

# QUALITY OF LIFE AND ENTRY ONTO THE JOB MARKET FOR H.E. STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: PROJECT IN-WORK'S INTERVENTION MODEL

## QUALITA' DI VITA E INGRESSO NEL MONDO DEL LAVORO PER GLI STUDENTI UNIVERSITARI CON BISOGNI EDUCATIVI SPECIALI: IL MODELLO DI INTERVENTO DEL PROGETTO IN-WORK



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Anna Maria Mariani  
Università Telematica Pegaso  
[annamaria.mariani@unipegaso.it](mailto:annamaria.mariani@unipegaso.it)



Catia Giaconi  
Università degli Studi di Macerata  
[catia.giaconi@unimc.it](mailto:catia.giaconi@unimc.it)



Noemi Del Bianco  
Università degli Studi di Macerata  
[n.delbianco@unimc.it](mailto:n.delbianco@unimc.it)



Gigliola Paviotti  
Università degli Studi di Macerata  
[gigliola.paviotti@unimc.it](mailto:gigliola.paviotti@unimc.it)



### ABSTRACT

Self-determination and work are two of the determining aspects of the quality of life of people, as well as people with special educational needs. Within IN-WORK project, the research group designed and is implementing in a piloting phase a process aimed at tackling the urgent issue of enhancing students' job prospects, and defining effective work-integrated learning activities thanks to the connection among all stakeholders involved. The priority is the chance given to the students to be active in their development and learning process.

L'autodeterminazione e il lavoro sono due degli aspetti determinanti della qualità della vita delle persone, così come delle persone con bisogni educativi speciali. Nell'ambito del progetto IN-WORK, il gruppo di ricerca ha progettato, e sta implementando in una fase pilota, un processo volto ad affrontare la questione urgente di migliorare le prospettive di lavoro degli studenti e definire efficaci attività di apprendimento integrate nel lavoro grazie alla connessione tra tutte le parti coinvolte. La priorità è data alla possibilità per gli studenti di essere attivi nel loro processo di sviluppo e apprendimento.

### KEYWORDS

Quality of life, special educational needs, higher education, employability

Qualità di vita, bisogni educativi speciali, università, occupabilità

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the Western context, the transition to adulthood primarily occurs through entering the job market, which serves as an essential prerequisite for developing a sense of adult identity and a sustainable quality of life. Quality of Life (QoL) reflects an individual's evaluation, shaped by the cultural and social context. It encompasses everyone's dreams, expectations, standards, and concerns. However, individuals with special needs face various challenges in their everyday lives, which greatly affect their QoL. Although they may be capable of leading a productive life, often social and cultural barriers hinder their ability to achieve it.

The construct of Quality of Life (QoL) is multidimensional, being composed of a plurality of both objective and subjective elements (Giaconi, 2015), strongly influenced by personal and environmental factors (Verdugo et al., 2005, Müller & Cannon, 2014). The subjective dimension concerns the individual's perceptions, expectations, and level of satisfaction, while the objective dimension considers observable elements such as the characteristics of the physical environment, the quantity and quality of support provided, and the health and nutritional conditions of the individual.

The most cited definition of QoL is the one promoted by WHO (1997) which states *"Individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs and their relations to salient features of their environment (p. 1)"*.

The definition of Quality of Life by Schalock and colleagues (2010) is that of a model that considers quality of life as a multidimensional concept, encompassing various aspects of an individual's life, such as emotional, physical, social, and material well-being. This model focuses on the individual as a whole and considers their desires, values, and aspirations. Schalock and Verdugo developed this approach to assess and enhance the quality of life of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

At the core of the QoL model, Schalock and Verdugo (2002) identify 8 domains with additional indicators that contribute to explaining and measuring the phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> The study is the result of the collective work of all the authors. In particular, Anna Maria Mariani wrote paragraph 2; Catia Giaconi Introduction; Noemi Del Bianco paragraph 1 and Gigliola Paviotti Conclusion

These encompass behaviours, perceptions, and conditions related to QoL (Verdugo et al., 2005; Morisse et al., 2013). This framework has proven to be applicable across diverse cultures and individuals with varying abilities. Subsequently, another level of structuring the model was added, consisting of factors that aggregate the various domains into 3 categories: Independence (Personal development and self-determination), Social Participation (Interpersonal relationships, inclusion, and rights), and Well-being (Physical, material, and emotional well-being) (Schalock et al., 2010; Coscarelli and Balboni, 2014; Giaconi, 2015). Across all the elements identified in the three categories, the role of employment appears to be crucial in ensuring a high level of quality of life (Claes et al. 2012; Caldin, Friso, 2019; Tait et al. 2020, Randall et al., 2023).

In Italy, regulations aimed at promoting the employment inclusion of people with disabilities have a long existence; the main one is represented by Law 68/99 "Rules for the right to work of disabled people," which introduced the institute of targeted placement, replacing the previous mandatory placement that was merely compensatory for individuals with severe health issues. Despite this forward-thinking legislation, the disadvantage in the labour market for people with disabilities remains significant. Employment rates are generally low in Italy, both for people with and without disabilities. Echoing the results on poverty, people without disabilities in Italy have much lower employment rates (36%) than the OECD average (40.6%), while the occupational gap for people with disabilities, i.e., the difference between the employment rates of people with and without disabilities (24.1%), is lower than the OECD average (26%). The employment rate of people with disabilities has decreased in recent years, however, rapidly widening the gap compared to the employment rate of people without disabilities.

According to existing literature, access to employment for youths with special needs in Italy, and Europe, is made difficult by some key elements:

- Limited educational Opportunities: Inadequate access to inclusive education and vocational training can limit the skills and qualifications of youths with special needs (Grammenos, 2022; Eurofound, 2021).
- Skills and work experience: the lack of work experience is one of the main obstacles in accessing employment for youths in general and youths with special needs in particular. The misalignment between theory and practice affects the acquisition of professional skills and vocational awareness and maturity, central to entering the labour market after graduation (Paviotti et al., 2021; Del Bianco et al., 2021; Espada-Chavarria et al., 2020).

- **Support Systems:** the lack of appropriate support services, such as vocational guidance, job coaching, and assistive technologies, can impede the employment prospects of youths with special needs. Without these supports, individuals may struggle to navigate the job search process and fulfil job requirements (European Disability Forum, 2019).
- **Lack of Employer Awareness and Accommodations:** it stems from employers' limited knowledge and understanding of disabilities, which can lead to misconceptions, biases, discriminatory attitudes and lack of accessibility and reasonable accommodations.

To establish a strong connection between the educational and employment paths, it's crucial for education not only to focus on learning disciplinary content but also to provide practical experiences and connections that enable students to acquire skills applicable to the job market. This objective must be pursued for everyone, including young people with disabilities, whose future careers largely depend on the opportunities provided by the educational system and local communities to guide and prepare them for entry into the workforce (Bottà et al., 2022). A revision of strategies is needed to increase the “bridges” between education and work for all persons with disabilities, including university students (Del Bianco et al., 2021) and higher education can have a crucial role in fostering an inclusive learning context to support the transition to adulthood by activating appropriate strategies to fill the existing gap, feeding the Quality-of-Life concept.

Based on this background, this article addresses the issue of work and social inclusion of HE students with disabilities, focusing on self-determination and quality of life through an effective and fluid process of transition from the world of school to the job market. The preliminary results of the IN-WORK project, co-founded by the European Union, will be presented.

## **1. The IN-WORK Project**

The IN-WORK project aims to explore the university's role in fostering an inclusive culture, addressing the needs of all stakeholders involved in the transition process from education to work, especially students with special needs. 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 has developed and is testing a model of intervention that emphasizes the relationships between the university and its context while engaging the relevant stakeholders. This project adopts the work-integrated learning (WIL) approach (Rowe et al., 2012), encompassing work-based learning such as internships and traineeships, to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for individuals with special needs within the realm of work. WIL is a pedagogical practice that facilitates students' learning through connecting experiences across academic and workplace contexts (Billett, 2009), integrating theory and practice in real-world work settings. The WIL activities may include, but will not be limited, to the following activities:

- industry project (students working with business in real projects),
- consultancy projects (students simulating consultancy for external organisations),
- joint workshops university-business on specific topics, co-organized by students
- internships including online internships, and traineeships, both incoming and outgoing for the universities in place, online and by testing blended pathways.

Creating a suitable work-integrated learning environment for students with special needs requires careful consideration of students' individual needs, abilities, and preferences as well as the possibilities of the workplace to offer suitable tasks, support and guidance. It is also important to consider what the student is supposed to learn, whether learning objectives have been set in the curriculum or whether the person defines the learning objectives himself/herself. The most appropriate learning environment can vary greatly from one person to another.

One of the main aims of WIL is to strengthen the youth's engagement with the community and to create a reciprocal outcome that enriches the learning experience, teaches civic responsibility, and strengthens communities. According to Del Bianco (2019) and Caldin (2016), the co-creation of inclusive environments can allow the implementation of opportunities to accept the critical points in a proactive framework aimed at encouraging the exercise of self-determination and active participation, as well as increasing personal agency for an independent life. As stated by the pedagogical movement Students' Voice, the active and committed role of students, with the co-responsibility of the former in the management of the latter, allows an adequate understanding of educational contexts (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2002).

Community engagement can enable individual, equitable and fair learning opportunities for students and young in need of special support. At the same time, workplace competence increases, and social responsibility develops, which can also affect the company's success. The level of community engagement and its impact on students' learning can vary widely depending on the specific community, its resources, attitudes, and existing support systems. Engagement is influenced by factors such as motivation, satisfaction, compatibility, and communication. Efforts to enhance community engagement should be context-specific and tailored to the unique needs of persons and their communities. In some cases, lower levels of community engagement may perpetuate stigmatization and negative attitudes toward students with special needs, making it difficult for them to fully integrate and participate in community life and foster their quality of life. Lower community engagement may lead to reduced advocacy for students' needs, potentially limiting their access to appropriate work-life activities. For this reason, teachers/educators may consider the needs of both students and the community when they plan WIL activities. They have to build cooperation models in which all parties benefit from cooperation. Teachers play an important role in promoting social justice and developing equal learning opportunities for every student. Enabling students in need of special support to integrate into working life not only increases their opportunities to participate equally in community activities but also enables learning and development for work communities and thus the development of an inclusive society. Cooperation with students in need of special support enables the workplace to examine and develop its practices, culture, accessibility, and equality.

For that reason, the project seeks to promote an inclusive culture beyond university, by involving businesses in the design and development of learning experiences. The process focuses on the interactions among universities, business or public organizations and youths with special needs, paying particular attention to the role of self-determination and choice of young people with special needs.

## **2. The IN-WORK intervention model**

According to the results of the research that has been delivered in the first step of the project (Giacconi et al., 2023), an intervention model has been developed and implemented through real-world testing during a regular semester of the academic year.

Three principles guided the design of the model:

- Self-determination and quality of life: give a voice to students with special educational needs and offer the opportunity to be protagonists in making choices for their own lives.
- Repeatability and sustainability of the process for all stakeholders involved.
- University as generative organization of inclusive contexts and opportunities (Del Bianco et al., 2021)

In this framework, the students with the support of the universities, have the chance to collaborate with the hosting companies or organisations to participate in the WIL programme. The objective is to foster their self-determination allowing them to choose their path following inclinations and desires and considering their need for support. According to the Students' Voice perspective, through the creation of spaces in which the 'voices' of students are listened to, recognized and legitimized as transformative elements of the educational context, universities can achieve the well-being and learning of students with special educational needs (D'Angelo et al., 2020). This objective is achieved by the movement through the concrete "sharing and distribution of power" (Cook-Sather, 2018, 2006; Fielding, Bragg, 2003) and the creation of a co-leadership between students and educators/teachers/researchers.

The model aims to be a guide for those who want to implement an effective WIL activity within higher education students with special needs. The model is divided into three phases, see Fig. 1

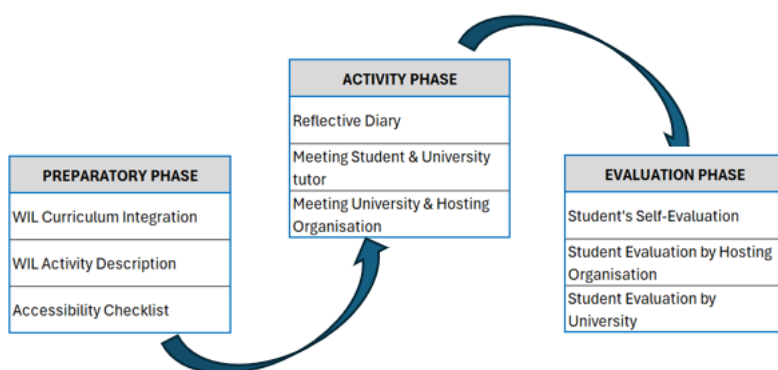


Figure 1 – Three-step IN-WORK model

The preparatory phase is designed to focus on students' aspirations and needs and give them the chance to design their future. It is a phase of planning and definition

of the context necessary so that the WIL activity is effectively inserted into the child's development path and respects his aspirations and needs.

The “WIL Curriculum Integration” step is tailored for WIL activities exclusive to university students as it will reflect how WIL activities will be integrated into the university curriculum. This involves identifying specific courses or subject areas where WIL activities can be effectively incorporated. Simultaneously, it is essential to clearly define the learning outcomes and the objectives of the WIL activities to ensure that the educational and professional aspects provide students with a well-rounded and productive learning experience. Curriculum integration depends on the availability of collaborating entities. Therefore, in this first phase of the process, it is important to establish collaboration links with external entities and initiate the process of negotiating agreements.

After completing the brainstorming on possible WIL activities and their integration into the university curriculum, the hosting organisation in collaboration with the university and the student will outline the details of the WIL activity (tasks, objectives, methodology, duration, evaluation, etc.). The “WIL Activity Description” must include a detailed description of the WIL activity, with dates and deadlines, students’ tasks, the learning objectives of the WIL activity, learning methodology, assessment, resources, policies and student support.

The final step of the preparatory phase is the “Accessibility Checklist” which serves as a tool for students to communicate their specific needs before embarking on the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience. It facilitates the collection of crucial information regarding workplace adaptations, aiming to guarantee accessibility and comfort for students with special needs.

In the Activity Phase, when the students start their WIL activity, it is important to monitor the progress of activities from the point of view of all stakeholders.

First of all, it is important that students thoughtfully and systematically reflect on their WIL activity, thoughts, feelings, actions and progress. The reflective diary, with some prefixed questions, can promote their self-awareness of their emotions and reactions, track their progress, and identify areas for skill enhancement. The diary guides students to recognize and articulate any challenges or difficulties they may have encountered during the WIL activity.

During the WIL activity, meetings need to be held among all stakeholders. It is suggested to organize a meeting between the students and the university tutor, to investigate about students’ progress and difficulties encountered, communication

aspects and integration at the workplace and goals for the upcoming period. If necessary, the tutor can provide additional support or resources.

Besides, universities and hosting organisations need to be in contact and collaboration to monitor student's progress on tasks, communication and integration at the workplace, handling potential critical issues.

After the WIL activity, it is important to promote an evaluation phase where the students can evaluate their participation in the WIL activity, critically reflecting on their accomplishment of the tasks, time management, ability to overcome challenges, adaptability and development of their communication and social skills and evaluate their performance.

Also, the hosting organisations need to evaluate students' performance and progress on skills, as well as the university tutor needs to assess the students' engagement using a comprehensive approach. The university tutor evaluation will be based on the student's active participation in meetings, the quality of the reflective diary and the engagement and development.

## **Conclusions**

Self-determination and work are two of the determining aspects of the quality of life of people, as well as people with special educational needs. The alignment between the student's point of view and the University and work fields can be important in terms of awareness and life-orientations programs, to help students achieve and acquire attitudes that can make *«people resilient in their personal, professional and social life»* (Bellacicco, 2018, p. 19). The literature (Frison, 2017; Summers et al., 2014; Stein, 2013) indicates that non-adherence often conceals an incapacity or reluctance to express oneself and one's needs or support one's rights, failing in terms of quality of life and success in the work field.

Universities, as reference organizations of the territory where they operate, have the responsibility to be the driving force for an inclusive society, creating tools and processes that support and enhance the Students' Voice perspective (Del Bianco, D'Angelo, Crescimbeni, 2019; D'Angelo et al., 2020; Giaconi et al., 2020). The IN-WORK Project presents an innovative initiative aimed at tackling the urgent issue of enhancing students' job prospects. Simultaneously, it seeks to address the employment hurdles faced by individuals with disabilities or unique circumstances despite having higher education qualifications. By acknowledging the latent talents

of these individuals, this project aims to establish a more inclusive and accessible route to the job market. Providing educators and university personnel with the necessary tools and techniques to integrate the learning-to-work model opens opportunities that benefit not only the students but also make significant contributions to both universities and businesses alike (Del Bianco et al., 2021; Dean, 2023; Zegwarrrd et al., 2023; Giaconi et al., 2023).

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