Summary

This thesis reports on two studies: (1) an analysis of European disability policy and (2) an exploratory quantitative analysis of social participation and subjective well-being of people with and without disabilities in a number of European countries.

In the first chapter the background of the studies is presented, followed by the objectives and research questions. The objective of the policy study is to analyse the development of disability policy at the level of the European Union (EU) as well as to study cross-nationally the similarities and differences in disability policy in various European countries, including an analysis of the relation between policies at the EU and the national level. The objective of the quantitative study is to compare the situation of people with disabilities in a number of European countries and to explore the relation between this situation and the policy circumstances in those countries. Important in this respect are the outcome measures used to determine the effects of disability policy. It is argued that social participation, defined as ‘involvement in life situations’, can be used as an outcome measure. However, social participation is not an end goal in itself. It is also a means to leading a satisfactory and full life, and is thus, also a subjective assessment of life circumstances. Subjective well-being is therefore used as an outcome measure. In addition, social participation and subjective well-being are also determined by individual characteristics. Thus, the general question of the second study is: do different policy circumstances (i.e. in different countries) result in, or are they related to, different degrees of social participation and the subjective well-being of people with disabilities in addition to individual characteristics? To explore this question a staged model of the pathway from disability to social participation and subjective well-being is used.
In chapter two the methodology of the studies is described. To collect country-specific information for the cross-national policy study, a structured questionnaire was sent to 20 European countries. It covered the broad field of disability policy and aimed at collecting information on policy, implementation and policy instruments and measures. Nine countries returned the questionnaire. The data were qualitatively analysed on the basis of the following characteristics: coherence or fragmentation in policy, legislation and policy-implementation, and the (level of) influence of (organizations of) people with disabilities on these aspects. Regarding the development of disability policy at the European level, an analysis was made of the contents of relevant documents of the European Council and the European Commission. The relation between policy at the EU and the national level is discussed on the basis of the outcomes of the analysis of disability policy at these levels.

In order to answer the research question of the quantitative study, a secondary analysis was done using data retrieved from the European Social Survey (ESS). People with disabilities are identified by a so-called global question or global rating scale of perceived health status. Three subgroups are discerned: disabled a lot, disabled to some extent and not disabled. Regarding social participation, a scale was constructed using variables on the frequency of social meetings and activities, being in paid work and doing housework. A scale for subjective well-being was constructed with variables on satisfaction with life and happiness. Two types of differences in social participation and subjective well-being were considered: the differences between the countries for each of the three subgroups and differences between the subgroups within the countries. Regarding individual characteristics serving as potential determinants of social participation and subjective well-being, a number of socio-demographic variables and variables concerning self-rated health and mental and economic conditions were used.

Chapter 3 presents the results of the policy study. Disability policy at the European level has been developed over the last 15 years mainly as part of social policy. The objectives are formulated rather abstractly: equal opportunities, inclusiveness and mainstreaming. Notwithstanding the numerous initiatives, the reach of formal, direct European disability policy is modest. It is mainly aimed at employment and social integration. There is only one ‘hard’ measure with legal power: the directive for equal treatment in employment and education. The other initiatives are only ‘soft’ resolutions, communications and action plans with no legal obligations for member states. These measures aim more for ‘influence through persuasion’ than ‘influence through legislation’.

Concerning the objective of the cross-national policy study, the similarities and differences in disability policy in nine European countries are examined. As a result, the countries are grouped into three clusters: coherent, fragmented and transition policy. There is no clear trend toward similarity or convergence in national policies. The existing similarities between countries are not a result of EU policy but have existed longer and are embedded in general national social and welfare policies.

The modest influence of the EU can to a large extent be explained by the subsidiarity principle. There may, however, be indirect and informal EU influence.
Indirect because legislation in other policy fields may also have impact on people with disabilities, social benefits, health care and social services. And informal because besides this indirect ‘influence through legislation’, national disability policies may undergo an informal influence first through the effects of instruments like the Open Method of Co-ordination (‘influence through persuasion’) and secondly through the activities of the various European organizations, committees and consultative bodies (‘influence through dialogue’). Surveying these routes from the European level to the national level, it seems probable that EU initiatives and activities in disability policy and other fields will influence national disability policies.

In chapters 4 to 8 the outcomes of the exploratory quantitative analysis are presented. Chapter 4 focuses on the differences in social participation of people with and without disabilities between the individual countries. In Denmark, the Netherlands, and then Finland and the United Kingdom all three subgroups scored highest on social participation compared to the other countries. In Germany, Slovakia and Slovenia all groups scored lowest. In all countries the disabled a lot participate least in society, and given the low number of significant differences between the countries for this subgroup, it seems that this group is more equal across countries than the other two subgroups. In addition, considering the mutual differences between the countries and the sizes of the differences concerning the three separate subgroups, a pattern may be observed. This could be an indication of a specific ‘country influence’.

In chapter 5 the differences in social participation between people with and without disabilities within the individual countries are described. With respect to the number and effect sizes of the statistically significant differences between the subgroups, Denmark, the United Kingdom and Slovenia are in a high position; i.e. there are fewer differences and the differences are smaller compared to the other countries. Belgium, Finland and the Netherlands are in the middle position, and Germany and Slovakia in the lower position. In most cases there are significant differences between the subgroups. The number of mutual significant differences between the two disabled subgroups is lower than the number of differences between each of the two groups with the non-disabled. This means that the two disabled groups are in general more alike and differ more or less equally from the not disabled.

Chapter 6 addresses the questions of whether and how individual characteristics are associated with and contribute to social participation in addition to disability, and whether there are differences in this respect between the individual countries. In addition to disability, socio-demographic determinants and self-rated conditions are associated with social participation. After entering all of the determinants in the analysis, disability is no longer significantly associated. Two determinants, “Age” and “Feeling optimistic and energetic”, play a major role compared to the other determinants. These two determinants work the same in all countries. The role of the other determinants is mixed; they have different contributions in different countries. Thus, there are differences between the countries, but to a large extent only regarding determinants with a less important role. The combined influence of the determinants results in a better prediction of social participation in some countries than in others.
Chapter 7 focuses on the differences in subjective well-being of people with and without disabilities between and within the individual countries. In the majority of cases there are significant differences between the countries for all three subgroups. In Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands people with disabilities have a higher score on subjective well-being compared to the other countries. However, in all countries the disabled a lot are worse off than the disabled to some extent, who are worse off than the non-disabled. Almost all the differences between the three subgroups within the countries are significant. In terms of the differences within the countries, the sizes of the differences between the subgroups are the lowest in Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom. Slovakia is in a relatively low position regarding both types of differences. Concerning the differences between countries, Germany and Slovenia are also in a relatively low position, but close to Belgium and the Netherlands regarding within-country differences.

Chapter 8 examines whether and how individual characteristics, including social participation, are associated with and contribute to subjective well-being in addition to disability, and whether there are differences in this respect between the individual countries. In addition to disability, the individual characteristics are associated with subjective well-being. If adjusted for these determinants, disability is no longer significantly related. The three self-rated conditions, “Feeling optimistic and energetic” in particular, play a major role compared to the other determinants, and they work the same in all countries. Social participation also contributes to subjective well-being in all countries, although the association is less strong. The role of the other determinants is mixed; they have different contributions in different countries. This also means that there are differences between the countries, but predominantly only regarding determinants with a less important role. The combined influence of the determinants results in a better prediction of subjective well-being in some countries than in others.

In the final chapter, Chapter 9, the main findings of the two studies are presented, followed by a discussion of these findings and a number of methodological considerations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for policy and research. With respect to the relation between disability policy at the national and at the EU level, the already described ‘influence mechanisms’ are discussed along with two additional ‘mechanisms’, which may presumably have an impact on disability policy at the national as well as the EU level: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and decisions of the European Court of Justice.

National disability policies are grouped into three ‘ideal type’ clusters, based on so-called ‘policy on the books’. It is argued that an analysis of the ways in which legislation and regulations are implemented and executed (‘policy on the streets’) may lead to another clustering, a clustering in ‘real world types’.

The data from the ESS were adequate for our purpose of comparing eight European countries on the social participation and subjective well-being of people with disabilities. We concluded that people with disabilities are in a disadvantaged position in all countries, especially the disabled a lot, who are worst off in all countries. The role and effectiveness of disability policy are questioned. Our findings,
which show that social participation and subjective well-being are mainly determined by age and subjective feelings, are very hard to apply in disability policy. It is obvious that age cannot be influenced. A person’s attitudes and feelings are very difficult to change, and current disability policy does not have instruments at its disposal to influence or improve them. The question arises as to whether social participation and subjective well-being can serve as adequate outcome measures of disability policy.

Concerning the relation of the findings of the two studies, the countries in the coherent policy cluster – with a partial exception for the United Kingdom – are predominantly in the highest position concerning social participation and subjective well-being. This is even clearer from the viewpoint that with respect to national policies, the differences within countries are more important than the differences between countries. To improve the participation of people with disabilities and to reduce differences between people with and without disabilities is after all an important objective of disability policy. The countries in the fragmented policy cluster are, certainly regarding the within-country differences, in a medium position on social participation and subjective well-being. Germany is in part an exception: taking also into account the differences between the countries, it is for the most part close to the position of the countries in the transition policy cluster. Thus, there is a relation between the ‘policy types’ and social participation and subjective well-being. However, on the basis of our data it is not possible to show that the different positions of the countries on social participation and subjective well-being are a consequence of the differences in national disability policies. Certain ‘country influences’ were found, however.

The methodological considerations address the definition and measurement of disability, the data collection and sources of information of the policy study, the data of the empirical study, the concept and measurement of social participation and the measurement of the individual characteristics, which served as determinants of social participation and subjective well-being.

Recommendations for policy focus on the desirability of a more ‘coherent’ disability policy; the development of policy measures aimed at target groups, such as the disabled a lot; a common challenge for the European countries to improve disability policy, with the EU in a coordinating and stimulating role; and the need for specific, circumscribed policy goals.

Recommendations for research are directed at the development of a more specified and uniform instrument for the measurement of disability; more research on the concept and measurement of social participation; a repetition of the empirical study with improved instruments; an investigation into the availability of existing European data; an adequately organised collaboration between European research institutes in the field of disability; and a repetition of the policy study with a broader scope and from wider angles.