

## The Inclusive University: Practices and reflections for student community well-being

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### Abstract

Following the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), the growth of an inclusive culture in higher education contexts contemplates the strategic value of promoting the university community well-being, starting from each person's contribution (Priestley *et al.*, 2022). According to Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), providing opportunities to support study and university life means moving from a logic of needs to a logic of rights. In that sense, the University of Macerata promotes the psycho-physical and social well-being of its students, developing empowerment processes (Barbuto, 2018; Taddei, 2020) that guarantee a more equal participation in university life. In this paper, we will present the format Inclusion 3.0 which, starting from the "Voice" (Grion, 2017; D'Angelo *et al.*, 2020) of university students with disabilities and SLDs (Giaconi, Del Bianco, 2018; Giaconi *et al.*, 2018), embodies an innovative perspective for University as a place of well-being.

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## 1. University and Inclusion: Evolving Challenges

The adoption of an inclusive university culture requires the ability to interpret the dimension of individual needs in a social and community perspective aimed at welcoming and enhancing students' differences for the sake of collective well-being.

In this sense, it becomes strategic to propose university policies and practices that include the entire student population, including students with difficulties caused by socio-economic and cultural reasons and/or disability and Specific Learning Disorders (SpLDs) situations.

More precisely, according to the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (ANVUR) report (2022), the student population with disabilities and SpLDs represents 2.13% of the total number of students enrolled in Italian universities. As underlined by the document, the historical series of Minister of Universities and Research (MUR) data from the academic year 1999/2000 to 2019/2020 shows a fourfold increase in the number of these students. Overall, the presence of female students is greater and progressively increasing in all study courses with the sole exception of Ph.D. courses where the male component prevails. Furthermore, an emerging datum of considerable interest is that despite the absence of a legal compulsory obligation on the part of university institutions to take charge of students with Special Needs in conditions of socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic disadvantage, 46.6% of the universities that participated in the ANVUR Research (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2022) provides support to this type of student at their request.

In this context, it is useful to underline the importance of the Guidelines of the National University Conference of the Delegates of Disability (CNUDD, 2014) that outlined the methods and types of services to support the inclusion of students with disabilities and/or SpLDs.

The state of art on students with disabilities and SpLDs raises new challenges to Universities for the improvement of services in an international regulatory framework strongly rooted in the principles of inclusion. In particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) through its Articles 30 "Participation in cultural and recreational life, leisure and sport" and 24 "Education" represents the compass to guide academic commitment in support of effective inclusion that guarantees access to culture and lifelong and university education as an inalienable right of persons with disabilities. The principles of equality and equity promoted by the Convention have been re-launched in terms of Sustainable Goals by the United Nations 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) in particular with SDG 4 "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

With reference to the content of SDG 4, the latest Censis 2023/2024 Report underlines a worrying datum concerning the level of drop-outs that affects

students without distinction of gender and on which universities should question themselves. This situation requires to be read in a scenario of Italian universities characterized by persistent structural inequalities, with negative repercussions on the opportunities of access to University for the most socio-economically disadvantaged student population (Censis, 2023).

An inclusive University committed to ensuring the well-being of all is also called on to assume the gender issue as a fundamental policy to protect the rights of fairness and equality of opportunity. According to the MUR data (2024)<sup>1</sup> the number of female students enrolled is greater than that of male students and progressively increasing from the year 2021/2022.

In addition, the international dimension of the University, which is increasingly emphasized in the assessment processes, requires the adoption of an intercultural perspective that knows how to welcome foreign students and promote inter-university exchanges at all latitudes. The same Censis Report (2023) shows a positive increase in the number of foreign students enrolled within our university system (+3.5% over the previous academic year), which inevitably invites us in its various dimensions.

In recent years, Universities have unfortunately had to take cognizance on several occasions of worrying levels of psychological distress among the student population that have sometimes resulted in extreme gestures such as suicide. The incidence of mental health problems among university students has increased exponentially over the last decade (Porru *et al.*, 2022). Recent meta-analyses have estimated a proportion of 33.8% of university students worldwide suffer from anxiety and 27.2% are affected by depressive symptoms (Quek *et al.*, 2019). Against the backdrop of this picture, rhetoric is rampant that emphasizes models of unattainable performance and extreme competition that do not contemplate failure as a circumscribed existential experience often linked to fragilities that need to be adequately understood and contextualized.

The set of data and considerations presented inevitably solicits in-depth reflection and at the same time a solid commitment to the promotion of well-being that cannot be conceived as just one of the many challenges on the academic agenda, but must instead be assumed as a socio-pedagogical priority to which to address with appropriate, structural and inclusive interventions (WHO, 2001).

## 2. Theoretical Framework for an Inclusive University

The condition of well-being is nourished by inclusive processes based on participatory experiences that contribute to recognizing the uniqueness of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ustat.mur.gov.it/documenti/2024-notiziario-statistico-n-1/>.

student, the value of his or her thinking, and the ability to consider his or her rights together with his or her needs and duties. In particular, the possibility for students with SpLDs and disabilities to participate in the design of their educational pathways and services is an example of how the University can embody the statement of the organizations of people with disabilities, “nothing about us without us” so that this does not remain a mere slogan faded by the dusty passage of time. The full participation of male and female students with disabilities in the research and design processes that affect them follows an emancipatory methodological approach, which is part of the wide range of theories and methodologies of participatory action research (Boog, 2003; Mortari, 2009). It is a model of inquiry that has been proposed by several scholars (Oliver, 1992; Barton, 2005) as one of the potentially most inclusive research paradigms to produce new knowledge while fostering the emancipation of the most marginalized groups – such as people with disabilities – through their full participation in the study of issues relevant to their lives (Taddei, 2018).

In this direction, “Student Voice” movement pursues emancipatory trajectories through different advocacy actions that defend the right to participation of all students. Indeed, despite equal access opportunities and legislative protections aimed at guaranteeing the right to higher education for students with disabilities, there are still numerous social and physical barriers (Agarwal *et al.*, 2015; Bellacicco, 2018) that prevent their full participation in academic life. This translates into a qualitative impoverishment of educational success with repercussions on the acquisition of skills, attitudes, and competencies spendable in future life contexts, not least that of the world of work (Giaconi, 2015).

The University is called upon to rethink its institutional task by incorporating parameters of accessibility, quality, and equity in the assessment of its teaching, evaluation, and organizational practices to achieve inclusive education and training for all. It is with these premises that several kinds of research have been conducted to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder learning and belonging in the academic context (de Anna, 2016), among these a strand of studies is located within the Students’ Voice Movement (Beardon, 2009; Grion, 2017; Bellacicco, 2018). Born in the 1990s in the international context, this movement aims to enhance the active and participatory role of students in understanding and critically analyzing their educational contexts (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2014), through the creation of spaces where students ‘voices’ are heard, recognized and legitimized as transformative elements of the educational context.

In this perspective, since the 1990s, a research tradition has been developing that, using different qualitative methods, has given space to the voice of

students with disabilities (Hurst, 1996; Morña Díez *et al.*, 2015; Kendall, 2016; Bellacicco, 2018). However, from the analysis of the literature (Beardon, 2009; Pavone, Bellacicco, 2016; Seale, 2017), it emerges the need to deepen the listening of students with disabilities within higher education through field investigations that show their contribution to the development of university policies and services dedicated to them.

The considerations realized lead to reflection on inclusion and well-being in university contexts in the direction of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018; Alba Pastor, 2019). The creation of positive learning situations and experiences for the entire student population presupposes a paradigm shift that intertwines the pedagogical pillars of inclusive education with curriculum development. Universal Design is at the heart of this paradigm insofar as educational foundations, methodological innovations, resources, and assessments are based on an inclusive approach, through which the right to learn, socialize, participate, and progress in common spaces of all and for all is realized (Forteza Forteza *et al.*, 2022).

### **3. Building Inclusion and Well-being: the University of Macerata's Commitment**

The University of Macerata's commitment to inclusion issues has grown through academic policies and practices that have found synthesis and synergy in the Inclusion 3.0 Project launched in 2017. The project, since its inception, has the welfare of the entire student community at heart, paying particular attention to the inclusion of students with disabilities or Specific Learning Disorders, who are often at risk of marginalization. The project invests in strategies for enhancing university services and in awareness-raising activities at the national and international level, aimed at improving trajectories on a political and scientific level and in support processes for didactic planning, mediation and organization (Giacconi, Del Bianco, 2018).

The unexpected challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic generated a break in the balance that inevitably "forced" a rethinking of the actions in place to continue to ensure the inclusion of the entire student community. For this reason, a study was carried out in line with the research approaches described above involving 200 students (Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020). The research investigated perceptions about online training concerning access modes, use of technological tools, teaching strategies used, and services offered online.

The results emphasized the need for the direct involvement of students with disabilities and SpLDs in the conception and design of strategies and the choice of tools. In particular, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder demanded

greater anticipation and predictability of university environments for better participation (Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020).

Over time, the Inclusion 3.0 Project has developed various areas of action that have been shaped based on the socio-pedagogical emergencies that arose during the pandemic that profoundly affected the overall sense of well-being of the university community, in particular of the most vulnerable students. Specifically, concerning the *services for students with disabilities and SpLDs*, which in the pre-pandemic were mainly provided online, during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic a call centre and a platform were activated to support students with disabilities and SpLDs on the new ways of conducting examinations and teaching. A specific psychological service was activated during the most critical phase, to reduce the risk of reduced participation in university activities by the most fragile students. The most critical issues concerned psychological support in particular for anxiety management and the identification of appropriate technological resources to ensure the attendance of as many students as possible at classes. Concerning the *availability of technological devices and software*, the project, from the outset, envisaged the implementation of an integrated system of technologies capable of supporting all students in their university careers, especially those with disabilities or Specific Learning Disorders. Indeed, the combination of different study tools in a single system allows for greater ease and accessibility of content. In addition, the workstations have been placed at strategic points in the university to foster the creation of inclusive and cooperative learning communities. Since the pandemic, additional technological strategies and solutions have been adopted to enable individual students to access distance education, applying a flexible and customized offer to meet different study needs, which has included the use of platforms and the free loan of technological devices to those who need them. The Inclusion 3.0 project also provides an *educational mediation service, with specialized professionals and peer tutoring activities*. The specialized tutors are external experts who support students in their studies, enhancing their resources and potential to pursue the best academic results. In addition, there are inclusive modes that are particularly flexible and suitable for the entire student population: e.g. the ‘disciplinary tutor’, which involves particularly capable students in helping fellow students who are having difficulties in certain disciplines. In addition, students in training may have the opportunity to take on the role of ‘Inclusion Buddy’ for their peers with disabilities or Specific Learning Disorders. This support encompasses not only academic aspects but also those associated with the opportunity to fully enjoy university life and thus create a more inclusive community. During the pandemic, interactive working modes were activated to support learning processes and to foster group activities, managed by lecturers and guided by

specialized and disciplinary tutors with the support of technological tools accompanied by guidelines and repositories to make video lectures accessible. The *dimension of communication and interaction* has been taken into account since the pandemic period, when efforts were made to foster relations between students in any case, both from a pedagogical point of view and from the point of view of university and community life.

One of the most representative initiatives was the creation of a radio program, hosted by students, with or without disabilities, and run by the university. The program was a way of listening to the students' voices, and their reflections and offering an experience of self-determination and self-representation in a dedicated debate space.

Finally, concerning internships *for students with disabilities*, thanks to the design of customized internship programs, students have access to and acquire skills in work contexts during their years of study. Thus, accessible and inclusive work environments and procedures that take into account individual needs have already been tested within the project. The pandemic required redesigning and finding alternative solutions for all students, with and without disabilities. The main aims pursued within the project were the promotion of self-determination and the co-design of the work-based learning pathway with the actors involved: the student, the company, academic tutors and the specialized and online tutors.

#### 4. Reflections on the Future

In the perspective described above, one of the main objectives of the university is to *care for* the integral development of the student within an institution that offers multidimensional living, meeting and learning spaces, which are not limited exclusively to study activities within classrooms and libraries. The University acquires in this perspective the role of a social aggregator trying to contribute to the quality of life of all students. The inclusive policies of the universities can therefore represent a tool for defining the quality of the university experience, embodying an innovative perspective for constructing academic contexts understood as places of personal, relational, and organizational well-being for the entire student population.

The university period generally represents the antechamber to the world of work and the full assumption of the role of adult citizens; it is, therefore, necessary to orient training not only towards the quality of disciplinary learning but also towards the consolidation of autonomy in relational processes, learning, participation and self-determination.

This means investing – as in the case of the Inclusion 3.0 project – on the one hand, in support of learning processes and, on the other, on access to services and social life in a logic of synergy between the university and the territory, in line with the aims of the third mission.

The acquisition of different skills can be pursued, as described above, by drawing on different types of support, including the aggregate systems of technologies that now contemplate access to virtual reality and the use of artificial intelligence. These new dimensions offer frontiers to be explored that, when interpreted from the perspective of self-determination, open up innovative opportunities for knowledge and inclusion (Ceccacci *et al.*, 2022).

In pursuing innovative trajectories, the role of the Services and teaching staff is fundamental for the development of inclusive welfare that goes beyond the welfarist logic accompany young people in empowerment paths) in the guise of authors of their educational project and not mere users (Lechtenberger *et al.*, 2012; Barbuto, 2018).

This vision requires academic governance to be able to act, as happened during the pandemic, with flexibility measures that facilitate the adaptation of practices and policies to actual needs based on social transformations and the heterogeneity of the student population.

It is important to remember that improving services for inclusion within the universities also depends on the ability to prepare systematic data collections nationally, which gives an overall picture without renouncing the peculiarities of individual territories. Peculiarities that express a diversified set of needs, expectations, difficulties, and socio-economic and cultural affiliations of the student population. To date, as underlined by ANVUR, this integrated information system has been slow to see the light of day, disregarding the commitment signed by Italy concerning Article 31<sup>2</sup> of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The data, together with emancipatory research that gives voice to students would help to generate greater awareness of the well-being condition of students, especially of the most fragile groups, to unveil interstices of discomfort in which many young people become invisible.

Finally, the “Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)” adopted by the European Commission (2021) often makes explicit reference to recovery and resilience plans and the use of the Next Generation EU’s economic resources to foster the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The Strategy promotes an intersectional approach that should guide the reading and interpretation of the complexity that characterizes the world of disability,

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<sup>2</sup> Art. 31 UN Convention (2006): “States Parties undertake to collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable them to implement and formulate policies to give effect to this Convention”.



also within universities. Such an approach would make it possible to identify the different facets derived from the interaction of conditions of different natures -from physical, intellectual, and sensorial to socio-economic, cultural, and gender-based- to which to give voice (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2022, p.77).

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