

# The Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education 25 Years since the Salamanca Statement: Overview and Highlights

## L'inclusione degli studenti con disabilità nella formazione universitaria a 25 anni dalla Dichiarazione di Salamanca: overview e highlights

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The Salamanca Statement inaugurated a period of rights which aimed to promote inclusion at all levels of education, including higher education, considered strategic in the preparation of people with disabilities for adult life.

This article aims to provide an overview of the principal steps which, from 1994 up to the present day, have marked the gradual process of the opening up of the post-secondary institutions to disability, in order to critically highlight the progress and the challenges of a process in act. The paper, based on a review of the international and national literature, is organized into two periods (with the UN Convention as a watershed). From the universities' initial concern to guarantee equality of access to students with disabilities by removing architectural barriers and offering services, we move to a subsequent phase in which new complex trends emerge which have innovative and inclusive potential. Among these we find the quality of the teaching; the monitoring of academic careers and the transition to the labour market; the evolution of the Disability Services from campus support centres to campus resource centres; staff training; and the more active participation of students. There is an open challenge to continue to gather evidence and reframe these issues, because improving the quality of academic experiences can guarantee better future lives for students.

**Keywords:** higher education; inclusion; students with disabilities; reasonable accommodations; Disability Services

abstract

Riflessione teorica 124

a. incontro con la storia  
b. questioni epistemologiche

## 1. International background<sup>1</sup>

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) reminds us of how inclusion is a question of human rights, the privileged route for fighting all forms of discrimination (UN, 2006; Hughes, Corcoran, and Slee, 2016). In the last 25 years, its guiding principles have affected not only school but also university life: the inclusive approach proposed opens up the way to lifelong learning.

As the Statement affirms, necessary provision should be made to ensure the inclusion of young people, guaranteeing equality of opportunity, access, and retention in an integrated setting, through particular attention to tertiary education (Article 19). It also invites the universities to actively involve people with disabilities in their research and training in order to ensure that their perspectives are taken fully into account (Article 47). Moreover, the document is far-sighted in identifying preparation for adult life as a priority area of intervention in so far as it is a crucial phase in the life of people with disabilities (Article 56). It therefore stresses the three areas of 'secondary education', 'tertiary education', and 'the world of work' as strong containing factors in the worsening of situations of disability.

As from 1994, the importance of access to higher education (henceforth HE) has been continually taken up in a series of statements, both international and European, which, on one hand, stress what has already been stated, but, on the other, also introduce innovative elements into the issue of tertiary education.

On a European level, the *Charter of Luxemburg* (European Commission, 1996a) and the document entitled *Access to Social Rights for People with Disabilities in Europe* (Council of Europe, 2003) are examples of this: both highlight the need to offer people with disabilities quality education for the entire span of their lives at whatever level of education, encouraging transition between levels of study. We can clearly see how access to HE is a crucial factor in promoting the active citizenship of people with disabilities. On an international level, the document which best takes up the legacy of the Salamanca Statement is the *Convention on the rights of people with disabilities* (UN, 2006). Compared with previous statements, the UN Convention sanctions the right to education, including tertiary education (Article 24). The provision of effective education must be facilitated by reasonable accommodations and individualized support in environments which optimize learning and participation. Quality education – which encourages the integration of the principle of accessibility with the principles of Universal Design (henceforth UD) in educational curricula (including HE) – is also the line followed by the *European Strategy on Disability 2010/2020*, re-confirmed in 2017 (Euro-

1 This contribution, developed and shared jointly by the three authors, was drawn up as follows: paragraph *International background* by Alessia Cinotti; paragraph *The first important steps: 1994-2006 (Legislation and services and Emerging topics in literature)*, and subparagraphs *The more active participation of the students* and *The transition entering and leaving higher education* by Rosa Bellacicco; paragraph *An ongoing challenge: 2006-2019 (Data and careers, From the medical model to Universal Design for Learning, The accessibility of teaching and The staff of the Disability Services)* by Marisa Pavone; paragraph *Conclusion* by Marisa Pavone, Rosa Bellacicco and Alessia Cinotti.



pean Commission, 2010, 2017). This allows for the improvement of the efficiency of education systems for all and the facilitation of the entry of young people with disabilities into the job market (Youth on the move – European Strategy 2010). More recently, the principal political, cultural, and economic organisms (OECD, 2011, 2017; UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2015) have stressed on a worldwide scale the importance of HE and the promotion of the equal opportunity of learning for all in a changing global context.

Despite these pronouncements and government policies, which aim to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities in HE in an increasingly large number of countries, the principal international reports continue, on one hand, to describe a situation concerning the condition of people with disabilities which, even though it is in the process of change, is not entirely encouraging, and, on the other, to re-affirm the strategic importance of education in the context of lifelong learning. In fact, education represents one of the principal tools for emancipation (WHO and World Bank, 2011, 2017; UN, 2016). Governments have the duty to remove the barriers that hinder inclusion: an environment is facilitating if it is without restrictions or limitations which are not only physical and architectural but also prejudicial, socio-cultural, and political (Armstrong and Barton, 1999; WHO, 2001).

This paper aims to provide an overview of the principal steps taken since 1994, which have marked the gradual process of the opening up of universities to diversity, in order to critically highlight aspects of light and shade in a process that is in act. In this sense the paper aims to go back over a quarter of a century of university inclusion, describing ‘two seasons’ and identifying the UN Convention as a watershed. The first season covers around a decade (1994-2006) and corresponds to the ‘phase of access’, starting from legal recognitions that sanction the right for people with disabilities to ‘have a place and receive supports’ at university. The second season covers the period of time from the UN Convention up to the present day, and poses new questions to the universities who receive students with disabilities (henceforth SWDs). The second period views inclusion in a broader scenario, which places in centre stage themes that are relevant for the promotion of both learning and participation (Booth and Ainscow, 2016). Inclusive education is implemented in different ways in different contexts, and it is described in a scientific literature which is increasingly substantial and diversified according to the methodologies used, the stakeholders questioned, the samples surveyed, and the countries involved. In other words, the paper will seek to shed light, in a diachronic view, on emerging issues and open questions that are common to countries engaged in the protection of the rights of SWDs in HE.

## 2. The first important steps: 1994-2006

### 2.1. Legislation and services

Before the 1990s many SWDs could be denied admission to university; Barnes (1991) describes how, in that period, most British universities were inaccessible and only some were able to provide support services. At the same time, there

was little interest in the issue in scientific literature (Peña, 2014). In a text which is often quoted, Hurst (1996) urged researchers to study the experiences of SWDs in HE. A subsequent report by the OECD (2003) confirmed the paucity of research on the subject, which consisted of contributions by few authors or international organisms, like the OECD itself (1997) or the European Commission (1996b; see the Helios II programme).

During the period concerned, a strong impulse towards the participation of the disabled population in HE came from the spread of anti-discriminatory legislation in many countries (Hurst, 2015), which was coherent with the declarations already mentioned. The United States and Australia, for example, were moving in this direction when they adopted the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990) and the *Disability Discrimination Act* (1992) respectively<sup>2</sup>. Canada also reached a similar milestone with the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* in 2001. In the United Kingdom the most relevant laws were the *Disability Discrimination Acts* (1995 and 2005) and the *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act* (2001). In Italy, inclusion at university level was established with the 1992 *Law on Disability*<sup>3</sup>, specified by Law 17 of 1999<sup>4</sup>.

Anti-discrimination legislation had a significant impact on the rise in the number of SWDs in academic institutions. In the United States, for example, the percentage of attending students tripled between 1978 and 1998 (National Council on Disability, 2000). In France in 1993/94 there were 3,601 young people in universities; the number rose to 7,029 in 2000/01 (data from the Ministry of Education, see OECD, 2003). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows an increase of SWDs in the United Kingdom between 1995/96 and 2004/05 from 3.1% to 7.1% of all undergraduate students. In Italy there had also been a rise in enrolment; it is interesting to note that the first ministerial statistics refer to the academic year of 1999/2000 (4,709 SWDs; source: MIUR).

This rapid increase hides some critical areas which are beginning to emerge in many countries. The first is that, as the EADSNE (2006) points out, the percentage of SWDs who participate in tertiary education is still much smaller than the percentage expected and is in any case lower than that of their non-disabled peers. In the second place, the lack of comparative data regarding student access to HE and the need for information about these students' profiles and their careers is starting to become evident. In fact, according to the OECD (2003), the lack of statistics makes it difficult to monitor the extent of the progress and the provision of different types of accommodations.

Regarding these, in the 1990s there was a rapid expansion of Disability Services (Konur, 2002; Madaus, 2011). As Brinckerhoff, McGuire, and Shaw describe,

- 2 However, in Australia, for instance, attention to SWDs in HE only developed after 1998, following the *Australian Higher Education Policy*, which aimed to promote diversity, equality, and growth in the academic environment (Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler, 2018).
- 3 Law no. 104/92 ("Legge-quadro per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate").
- 4 Law no. 17/99 ("Integrazione e modifica della legge-quadro 5 febbraio 1992, n. 104, per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate").



in 2002 the field of Disability Services in academic institutions ‘moved through its adolescence and was embarking on adulthood’ (xiii). Among the services most implemented to retain youth with disabilities in HE were human resources (tutoring, note-taker), technologies, and financial interventions, as well as support in exams (extra time, for example; OECD, 2003). According to the coordinators of the Disability Services involved in the survey by Stodden *et alii* (2001), in the United States, testing accommodations were the most frequently offered service, while disability specific scholarships and support for study abroad were those most rarely provided.

## 2.2. Emerging topics in literature

In response to Hurst’s challenge (1996), researchers increasingly began to concentrate on the study of facilitators and above all on the obstacles that students encounter in academic contexts.

Access to buildings represented one of the most important obstacles identified by the initial research, as many universities are housed in old structures (Tinklin & Hall, 1999; Holloway, 2001).

In the beginning, most research looked at ‘technical’ issues linked to the use of services and the response of academic and administrative staff. Elacqua, Ross, and Bradford (1996), for example, revealed that almost all students questioned at a midwestern university felt satisfied with the reasonable accommodations they received; however, they pointed out that the faculty members were not familiar with disability and the services available. Moreover, asking for classroom accommodations was considered to be stressful. Another survey, carried out in the academic year 1996/97 in Scotland, discovered obstacles in four different areas: the physical environment, entrance to HE, access to information, and the levels of awareness among the academic community (Tinklin and Hall, 1999). For the students, their positive experiences depended on the personal attitudes and knowledge of members of staff; in addition to this, the accommodations varied notably between academic departments. In line with these initial forms of exploration, other surveys concluded that, despite the fact that the base-level provision had improved, support for SWDS had not yet been incorporated into institutional policies and procedures (Borland and James, 1999; Holloway, 2001; Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson, 2005). More generally, the main barriers faced by SWDs seemed to be a consequence of viewing disability in the light of a medical model and a provision of services which was excessively linked to the supply of individual supports which did not modify the mainstream system (Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson, 2004).

Moreover, despite the fact that the model of UD was already beginning to be conceptualized in its application to learning environments, the perspectives of developing the practice of universal access were considered to be remote (Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela, 2004). In the studies that began to focus on teaching, the context of teaching, learning, and assessment was recognized to be an area in which cultural change could take a long time and the training of academic staff could be crucial. Barriers during both lessons and exams emerged from one of the first systematic surveys (Fuller *et alii*, 2004). Difficulties in taking notes, reaching lecturers’ handouts, and taking part in class discussions, as well as neg-

ative attitudes towards people with disabilities, were aspects highlighted in other studies (Fuller, Bradley, and Healey, 2004; Ryan and Struhs, 2004; Shevlin, Kenny, and Mcneela, 2004). In Italy, the challenges encountered by SWDs in HE were simply absent from the research. One exception is the primary study by Muttini and Marchisio (2005). As previous authors had found, they pointed to a conspicuous outlay of support, but the limited knowledge of lecturers regarding disability and a teaching which was still far from ensuring an accessible curriculum for SWDs.

In this time period, dialogue between post-secondary institutions and secondary schools also appeared as a 'new' area on which further research was needed (Eckes and Ochoa, 2005).

Considering that these initial studies generally involved small samples of SWDs, experts continued to express the desire for a broader consultation of them in order to monitor academic practices and policies (OECD, 2003; Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson, 2004).

### 3. An ongoing challenge: 2006-2019

#### 3.1. Data and careers

The UN Convention has undoubtedly improved the conditions of access to HE for SWDs. The emphasis laid on its implementation, in a decade, by a wide range of international organisations has contributed to the spreading of a new cultural approach, which in its turn has enhanced the quality of university life for SWDs (Soorenian, 2014; Moriña, 2017). Governements have adopted increasingly effective anti-discriminatory policies, while universities have been directly involved in their actual implementation (ANED, 2018), trying to develop a welcoming environment. Adequate action has been carried out, relying on a wide choice of support measures – services, human resources, assistive technologies (EADHE, 2014; Schreuer and Sachs, 2014).

Surveys carried out in OECD countries document a further increase in the presence of SWDs in HE in the last ten years: SWDs represent 11.3% of the university population in the United Kingdom (HESA 2013/14); 7% in France; 13% in Holland; 2% in Germany (DZHW, 2015, with reference to students with severe disabilities); 10.8 in the USA (OECD, 2011) and 5.8% in Australia (Kilpatrick *et alii*, 2017). In Italy, where legislation distinguishes between the protection of SWDs and that of students with learning disabilities, the former have increased from 14,985 in 2006/2007 to 19,580 in 2016/17 (representing around 1% of the total student population; source: MIUR). In a shorter period of time, the number of students with learning difficulties has quadrupled (from 1,457 in 2010 – the year in which their rights were recognized – to 6,515 in 2016/17; source: MIUR). The quantitative differences between countries reflect permanent difficulties in comparing data, which are due to many factors, including different criteria for selecting information, a different conceptualization of disability, and reference to learning, behavioural or health difficulties, or to severe disabilities.

In an international scenario where the number of SWDs in HE is dramatically increasing, leading to an increase in the importance and the diversification of



needs (Fossey *et alii*, 2017), research describes a persistent ‘fragility’ in the progress of careers and greater barriers to overcome for SWDs compared to their non-disabled peers. The approach of the academic world to disability is characterised by ‘light and shadow’ (Fleming, Oertle, and Plotner, 2017; Martins, Borges, and Gonçalves, 2018). Easier access to HE for SWDs does not seem to imply equal career opportunities: SWDs need more time to finish their courses and their chances of success are lower. The figures clearly show this phenomenon: 29.4% of SWDs complete tertiary education or its equivalent compared with 43.0% of the non-disabled; and they are still far from the aim of 40% set by the *European Strategy* for the 30-34 year old age range (ANED, 2018). SWDs are also more liable to drop out (Quinn, 2013; despite the Canadian data which show the opposite trend: Stewart and Schwartz, 2018), to interrupt their studies for a period, to study part-time, or to change degree course or university, and they have fewer chances of attaining a degree (Huber *et alii*, 2016; Childs, Finnie, and Martinello, 2017). They tend to study humanities rather than technological and scientific subjects, despite the fact that degrees in this area make access to work more difficult (Le Roux and Marcellini, 2011; CENSIS, 2017). The number of SWDs who study for a PhD, MA, or a specialization is low; and few are involved in international exchange programmes (Holben and Ozel, 2015), although the number is on the increase in some countries (the United States, for example).

Therefore, the increase in the number of SWDs in HEs does not necessarily seem to be a synonym for inclusion and equal opportunities. The radical innovative proposal of the human rights approach to disability requires an extremely long period of time for things to settle, and as a result profound change is required in the academic community: a change in culture and values as well as a change in the organizational, technical, and teaching structures. The process of implementing inclusive policies is continuous but slow and not devoid of obstacles in the face of cultural traditions, local policies and legislation, and different academic planning and organisation.

In general, disability is still an uphill challenge, as the academic community continues to privilege a medical model which considers SWDs as a marginal population whose performance is expected to be lower than that of the ‘norm’, due to their impairment (Ebersold and Cabral, 2016). According to this vision, in order to guarantee equal opportunities, universities must provide dedicated and special support which serves to make up for the gap in performance (Pavone, 2019). Ample evidence confirms the persistence of this mentality. In particular, social networks and families still play a key role in academic attendance (Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová, 2015). Once a student is enrolled at university, in order to obtain support he/she has to declare the typology and the nature of his/her disability, with the risk of exposing him/herself to prejudice. Personalized accommodations remain the principal protective factor in the career advancement of SWDs (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014; Benoit, 2018).

The academic world does not seem to have reached the point yet of structurally addressing the theme of diversity in its curriculum and organization, and it has not yet thoroughly elaborated the conviction that the inclusion of SWDs can become a vector of innovation and a stimulus to re-think teaching models and the allocation of resources, with a view to the principle of respect for human differences (Moriña, 2017).



### 3.2. *From the medical model to Universal Design for Learning*

Among the factors which influence the academic success of SWDs – besides legislation, investment, and structural accessibility, that is, the ‘hard dimension’ – the literature has broadened its focus to consider ‘soft aspects’ which permeate the life of the university; in particular: the quality of the teaching, the dynamics of internal relations in the academic community, professional attitudes, the functioning of the Disability Services, and the longitudinal monitoring of careers (European Commission, 2017; Pavone, 2018).

Consistent with the concurrent advancement of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Meyer and Rose, 2000; Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014) applied to the academic world (Burgstahler, 2013; Kats and Sugden, 2013), the approach that views SWDs as a disadvantaged and marginal category should be overcome in order to adhere to a paradigm that considers disability as one of the many manifestations of the multiple diversity of the student population.

The implementation of study courses, behaviours, and practices which aim to combine personalization and inclusion is therefore a top priority, as it is necessary to create flexible learning environments which can be used by everybody. In a university context which aims to promote participation and educational success, the degree of accessibility should be inversely proportional to the incidence of choices based on ‘special’, albeit necessary, compensations. Indeed, the more the educational environment is lacking in accessibility management, the more students manifest the need for compensatory measures; vice versa, the more proactive attitudes and devices adaptable for a differentiated public are consolidated in the system, the less need there is for special interventions (Ebersold, 2018; Benoit, 2018). This is relatively easy in the current digitally and technologically mediated systems, where Open Education Resources are used, which guarantee a dynamic, multi-modal, and multimedia connective tissue (Treviranus, 2018). In HE, UDL is – indirectly or directly – becoming the expected scenario and the unit of comparison for research on a wide variety of aspects of the academic experience.

### 3.3. *The accessibility of teaching*

An increasing amount of research is analysing the relationship between lecturers and students: lessons, laboratory work, internships, exams, and interviews. What emerges from this research is that more than a few lecturers continue to be barriers to study for SWDs due to a lack of knowledge about disability, low expectations of student performance, a reluctance to modify traditional teaching methods, and to authorize the use of technological and ICT tools, and an excessive concern about the aims of the curriculum or the experiences of other students in the course (Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová, 2015; Martins, Borges, & Gonçalves, 2018).

Other studies confirm that lecturers show little interest in the needs and difficulties of SWDs in study – unless they are directly called on to do so – and are reluctant to modify the way they teach and evaluate. Many prefer support which does not require much professional involvement (a tutor, for example, or the use of a computer), rather than adopting alternative modes of teaching. More willing





to deal with traditional disabilities – physical and sensory – they do not feel prepared to approach new psychic and ‘invisible’ disabilities (Phillion *et alii*, 2016). Comparative studies carried out in Spain, the United States, and Canada reveal that, even if lecturers manifest positive attitudes towards deficits and appreciate inclusive strategies, they are still reluctant to put them into practice (Lombardi, Vukovic, and Sala-Bars, 2015).

Research also has shed light on the complexity and the difficulty of apparently simple processes, such as establishing a positive relationship between peer tutor and student, negotiating reasonable accommodations between students, lecturers, and Disability Services (Fossey *et al.*, 2017), or establishing if and how much the working load for an exam can be reduced (Lipka, Forkosh Baruch, and Meer, 2019).

However, literature recognizes the positive role that lecturers can play, by manifesting attitudes of appreciation and care towards SWDs, or helping them to disclose their condition, agreeing on the adaptations to the teaching method and technological or tutorial support, and encouraging them to develop self-determination (Zeng, Ju, and Hord, 2018). In general, literature agrees in pointing to the need to train more lecturers, managers, and staff of the Disability Services in the management of disability in universities (Fleming, Oertle, and Plotner, 2017; Kendall, 2018).

### **3.4. The staff of the Disability Services**

Disability Services are confirmed as the most ‘obvious’ and the most used point of contact (Fossey *et al.*, 2017), as they focus highly on the role of providing services and compensatory tools, aimed at the increasingly diversified needs of students. They almost always also carry out the function of mediator between the student, the lecturers, and other university offices.

Some studies emphasise persistent inadequacies, due to lack of financial resources, procedural difficulties in access to support, or negative attitudes of the personnel (Yssel, Pak, and Beilke, 2016; Martins, Borges, and Gonçalves, 2018). Others investigate the role of the Service: if it is to provide the all-out support of student requests, or rather to try to incentivize the growth of his/her ability at self-determination and self-efficiency, a perspective which has not been greatly promoted so far (Collins, Azma, and Rentschler 2018). Disability Studies point out that Disability Services are functional to the ‘containment’ of disability and the preservation of the system, instead of developing – as should happen – into a data collection centre, or consultation and guidance services (Medeghini *et alii*, 2013). Many researchers believe that the staff in Disability Services are still the major factor contributing to the development of a culture of disability on campus (Fleming, Oertle, and Plotner, 2017).

### **3.5. The more active participation of the students**

Listening to SWDs has gradually been placed at the centre of research into the field (Lane, 2017): there is by now a tradition of research that gives SWDs a voice (among the most recent, Squires and Counterline, 2018). The desire of re-

searchers to understand the complexities of SWDs' experiences is reflected in larger-sized samples included in studies (e.g. Madriaga *et alii*, 2010), even though rigorous designs were not always used (Faggella-Luby *et alii*, 2014).

In theory, the direct participation of SWDs in surveys is held to be fundamental in order to gain a better understanding of the barriers that still exist in academic contexts and to identify the most appropriate strategies for reducing them (Seale, 2017). The results of these consultations should also be used to train academic and administrative staff, as this could have a significant impact on qualifying practices (Hopkins, 2011; Fleming, Oertle, and Plotner, 2017).

In this direction, initiatives and tools for evaluating the 'campus climate' are also increasingly widespread (Leake and Stodden, 2014). Successful experiences of involving SWDs have been carried out, for example, in Ontario, Canada (Ebersold, 2008), where certain institutions monitor their degree of accessibility with students. In Ontario again, students, lecturers, and administrative staff are also given the opportunity to participate in identifying needs and in planning the necessary adaptations.

However, this is still a challenge for institutions to consider. Numerous surveys indicate the fact that the contribution of SWDs to the definition of university policy guidelines is relatively unimportant (Moswela and Mukhopadhyay, 2011): their opinions are heard but not listened to (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012).

### 3.6. *The transition entering and leaving higher education*

133

Despite the fact that the transition from secondary school to university is a crucial phase, it is surprising that this process has only been explored seriously in the research in the last ten years (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Wessel *et alii*, 2015).

While there has been an increasing development of pre-university preparation programmes, allowing SWDs to experience campus life ahead of time (e.g. the Italian project 'From High School to University: Supporting Choice and Ensuring Continuity')<sup>5</sup>, this remains a stressful experience for them, a 'transition cliff' (Kochhar-Bryant, Bassett, and Webb, 2009). Their experiences at school do not seem to adequately prepare them for attaining academic success (Bangser, 2008), and transition services are still inadequate or lacking, above all as far as inter-professional and inter-agency collaboration is concerned (McCall, 2015; Lindsay *et alii*, 2018). Research highlights, instead, that the implementation of co-ordinated actions and responsibility well distributed among all the partners involved in this phase – the students, the service providers, the universities/schools, but also social networks and families – are essential (Weedon & Riddell, 2007; Lang, 2013).

Other studies demonstrate the positive impact of the transition planning education received in secondary school on students requesting services at the beginning of their academic career (Newman, Madaus, and Javitz, 2016) and on the disclosure of their disabilities (Lightner *et alii*, 2012). There has also been more

5 <https://www.unito.it/servizi/lo-studio/studenti-con-disabilita/iniziativa-e-progetti-studenti-con-disabilita> (last consulted on 28/06/2019).



emphasis on the importance of supporting SWDs in learning self-advocacy skills during this stage. A further development of these skills can help them indeed to disclose their disability in HE and increase the disclosure rates, which are still low, and to advocate for their learning needs (Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa, 2018; Kutscher and Tuckwiller, 2019).

Finally, another emerging issue is the transition to the world of work. As pointed out for the transition to university, the transition to work requires an ecological approach, which considers the student's skills, the Disability Service and the Career Centre, the companies, and, when necessary, also the families (Cabral *et alii*, 2015).

Yet, currently, the transition to the labour market remains fraught with challenges and employability does not seem to be the main focus in institutional policies (Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler, 2018). According to ANED data (2018), a higher level of education improves rates of employment and reduces the gap with non-disabled graduates; yet it persists in all countries. A few studies on the labour-force status of graduates with disabilities, especially in some countries like Japan and Italy, are available (Boeltzig-Brown, 2017; Bellacicco, 2018).

More generally, there is broad agreement in the literature on the need to promote greater synergies with the job market/companies and to further develop the professional skills of SWDs by means of educational events and access to work experience during their academic careers (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017; Collins, Azmat, & Rentschler, 2018). Additionally, research suggests SWDs' limited use of career services, which in some places are considered to be relatively lacking in training in the area of disability (Mask & DePountis, 2018). The students themselves believe they have to continue to study more than their non-disabled peers in order to become employable, and they are afraid they are still not adequately trained to achieve equivalent success in the world of work (Kim & Williams, 2012; Vlachou & Papananou, 2018).

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to register and reconstruct the evolution of the process of inclusion and accompaniment of SWDs to academic success in HE from the mid 1990s to the present day. Over time, the themes investigated have become increasingly more specific, refined, and complex.

In the first period, the universities concentrated their attention on guaranteeing equality of access to SWDs, making sure primarily that their buildings were adequate and that they provided services of compensatory support. In the second phase, the focus of their interest broadened and concentrated on the many aspects that make up academic life, always bearing in mind a model of UD in relation to the academic strategic plan.

This article is as a starting point for a critical reflection on theoretical issues and on some salient trends found in the literature, with regard to a wide temporal and contextual dimension. Faced with the quantity of the literature available, this literature review has necessarily examined part of the existing research, asking more questions than it answers. At the same time, it has defined some relevant tracks. In fact, several potentially innovative and inclusive themes were highlight-

ed: the quality of the teaching, mediated by technology; the monitoring of the academic careers; the way the Disability Services are set up as resource centers for the campus and support for self-advocacy skills for SWDs, as well as offering 'special' support; the training of academic and administrative staff; and the even more active participation of students, already mentioned in the Salamanca Statement.

In relation to the cultures of the various countries, in a continuum of a slow, progressive tendency towards the inclusion of SWDs, some universities still concentrate more on providing SWDs with individual support; others are gradually adopting policies and practices which are increasingly oriented to orchestrating the forms of accessibility with the UD towards a salient institutional change.

The open challenge is to increase scientific research into these questions, continuing to gather qualitative and quantitative evidence on the academic careers of SWDs and to monitor the changes in progress. What is at stake is the improvement of the academic strategic plan on offer, which reflects on the preparation for adult life and the probability of access and success in the world of work. The growth in the literature on the subject makes it possible and appropriate to have greater recourse to systematic reviews for gathering evidence.

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