UNIVERSITY AS AGENT OF CHANGE IN TERMS OF INCLUSION IN WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

L'UNIVERSITA' COME AGENTE DI CAMBIAMENTO PER L'INCLUSIONE NEGLI AMBIENTI LAVORATIVI

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ABSTRACT

Education can be considered an agent of change and one of the primary aims is to create feasible and inclusive pathways to strategically favour the realization of values and social change.
The authors explore the role that universities can have in terms of agents of change for inclusion in the work environment, giving some methodological approaches. The results emerging from the literature analysis carried out during the IN-WORK (inclusive Communities at Work) project funded by the Erasmus + European Community will be presented.

L'educazione può essere considerata un agente di cambiamento e uno dei suoi obiettivi primari è quello di creare percorsi fattibili e inclusivi per favorire strategicamente la realizzazione di valori e il cambiamento sociale. Gli autori esplorano il ruolo che le università possono avere in termini di agenti di cambiamento per l'inclusione nel mondo del lavoro, fornendo alcuni approcci metodologici Verranno presentati i risultati emersi dall'analisi della letteratura portata avanti durante il progetto IN-WORK (inclusive Communities at Work) finanziato dalla Comunità Europea Erasmus +.

KEYWORDS
Inclusion, agent of change, university, workplace
Inclusione, agente di cambiamento, università, luogo di lavoro

Introduction[1]

Educational action substantiates a change that is a relational process directed both by the agent subject and by whoever interacts with him (Demetrio, 2006). The relationship between educational processes and change has been an object of interest in the pedagogical field. This connection has an impact on education, as it is inevitably shaped by and in constant interaction with the social conditions in which it occurs. We are currently witnessing profound transformations in the social sphere, and, from a pedagogical point of view, it is essential to examine these changes and reflect on the meaning of the educational act in the contemporary social context. Currently, one of the most important change challenges is that of inclusion in all areas of the social vision. In this contribution, we will focus on the inclusion of young people with special educational needs in the world of work and the role that Universities can have in this process as first agent of change of minds and behaviours.

International reports, such as UNESCO (2020), denounced that people with disabilities are less than half as likely to be employed as people without disabilities. In Italy, the relationship between people with disabilities and the world of work continues to be a critical issue. According to the data presented by Istat, out of every 100 individuals aged between 15 and 64, who have functional limitations in motor or sensory functions essential for daily life, or face intellectual or behavioural disorders, but still possess work-related abilities, only 35.8% are employed (compared to 57.8% of individuals without limitations). Meanwhile, 20.7% are seeking employment, while 43.5%, likely discouraged by the limited prospects of finding a job, are inactive (the rate among those without limitations is 27.5%). It is within the age range of 25 to 44 years that the greatest "occupational distress" among people with special needs is concentrated, with a proportion of those seeking employment standing at 31.2%, nearly double compared to the 45-64 age group, where the same figure drops to 16.8% (Fondazione Consulenti del Lavoro, 2019).

These statistics unveil a significant reality, underscoring that despite advancements in higher education accessibility and the endeavour to forge pathways for inclusion into the workforce, disparities persist. Nevertheless, compelling evidence supports the notion that a person's level of education directly correlates with improved

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prospects for employment (Morina, 2017). Hence, attaining admission to and successfully completing university studies can serve as a pivotal avenue for individuals with disabilities to enhance their quality of life, foster self-empowerment, secure gainful employment, and relish an autonomous existence (Giaconi et al., 2020; Del Bianco et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2021). In the following paragraphs, we will investigate how universities can represent a reference point for youths with special needs, both students enrolled in university and young adults not in higher education, the obstacles faced today by youths and which methodological approaches can be useful to promote employability and inclusion in the workplace. The results emerging from the literature analysis carried out during the IN-WORK (Inclusive Communities at Work) project funded by the Erasmus + European Community will be presented.

1. The role of universities as agent of change

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are influenced by changes happening in society, but they also have the power to influence society themselves. They are not just passive observers; they play an active role. This has become more important due to trends like New Public Management principles being adopted, changes in how they are funded and regulated by the government, increased assessment activities, and the fact that HEIs now operate like organized entities with clear goals, strategies, and ways to be held accountable. Adapting to shifts in society demands that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) adopt new ways of structuring and being flexible. This flexibility is vital for HEIs to effectively handle the emerging needs in their surroundings, especially in disadvantaged categories. As stated by Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff (2000), the Universities are an essential driver of knowledge-based economies and societies, in synergic relationships with government and businesses, contributing to sustainable development and promotion of fundamental values for the collective wellbeing (Del Bianco et al., 2021).

As emphasized in prior studies (Giaconi et al., 2021; Del Bianco et al., 2020; D'Angelo, Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi et al., 2018), it's imperative for universities to cultivate inclusivity, acting as primary hubs for community interaction and societal engagement. The university's purpose needs re-evaluation, transcending institutional roles (Caldin, 2017) and actively fostering environments of inclusiveness and chances 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). Therefore, universities should establish fresh, symbiotic connections with their local contexts to facilitate accessible education and enhanced social equity (Mura, 2011). Based on this

premise, universities have the potential to become platforms for interaction and social integration, forming the backdrop for genuinely comprehensive processes.

The concept of engagement has gained traction in recent times, particularly in its connection to universities and their expanded role within the framework of the third mission (Davey, 2017). Within the framework of a regional learning innovation system (Gunasekara, 2006), an engaged university operates in close collaboration with its local context, prioritizing its regional ties over exclusive partnerships with businesses or entrepreneurial ventures. Traditionally, the third mission involved a unilateral transfer of knowledge from knowledge providers (universities) to knowledge recipients (businesses and society) (Mitton et al., 2007). Nevertheless, more recently, this unidirectional model has evolved into a multidirectional and multi-channel exchange of knowledge (Van der Sijde, 2012), involving universities, businesses, and government in a mutually beneficial relationship (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1999; Mars et al., 2012). This dynamic has added complexity to the execution of the third mission, rendering its comprehension even more intricate. Effectively implementing the engaged university concept requires combining the university's resources and expertise with those of the public and private sectors. This collaboration aims to enrich academic pursuits, advance research, refine curriculum design and teaching methods, enhance graduates' employability, foster informed and involved graduates, reinforce civic and democratic principles, tackle societal challenges, promote social unity, and contribute to the overall betterment of society (CIC Committee on Engagement, 2005).

In this context, we delve into the matter of employment and societal integration for individuals and students with disabilities. More precisely, we focus on the ways in which universities can serve as particularly advantageous environments for inclusive learning, aiding the progression into adulthood through the implementation of effective methodological approaches to foster inclusion processes supporting enrolled students to achieve their learning and life objectives and supporting the achievement of widespread inclusive education. On this assumption, the university can be an educational place and driver of social inclusion also for those who are not enrolled in higher education. The social role of the university requires spreading a culture of inclusion beyond the walls of academia by being an active player on the reference territory and contributing to community development.

2. **Effective approaches and initiatives to support the transition of people with special needs.**

Pedagogical approaches play a crucial role in supporting the transition to work of people with special needs, providing them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and support to navigate the transition from education to adulthood and independence.

According to Casares (2013), the two challenges for a support-based pedagogy are:

- strengthening institutional networks and partnerships among organisations, administrations, and companies to offer more possibilities for high-quality integrated training and service experience.
- responding to the needs of people and increasing employment opportunities calls for partnerships.

Different approaches and guidelines have been established in European countries to facilitate the transition. In Italy, the guidelines for the scholastic inclusion of pupils with special needs establish that each school must activate guidance actions to guarantee continuity in the assistance to the pupil by the following school or the chosen post-school path (MIUR, 2019). The second biennial action program for the promotion of the rights and integration of people with disabilities (2017) encourages the creation of blended educational paths that combine education, vocational training, and work experience, in collaboration between schools, vocational training centres and the world of work. This approach offers opportunities for inclusion and professional development through educational paths that promote the autonomy and socio-occupational inclusion of people with disabilities. The design of adulthood pathways to develop autonomy requires not only support in the construction of autonomous thought inside and outside school but also the design of operational practices that consider everyone as a thinking being, beyond the limitations caused by intellectual disabilities. This lays the foundations for the ability to think and reflect on the other, promoting their autonomy in thought and choice (Pavone 2014; Chiappetta Cajola, 2015; Mura et al., 2021; Giaconi et al., 2021). As part of the guidance, each student is called to experiment with cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional skills, expressing opinions, and preferences and sharing interests, passions and aspirations. These actions are closely linked to the development of metacognitive skills that support the organization, monitoring and control of one's knowledge process, making the student progressively autonomous in the conscious choice of the opportunities that present themselves (Domenici, 2009; Chiappetta Cajola, 2015). Guidance must not be reduced to a simple tool for managing formal transitions between school orders but must take on a permanent value in the experience of students with special educational needs. It is necessary to adopt a diachronic training orientation model that values personal planning and accompanies the progressive structuring of a life

project throughout the years of training. The school, as a guidance environment, must stimulate learning and highlight the abilities of everyone, allowing functioning in the classroom and in all extra-school situations. The methods of the response of the school system to personal orientation trajectories must embrace an accompanying logic that goes beyond the fragmented and sporadic approach, guaranteeing continuity and adopting a planning perspective starting from kindergarten. It is important to favour a heuristic dimension that operates on the possible, probable, and latent potential of students (Miatto, 2021). It's useful to adopt a complexity paradigm that allows the coordination of actions that fall under the concept of "reasonable accommodation" (CRUI Conference). It is crucial to consider the specific contexts and needs of each student, with a focus on personalized support. Four key conditions that should be applied (Paviotti et al., 2021):

- Transparency: It is essential to be transparent with students and their families about potential future challenges they may face during their academic journey and in terms of employability prospects.
- Managing expectations: It is important to manage hopes and expectations to avoid creating illusions that could lead to disappointment and discouragement later. It is essential to align expectations to construct meaningful life paths that prioritize the individual's quality of life (Giaconi, 2015).
- Promoting awareness and self-responsibility: Students and their families should be encouraged to develop a sense of self-responsibility and awareness about their abilities and potential. The role of the specialized tutor is another critical aspect. They should be well-trained experts who consider both the expectations and functioning profile of the student with disabilities, as well as the requirements of the working environment. This includes addressing accessibility, necessary services, and the presence of facilitators (CRUI, 2018).
- Freedom of choice and academic support: Respecting students' freedom of choice is vital, and appropriate measures should be put in place during their studies to prevent academic failure (Del Bianco et al., 2021; D'Angelo, 2020).

By adhering to these conditions, universities can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers students with disabilities to succeed in their academic pursuits and transition smoothly into the workforce. University-Business Cooperation (UBS) is encouraged at the European and national levels and includes curricular internships as mobility of students (Davey et al., 2018, p. 40).

Enhancing vocational maturity levels in students with disabilities is essential (D'Angelo et al., 2020; Dowrick, Getzel, & Briel, 2004). In-depth studies on the skills

required for internships and employment are significant in this regard (Espada-Chavarria et al., 2020). It is vital to provide specific support to empower students, raise their self-awareness, and develop decision-making and problem-solving strategies. These actions contribute to self-determination and the perception of their own capability to shape their professional future (Del Bianco, 2019). Furthermore, the evaluation of competencies acquired during internships should be emphasized. The European Higher Education Area highlights the importance of competence-based learning plans that allow students to assess their own competencies in real situations and improve their self-learning (Espada-Chavarria et al., 2020). This self-evaluation capacity is especially crucial in personalized learning programs for students with disabilities, as it promotes self-assessment, self-advocacy, and the understanding of rights and accommodation needs. Lastly, investing in integrated support systems for internships is vital for improved employment outcomes and quality of life for individuals with disabilities (Del Bianco et al., 2020; Zappaterra, 2012). Collaboration and coordination among universities, companies, and support services in the community can foster an inclusive culture and mainstreaming strategies in the labour market (Giaconi et al., 2021; Bocci et al., 2020; Pace et al., 2018; Caldin, 2017).

The research by Montserrat et al. (2012) presents various strategies that could be promoted in secondary education from a psycho-educational guidance viewpoint if an inclusive process wants to be ensured for students with learning difficulties in their transition to working life. Person-centred planning foresees education authority involvement in defining a legal framework that clearly establishes the responsibility of secondary schools in such processes. It is a model for guiding students in the areas of education, social and labour market inclusion that is integrated within the different areas of the secondary curriculum and is considered in the guidance given by teachers, balancing academic curricula to include components relating to social and self-determination skills. Moreover, Person-centred Planning (PCP) is presented as an innovative approach that offers new perspectives on supporting socio-educational and occupational pathways of people with intellectual disabilities. It is important to keep in mind that the vulnerability of people with intellectual disabilities in these transition processes requires an intentional emphasis on promoting socio-labour inclusion strategies during the secondary stage guidance process. Finally, advancing the implementation of the actions presented in educational practices also means effectively introducing them into the training processes of education professionals.

The research conducted by Markel and Barclay (2009) highlights the significance of enhancing the involvement of graduates with disabilities in the workforce. This can be achieved by fostering a collaborative network between universities and businesses. This collaboration involves joint planning of work initiatives and the organization of activities. On one hand, it entails providing specialized training for company staff, while on the other, it involves the university-company-student partnership. Within this partnership, there is a focus on managing connections with disability services and ensuring continuous support for the recruitment of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, job coaches are made available to students. The study by Brendle et al. (2019) observes that certain companies have introduced these professionals, enabling students with disabilities to receive assistance and training related to their work responsibilities during placements. Implementing these measures would significantly increase the employability of graduates with disabilities (Jurado & Soler, 2016).

An interesting experience In Spain, Inserta Empleo, the Foundation ONCE's entity for training and employment, presented in 2022 the 'Community for Young Talent', the first initiative focused on the environment of young people with disabilities, as well as families and professionals who support them, with the aim of advising them to promote inclusion in the labour market and accompany them during the process. The 'Community for Young Talent' aims to become the advisory place for the people closest to young people with disabilities and, to do so, it offers useful resources, content and training courses for both families and professionals, to help them break prejudices and barriers and eliminate the overprotection that, on many occasions, they exercise over young people with disabilities. Co-financed by the European Social Fund, the 'Community for Young Talent' materializes in a connection space. The first one offers valuable content, including knowledge, tools, and methodologies, to young people with disabilities, their families, and the professionals who serve them, such as healthcare professionals, teachers, and counsellors. Thus, the virtual community has a series of courses focused on providing resources, strategies, initiatives, guidelines, and testimonies that contribute to facilitating the processes of labour inclusion. The website has three sections, depending on the recipients, for young people, families, and the third sector of disability and socio-sanitary professionals, teachers, and counsellors, and the training content is adapted to each of the recipients.

L'Associació empresarial d'economia social (2019) highlights some concepts to be followed to foster the social inclusion of people with disabilities in the world of work:

- Employability must be understood as the degree to which a person's skills and abilities match the specific needs of the job market.
- Employability is the result of training, age, place of residence, type of disability and other personal characteristics of people with disabilities that can influence job performance" (p. 76)
- Mixed employment and training formulas, such as the case of adapted dual training, seem to be the most appropriate way for the development of skills and professional competencies among the group of people with disabilities and special needs.
- Dual training allows to establish a bridge between the educational and work spheres, seeking greater integration between theory and work practice and obtaining a professional certificate CP. The certificate accredits the acquisition of a series of technical competencies (p. 76-77).

One more important suggestion are the Micro-credentials as an opportunity to complement and improve the ecosystems of education, training, lifelong learning, and employability, without altering the systems of initial education, higher education, and vocational education and training, according to the Council of the European Union on June 16, 2022, "Recommendation about the importance of updating competencies, skills, and knowledge in a job market". Micro-credentials can also be used as part of targeted measures to support inclusion and facilitate access to education training and career opportunities for a wider range of learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities, the elderly, low-qualified/skilled people, minorities, people with migrant backgrounds, refugees, and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their socio-economically disadvantaged situation) (Council Recommendation, 2022).

In Finland, an interesting initiative in terms of transition to work-life is the "Career Club" operated once a month for students in need of special support (Lignell & Pynnönen, 2018). In the practical workshops, the starting point is the value of the student's participation in the workshop. They support the youth's own employment skills and information affecting them. Furthermore, various job search opportunities and job search channels are presented. The day-long workshops include different mapping and analysis tasks, personal guidance, group discussions

and feedback. Career club activities can be also organized as personal guidance and online meetings. Application for personal guidance is due to the client's perception that she/he is "difficult to employ". Personal counselling covers how to appear in a job application situation, stress, work career, the preparation of the CV and the student's strengths. Students with special needs consider the personal support and guidance of the career coach as fundamental for their presentation skills. During the project, the guidance material created in the career workshop is used and developed for the university's public internet pages, and the website is accessible to everyone. The purpose of the site is to help the students to identify their own competencies and communicate them to the job application situation. During the project, recruitment events, company visits and working life forums are organized at the University site.

To promote inclusion in the hiring and assessment processes, it could be useful to consider the following aspects (Fundacion ADECCO, 2021):

- Flexible selection processes to make them more inclusive, valuing soft skills that are in demand such as creativity and motivation, which are frequently present in young people with special needs.
- Promote closer ties with associations, universities, and vocational training centres as sources of recruitment for young people with disabilities.
- Invest in universal accessibility as an instrument of competitiveness, attraction, and retention of young talent with disabilities.
- Take advantage of the sudden digitalization, a consequence of the pandemic, as a motor for hiring young people with disabilities, promoting telecommuting.
- Implement mentoring programs that act as a link between the young person with a disability and the world of the company.
- Participate in conferences, forums, and activities that bring together professionals from the sector with young people with disabilities in the environment, promoting networking and exchanges of experiences and knowledge that facilitate access to the labour market.
- Some specific proposals to achieve these goals include corporate volunteering, professional volunteering, and speed networking sessions. These activities promote coexistence and interaction between young people with disabilities and workers from companies, generating empathy and professional links that contribute to breaking down barriers and stereotypes while training skills such as teamwork or communication. By implementing these proposals, companies can attract and retain young talent with disabilities, contributing to a more inclusive society.

Conclusions

Universities can play a crucial role in facilitating the transition of young people with special needs into the world of work and being effective change-makers in social aspects. They play a central role in the area in which they are located, as a point of reference for all the stakeholders in the process. Lots of work has already been done, it still requires significant progress.

First, actions to raise awareness of the enlarged community on the importance of inclusion and diversity must be established by universities. This can help create a welcoming environment where youths with special needs feel supported and valued.

To guarantee equal access to work and the same level of employability to youths with special needs as that of their peers, the university must offer individualised services and support, within students enrolled in education and not. Regarding youths, academic and personalized support, including tutoring services, additional lessons, assistive technology tools and customized study plans to fit each student's specific needs, should be organized. Furthermore, counselling and guidance services in identifying their passions, skills, and career interests, are useful to help them make decisions about choosing the career path that best suits their skill set. In terms of skills improvement, it is a good action to offer courses and workshops on soft skills, such as effective communication, time management, problem-solving and teamwork and specific work-focused activities such as interview practice, CV workshops and conferences with company managers. These skills are essential for success in the workplace regardless of industry.

As regards workplace and connections with business areas, universities must partner with companies and organizations to create internship programs that provide opportunities for young people with special needs to gain hands-on experience in the industry they wish to work in. This allows them to apply the skills they learned in college in real life. Furthermore, they can organize networking events, conferences and seminars that connect students with professionals and companies in their field of interest. This can help build relationships and future job opportunities. To support youths in the workplace, universities plan, together with students, strategies and support to help youths to manage their disabilities in the workplace, besides creating mentoring programs where youths with special needs can be paired with experienced professionals in the field. These mentors can offer advice, guidance, and support to help students navigate the world of work.

Partnerships with companies and organizations to develop inclusive recruitment programmes can be required to involve selection and hiring practices that consider candidates' skills and competencies, regardless of their special abilities.

Considering its institutional role, the university can invest more in the research and development of new technologies and tools that can facilitate the learning and engagement of students with special needs and monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives put in place to facilitate the transition of young people with special needs into the world of work.

In conclusion, in this work, we highlight the important role that Universities have in contributing to social change and give some areas of interventions to be considered and implemented. It has also been highlighted the need for further studies to increase awareness and inclusion in the academic and professional world.

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