

INCLUSION PATHS IN THE WORKING CONTEXT: THE FIRST RESULTS OF THE IN-WORK PROJECT
PERCORSI DI INCLUSIONE NEL CONTESTO LAVORATIVO: I PRIMI RISULTATI DEL PROGETTO IN-WORK

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ABSTRACT

This contribution shows the first results of the research developed within the European project IN-WORK which aims to create opportunities for connection with the economic and productive fabric for youths with special needs. The research collected the points of view of the involved stakeholders on the obstacles and opportunities present today in the social environment and on the role of the university. The research results highlight several obstacles but also some highly effective initiatives. Stakeholders attribute to the university a decisive role in defining inclusive and innovative projects in the working context.

Il presente contributo mostra i primi risultati della ricerca sviluppata nell'ambito del progetto europeo IN-WORK che ha l'obiettivo di creare opportunità di connessione con il tessuto economico e produttivo per i ragazzi con bisogni educativi speciali. La ricerca ha raccolto i punti di vista dei diversi stakeholders interessati da questo tema sugli ostacoli e le opportunità oggi presenti nella società e sul ruolo dell'università. I risultati della ricerca evidenziano diversi ostacoli ma anche alcune iniziative di grande efficacia. Gli stakeholders attribuiscono all'università un ruolo determinante per definire progetti inclusivi e innovativi nel contesto lavorativo.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, work-integrated learning, inclusive work, internship, Special needs.

Inclusione, apprendimento integrato al lavoro, lavoro inclusivo, tirocinio, bisogni educativi speciali

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Introduction¹

European Economic and Social Committee (2022) hearing emphasizes the challenges faced by young people with special needs in accessing employment opportunities despite legal efforts and increasing skill levels. The barriers exist in both the private and public sectors, and while technological progress and improved access to education have been positive developments, there is still a risk of exclusion from the job market. In Italy, only 31.3% of people between 15- and 64 years old suffering from serious limitations are employed compared to 57.8% of people in the rest of the population (Istat, 2019). This result depends on many variables, from the type and the level of difficulty (disability, learning disorder, or emotional/behavioural difficulties), cultural and contextual factors, and a generalised resistance of the labour market to employ people with special needs. Resistance, according to previous research, often relates to stereotypes about competencies (therefore ability to perform the job), belief that it is more expensive to accommodate people in the workplace, fear of difficult management of the employee or difficulties for co-workers, law-related constraints on processes of hiring/dismissal, and sometimes lack of candidates. It is crucial to address these obstacles and ensure that the new EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities effectively tackles the concerns related to employment and education for young people with special needs. The strategy should be ambitious and include quantifiable measures to promote inclusivity and overcome stereotypes that portray individuals with disabilities as unproductive. Efforts from social partners, civil society organizations, and policymakers are necessary to create an inclusive and supportive environment that enables young people with disabilities to access and thrive in the labour market (Giaconi, 2015). Ongoing dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders can help identify and implement effective strategies to increase the employment rate of persons with special needs, particularly young individuals. The 2021 Eurofound Report on policies to promote the employment of persons with disabilities highlights that 35% of the measures identified in the study specifically target employees and job seekers with disabilities. This indicates that efforts are being made at the policy level to support the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the labour market. The Commission's online disability tool provides information on various measures implemented in 14 different Member States to

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support individuals with disabilities. These measures encompass a range of support, including individualized assistance, vocational training, vocational rehabilitation, the transition from education to employment, guidance counselling, and skills enhancement. While the mentioned list is not exhaustive, it gives an overview of the types of measures being implemented to facilitate the employment of persons with disabilities. These measures are crucial in addressing the barriers and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing and maintaining employment. By providing tailored support and training, individuals with disabilities can enhance their skills, gain independence, and improve their chances of successful employment (Del Bianco et al., 2021; D'Angelo et al., 2020).

University can play a significant role in terms of the inclusion of people with special needs in the work environment (Paviotti et al., 2021). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not merely passive entities in society; they wield influence and actively contribute to shaping societal changes. Adaptability and flexibility are crucial for HEIs to effectively respond to evolving societal needs, particularly those affecting disadvantaged groups. Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff (2000) emphasise that universities are pivotal drivers of knowledge-based economies and societies. They engage in synergic relationships with government and businesses, contributing to sustainable development and the promotion of fundamental values for collective well-being (Del Bianco et al., 2021). Building on previous research (Giaconi et al., 2021; Del Bianco et al., 2020; D'Angelo, Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi et al., 2018), universities must foster inclusivity and serve as primary hubs for community interaction and societal engagement. The traditional purpose of universities requires re-evaluation, transcending institutional roles (Caldin, 2017), and actively creating environments of inclusiveness and opportunities for personal growth, especially for vulnerable students (Giaconi et al., 2020; Bocci et al., 2020; Gariboldi et al., 2020; Gilson et al., 2020; Giaconi et al., 2018; Galimberti et al., 2016; d'Alonzo, 2009). Universities should establish connections with their local contexts, facilitating accessible education and enhanced social equity (Mura, 2011). By doing so, universities have the potential to become platforms for interaction and social integration, laying the groundwork for genuinely comprehensive processes in education and societal development.

Based on this background, the IN-WORK project aims to explore the university's role in fostering an inclusive culture. The project is co-funded by the European Union, Erasmus +, and is developed by a consortium composed of three universities, Macerata University in Italy (the coordinator), University of Applied Science – JAMK in Finland and Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Spain; the fourth partner

is EUCEN, an association of universities based in Belgium. The project aims to develop and foster an inclusive culture, by developing and testing a model of intervention that emphasizes the relationships between the university and its external environment while actively engaging relevant stakeholders. This project adopts the work-integrated learning approach, encompassing work-based learning such as internships and traineeships, to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for individuals with special needs within the realm of work. Within the university, the goal is to encourage the inclusive use of work-integrated learning pedagogies by educators, utilising online technologies as well. The project seeks to promote an inclusive culture beyond university, by involving businesses in the design and development of learning experiences. This paper shows the results of field research carried out during the first step of the project that explores and triangulates different points of observation and identifies the needs, constraints, and opportunities of the involved target groups. These data are useful to design a grounded model of intervention for inclusive universities.

1. The research

The research aim is to identify obstacles and enabling factors for job insertion of people with special needs, with an overview of contextual issues, such as culture, type of sector, size of company etc., in the regions of the addressed countries. It includes the collection of data from different perspectives and target groups representing the main stakeholders of the project:

- Higher education students with special needs.
- Youths with special needs not enrolled in higher education.
- Social services or labour administration involved in the process of employment of youths with special needs.
- Public and private organisations (the employers).

Two different tools have been used to collect data from the target groups, interviews, and questionnaires, according to their specific needs and characteristics.

1.1. The questionnaire

The questionnaire addressed two target groups:

- Students with special needs enrolled in higher education and
- Public and private organizations.

The HE student questionnaire aimed to include the perspective of higher education students with special needs and to collect their perceptions about the transition from education to work and the labour market.

The organization questionnaire collected the perspective of employers and their experiences and perceptions about the employability of workers with special needs and the potential role of the university in facilitating the transition from education to work.

The questionnaire has been administered through a Google Form provided in the languages of the consortium and English. To reduce respondent variability the questionnaire included as many questions as possible that were in the form of checklists (tick-boxes) and multiple-choice questions and minimised the use of closed-constructed response items (which require one-word or short phrase answers) and open-constructed response items (which require more extensive writing).

Validation of the instruments in the partners' proper language has been carried out by each partner country. Formal validation of the questionnaires required cognitive interviews with a sample of the target population (about four students) to identify problematic questions that may elicit response errors (Willis 2015): Verbal probing has been used as a technique for this process.

1.2. The interview

The interview addressed two target groups:

- Youths with special needs and
- Social services.

It was delivered using a semi-structured format and administered face-to-face with the interviewees or by telephone/online, if necessary. The topics of interviews were:

- Perceived strengths and weaknesses of job insertion for youths with special needs
- Perceived potential of the university's cooperation with the contest for job insertion of people with special needs
- Perceived mismatch between the labour market needs and the available profiles/competencies of youths with special needs.

Each theme had three kinds of questions:

- Main questions – these addressed the IN-WORK issues from a general perspective by setting the scene for the discussion.
- Supplementary questions – these are drilled down more deeply into the general questions.
- Clarifying questions, such as "Are you saying that...; do you mean that..." to clarify the interviewee's position about issues, were also used during the interview.

2. Results

The results of the research have been presented by grouping the data according to the stakeholders, to provide different points of view and then proceed with the necessary comparisons.

2.1. The point of view of youths

2.1.1 HE Student Questionnaire Results

The respondents to the questionnaire were 65 HE students of the three universities of the consortium (UNIMC, JAMK and URV), 79% female (Tab. 1)

	JAMK	UNIMC	URV	TOTAL
TOTAL	39	16	10	65
Female	85%	75%	60%	79%
Male	10%	25%	40%	18%
Other	5%	0%	0%	3%

Tab. 1 – Sample by gender

In terms of age, most of the sample fell into the 21-25 age range (45%) (Tab. 2). In terms of special needs, most of the sample had a Specific Learning Disorder (55%) (Tab 3). 85% of the sample were bachelor students.

	JAMK	UNIMC	URV	TOTAL
TOTAL	39	16	10	65
15-20 years	13%	19%	50%	20%
21-25 years	33%	75%	40%	45%
26-29 years	13%	0%	0%	8%
30-> years	16%	6%	10%	28%

Tab. 2 – Sample by age

	JAMK	UNIMC	URV	TOTAL
TOTAL	51	16	10	77
Physical Impairment	4%	19%	50%	13%
Intellectual Impairment	20%	0%	10%	14%
Specific Learning Disord	51%	75%	40%	55%
Others	25%	6%	0%	18%

Tab. 3 – Sample by Special Need (it was possible to select more than one answer)

With regards to work experience, 74% of participants didn't have work experience. 54% of people lacked work experience because they hadn't tried looking. The other 46% tried but without luck.

With regards to the perceptions about the labour market, 80% of participants had information about job opportunities and they gathered info mainly via web search (46% of replies) (Tab. 4).

74% of respondents believed that there were some chances to work for them, 22% thought they didn't have enough information and 5% thought that there was no possibility to find a job.

	TOTAL ANSWERS
If yes, how?	96
Web search	47%
University job placement	15%
Notification of relatives/friends	19%
Labour office	15%
Other	5%

Tab. 4 – Info search (it was possible to select more than one answer)

For the 43% of the answers the participants, who hadn't tried to search for information about job opportunities, declared that the reason was the lack of time and the 36% of them because they didn't know where to look.

About the possible obstacles they perceived to job insertion, most of the answers (24%) are that there was no obstacle perceived in job insertion followed by the lack of flexibility in working hours (20%) (Tab. 5). It's interesting to underline the fact that most respondents who say "none" were located in Finland.

	JAMK	UNIMC	URV	TOTAL ANSWERS
	62	13	10	85
None	17	3		24%
I don't know who to contact	1		1	2%
I don't know what to search	4			5%
Mistrust/Prejudices of colleagues	3	2		6%
Lack of tools for me	5	1		7%
Lack of flexibility in working hours	11	2	4	20%
Non-continuous work	3	1	3	8%
Unrewarding job for me	10	3	2	18%
Lack of working experience		1		1%
Other, please specify	8			9%

Tab. 5 – Perceived obstacles in job insertion (it was possible to select more than one answer)

A dedicated database was perceived as the major potential enabling factor to job insertion by 34% of the answers, followed by the competencies in a specific area (Tab. 6)

	JAMK	UNIMC	URV	TOTAL ANSWERS
	62	13	10	85
None	17	3		24%
I don't know who to contact	1		1	2%
I don't know what to search	4			5%
Mistrust/Prejudices of colleagues	3	2		6%
Lack of tools for me	5	1		7%
Lack of flexibility in working hours	11	2	4	20%
Non-continuous work	3	1	3	8%
Unrewarding job for me	10	3	2	18%
Lack of working experience		1		1%
Other, please specify	8			9%

Tab. 6 – Perceived enabling factors in job insertion (it was possible to select more than one answer)

In general, regarding expectations of future employability, the participants declared they needed to improve some skills both in the specific professional field and in the soft skill area. They mentioned the following competencies:

- Technical skills: ability to interpret a curriculum, mathematical and practical skills (laboratories, etc.), knowledge about the job market, job listings, and public service exams, theoretical knowledge of the profession, competencies related to the field of medicine, effective teaching in early childhood education, tools management.
- Soft skills: initiative, teamwork, resourcefulness, empathy, conflict management, critical thinking, effective communication, language skills, digital skills, leadership, proactivity, problem-solving, adaptability, and creativity.

Regarding the role of the University in the employment process, 72% of the participants thought that the University could be helpful in job insertion. The ways Universities could help have been identified as follows:

- Offering internships in the third or fourth year of the degree and creating connections with organizations that can offer internships.
- Providing students with helpful tools for job placement with job offers related to the degree.
- Guidance counsellor for career plans and job opportunities.
- Creating networking opportunities and business collaboration.
- Offering training with practical activities.

45% of the respondents stated that his/her special needs could make it difficult to find a job.

Participants were also asked to identify the factors that can support a successful transition from education to work. Following the list of success factors identified:

- more accessibility, more specific information for people with disabilities, and greater adaptability when it comes to doing internships.
- Support in job searching, such as writing a CV, requesting a job via email, etc.
- Personal creativity, motivation, perseverance, and social skills.
- Internship within the university.
- Connection with an organisation available for an internship
- Knowledge of the subject matter.
- A good grade in the degree.

- Job opportunity.
- Tutoring and counselling.
- Accessible environment.
- University support in job searching and networking.

Among the critical issues, they highlighted:

- lack of inclusion of people with disabilities in companies, possible discrimination in the workplace due to having a disability, etc.
- Finding very temporary jobs. Not maximising the opportunities of the present.
- Lack of contacts and few job offers around residence.
- Not being able to work full-time.
- A bad grade, not passing the MIR (medical intern resident exam).
- Prejudices and mistrust.
- Lack of working experience.
- Ignorance, lack of knowledge and uncertainty about one's competence.
- Geographical distance to companies offering jobs
- Health challenges.

2.1.2 HE Student Questionnaire Results

20 interviews have been administered. The participants were 50% male, aged between 17 and 29 (only one person is 43 years old) with the following profile:

Profile	20
Physical impairment	3
Intellectual impairment	8
Intellectual impairment & autistic spectrum disorder	5
Learning disorder	4

Most of them (75%) were unemployed and were looking for a job.

The results of the interviews have been reported taking into consideration the three main themes that have been investigated.

- 1) The perceived strengths and weaknesses of job insertion for youths with special needs

Most of the participants believed that finding a job is challenging for them, primarily due to their special needs. The reasons for their concerns were related to the lack of information about special needs and their impacts on jobs by employers and to the misconceptions and limited support programs developed. Furthermore, the need to acquire support and tools to facilitate the work and the lack of work experience and training were identified as obstacles to their job insertion.

Some of them knew their aspirations and did their best to be ready for the “desired job” but they acknowledged that it was difficult to reach it, even if they didn’t give up.

Most of the participants had experience in searching for a job and had met some difficulties. One participant found the process very difficult (“Surfing the internet is complex”) and some others have been supported by employment services, but it was not easier. In some cases, relatives and acquaintances were effective channels to find a job, even if the experience in this area was different. One participant reported that employers only offered her unpaid activities. In general, they did not have a wide knowledge of the labour market, but it was related exclusively to their experience.

- 2) The perceived potential of the university's cooperation with the contest for job insertion of people with special needs.

Overall, the participants have varied opinions on the role of the university in job insertion for people with special needs. Some believed that the university could play an important role, but mostly they were not sure, as they had not any experience with the university and the role that the university could play in their job insertion. They didn’t know if the university has vocational training programs, job placement services or internships. Those who attributed an important role to the university argued that this role is about providing knowledge skills and connections with the world of local entrepreneurs and organising job fairs. They suggested that the university planned activities for on-the-job learning, internships, or short courses to learn specific skills. Furthermore, two participants mentioned the possibility of defining the role of a tutor/counsellor/special education teacher inside the university that supports youths with special needs to search and find a job (making job applications, preparing for job interviews, connecting with employers to underline the students’ strengths, etc.).

- 3) Perceived mismatch between the labour market needs and the available profiles/competencies of youths with special needs.

Overall participants agreed that companies look for people with skills when hiring employees. They mentioned skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, sociability, punctuality, and initiative but also technical skills related to the specific companies' business area. Also, IT and language skills were considered important to develop. They felt that they possessed certain competencies that could be useful for certain jobs but might need additional training, guidance, or accommodation to perform effectively. Some were more confident in their abilities than others, but all expressed a willingness to learn and develop new skills to meet the demands of different jobs.

These answers were partially influenced by the lack of knowledge of the labour market.

2.2. The point of view of organizations

2.2.1 Organization Questionnaire Results

40 companies answered the questionnaire, and 75% were privately owned. According to Eurostat Classification, most of the organizations were in the Professional and Scientific service sector (24%) (Tab. 7)

	TOTAL
TOTAL	37
Manufacturing	14%
Transportation and storage	5%
Professional, scientific service	24%
Distributive trades	19%
Accomodation and food	8%
Administrative and support	22%
Construction	3%
Information and communication services	3%
Repair of computers and personal and household goods	3%

Tab. 7 – Economic Sector

With regards to the dimensions of the companies, 30% of the sample had 11-50 employees, followed by 27% that had >250 employees (Tab. 8).

	TOTAL
TOTAL	40
< 10 employees	18%
11 - 50 employees	28%
51 - 100 employees	15%
101 - 250 employees	15%
> 250 employees	24%

Tab. 8 – Organization dimensions.

62% of the organizations didn't have any legal obligation to hire employees with special needs and 33% didn't have employees with special needs in their organization. Concerning the methods used by the organizations to hire and include workers with special needs, as they were strictly related to the national legislation, we reported the answers by country in the following Tab. 9.

JAMK (FINLAND)
Hiring people with partial work ability is part of the company's HR strategy, and they are hired directly
Cooperation with other organisations and actors, e.g. workshops, various associations and social enterprises to employ people with partial work ability, and receiving support for salary costs from another organisation
Internships without pay
ITALY (UNIMC)
Insertion managed directly by the company
Named goodwill with Targeted Placement Service (Law 68/99) (the employer freely chooses the person to be hired from among the unemployed list, according to Law 68/99)
Numerical start (sent directly by the Placement Service) (the employer hires the worker on the basis of a ranking, provided by the Employment Centre, of registered in the targeted placement lists)
Agreements with social services
Internship
SPAIN (URV)
Insertion managed directly by the company
Special employment centre (CET in Catalan)
Enclavament laboral (A job lock is a group of workers from a Special Employment Center who carry out their tasks by temporarily moving to the workplace of the collaborating company (client) for a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 3 years)
Public examination to be a civil worker
Internship

Tab. 9 – Methods to hire and include employees with special needs in the organization.

Among the advantages perceived by the organizations about the inclusion of employees with special needs, the most chosen answer was the Social Responsibility performance improvement, followed by the enrichment for the employees (Tab. 10).

Internal and external advantages	100%
Social Responsibility performance improvement	36%
Enrichment for the employees	23%
Enrichment of the skills present in the company	20%
A human resource management strategy	13%
Improvement of the company climate	4%
Productivity improvement	3%

Tab. 10 – Perceived internal and external advantages

Organizations that had employees with special needs preferred to place the worker in a company area suitable to the worker’s special needs and gave training and tutoring ad hoc, often defining a specific job description that considers abilities and limits (Tab. 11).

Management tools used for the job placement of employees with special needs	TOTAL
	100%
According to the worker's special need, placement in a suitable company area with related training and tutoring	27%
A specific job description that takes into account abilities and limit	22%
Identification of the most suitable tasks among those routinely carried out in part also by the rest of the employees	17%
Promotions for comparative merits under the contract	14%
Restoring awareness that they are part of an active cycle	14%
Training dedicated to employee placement and career development	7%

Tab. 11 – Management tools used for the job placement of employees with special needs.

Among the helpful initiatives that could support in terms of hiring of people with special needs, the companies in the sample mentioned the most a greater knowledge of the types of disability/special needs and specific training for the company’s tutors (Tab. 12).

Helpful initiatives for hiring of people with special needs	TOTAL
	100%
Greater knowledge of the types of disability	29%
Specific training for company tutors	17%
Comparison/sharing with other companies	11%
Insights on aids and workplace adaptations	8%
Knowledge of issues had with previous employers (with the permission of employee)	8%
Greater knowledge of work limitations	6%
Specific insights on the Social Responsibility theme applied to placement	6%
More information about aids provided by public administrations and also about the adaptations that a job may require	5%
Everything	3%
Greater knowledge of Disability and health and safety	3%
Training dedicated to employee onboarding and career development	2%
More places and channels to find people with special needs	2%

Tab. 12 - Helpful initiatives for hiring people with special needs.

Companies declared that support from the external environment could be useful in fostering the inclusion of people with special needs in their organizations. They would appreciate primarily support in the post-insertion phase (24%), to help the person in his process of integration and work and, secondly, internship activation with tutoring (Tab. 13).

Useful actions for the inclusion of people with special needs in your company
A constant support in the post-insertion phase
Activation and tutoring of training internships
Pre-selection service
Environmental analysis (barriers and facilitators)
Specialist consultancy on legal questions
Consultancy and support in the detection of needs
Tutoring and collaboration in specific projects for integration (e.g. psychologists, educators, etc.),
Information related to the provision of incentives
Channel to find people with disabilities and specific workplace requirements

Tab. 13 – Useful actions for the inclusion of people with special needs in companies

89% of the respondents thought that Universities could have an important role in promoting the inclusion of people with special needs in the work environment. Regarding the initiatives they expect from the Universities, they mentioned the training to raise awareness on inclusion, but also training paths for different stakeholders. They listed topics such as the General Disability Law (for teachers and staff), the figure of labour inclusion delegates, within the curricula of Social Work,

Social Education, Psychology, and Labor Relations, the disability concept and special needs, accessibility, inclusion activities, laws and legal requirements in a specific region and psychological aspects (for business companies), and specific competencies required in their area for youths with special needs.

Furthermore, companies expected a networking role from the universities, acting as an intermediary between employers and youths with special needs, but also supporting with a database of competencies and working demands and being a trade union between employers and candidates with special needs. Companies also appreciated assistance in pre-selection, analysing obstacles that people with special needs encounter when seeking employment and offering training/information to companies on how to manage it.

A third area of initiative they expected from the universities was the internship. According to the answers, an intermediary role between employers and youths with special needs and the activation of internships within their structure, according to the specific disciplines were considered two important actions they would like to receive.

About the perceived mismatch between profiles/competencies and the labour market needs, 87% of the companies believed that youths are prepared to work, and in the case of youths with special needs, 46% see a difference in competencies level. In particular, the differences they mentioned were linked to a higher level of protection, the working pace (but it can be seen as an investment), the lack of digital skills and a real vision of the labour market, but also poor motivation to enter the labour market linked to the additional challenges of their disability.

Some of the respondents stated that there were differences among all individuals and that everyone had different needs, abilities, and skills. In any case, depending on the person, people with special needs might have more requirements.

With regards to the obstacles perceived by the organizations in hiring people with special needs, 28% of the answers were focused on productivity issues, followed by problems with other employees (21%) and environmental issues (21%) (Tab. 14)

Obstacles in hiring	100%
Productivity issue	28%
Problems with other employees	21%
Environmental issue	21%
Legal problemes	13%
Organitization donjt adapt job especification to worker's needs	8%
It's not a matter of problem, but of conscience.	3%
I don't see any problem	3%
Lack of knowledge, lack of supervicion and lack of social conscience	3%
Other	3%

Tab. 14 – Obstacles in hiring perceived by companies

About the training the respondents said as necessary to facilitate the hiring of candidates with special needs, we can divide the answers into two areas: the training for candidates and the training for employees in the company.

With regards to the candidates, 45% of answers focus on training courses before insertion into the company, followed by 38% on pre-insertion internship for the target role (Tab. 15).

Training needs for candidates	100%
Training courses prior to insertion into the company	45%
Specific pre-insertion internships for the target role	38%
Educational/psychological support	14%
Digital skills and driving license	2%

Tab. 15 – Training needs for candidates

With regards to the companies' employees, the most answered training needs is the training about tutoring and mentoring competencies (43%) followed by the inclusion topic (39%) (Tab. 16).

Training needs for companies' employees	100%
Tutoring and mentoring competencies	43%
Inclusion topic	39%
Training for tutors about the different disabilities	16%
Other	2%

Tab. 16 – Training needs for companies' employees

2.2.2 Social Service Organization Questionnaire Results

6 interviews have been administered. Four of them were administered to coordinators or managers of no-profit social service organizations, and the other two to coordinators of municipality social services.

The results of the interviews have been reported taking into consideration the three main themes that have been investigated.

- 1) The perceived strengths and weaknesses of job insertion for youths with special needs.

The respondents said that the difficulties in job insertion for youth with special needs were at two different levels, individual and company levels. As regards the individual level, they identified a lack of training or education (mostly not having completed compulsory secondary education or basic vocational training) but also of self-awareness about their competencies and inability to put them into words for employers. Furthermore, they mentioned the low awareness about the importance of having work experience in any area and the low perceived self-efficacy to get and manage a job. In some cases, the services for youths with special needs were difficult to access for them.

In rural areas, in Spain, young people faced a first deficiency which was the lack of access to formal education, a minimum educational level is not guaranteed, and they cannot access professional degrees.

At the company level, the respondents mentioned the general resistance to hiring due to a lack of knowledge and experience in people with disabilities, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises, but also the lack of tools to support needs in job tasks (when necessary) and the stigmatization and prejudices. One more issue has been identified in the lack of awareness about inclusion topics, and the need for special support and guidance in the employment process to meet the “right person” for the job.

They acknowledged the existence of facilitating factors such as the support provided to youth with special needs to carry out the training and a follow-up when they arrive at the company for the first time, but also the presence of job counsellors and job trainers who accompany the person in the insertion process, and even within the company with techniques such as supported employment.

- 2) The perceived potential of the university's cooperation with the contest for job insertion of people with special needs.

The general perception was that educational institutions, including universities, had good cooperation with other authorities. The Universities have great visibility and can carry out various projects that give visibility to this issue. University should assume a reference role in their context to be the connections among institutions, youths, and business organizations, in different ways:

- The creation of a reference figure (teacher) who supports the student or young person with special needs in the process of approaching job search and insertion, and in the initial stage of internships and to become the contact person for the employer.
- Systematization of the job placement and insertion process for youths with special needs to provide tools to job trainers to work with users.
- Awareness, facilitation, and accreditation of the job search and insertion for companies to get them involved.
- Integrations in the educational paths with skills required in working environments, life management skills (that are the most important criterion for employment), employment relationship (benefits and obligations), inclusion topics and special needs.
- Cooperation with business organizations to develop specific students' education paths.
- Integrations of undergraduate and master's degrees in the field of human resources with topics linked to work inclusion and projects and activities related to job placement so that future human resources managers are aware of it.

- 3) Perceived mismatch between the labour market needs and the available profiles/competencies of youths with special needs.

The perceptions of a part of the participants were that a large proportion of young people had poor working life skills (e.g. mobile phone use, working hours, breaks, reporting absences), and a low level of professional skills. Some participants said that youths with special needs have a low ability to apply for a job and to get an interview, and they were not able to show their competencies to the employer. So, they should be prepared for that by a tutor or coach.

Transversal and digital skills seem to be very important for the actual job market and youths with special needs must improve them. In some areas, a driving license seems to be important to get a job.

A skills accreditation process could help workers with disabilities to certify their work experience and it would help in the selection processes in ordinary companies.

In general, they declared that it was important to perform a competency analysis of both the person and the job position to see the competencies and needs requested and the possibility of matching and/or adapting mutually.

Conclusions

The transition from school to work for young people with special needs can be challenging, but there have been significant efforts to improve inclusion and access to employment opportunities for these people. There are still obstacles related to the lack of employers' awareness and accommodation but also to the supporting services and infrastructures sometimes not easily accessible or lacking. On the other hand, youths with special needs register a low level of self-efficacy and motivation that negatively influences their approach to search and finding a job. In some cases, they have no easy access to education and training or internships which can bring a mismatch in competencies for working.

Progress may vary from country to country depending on laws, policies, and available resources. Many countries have laws and regulations that promote the employment of people with disabilities, both in the public and private sectors. These laws may include hiring quotas, tax breaks for employers, and other incentives. Access to good vocational training and education programs is part of the process activated to ensure that young people with special needs can develop the skills and abilities needed for the world of work, but it is still not enough (Paviotti et al., 2021). Many organizations and companies have shown greater commitment to recruiting and supporting workers with special needs, recognizing the value of diversity in a work environment. Despite various policies aimed at promoting the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the labour market, the available data and results of our field research indicate that there is still a substantial gap in youths with special needs employment. Our research explored how improved quality can be achieved by creating better opportunities in the open labour market, which relies, to a significant extent, on providing reasonable accommodations and flexibility to enable individuals with special needs to work while retaining their

disability allowances. Education and training are also crucial in preparing individuals with special needs to meet the demands of the modern labour market.

The role of the Universities is crucial for the success of the process. It is considered an authoritative point of reference for all stakeholders and has all the necessary competencies to be the collector of needs and demands. First, it is seen as the best networker among professionals involved in work environments (Del Bianco et al., 2021).

Then, one of the main areas to focus on is the promotion of an inclusive culture and strategies among all stakeholders: people with special needs, educational institutions, public authorities, public and private companies, and social services.

Furthermore, the university must make efforts to develop training for a figure of a specialized tutor, who serves as both an expert and a mediator within the "work system". This tutor must consider the expectations and functional profile of the young person with disabilities, as well as the requirements of the work environment (such as location accessibility, necessary services, presence of facilitators, etc.).

University is seen as an important promoter of a well-organized and structured approach to internships and traineeships that enables young people with disabilities to receive valuable training that prepares them not only for the professional realm but also equips them for social engagement (Salerni, 2016). The enhancement of the vocational maturity levels of students with disabilities, based on in-depth studies regarding the skills necessary for finding and securing internships or jobs (Giaconi & Del Bianco, 2019) is considered a crucial aspect of university responsibility, together with their empowerment, providing specific support to increase their self-awareness of abilities and needs and equipping them with decision-making and problem-solving strategies.

In conclusion, the implementation of fair and accessible work environment traineeships also for people with special needs requires not only the sharing of a physical place, but inclusive communities able to share clear values, policies, and practices (Cottini, 2021; Giaconi et al., 2020; Caldin, Scollo, 2018; Cologon, 2014). We believe it is important to adopt beneficial and widely applicable approaches that can be adapted in various social, cultural, and institutional settings to foster meaningful networking.

The results of this research, which is part of the In-Work Project, aim to provide the foundation to create methodological guidelines that encourage and get the basis to design, develop and implement work-integrated learning activities to answer the

identified needs, and consider the resources of the places, and to involve stakeholders all over the process of designing work integrated learning activities, promote joint development, and integration of practices into the involved organisations.

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