

Towards inclusive universities: Promoting self-advocacy and active citizenship for students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders

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Abstract

The pursuit of inclusion in higher education requires reevaluating the roles and practices of universities. While institutions are increasingly recognized as essential agents in promoting social equity and community well-being, students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders continue to encounter barriers that prevent their full participation in academic and civic life. These challenges highlight the shortcomings of current approaches and emphasize the need for systemic innovations that prioritize both citizenship and active engagement. In this context, the University of Macerata has launched a project aimed at including students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders, seeking to develop transformative strategies that align educational equity with broader objectives of promoting community development and welfare.

Keywords: inclusion, higher education, citizenship, participation, self-advocacy.

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1. Introduction

Inclusion poses a significant challenge for modern educational systems, particularly within higher education (Canevaro, 2007, 2014; Pavone, 2014;

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d'Alonzo, 2015; Giaconi & Del Bianco, 2018; d'Alonzo & Giaconi, 2024; Aiello & Giaconi, 2024). Universities are expected to play a vital role not only as institutions of academic learning but also as promoters of community welfare, inclusive culture, and active civic participation (Palumbo & Proietti, 2020; Taddei et al., 2024). This has led to a growing emphasis on enhancing welfare and influencing policy and organizational decisions within universities. Consequently, innovative practices are being adopted to create pathways for empowerment (Elia et al., 2024).

However, despite the progress made, significant barriers remain that prevent the full inclusion of students with special educational needs (Mura, 2012; Bellacicco, 2018). These barriers include a lack of teacher training in adapting teaching methods to meet diverse student needs, insufficient accessibility of facilities and instructional materials, inadequate support services, and the persistence of biases and stereotypes (Sahu & Sahu, 2015; Bellacicco, 2018).

In response, there is a pressing need to develop innovative approaches that not only ensure formal accessibility but also promote the meaningful participation and academic success of all students, particularly those facing the greatest challenges (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022). It is only through sustained commitment and a holistic perspective that universities can effectively fulfill their role as advocates for a more equitable and inclusive society, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities for personal growth and active engagement in civic life.

In light of these considerations, the University of Macerata has developed a project proposal aimed at enhancing the inclusion of university students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders, with the goal of fostering innovative strategies to promote community welfare within higher education contexts.

2. Research background

Over time, numerous institutional changes have occurred both nationally (e.g., Law 170/2010; CNUDD, 2014) and internationally (e.g., United Nations, 2020), creating opportunities for people with disabilities to access higher education. However, significant barriers remain, hindering effective participation and inclusion of these students in academic life (Soorenian, 2021; Moriña, 2022). To better understand the factors influencing learning and a sense of belonging in the university context (Grimes et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2022; Tai et al., 2023), research is increasingly focusing on involving this student population.

One significant initiative in this area is the Students' Voice movement (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Di Vita, 2017; Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013; Healey & Jenkins, 2009; Giaconi et al., 2020; D'Angelo et al., 2020; Seale et al., 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). This movement operates on the principle that "there is something inherently wrong with building an entire system without consulting those directly involved in it" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). Initially focused on amplifying the experiences of children and adolescents in schools (Cook-Sather, 2018), the movement has evolved to address the specific needs of students with disabilities and SpLDs in higher education.

Originally, Students' Voices were used merely as a consultative resource to identify perceived barriers and their impacts (Moriña, 2017; Kubiak, 2015). The goal was to develop strategies to overcome these barriers (Kubiak, 2015). However, this approach has shifted towards co-design strategies that emphasize collaboration between students and faculty. Listening to student voices has fostered a bottom-up approach, not only improving or creating inclusive practices and environments but also establishing a partnership model defined as "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 6-7).

This change in perspective has led researchers to recognize the importance of student input in shaping university policies and developing dedicated services (Soorenian, 2021; Moriña, 2022). It encourages a reevaluation of educational offerings (Moriña, 2017; Kubiak, 2015; Lombardi et al., 2018), instructional organization (Soorenian, 2021; Moriña, 2022), and the academic environment, including space, schedules, practices, and support structures (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Grimes et al., 2019).

This initiative highlights the importance of equipping students with self-advocacy and active citizenship skills, which are crucial for enhancing their agency (Grimes et al., 2019) and promoting personal and social empowerment (Moriña, 2022). In the context of higher education inclusion, self-advocacy refers to the ability to express and defend one's rights, needs, and interests (Test et al., 2005; Grion & Dettori, 2014; Kimball et al., 2016). For students with disabilities, this means effectively communicating their needs, negotiating reasonable accommodations, and actively participating in decision-making processes that impact them (Daly-Cano et al., 2015).

Active citizenship involves being consciously and responsibly engaged in both the academic community and the larger society. Research indicates that these two interconnected concepts are essential for promoting agency and empowerment among students with disabilities and SpLDs (Bellacicco, 2018; Elia et al., 2024). Additionally, developing self-advocacy skills has been linked

to better academic performance, increased self-esteem, and smoother transitions into the workforce (Ju et al., 2017; Traina et al., 2022).

Moreover, active participation in university life through active citizenship practices helps foster a sense of belonging, build social networks, and promote cultural change toward greater inclusivity (Moriña, 2017).

Despite the importance of these principles, implementing them effectively in academic settings still poses significant challenges. Many institutions struggle to provide adequate spaces and opportunities for promoting self-advocacy and active citizenship (Seale et al., 2021). Additionally, students may face barriers in acquiring and practicing these skills, often stemming from previous experiences of marginalization or a lack of support (Hong, 2015).

Addressing these complexities requires a multidimensional approach that involves all stakeholders in the university system. This includes providing specific training and raising awareness about self-advocacy issues, as well as creating institutional structures

that facilitate students' active participation in decision-making processes (Vaccaro et al., 2015). It is also crucial to recognize and value the diverse experiences and perspectives of students with disabilities, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches that overlook individual specificities.

Embracing these challenges, the University of Macerata launched the "Inclusione 3.0" project in the 2018-2019 academic year. This initiative aims to promote the inclusion of university students with disabilities and SpLDs, progressively orienting its proposal towards enhancing self-advocacy and active citizenship skills.

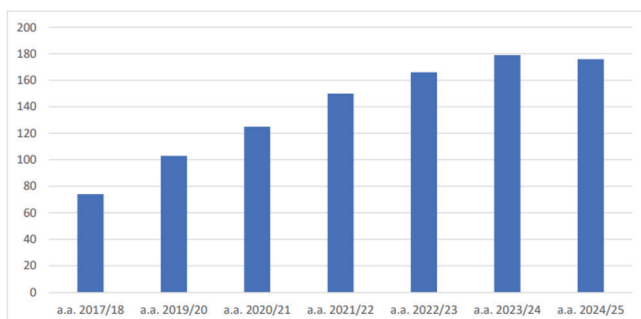
3. The field of research

The increasing enrollment of students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders at the University of Macerata (Tab. 1) has led to the establishment of dedicated services and initiatives. These are designed to enhance social and academic inclusion throughout the university community.

As highlighted in previous studies (Giaconi & Del Bianco, 2018; Giaconi et al., 2020; Del Bianco et al., 2021a, b), one of the key initiatives focused on inclusion is the "Inclusione 3.0" project. This project encompasses various operational areas and strategic axes, as outlined in Table 2.

Tab. 1 – Trend in the number of students with disabilities and SpLDs followed by the Service of the University of Macerata in the last 6 years. A.Y. 2024/25 data updated as of 31/10/2024

a.a. 2019/20	a.a. 2020/21	a.a. 2021/22	a.a. 2022/23	a.a. 2023/24	a.a. 2024/25
103	125	150	166	179	176



One of the significant actions within the project is the “alignment with accessibility criteria”. This entails providing all staff with the necessary resources to create teaching materials that are accessible and user-friendly. The guidelines implemented as part of the project are based on the “Guidelines for the Accessibility of Information” from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2015) and the “Guidelines on the Accessibility of Technological Tools” from the Agency for Digital Italy (2020). Key aspects of teaching material accessibility include compatibility with speech synthesis programs, use of highly legible fonts, inclusion of subtitles and audio descriptions, as well as appropriate line spacing and color contrast. Additionally, repositories have been established to collect accessible video lectures and adapted study materials.

The Inclusion 3.0 project also aims to create “inclusive university contexts” that enhance the educational and social strategies for university students with disabilities and SpLDs. After evaluating suitable technological solutions to support teaching, the University of Macerata has established four technologically equipped workspaces to improve student access to academic studies. These study spaces have been strategically placed in key locations, such as university libraries and computer labs, to promote the development of inclusive study communities, encourage peer mentoring, and facilitate cooperative learning. The primary specialized equipment includes backlit keyboards, mouse scanners, trackballs, and screens for visually impaired students, along with advanced software such as speech synthesis programs and tools for conceptual mapping.

Recognizing that many university students view assistive technologies as separate from traditional study methods and may struggle to use them independently, the Inclusion 3.0 project has developed an integrated

technology system to support all students, with a focus on those with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders. This system allows for the accessibility of multiple teaching tools within a single platform, enhancing usability.

The project further expands its scope with an initiative called “Study Empowerment for Inclusion”. This area specializes in study support within the Research Centre for Teaching, Disability and Inclusion, Educational Technologies (TIncTec), designed as a comprehensive support space for students with disabilities and SpLDs. Here, students can benefit from personalized tutoring, access to technological tools, and skill enhancement programs. The goal is to guide students through their academic journeys by not only offering technical assistance but also promoting their autonomy and self-awareness as active members of the university community.

Forms of specialized and disciplinary support are being implemented to achieve these objectives. Specialized tutors, who are experts in special pedagogy, will work closely with students to support their personal and academic development, acting as intermediaries between the students, faculty, and administrative staff. Their role includes helping students recognize and utilize their resources to achieve their academic goals.

In addition to structured pedagogical strategies, the University of Macerata has introduced flexible and inclusive approaches, such as the disciplinary tutors program. In this program, particularly talented students in specific subjects offer academic support to their peers. Moreover, students in training also have the opportunity to become “Inclusion Buddies”, assisting classmates with disabilities or SpLDs not only academically but also in navigating university life and the broader community. Also organised by the TIncTec Research Centre, InclusiveL@b is a strategic action for inclusion implemented through the Inclusion 3.0 project. In detail, it serves as a meeting point for teachers, professionals, scholars, and the broader community, promoting research on innovative, inclusive, and sustainable devices, teaching, and educational practices. InclusiveL@b is, therefore, an initiative to enhance research and dissemination carried out in collaboration with local associations and schools. Every year, 40 to 50 participants attend a 30-hour training course, fostering the co-creation of knowledge and the establishment of an inclusive network between universities and communities.

The organisation of the Inclusion 3.0 project makes it possible to appreciate continuity and interconnection also with local realities, representing an emblematic example of how the enhancement of knowledge can be matched by practices capable of enhancing the prerequisites of teaching and research, encouraging exchange and development with the territory, a central element of this initiative is represented by “personalised internships”, which offer students with disabilities and SpLDs a concrete opportunity to enter the world of work.

These experiences not only allow participants to acquire professional skills and enhance their skills, but also help to debunk stereotypes and prejudices, raising awareness among companies and organisations of the adoption of inclusive practices and the creation of work environments accessible to all.

In addition, a student-led university “radio programme” has been launched since May 2020 to give voice to the experiences, concerns, aspirations, and reflections of students with and without disabilities. The programme has fostered discussions on key topics such as internships, job integration, and transition strategies from education to work. These initiatives emphasised the university’s responsibility not only to support students in obtaining their degree but also to support their transition into the world of work.

Alongside these actions, Inclusione 3.0 is enriched by moments of collective reflection, such as the “Inclusion Week”, an event that is configured as a space for reflection and comparison between students, teachers, and the wider community. Through seminars, workshops, and moments of discussion, this initiative makes it possible to deepen the issues related to inclusion and to identify concrete strategies to overcome the barriers still present in the university system. The Inclusion Week is a real laboratory of pedagogical innovation in which practices and proposals emerge that can be translated into concrete actions in collaboration with the wider EU territory.

Another essential dimension of Inclusione 3.0 is the “International Award Inclusione 3.0” (Premio Internazionale Inclusione 3.0), an award given to associations, projects, and organisations in Italy and internationally that stand out for their contribution to the implementation of inclusive practices. This award is not only an incentive but also a clear signal of the importance of inclusion as an institutional value. Over time, the Prize has delivered 160 awards on a national and international scale. This recognition not only enhances the most virtuous experiences but also acts as a stimulus for the creation of new projects and the spread of an inclusive culture.

In summary, as seen in Table 2, ‘Inclusione 3.0’ is not just a project but can represent a real observatory on inclusion, capable of generating a concrete impact. Through its systemic approach and multiple initiatives, the University contributes to transforming itself into an engine of social, cultural, and economic development, thereby strengthening the value of diversity and active participation. Its impact extends not only to the lives of students with disabilities and SpLDs but also to their families, the academic community, and society as a whole, charting the path to an inclusive future.

Tab. 2 - Summary of the trajectories proper to the University of Macerata's Inclusion 3.0 Project

Strategic Axis	Description
Alignment with accessibility criteria	Providing teachers and tutors with the necessary resources to create accessible and easily usable instructional materials.
Creation of inclusive university settings	Creating university settings equipped with assistive technologies (backlit keyboards, mouse scanners, speech synthesis software, etc.) to break down barriers to access to education and technologies for inclusion to be tested in different study tracks. The TIncTec Research Center offers an area dedicated to study support, with specialized tutoring, customized trainings that also make use of technological devices and grounded in the outcomes of scientific research.
Study Empowerment for Inclusion	Dedicated study support area within the TIncTec Research Center, where students can take advantage of personalized tutoring, technological tools, and skill-building pathways.
InclusiveL@b	Organized by the TIncTec Research Center, it is a meeting place for faculty, professionals, scholars and the community. It promotes research on innovative, inclusive and sustainable devices, teaching and educational practices.
Specialized and disciplinary support	Specialized tutors, experts in special pedagogy, work closely with students to support their personal and academic growth, acting as intermediaries between students, faculty and administrative structures. In addition to structured pedagogical strategies, the "disciplinary tutor" program fosters peer-tutoring processes. In addition, students in training also have the opportunity to become "Inclusion Buddies" to support orientation processes in university life and the broader community.
Customized internships	Fosters concrete opportunities for placement in the world of work, through the activation of internship and apprenticeship pathways that adhere to students' functioning profiles.
Radio program	Student-led university radio program to give voice to the experiences, concerns, aspirations, and reflections of students with and without disabilities on crucial issues such as internships, job placement, and transition strategies from education to the world of work.
Inclusion Week	Organization of an annual event aimed at reflection and discussion on issues of inclusion, involving students, faculty, and the academic community.
Inclusion Award	International recognition for projects and initiatives that stand out for their contribution to building an inclusive society.

In light of the developments and progress achieved over time, the Inclusion 3.0 project has increasingly shifted towards an innovative model aimed at enhancing active citizenship and self-advocacy skills. These insights were informed by a preliminary study (Del Bianco & Paviotti, 2024), which provided

valuable ideas for pedagogical reflection on potential implementation strategies to strengthen personal development, decision-making autonomy, and active participation in academic life.

In particular, several key dimensions – such as autonomy in making choices, managing difficulties, understanding one's rights, and participating in university life – require specific interventions. A pedagogical approach is necessary to address the needs of this group of students and encourage their full and active inclusion in academic settings.

Consequently, in the post-pandemic period, the focus has shifted to training students in skills related to active citizenship and self-advocacy, aiming to help them become aware and engaged members of society. The project has emphasized promoting a culture of inclusion that involves the entire university community, including training for academic staff. This training equips them with the necessary skills to support and celebrate the diversity of students. Additionally, awareness-raising initiatives are aimed at all students to encourage them to actively contribute to this cultural transformation.

4. The proposed project

The proposal represents an innovative evolution of an inclusive approach in higher education. By exchanging good practices and adapting inclusive strategies, it aims to build a more sensitive and supportive community where every student can find the necessary support to reach their full potential.

This approach recognizes the crucial role of universities not only as educational institutions but also as key drivers of social inclusion and promoters of active citizenship. The main objectives are multifaceted: to increase participation and access to civic engagement for everyone, particularly those with fewer opportunities; to design, develop, and test innovative approaches and tools that support the development of self-advocacy skills in students, both with and without special educational needs; and to strengthen the academic community's role in the processes of inclusion and civic participation.

The conceptual innovation lies in the explicit connection between academic inclusion, self-advocacy, and active citizenship. This approach understands that inclusion in higher education is not an end in itself but a means to prepare all students to become active, informed, and engaged citizens in society.

The methodology for implementing the proposal is based on creating a community space that serves as a catalyst for several interlinked phases. These phases include:

Tab. 3 - Summary of the phases

1.	Desk and field research to understand best practices and current challenges in the inclusion and promotion of active citizenship;
2.	Active involvement of stakeholders inside and outside the institution to ensure that the solutions developed meet the real needs of the community;
3.	Co-design and development of innovative strategies to support the enhancement of self-advocacy skills in students;
4.	Piloting innovative approaches and tools;
5.	Re-testing and validation of innovative strategies.

Initially (Phase 1), we plan to conduct both on-desk and field research aimed at exploring and deepening our understanding of the needs of university students regarding current challenges related to inclusion and the promotion of active citizenship. This analysis will focus on student engagement in civic responsibilities and community participation. We will employ a mixed research approach that includes studying existing literature and collecting new data through both quantitative and qualitative methods.

To achieve this, we will triangulate various observation points to identify constraints and opportunities for our target group. This will involve gathering insights from students with and without disabilities, as well as from third-sector associations that promote the inclusion of people with disabilities. By collecting data directly from beneficiaries and other key stakeholders, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and expectations of students, particularly regarding their participation in civic and community life.

Based on these findings, we will develop a preparatory program (Phase 2) to inform and train students, staff, and stakeholders on the concepts of active citizenship and self-advocacy. The goal is to equip participants with the theoretical foundations required to comprehend the fundamental principles of these approaches. The training will combine traditional teaching methods with interactive activities, fostering student involvement and stimulating participation to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Once the initial training is complete, a “Community Space” will be established (Phase 3), providing participants with the opportunity to collaborate on the topics addressed in the preparatory program. This methodology encourages cooperation, mutual knowledge exchange, and respect for person-centered processes among participants. We will support the organization of joint events and meetings to promote reflection on active citizenship within a community context, thereby creating a solid foundation for the next phase of

the project, during which new ideas and contributions will be generated to further evolve the program.

In the next phase (Phase 4), the methods and techniques that have been developed will be tested in real-world settings. This phase will involve creating research and evaluation tools, as well as systems to monitor progress and document the procedures being used. The goal is to implement the program in actual conditions to assess its effectiveness and identify any critical issues.

A significant aspect of the project will be the final evaluation (Phase 5), which will be conducted on four distinct levels: students, support staff, institutions, and external stakeholders. The evaluation data will be analyzed to determine which approaches were successful, for whom they were effective, and under what conditions. Based on the findings, a review of the methods, strategies, and tools used will take place to improve the program's effectiveness continuously. All partners will contribute to this phase of analysis and reflection.

In summary, through an integrated and participatory methodology, the project aims to promote inclusion within the university community while also strengthening the university's role as an organization that collaborates with external contexts to build broader, inclusive communities.

4.1 Challenges and implications

The proposal presents an innovative and comprehensive model for tackling the challenges of university inclusion. It has the potential to significantly impact student empowerment, promote transdisciplinary collaboration, and standardize inclusive practices.

One of the most innovative aspects of the project is its emphasis on student agency. The proposal aims to develop self-advocacy skills, enabling students to take charge of their own inclusion journey rather than simply being passive recipients of institutional measures. However, despite its promising potential, implementing the proposal faces several key challenges.

The first challenge is ensuring long-term sustainability. Maintaining and integrating the practices and structures developed during the course into the university's daily activities is crucial. This will require a continuous commitment from the academic institution to embed innovative principles and approaches into its organizational culture.

Another essential aspect to consider is the need for a practical impact assessment. Metrics must be developed to measure not only academic inclusion but also the growth of active citizenship skills and their long-term effects on students and society. This will help demonstrate the benefits of the model and allow for further refinement based on the results.

Lastly, in an age of increasing digitalization in higher education, it is essential to explore how emerging technologies can be integrated into the proposed model to enhance its effectiveness and reach. Using innovative digital tools could improve student accessibility, collaboration, and engagement, contributing to a more inclusive and interactive learning experience.

5. Conclusions

The proposal presented is an ambitious and innovative attempt to redefine the role of universities in promoting inclusion and active citizenship, to integrate these concepts in a systematic and lasting way throughout the academic ecosystem.

As highlighted in previous studies (Giaconi & Del Bianco, 2018; Giaconi et al., 2020; Del Bianco et al., 2021a, b), the ecological approach to inclusion goes beyond merely removing barriers; it encompasses the entire experiential and relational dimension of university life. By empowering the self-advocacy construct and promoting active citizenship, universities can transform into spaces where all students can develop their potential as empowered people and active members of the academic community.

The cultural change that this proposal aims to foster is essential both within and outside the academic community. It is critical to engage in training and awareness-raising efforts for not only students but also teachers, researchers, and administrative staff, ensuring that inclusion becomes a regular practice rather than an exceptional measure. This process should be viewed as a collaborative effort, providing an opportunity to co-create new, inclusive practices. It may be beneficial to explore innovative methodologies such as participatory training and action research that actively involve all stakeholders in the cultural transformation process.

Additionally, the proposal emphasizes a holistic approach to inclusion that engages all stakeholders, from academic institutions to civil society organizations. Through pedagogical interventions that promote an integrated approach, the aim is to build synergies between universities and the surrounding community, extending inclusion to the entire local context. Creating an inclusive environment requires a collective commitment that surpasses the academic sphere and encourages collaboration among various social actors. A cross-sectoral collaboration approach, which includes external stakeholders like companies, presents new opportunities to link academic inclusion with job prospects, thereby significantly improving employment opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Del Bianco et al., 2021a, b; d'Alonzo, 2022; Pavone et al., 2022).

In this manner, inclusion becomes a fundamental aspect not only of the university experience but also contributes to the formation of a society that ensures equal opportunities for all its members.

Finally, it is crucial to note that this proposal is part of a broader discussion on the social responsibility of universities and their role in promoting a fairer and more inclusive society. This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), particularly Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and Goal 10 (Reduce inequalities within and between countries), illustrating how academic institutions can make tangible contributions to achieving these global objectives.

In conclusion, this proposal seeks to present a reflection on an innovative model for university inclusion while also opening new avenues for research and intervention in the field of inclusive academic education. The outlined ecosystem, participatory, and territorial approach aims to redefine the role of universities as agents of social change, fostering a culture of inclusion that transcends the boundaries of the academic institution, thereby contributing to the advancement of a fairer and more sustainable society.

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