University: a universe of study and independent living opportunities for students with disabilities. Goals and critical issues

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Abstract

The study and inclusion experience of university students with disabilities is characterised by many complex issues but is also of great importance for personal, working and social life. Over the last two decades, international organisations have issued guidelines aimed at ensuring equal opportunities to underrepresented groups in higher education; first among them, the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006)[2]. However, the academic quality of teaching programmes is greatly influenced by the autonomy of each university and by varying national legislations. Innovative trends move towards the model of inclusion: from the provision of services for a specific population to a structural reorganisation of the context. In Italy, the rate of students with disabilities at university has been found in quantitative and qualitative data since the early 1990s. Evidence shows that there has been a progressive increase in the number of enrolments leading in parallel to a more established provision of financial, professional and material resources. The few surveys conducted in the field, however, highlight the need to improve the quality of individualised courses and of the tools used, directing support towards a more systemic and diachronic perspective.

Keywords: higher education, disability, right to education, equal opportunities, inclusion, independent living.

1. Overview

Over the last decade, the rights to further and higher education, adult education and further training throughout one's life-time – without discrimination and based on equal opportunities, within the perspective of human development, independent

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[2] The United Nations General Assembly approved the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in December 2006. Through its 50 articles, the document indicates the path that the world countries must take in order to guarantee rights of equality and social inclusion of all citizens with disabilities. The Convention was ratified by Italy with Law nr. 18 dated 3rd March 2009 and by the European Union on 23rd December 2010.

living and full participation in the community – have targeted a strategic goal and fundamental step for civilisation with the *UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (2006)*. This year marks the first decade of this Convention: an important step in looking at how tertiary education institutions are able to fulfil the urgent needs of a path of higher education that is aimed at a project of independent living, within their own activities and in the didactic, organisational, procedural sections, within an inclusive perspective.

Thinking back over past news stories, the first movements for the self-determination of people with disabilities started in universities. *Independent Living* as a philosophy was born in the United States and made up the homonymous movement in the early 1970s: the first *Centre for Independent Living* was founded in 1972 thanks to Edward Roberts, a poliomyelitic student at Berkley University in California, who was determined to win his right for equal opportunities in higher education. His call was shared by other people with disabilities, united by the wish to defend their rights to independently determine their own existence and expectations and to be considered an active part of the processes that directly involved them.

In Europe in the early 1970s, the first academic course on the theme of disability was established in Britain's *Open University* proposing an emancipative reading of the theme, assuming the evolution of the traditional medical setup to an interpretation of the same as an oppressive social relation. This change of perspective was made possible thanks also to Mike Oliver. Oliver, a paraplegic, was renowned in sports for disabled people in his youth and then, after graduation, went on to become a university lecturer; today he is a distinguished professor in the University of Greenwich, which at the time inaugurated the first course in *Disability Studies*[3] (Medeghini *et al*., 2013).

2. International regulations and surveys

2.1. Tertiary education as a driving force for personal realisation

Thirty years have passed since these stories and events. In the first decade, young adults with disabilities were invisible or just starting to emerge in the

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[3] *Disability Studies* is a sector of interdisciplinary research which originated in England in the second half of the 1970s. According to its supporters, the reduction of the disability to a medical condition, therefore a personal problem, conceals its true nature of social-political construct. Moving the attention from "personal tragedy" – the misfortune of a flawed body – to the social organisation, which excludes from active citizenship all those who do not correspond with their abilist expectations, means reconfiguring the interpretative model of disability investing the context of life with responsibility.

university world (OECD Reports 2003, 2011; Ebersold, 2008). Over the last twenty years, Western countries have increasingly adopted pronouncements that higher education is a strategic lever in personal and professional realisation – even for the weakest sectors of the population and including persons with disabilities – within the ambit of *lifelong learning* and inclusion. For example, the UNESCO documents (1994, 1998, 2004) and the directions of the *European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education*. The EU Commission Lisbon *Memorandum* (2000) affirmed how society must guarantee the same opportunities to higher education for all, making it is flexible depending on individuals' needs. Within the framework of *Bologna Process*[4], over time we have established the trend to extend access to higher education to under-represented social groups, including students with disabilities. Over time, national legislations and local decrees in the various countries have aligned with these international directives, each with their own individual characteristics.

2.2. Increase in students with disabilities in universities from 2000

Many experts and surveys, however, highlight how long it took higher education to confront the theme of rights and inclusion for weakest students, for a number of reasons. International comparative studies confirm that, especially in the European and North American areas, it is only in the last fifteen years that we have recorded progressive growth in students with disabilities in universities. For example, Norway shows an increase of 7% between 2001 and 2004; according to a further survey on the "conditions of life", carried out in 2005, 24% of Norwegian university students declared a health problem (OECD, 2011). In the United States, the percentage of students who declare difficulty/disadvantage attending their studies has increased, from 9.2% in 1996 to 10.8% in 2007. In France, enrolment by persons with some disability doubled between 2000 and 2006, reaching 0.4% of the total amount of higher education enrolments. In Denmark, the number of young people in the weakest sector receiving support in higher education rose from 0.5% in 2004 to 0.7% in 2006.

Evidently, the data regards those people who agree to reveal their condition; the actual numbers are certainly higher. The question of disclosure is evident, intended as the difficulty in making public one's disability in order to obtain the support measures available. According to international literature, one of the most

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[4] An important agree aimed at the harmonisation of the various systems of higher education in Europe, with the aim of promoting it on the global scale to increase its international competitiveness. The agreement – drawn up on 19th June 1999 by the Ministers of Higher Education – was adhered to by 29 European countries at the beginning, and grew to 48 in 2015.

critical and complicated aspects for people with disabilities moving onto higher education is, in fact, the disclosing of their special needs (Borland and James, 1999; Tinklin and Hall, 1999; Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela, 2004; Mullins and Preyde, 2013); despite the fact that the research shows that students requiring services immediately after enrolment are more likely to perform better academically than those who delay their request for help (Lightner *et al.*, 2012).

The comparative studies highlight the difficulty of comparing the data gathered in the various countries, as each one adopts different criteria in identifying disability. For example, some concentrate almost exclusively on recognising physical and sensorial disturbances/ impairment, while others also take into consideration learning difficulties and disadvantaged background (Riddell and Weedon, 2014).

2.3. Qualitative surveys: disability as a challenge for universities

Qualitatively, research carried out from the late 1990s tends to concentrate mainly on specific aspects of the university life. From the methodological point of view, some small sample groups of the survey and/or particular types of disability are privileged, to the detriment, for example, of the triangulations of quantity/quality data. In general, the investigations mainly leave aside the whole of the learning experience and longitudinal monitoring of careers: from initial training to the systemic observation of the development of the academic path, right up to graduation from university and entry into the workplace (OECD, 2011).

This information is effectively complex to survey, not less because it is not easy to identify shared indicators. If the imbalance between conceptual references and data collection methods in the various countries does not work in favour of focussing and elaborating the evidence, on the other hand, the international debate between university systems is a strategic moment for reflecting on the choices made – in each context as well as in the whole of them – in order to best qualify the careers and inclusion of vulnerable people in the third level and, thereby, in society.

Despite the goals reached and progress made, disability is still a challenge for the academic communities, on both the international and national levels. Even where innovative policies and programmes are adopted, individual and collective behaviour are not always immune from obstacles in the way of equal rights to study: support strategies adopted are not sufficient and above all they do not have any sistemic approach (Murgioni, 2009).

There is still much to do. Among the obstacles that disabled people find in university, international research has uncovered, in particular: architectural

barriers, difficulties in requesting services, problems in accessing information, negative or indifferent behaviour by the academic community. Various surveys, which have started with listening to the students themselves, lead to the return of the question of vocational guidance upon enrolment and graduation, which is considered insufficient. Other scientific explorations reveal limited availability of the teaching staff in elaborating flexible didactic proposals, providing accessible study material and providing special examination arrangements.

Unfortunately there are more than a few students with disabilities who drop out during their first year: for example, Newman *et al.* (2009) show how in the USA, 10.2% leave their studies stating reasons of health or time; moreover, the results also reflected a high percentage of students who changed study course partway through, low attendance of lessons, lower academic performance and delays in graduating (Foreman *et al.*, 2001; Mpofu and Wilson, 2004; Dutta, Schiro-Geist and Kundu, 2009; Sachs and Schreuer, 2011; Álvarez-Pérez, Alegre-de-la-Rosa and López-Aguilar, 2012). On the other hand, the possibilities of accessing second level degrees and doctoral levels result as inferior compared to those of students without disabilities or disadvantage (Newman *et al.*, 2009). According to Ebersold and Cabral (2016), the increased number of students with Special Needs (SN) in higher education in OECD countries is not synonymous with academic success, nor does a degree guarantee better opportunities in the world of employment.

3. Moving towards the model of inclusion

Generally speaking, Western universities employ a variety of inclusion models: in many realities, the logic of problem solving and investments in supplementary measures and services seems to prevail, though it has been found that this logic does not favour a real sense of belonging to the institution among students. Few universities have reviewed their organisation within the viewpoint of universal planning /universal design: accompaniment in general is summarised in the offer of services and compensatory resources provided upon request. Rarely does it involve elements that characterise the university trajectories including, for example, teaching practices, exam methods, the synergy between services and between training and research, solidarity with fellow students, etc...And rarely is it concretised in the predisposition of environments which themselves respect diversity and which are accessible to all types of students.

It is without doubt that the cultural weight of ten years of the UN Convention supported and distributed the recognition of the rights of people

with disabilities, including the right to access post-secondary education and lifelong learning (art. 24). Global sharing of such a meaningful conquest expresses a high level of human sensitivity and opening of horizons, within the perspective of recognising social visibility and equal civil prerogatives to the weakest sectors of the population. Nonetheless, radicalism from the viewpoint taken on still requires an enormous effort in comprehension and in-depth thinking; the solicited change in perspective is deep, it is one of value rather than technical or organisational.

Specifically, we can convene that universities have not yet succeeded in structurally taking on diversity as a part of the curricular and organisational setup and they have not fully elaborated the idea that opening the doors to students with difficulties may be the innovative driving force that encourages us to rethink both the models of academic teaching as well as the allocation of resources within the idea of differentiation: principles that should be dynamically united with the development of talent and with the need for inclusion. The approach that we expect to see is ecological, associating the vast diversity of university students with the human diversity that makes up society and which invites us to make study universally accessible for the wellbeing of the entire academic community (Ebersold and Cabral, 2016).

In reality, the theme of SN students is not foreign to the current debate on which focus universities should be oriented in the globalised society of knowledge. In extreme summary, the positions become radicalised and branch off. On one hand the adoption of the perspective of Human Capital – focus on the highest development of individual potential in order to create producers and consumers among citizens (University-business): this is the most verifiable model and the one that seems to stir up most interest. On the other hand, there is the adhesion to the framework of Human Development: this paradigm aims to redefine the role of the university as a flexible balance between the demands of the global market and the themes of equality and social justice, considering the anthropological scenario in which higher education is moving and within which the provocation of personal differences is inserted (Boni and Walker, 2013). The dilemma – or tetralemma as many experts sustain (Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010) – affects four interconnected dimensions, which can also be extended to the academic experience: growth and innovation, equality, democracy and sustainability. Together with this position, Europe 2020 – the new ten-year strategy for development of the European Union (following the Lisbon strategy which was valid until 2010) – recently added the following to challenges in the field of education and training (*Education and Training* 2020): lifelong learning and mobility; improvements in quality and effectiveness; equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship.

In a poor scenario within the systematic collection of both quantitative and qualitative information as mentioned before, the surveys highlight that Italian universities share many of these critical points; only recently has the research recorded deeper and broader aspects such as, for example, the development of skills and functional independence towards a full inclusion in work and life.

4. The Italian reality: focus on the data

4.1. Legislation changes everything

Since the end of the 1990s, thanks to the promotion of increasingly equal, flexible training setups aimed at respecting cultural and social diversity, the number of students with disabilities has also progressively grown in Italian universities. Canevaro (2006) highlights that in recent times the situation has changed for people with disabilities: instead of being in a "*forced domicile*" they now have the possibility of being out of town university students.

In Italy, the framework legislation on disability (Law nr. 104/92)[5], resumed in the late 1990s by Law nr. 17/99[6], represented a fundamental turning point in this sense: if until now, access had been sporadic and based on the sensitivity of available operators, the existence of a specific regulation led to the obliged promotion of equal educational and cultural opportunities to *all* students, including those with disabilities (Muttini and Marchisio, 2005). Subsequent Law nr. 170/2010[7] then reaffirmed this principle also for students with specific learning disabilities (LD), which we will not be dealing with in this article.

Approval of the legislative rulings furthermore determined the appointment of a professor delegated by the President with the "functions of *coordination, monitoring and support*" of all initiatives concerning inclusion within the university. Moreover, it stimulated the establishment of an administrative structure (Disability Services/Disability Office) to provide services and interventions – including mentoring for didactic support, mobility assistance, assigning of technological devices, vocational guidance and support within the university and for employment, etc. – to favour the student's learning. In order to activate the regulation itself – as well as to make the rulings offered uniform

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[5] Law 5th February 1992, nr. 104, *Disability Act for the assistance, social integration and rights of people with disabilities.*

[6] Law 28th January 1999, nr. 17, *Integration and modification of Disability Act of 5th February 1992, nr. 104, for the assistance, social integration and rights of people with disabilities.*

[7] Law 8th October 2010, nr. 17, *New regulations in the matter of specific learning disabilities in education.*

throughout the country – in 2001, a body was established to coordinate all Italian universities regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities, the *National Conference of Delegates of the Presidents for Disability* (CNUDD). The aim of the CNUDD is to share information, innovative projects and good practices, searching for exchange and synergy between universities. The elaboration of the *Guide Lines* (CNUDD, 2014)[8] was a huge step forward in this regard, as it aimed to direct university services and policies towards common models, within the ambit of better qualification of students' educational paths and the creation of inclusive academic environments.

4.2. Available quantitative data

One of the first elements of reflection on the presence of students with disabilities in Italian universities regards the quantitative data available regarding their educational course. In Italy, there is still a partial lack of specific surveys; this incompleteness in data has repercussions on the policies and organisation of services and means that Italy is not always listed in international statistics, despite having activated a number of projects in its universities (de Anna, 2005). According to Cundari (1999), the lack of official estimates indicates how the question has been undervalued in past years and also indicates the universities' lack in punctual representation of the obstacles met by these students during their career path.

To confirm this, it should be mentioned that ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics), at the moment, does not procure any information on the phenomenon; nor does the Consorzio Interuniversitario AlmaLaurea (AlmaLaurea Inter-university Association) collect systematic information on graduates with disabilities[9]. Some of these estimates could be found until 2007/2008, on the "Disabilità in Cifre" ("Disability in numbers") website which was part of the "Disability Statistical Information System" project promoted by the Ministry of Social Solidarity and carried out by ISTAT. The

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[8] The CNUDD Guide Lines, reviewed in 2014, are available at https://www.crui.it/documenti-pubblici.html

[9] More precisely, in virtue of a recent agreement with the ASPHI Foundation, AlmaLaurea has introduced the opportunity for students with disabilities to indicate their condition on the curriculum entered in the database. The aim is not merely statistical, but also to ease matching among companies subject to the obligations set out in Law nr. 68/99, and the profiles of graduates with disabilities.

site has not been updated for years but was reviewed in 2016 and no longer has information on access to higher education for people with disabilities[10].

The data available derives from the Statistics Office of the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) which, within the ambit of "University contribution and interventions"[11] surveys, allows us to indirectly reveal some estimates regarding the number of people who are (totally or partially) exonerated from paying fees insofar as they are disabled.

An interesting aspect regards the number of disadvantaged students enrolled in universities: there were 13.614 people in 2014/2015 (the last one available). This data refers to individuals who are completely exonerated from paying fees (those with a disability percentage higher than 66%), also considering those who are partially exonerated (less than 66%), the estimate, in the same academic year, is 15.486. Students with disabilities represent therefore 0.9% of the total number of students enrolled and have substantially tripled in a little more than a decade. In the first academic year for which the MIUR can provided statistics (1999/2000), the total number of young people with a percentage of disability higher than 66% was 4.370.

Another estimate supplied by the MIUR concerns those who are enrolled in a doctorate degree course and a specialisation course. The number of students with disabilities attending third cycle is low: 160 people, in 2014/2015, in all Italian universities, or rather less than 0.2% of the total student population.

A research project promoted by CENSIS (Centre of Studies into Social Investments), which started in 2015 and was carried out on a sample of 40 Italian universities, provides further information. The survey, which is still in progress, in fact intends to build documentation archives on both the quantitative aspects – numerosity and type of students enrolled in universities; quantities and diversity of the services provided; resources made available to the MIUR, to regional organisations for the right to study and to universities; reaching graduation; subjects with disabilities present in the scholastic system, as a potential user group –; as well as on the qualitative dimensions – characteristics of the educational paths and critical points met by the students – with the aim of providing a complete overview of the index of success of individuals with disabilities (and LD) enrolled in the university system.

Among the information found, CENSIS highlights the fact that the incidence of subjects with disabilities is higher in smaller universities (with students numbering fewer than 10,000): in these universities, young people with disabilities represent more than 1% of the overall student population.

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[10] http://dati.disabilitaincifre.it/. In the new data presented on the level of education of people of 15 years and older with disabilities, ISTAT generally indicates the percentage of subjects with "high school diploma and higher".

[11] http://statistica.miur.it/scripts/TC_UNIV_BD/vTC_UNIV1.asp

Regarding the disciplinary areas, the data is partially indicative in that the surveying of it also includes persons with LD. Faced with the criteria used, in academic year 2014/2015 students were divided as follows: 32.4% were enrolled in courses in human and educational studies, 29.3% in scientific courses, 27.5% in economic and law courses and 10.8% in medicine-related courses. The recent trend shows a good increase in enrolments in scientific courses (+24.3%) (CENSIS, 2016a). Previous statistics regarding the subdivision by Faculties/Departments present on the "Disability in Numbers" website show that the highest number of students with disabilities were enrolled in Letters and Philosophy, Law and Educational Sciences. It is without doubt, therefore, that it was the social-human studies area that welcomed – even back then – the highest number of people with disabilities.

Regarding the type of disability, motor impairment is most common among those persons who resort to the Disability Services involved in the CENSIS survey (2016b)[12]. Nonetheless, in some institutions, neurological and psychiatric disorders are on the increase, as are pathologies in comorbidity, providing new challenges for the universities.

Finally, the students' careers: in the three-year period between 2012 and 2014, for every thousand graduates, 5 had a disability. In particular, educational success seems more possible mainly in very large universities (with more than 40,000 students enrolled), where the average number of graduates is higher, reaching 5.9 per thousand (CENSIS, 2016a). This data is not comparable with statistics referring to other years, as it was not found by the MIUR Statistics Office.

4.3. Some considerations: an open challenge?

The outlined evidence does not provide us with merely a descriptive overview, but also tends to cause us to reflect on the trends and processes in progress in Italy and on the similarities/differences with the international context.

As is the case in foreign universities, in fact, accessing higher education does not always mean that a person with a disability may completely reach personal and professional fulfilment (Fornasa, 2013). The prevailing enrolment (though this trend is changing) in courses in human and social studies sets, for example, a strategic question in terms of transition to the employment market, in that traditionally these areas are a weaker bridge towards the entrepreneurial world compared to science and health courses (Le Roux and Marcellini, 2011).

Furthermore, the still limited number of people with disabilities who complete their studies and, above all, those who continue in specialised

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[12] The data is partial in that it only concerns those students who declare their disability.

education, cannot be neglected in society knowledge society and we must focus on the difficulties they may find in following their path on the highest levels; and consequently, of entering the employment market (Mancarella, 2012; Pavone, 2014a)[13].

The lack in the structural collection of data leaves a number of questions open, concerning drop outs or delays in graduation. These phenomena are particularly common among students with disabilities, as can be seen from the afore-mentioned international literature. In Italy, this information may only be found by referring to the databases of the individual universities. For example, a local survey carried out by the University of Torino allows us to deduce that first year drop outs have decreased (from 23.3% in 2009/2010 to 16.9% in 2013/2014) and students with disabilities about to graduate have increased (from 23.0% in 2009 to 32.6% in 2014) (Bellacicco, 2016). Nonetheless, the percentage of people with disabilities who graduated regularly is much lower if compared with that of the university's student population (52.1% in 2014)[14]. The time factor can no longer be ignored as it exposes students with disabilities to a stigmatisation: everything that causes a delay in study (be it due to personal factors or factors to do with the university environment) in fact provokes a delay in graduation and, therefore, possible future emargination in the world of employment (OECD, 2011).

In order to get a more refined view of students' academic careers we also need to have information regarding the year of enrolment in university, as a data that affects academic success. In fact, the OECD (2011) documents that the learning performance and possibility of employment for youngsters with special needs improve if they enrol in higher education immediately after completing regular school.

5. The qualitative data: the problems to resolve

5.1. Listening to the students: the first surveys

The available quantitative data is insufficient in outlining the Italian situation regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities. As well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, university attendance is, in fact, a strategic moment in a young person's life for personal and social development and

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[13] Lacking in statistics is the employment condition of individuals with disabilities who have undertaken the academic title (Pavone, 2014b). Nonetheless, the data that can be deduced from the *Seventh Report to Parliament on the state of executing Law nr. 68/99* testify a negative trend of the protected employment referring to years 2012-2013.

[14] Source: AlmaLaurea.

therefore the focus must be placed on also exploring participation in academic life in the broadest sense (d'Alonzo, 2009).

In Italy even today there is a quantitative lack in consistency in those surveys published which directly involve students with disabilities and which analyse their university experience from the qualitative point of view. The theme started being looked at more systematically from the beginning of this century, on the same wave length as that which emerges from international literature, where research in the field indicates that only recently have higher education institutions started listening to people with disabilities, and this must be investigated further (Borland and James, 1999; Fuller, Bradley and Healey, 2004; Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson, 2005; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012, 2013; Gilson and Dymond, 2012).

In one of the first pieces of research carried out in the University of Torino on 97 students with varying types of disabilities, Muttini and Marchisio (2005) highlight critical points mainly regarding three areas: architectural barriers (which are still an issue for 87% of those interviewed); didactical barriers (not all teaching staff are aware of or pay attention to the needs of students with disabilities in their classes); use of non adapted learning materials (slides and notes are no always supplied, even when requested, by the teaching staff). Another aspect which came to light is the phenomenon of disclosure, which we mentioned in the opening of this paper. Difficulties that students have in disclosing their disabilities open the path to various explanations, including the persistency of stigmatising behaviour in university contexts regarding diversity (highlighted, in particular, in foreign surveys; for example, Trammell, 2003, 2009a, 2009b) or the possible existence of a gap between the demands put forward and the services supplied by the Disability Service (an aspect that seems to emerge primarily in the Torino survey; Muttini and Marchisio, 2005).

A subsequent study in the same university revealed the presence of structural problems and obstacles in buildings among its critical points (Bertellino, 2007). Another unresolved problem is that of public transport, which is considered rather inaccessible. Even the relationship with teaching staff is identified as a central and sensitive point, requiring specific training actions, in that the experiences reported by students differ depending on the sensitivity and availability of each professor. Finally, the people with disabilities interviewed express the need to receive further support in the *post lauream* phase. These problems are also identified by the members of the Disability Service, which highlighted the ineffectiveness of the University's Job Placement Services and the need to change the cultural perspective, which has low expectations regarding the professional success of individuals with disabilities.

Even more specific and in-depth reflections regarding the transition in leaving university move then to research in Padua (Boccuzzo, Fabbris and

Nicolucci, 2011). In their analysis on university graduates with disabilities the authors observe that, compared to other variables (including age, educational qualification and the profession of their parents, graduation score, etc.), disability is «the condition that most reduces the probability of finding employment: 66.3% lower for persons with disabilities compared to those without» (p. 152). The most successful way to enter the employment world seems to be on the initiative of the graduate himself, by launching himself directly onto the market by sending his CV and contacting businesses. Subordinately, this is followed by access by percentage, based on Law nr. 68/99[15] and apprenticeships supported by the University, which is the least effective tool compared to subjective intradependency.

5.2. Other more global recognition

A survey carried out in 2014 in the University of Bologna, as part of a European project on the inclusion of students with disabilities in universities (*European Action on Disability within Higher Education* – EADHE, 2014), involves staff members of the Disability Service and technical-administrative staff, teaching staff and students with disabilities[16]. Overall, the research highlights that, from the viewpoint of «technical aspects of inclusion» (p. 34) – provision of services and technological devices; concession of compensative measures, reasonable adjustments and adaptations, etc. –, the university functions suitably. Despite showing differing levels of satisfaction, on average students declare a discreet awareness by the teaching staff and technical staff regarding their educational needs. Nonetheless, the study sheds light on some critical points regarding the full participation of students in academic life. While admitting that the question of socialisation – a dimension that is far too delicate to examine through a questionnaire – was not looked at in depth, according to the researchers, many answers reveal limited collaboration with fellow students and scarce involvement by student organisations, leading to the risk of social isolation. The majority of students (62%) explicitly declares that the university should deal with these aspects more. Accessibility to lecture rooms and buildings is on the other hand brought up as one of the less critical dimensions (EADHE, 2014). Regarding vocational guidance upon graduation, only just over half of the students interviewed (52%) is aware of the existence of support services to ease entry to the world of employment.

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[15] Law 12th March 1999, nr. 68, *Regulations for the right to work of persons with disabilities.*
[16] The latter were contacted among the students adhering to the Disability Service; 50 questionnaires out of 280 sent out were returned.

The operators and collaborators of the Disability Office confirms that the inclusive perspective only partially directs the university's projects, in that charitable logic is still widespread among some components of the academic community; furthermore they indicate that the university should better establish relationships with the surrounding territory and productive businesses.

Another piece of research carried out in 2014/2015 in the University of Torino (UniTO) showed results that were partly similar to those described for the University of Bologna (Bellacicco, 2016). From the survey it emerges that the actions of support made available by the university are particularly effective in some dimensions, such as mobility within the buildings, the availability and usability of spaces set aside specifically for study activities, lesson attendance, the possibility of using specific material for study, individualised arrangements for examinations. The positive results reached in the learning processes are confirmed, in particular, by the final grades reached by graduates with disabilities which, unlike those found in international literature, are substantially identical (and not inferior) to the grades obtained by the UniTO student population[17].

Nonetheless, as also highlighted by students with disabilities involved in various focus groups, the support system appears greatly centralised: a high level of performance is, in fact, almost always obtained thanks to the provision of specialised aids (mentors/sign language interpreters, personal assistant, "dedicated" rooms, etc.) by the Disability Service. In particular, the role of mentors is a crucial part of the education of most young people with disabilities. This however can lead to the risk of dependency, losing sight of its main goal which is to promote protagonism and empowerment of the student and the creation of mutual relationships with the environment and social networks. It is therefore necessary that universities pay more attention to training personal mentors.

Furthermore, the research reveals that other experiences of academic life (for example socialisation) are not crucial aspects of the university's agenda, despite such training and extra-curricular dimensions being fundamental in permitting students to become fully-rounded members of the academic community (Canevaro, 2006). The actions of peers and the Students' Committee in involving students with disabilities in university life are still limited. Further effort is needed towards international mobility: only 11 students studied abroad for a period between 2009/2010 and 2013/2014. Regarding vocational guidance upon graduation, a general lack of information regarding the regulations and services offered by the Disability Office, together

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[17] The average graduation grades of persons with disabilities was equal to 101.6 in 2014 while that of the UniTO student population, in the same year, was equal to 101.2.

with negative convictions about access to the world of employment mean that any support opportunities offered are not always taken up by the students.

Interesting elements also emerge from the national survey carried out by CENSIS (2016a) which, in its qualitative aspects, maps the presence/absence of support for young people with disabilities and the sections of the university system in which the Offices are called to optimise their work. Overall, the data shows «an appreciable suitableness of the system of the services present in individual universities» (p. 37).

The most frequently requested support aids, as can be deduced from that declared by members of the Disability Services, mainly include specialised measures and support aids (including mentoring; assistance for mobility, administrative practices and for the tracing of didactic material; the accessibility of text books). Tutoring, used for teaching and learning needs by 54.6% of students with disabilities, is recognised as being on of the basic services in the training procedure and judged by the students as being a satisfactory aid. The less requested support aids seem, on the other hand, to include all activities aimed at supporting the existing autonomy and future-planning of young people with disabilities, or rather the provision of technological aids in halls and libraries, grant, residential services and vocation guidance when leaving university (CENSIS, 2016b). Among the problematic issues, students highlight architectural barriers; "relationship aspects" (or rather difficulties regarding teaching staff's attention to the special needs of the students, scarce continuity in relationships with service operators and fragile relationships with peers) and availability of didactic material and technological aids for personal use (CENSIS, 2016b).

The evidence set up by CENSIS sheds light on the wide variability of conditions of the various universities surveyed: for example, on the national level, accessibility of the structure and relationship with teaching staff are still indicated among the most critical points, while from surveys carried out in the two Mega Universities of Torino and Bologna, these seem less relevant compared to the transition towards the world of employment or socialisation.

6. Conclusions

According to the innovative trends found on the international level, the inclusion of students with disabilities in university is characterised as a pervasive pathway, transversally contaminating all levels of the institution and taken on by all components of the academic community and not only by the "workers". The presence of people with disabilities in higher education may become a significant factor for the entire student population, in that it

encourages universities to rethink the didactic, methodological, organisational and evaluation aspects in a more flexible way (de Anna, 2012).

The quantitative and qualitative data reported both on the international and national levels highlight the fact that university systems are increasingly welcoming, qualified and functional for the varying needs of the students; we can see widespread activism and a profusion of commitment, the results of which are influenced, evidently, by variables such as the national context, history and tradition of the individual universities. Nonetheless, there are still some important goals yet to be reached: particularly, the collocation of the academic experience as part of a broader process, that is each student's personal and professional life project within the viewpoint of active citizenship, as well as the overall reorganisation of an inclusive university education (Fornasa, 2013; Garbo, 2013). It is possible to confirm that universities are progressively moving from a model of assistance and performance towards an intended system of socio-ecological training, able to welcome any type of diversity and to promote dialogue: a dialogue that in today's society is absolutely vital.

An exemplary international experience in this regard comes from the implementation of the social model of disability in five universities in the USA, the innovation of which can be translated in: transformation of the functions of the Disability Service, which has evolved from problem solver to a Resource Centre not only for the students, but also for teaching and technical-administration staff; moving the focus from diagnosis to the student's self-declaration; activation of networks within the university as vital components of the inclusive process; training of members of the academic community (Mole, 2012/2013).

In Italy, we would like to mention the projects currently underway in the Polytechnic of Milan, which is developing (thanks to Faculty of Electronics, Computer Sciences and Bio-Engineering researchers and Disability Service experts) innovative technological solutions to allow students with disabilities and learning disorders to independently participate in lessons. Furthermore, the university is also committed to the raising of awareness in the academic community, regarding the use of international guidelines for the creation of materials that are accessible in a variety of formats[18]. Still on the subject of technology, the *Federico II* University in Naples is worth a mention for its *Centro SInAPSi*, an interdisciplinary university interface for all matters regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The *Enjoy the Difference* project, set up by the University of Torino, was founded from the collaboration between a variety of entities – both institutional and non – including some associations, and encourages university students and

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[18] The international guidelines are the main result of the *European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education* ICT4IAL – *ICT for information accessibility in learning*.

young people with disabilities to live together in order to foster relationships between peers and support an Independent Life for all the persons involved, whether they have a disability or not.

Other universities (like those of Parma and Padua) are focussing more and more on identifying the characteristics/skills that are most suitable for the role of peer tutor and training them, in order to customise the services offered, overcoming any action carried out with a pietistic approach.

Together with the cultural suggestions provided by the UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities (*Universal Design*; 2006, art. 2), virtuous universities are shifting their focus onto the organisation of frameworks within the academic context – without excluding support for particular groups of people, where necessary – and the relational-didactical training of various components of the university community, rather than special and specific activities (Benoit, 2015).

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