

## Inclusion in university contexts and the role of internships in the education of students with disabilities: Critical issues, perspectives and good practices

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### Abstract

The topic of university inclusion is today at the centre of the international and national debate. The reasons are related to a significant increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in university, as shown by the first report "Disability, Dsa and access to university education", presented these days by ANVUR (Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University system and Research) and CNUDD (National Conference of University Delegates for Disability). From this report, several steps forward for the inclusion of university students emerge, but also several critical dimensions that still require the attention of research and academic policies. This article will examine this issue and focus on exploring one of the critical nodes of university inclusion, namely the role of internships in the educational experience of students with disabilities and in their life project.

A growing literature has explored their academic experience; on the contrary, there is little research to date that explores the issues and challenges of a central aspect of the higher education and training pathway, namely internships.

Completing the study pathway in higher education is identified as a factor that can impact increasing the social and employment inclusion of people with disabilities (Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and consequent improvement of levels of Quality of Life (Giaconi, 2015). However, one of the main obstacles to obtaining a qualification is the accessibility of internships.

This article addresses the meaning and implications of internships for competences' building and insertion into the labour market of disabled graduates. Therefore, it explores the state of play of research, identifies the most critical issues, and reports about the running debate in the field.

**Key words:** Work-based learning; internship; employability; higher education students with disabilities; university inclusion; life design.

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## 1. Introduction

Talking today about inclusion in university contexts is possible thanks to the abundant studies that can be found in the scientific literature (Giaconi *et al.*, 2019; D'Angelo and Del Bianco, 2019; Pace, Pavone and Petrini, 2018; Caldin, 2017; Pavone, 2015), and to the attention that bodies in charge of ensuring inclusion for university students with disabilities have dedicated to this issue. The recent report “Disability, Dsa and access to university education”<sup>1</sup>, presented these days by the ANVUR (Italian Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research) and the CNUDD (National Conference of University Delegates for Disability) highlights the light and the shade of university inclusion. Specifically, the ANVUR- CNUDD report 2021 snapshots an advanced Italian reality regarding specific orientation services before, during and after studies and support services such as specialised tutoring or digital teaching materials. On the other hand, transport and home services, platforms accessible also on sign language, textbooks accessible to all are still critical aspects to be improved. As we have demonstrated in previous studies (D'Angelo and Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi *et al.*, 2019, Giaconi and Del Bianco, 2018; Giaconi *et al.*, 2018), there are international excellences that also allow Italian contexts to express models of good practice for supporting university students with sensory disabilities (Buckley, 2019) or with Specific Learning Disorders (dos Santos *et al.*, 2019; Demetriou, *et al.*, 2019). From these studies, several junctures remain for international and national research to address to promote not only university inclusion but the very opportunity for growth that the university can represent in the life project of students with disabilities. For this reason, we tackle with this article one of the most delicate issues for the university education of all students and in particular, as we shall see, of students with disabilities: the internship.

The normative and sequential relationship between education and work has dramatically changed over time (Müller and Gangl, 2003). The acquisition of skills for graduate employability became central in university teaching and learning since the Bologna Declaration (1999). Internships, previously more common in medicine and healthcare degrees and vocational education and training, became spread across university study curricula and educational policies to speed the insertion of graduates in the labour market.

Work-based learning (WBL) represents the pedagogical approach on which the internship experiences are built on. WBL, typical of vocational education and training, has been defined as “learning that occurs in a work environment through participation in work practices and process”; the joint concept of Work

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.anvur.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Risultati-indagine-ANVUR-disabilita-e-DSA.pdf>.

Integrated Learning (WIL), refers instead «learning that comprises a range of programs and activities in which the theory of the learning is intentionally integrated with the practice of work through specifically designed curriculum, pedagogic practices and student engagement» (Atkinson, 2016, p. 2). Both approaches are based on the principles of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984): reflective, self-directed and self-managed individuals can learn from practice and work (Kolb, 1984; Brookfield, 1995). According to Raelin (1997), WBL has both an individual and collective propriety, able to link theory and action and to make tacit knowledge explicit in a «form of knowing that is context-dependent» (p. 572).

WBL processes are formalised in the internship experience; however, the word can refer to different stages and types of learning at work, depending on countries (ILO, 2018). In Europe, internship and traineeship are often used interchangeably, and translations in national languages often make understanding even more unclear. For the purpose of this paper, we keep the EURES definitions: an internship is a work experience carried out while studying, and it is often curricular (needed to complete the study course); traineeship is a work practice, which is usually carried out after the end of the studies to gain some work experience. A traineeship can be paid or unpaid and always has a learning component (EURES, 2015).

On this background, there is a need to understand how WBL can be valuable for inclusion in university contexts and the professional formation of students with disabilities in higher education.

## 2. The internship process: players' perspectives

A typical internship process includes three players: the employer, the educational provider and the student/intern; they agree on a learning programme performed through a series of tasks, mentoring, monitoring and evaluation from both academic and company tutor, and reflection and evaluation from the student (ongoing and final). The administration part, including insurance, agreements and official documents to record the internship, is usually managed by the educational provider in agreement with the company. However, according to business culture, national rules, and contextual needs of any of the involved players, the main process can have much different management and implementation features.

### 1.1. *The employer perspective*

By taking a collective perspective, employers seem to be the first

condemning the missing work-readiness of graduates: several studies stress the lack of skills, in particular soft skills, financial skills and business skills among newly graduates, in the frame of the skills mismatch analysis (CEDEFOP, 2018; McGuinness *et al.*, 2018; Brunello and Wruuck, 2019, among others). On the other hand, employers recognise the added value of experience when looking for staff (Thompson, 2014). When analysing internship, and to a greater extent traineeship, the globalisation and the competition of the labour market should be considered. The supervising of an intern requires time, time is constrained, and 'time is money': therefore, often, costs are more valued than benefits in hosting an intern. The first advantage recognised by industry is in fact related to costs (CABS, 2014; Rowe *et al.*, 2018): even if this is applicable in particular for the traineeship, internships are often considered a form of low-cost labour without long-term commitment (Galloway *et al.*, 2014), or additional resources for projects that would not be implemented with regular resources (Maertz *et al.*, 2014). However, the cost issue is not always the reason for hosting interns: the internship can be seen as a form of recruiting process (Divine *et al.*, 2007) or as a trial period in the company (Elarde and Chong, 2012; Maertz *et al.*, 2014).

The intern can be beneficial also to the working group by contributing with a different perspective that can support change in methods and approaches (Fleming, 1999).

Finally, the contribution to the community by companies should be stressed: many internship programmes, in particular in large companies, are linked to corporate social responsibility strategies (Gould *et al.*, 2020; Cordero *et al.*, 2014). In smaller companies, where comprehensive corporate social responsibility strategies are not common, still, the relationship with the community is strong, based on trust and reputation: in this sense, hosting interns represents a way of contributing to common societal good and well-being (Jenkins, 2006; Spence, 2007).

### *1.2. The University perspective*

Internships in curricular courses were among the significant novelties following the establishment of the European Higher Education Area.

The internship is a part of the students' learning and career development process (Holyoak, 2013). In this sense, the university takes advantage of WBL to increase the acquisition of skills useful for preparation for the world of work, and, above all, life design.

Further, internship programmes enhance institutions' reputation and, consequently, their attractiveness for prospective students (Vélez and Giner, 2015).

Finally, internship programmes strengthen ties with the corporate world (Gerken *et al.*, 2012), which is beneficial to several aims, e.g., funding support (Cook *et al.*, 2004); participation in job fairs (Divine *et al.*, 2007); consulting opportunities and joint curricular activities (Toncar and Cudmore, 2000); increased understanding of industry needs (Tovey, 2001); etc.

### *1.3. The student/intern perspective*

The internship is a widely recognised learning experience that enables students to acquire skills that cannot be developed through classroom learning (Ismail, 2018), improve employment outcomes (Saniter and Siedler, 2014; Rigsby *et al.*, 2013), and reflect on career prospects (Vélez and Giner, 2015).

Among skills acquired through the internship's experiential learning experience, students gain a wide range of transversal skills, such as e.g. interpersonal skills (Zeher and Korte, 2019), teamwork skills (Andrew and Highson, 2008), and business culture (Korte, 2009) skills. The internship supports the acquisition of a pre-professionalism attitude (Jackson, 2018) and the formation of professional network building (Stanton, 1992). Concerning requests from the labour market, internships increase the marketability of graduates (Gault *et al.*, 2010).

## **3. University internship and disability**

As for all young people, work is important for youths with disabilities. However, their employment outcomes have persistently lagged behind (Simonsen *et al.*, 2015): in 2011, Eurostat (2018) observed that the employment rate of people with basic activity difficulties was 47.3 % (almost 20 percentage points below that of people without disabilities). Therefore, it is even more crucial to establish 'bridges' between education and work for students with disabilities, including those at the university. By saying 'disability', we refer to a wide range of different special needs and impairments: the following paragraphs refer to the most frequent topics found in literature, pointing out, however, the reference to the type of disability when available.

### *3.1. The employer perspective*

Previous research explored the perspective of employers, particularly from an employment point of view. At the same time, university internships are more studied from the point of observation of the institution and the student.

However, interesting inputs can be drawn from work-based learning for specific sub-groups and research on the transition from education to work of people with disability. Literature suggests that people with psychiatric disability face more difficulties in finding employment and more significant discrimination than physical disability (Bricout and Bently, 2000; Chi and Qu, 2005; Kocman *et al.*, 2017). Greenwood and Johnson (1987) also confirmed the preference for employers to hire people with a physical disability and less favour for those with intellectual disability. In addition, they identified among variables in hiring people with disability the size of the company (larger companies vs small companies, the first reporting more positive attitudes) and the level of academic attainment of recruiters (higher attainment corresponding to positive attitude).

Additional perceived barriers include:

- Lack of adequate jobs, often linked to stereotypes about possessed competencies, therefore able to perform the job (Louvet *et al.*, 2009).
- Resources-related issues: belief that to accommodate people with disability at the workplace is too complicated and requires additional efforts (Kocman *et al.*, 2017).
- Teamwork and human resources issues: fear of difficult management of the employee or difficulties for co-workers in dealing with people with disability (Bonaccio *et al.*, 2020).
- Legal issues: fear that law-related constraints would hinder the process of hiring or dismissal (Kocman *et al.*, 2017), which depends on national legal frameworks.
- Lack of candidates (Kocman *et al.*, 2017; Domzal *et al.*, 2008).

Organisation and implementation of work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities face similar difficulties: according to Riesen and Oertle (2019), besides problems, three crucial factors favour the hosting/hiring people with disability, namely (a) desire to diversify the workforce, (b) desire to expand job opportunities for youth, and (c) commitment to give back to the community (p. 15). These factors are related to general factors supporting the hosting of interns, particularly concerning the community's contribution. Instead, diversification of the workforce and diversity management seems to be a distinguishing factor related to hosting interns or hiring young people with disabilities. Managing diversity in the workplace has become increasingly popular in organisations, both for corporate social responsibility reasons and for reputation/branding reasons. Especially for large companies, managing diversity means enlarging the pool of potential (talented) candidates, benefiting from different thinking/creative ideas in the workforce, and be able to deal and interact with diverse consumer groups. However, it should be stressed that

when referring to ‘diversity’, both literature and policies include several segments of the population, such as minority ethnic groups, or sexual orientation, gender and, of course, also disability, which is itself composed of people with very different needs, as previously said. Therefore, even if it is common to believe that hiring people with disability is a benefit for the company in terms of diversity, it should be recalled that the traditional management diversity approach could be challenged by the reality of disabled individuals, who «necessitate both different types of equality initiatives and significantly more individualised equality measures» (Woodhams and Danieli, 2000, p. 414).

### *3.2. The University perspective*

Among support services, usually, the internships in universities are managed by the career services: those should be ideally designed, like all other services, according to the principles of Universal Design, therefore ensuring physical access, but also access to printed and digital resources, and trained staff (Chartered, N/A; Optiz and Block, 2008).

Aune (2000) described four models of career services delivery for students with disabilities: 1) career and disability offices operate independently; 2) the disability office also takes care of career development, as a part of the overall learning experience; 3) career and disability offices operate in an integrated way; 4) the two concerned offices are integrated, according to the Universal Design principles, and the student does not need additional or ‘special’ services, since the regular services are accessible from anyone. The latter is the ‘ideal’ situation, but is still challenging implement.

Being the reality is often far from the ideal situation, usually, work-based learning is managed by both services: a part managed by the career service (typically job search and admin procedures), and another part is governed by the disability service (for example, accommodation and special staff support, or tutoring). Depending on the university’s organisation, tasks can be differently divided. However, usually, accommodation, including special tools (e.g., assisting technologies), is managed by the disability service and special support during the internship experience, if needed. As this type of support is not very different from regular learning support, also in the classroom or generally in academic life, the challenge in the internships’ organisation of students with disability is more finding work-based learning opportunities than in managing the WBL process.

### *3.3. The student/intern perspective*

As for all students, the internship experience is crucial in the educational

journey of students with disability. However, students with disabilities have to face additional challenges.

Literature, both on work-based learning and job insertion, identify as most common difficulties the following ones:

- Perception of being employed/hosted as disabled student/worker, not as a student/worker (Nolan and Gleeson, 2016).
- Fear of discrimination can lead to refusal of disability disclosure for those who are affected by invisible disabilities (e.g., mental illness) (Nolan and Gleeson, 2016; Bonaccio *et al.*, 2020).
- Low self-efficacy perception, linked to disability (Nolan and Gleeson, 2016).

In the background, yet it should be recalled that the perception of disability varies across cultures and may also be influenced by the labour market status (Kreider and Pepper, 2007).

#### 4. University internship in Italy

Focusing on the Italian context, curricular training has become an integral part of university education since 2004. Ministerial Decree no. 270 of October 22, 2004, established that, in addition to the educational activities qualifying the courses of study, the curricula must include educational activities relating to internships and training periods in companies, public administrations, public or private bodies, etc. As indicated by the same Decree, curricular internships are work-based experiences promoted by the University and are carried out on the basis of special agreements governing the relations between the bodies involved in the interns' activities. In addition to curricular internships, Italian universities can also set up and manage "training and guidance traineeships", i.e., traineeships undertaken within 12 months of obtaining a degree or professional training aimed at facilitating professional choices and employability in the transition phase from school to work through training in a productive environment and direct knowledge of the world of work.

Internships involve three players: the promoter, i.e., the University, the host (company, business, etc.) and the intern, i.e., the student. To start an internship, it is necessary to draw up a training and guidance project containing the objectives and methods of carrying out the internship (ensuring, for students, the link with their training courses), the names of the academic and company tutor and the duration and period of the internship.

Regarding university students with disabilities, their right to access higher education is historically ascribed to the principle of educational continuity (de Anna, 2016) as established by the Italian Constitutional Court (sentence 215,



1987); the same rules and implementation procedures apply to curricular internships. To guarantee the right to study and the provision of the same educational opportunities, including the orientation of the internship, the *National University Conference of the Delegates for the Disability (CNUDD)* elaborated guidelines to ensure the right to study and to contextually promote inclusion, autonomy and active citizenship of all students (CNUDD, 2014, p.5).

In particular, the CNUDD's commitment is to promote and support access to university, training and lifelong learning, in the belief that knowledge, higher culture and participation in research foster full human development, entry into the world of work and the realisation of freedoms, understood as opportunities to realise personal aspirations (CNUDD, 2014, p.5).

In this direction, to support the educational success during the entire university course, Italian universities have established specific professional figures, such as the Rector's Delegate for Disability and Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs), and administrative support structures. The latter, named in the CNUDD guidelines with the term University Disability/SLDs Services (SDDA), is the first point of contact for students with disabilities at university and play a strategic role in the reception and management of the various services set up in the universities themselves to protect their right to study. The SDDAs, in collaboration with the Rector's Delegate for Disability and SLDs, are called upon to play the role of interface between the university system and students, as well as, if necessary, with families and local and health services; they are responsible for liaising with the university services and, in particular, with tutoring and with entry and exit orientation; they prepare personalised support services ongoing as well as having organisational and administrative management responsibility for the provision of services and the monitoring of their effectiveness (CNUDD, 2014, p.7). Within these responsibilities, the SDDAs are therefore involved in supporting the preparation and management of the practices necessary for the start of curricular internships for students who request them.

The structuring of actions aimed at favouring orientation and tutoring during the curricular internship, also through personalised methods able to ensure the connection with the pathway undertaken, is undoubtedly essential in the creation of opportunities for a concrete opening to the labour market. The recently issued Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 sets among its objectives that people with disabilities in Europe have equal opportunities and have equal access to participate in society and the economy. Specifically, it stresses that equal access to education and labour market-oriented learning at all levels should be ensured through the adaptation of

education and training policies to the needs of persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the UNCRPD<sup>2</sup>.

The Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>3</sup> highlights as today: «The employment gap between persons with and without disabilities remains high: persons with disabilities have a lower employment rate, are disproportionately affected by unemployment, and leave labour markets earlier. A large number of persons with severe disabilities do not work in the open labour market, but in facilities offering so-called sheltered employment» (Union of Equality - Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, p. 13).

Also, the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience<sup>4</sup> invites the Member States to design vocational programmes to be inclusive and accessible for persons with disabilities.

In this framework, the role played by internships in higher education as an opportunity to prepare for the demands of real labour market contexts is central. However, as we will elaborate in the next paragraph, there are still several critical issues concerning university placements of students with disabilities.

#### *4.1. The debate on internship and disability*

Access to university studies is a natural aspiration and a chance for self-fulfilment for many people with disabilities or SLDs (CNUDD, 2014, p. 11).

As stressed by previous research (Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020; D'Angelo and Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi *et al.*, 2019; Giaconi *et al.*, 2018), universities should provide the right to study: they should pursue accessibility in teaching and promote inclusive processes within the academic community.

Educational guidance is a fundamental step in building a continuum between high school and university. Support for the choice of study pathway represents, in fact, the first real and concrete opportunity to plan a future career. A realistic and sustainable academic planning, more than the mere aspiration to a degree, is predictive of the permanence of young people in the university context and is the bridge to the world of work (CNUDD, 2014), an important goal for the project of independent living (Giaconi *et al.*, 2020; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018; Caldin and Scollo, 2018). To this end, the CNUDD guidelines emphasise the importance of structuring orientation methods, even after leaving university, to provide adequate support to students with disabilities or SLDs in the transition

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1484>.

<sup>4</sup> Council Recommendation (2020/C 417/01).

to the world of work. In this direction, universities are called upon to organise interventions to enable students to acquire specific skills in the drafting of the Curriculum Vitae; to promote the relationship between the student and the world of work; to achieve an effective match between job supply and demand, based on the profile and aspirations of the individual student (CNUDD, 2014, p. 11).

National (Bocci, Cajola and Zucca, 2020; Pace, Pavone and Petrini, 2018; Pavone, 2017; D'Alonzo and Carruba, 2016; Caldin, 2017; CNUDD, 2014) and international studies (Espada-Chavarria, Moreno-Rodriguez, and Jenaro, 2020; Buckley, 2019; Briel and Getzel, 2001) however highlight some critical issues related to the conduct of curricular and extracurricular internships by students with disabilities and SLDs at university.

Regarding critical issues, the Italian context reports similar difficulties as other countries, as highlighted in paragraphs 2.2 and 2.3. While there is a wide consensus on how the internship of students with disability should be designed and developed, implementation still suffers from internal and external misalignments between theory and practice. Recently, the Conference of Italian Rectors (CRUI) pointed out the need of addressing the issue according to the paradigm of complexity, i.e., through coordinated use of actions that fall under the general concept of “reasonable accommodation” (UN Convention, 2006<sup>5</sup>). Therefore, the specific contexts and needs of each student should be taken into account, adhering as possible to the guiding principle of personalisation. Furthermore, the participants to the CRUI conference (Disability Delegates of Italian Universities), by recognising the need of leveraging on the students’ capacities and not on their constraints, stressed the need of applying at least four conditions, as follows:

- Being transparent toward students and their families on potential future difficulties, both along with the study degree and employability potential.
- Managing hopes and expectations, avoiding illusion and consequent disappointment and discouragement.
- Strengthening awareness and sense of self-responsibility in students and families.
- Respecting freedom of choice and putting in place appropriate measures during the study course to avoid academic failure.

Some authors have also identified these points: while leaving the broadest possible set of opportunities to the subject, thus, all the actors involved in the orientation process must make very clear the characteristics of the future course of study and any constraints related to workshops, internships and professional

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

outlets (EADHE, 2014; CRUI, 2018). In other terms, the student should be supported in gaining self-reflection, self-awareness and self-responsibility in designing her/his life project. On this consideration, also the design of the support system should be prepared: however, the complexity of relations concerned – e.g., support offices, tutors, but also medical doctors, and the involved dimensions from legal to technical and pedagogical, make difficult the realisation of such a university eco-system.

Whilst the described conclusions of the CRUI conference could apply to any student, the conference was specifically addressed at a specific segment of the students' body, namely those enrolled in the *qualifying degrees*. Qualifying degrees lead to the automatic authorisation to the professional practice, which in Italy usually requires a State examination to be passed after the degree attainment. Today, the available qualifying degrees are health degrees (such as Medicine), one education degree (for primary school teachers), and one restoration degree. In particular, the first two, these specific degrees add complexity to the organisation of work-based learning: both professions, Medicine professions and primary school teachers cannot be carried out outside field-specific environments and settings that could not be appropriately arranged to the needs of the student. The conclusion of the conference, by acknowledging that at present there is no shared solution, which is found and implemented case-by-case, recognises that there is a need of harmonisation on the internship of qualifying degrees, and a wider need also to harmonise approaches, methods, and organisational structures across the country.

## 5. Internships within the Inclusion 3.0 Project

As highlighted in previous studies (Giaconi *et al.*, 2019; D'Angelo and Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi *et al.*, 2018), the University of Macerata, consistently with the CNUDD guidelines and in addition to regular disability services, has implemented the project Inclusion 3.0, to support projects addressed at the University inclusion.

Inclusion 3.0 is a project launched by the University of Macerata in July 2017 and designed to implement design actions in university inclusion of students with disabilities or Specific Learning Disorders.

The project's intervention strategy focuses on the enhancement of university services and awareness-raising events at the national and international level aimed at strengthening policy and scientific guidelines as well as the development of support processes both for educational planning, didactic mediation and evaluation, and for the inclusion of students with disabilities or DSA in the various aspects of university life. Therefore, the Inclusion 3.0

project was created to provide innovative and sustainable perspectives following the increase in enrollment of students with disabilities and SLDs at the University of Macerata (Giaconi and Del Bianco, 2018). Policies to enhance internships and apprenticeships, both curricular and extracurricular, are included in the various micro and macro planning actions<sup>6</sup>.

As for other support, the Inclusion 3.0 initiative also includes the design and implementation of internships, both curricular and extracurricular, therefore additional work-based learning experiences carried out during the study years. The adopted approach seeks to adhere to the CNUDD guidelines, thus focusing on the personalisation of the learning path as possible.

Within the standard path provided in universities for the activation of the internship<sup>7</sup> and the host institution and the educational tutor, a “special tutor” is part of the team. This tutor has a specific task: to mediate between the intern with disabilities and the company. Specifically, s/he operates to build a “bridge” between the functioning profile of the student with disabilities and the specific requests formulated by the working context of the company. S/he detects through an interview with the company tutor and observation in-context (Bortolotti and Sorzio, 2014) the variables characterising the company system to build customised facilitators based on the functioning profile of the intern. By identifying the tasks required by the intern, the physical and relational characteristics of the business context and the knowledge of the student's skills, the tutor designs specific supports to favour adequate development of

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<sup>6</sup> The project is structured along different operational areas, and so far has implemented: Reception services for students with disability and Specific Learning Disorders; The purchase and deployment of technological devices and software; A tailored organisation of teaching, and mediation in education; Support for study, exams and internships with specialised professionals and peer tutoring activities; Activation of interaction, University life and campaigns to raise awareness across the geographical area in which the University is located; Design and implementation of personalised paths for the internship. (<https://www.unimc.it/it/servizi-agli-studenti/unimc-for-inclusion/progetto-inclusione-3-0.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> There are six main steps required in the activation and completion of the curricular internship. 1 step: The intern reviews the educational provisions of his/her course of study to understand the access requirements and identify the educational/academic tutor; 2 step: The intern contacts the academic tutor, to define the objectives of the training project; 3 step: The intern contacts the host institution that first generates in the internship portal the training project with the student, initiating the internship procedure; Step 4: The intern, within the same portal, indicates the name of the academic tutor; subsequently, the system transmits the data of the learning project to the academic tutor, via email, so that s/he can check the project and possibly approve it; Step 5: The internship office makes the internship active and valid within 15 days from the receipt of the acceptance email from the academic tutor. During the internship the student must: compulsorily record the daily activity carried out in the internship, completed with signatures, to certify the attendance, by the intern and the company tutor. At the end of the internship, the company tutor and the intern are required to complete the final evaluation questionnaire and the student must submit the final documentation required by his/her course of study.

professional and social skills. Hence, the tutor's task is to facilitate the recognition by the company system of the student as a real intern, and that s/he should work to internalise the professional and social role. The mediation competence of the specialised tutor is not only concerned by the relationship with the company but also with the university system and the family and/or friendship network of the intern. In this sense, the tutor works alongside the Offices of Orientation and Disability and SLDs, activates all available resources and further resources of other university's offices (e.g., the IT office), to ensure the completion of the training project agreed with the academic and business tutor. Finally, the specialised tutor works to mediate the expectations of all subjects involved in the internship pathway, including those of the family and the student. Therefore, the specialised tutor supports the student all over the work-based learning process, from the activation to the completion. Thanks to the work of specialised tutors, the working group of Inclusion 3.0 has created over time a rather wide local network of private and public organisations and companies hosting interns with disabilities.

Today, at least 50 internships of students with disabilities were organised, including online internships during the lockdown period due to pandemic (Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020). By analysing previous experiences, it could be noted that some features are recurrent during the process.

A critical step is related to the mismatch of expectations between the intern and the company. As we will deepen in the last paragraph, the alignment of expectations of all subjects involved in the internship (Giaconi, 2015) remains fundamental in constructing meaningful and sustainable training courses.

Furthermore, a common need for almost all internships is the breadth of relationships required by both design and implementation: the organisation's network needs to be extended to additional material and personal resources that are typically present in the construction of an internship path not formalised. Finally, among the major critical issues found, we find the disclosure of students with disabilities and the simultaneous need to work to increase their vocational maturity.

## 6. Conclusions and implications for further work

In the light of the literature and the ongoing debate, and the Inclusion 3.0 experience with internships, we conclude by focusing on the key issues that we deem crucial in organisation, activation, implementation and evaluation of internships of students with disabilities in higher education.

Firstly, the internship, as for all students, but even more so for those with disabilities, is an educational experience of considerable importance for the life

project. The university, in this case, represents the privileged place for people with disabilities, who, with targeted support, can learn in action (Giacconi and Del Bianco, 2019) and start to build professional skills that are fundamental for working contexts.

Several aspects should be considered to design a protocol for internships of people with disability to operationalise this principle. Crucial is transparency and the need to manage the expectations of students with disabilities and their families (CRUI, 2018<sup>8</sup>) concerning the practical experience and the learning experience for which the internship is activated. The alignment of expectations (Giacconi, 2015) remains a central issue in constructing meaningful life paths centred on the person's Quality of Life.

Secondly, it is essential to define the learning project together with the individual with disabilities: for this reason, it is mandatory to provide proposals that are accessible and produced in an easy-to-read format.

The third aspect is the training of the specialised tutor, who should be an expert and a mediator of the "internship system", i.e., s/he should take into account both the expectations and the functioning profile of the young person with disabilities and the requirements of the working context (accessibility of the location, type of service required, presence or absence of facilitators, etc.). Moreover, in addition to the learning proposal, attention should be paid to the construction and internalisation of both the social and the professional roles to be played in the company.

The fourth aspect focuses on enhancing vocational maturity levels in students with disabilities (Dowrick, Getzel and Briel, 2004), starting from the conclusions of in-depth studies carried out on the skills required for searching and getting an internship or a job (Espada-Chavarria, Moreno-Rodriguez and Jenaro, 2020). In this sense, we consider it essential to work on self-empowerment, activating specific support for acquiring a higher awareness of one's abilities and needs, strategies for decision-making and problem-solving. These actions significantly contribute to the students' opportunities for self-determination (Del Bianco, 2019) and an increased perception of the capability to build their own professional future. In that direction, the structuring of spaces for collaboration and reflection on practices, under the supervision of the specialised tutor, can constitute a strategy in assessing achievements and evaluating difficulties (Espada-Chavarria, Moreno-Rodriguez and Jenaro, 2020).

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<sup>8</sup> Report from the CRUI conference 'Students with disabilities and SLDs in degrees and qualifying pathways'. Retrieved April 30, 2021: <https://www.crui.it/studenti-con-disabilit%C3%A0-e-dsa-nelle-lauree-e-nei-percorsi-abilitanti.html>.

Regarding the above, our reflection shifts to the need to strengthen the educational strategies to support the evaluation of competences acquired during practice. The European Higher Education Area<sup>9</sup> emphasises that academic experiences concerning practice should refer to a competence-based learning plan since practices in real working environments allow the assessment of competences, besides knowledge and skills. We agree with Espada-Chavarria, and collaborator that such an educational design would allow «the students themselves to be aware of their level of competence in a real situation, that is, to evaluate themselves and, consequently, to improve their self-learning» (Espada-Chavarria, Moreno-Rodriguez and Jenaro, 2020, p.3). The self-evaluation capacity is even more crucial in the structuring of personalised learning programmes for students with disabilities: those programmes aim to develop competences, abilities, and social skills that depend on the capacity for self-assessment and, consequently, self-advocacy, both of their rights and the need for accommodation.

Finally, as a fifth aspect, we believe that it is important to invest in new integrated systems of support for internships (Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020; Zappaterra, 2012; Giaconi *et al.*, in press), favouring forms of co-planning and coordination between universities, companies and services in the territory supporting people with disabilities. This collaborative research is mandatory for developing new strategies and practices that contribute to improved employment outcomes; it is also essential for enhancing career opportunities and quality of life outcomes for people with disabilities. Greater dissemination of inclusive culture and strategies to support its mainstreaming in the labour market can be fostered within the dialogue among the academic institution, the business world, and the territorial support services. In addition, this dialogue could stimulate the building of a more coordinated and effective network between professional figures that revolve around the activation of curricular and extracurricular internships (Bocci, Cajola and Zucca, 2020; Pace, Pavone and Petrini, 2018; Caldin, 2017).

By taking in due account those five key aspects, universities would ensure internships intended not as a step needed to attain a degree but as a concrete opportunity to build personal and professional skills capable of increasing the probability of success, both when facing the recruitment process, and staying in work.

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<sup>9</sup> Report from the European Higher Education Area: <https://www.ehea.info/>. Retrieved April 30, 2021.



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