

Italian Case: The Role of Learning Processes in University Inclusion

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This proposal is focused on the first outputs of the doctoral thesis "Universitabile" based, specifically, on the relationship between educational inclusion (Ainscow & Miles, 2009) and ICT (Information and Communications Technology). Starting from a review of the literature on the role of universities as places of inclusion and confrontation with diversity (Bolt & Penketh, 2016; Moriña & Gavira, 2015), the proposal analyses the inclusion strategies by three main universities in Rome: La Sapienza, Tor Vergata and Roma Tre through a mixed method approach. We will show the answers to interviews administered to operators of dedicated services. In this context, ICT, during the Covid-19 emergency, acted as a facilitator allowing people with disabilities to benefit from distance learning, but also as a barrier, since the evidence shows that technology, if conceived as a facilitator but designed only on the basis of the characteristics of able-bodied users, can represent an obstacle factor. In this sense, as found by Tsatsou (2020), the inclusion of people with disabilities can be facilitated by the use of digital technologies. This view is also found in Valentini (2008), who emphasises how the use of digital technologies is a prerequisite for the development of concrete solutions. To conclude, it would be appropriate to rethink technology on the basis of Universal Design, i.e. "an approach to the design of technologies that pays more attention to the concept of universal usability: buildings and tools should be conceived, designed and constructed in a way to be usable by all" (Fiocco & Martinati, 2002, p. 232).

Keywords: digital inclusion, Universal Design, students with disabilities

Introduction

This proposal aims to examine the issue of university inclusion of students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs), in relation to the role of digital technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the objective of understanding, through the voices of professionals involved in the provision of specific services and through the documents produced by universities, whether, and how far, technology has actually acted as a facilitator of learning, as prescribed by numerous supranational and national legislation.

Having referred to the normative aspects of the issue helps us to bring to the attention of the academic community the first research outputs of the doctoral thesis project entitled "Universitabile: indagine sull'inclusione universitaria degli studenti con disabilità e DSA nel contesto universitario romano", which, starting from a review of the literature on the role of universities as places of inclusion and confrontation with diversity (Bolt & Penketh, 2016; Moriña & Gavira, 2015), analyses the inclusion strategies of the three main universities in Rome: La Sapienza, Tor Vergata and Roma Tre. Strictly speaking, with regard to the research

design, this is based on a mixed methods approach (Mauceri, 2017), based on the combined use of qualitative (focused interviews and focus groups) and quantitative (survey) techniques. It is divided into four main phases: “background research” (Corbetta, 1999), in which the aim was to verify the existence of a database for each university, while at the same time mapping the services through interviews with the staff of the dedicated offices; design of a semi-structured questionnaire administered to students with disabilities and SLDs in the online mode (web survey); monovariate and bivariate analysis of the data (Di Franco, 2011); focus groups (Corrao, 2000) for policy suggestions on a voluntary way. Specifically, the contribution deals with in-depth focused interviews (Merton & Kendall 2012 [1946]) administered to the operators of the dedicated services (“background research” phase), in the period May-July 2021, facing, also, the issue of barriers and facilitation mechanisms.

In order to better understand the theme of the role of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) in the learning processes and university inclusion of students with disabilities and SLDs, it seems useful to provide a terminological clarification on different concepts, but, in equal measure, interrelated to give an explanation of the issue: the concept of educational inclusion, the theme of technology as a facilitator (Universal Design) or, vice versa, as an obstacle (digital divide) and, finally, the COVID-19 pandemic, in this meaning extendible to the definition of emergency provided by Perez and Thompson (1994), understood as an event that causes extensive and profound damage, which goes beyond the capacity of any community to cope with it, thus requiring external interventions. This emergency period has, in fact, overturned, on the one hand, social habits, and on the other, the functioning of institutions, within which it is possible to include the university where, however, “digital technologies have made it possible to continue ordinary activities (...) through the main tool of the e-learning, thus guaranteeing the right to study” (Fasanella, Lo Presti, & Parziale, 2020, p. 96). At this point of the discussion, in order to complete the theoretical framework of reference, it is perhaps useful to provide a definition of educational inclusion (Ainscow & Miles, 2009), to be understood as a process of systematic improvement that educational administrations and universities must address in an attempt to recognise and remove barriers of various types and at different levels (macro, meso and micro), which limit the presence, learning and participation of students in the university life, with particular care for the most vulnerable ones.

Relationship Between ICT and Inclusion. Italian Context and Normative References

From this point of view, it is appropriate to open the paper with a specific reference to the EU Strategy 2021-2030, which recognises, among the main guidelines for the concrete realisation of inclusive contexts, understood as accessible physical and virtual environments, the strengthening of ICT, implementing digital access through the preparation of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2021, art. 8), which provides for the allocation of resources to guarantee an accessible digital environment, in order to prepare inclusive digitalised learning modes, promoting the concept of universal design for all. In Italy, in fact, as early as 1992, Article 8 of Law no. 104 provided, for the inclusion and social integration of persons with disabilities, measures to make the right to study effective “with particular reference to educational and technical equipment, programmes, specialised languages [...]” (L.n. 104/1992, art. 8, lett. d). The provision was supplemented and further delimited by Law no. 04/2004 laying down provisions to facilitate disabled people’s access to IT tools, aimed at guaranteeing the right, in particular to disabled people, to “access all information sources and related services, including those that are articulated through IT and telematic tools” (L.n. 04/2004,

art. 1, para. 1). The law then provides, in Article 2, a definition of accessibility to IT tools, as well as a further specification on the concept of assistive technologies, to be intended as “tools and technical solutions, hardware and software, that enable the disabled person, by overcoming or reducing the conditions of disadvantage, to access the information and services provided by IT systems” (L.n. 04/2004, art. 2, co. 1, lett. b), by providing computerised textbooks for state schools, an aspect which, in the state universities that are the subject of this study, has not yet been fully implemented to date, and carries with it considerable difficulties, as can be learnt directly from the words of those working in services for students with disabilities and SLDs who took part in the survey, who expressed themselves on the topic as follows:

For example, the one that always emerges, concerns this rigidity of the publishing houses, no, the granting there where it is needed... The accessible material... Especially for the blind or in any case the pdf for accessible formats, we always buy the print copy, but in the end it is difficult. (Key informant 8, rector’s delegate disability and SLDs, Tor Vergata)

Another critical element is accessibility from the teaching point of view as regards the functioning of some services, one example above all, that of digital texts. Many times we have difficulty finding digital texts, this is a bit of a national problem, because there is a whole problem with the publishing houses, this is a problem that we are also trying with the university libraries to solve. (Key informant 3, head of disability and SLDs sector, Sapienza)

On the same topic, another employee (Key informant 12, rector’s delegate, Roma Tre) states:

Well, we try everything to make these texts accessible, but then you have to deal with the publisher, and I also contacted the head of digital publishing and she told me that it is also a matter of national policy, not a university policy. And then we also joined the possibility of accrediting ourselves as an accredited body for text accessibility. This was an issue just this year.

Principal Evidences from Key Informants

The employees also expressed their opinion on the pandemic period, regarding the Covid-19 crisis, Key informant 8 (rector’s delegate disability and SLDs, Tor Vergata) states: “the Covid crisis that completely changed the way of accessing, requesting, etc., going all on telematics”, and, again, “we reduced to the essentials, the essentials mean that we focused on the problems that suddenly came up as new because of the forced distance”. In this regard, Key informant 6, an employee in the role of student tutor, reinforces the concept by stating: “in this pandemic situation I practically only interact with the students [...] because now my job has moved online, so that means I have to follow their lessons online”.

The issue is also echoed in the words of Key informant 11 (dedicated student office desk, Tor Vergata), who states as follows: “in this last year, unfortunately, there has been more of a focus on addressing the emergency, so there has been a search for remedies for distance learning and all the problems there have been”. The Key informant then goes on to point out that the pandemic has burdened the modes of communication between students, lecturers and the service, as can be seen from the following testimony: “the problems, as you can imagine, have now been accentuated with the pandemic [...]. Perhaps, some communications may still be published and provided in a way that is not entirely usable [...]. So the criticality is communication” (Key informant 11). It seems clear that the Key informant refers to the online communication modes not always accessible to students with disabilities and SLDs.

However, online communication is not the only element of complexity encountered, in fact, to date, even the use of platforms commonly used for teaching (e.g. Meet, Zoom, Skype, Teams, etc.) also presents a number of critical issues, as can be seen from the words of Key informant 2 (staff member disability and SLDs):

Sapienza had to organise itself [...] in a very short time and organising distance learning must not have been easy, also because we have some very experienced lecturers, telling a lecturer: “do the lesson on meet”, oh my god! [...] we ended up being computer experts [...]. Almost as if you can’t do without it now. “Ah why don’t you use this, why don’t you use that, ah but you know if you use Zoom you can foreground a person and see the teacher’s screen at the same time. On Meet you can’t do that because if the lecturer shares his screen you can’t see all the people, you can’t see them big, but you see them small”. I mean, we have become experts.

The testimony refers on the one hand to the individual resilience of the professionals in adapting to the new systems, and on the other hand to the problems in the use of the lectures delivered by the teaching staff.

Nevertheless, further excerpts demonstrate the benefits and resilience of the universities in service delivery, students at this phase “preferred to study at home and used our distance tutoring, they studied with the tutor on Skype. The student at home, and the peer tutor at his home instead” (Key informant 2), in the same interview, further on, we can read a somewhat surprising fact “we have students who studied and finished their thesis with the tutor from home, sharing the Word file of the thesis in drive and editing it in real time”. Another employee (Key informant 5, specialised tutor, Sapienza) states:

let’s think about online tutoring for example. Study tutoring done via Meet. How many students find it difficult to go to university? And how convenient is tutoring done that way? So we have probably cleared customs in a new way. I’ll tell you more, nowadays, for example, even the application for study mentoring is done through forms, online forms.

However, this way of doing didactics (Distance Learning) (D.P.C.M, 2020) does not only have positive aspects, as can be read from the following excerpt: “Marx tells us about alienation, right? Let’s talk about alienation at work, can you imagine going into a Meet chat and a Classroom, into a lesson and taking notes for a person you have seen maybe only once on Zoom, on Meet and handing him the notes?” (Key informant 5), in the same way the following statement “I stay at home, I follow the lesson while I do the laundry” (Key informant 2, staff member disability and SLDs, Sapienza) raises some practical perplexities, on the efficacy of online learning.

Probably the latter assertion reminds us that technological tools are not enough for the process of active learning to actually take place (Cesareni & Pascucci, 2011).

Discussion

The aspect just mentioned is confirmed by further studies in which, regarding the relationship between distance learning and Covid-19, it is possible to read: “the change in the didactic offer seems to have been characterised by a level of structuring and innovation that is not always adequate to maintain students’ interest, making their daily work difficult” (Fasanella et al., 2020, p. 102). In this sense, as found by Tsatsou (2020), technology, in fact, if conceived as a facilitator but designed only on the basis of the characteristics of able-bodied users, can represent an obstacle factor, risking not performing the function of alleviating stigma of people with disabilities, which in fact consists of:

- helping them perform daily tasks and assisting them in overcoming the difficulties associated with their condition;
- enabling them to connect with those who have the same type of disability, which increases their sense of belonging and improves their social integration;
- facilitate processes of self-identification and confidence in communicating with others mediated by technology.

Considering the condition of digital exclusion (digital divide) to which our country is exposed, experienced even more by students with disabilities and SLDs, who are often excluded from the design of lessons and activities for them, becoming the object of what Burgstahler (2015) defined as the second digital divide, having access to technology but not all the advantages experienced by their able-bodied counterparts, as pointed out in the introductory pages of this essay. This conclusion is also shared by Goggin and Newell (2003), who express further doubts on this topic, stating that the promises of digital technologies to overcome the problems of disability are overestimated and have not been fully realised. According to researchers, rather than creating a system of inclusion, these have had the opposite effect, further isolating people with physical impairments and becoming “a double-edged sword” (Byerley & Chambers, 2002, p. 169). A view is shared and echoed by Tobias (2003), who pronounces on the UD movement’s “uncritical belief in the benefits of technology” (Tobias, 2003, p. 1); for the author, the realisation of technological benefits requires the UD movement to adopt a non-deterministic point of view that conceives technology as a socio-cultural construction, embodied and shaped by values, human intentionality, and actions, rather than asserting the independent nature and power of technology by itself. This view is also shared and found in Valentini (2008), who emphasises how the use of digital technologies is a prerequisite for the development of concrete solutions, since these “break down boundaries and create a new deterritorialised space that can be accessed by a wider range of users than that represented by traditional students” (Valentini, 2008, p. 17). In fact, the author goes on to say that deterritorialisation “creates the prerequisites for carrying out actions and accessing services related to didactics and university training from different places: from home, from the workplace, from other centres that do not coincide with the university’s premises, such as decentralised poles” (ibidem, p. 22). The latter process is considerably accelerated by the Covid-19 emergency, which provides the basis for rethinking technology in the light of the concept of Universal Design, i.e. “an approach to the design of technologies that pays greater attention to the concept of universal usability: buildings and tools must be conceived, designed and constructed in such a way as to be usable by all” (Fiocco & Martinati, 2002, p. 232); this approach, to date, has not yet been fully implemented in the educational sphere, as can be seen from further empirical evidence: “such experiences are still far from an educational approach of ‘innovative learning’, marked by the use of a plurality of digital tools and on the discussion and creation of content by the participants [...]” (Fasanella et al., 2020, p. 101). This is the direction taken by the guidelines of the Roma Tre and Sapienza Universities, prescribing that “on the basis of the requests of the student with disabilities, it would be appropriate to adapt the teaching material [...] in the format most suited to the type of need and the most congenial study method” (Vademecum Roma Tre, p. 9), especially through the use of teaching materials in digital format, in this regard, the Sapienza University goes further, providing criteria for the preparation of SLDs-friendly slides and lessons (Linee guida Sapienza, 2019, sect. 2, ch. 10), thanks to the use of Information and Communications Technology, reiterating, however, that the way in which these measures and tools are applied is left to the discretion of the teacher in the exercise of “teaching autonomy”. This brings us back to the question that technology can correctly fulfil its function exclusively in support of man and not in substitution of him, an aspect that can also be seen in the last excerpts of the interview we propose, in which the staff describes the technical equipment of the new multimedia classroom as follows:

starting apart from the individual PCs that have voice synthesis, to the braille keyboard, from the braille bar, to the mouse pointers for people with motor difficulties there is really a lot that precisely the student in the case in which he is here within the university and needs to study in a specific room with specific tools can come. (Key informant 2, staff member disability and SLDs, Sapienza)

In the same interview, later on, we read, however: “it was a richness that during the pandemic period we had to stop” (Key informant 2), an aspect that links to the final thesis of our paper.

Conclusions

Universities today still stand as one of the main spaces of social life, contributing, as an institution, to breaking down material and immaterial barriers that exclude certain categories of students. As argued by Chiang (2019), in fact, they play a key function both in the implementation of services and in the recognition of a culture of disability, emphasising the following aspects: providing safe and welcoming spaces, emphasising the positive aspects of disability, educating the university community in non-discrimination, connecting the university and the local community through shared programmes, also making use of digital technologies, to which several studies recognise the usefulness as regards the satisfaction of relational needs (Addeo, Catone, & Parziale, 2020) in an emergency context such as the pandemic, but which, however, are only an option and cannot totally replace traditional socialisation contexts. This is even more true for students with disabilities and SLDs, for whom the university is also a space for peer socialisation, which the pandemic, with its forced distancing, has contributed significantly to reduce.

In this new phase that we are going through, as a university community it would be opportune to bear in mind the positive heritage that the pandemic situation has left us in terms of the digitalisation of the country, reflecting on the enhancement of ICT and the reduction of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017), implementing, if necessary, some forms of mixed teaching, taking care, however, not to consider distance learning as the panacea for solving “all evils”, since its abuse could lead “in germs to a reversal of perspective, which from the anti-discriminatory strategy and the egalitarian ideal risk opening the door to the most extreme differentialism” (Piccone Stella, 2003, p. 65).

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