

University-to-Work Transition: Resources and Challenges for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The paper presents the first results of a doctoral research project in Social Pedagogy. It is based on the analysis of twenty interviews with graduates and students with disabilities in Italy. The subject of university-to-work transition is explored in relation to the legislation, as well as the characteristics and experiences of interviewees. The data collected highlights the possibility of pursuing a degree and working, even in the presence of significant functional limitations. Universities are poorly connected to the world of work, despite their ability to support higher education pathways. Job placement services remain underutilised and are not well known. The study proposes the implementation of qualitative research, with the participation and contribution of all stakeholders, in order to deepen the knowledge of the issues under investigation, balancing protection and promotion of the rights to training and work for all.

Keywords: *students with disabilities; workers with disabilities; university-to-work transition; social pedagogy; pedagogy of work; qualitative research*

1. Introduction

Higher education pathways aim to provide better employment opportunities, although the knowledge and skills acquired are not always immediately transferable in today's labour market. The factors involved in finding and keeping a job are multiple, and university-work transition theories (Kyndt et al., 2017) explore this area, also with the aim of improving interventions and policies. For people with disabilities, in particular, access to higher education and employment is hampered by cultural and environmental barriers which demand the attention of educational institutions and other social actors. According to the surveys conducted, job placement is more difficult for people with disabilities (European Disability Forum, 2023; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica [ISTAT], 2022).

In light of the significance of work for an independent life, international documents place particular emphasis on the rights to education and employment (United Nations Convention on

the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; The European Disability Strategy 2021-2030; The Charter of Solofagnano, 2024). In Italy and in most countries, these rights are protected by national laws which establish specialised services and introduce obligations on public and private employers.

In academic literature, there is now a growing interest in and focus on issues related to the adult life of people with disabilities. This includes higher education and employment opportunities (Aust et al., 2014; Bellacicco & Parisi, 2020; Cottini et al., 2016; Giaconi, 2015; Friso & Scollo, 2018; Israelite et al., 2005; Laschioli et al., 2022). The studies explore the challenging issues that the independent living movement, disability studies and the bio-psycho-social paradigm have raised in recent decades. If the rights of people with disabilities are recognised and regulated, their implementation requires the design of integrated and multidisciplinary interventions to foster, at all stages of life, a balance between protection and promotion.

This paper presents the first results of a doctoral research project in Social Pedagogy, still in progress. It analyses the results of a first phase survey on the university studies and working conditions of twenty university graduates or students with disabilities enrolled at university, in the Rome area. The study describes some characteristics of their study and employment pathways based on the, sometimes dichotomous, demands of protection and promotion. Graduates (and university students) in university-to-work transition go from an educational environment, which accompanies and protects them, to the world of work where productivity and competitive skills, reduce or significantly change this protection. In this regard, it is important for the university (but also for schools and vocational training) to understand how to realistically co-design interventions concerning people and environments, in collaboration with all stakeholders, to improve students' skills and promote processes of full socio-occupational participation in today's labour market (Santi & Di Masi, 2018).

2. Protection vs promotion for people with disabilities

International and national legal systems provide specific rules to recognise and safeguard the rights of the most fragile people. The protection of the right to study and work entails the promotion of the person who, in the enjoyment of these rights, can find possibilities for social and professional fulfilment. Pedagogical studies and practices, in formal and non-formal educational contexts, must take into account the dual purpose of these laws and avoid that protective measures reduce the developmental capacities of people with disabilities (Biagiotti & Sannipoli, 2022; Marchisio & Curto, 2019).

The protection and promotion issues in the university-to-work transition proposed here require a brief examination of the rules governing university studies and access to the world of work. Since there exist various laws and policies at the national level, the study considers two important Italian legal references to define the topics of interest: Law No 17/99 on University

Studies, and Law No 68/99 on Job Placement. Two national laws, enacted in the same year: a) Law No 17/99 has increased the protection of the rights of people with disabilities on university courses, following the recognition of their right to access to university studies by Law No 104/92; b) Law No 68/99, which repealed Law No 482/68, has introduced important changes in job placement (Bombelli & Finzi, 2008). Labour regulations have been further amended through various legislative measures (e.g. D.M. n. 43/2022, D.lgs. n. 62/2024). Despite these interventions, especially by employers, there is a need to review the placement system (Fasola, 2025), also in view of changes in the labour market.

Law No 17/99, on the other hand, would better respond to the needs arising in university settings, although it is worth noting that these conditions are also protected by other laws for students with specific needs (e.g. Law No 170/2010). Some parts of the training pathway (such as the internship) are regulated at university or specific degree course levels, and in professional contexts, but are not generally specified.

In the following paragraphs, overall reflections will be proposed in order to focus attention on how these laws protect and promote the development of people with disabilities. It should be noted that the analysis aims to focus only on a few macro-elements, which are relevant for the purposes of this paper.

2.1. Protection

Law No 17/99 identifies for students with disabilities an articulated offer of services, figures and supports, which universities have introduced to improve the accessibility to study pathways. To be eligible for benefits, students must present a certificate of their status. Special needs protection therefore is not automatic, but can be granted on request by the student. In addition, due to the objectives to be achieved on each course of study and activity, professors and university staff may identify appropriate pathways to enable participation in learning activities and examination tests.

Law No 68/99 regulates the conditions for workers and employers. It identifies the categories of people entitled to be included in Targeted Employment. People with disabilities can access a dedicated channel for seeking employment by registering in the Targeted Employment lists. Public or private employers are obliged by the same law to employ a number of people with disabilities (based on the number of workers employed), and can then find candidates on these lists. The registration also allows participation in public competitions that take into account special needs. Targeted Employment and related services are managed by regional offices, as the Regions have shared competence in labour matters.

2.2. Promotion

Current legislation, as reported, regulates protection for people with disabilities in higher education and work. Protection, however, does not automatically translate into promotion and better opportunities for socio-economic fulfilment. Laws must be properly understood by the person with disabilities and all stakeholders in the education and labour system.

With regard to higher education, the recognition of rights must be the guiding principle in designing pathways that put the student at the centre. University courses must be embedded in a broader project with positive effects on the individual and on living environments (Callegari & Sandri, 2024; Estima & Carvalho, 2024; Giannoccolo & Aluffi Pentini, 2023). The university, according to this logic, can therefore play a key role in research and educational innovation in order to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge and make it applicable in the labour market.

In the context of work, the law raises several issues concerning the promotion of people with disabilities. In the first instance, it would be necessary to investigate what the real needs of people registered for Targeted Employment are, to draw up a realistic profile of the person's skills and placement possibilities (Bottà, 2024). Moreover, it is not possible to take care of the worker without taking care of the employer's interests, without knowing the needs of the productive world, and the skills required by the labour market. Promoting people with disabilities in the workplace is only possible if it becomes also a place of training and real participation (Alessandrini, 2017; d'Aniello, 2019; Dato, 2022; Caldin & Friso, 2019).

3. Methodology and first research results

The article, as indicated, presents the first results of a doctoral project, which is still in progress. The research design aims to investigate the structures and characteristics of social networks that support graduates and students with disabilities in their job placement in the Rome area. In the first phase, a qualitative survey employed the instrument of semi-structured interviews and involved: a) representatives of associations of people with disabilities, active in the protection of workers' rights (16); b) representatives of institutions and organisations engaged in active labour policies (28); c) graduates and students with disabilities (24).

The themes proposed in the interviews were identified from an analysis of the cited legislation and the academic literature. Thematic analysis of the interview texts is currently underway; the NVivo software is used for text encoding. The data collected will then be discussed in focus groups with the aim of bringing out shared proposals to improve the functioning of social networks, which can facilitate the university-to-work transition.

In the following section, some data collected in interviews with graduates and university students are reported and analysed in order to explore the experiences of participants and

highlight forms of protection/promotion. The analysis is based on twenty interviews conducted between May 2024 and January 2025. Four interviews were excluded, as two were conducted with people with psychological disorders and two with parents of students with disabilities. The information gathered covered the following areas: age, impairment, degree or course of study, access to university services, registration for Targeted Employment, current job position, other work/training/volunteering experience. The elements that emerged are summarised below, starting with the description of the characteristics of the sample (non-probability).

The average age of the participants is 32, the youngest is 21 and the two 'oldest' respondents are 43. A prevalence of men is observed, with twelve interviewees. This element refers to biological data and is interesting since academic research and statistical data indicate that women with disabilities are at greater risk of social and labour market exclusion (Taddei & Alesi, 2024). The functional limitations are physical (fourteen), of which seven are sensory (two with blindness, five deafness); related to neurodevelopmental disorders (five); in one case, there are limitations due to a rare disease, not yet certified.

At the time the interviews were conducted, there were four university students, although two had already completed all examinations. The other participants have a university degree (three or five years), six have postgraduate training. Seven respondents have completed - or are studying to complete - a degree in the Humanities; five interviewees, economic and legal disciplines; four participants, in psycho-pedagogical disciplines; two, in health professions; one, in Engineering; one, in Life Science.

Although the data set can only be used in an exploratory way, it shows a lower attendance in scientific courses. Overall, the lack of accessibility of study materials in Mathematics, Statistics and Science was highlighted. Almost all interviewees emphasised the challenges of the academic experience: attending courses and receiving support in studying and testing requires students a high level of autonomy and awareness of the services. In the presence of relational difficulties, as in the case of neurodevelopmental disorders, students tend to seek (integrative) support from their families. Some interviewees underline the differences between study and work environments, as employers show less willingness to accommodate special needs. School and university would not prepare adequately for the working world. In relation to the issues, therefore, the university would seem to guarantee access to study paths and perform a function of protection and promotion of people with disabilities in studies, without adequately addressing what happens afterwards.

Concerning the work situation, sixteen respondents are registered in the Targeted Employment lists (Law No 68/99). In contrast to this, participants' information about the functioning of the Service is insufficient. Graduates enrol at the end of their university studies or at a later stage. In most cases, they are concerned that registration may limit the possibilities of choice in the private labour market, while the usefulness of registration to participate in public job

competition is sufficiently recognised. Respondents recognise the need for the protection offered by work integration regulations. However, they do not consider them relevant to professional fulfilment.

Regarding the employment, twelve interviewees are employed; two participants are not looking for a job because they are studying; one interviewee with a bachelor's degree in Engineering, who has completed the examinations of the Master's Degree, has already signed the proposal for a work contract; one young woman, who reported some difficulties in her university career, is working. The last two interviewees found work through their internship, before completing their degree, in two different fields (banking services market, culture and tourism).

The average age of the twelve workers is over 35. There are five people working in the public sector, one participant employed in the private sector and three people employed in associations and cooperatives. Interesting facts: two interviewees are self-employed, one participant is an entrepreneur in the tourist sector. Among public sector workers, three persons found employment through a reserved competition; one participant is a teacher in a public school. A job with Targeted Employment was found by only one person.

Among the respondents who do not have a job, the position of two requires special attention. Despite participating in various experiences promoted by the Services, they have not found employment. In one case, the person has a postgraduate education and excellent foreign language skills.

The situation of graduates with disabilities in the world of work appears to be positive, but it deserves further analysis to explore data from work environments regarding existence and efficacy of inclusion practices, job tasks, professional development, and relations with colleagues. In the public sector, the protection system also appears to be a promotional tool. Personal factors would seem to influence the achievement of success in the field of work for those who practice the professions. Despite some substantial difficulties in the university pathways, these interviewees have achieved important milestones. The only woman entrepreneur, on the other hand, took a friend's advice: 'Start your own business!'

4. Conclusions

Interviews with graduates and students with disabilities provided an insight into their study and work experiences, as well as some information about research topics and services. These are people who today have a different set of resources than they did in the past. They have studied and can design their own future work, even with significant functional limitations. Their desire for professional fulfilment and active participation in social and economic life has not been diminished by the effort (and for some, 'fatigue') required to achieve success in training.

The challenge for teachers, trainers, service managers and employers, both public and private, is to create favourable conditions for cultural and professional development by integrating

interventions and resources in a labour market that is constantly and rapidly changing. The experience of the two interviewees who found a job through internships, for instance, emphasising the importance of this tool to facilitate the university-to-work transition, is not fully utilised.

The data collected highlights the importance of implementing qualitative research, with the participation and contribution of all stakeholders, also from a multidisciplinary and comparative perspective, in order to improve knowledge of the topics under investigation and customise training proposals, balancing protection and promotion concerning the rights to study and work for all.

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