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From university to the world of work world.
Traineeship as a gateway to employment and social inclusion

Dall'Università al mondo del lavoro.
Il tirocinio come snodo per l'inclusione lavorativa e sociale

Articoli

ABSTRACT

The university's interconnections are played out through interlocked layers – from research to education, to the socio-economic role. The university participates in networks both in business and social services at the territorial level and contributes to local development and well-being. Concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities, it can play a significant educational and social role within a territory: in addition to supporting enrolled students, it can be a hosting partner of traineeships co-designed and co-managed with social services. The paper reports a case study on Social Inclusive Traineeship activated by the University of Macerata in cooperation with local social and health services institutions. It analyses the process and activities needed to implement inclusive environments and presents the achieved outcomes for those who are not higher education students, but are part of the university's community at territorial level. Findings highlight the relevance of the experience for the construction of the professional and social role of the intern. Conclusions stress the need for further research and joint work within the scientific community to strengthen the capacity of universities to implement inclusive practices with the territory and activate networks through meaningful traineeships.

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1. Introduction

The growing number of students with disabilities enrolled in Italian universities (Giaconi *et al.*, 2019; Rivera *et al.*, 2019; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018; Caldin, 2017; Pino, Mortari, 2014) has consequently led local and university institutions to rethink more equitable forms of accessibility to the world of work (Ghedin, 2021; Bonaccio *et al.*, 2020; Caldin, 2017; Zappaterra, 2012; Lepri, 2009). These considerations call into question the redesigning of life paths, which can find trajectories of meaning and quality also within the labour market (Galanti, Giaconi, Zappaterra, 2021; Giaconi, Del Bianco, 2018; Giaconi, 2015).

As for all young people, including people with disabilities, work represents a crucial element for self-fulfilment toward adulthood (Lepri, 2009). A work activity also shapes a person's identity. Work, therefore, entails an existential component in the achievement of better levels of Quality of Life (Caldin, Friso, 2019; Cottini, Zorzi, Fedeli, 2016; Giaconi, 2015; Friso, 2013; Schalock *et al.*, 2002).

Despite the acknowledged importance of work in self-fulfilment, the employment outcomes of people with disabilities still show significant criticalities (Simonsen *et al.*, 2015). Eurostat (2018) noted that the employment rate of people with difficulties in basic activities is 47.3 %, almost 20 percentage points below that of people without disabilities. For this reason, during the Annual Convention for Inclusive Growth 2018 (ACIG) in April 2018, the European Commission proposed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which sets out 20 principles, many of which refer specifically to the issue of integration for all into the labour market. As stressed in previous works (Paviotti *et al.*, 2021; Giaconi *et al.*, 2020), a revision of strategies is needed to increase the "bridges" between education and work for all persons with disabilities, including university students. A crucial element is related to planning sound processes to reach objectives, thus avoiding unplanned responses to emergency states (Murdaca, Dainese, Maggiolini, 2021; Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018; Nolan *et al.*, 2015; Lepri, 2009).

On this background, this article addresses the issue of work and social inclusion of people and students with disabilities. Specifically, it focuses on how universities can be a privileged inclusive learning context to support the transition to adulthood by activating appropriate strategies for curricular traineeships (Ministerial Decree n. 270/2004) and the deployment of Social Inclusive Traineeships [*Tirocini Inclusione Sociale* – TIS afterwards].

In the following paragraphs, we will investigate how universities can represent places for the construction of life projects for people with disabilities, both for students enrolled in university and for young adults who actively participate in university contexts through Social Inclusive Traineeships. Starting from the assumption that universities could be players within the network of services supporting the life projects of people with disabilities at the territorial level, we report about the pilot project undertaken by the Chair of Pedagogy and Special Didactics of the University of Macerata. In the frame of the Third Mission, the research group implemented initiatives and learning activities for social inclusion through work for young adults with disabilities. Therefore, the university's role is twofold: internal, supporting students with disabilities toward adulthood, and external, as a player in work-based learning pathways at a territorial level for people with disabilities not enrolled in university.

The specificity of the case study presented in this article uniquely represents the new role that the university can take on in the network of services to substantiate social inclusion. In other words, the university goes from being a promoter of learning and training courses for the benefit of the outside world (companies, bodies, institutions, etc.) to being a privileged place for young people with disabilities to experiment with processes of self-determination, to acquire new professional skills, to maintain social relations with their peers and to promote new social and work roles.

2. Role of the University in the territory

Before signing the Bologna Declaration, there has been a shift toward a more societal role of universities (Zomer, Benneworth, 2011; Goddard, 2009). In past decades, there has been a growing reflection on the regional role of universities, leading to models such as the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz, 2008), the regional innovation system approach (Cooke, 2004), Mode-2 knowledge production (Gibbons, 1994), and the civic university (Goddard *et al.*, 2013; Goddard, 2009). All proposals for this 'new role of the universities' consider the higher education institutions as key players within the regional innovation system from a socio-economic point of view, contributing to sustainable development and promotion of fundamental values for the collective wellbeing. University-Business

Cooperation (UBS) is encouraged at the European[1] and the national levels and includes curricular internships as mobility of students (Davey *et al.*, 2018, p. 40).

In Italy, educational and labour policies promote an active role within the regional socio-economic system, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan[2], by recognising the skills mismatch and the limited transfer of research results into the production system, provides specific actions for tertiary level of education. Concerning the universities' role at territorial level, the National Agency for Research Evaluation is appointed to assess the knowledge and technological transfer (Decree of the President of the Republic No. 7, 1/2010); educational evaluation includes work-based learning. Students' feedback has a significant role on this point.

Training and orientation internships were introduced into the Italian system by Article 18 of Law no. 196/1997 (so-called Treu Package) and operationalised through the Inter-Ministerial Decree No. 142 of March 25, 1998[3]. The Ministry of Labour then provided further specifications through Circulars (in 1998[4] and 2004[5]). According to the Law, the university can activate internships recognised through learning credits, valid for degrees attainment (this is the case of curricular internships), and internships not recognised through learning credits, but that have value in preparation for future work (non-curricular internships, or traineeships). For its graduates, the universities can activate traineeship, some limitation can be applied concerning the geographical coverage, e.g., only in their Region, except for specific financing programmes (such as the case of Erasmus Traineeships), or to the time after graduation (e.g., only newly graduates). However, either for graduates or other educational levels, the university can always host traineeships activated by other actors.

Traineeships (after graduation, or anyway non-curricular), besides educational organisations, can be activated by public employment services, disability offices, public centres concerned by training and guidance offer, social cooperatives and other organisations dealing with disability, if registered in special lists.

Concerning people with disabilities, the Law establishes special provisions related to length (up to 24 months), while other special conditions are foreseen by other Laws and regulations, depending on specific fields (e.g., Ministry of Education for curricular internships within universities).

Universities, therefore, have legal instruments to take advantage of the work-based learning pathways to strengthen links with the territory and contribute both to local development and professionalisation of human capital for socio-economic wellbeing. While curricular and non-curricular internships are widespread and the university is recognised as a key player in activating and managing them, its role as hosting organisation is less known. Instead, the university can play a significant educational and social role within a territory also by hosting interns, including those with disabilities. In the latter sense, in fact, the setting up of a network by the university context with the social services can represent a significant opportunity for co-designing the creation of new inclusive scenarios able to foster human development and the promotion of lifelong learning.

2.1 University for young people with disabilities as a gateway to work: critical issues

The National Guidelines (CNUDD, 2014) and previous research in the field (Paviotti *et al.*, 2021; D'Angelo, Del Bianco, 2019; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018; Caldin, 2017) highlight theoretical lines and implementation practices that guide Italian Universities in ensuring the full accessibility and inclusion of all university students, including those with disabilities. However, among the main criticalities detected in obtaining an academic degree, the question of the accessibility of internships is still open.

The legislation stipulates, for all students, that 'curricular' internship experiences have been an integral part of academic training since 2004. Ministerial Decree no. 270 of October 22, 2004 establishes that in addition to the educational activities qualifying the study courses, curricula must include educational activities related to internships and training periods in third-party organisations (companies, public administrations, public or private bodies, etc.). According to the same Decree, curricular internships are work experiences promoted by the university and based on special agreements that regulate the relationships between the bodies involved in the internship activities (Paviotti *et al.*, 2021).

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1 https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/innovation-in-education/university-business-cooperation_en
2 https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf
3 http://presidenza.governo.it/normativa/diprus/DM142_1998.pdf
4 http://bancadati.anpalservizi.it/bdds/download?fileName=C_21_NormativaNazionale_786_documenti_itemName_0_documento.pdf&uid=a38152a0-b978-466b-83ca-8d540832345c
5 http://bancadati.anpalservizi.it/bdds/download?fileName=C_21_NormativaNazionale_416_documenti_itemName_0_documento.pdf&uid=ec3d4633-1acd-4e2c-b5c1-a8cd9220eea4

In detail about the placement of students with disabilities, Italian universities pursue the principles of personalisation and reasonable accommodation underlying the CNUDD Guidelines (2014).

The internship experiences of students with disabilities, despite the widespread consensus (Caldin, Scollo 2018; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018; Nolan, 2015; Briel, Getzel, 2001) and the regulating legislation (Ministerial Decree 270/2004; CNUDD, 2014), still suffer from internal and external misalignments between theory and practice. This misalignment affects the acquisition of professional skills and vocational awareness and maturity, central in entering the labour market after graduation (Paviotti *et al.*, 2021; Espada-Chavarria *et al.*, 2020).

Several critical issues arise concerning the accessibility of curricular and non-curricular internships: among those, a crucial point is the existence of an inclusive network to support students with disabilities.

By keeping the perspectives of employers, i.e., host institutions, the literature (Riesen, Oertle, 2019; Simeon *et al.*, 2015) points out that three factors can influence the reception/hiring of interns and trainees with disabilities: (a) desire to diversify the workforce, (b) desire to expand job opportunities for youth, and (c) commitment to give back to the community (Riesen, Oertle, 2019, p. 15). Instead, disincentives include difficulties in structuring specific support for the accessibility of internship training activities and some stereotypical beliefs due to the lack of inclusive culture. The scarce availability of hosting organisations, then, puts in danger the design and implementation of effective work-based learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Paviotti *et al.*, 2021).

The quality of design and the capacity to implement significant learning experiences are not enough: the network of relations is also crucial to enable students with disabilities to participate in internship programmes. The same applies to newly graduates and traineeship experiences for work insertion.

2.2 The University, a territorial place for growth for young people: social inclusion traineeships

As we have already pointed out in previous research (Del Bianco *et al.*, 2020; D'Angelo, Del Bianco, 2019; Giaconi *et al.*, 2018), universities should foster inclusion processes, being par excellence places of aggregation for community and social life.

The university context should rethink its mission, which is not merely institutional (Caldin, 2017) but generative of inclusive contexts and opportunities, also for the most fragile students, to experiment with social roles and growth (Bocci *et al.*, 2020; Gariboldi *et al.*, 2020; Gilson *et al.*, 2020; Galimberti *et al.*, 2016; d'Alonzo, 2009).

Universities should, therefore, engage in new generative links with the local area to support the achievement of widespread education and greater social democratisation (Mura, 2011). On this assumption, the university can be the place for encountering and social exchange in the frame of qualitatively inclusive processes. For people with disabilities not enrolled in higher education, the university can still be an educational place and driver of social inclusion. For these reasons, the organisation's network should be extended to all the material and personal resources that are typically present in the building of educational pathways, to be, on the one hand, qualifying for the person with disabilities and, on the other, a promoter of inclusive processes capable of creating cultural interconnections.

Traineeships for people with disabilities not enrolled in the university can be an opportunity to pursue that aim and, as previously mentioned, the most effective instrument to the aim in Italy is the TIS. This type of traineeship is regulated by the "Guidelines for orientation, training and insertion/reinsertion apprenticeships aimed at social inclusion, personal autonomy and rehabilitation" agreed by the State-Regions Conference of 22.01.2015[6]. According to the Guidelines, it is addressed to people taken into care by the professional social service or by the competent health services who need personalised assessment, counselling and guidance paths for the purposes of social and work inclusion and the acquisition of personal autonomy. Traineeships are a social activation measure, expressly aimed at supporting empowerment and autonomy processes at personal, family and social level. In Italy, Regions are appointed to implement this type of intervention, therefore each Region and Autonomous Province set up specific regulations for the purpose.

In the Marche Region, where the University of Macerata is located, the provision entered into force in 2016[7], then amended and further regulated by the Resolution n. 593/2018[8]. Key features of the instrument include:

– the addressed target, thus people taken into care by the professional social service or by the competent health services

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6   http://archivio.statoregioni.it/DettaglioDoc83eb.html?IDDoc=46234&IdProv=13747&tipodoc=2&CONF=CSR
7   Resolution of the Regional Council 293/2016.
8   http://www.norme.marche.it/Delibere/2018/DGR0593_18.pdf

- the design of a personalised training project agreed upon by the person in charge of the trainee, the promoting subject, the promoter, the host subject and the trainee, which defines the objectives to be attained, as well as the modalities of implementation; the coherence between the personalised training plan and the with the Individualised Care Plan (IAP) defined at the time of taking charge should be ensured
- a maximum duration of 24 months
- a compulsory allowance for participation in the traineeship for the trainee. The costs can be sustained by the promoting body or the host body or the legal entity in charge of the trainee or another legal entity.

The promoter of the traineeship can be any organisation appointed for active labour policies (therefore educational and training institutions, labour agencies, employment centres, public bodies and agencies at local level, health system agencies, agencies accredited for labour services, and subjects of the Third Sector/social sector formally cooperating with the health system).

Both public and private organisations can host a TIS.

3. Traineeship at the heart of a new Integrated Learning System for inclusion: a case study

From a pedagogical point of view, regarding the importance of supporting the transition processes of students with disabilities or DSA, specifically during the curricular pathway and after graduation, the University of Macerata acts following the CNUDD guidelines (2014). Internships and traineeships can be an essential test to plan or possibly rethink one's future career, allowing students to acquire professional skills and self-awareness and self-responsibility in designing their life projects. Work-based learning allows to initiate or strengthen the relationship between the student, and the world of work and match skills needs with individual aspirations. To support the process, the University, in the frame of the Inclusion 3.0 project (Giaconi, Del Bianco, 2018), created a specific professional profile, the "specialised tutor", already mentioned in previous research (Paviotti *et al.*, 2021). In detail, the tutor acts as a facilitator for the student's insertion into the organisation system. At the same time, s/he works within the organisation to prepare an inclusive environment. Finally, s/he supports the development of professional and social skills of the intern, supporting him/her throughout the process of learning at work. Therefore, the specialised tutor mediates between all parties' expectations during the placement (company, university, student, student's family), activating all the resources available from the university and the social and family network. In his/her role of "bridging" the different systems involved, this professional figure manages to keep the relationship between the company, the university, and the intern's family and/or friends.
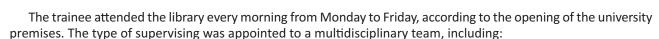
Thanks to the work of specialised tutors, the University of Macerata has created over time a rather vast local network of private and public bodies and companies that host interns with disabilities.

The network created as a sending organisation for interns with disabilities created the condition for the university to also become a hosting organisation for disabled interns. Through the TIS instrument, the university then hosted a twenty-four years old man with physical disabilities. The trainee was supported by the Agenzia Sanitaria Unica Regionale (Single Regional Health Authority, following ASUR) and a rehabilitation centre of the area. Since leaving school, the family and the services of the territory had already activated a form of TIS which, over time, presented limits in terms of social integration and construction of meaningful relationships. For this reason, the chair of Pedagogy and Special Didactics at the University of Macerata, together with the family, the person with disability and the local services, created a TIS project at the Department of Education Sciences library, among the places most frequently visited by university students and lecturers. The project was implemented before the pandemic and will be reactivated in September 2021.

Therefore, the start-up and development of the project was based on co-design and joint planning between different bodies and training agencies of the territory, such as ASUR, the social service, the family and a hosting body (usually companies, bodies, various institutions). The innovative aspect with respect to the classic networks that are activated for TIS lies in the interpretation of the university as the privileged location for a traineeship for work insertion and social inclusion.

Based on the trainee's functioning profile and the objectives of the life project, the internship project aimed at:
- Gaining some skills in managing library practices (categorisation, lending books to students, etc.) with the support of assistive technologies;
- Building opportunities for interaction with peers and university students;
- Promoting pathways to self-determination;
- Favouring the adoption of a social and professional role within the traineeship environment.

The trainee attended the library every morning from Monday to Friday, according to the opening of the university premises. The type of supervising was appointed to a multidisciplinary team, including:

- A tutor as a social mediator and as an operational model of the procedures to be acquired;
- An educator to foster integration with peers and other university students (e.g., at break times).

Those professionals also have the fundamental task of making the matching between what is the functioning profile of the young person with disabilities and the working system, in which the TIS will be played out. The aim of this action is to support the recognition of the trainee as a real intern by the business environment; the trainee then should work to internalise the professional and social role (Cornacchia, 2015).

The tutor and the educator also took care of preparing an accessible working environment and specific assistive technologies to enable the intern to carry out the planned tasks.

Specific training was added for the use of the selected assistive technologies and the software for the autonomous management of library procedures.

The traineeship period lasted two years. At the end, the most important objective achieved resulted in social integration with peers and with young university students: since after the school leaving one of the major risks is social isolation, this objective was in fact considered as top priority (Gariboldi, Pugnaghi, 2020; Pinnelli, Fiorucci, 2019; Bell, Clegg, 2012; Goussot, 2009).

Furthermore, the TIS gave the opportunity to strengthen the processes of self-determination within a structured environment with specific material resources and with the support of a tutor, thus laying the basis for an important pathway of acquisition of competences, fostering conscious choice and decision-making within the working contexts. An additional objective achieved was to foster the assumption of the social and working role: the young person with disability had the opportunity to experience the professional role within the library and at the same time had the chance to show a new social role, namely that of a young person who is a trainee.

The TIS route then underwent a change due to the pandemic. In this case, the network of the territory with the university was fundamental in order to guarantee the possibility of continuing the TIS through teleworking. In this regard, the technological instruments that the trainee used in the University Library were guaranteed on loan for use and delivered to his home, and an online environment was built to allow him to interact with the company tutor and the support tutor. In the ending phases, the presence of an older brother made possible to guarantee home support. In this case, there were several training meetings for the sibling so that he could provide the right home support in coherence with the TIS training course.

Conclusions

The data of recent national reports (ANVUR-CNUDD, 2021[9]; Disability, DSA and access to university education, 2021) leave room for reflection on the promotion of educational environments in Italian universities that are able to increasingly support the different functioning profiles of students and thus offer opportunities for personal fulfilment and professional development (Antonietti *et al*., 2020; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018; d'Alonzo, 2009). As confirmed by the literature (Mura, 2018; Caldin, 2017), University is expected to respond to diversified needs of students to provide multiple and personalised intervention strategies. To ensure inclusive pathways able to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the world of work, the University is called upon to create highly qualified and personalised educational and training plans that can be implemented through the practice of internships and traineeships. In fact, if it is well organised and structured, this allows young people with disabilities to achieve a training that is useful for dealing not only with the world of production, but also with the social world (Salerni, 2016).

From this point of view, it represents a training experience able to contribute to the development and growth of the future professional, and necessarily requires the active participation of the subjects involved in the process (*Ibidem*). The practice of practical traineeship solicits, therefore, allows "to inhabit everyone's contexts; [...] to come to terms with boundaries [...] making us cognitively exercise with complexity and overcoming problems" (Caldin, 2017, p. 192).

The goal of spreading an inclusive culture by universities should then address the broader social contexts and not limited to provide opportunities for enrolled students. The university context can become a privileged place for the activation of Social Inclusive Traineeship paths for young adults with disabilities, who can thus attend social

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9 http://convegnocnudd2021.unifg.it/

and work environments, which are both relevant for social dimension (for the age of students and trainees) and already prepared for the implementation of personalised and inclusive paths.

In line with several studies conducted by the scientific community of special pedagogy aimed at the enhancement of pathways to promote the adulthood of people with disabilities (Mura, Tatulli, Agrillo, 2021; Bocci, Cajola, Zucca, 2020; Del Bianco, 2019; Caldin, 2017; Aiello *et al*., 2017; Cottini, 2016; Cornacchia, 2015; d'Alonzo, 2009; Goussot, 2009; Pavone, 2009; Lascioli, Menegoi, 2006), the presented case study allowed to represent how it is possible to promote both self-determination and the assumption of a professional and social role for young people with disabilities through TIS (Caldin, Scollo, 2018; Cornacchia, 2015).

In conclusion, the implementation of fair and accessible traineeships also for people with disabilities requires not only the sharing of a physical place, but inclusive communities able to share clear values, policies, and practices (Cottini, 2021; Giaconi *et al*., 2020; Caldin, Scollo, 2018; Cologon, 2014). For this reason, we believe it is fundamental to start from the methods already experimented, in order to make the past experience functional to the future needs of the labour market. Therefore, we believe that it is advisable to implement good and widespread practices that can also be shared in other social, cultural and institutional contexts, to truly activate meaningful networking. In this sense, we relaunch the idea of drafting guidelines that can promote and guide inclusive traineeship processes.

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