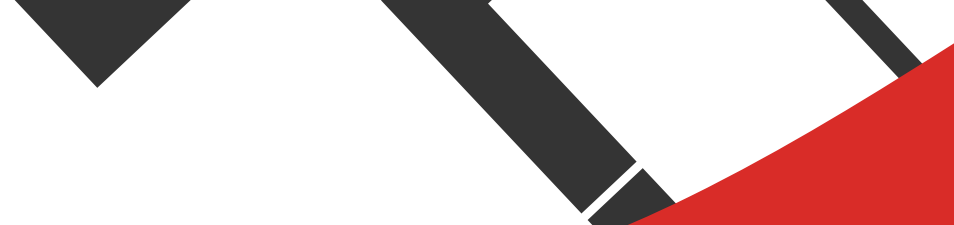
4.4 Preparing the Student Emotionally and Logistically

Preparing learners with disabilities for an international mobility experience involves more than logistical arrangements; it requires thoughtful emotional preparation to build confidence, reduce anxiety, and ensure that the learner feels safe, empowered, and ready for the upcoming transition. This dual preparation process emotional and logistical is fundamental to the success and sustainability of inclusive mobility.

Emotionally, leaving familiar environments, caregivers, routines, and support networks can be daunting. Learners may experience stress, fear of the unknown, self-doubt, or worries about how they will be perceived and supported in a new country. Emotional preparation begins with open conversations that acknowledge these feelings as valid. Companions and educators should create a safe, nonjudgmental space for the learner to express their concerns, ask questions, and talk about expectations. Sharing stories from peers who have had similar experiences can help normalize fears and offer hope. Role-playing scenarios such as asking for help, navigating unfamiliar streets, or communicating needs to new people can also reduce uncertainty and build self-advocacy skills.

Setting realistic expectations is another vital part of emotional readiness. While mobility programs can be transformative and enriching, they also come with challenges. It is important to support the learner in understanding that difficulties may arise and that this does not mean failure. Equipping them with emotional coping strategies (like journaling, grounding techniques, or having a go-to contact person) can promote resilience and autonomy. At the same time, clarifying the support systems that will be in place companions, host institution staff, and emergency contacts, can significantly boost their sense of security.

Logistically, preparation involves a detailed and individualized plan that addresses every aspect of the learner's journey. This includes arranging accessible travel (from airport transfers to public transportation), confirming adapted accommodation (e.g., wheelchair-accessible rooms or proximity to medical services), and ensuring that assistive devices, medications, or dietary needs are taken into account. It's critical to check if personal care or medical support is needed abroad, and whether it can be provided by the host institution, a local service, or a traveling companion.



Another major logistical aspect is ensuring the learner has the necessary documentation and legal awareness. This includes valid travel documents, health insurance coverage that includes disability-related needs abroad, letters of medical necessity for devices or medication, and emergency plans in case of health complications. The student should be briefed on rights and responsibilities in the host country, especially regarding accessibility and discrimination protections.

Providing a step-by-step itinerary with visuals if needed, can also be helpful, especially for learners with cognitive disabilities. This can outline what to expect before departure, during the travel process, upon arrival, and in the first week abroad. If the learner uses assistive technology, time should be allocated for testing its compatibility with the host institution's systems.

Finally, fostering connections prior to departure can alleviate emotional and logistical stress. If possible, organizing virtual meetings with staff or peers from the host organization gives the learner a chance to form early relationships and ask location-specific questions. Having a known contact in the host country can significantly ease the transition.

In essence, emotional and logistical preparation must go hand in hand. A well-informed, emotionally resilient learner is far more likely to adapt, engage, and thrive in their new setting. This preparation phase is not just about "readiness" but about empowerment, giving the learner the tools, knowledge, and confidence to make the most of their mobility experience while feeling secure and supported throughout the journey.


5. During the Mobility Period

The mobility period represents the core of the learner's international experience and is a critical time when preparation meets reality. During this phase, the learner is immersed in a new cultural, social, and educational environment, navigating unfamiliar settings while engaging with learning and development opportunities. For learners with disabilities and special educational needs, this period can be both empowering and challenging. Continuous support, structured monitoring, and a responsive, inclusive approach are essential to ensure a successful and meaningful experience.

One of the primary focuses during mobility is maintaining a balance between offering assistance and promoting the learner's independence. Companions and host institution staff should strive to create an environment where support is readily available but does not overshadow the learner's autonomy. Encouraging self-advocacy, problem-solving, and cultural participation are key elements of inclusive practice during mobility. At the same time, responsiveness to evolving needs is crucial. Learners may face unexpected accessibility barriers, emotional challenges, or health-related issues that require immediate attention. A flexible and proactive mindset from companions can make the difference between a minor obstacle and a significant setback.

Communication plays a vital role during this period. Regular check-ins between the learner, the companion, and both the sending and hosting organizations help maintain a consistent flow of information and provide opportunities to address concerns before they escalate. These check-ins should be learner-centered, allowing space for open dialogue about emotional well-being, inclusion in learning activities, and satisfaction with living arrangements. If issues arise, having clear protocols and contacts in place allows for timely problem-solving and coordinated interventions.

Social inclusion also becomes a significant theme during the mobility period. Learners with disabilities can sometimes feel isolated, especially if social or cultural integration is not actively facilitated. Companions should collaborate with the host institution to foster inclusive group dynamics and support participation in extracurricular activities, local community events, and peer interaction. This contributes to the learner's sense of belonging and enhances the intercultural dimension of the experience.



In terms of learning, instructors and trainers in the host institution must be prepared to accommodate a range of learning styles and access needs. Inclusive pedagogy including visual supports, clear communication, hands-on learning opportunities, and flexible assessments should be adopted as standard rather than exception. Companions can assist by acting as bridges between the learner and the educational context, helping to interpret expectations, adapt tasks, and offer encouragement.

Another important aspect is monitoring emotional and psychological well-being. Learners may experience culture shock, homesickness, or anxiety related to performance and social integration. Companions should be attentive to early signs of distress and provide emotional support, which could include reassurance, structured routines, or facilitating conversations with mental health professionals if necessary. Emotional resilience-building activities such as journaling, mindfulness practices, or peer support groups can also be helpful.

Throughout the mobility period, documentation and reflection should be ongoing. Learners should be encouraged to record their experiences, challenges, and achievements, either through writing, videos, or creative formats. This reflective process not only strengthens self-awareness and learning but also informs future improvements in program design and support structures.

In summary, the mobility period is a dynamic and potentially transformative phase. It requires active involvement from companions and institutions to maintain an inclusive, responsive, and empowering environment. Success during this time hinges on the quality of interpersonal relationships, the adaptability of the support framework, and the learner's ability to grow within a respectful and inclusive setting. The goal is not only to ensure safety and accessibility but to nurture confidence, competence, and cross-cultural understanding that the learner will carry forward long after the mobility ends.

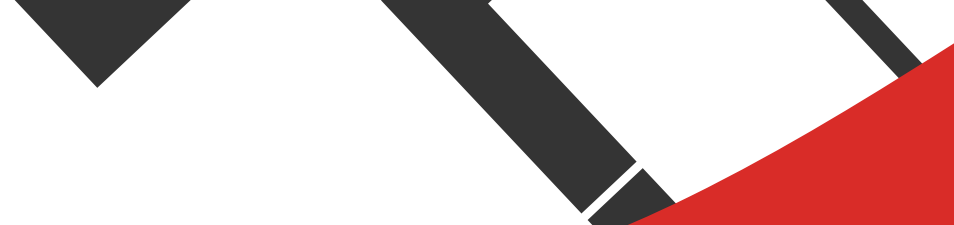
5.1 Daily Support and Supervision

Daily support and supervision are essential components of a successful and inclusive mobility experience for learners with disabilities. This ongoing, consistent presence ensures that learners feel secure, guided, and empowered as they navigate new environments, routines, and social interactions. For companions and staff, providing daily support goes beyond meeting basic needs, it involves cultivating trust, fostering independence, and being attentive to both visible and invisible challenges that may arise throughout the mobility period.

Effective daily supervision starts with establishing a structured routine that promotes stability while allowing for flexibility. Predictability in daily schedules helps reduce anxiety, especially for learners with cognitive, sensory, or psychological conditions. Companions should work with learners to co-create a daily plan that outlines key activities, transitions, breaks, and leisure time, ensuring that the pace is manageable and that individual needs are respected. This approach supports learners in organizing their day while also encouraging them to develop their own time management and self-regulation skills.

A major aspect of daily support is helping learners engage with the academic or vocational components of the mobility program. This may include assisting with understanding instructions, navigating assignments, advocating for necessary adaptations, or providing encouragement during hands-on tasks. Companions should maintain close communication with educators and trainers to ensure learning objectives are clear, accommodations are implemented consistently, and learners are progressing without unnecessary pressure.

Equally important is supporting the learner's social and emotional well-being on a day-to-day basis. Daily supervision provides opportunities to check in informally about how the learner is feeling, whether they're experiencing any discomfort, stress, or barriers, and whether they're participating in social life and community engagement. Companions should offer a listening ear, validate emotions, and help brainstorm solutions when difficulties emerge. Small, consistent acts of empathy and encouragement can have a significant impact on a learner's confidence and sense of belonging.



Supervision must also include practical assistance, especially for learners with physical or sensory disabilities. This may involve guiding them through unfamiliar spaces, ensuring the accessibility of transportation routes, helping manage medications or daily routines, and intervening when infrastructure or environmental obstacles arise. While the goal is to promote independence, companions must remain vigilant and ready to step in with support when needed, balancing autonomy with safety.

Monitoring and documenting daily progress and observations can also be helpful. Keeping a simple daily log or reflection journal either independently by the learner or collaboratively with the companion can aid in identifying patterns, recognizing achievements, and spotting emerging concerns early. These records also serve as valuable input for debriefing sessions, evaluations, and reports.

Finally, companions should take care of their own well-being and boundaries during the supervision process. Providing daily support can be emotionally demanding, and companions need time for rest, reflection, and connection with their own support networks. Institutions should ensure that companions are not working in isolation and have access to guidance, supervision, and peer exchange themselves.

In essence, daily support and supervision are the human touchpoints of the mobility experience. They anchor the learner in a new environment, provide emotional and practical continuity, and create a foundation of trust that allows each learner to explore, participate, and grow with dignity and assurance.

5.2 Managing Emergencies and Stress

Managing emergencies and stress during a mobility period is a critical responsibility for companions and VET staff supporting learners with disabilities. Unexpected situations can arise at any time from medical incidents and accidents to emotional crises or logistical disruptions and how these moments are handled can profoundly affect the learner's safety, well-being, and overall experience. Preparation is key to effectively managing emergencies. Before the mobility begins, companions should familiarize themselves thoroughly with each learner's specific health needs, potential triggers for stress or anxiety, and emergency protocols. This includes knowing how to respond to medical conditions such as seizures, allergic reactions, or mental health episodes, as well as having immediate access to emergency contacts, healthcare providers, and local emergency services. Having a clear, individualized emergency plan that is communicated to all relevant parties ensures that everyone is ready to act swiftly and appropriately.

During the mobility, stress is a common experience, not only because learners are adjusting to new environments and routines but also because they may encounter unfamiliar challenges related to accessibility, social interactions, or cultural differences. Companions play a vital role in recognizing early signs of stress such as withdrawal, agitation, fatigue, or changes in behavior and responding with sensitivity and reassurance. Providing calm, clear communication, creating safe spaces for learners to express their feelings, and encouraging coping strategies like deep breathing or mindfulness can help mitigate stress before it escalates.

In emergency situations, companions must act decisively while maintaining composure. This includes ensuring the immediate safety of the learner and others, contacting medical or emergency services when necessary, and providing first aid within their capacity. Importantly, companions should also inform the sending institution and the learner's family promptly to keep them updated and involved. After an emergency, debriefing with the learner, reflecting on what happened, and adjusting support plans can help rebuild confidence and prevent future crises.

Stress management also extends to the companion's own well-being. The emotional labor involved in supporting learners through emergencies and ongoing challenges can be substantial. Companions should seek supervision, peer support, and professional guidance to maintain resilience and effectiveness. Ultimately, managing emergencies and stress requires a balance of proactive planning, quick and compassionate response, and ongoing emotional support. By being prepared and attentive, companions ensure that learners with disabilities can navigate mobility experiences safely and with confidence, even when faced with unforeseen difficulties.

5.3 Encouraging Participation and Independence

Encouraging participation and independence is fundamental to empowering learners with disabilities during their mobility experience. Mobility programs offer invaluable opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and intercultural learning, and companions play a crucial role in facilitating these outcomes by fostering an environment where learners feel confident and motivated to engage fully.

Rather than focusing solely on providing assistance, companions should aim to support learners in building their autonomy and decision-making skills. This involves recognizing each learner's capabilities, encouraging them to take initiative, and providing opportunities to practice problem-solving in real-life contexts. For example, allowing learners to navigate public transportation routes themselves with guidance rather than full control promotes self-confidence and practical competence.

Active participation extends beyond practical independence, it includes engaging socially, academically, and culturally. Companions can encourage learners to join group activities, attend local events, and communicate with peers and instructors. Promoting such involvement helps learners build relationships, improve language skills, and deepen their understanding of the host culture. When learners feel included and valued, their motivation and satisfaction increase significantly.

Importantly, fostering independence requires a delicate balance between support and challenge. Companions must remain attentive to learners' needs and be ready to step in when necessary but should avoid overprotectiveness that can unintentionally limit growth. Respecting learners' choices and encouraging risk-taking within safe boundaries helps them develop resilience and adaptability.

Companions can also help learners set realistic goals for their mobility period, celebrating milestones and reflecting on achievements. This positive reinforcement nurtures a growth mindset and reinforces the value of active engagement.

In summary, encouraging participation and independence is about creating a supportive yet empowering atmosphere. By promoting learner agency, companions help ensure that mobility experiences are not only accessible but transformative, enabling learners with disabilities to realize their full potential in new and challenging environments.

5.4 Conflict Resolution Strategies

During a mobility experience, conflicts may arise due to misunderstandings, cultural differences, communication barriers, or stress related to unfamiliar environments. For learners with disabilities, these challenges can be heightened by their unique needs and the pressures of adapting to new settings. Companions play a vital role in recognizing and effectively managing conflicts to maintain a positive and supportive atmosphere throughout the mobility period.

The first step in conflict resolution is prevention. Companions should foster open communication by encouraging learners to express their feelings and concerns early on. Establishing trust and a safe space where learners feel heard helps defuse tensions before they escalate. Being proactive in identifying potential triggers such as accessibility issues, social exclusion, or differing expectations allows companions to address problems promptly.

When conflicts do occur, active listening is crucial. Companions should listen empathetically to all parties involved without judgment, validating feelings and clarifying misunderstandings. Using calm, respectful language helps de-escalate emotional situations and models constructive communication. It's important to separate the person from the problem, focusing on behaviours or issues rather than assigning blame.

Problem-solving techniques such as brainstorming solutions collaboratively with the learner can empower them and promote mutual understanding. Companions should encourage compromise and flexibility while keeping the learner's best interests and safety as priorities. In some cases, involving a third party, such as a coordinator or counsellor, may be necessary for mediation.

Additionally, companions must be culturally sensitive, recognizing that approaches to conflict vary across societies. Understanding cultural norms around communication, confrontation, and resolution helps tailor strategies to the context and individuals involved.

Lastly, reflecting on conflicts after resolution provides learning opportunities. Companions and learners can discuss what worked, what could be improved, and how to better handle future challenges. This reflection supports emotional growth and equips learners with valuable interpersonal skills.

In summary, effective conflict resolution requires patience, empathy, clear communication, and cultural awareness. By managing conflicts constructively, companions help maintain a positive environment that supports the learner's well-being and success during the mobility experience.

6. Post-Mobility Support

The period following a mobility experience is critical for consolidating learning, reflecting on personal growth, and ensuring continued support for learners with disabilities. Post-mobility support helps learners process their experiences, address any unresolved challenges, and apply new skills and insights in their home environments. For companions and VET providers, this phase offers an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the mobility program, identify areas for improvement, and strengthen inclusive practices.

One of the primary elements of post-mobility support is structured reflection. Learners should be encouraged to share their experiences, both positive and challenging, through interviews, focus groups, or written reports. This process not only validates their journey but also helps build self-awareness and resilience. Companions can facilitate these conversations by asking open-ended questions that explore personal achievements, obstacles overcome, and lessons learned.

Emotional and psychological support remains important after mobility, as learners may experience reverse culture shock, feelings of isolation, or uncertainty about how to integrate their new experiences into daily life or career paths. Providing access to counselling services or peer support groups can be invaluable during this transition. Additionally, companions and coordinators should work closely with learners to ensure continuity of accommodations and support upon return. This may involve updating educational or vocational plans to reflect new goals, addressing any unmet needs that emerged during mobility, and liaising with local institutions or employers to promote inclusive opportunities.

Another key aspect is gathering feedback for program improvement. Collecting insights from learners, companions, and host organizations helps refine policies, training, and logistical arrangements to better support future participants. This data contributes to building a more inclusive and responsive mobility framework within VET.

Finally, post-mobility support should emphasize recognizing and celebrating the achievements of learners with disabilities. Public acknowledgments, certificates, or presentations within the educational community can boost confidence and encourage further participation in inclusive mobility programs.

In sum, post-mobility support is essential for sustaining the benefits of mobility, addressing ongoing needs, and fostering a culture of inclusion that extends beyond the immediate experience. It closes the mobility cycle by ensuring learners feel supported, empowered, and ready to take the next steps in their personal and professional development.

6.1 Debriefing and Feedback Collection

Debriefing and feedback collection are vital components of the post-mobility phase, providing structured opportunities for learners, companions, and coordinators to reflect on the experience and share valuable insights. This process enables all stakeholders to evaluate what worked well, identify challenges encountered, and suggest improvements for future mobility programs.

For learners, debriefing sessions offer a safe space to express their thoughts and feelings about the mobility experience, including aspects related to accessibility, support, cultural adaptation, and personal growth. These reflections help learners process their journey, consolidate learning, and voice any unmet needs or concerns. Facilitated discussions or guided questionnaires can be used to encourage honest and comprehensive feedback.

Companions and coordinators also benefit from debriefing, as it allows them to assess the effectiveness of their support strategies, communication, and collaboration with hosting organizations. Their observations provide critical perspectives on logistical arrangements, training adequacy, and the overall inclusivity of the program.

Effective feedback collection should be systematic and inclusive, employing a variety of tools such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, or digital platforms to accommodate diverse communication preferences and abilities. It is essential to ensure confidentiality and create an environment where participants feel comfortable providing candid feedback without fear of negative repercussions.

The information gathered through debriefing and feedback informs continuous improvement of mobility initiatives by highlighting strengths to build on and areas requiring attention. It also contributes to developing best practices, enhancing companion training, improving accessibility measures, and fostering stronger partnerships between sending and hosting institutions.

Incorporating learners' voices in this process embodies the principle of learner-centered inclusion and helps create more responsive and empowering mobility programs. Ultimately, debriefing and feedback collection not only enrich future mobility experiences but also affirm the commitment to equity, respect, and ongoing development in VET mobility for learners with disabilities.

6.2 Reintegration into the Home Institution

Reintegration into the home institution is a crucial yet often overlooked phase of the mobility journey for learners with disabilities. After experiencing a new environment, culture, and learning context, returning home can bring about a mix of emotions, ranging from accomplishment and pride to confusion or even disconnection. For some learners, the transition back can be as challenging as the initial departure, especially if their mobility experience provided higher levels of independence, inclusion, or support than they typically receive at home.

Successful reintegration requires deliberate planning and coordination among the learner, the companion, and the staff at the home institution. It begins with recognizing the personal growth and new skills the learner has acquired such as increased self-confidence, intercultural awareness, adaptability, or improved communication and finding ways to validate and apply these in the local VET environment. This might include integrating mobility-related experiences into their academic records, vocational training, or peer mentoring opportunities.

At the same time, emotional reintegration is equally important. Learners may experience reverse culture shock or frustration if they return to inaccessible or less inclusive settings. Institutions must be sensitive to these realities and provide emotional support, such as counselling, peer support groups, or follow-up sessions to help learners reflect on their journey and adjust back into daily routines.

Equally important is the role of the companion and educators in ensuring that the lessons learned from the mobility period are shared and acted upon. Companions can offer feedback to the institution on accessibility gaps and areas for improvement, while learners can be encouraged to share their experiences through presentations or storytelling sessions to inspire others and raise awareness.

Ultimately, reintegration should not be viewed as a return to “normal,” but as a continuation of the learner’s development. Institutions must ensure that mobility is not treated as an isolated event, but as an integral part of a learner’s educational path. By acknowledging the transformative power of inclusive mobility and supporting reintegration thoughtfully, VET providers contribute to a culture where learners with disabilities are seen not only as participants in mobility, but as changemakers within their learning communities.

6.3 Long-Term Inclusion Planning

Long-term inclusion planning is a critical component in ensuring that the benefits of mobility experiences for learners with disabilities are sustained and translated into lasting personal, educational, and institutional development. While the immediate goals of mobility programs often focus on the successful execution of a temporary experience abroad, inclusive education does not begin or end with the mobility period. Instead, it must be embedded within an ongoing, strategic framework that prioritizes accessibility, empowerment, and systemic change within VET institutions.

For the individual learner, long-term inclusion planning means more than just a smooth return home, it involves integrating the skills, confidence, and independence gained during mobility into future educational and vocational pathways. This may include revising Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), updating career guidance strategies, and identifying further opportunities for international exposure, internships, or advanced training. In some cases, it might involve supporting learners in applying their experiences to long-term goals such as employment in inclusive workplaces or advocacy within their communities.

At the institutional level, long-term inclusion planning should involve the systematic documentation of lessons learned during mobility activities. Companions, educators, and coordinators should be encouraged to contribute to institutional memory by recording successful practices, accessibility challenges, and feedback from learners and host organizations. These insights can inform future mobility planning, influence staff training, and help develop inclusive policies and procedures that ensure continuous improvement.

Moreover, partnerships forged during mobility should not dissolve after the program ends. Building sustainable relationships with host institutions, disability organizations, and support networks across Europe strengthens the overall infrastructure for inclusive mobility. These networks can become invaluable sources of expertise, resource exchange, and future collaboration.

Inclusion planning must also encompass the continued development of staff capacity. Training in disability awareness, inclusive communication, digital accessibility, and universal design principles should be provided on an ongoing basis, not only for those directly involved in mobility, but for all staff. Inclusion cannot rely on a few dedicated individuals; it must become a core institutional value upheld by policy, leadership, and everyday practice.

Finally, long-term planning requires monitoring and evaluation. VET institutions should gather and analyse data on the participation and experiences of learners with disabilities over time, using this evidence to shape their inclusion strategies. They should also engage learners in shaping these strategies, recognizing them as experts in their own needs and as key stakeholders in building more equitable education systems.

In essence, long-term inclusion planning transforms mobility from a one-time opportunity into a catalyst for broader institutional transformation. It ensures that inclusion becomes not just a project, but a permanent and evolving commitment to equity, accessibility, and the empowerment of all learners.

7. Best Practices and Case Studies

In this section, we highlight practical examples and proven strategies from Greece, Italy, and Germany that demonstrate how inclusive mobility in Vocational Education and Training (VET) can be effectively implemented. These best practices and case studies illustrate the principles, methods, and outcomes of inclusive mobility, providing a valuable reference for companions, coordinators, educators, and policymakers seeking to improve their own practices.

Case Study 1: A Learner-Centered Mobility Model in Thessaloniki, Greece

In Thessaloniki, a public VET institute implemented a learner-centered mobility support model for a group of students with physical and sensory disabilities participating in a short-term Erasmus+ mobility project. The institution began by conducting comprehensive pre-mobility assessments, including one-on-one meetings with learners and their families to identify specific needs and preferences. Based on this input, they adapted travel and accommodation plans, ensured accessible venues, and assigned trained companions with relevant experience.

What made this initiative effective was its emphasis on emotional readiness. Weekly workshops focused on self-advocacy, cultural adaptation, and confidence building were organized prior to departure. During the mobility, companions provided daily check-ins but also encouraged independence by allowing learners to plan portions of their day. Post-mobility debriefing sessions included all stakeholders, learners, companions, families, and teachers, which helped the institution refine its practices for future exchanges.

Best Practice: Institutionalizing Companion Training

Several Italian VET providers have addressed one of the most persistent challenges in inclusive mobility: the lack of consistent and standardized training for companions. One exemplary organization in Bologna developed a formal training program for companions, focusing on inclusive communication, disability etiquette, emergency response, and cultural mediation. The course includes both theoretical content and simulations with experienced trainers and actors with disabilities.

The training is now integrated into the institution's annual preparation cycle for all mobility projects, resulting in a noticeable increase in learner satisfaction and participation. Companions report feeling more confident and better prepared to support a variety of needs without overstepping learner autonomy. As a result, the institution has seen a 40% increase in applications from learners with disabilities in the last two years.

Case Study 2: Collaborative Mobility Planning in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

A VET center in North Rhine-Westphalia developed a strong partnership model with both sending and hosting organizations, as well as local disability support groups, to streamline inclusive mobility planning. Prior to each mobility project, planning teams from both sides engage in joint meetings—sometimes virtually—to share individual learner profiles and design an inclusion plan tailored to each participant. These plans include details about daily routines, needed accommodations, accessible transportation routes, and a list of accessible medical facilities near the host location.

A key success factor was the use of a digital mobility journal—a shared, secure platform where companions, learners, and coordinators could record progress, observations, and emerging challenges during the mobility period. The journal helped maintain transparency, monitor emotional and physical well-being, and allowed real-time troubleshooting across countries. Feedback from learners confirmed that this approach significantly reduced anxiety and helped them feel more connected and supported.

Best Practice: Peer Mentoring and Social Integration

Another effective strategy, particularly observed in Italy and Germany, is the introduction of peer mentoring systems during mobility. In this model, learners with and without disabilities are paired during the experience abroad. The peers are trained together before departure, focusing on inclusion, empathy, and intercultural communication. This not only fosters meaningful friendships and mutual learning but also breaks down social barriers and promotes a culture of inclusion among all participants.

Learners with disabilities involved in such schemes often report increased confidence, reduced isolation, and a stronger sense of belonging in the host community. Institutions also benefit, as peer mentoring helps reduce the dependency on staff and encourages learner autonomy.

Lessons Learned Across Contexts

Despite differences in national policy frameworks and resource availability, these case studies demonstrate that inclusive mobility is achievable when there is intentional planning, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and a deep respect for the individual needs and voices of learners. The most successful practices shared the following features:

- Early and detailed planning that includes learners and their families
- Standardized companion training programs tailored to mobility and inclusion
- Strong inter-institutional collaboration, including NGOs and disability experts
- Emphasis on learner autonomy and emotional readiness
- Post-mobility follow-up integrated into longer-term educational planning

By learning from these practical examples, institutions across Europe can adapt and scale up inclusive mobility efforts, ensuring that learners with disabilities are not only included but are empowered to thrive in international VET experiences.

7.1 Real-life Stories from Past Mobilities

Ana's Journey to Finland – Embracing Independence with a Visual Impairment

Ana, a determined 19-year-old student from Portugal, participated in a long-term mobility program in Finland to study renewable energy technologies. Born blind, Ana used a white cane and was accompanied by a specially trained guide dog. Her mobility journey was the result of months of preparation involving multiple stakeholders, including her family, home institution, a specialized mobility coach, the host organization in Finland, and of course, her companion.

The first challenge was accessibility in transit. Airlines had to be informed in advance about Ana's needs and her guide dog, while detailed coordination with transport services in Finland was carried out to ensure a seamless arrival. Her accommodation was carefully selected, located near her internship placement, pet-friendly, and equipped with tactile signage and voice-controlled appliances.

Ana's companion played a critical role in familiarizing her with the new surroundings. The first week was devoted to orientation: mapping out safe walking routes, navigating local shops, and practicing routes to the university and training center. Ana's classes were supported by the provision of accessible materials in Braille and audio formats. Lab equipment was adapted, and her host mentor provided verbal descriptions during hands-on sessions.

Despite cultural differences and moments of uncertainty, Ana quickly began to thrive. Her feedback emphasized how the unwavering presence of her companion and the preparedness of the host institution allowed her to gain autonomy. She returned home more confident, having made new friends and established professional connections. Her story is a shining example of how, with the right structure and support, mobility can become a transformative milestone for learners with disabilities.

Luca's Culinary Experience in Italy – Navigating Autism with Structure and Support
Luca, an 18-year-old Dutch student passionate about cooking, had long dreamed of traveling abroad. Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), he faced challenges in social communication, sensory sensitivity, and managing unexpected changes. When offered a placement in an Italian culinary institute, concerns were raised about whether he could adapt to a fast-paced, high-stress kitchen environment in a foreign country.

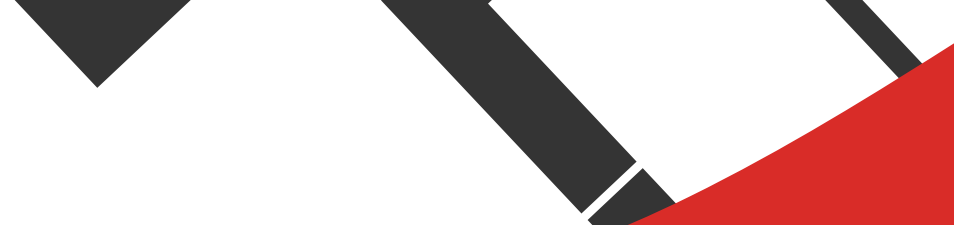
To ensure success, a multi-disciplinary team, including Luca's special education teacher, an autism specialist, the host organization, and a designated companion developed a tailored mobility plan. His needs were mapped in detail: he was provided a visual timetable, task flowcharts, and a clearly structured daily routine. The restaurant staff received training on autism-friendly practices, such as giving short, direct instructions and avoiding sarcasm or metaphors.

Each day started with a check-in between Luca and his companion to review expectations and prepare for social interactions. A calm space was made available at the restaurant for Luca to retreat to if overstimulated. Tasks were initially simplified but gradually increased in complexity as his confidence grew. His interest in pastry was nurtured, and he was given the role of preparing desserts.

On his final day, Luca independently created a three-layer cake for the team, who celebrated his progress with heartfelt applause. Post-mobility feedback revealed that the experience profoundly affected him: he learned to manage uncertainty, take initiative, and build rapport in a diverse setting. He later shared that, for the first time, he felt "understood and valued not despite [his] autism, but with it." Luca's story highlights how empathy, structure, and proper training can unlock potential in learners who may otherwise be excluded.

Maya's Artistic Internship in Spain – Supporting a Student with Cerebral Palsy

Maya, a talented 20-year-old from Poland with cerebral palsy, was selected for a short-term internship at a cultural arts center in Seville, Spain. Her mobility was limited; she used a wheelchair, had partial hand dexterity, and occasionally required assistance with personal care. While passionate about graphic design and digital illustration, she had never traveled alone.



Her companion, herself a student with experience in inclusive education, underwent training in accessibility advocacy and basic physical support before the journey. The host center modified its workspace: ramps were installed, adjustable desks were provided, and all workstations were adapted with voice-command software and ergonomic tools.

Maya's greatest challenge was not physical but social, she feared being pitied or excluded. Her companion played an important role in framing her presence as one of strength and professionalism. With support, Maya conducted a presentation in Spanish about disability-inclusive design, which received acclaim and initiated broader discussions at the center.

Throughout the placement, Maya's autonomy was respected. Her companion avoided overstepping, stepping in only when needed. At the conclusion of her stay, Maya published a digital artwork series themed "Freedom and Form," inspired by her time in Seville. Her success story was later featured in an EU-wide campaign on inclusive mobility.

Daniel's Tech Internship in Germany – A Deaf Student's Triumph

Daniel, a 21-year-old student from Slovakia, had a strong passion for information technology and coding. He was profoundly deaf and communicated using Slovak Sign Language (SSL). When the opportunity arose to intern at a start-up in Berlin focused on cybersecurity, Daniel hesitated not because of the challenge of living abroad, but due to concerns over communication barriers in the workplace. To ensure a smooth experience, a sign language interpreter was included remotely via video conferencing for key meetings. His companion, fluent in SSL, was crucial in everyday social and logistical support, helping Daniel navigate non-verbal cues, reading written instructions in English, and building trust with the host staff.

The hosting company went beyond expectations. They created visual workflows and used written communication for daily tasks, ensuring Daniel could operate independently. Weekly check-ins with Daniel, his mentor, and his companion helped adapt support to his evolving needs. Despite the communication differences, Daniel impressed the team with his skills and problem-solving mindset. He was later offered a remote freelance opportunity. His success proved that with creativity and flexibility, communication barriers can be transformed into bridges.

Sara's Agricultural Placement in Greece – Living with an Intellectual Disability

Sara, a cheerful and determined 20-year-old from Ireland, had a mild intellectual disability and had struggled academically throughout her life. She enrolled in a mobility program that offered placements on organic farms in Greece. Her interest in hands-on work and love for animals made it an ideal choice.

Her preparation phase included visual timetables, simple checklists, and practicing routines before departure. Her companion, trained in working with people with cognitive disabilities, used plain language, repetition, and positive reinforcement techniques.

The host farm family received training and a toolkit on inclusion developed by the sending organization. Sara was given predictable, repetitive tasks such as feeding animals, watering plants, and collecting produce roles she could complete with confidence. She gradually took on more responsibilities and even taught other volunteers how to care for chickens using her own illustrated guide.

Sara developed not only practical skills but also social confidence. She made friends, participated in cultural events, and communicated in basic Greek. Her story is a testament to the fact that learners with intellectual disabilities can flourish in the right environment, especially when their strengths are recognized and nurtured.

Nikos' Erasmus Experience in the Netherlands – Navigating Chronic Illness and Fatigue

Nikos, a 23-year-old student from Cyprus, lived with multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic condition that caused fatigue, occasional muscle weakness, and sensitivity to heat. He was eager to participate in an Erasmus+ semester in the Netherlands studying environmental engineering but worried that his health needs might restrict his experience.

From the outset, Nikos and his mobility team worked closely with both home and host universities to tailor the program. His course schedule was adapted to allow for rest breaks, and his accommodation was selected based on proximity to campus and access to medical services. His companion helped with daily planning, medication reminders, and fatigue management techniques.

A cooling vest was purchased to help him manage heat sensitivity during summer months, and coursework was made accessible online in case of flare-ups. Nikos also joined a local support group for chronic illness, which gave him a sense of solidarity and helped reduce anxiety.

Despite occasional setbacks, Nikos excelled academically and contributed to a major student sustainability project. He learned to advocate for his needs and balance ambition with self-care. His story highlights the importance of pacing, planning, and psychological support when chronic illness intersects with mobility.

7.2 Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The implementation of inclusive mobility for learners with disabilities and special educational needs across Greece, Italy, and Germany has provided a wealth of insights into both the barriers and enablers of successful participation in VET (Vocational Education and Training) programs. Drawing from qualitative and quantitative research findings, including real-life stories, stakeholder interviews, and institutional feedback, several key lessons and actionable recommendations emerge.

Inclusion Starts with Mindset, Not Only Infrastructure

One of the most critical lessons is that inclusive mobility is not solely dependent on accessible buildings or digital tools, it begins with inclusive attitudes. Many of the challenges learners faced were rooted in low expectations, inconsistent communication, or a lack of awareness among staff and peers. Positive experiences were almost always underpinned by a culture of empathy, flexibility, and a belief in the potential of every learner. Train VET staff and companions not only in technical accessibility but also in inclusive mindsets, emphasizing cultural sensitivity, learner autonomy, and respectful engagement. Mandatory training modules on inclusive communication, disability awareness, and rights-based approaches should be integrated into mobility preparation.

Early and Individualized Planning Is Essential

Pre-mobility preparation proved to be one of the most influential phases. When needs were assessed early and accommodations arranged in advance, the mobility experience was smoother and more empowering. Conversely, last-minute adjustments often led to stress, exclusion, or even cancellations. Implement a structured, learner-centered planning process that includes early risk assessments, accessibility checks, emotional preparation, and clear communication with host organizations. Include the learner in every stage of the planning to promote ownership and accuracy in identifying needs.

Companions Play a Pivotal Role- But Need More Support

In all three countries, companions were often the linchpin of a successful mobility experience. Their roles went far beyond logistics, they became advocates, emotional supporters, translators, and problem-solvers. However, companions often lacked consistent training and formal recognition. Develop standardized, accredited training programs for companions focused on inclusive VET mobility. This training should address practical care, emergency management, attitudinal support, legal responsibilities, and cross-cultural understanding. Establish mentoring systems for new companions to learn from experienced peers.

Accessibility Must Be Holistic and Context-Specific

Accessibility is not a one-size-fits-all concept. What works in one context (e.g., a university campus) might not apply in a workplace or shared accommodation. Physical access, digital usability, sensory needs, and social inclusion all need to be addressed based on the specific destination and learner profile.

Create mobility-specific accessibility toolkits tailored to various types of disabilities and environments. Encourage institutions to collaborate with disability organizations and accessibility experts to perform detailed audits before hosting learners.

Learners Need Ongoing Emotional Support and Empowerment

Mobility can be emotionally intense, especially for learners who are leaving familiar routines and support systems. Several participants experienced loneliness, anxiety, or low confidence, particularly when peers or staff were not adequately prepared to include them socially. Integrate emotional resilience building into pre-departure preparation. Provide accessible mental health resources and ensure regular check-ins during the mobility. Encourage peer buddy systems to support informal social inclusion.

Institutional Cooperation Determines Success

One of the biggest gaps observed was inconsistent collaboration between sending and hosting institutions. When cooperation was strong with shared protocols, mutual respect, and proactive communication—the experience tended to be smoother and more empowering. Fragmentation, however, led to confusion and unmet needs. Establish formal agreements between institutions that clearly outline inclusion protocols, points of contact, emergency procedures, and mutual responsibilities. Promote European-level networks to share good practices, coordinate inclusive practices, and enhance trust among partners.

Evaluation Is Often Overlooked but Crucial

Many institutions did not evaluate the specific inclusion outcomes of their mobility programs, which meant that important lessons were lost or never documented. Learners' feedback, especially from those with disabilities—was rarely collected in a systematic way. Develop inclusive evaluation tools that gather feedback from learners with disabilities and companions. Use this data to refine institutional practices and shape future programs. Ensure feedback collection is accessible, anonymous when needed, and emotionally safe.

The journey toward fully inclusive VET mobility is ongoing and multifaceted. While legislation and policy frameworks are essential, their true impact depends on daily practices, personal attitudes, and a deep understanding of the learners' lived realities. Inclusive mobility is not about offering special treatment—it is about removing unnecessary barriers so that all learners, regardless of disability, can benefit from the rich learning, cultural, and professional opportunities that transnational VET programs offer. By committing to continuous learning, fostering collaboration, and centering the voices of learners with disabilities, institutions can not only comply with legal requirements but become active agents of social inclusion and educational justice.

8. Checklist Toolkit

For learners with disabilities participating in international mobility experiences, structure, clarity, and preparedness are essential. The role of the companion in this journey cannot be overstated, serving as both a logistical coordinator and emotional anchor. To make this role more effective and manageable, this section presents a practical toolkit that companions can use to guide, support, and document the learner's journey.

This toolkit is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a flexible and adaptive set of tools that should be tailored to the specific needs of each learner. These templates and checklists are rooted in real-world practices, developed through years of experience in inclusive VET mobility projects. They aim to reduce oversight, ensure consistency in support, and empower both the learner and their companion to navigate each stage of the process with confidence.

8.1 Mobility Preparation Checklist

Preparation is often the most intensive part of the mobility process. This checklist ensures that no critical step is missed during the pre-departure phase. It is designed for use by the companion, in collaboration with the learner, their family (if applicable), the sending organization, and the hosting institution.

Travel Documents and Legal Preparations

- Ensure the learner's passport and visa (if required) are valid for the entire duration of the stay.
- Confirm comprehensive travel and health insurance, including disability-specific needs.
- Secure documentation for any medications or treatments, and ensure translation into the local language if necessary.
- Book accessible travel arrangements, including airport assistance and wheelchair-friendly transport if needed.

Accommodation and Environment

- Conduct a thorough accessibility check of the accommodation (e.g., step-free entrance, accessible bathroom and kitchen, emergency exits, visual alarms for deaf or hard-of-hearing learners).
- Map out the local environment to identify accessible shops, medical facilities, public transport, and leisure spaces.
- Establish routines for safety, including fire drills or safe zones, and assess the risk level of the surrounding area.

Communication and Coordination

- Facilitate a pre-arrival meeting with the host organization to discuss the learner's needs in detail.
- Share detailed contact information (email, phone, emergency number) of all parties involved.
- Establish a communication plan outlining how and when updates between companion, learner, and stakeholders will occur.

Emotional and Psychological Preparation

- Discuss and practice emotional coping strategies with the learner, especially if this is their first time traveling abroad.
- Role-play potential social interactions or daily routines to build confidence.
- Introduce learners to cultural expectations, norms, and basic language terms if necessary.
- Reinforce the learner's strengths and encourage independence while preparing backup plans for challenges.

8.2 Daily Routine Tracker Template

A predictable and well-documented daily routine is crucial for many learners with disabilities. This template helps companions support learners in managing their time, identifying emotional and physical patterns, and tracking progress throughout their mobility.

Example Daily Routine Log:

Date	Time	Activity/Task	Completed	Notes / Observations

Companions can also use checkboxes or mood trackers:

Mood today

Energy levels: High / Medium / Low

Interaction with others: Very Social / Moderate / Withdrawn

Goal achievement: All / Some / None

This template supports regular reflection and can be shared with the sending organization or parents (with consent). It also helps track changes in behavior, emotional well-being, or support needs.

8.3 Emergency Contact Sheet Template

An emergency contact sheet is a vital document that ensures everyone involved in the mobility can quickly respond to any incident. It should be printed and accessible to the companion, the learner (if appropriate), and staff at the host organization.

Emergency Contact Sheet Example:

Type	Name	Phone	Email	Notes
Local Emergency				
Host Organization Lead				
Companion				
Family Contact				
Doctor (Home Country)				
Insurance Hotline				

Additional Tips:

- Keep both a printed and digital copy of this sheet.
- Update it immediately if any contact changes.
- Translate key elements into the local language

8.4 Student Progress Log Template

Monitoring and documenting the learner's progress during their mobility experience is essential for ensuring that they are supported effectively, making meaningful gains, and overcoming challenges. The Student Progress Log Template serves as a structured tool for companions and staff to record daily, weekly, and monthly reflections on the learner's development academically, socially, emotionally, and practically.

This log is especially important for learners with disabilities because it allows for:

- Personalized support and intervention when difficulties arise.
- Recognition and celebration of achievements and milestones.
- Transparent communication between the companion, host organization, and sending institution.
- A reflective tool to evaluate the effectiveness of mobility programs.
- A record that contributes to the learner's future educational and professional pathway.

Structure of the Student Progress Log

The Progress Log is divided into four key sections, each focusing on different areas of development:

1. Personal and Emotional Well-Being

This section monitors the student's emotional state, stress levels, homesickness, confidence, and ability to adapt to new environments. Regular tracking helps prevent burnout or emotional distress and ensures timely support.

Example Entries:

Date	Emotional State	Challenges Faced	Coping Strategies Used	Notes from Companion

Additional Prompts:

- What made the student feel comfortable today?
- Did they express any concerns or stressors?
- How did they handle a difficult situation?
- Is there a pattern of emotional fatigue or low engagement?

2. Social Integration and Communication

Interaction with peers, mentors, and local community members plays a critical role in inclusive learning. This section assesses the student's willingness and ability to engage socially, communicate effectively, and feel part of the environment.

Example Log Format:

Date	Peer Interaction	Participation in Group Activities	Communication Style	Progress Notes

Prompts:

Did the learner initiate or avoid social interaction?
Were there any misunderstandings or cultural barriers?
Did they need interpretation or communication support?
What strategies helped improve social inclusion?

3. Learning/Working Engagement and Skill Development

This part of the log focuses on the learner's participation in their VET placement, coursework, or training. It highlights strengths, difficulties, acquired skills, and learning preferences.

Sample Log Entry Table:

Date	Task Objective /	Participation Level	Skills Practiced	Companion/Trainer Feedback

Prompts:

What new tasks did the student attempt today?
What kind of support was required (if any)?
Were any accommodations especially helpful or insufficient?
Are there any signs of disengagement or skill stagnation?

4. Reflections and Goal Tracking

This final section gives space for both the learner and the companion to reflect on weekly or monthly achievements and setbacks. It is a great tool to build self-awareness, resilience, and agency in learners with disabilities.

Weekly Reflection Template:

Week No.	Goals Set	Achievements	Challenges	Strategies for Next Week	Learner Comments	Companion Comments

Why the Progress Log Matters

The Student Progress Log Template is not just a monitoring tool—it is a growth map. It supports inclusive practices by focusing on the learner’s individual pace, voice, and experience. It also ensures that the companion plays an active, responsive, and compassionate role, rather than a purely supervisory one. These records can later feed into evaluation reports, personalized learning plans, or even career guidance sessions after the mobility ends.

All logs should be handled with care, confidentiality, and the learner’s consent, reinforcing a respectful and inclusive environment.



9. Resources and References


Inclusion does not happen in a vacuum, it is supported by structured frameworks, informed practices, and networks of care and advocacy. To effectively support learners with disabilities during international mobility experiences, companions and educational professionals must be equipped with robust tools, practical knowledge, and access to relevant support systems. This section presents a carefully selected collection of resources, legal references, planning tools, and support networks designed to guide companions before, during, and after the mobility period. These references will empower companions to act with confidence, ensure inclusive standards are upheld, and respond swiftly and appropriately in times of need.

The aim of this section is not only to direct companions to information but also to offer an interpretive lens that helps translate policy and tools into everyday actions whether that's planning an accessible flight, advocating for a reasonable accommodation in a workplace setting, or providing emotional support to a student encountering challenges in an unfamiliar cultural environment.

9.1 EU Guidelines on Disability and Mobility

The European Union has long recognized the right to education, training, and mobility as essential for social inclusion and active citizenship. For learners with disabilities, this right must be accompanied by proactive accommodations, equitable access, and thoughtful design of mobility experiences. Companions must understand the legal and ethical framework within which they operate to ensure that learners' rights are protected and promoted.

One of the most foundational policy instruments is the European Disability Strategy 2021–2030, which reaffirms the EU's commitment to breaking down barriers across society. A key focus is ensuring that persons with disabilities can enjoy their right to free movement, participate in educational and professional exchanges, and access opportunities on equal footing with others. This strategy links directly to mobility by calling on institutions to adapt procedures, funding structures, and environments to the needs of learners with disabilities.



Further, the European Pillar of Social Rights, particularly Principle 17 upholds the right of people with disabilities to “income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs.” While this may seem more employment-oriented, the underlying message also applies to educational mobility. The environments into which learners are placed must be adapted, not the other way around.

At an international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), which has been ratified by all EU Member States, places responsibility on governments and institutions to promote inclusive education and support mobility. Article 24 focuses on inclusive education, while Article 19 and 20 deal with personal mobility and independent living.

Erasmus+, the flagship program for educational mobility in Europe also includes an Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, which explicitly addresses how learners with disabilities can participate meaningfully in the program. It offers financial support for additional costs (such as for assistive devices, companions, or transport) and encourages simplified application processes. Companions should be aware of this framework and help learners advocate for these supports.

When companions understand these policies, they are better prepared to:

- Interpret a student’s rights in the host country.
- Collaborate with sending and hosting institutions to ensure compliance.
- Make ethical decisions in complex situations.

These guidelines also provide legitimacy when companions need to push back against inaccessible practices or when advocating for modifications. Familiarity with these principles empowers companions to act not only as supporters but also as informed advocates.

9.2 Tools for Accessible Travel Planning

Travel planning for learners with disabilities goes far beyond finding a destination or booking a ticket, it requires a thorough examination of how each step of the journey will accommodate the learner's physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional needs. Without careful planning, even minor logistical oversights can cascade into stressful or dangerous situations. This is where accessible travel tools become invaluable.

Wheelmap.org is one of the most practical and widely used resources for mapping wheelchair-accessible places across Europe. Created by the German nonprofit Sozialhelden e.V., this crowd-sourced tool allows users to find and rate the accessibility of restaurants, train stations, public toilets, and educational facilities. Companions can use it during the preparation phase to scope out areas around the learner's accommodation or workplace.

Similarly, Euan's Guide, developed in the UK, offers detailed accessibility reviews written by people with lived experience of disability. This human-centered insight often goes far beyond technical data, offering emotional context, potential risks, or personal recommendations, elements that can be crucial for companions in anticipating the learner's comfort level.

Apps like Access Earth and Google Maps' accessibility layer also assist in pre-mobility planning by displaying accessible walking paths, elevator availability in public transport hubs, and curb ramp placements. These tools can help companions plan door-to-door trips with accuracy.

For air and train travel, EU Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 mandates the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when traveling by air, including the right to free assistance at airports and on aircraft. Knowing this regulation can help companions book necessary assistance in advance and advocate for smooth transitions across international airports.

Custom tools and checklists, often generated internally by mobility organizations, can also be customized. Examples include:

- Individual medical packing lists tailored to the learner's diagnosis.
- Contact cards with disability information in multiple languages.
- Cultural sensitivity guides addressing how different countries perceive and support disabilities.

Finally, European Consumer Centres (ECC-Net) are available in each EU country and can intervene when a learner with a disability experiences discrimination during travel. Having this kind of institutional backup gives companions a concrete route for recourse in difficult scenarios.

By relying on these tools, companions become proactive problem-solvers rather than reactive responders, reducing risk while.

9.3 Support Networks and Helplines

Support networks are the backbone of successful mobility experiences for learners with disabilities. While companions serve as direct, on-the-ground supporters, no single individual can manage all potential needs or crises alone. This is where broader support systems ranging from local organizations to international helplines, play a vital role. These networks offer expert knowledge, emergency intervention, emotional support, and guidance grounded in the lived experience of disability advocacy. Knowing how to navigate and activate these networks can make a critical difference in the quality and safety of a learner's mobility experience.

Local Support Services in Host Countries

Every country in Europe has its own ecosystem of disability advocacy organizations, legal aid providers, accessibility specialists, and crisis intervention services. Before departure, companions should research and compile a list of relevant local organizations in the host country.

These might include:

- National disability associations (e.g., APF France Handicap, FONCE in Spain, Disability Federation of Ireland), which often offer regional chapters that provide legal advice, transportation help, or peer support.
- Municipal social services or youth social inclusion offices, which may offer local interpreters, assistive device rental programs, or links to accessible housing providers.
- University disability support offices or VET partner institutions, who can provide academic adjustments, quiet spaces, or coordination with workplace mentors.
- Embassies or consulates, which can be contacted in emergencies or for advice about medical care or interpreter services, especially in the case of communication barriers.

Creating a localized contact guide for each destination ensures that companions can connect quickly with the appropriate stakeholders when challenges arise. These relationships also reduce feelings of isolation—for both the learner and the companion by connecting them with community-based support.

European and Transnational Networks

At a broader level, the European Union and affiliated organizations maintain networks that provide structured, cross-border support:

- ENIL (European Network on Independent Living): Advocates for the rights of people with disabilities across Europe and offers policy guidance, legal advocacy, and user-led resources on independent living and mobility rights.
- Erasmus Student Network (ESN): Through its ESN Inclusive Mobility Alliance, ESN promotes equal access to Erasmus+ for students with fewer opportunities. Local chapters often provide orientation events, peer mentoring, and social activities adapted to diverse needs.
- EDF (European Disability Forum): While primarily focused on policy advocacy, EDF provides a wealth of publications and newsletters that keep companions up to date on accessibility policies across EU nations.

These transnational networks are important not only during crises but also as tools for building long-term awareness, gaining knowledge, and even expanding learners' own social networks while abroad.

Helplines and Crisis Services

In addition to community networks, companions should be aware of emergency support services available in the host country. Learners with disabilities may encounter unexpected challenges, including medical emergencies, mental health crises, or cases of discrimination and in such instances, quick access to the right helpline or support service is crucial.

Essential types of helplines to document:

- National emergency numbers (such as 112 across Europe) and how to request assistance for someone with a disability (e.g., through SMS for the hearing-impaired).
- Mental health crisis lines, such as SOS Help in France, Samaritans in the UK, or Telefono Amico in Italy, many of which offer English-speaking services and support for stress, anxiety, and depression.
- Legal support lines, such as Your Europe Advice, where citizens can seek confidential advice on rights during cross-border situations, including disability discrimination or accessibility issues.

EU-wide resources, including:

- The SOLVIT network, which helps resolve disputes related to EU law (e.g., refusal of access based on disability).
- The European Consumer Centres Network (ECC-Net) for travel-related issues.
- Safe Spaces for Youth run by NGOs that support vulnerable learners abroad.

These helplines should be programmed into both the companion's and learner's phones before departure, and clearly listed in a printed emergency contact document. It is also recommended to conduct a scenario-based simulation before departure so that both parties are comfortable using these resources under pressure.

Why Support Networks Matter

Support networks and helplines create an essential safety net but they also foster empowerment. They reinforce the idea that disability inclusion is a collective responsibility and that the learner is not alone, even while in a foreign country. For companions, these networks alleviate the pressure of feeling like they must have all the answers and instead allow them to act as facilitators who connect learners to the right resources at the right time.

Furthermore, these networks help normalize the presence and participation of learners with disabilities in international programs. As more learners engage successfully with these systems, they also help improve them, creating a virtuous cycle of accessibility and inclusion.

Companions are encouraged to not only use these networks but also contribute to them by sharing experiences, offering feedback, and suggesting improvements. This kind of reciprocal engagement ensures that support networks remain dynamic, responsive, and rooted in real-world needs.



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