

INNOVATING UNIVERSITY TEACHING THROUGH UDL: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE D.A.N.T.E.-U. PROJECT

INNOVARE LA DIDATTICA UNIVERSITARIA ATTRAVERSO L'APPLICAZIONE DEL MODELLO UDL: SFIDE E OPPORTUNITÀ DEL PROGETTO D.A.N.T.E.-U.



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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the structure and some outcomes of the PRIN 2022 project D.A.N.T.E.-U., aimed at innovating university teaching through the Universal Design for Learning model, with a specific focus on non-traditional students. After identifying this category and analysing the services provided by the five Italian partner universities, the project involves the development of an online platform for faculty, based on the adaptation of CAST's UDL Guidelines 3.0 to the university context.

L'articolo presenta la struttura e alcuni risultati del progetto PRIN 2022 D.A.N.T.E.-U., volto a innovare la didattica universitaria attraverso il modello Universal Design for Learning, con un focus specifico sugli studenti non tradizionali. Dopo aver identificato questa categoria e analizzato i servizi offerti dalle cinque università italiane partner, il progetto prevede lo sviluppo di una piattaforma online per i docenti, basata sull'adattamento delle linee guida UDL 3.0 del CAST al contesto universitario.

KEYWORDS

UDL, University, Non-traditional students, faculty development
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1. Beyond Access: Rethinking Inclusion in Higher Education Between a Culture of Difference and Educational Innovation

The democratization of access to higher education, pursued globally over the past decades, has made it essential to reflect on the inclusion of students with special educational needs within the university context—an institution traditionally dedicated to the development of critical and reflective thinking and recognized as a fundamental driver for the promotion of human agency among socially excluded or marginalized groups (Biggeri & Santi, 2012; Walker, 2008). An educational system that embraces this mission seeks the full development of all students, preparing them to be and to become active citizens in the future. Ensuring genuinely inclusive experiences within academic life not only represents the acknowledgment of a fundamental human right—the right to education and educability—but also constitutes a necessary condition for the enhancement of cognitive and socio-relational competences, the increase of employment opportunities, and the effective realization of active citizenship (Striano, 2013; Ebersold, 2012). To achieve this goal, universities should foster an inclusive culture, they value the diversity and strengths of each student, and they ensure that a population of learners with varied and complex needs is granted both the right to education and the opportunity for active participation. However, despite such intentions—supported by the steady increase in the enrolment of non-traditional students—numerous studies highlight that formal access to higher education does not automatically translate into equitable and meaningful participation. Structural, organizational, and, most notably, cultural barriers persist, limiting the actual realization of the right to inclusion (Kendall, 2016; Couzens et al., 2015). Despite significant regulatory advancements and the gradual consolidation of inclusive policies within the higher education landscape, the effective inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education remains a partial achievement, still largely hindered by deep-rooted cultural resistances that are difficult to overcome. In this regard, the Italian university system finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On one hand, it demonstrates an inherently flexible nature; on the other, it exhibits considerable rigidity when faced with an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous population of non-traditional students. The persistence of an elitist university model, largely unresponsive to the needs arising from human diversity and variability in functioning, continues to raise critical questions about the very meaning of “inclusion” in the context of higher education. As Murgioni (2009)

emphasizes, the university can no longer merely tolerate or accommodate diversity—it must actively foster a culture that recognizes functional difference as a resource for strengthening democratic citizenship and enriching educational practices. In the context of the ongoing evolution of university teaching, institutions cannot merely support the development of pedagogical, methodological, and digital competencies among faculty members; they must also design and implement structured processes for evaluating teaching performance. Within this framework, the adoption of an integrated approach—one that combines pedagogical and methodological dimensions—is essential for driving change and rethinking established educational practices. From this perspective, faculty development initiatives serve as a crucial epistemological and normative foundation; while Teaching and Learning Centers (TLCs) provide the ideal organizational setting to support and facilitate this transformation.

2. Innovating University Teaching for Inclusion: The D.A.N.T.E.-U Project

Building on these premises, this paper presents the objectives, development phases and preliminary results of the 2022 PRIN project D.A.N.T.E.-U. (Design Accessibility Network to Enjoy University). The project, involving five universities—University of Salento (lead institution), University of Perugia, Roma Tre University, University of Padua, and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano—aims to promote inclusive university teaching capable of ensuring equal opportunities for all students, whether traditional or non-traditional. The guiding framework is that of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2006), integrated with the inclusive principles proposed by the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a theoretical-methodological approach grounded in neuroscience and individual variability, designed to ensure equitable access to learning (CAST, 2018). Initially targeted at students with disabilities, it has evolved into a universal framework that addresses the needs of all students by removing barriers in lesson design, teaching and assessment. The three principles of UDL—representation, action and expression, and engagement—are based on the identification of recognition, strategic, and affective networks by neuroscience. UDL shifts the focus from individual deficits to the creation of accessible contexts, proactively planning them to meet the diverse needs of students. The goal is to adapt the environment rather than the learner, ensuring meaningful engagement in the learning process.

The Index for Inclusion adds a specific focus to the project by safeguarding the participation and inclusion of all individuals within educational contexts. It is a set of materials designed to guide educational environments through an inclusive development process, build supportive communities, and promote high outcomes for both staff and students. Unlike UDL, which is more oriented towards guiding the design process, the Index for Inclusion serves as a tool for the systemic analysis of contexts and for designing improvements to the learning/teaching environment from an inclusive perspective.

The project aims at (re)innovating university teaching through the adoption of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model, with particular attention to the needs of non-traditional students. Among the selected degree programs, the Primary Education course was chosen for its interdisciplinary structure, integrating numerous teachings from various disciplinary areas, providing a meaningful context to analyze teaching dynamics and potential challenges perceived by students. The development of the project has been divided into several phases, which will be explored in further detail in the following sections:

1. Systematic Review of Studies on the Implementation of the UDL Model in Higher Education.
2. Analysis and Definition of Criteria for Recruiting Non-Traditional Students and Relevant University Contexts.
3. Definition of Guidelines: Indicators, criteria and methodologies to be integrated into the guidelines for implementing accessible and inclusive university teaching, inspired by the principles of the UDL model and the INDEX approach.
4. Development of a Web-Based E-Learning Platform to support faculty in the practical application of UDL principles.

The Inter-university Experimentation of the “Design for All” Educational Model - Dante-U, the final phase of the project, is still ongoing.

2.1. A Silent Presence: UDL in Higher Education

The first step of the Prin Dante-U project was precisely to provide a mapping of UDL-based interventions aimed at academic staff. In order to achieve these aims, the working group carried out a systematic review describing the state of the art in the international landscape (trends and gaps) and identifying virtuous examples of interventions from which to draw inspiration both from a methodological point of

view and in terms of the structure of the intervention conducted in the individual studies selected (see Dell'Anna et al., 2024).

Although inclusive teaching practices within universities seem to be gradually gaining ground, research on the use of UDL in academic context remains relatively limited. The integration of the UDL approach into the university curriculum appears to be a potential solution for addressing the diverse range of learning needs and abilities within university classrooms: the design of multiple modes of representation and expression can support and enhance student engagement in higher education (Marino et al., 2014), while tackling high dropout rates and delays in students' academic progress, which are becoming a global emergency, as evidenced by the Eduscopio 2024 data. In Italy, these data depict a picture of a university system struggling to ensure inclusion and educational quality (Bombardelli, 2016).

Scientific studies demonstrate that the implementation of UDL in educational contexts brings benefits both for student learning and for the professional development of teachers. The studies highlight improvements in student performance, as well as in awareness, confidence, motivation, and engagement (King-Sears et al., 2023; Ewe & Galvin, 2023; Marino et al., 2014). For teachers, UDL increases awareness of accessibility and learning needs, fostering more inclusive educational environments (Coyne et al., 2012; Izzo, Murray & Novak, 2008; Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023).

At the same time, the literature reveals that the implementation of UDL in the university context has been scarcely examined: many systematic reviews tend to aggregate all educational levels, from K-12 to university (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Fornauf & Erickson, 2020; Seok et al., 2018), focusing only marginally on university settings, or concentrating on specific academic contexts, such as medical and healthcare education (Gawron et al., 2024) and STEM fields (Schreffler et al., 2019). Research on UDL is often hindered by inconsistent definitions and objectives, leading to ambiguity in its application and outcomes: many educators perceive UDL primarily as an intervention or program rather than as a comprehensive framework to be implemented with fidelity (Fornauf et al., 2020; Cumming & Rose, 2022). Addressing this conceptual ambiguity is essential to fully comprehend UDL's effectiveness in higher education and dispel associated misconceptions, such as the erroneous association of UDL solely with accommodations for students with disabilities (Schreffler et al., 2019; Seok et al., 2018) that conflates UDL with special education, overlooking its broader applicability. Despite the importance of UDL,

previous reviews have largely neglected non-traditional students. Fornauf et al. (2020) mention UDL's potential to address increased diversity, although without explicitly discussing its efficacy for non-traditional student groups.

Most studies emphasize student perspectives, with insufficient focus on the implications for faculty professional development and on training course.

UDL training courses aimed at teachers do not follow a definite line but vary in terms of methods and research designs adopted (mostly qualitative), variability in terms of sample size, measures taken and ultimate goals of the training itself with a measurement of the change that has occurred. UDL is explicitly mentioned as a central focus or as part of the course content.

Some submissions dealt exclusively with aspects related to course design and implementation, such as instructional strategies, materials, or content, while others combined these aspects with topics related to the broader implementation of UDL in undergraduate education, such as support opportunities, institutional leadership and organization. Few contributions included issues related to students with disabilities, while the remainder generically addressed topics whose improvement could have benefited all students (e.g., accessibility, variety of learning opportunities).

Faculties who participated in UDL training courses reported improved teaching effectiveness, awareness of student diversity and ability to create inclusive learning environments. This shift in perspective toward inclusive pedagogy reflects a growing recognition of the value UDL offers to educational settings. Structured training programs capable of integrating UDL principles into their teaching methodologies are effective strategies for promoting Faculty Development and improving teaching practices in academic settings.

2.2. Needs and Presence of Non-Traditional Students

In recent decades, the presence of non-traditional students—those who assume multiple roles beyond the academic one—has become a normal and structural component of the university population (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2014). While early studies on this topic marked the divide between an elitist university and a mass university, today they emphasize the need to rethink the entire educational design to respond to the growing heterogeneity of students (Macdonald, 2018).

Non-traditional students are indeed at greater risk in terms of access, retention, active participation and academic success (Coyne et al., 2012), requiring educational contexts that not only promote academic and professional

development but also foster social inclusion. In this scenario, the adoption of innovative pedagogical models, such as UDL, becomes essential, as it can eliminate barriers to learning and creating equitable and accessible learning environments (Murawski & Scott, 2021).

In light of the evidence emerging from the literature and studies on non-traditional students, the PRIN D.A.N.T.E.-U. project has included, among its implementation phases, the definition of specific criteria for the recruitment of non-traditional students and the identification of internal and external indicators for the analysis and evaluation of the relevant university contexts. The primary objective of the study was to identify and map the needs of students enrolled in the Master's degree program in Primary Education Sciences (LM-85bis), attending their fourth and fifth years at the partner universities of the project (University of Salento, University of Padua, University of Perugia, and University of Roma Tre).

The survey aims at highlighting the specificities and the frequency of the needs reported by students, with particular attention to the category of non-traditional students. The study also seeks to analyze students' perceptions regarding various teaching aspects, with a particular focus on UDL implementation, in relation to the courses they have undertaken throughout their educational path.

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the research unit at the University of Salento developed an anonymous questionnaire, structured in two sections, and administered through the Microsoft Forms platform.

The first section of the questionnaire consists of 51 closed-ended questions, aligned with the personal and social variables involved in the complex definition of the non-traditional student construct as outlined in the literature (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2014) and described in the table below (Tab. 1). The variables investigated include demographic aspects, working conditions, prior experiences in the university system, and factors that may influence the academic journey, contributing to a detailed characterization of this category of students.

Categories	Description Items
<i>Age</i>	Identify students over the age of 25 at the time of university enrollment
<i>Parenting</i>	Investigate the presence of children, including the number and the age of the youngest
<i>Work</i>	Explore any employment situation during studies (type of contract, working hours)
<i>Socio-linguistic-cultural disadvantage</i>	Analyze cultural background, financial support, citizenship status, and linguistic needs

<i>Special educational needs</i>	Verify any disabilities, specific learning disorders, giftedness and the use of assistive technologies
<i>Dual attendance</i>	Identify students enrolled simultaneously in multiple university programs
<i>Athletic career</i>	Explore dual careers as student-athletes and any related challenges
<i>Caregiving</i>	Assess family caregiving responsibilities and their impact on academic performance
<i>Non-resident student/commuting</i>	Investigate housing conditions and issues related to living away from home

Tab.1. *Nontraditional students categories*

The second section, consisting of 31 closed-ended items, aims at highlighting university teaching practices aligned with UDL design that students enrolled in the Master's degree program have experienced during their studies. Specifically, the section investigates the frequency with which certain instructional scenarios—described in the questionnaire statements—occurred during the courses attended. To describe their experience, respondents rated each item using an ordinal frequency scale with the following response options: Never – Sometimes – Often – Almost always- Always. The items were developed in alignment with the goals and UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024), with the aim of assessing the application of principles of instructional flexibility and content accessibility.

Objectives UDL	Description Items
Well-informed and resourceful student	Emphasize the need to present content in various formats to meet the diverse needs of students. Faculties are encouraged to use different formats such as text, audio, images, and video to ensure information is accessible to all, regardless of individual characteristics, and to incorporate educational technologies.
Strategic and goal-oriented student	It concerns the different ways in which students can demonstrate what they know, recognizing the variability in individual abilities and preferences. This principle applies primarily to the modes of assessment adopted by teachers and results in offering students multiple ways to express their understanding, provide practical opportunities to apply acquired skills, and support students' time management.

Determined and motivated student	It focuses on student motivation, recognizing that meaningful learning requires a mindset inclined toward growth and perseverance. The teacher should provide guiding questions to stimulate self-monitoring and reflection on learning processes, integrate self-assessment and reflection activities, and use tools such as rubrics, checklists, and metacognitive questionnaires to enable students to monitor their own progress throughout the course.
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Tab.2. *A syllabus UDL-based*

According to the results obtained from the administration of the questionnaire, only briefly outlined in this context (cf. Fiorucci et al., in press), it emerges that most students are non-traditional. Additionally, for some of these students, there is a co-occurrence of multiple individual and social variables that, intersecting, generate a multiple-role student profile. These students present a life situation that involves them in multiple areas of responsibility, extending well beyond exclusive academic commitment. The simultaneous management of work, family and educational obligations can lead to a significant increase in stress and organizational difficulties, affecting and influencing academic performance and study continuity.

From the analysis of the data that emerged from the second section of the questionnaire, it appears that frontal teaching is the preferred setting for mediating disciplinary content. Although its effectiveness is recognized, fostered by the constant presence of the teacher, it remains a traditionally transmissive form of learning, in which the student plays a passive role, as opposed to the one-way flow of information. In this configuration, the interaction and active participation of students may be inevitably limited, reducing the possibility of critical and reflective engagement with the proposed content. In addition, the frontal lecture implies a constant and regular presence that, in the case of the commuting, working and/or caregiver student, may be particularly difficult to reconcile with the multiple responsibilities and the plurality of roles that the student plays.

The results highlight the need for an instructional approach aimed at providing a variety of support structures and organizational tools to enable students to maintain a strategic vision in relation to study method, goals to be achieved and effective management of their time.

In addition to surveying the presence of nontraditional students at the project partner universities, the services of the five universities aimed at them were also mapped. The analysis of services also reveals a substantial fragility in the involvement of students and the support offered to them throughout their studies.

Although all of the PRIN project partner universities are progressively adopting an inclusive model that includes the activation of tutoring services, the introduction of economic benefits for the weaker groups and the presence of language centers to support international students, some of them continue to have a more regulated approach, with a greater focus on administrative aspects and less focus on the support services provided for students, revealing a discrepancy between the services offered.

3. University 3.0: UDL Transforms Higher Education in the DANTE-U Project

Among the main actions of the PRIN DANTE-U project was the adaptation and contextualization of the UDL Guidelines version 3.0 to the university setting. The updated guidelines emphasize key educational needs, including: the focus on identity as a component of interindividual variability; the recognition of individual, institutional, and systemic biases as barriers to learning; the valorization of interdependence and collective learning; and the shift from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered language.

In light of these considerations, it is essential to apply and extend an accessible and inclusive approach to all life contexts, including higher education. To this end, the DANTE-U research group developed an operational framework for the three UDL principles—Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression—as they apply to university teaching and academic learning environments.

Following an epistemological investigation into universal design approaches applicable to tertiary education, the research team adapted the CAST guidelines 3.0 by defining practical scenarios and operational recommendations to support university instructors in the inclusive and accessible design of their degree programs (Tab. 3).


<i>Principle</i> (e.g., Representation)	Theoretical explanation of the principle
<i>Guideline</i> (e.g., Welcoming Interests & Identities*)	Anchoring each guideline to university-level teaching

<i>Consideration</i> (e.g., Optimize choice and autonomy)	- General didactic indications per consideration (e.g., *Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols*) - Practical applications, tools, and scenarios for inclusive practices were developed
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Tab. 3 - Adaptation of UDL 3.0 Guidelines in the DANTE-U Project – Development stages


Each partner university focused on the analysis and implementation of one UDL principle.

University of Salento explored the principle of Engagement, specifically in relation to the design of strategies that promote students' active participation. In the academic context, this principle holds strategic importance as it directly impacts motivation, sense of belonging, and lifelong learning. The operational guidelines proposed—an example of which is provided in Fig. 1—are intended to support the creation of learning environments in which students feel recognized, heard, and valued in their cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and motivational uniqueness.




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○ **Consideration 7.2. Optimize relevance, value and authenticity**

One of the main questions that university students ask themselves is: "Does what I am studying interest me? Will it be useful in the world of work and in everyday life?" The perception of a gap between academic training, personal interests and professional needs can influence motivation, engagement and, in some cases, even academic success. For this reason, it is essential to rethink the role of the university not only as a space for theoretical learning, but as a meeting point between knowledge, work and real life. It is important that the objectives and contents identified by the university professor are authentic, relevant and meaningful.

Directions:

- Integrate practical activities that simulate real situations that are functional for future work, such as virtual reality internships, problem solving with authentic or plausible case studies, project-based learning, so as to allow work on concrete and interdisciplinary problems;
- Provide networking opportunities with businesses and organizations;
- Use more realistic evaluation methods (portfolio, project work, public presentations).
- Organize during the lessons meetings with alumni who have completed their academic path and started a career, allowing students to ask questions, doubts and specific curiosities

Activity example:

- Students are encouraged to undertake authentic research activities exploring relevant current issues. Each student collects first-hand accounts that reflect the concrete needs of the real community through interviews with residents, local activists and industry workers.
- Students approach a given topic starting from consolidated scientific studies and evidence-based cases, in such a way as to allow active participation, in-depth exploration and experimentation of knowledge, enhancing analytical and reflective skills.
- The teacher presents students with a series of problem scenarios with critical situations that they may encounter in their professional future, allowing students to train their problem solving skills by formulating possible concrete solutions to overcome these obstacles, combining theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquired during the course.

Fig. 1 - Activity examples of UDL 3.0 adaptation to university context in DANTE-U project

The second principle, Representation, was developed by RomaTre University. The proposed operational scenarios aim to acknowledge interindividual differences in the ways information is perceived, understood and processed. Therefore, it is essential to provide multiple means of presenting and making information meaningful, recognizing the plurality of cultural, identity-related, and communicative codes. Removing linguistic, cognitive and symbolic barriers resulting from a single mode of knowledge transmission is crucial, in favor of accessible environments that value diversity.

Finally, the Universities of Padua and Perugia elaborated theoretical guidelines and practical examples related to the principle of Action and Expression, with the aim of ensuring that students can demonstrate their knowledge and skills through a variety of expressive modalities. This approach emphasizes the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each student while ensuring equal opportunities for educational

success. In this context, ICTs prove to be essential facilitators for equitable, interactive, motivating, and flexible higher education teaching.

The design approach was shared and co-constructed, leading to the development of concrete application scenarios that can be transferred across a variety of disciplinary contexts. It supports university faculty—who are often unfamiliar with universal design approaches—with practical and operational tools that can be integrated into their teaching practices. The Guidelines outline a series of strategies and tools for planning objectives, methodologies, materials, and assessment methods. These are intended to overcome the barriers inherent in most existing university curricula, with the goal of creating a fully accessible and inclusive learning environment from the outset, in line with the UDL framework.

Although many faculty recognize the value of inclusive teaching strategies, the literature shows a significant discrepancy between theoretical awareness and practical application of UDL methodologies (Gawronski et al., 2016; LaRocco & Wilken, 2013; Lombardi et al., 2015; West et al., 2016).

The theoretical principles of Faculty Development (FD) - an expression that originated some four decades ago and refers to an innovative and transformative conception of teaching quality in university settings - are closely related to those of Universal Design for Learning.

Faculty Development encompasses a multifaceted set of theoretical and operational strategies aimed at enhancing the teaching, evaluation and management skills of academic staff, with the goal of improving the overall quality of the university system. Although the literature on the topic is still scarce, UDL approach is particularly attractive to faculty members, as it offers effective tools to promote inclusivity, accessibility and differentiation in instructional design (Leslie, 2020; Moriña & Carballo, 2017). As repeatedly stated, UDL enables proactive responses to student diversity (Dalton et al., 2017), reducing pressure on accessibility services by demonstrating that most student needs can be met with inclusive design strategies (Houghton & Fovet, 2012).

However, its implementation encounters several critical issues, including the time it takes to create accessible materials (Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Moriarty, 2007), unfamiliarity with educational technologies (Aguirre & Duncan, 2013; Nielsen, 2013), limited awareness of the needs of nontraditional learners (Habib et al., 2012; Schelly et al., 2011), and the complex and stratified environment anchored in tradition and academic hierarchy (Mcgrath, Roxå & Laksov, 2019). In response to these obstacles, some studies highlight the effectiveness of digital technology-

based instructional pathways in enhancing teachers' understanding and application of the UDL model (Davies et al., 2013). Data show that through ICT-based training, teachers gain a better understanding of the UDL model, facilitating its practical implementation in the classroom. What emerges from the review of the scientific literature, therefore, is a strong need for academic training and the need to make teaching and university programs flexible, accessible and inclusive.

The emerging picture underscores the urgency of rethinking university educational offerings in light of the principles of inclusion, not least in relation to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the need for more flexible and student-centered teaching. Despite this, specific training initiatives UDL-based focused on university staff still remain sporadic and often marginal within inclusive teaching programs. For an effective adoption of the UDL approach, it is important to invest in the ongoing training of faculty, promoting the development of professional skills capable of responding to the many forms of diversity present in academic settings.

Based on this assumption, the PRIN DANTE-U project sees in one of its working phases the design and set up of a web-based e-learning platform, at the moment still in a developmental stage, structured that will support teachers in their direct interlocution with the UDL perspective through digital content, audiovisuals, videos or podcasts. The goal is to create a repository for teachers to raise their awareness of the UDL pedagogical model.

The DANTE-U platform¹ conceived as a collaborative and training space on UDL design in university teaching, is divided into several sections: one dedicated to the explication of objectives, aims and project phases of the PRIN project; the presentation of the units involved in the project that include 4 partner universities (Salento, RomaTre, Padua and Perugia; an area related to scientific dissemination with events, seminars and updates on research results; and, finally, a database of teaching resources for university didactics structured according to the three principles of UDL (involvement, representation, action/expression). In this repository, digital resources are adapted to the university reality, with special attention to the needs of nontraditional students (Fig.2-3).

¹ <https://dante-u.it>



Fig. 2 - Homepage Dante-U web platform



Fig. 3 - Digital resources for university teaching DANTE-U web platform

In line with the objectives of the project, the e-learning platform has some basic features:

- the flexibility related to accessibility: it is a discriminating factor in setting up the service;
- the ease of use: web-based e-learning platform solutions with a clear and intuitive design were applied, i.e., accessible from a browser without the need to download and install any kind of software;
- the implementation of digital systems for evaluating and monitoring progress: the e-learning platform can generate customized reports on the

progress of knowledge to be a stimulus for possibly improving in specific areas and perhaps undertaking new insights;

- offer engaging and participatory distance learning formats: it is indeed possible to upload and have access to documents, pdfs, images, audio files, video files, lecture sessions.

In addition to responding to a process of improving the quality of university teaching, the DANTE-U platform becomes an opportunity for in-service training of the university teacher, thus placing itself in the furrow of actions inherent to the FD. While respecting and protecting teaching autonomy, in fact, the training design through the platform is configured as a virtual place of learning and participation, as well as an important opportunity for adaptation of teaching methodology and learning for those newly hired for whom the rigorous path of scientific research has not always been accompanied by a gradual introduction to the teaching of their discipline. At the same time, students will benefit from a flat digital form of training that is accessible and unique to all, which, as a result, in addition to the benefits in terms of academic performance, can produce an increase in well-being and egalitarian participation in the cultural and educational experiences that universities will activate.

The platform represents a digital educational and informational hub that promotes the design of accessible university learning environments to ensure the active participation of a diverse student population, thereby ensuring innovative teaching and an urgently needed change in cultural perspective in our university settings.

Conclusions

The development of quality teaching, or the creation of a true "culture of quality," represents the starting point for improving learning outcomes and ensuring adequate professional training. However, this goal requires a lengthy process of (trans)formation of academic staff competencies, so that they are prepared to face contemporary challenges and to "foster the development of students as creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers, and active and responsible citizens, capable of lifelong learning" (EUA, 2021).

What emerges from the review of the scientific literature is therefore a strong need for academic training and the necessity to make educational and university programs flexible, accessible, and inclusive. These needs are also emphasized in the

17 Sustainable Development Goals and the 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Since the project is still in its developmental phase and will conclude in November 2025, this contribution presents an overview of the project, outlining the results already achieved and the phases yet to be developed. These stages represent an opportunity to initiate a meaningful and constructive dialogue among the various stakeholders involved, particularly between university teachers and students. This exchange, which can be enriched by the dual perspective emerging from the DANTE-U project, it facilitates the development of dialogue between the experiences and opinions of both faculty and students, serving as a catalyst for the experimental introduction of changes to university curriculum design. The aim of these changes would be not only to improve the quality of university teaching but also to test, monitor and evaluate the effects of these innovations over time, with the goal of creating a cycle of continuous and pervasive improvement.

In conclusion, the PRIN DANTE-U project represents an opportunity to raise awareness across the entire academic community regarding the educational and social participation needs of non-traditional students. From the students' perspective, the project aims to increase social inclusion, particularly for non-traditional student populations; expand the reach of online education to a broader group of students; enhance user satisfaction; and improve both the quality and quantity of learning for all students. From the faculty's perspective, the project seeks to encourage the academic community to seize the opportunity to enhance their methodological and digital competencies and to engage with the issues of digital accessibility and inclusion.

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