University and Disability:
An Italian Experience of Inclusion

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Abstract

The University education is a very important step in the process of growth of each person. During this period we acquire a specific professional preparation and also have many opportunities to develop skills that are essential for adult life. In recent years the access opportunities for disabled persons to academic education in Italy have greatly increased, thanks to some legislative initiatives that supported the implementation of important measures to protect the right to study. The article sets out some reflections on the services and opportunities offered by the Italian University system.   The Centre for Inclusion of Students with Disability and Dyslexia of Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan is presented as an example case. Further areas for research and policy development are discussed.

Keywords: Italian universities; disabled students; inclusion; national policy development

The number of students with disabilities is increasing in higher education institutions and universities (Baker, Boland & Nowik, 2012). The implementation of policies and societal requests for more educated workers are some of the reasons to justify these growing numbers (Baker et al., 2012; Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Kiuhara & Huefner, 2008). Subsequently, university professors, students, and administrators are challenged every day to provide an atmosphere and facilities able to encourage and inspire academic success of young adults with disability.

Italy has a long history of policies towards inclusion but only recently prioritized the importance of inclusion in higher education. Some positive experiences are emerging in universities; in particular, regarding the role of specialized services and centers devoted to supporting students with disability during the academic years.   This article provides an overview of Italian polices and the establishment of dedicated services for the achievement of inclusion and awareness. The Centre for Inclusion of Students with Disabilities and Dyslexia at the Catholic University of the Sacred Hearth in Milan (Italy) is described to illustrate Italy's commitment to educating young adults with disabilities; supporting the whole academy in understanding the challenges, needs, and resources of these students, and fostering the efforts of specialized professionals and volunteers.

Italian Background and Educational Policies

The Italian model, which promotes scholastic inclusion for individuals with disabilities (law 118/1971 and 517/1977), boasts over 30 years of groundbreaking experimental work – both theoretical and applied. Drawing on pioneering pedagogical values that are now internationally recognized, Italy has been one of the first countries in the world to promote the inclusion of students with disability into mainstream educational provisions (Agnelli Foundation et al., 2011).

The latest research gives evidence of the achievements that have been reached so far (Canevaro, d' Alonzo, & Ianes, 2009; Reversi et al., 2007). The path

to inclusion has contributed to profoundly modifying the Italian education system and promoting significant changes in pedagogical and cultural fields (d'Alonzo, Cabrini, & Villa, 2004). Examples of these modifications can be seen in methodological and teaching innovation, enhancement of teachers' role and status, development of new skills, and the flourishing of a new culture that welcomes and openly values differences. If in the past schools promoted models to which it was necessary to conform and adapt, today plurality and diversity in all its forms is a recognized value of education, starting from the first years of schooling (van den Broek, 2010).

In line with these principles, even the adult educational system – including the University framework – has experienced remarkable changes that have enabled the activation of specific services to support students with disabilities in their academic path. The 1970s played a fundamental role in the development of Italian educational policies. The first laws to regulate the admission of students with disabilities into the classroom were created during that decade. The Law 118/1971 recognizes the right of these students to be educated in mainstream classrooms, with the exception of "individuals with severe intellectual disabilities or with physical disabilities so severe to impede and/or make difficult learning in normal classrooms" (Art. 28). In 1977, the 517 Law created a clearer and more detailed picture with regards to the integration of students with disability into the compulsory schooling system. Since then, there has been a series of legislative interventions in order to support, improve, and implement a more qualified and effective model of inclusion.

A specific noteworthy policy that includes secondary education is the Law 104/1992 "for the assistance, social integration and for the rights of individuals with disability," which tries to meet the complex needs of these people at the different stages of their life more systematically and exhaustively. Regarding the scholastic experience, this law (art.12, art.13) establishes that the right to education cannot be hindered by either learning difficulties or any other kind of problem such as poverty, low social/cultural level, lack of parent's care, or ethnicity. This law also established the rights of people with disabilities to attend all mainstream classes of academic institutions of any order and rank, including universities and higher education. Finally, this law resulted in the provision of tools aimed to challenge the functions and the potentials of the student

as much as possible, including functional diagnosis, dynamic functional profiles, and Individualized (or personalized) Educational Plans (IEP).

These laws are the result of a long process dedicated to realizing the inclusion of students with disabilities. However, it took several years of investigation of teaching models to reach this goal. The first phase, which occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, has been identified as *wild integration* because teachers were not prepared to manage the educational contest welcoming students with disabilities. The next phase, during the 1980s and 1990s, has been referred to as the *inclusion awareness* and *inclusion attention* period during which the school team gained a more specific special pedagogical competence.

At the start of a new century, Law 17/1999 integrated and modified the previous legislation, completing the pattern of mandating inclusion into the higher stages of education (d'Alonzo et al., 2004). The pedagogical values underlying this new piece of legislation are highly significant within the complex path for educational inclusion. Any individual, thanks to the skills acquired during his or her education, is able to offer personal contributions to the community's development and welfare. Therefore, guaranteeing fair access and equal opportunities for any individual in order to develop skills should be considered a society's duty and responsibility (International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN 2006, Art.24).

**The Inclusion of Students with Disability: Services and Activities.**

The years spent studying at the University represent the most important period for any young person within their developmental process. During this time, they develop not only their learning potential but also their reflective capacity to think about the future. Choosing the subject to study according to talent and ambitions, passing examinations, and creating their learning path are all valuable steps to enhance transferable skills that are essential for the adult life (d'Alonzo & al., 2004). Indeed, the system of higher education also plays a decisive role for the person with disability, as it has a positive impact on the construction of the adult identity and facilitates entry in the employment field (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008).

Therefore, promoting accessibility in higher education means eliminating deep-rooted cultural prejudices that, over time, contribute to stereotypes that consider

Figure 1. Disabled students in Italian Universities 2000-2010 (Cineca-Miur, 2010)

Figure 2. Students in relation to the degree of disability 2000-2010 (Cineca-Miur, 2010)
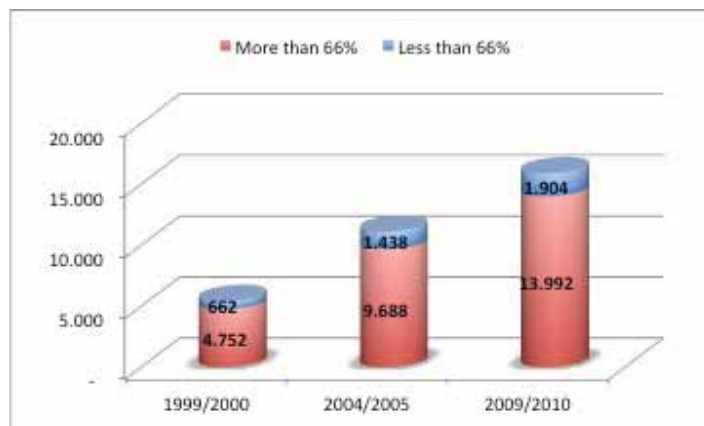
the individual with a disability as the subject of "pity" or "charity," as a sick person or as "eternal child" (May & Stone, 2012; Lightner, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice, 2012). This last misconception especially leaves the person in a state of constant need of another figure, confining him or her to a life that limits his or her ability to experience the challenges and successes of adult life (Myklebust, 2013).

Following this path, it is very difficult for these students to access high-level training that supports the achievement of specific professional qualifications. It is essential to work toward the removal of institutional barriers and teaching styles that limit and make the learning process more difficult for individuals with disabilities. A reflection on these topics is now fundamental because, in recent decades, the number

of students with disabilities in Italian universities has increased progressively (see Figure 1). From academic year 1999-2000 to 2009-2010, the numbers of Italian university students with disabilities increased from 5,414 to 15,884, out of a total student population of 1,799,542 people (Cineca-MIUR, 2010).

About 0.9% of students enrolled in Italian universities have a disability. Those who have a certification of disability of more than 66% and are therefore exempt from participation in university fees represent the vast majority (Figure 2). This growth pattern confirms a trend already established in lower school levels and that is reflected in other countries (Harbour & Madaus, 2011).

In order to remove academic limitations, many Italian universities have adopted a set of organizational and procedural methods. This approach is not reduced

to a quantitative or qualitative "simplification" of a university study plan. Rather, it is a way to ensure all students (regardless of their physical, mental or sensory condition) to have equal access to academic culture as stated in the Law 17/1999.

Indeed, these measures are not meant to deny or underestimate the challenges associated with a specific disability that might limit the access to a higher level of understanding, especially in the case of serious intellectual impairments. Specifically, the text of the law, supplemented by the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers on April 9, 2001, "*Measures for the treatment of the right on higher education*," outlines measures to promote the inclusion of youths with disability into university communities.

In respect of the national laws, many universities have implemented "Specialized Tutorial Services" having the mission to support higher education inclusion (Da Re, 2012). This type of services has three broad goals. First, the tutoring services include students with disabilities in university life by removing any didactic, psychological, pedagogical, and technological barriers that prevent them from having equal opportunities to study and learn. Second, the services manage and coordinate activities and initiatives that promote the right of students to attend higher education provisions. Third, these services address in the most appropriate way the individuals' special needs, ensuring full equality in access and performance. Furthermore, Law 17/1999 establishes the figure of a Deputy Rector who "coordinates, monitors and supports all the initiatives for inclusion within the University" (Article 5). In 2001, the National Conference of Deputies of Italian University Rectors (CNUDD) became the official committee that represents the policies and the activities of Italian universities regarding students with disabilities.

The student can freely access the inclusion service, through the website or other students. Based on the specific disability, the student will be in contact with the designed pedagogical tutor that will suggest the education and support path, also using the official updated documentation on his or her disability. The tutor overviews the diagnosis and defines which kind of inclusive tools the student will need. The specialized tutor can act as mediator between the student and the professor, if it is needed and addressed in the individual meetings. In accordance with the student, all his or her teachers will be informed regarding the disability and special needs through email and, if required by the professor, also with individual discussion.

The establishment of these services is the result of the collaboration between students and professionals working towards inclusion. The actions promoted by Italian university centers for inclusion are various and involve administrative, bureaucratic, and operational responsibilities that are described below as national trends and they are followed by an example of Italian university service, as case study (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan).

The Specialized Tutoring. Over the last few years, the education and training systems in Italian universities have undergone strong changes to adapt to European standards and to improve the educational and training quality by personalization of the courses (Isfol, 2003).

By law, the student with a disability can benefit from the support of a specialized tutor and consultant, who provides personal advice throughout the course of study without any economic fee for the student (Law 17/1999). The role of the specialized tutor is fundamental as a system mediator, a communication facilitator, and a moderator with the learning group; the different roles are implemented through focus groups, individual counseling, and connecting the student with the faculty members. Especially in the academic world, tutors are of increasing importance and Italian universities guide and support their actions, in favor of the students and in order to prevent the dropout phenomenon (Da Re, 2012). The tutor is a specialized pedagogical consultant and he or she is trained on special education and inclusion, holding a master degree on these topics and other postsecondary education diplomas on designed disability and special educational needs.

The specialized tutoring aims to encourage the students' attendance and participation in university life. Indeed, a relationship based on trust between the tutor and the student is very important, as it allows them to better identify problems and possible solutions in a collaborative manner (d'Alonzo et al., 2004).

The counseling section gives students space to talk about themselves in order to identify factors that may create barriers to the continuation and completion of their university studies, or those that cause uneasiness and personal dissatisfaction. It is not mandatory and is done only when the students request it. The counseling starts from the student's personal experience and explores the emotional state and relational ways of the student. In detail, these services include brief counselor (a few individual meetings) and extended

counseling (cycle of meetings distributed on the basis of the student's needs).

Furthermore, the specialized tutor is available for meetings on specific aspects related to disability. This consultation is offered to professionals, volunteers, professors, trainers, and parents who feel the need to discuss any issues that may arise regarding the student's university experience. In Italy, personal details are treated in respect of the individual's confidentiality and the service and tutors are obliged to be silent on the student's details, unless he or she authorizes to make them public.

The Peer Tutoring. The Peer Tutor is a student who is enrolled in the same university as the individual with disability welcomed by the service. Peer tutors offer their time and expertise in exchange for a small salary and/or formative experiences. In Italy most of the tutors who provide this service are enrolled in the National Social Service (Servizio Civile Nazionale), which pays a grant for social services and tutoring.

Peer tutoring involves different forms of interaction: one-to-one, small groups, large groups, diverse target, and stakeholders groups. The service has the responsibility of helping students with disabilities develop more suitable strategies for learning in university courses through collaborations with peers. The peer tutor can support the students in many different ways. One example is assist with studying, learning in class, preparing exams and tests together, and translating the contents of course readings. Another example is to facilitate interactions with others and being part of the university social life. A peer tutor could help a student with a disability achieve this goal by attending students' meeting or seminars together, creating studying groups on the same topics, or through social networks. Another role that peer tutors play is to support a student's autonomy and mobility on the university campus, overcoming barriers caused by architectonic and social barriers. An example of this type of assistance would be helping the student to reach the dining room, the toilets or a classroom, even if many universities have reached high standards of accessibility.

Recently, the University of Padua (Italy) began conducting a study of the services provided by several Italian universities and it analyzes peer tutoring for students with disabilities. This research is part of a two-year project still in progress, designed to evaluate services offered in support of students' learning difficulties and other higher education services. The researchers seek to gather data that will enhance training and the development of alternative resources for inclusion, such as peer tutoring services.

Individualized Educational Support. Another service aim is the promotion and active participation of all students in university life and each Italian university campus is trying to achieve this goal. This work involves the identification and removal of social and emotional barriers in favor of more accessible learning environments. The educational service is developed through a number of activities. These include the pedagogic assessment and description of the different profiles of learning; the formulation of hypotheses for pedagogic intervention; the elaboration of individualized didactic strategies; consulting with professors to elaborate interventional strategies aimed at removing any obstacles in attendance; the identification of equivalent ways of grading; and the provision of pedagogic counseling during the entrance orientation process to evaluate the functional requirements for University study, for example testing accommodations such as extended test time or helping tools.

The pedagogical assessment and intervention realized through an Individualized Educational Support is fundamental to creating accessible examinations. Students with disabilities can undertake university exams using the necessary aids (art. 16, paragraph 4), which include technological, visual, and auditory support (e.g., software, enlarging tools, calculators). In addition and in agreement with the professor and with the tutor's help, students with disabilities can find different ways to take these tests. Exam supports are individualized and determined according to the nature of the student's disability. They include, but are not limited to extended time and the use of special software to assist in exam taking. For example, the use of Braille, large prints, magnified prints, and audio presentations are facilitators that allow students with visual impairment to better access the testing environment. These students can be also allowed to have extended time during testing, as the special support provides whatever is needed by the student to have equal access (Allman, 2009).

The personalization of educational interventions plays an important role not only for exams, but also by allowing students with a disability to attend regular daily learning activities. For example, a lecturer who has been informed of the presence of a deaf student shall take all the necessary measures to make the les-

son contents and topics reachable and understandable. These include the use of slow and direct speech, the availability of digital material, and the viewing of summary slides. The sign language interpreter is not usually provided due to the high expenses of the service and very few private universities can offer this help; usually the interpreter is paid by the student himself.

However, there is still some concern that faculty members may hold preconceived stereotypes that can be a barrier to the student's success (Baker et al., 2012). The condition of disability may influence expectations and faculty may lack an understanding of the needs of students identified as having a disability (Houck, Asselin, Troutman, & Arrington, 1992). University settings are the primary ways for students to gain access to knowledge and faculty are directly responsible for understanding this student population. Students may question the need to disclose their disability in order to receive accommodations if the classroom climate is not viewed as a favorable one (Kiuhara & Huefner, 2008). Academic success for students with disabilities is therefore significantly affected by the attitudes of faculty and their willingness to provide accommodations (Wolman, Suarez McCrink, Figuero Rodriguez, & Harris-Looby, 2004). Further, students' perceptions of their fellow classmates and subsequent acceptance and support of those who are different from them are important to their satisfaction with and success in the college environment.

The prevailing characteristics of the "classroom climate," particularly in the classroom, affect students' success, especially those with disabilities (Hall & Sandler, 1999). The area of sensitive and supportive environments needs to be further explored as the academic progress of students with disabilities is significantly affected by the attitudes of faculty and their willingness to provide accommodations, both of which contribute to classroom climate (Wolman et al., 2004). The service aims to develop a common awareness through the whole higher education framework, providing pedagogical and didactic support for faculty members. This goal is being addressed in a number of ways.

Technical Support. The service identifies and provides the most appropriate technological solutions to answer students' necessities. In detail, the service includes three areas of support. First, it provides technological assessment to evaluate need in terms of assistive technology and consultation in the choice of appropriate solutions. Second, this service provides

education on specific projects of autonomy that regard new technologies for access to study and work. Third, the service provides technological support and on-site as well as remote assistance.

This area of support includes a wide variety of devices and assistive technologies that help the teaching and learning process of students with disabilities. For example, the Braille bar as well as special enlargement software are essential resources for people with visual impairments. Speech synthesis allows blind students to listen to a written text and makes it easier to understand, even for those with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia (Mortimore, 2012).

The list of technological aids available on the market is growing more extensive and refined, including interactive whiteboards, devices for speech recognition, and special pen drives for writing notes. Italian universities are gradually buying these tools for students. While assistive technology represents an effective support to the university experience, it should be noted that its use does not exhaust the range of possible interventions necessary to include all individuals with disabilities (d'Alonzo et al., 2004).

University Fees Exemption. The Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of April 9, 2001 (Article 8) exempts "*students with a disability up to or more than Sixty-six per cent*" from university fees or contributions. Article 14 of this Decree regulates the granting of economic benefits and the criteria for receiving them. The fee exemption is an important economical support that enhances higher education attendance for any individual with a disability.

The fundamental role of university training is emerging progressively and the presence of students with disability in Italian academies needs further insights. The experience of the service at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan is one of many Italian examples of commitment to carrying out the aim of higher education inclusion for every student.

The Service for Inclusion of Students with Disabilities and Dyslexia at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan

Since the academic year 1999/2000, the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan has enacted a policy of support and mentoring for students with disabilities through the establishment in different locations of a specialized center, the Service for Inclusion of Students with Disabilities (SISD). Since 2009, the

service has been also opened to students with specific learning difficulties. In Italy, learning difficulties are not considered a disability and this is the reason why it was not initially included in the services (Italian Guide-Lines for the Rights of Students with Learning Difficulties, 2011). Before the law 170/2010 (Law on University Inclusion of Students with Learning Difficulties, 2010) these students were able to access the services only informally.

In line with the national trend, the Catholic University has seen a growing number of students with disabilities (Table 1). At its Milan campus, out of a total of more than 25,000 students enrolled for the academic year 2012/2013, 422 have a disability or dyslexia, which represents 1.67% of the total number of students (Table 2). Specifically, 56 have physical disabilities, 40 have sensory disabilities and 143 students have other disorders, including psychiatric conditions; 90 students have dyslexia (Table 3).

The complexity and the variety of conditions forced administrators to provide a highly specialized service. The service staff works to address different educational needs and to support students with disabilities to enable them to fully access academic facilities and successfully complete their study programs.

The service offers two types of services: a secretary who provides technical and administrative support (e.g., with registration; exemption from fees; accessibility of buildings, spaces, and wheelchairs; management of people who need accompaniment; recruitment of teaching materials) and pedagogical tutors, who advise, support, and overviews the student's pathway during the course of study. There is also a shuttle service that connects the various offices of the university, provides accompaniment to the main railway stations, and is accessible to students with mobility impairments.

Tutors working in the service have specific expertise on a specific type of disability. The choice to offer specialized tutoring is developed to ensure that tutors are better able to understand issues related to a single type of disability, as well as to facilitate research on educational development. We can identify three important stages in the student's inclusion process into the broader Catholic University community: starting orientation (welcoming), access to the university system (placement and follow up), and monitoring throughout the course of study (educational supervision). Each stage is described below.

Step 1: Welcoming. The entry point of the entire process is welcoming students, alone or accompanied by their family, who seek help from the center with the intent of resolving issues with social integration. Above all, the service offers students the opportunity of a shared reflection upon personal academic and social objectives. The professionals will explore, together with the student, all the elements and conditions that determine his or her exclusion from University life. In detail, the service welcomes the student, recognizes the needs relative to the request for services, and clarifies difficulties that create distress for the student.

Another important step focuses on the process of choosing a course of study that fits the student's aspirations and aims. Students' choice of study at the end of secondary school results from a long process over their entire education to that point. It is the first real opportunity for a student to design a future career. In order to make a choice that is truly meaningful and grants access to employability, the student must develop a full self-awareness about the path he or she will follow. Self awareness and clear professional goals help prevent students from using the university experience to extend the course of study and delay adulthood.

Regarding this first orientation phase, the team at the service addresses several goals. First, staff members interview the student's family. Parents have many hopes and expectations for their son or daughter but they also carry worries and fears about the world that he or she will face. Establishing a relationship with the family means taking care of the student and his environment. It also means striking a good balance between "delegation" (the university has full responsibility for the student's education) and "excessive involvement" (the student is totally dependent on the family and unable to assert his or her desire for self-empowerment). Second, promote the autonomy of the student, who should be aware of personal academic performance, study habits, study strengths, and areas for improvement. Third, the student's choice of professional specialization, achieved through a specific curriculum, becomes a project with a definite beginning and end point. The insights provided by the service are an important incentive to promote these considerations and to build relationships with others based on trust and mutual respect.

Step 2: Placement and Follow Up. The access process continues with an educational agreement that marks the beginning of the concrete accompaniment of the students by tutors and mentors from the Service for

Table 1

Students with Disability and Dyslexia (LD) - UCSC Milan Campus

Academic Year	Past Years	Freshmen	Total Students with Disability
2006/2007	141	39	180
2007/2008	180	39	219
2008/2009	221	38	259
2009/2010	263	32	295
2010/2011	272	54	326
2011/2012	248	105	353
2012/2013	326	96	422

Table 2

Students with Disability for Each Faculty, UCSC Milan Campus.

Students' Area of Study in 2012/13	Total	With Disability or Dyslexia	Percentage
Law	3,939	39	0.99%
Economy	7,313	90	1.23%
Philosophy and Literature	3,103	66	2.13%
Foreign Languages	3,309	31	0.94%
Psychology	1,558	26	1.67%
Education and Teaching	2,928	100	3.42%
Social and Political Sciences	1,975	58	2.94%
Finance and Bank Sciences	1,097	12	1.09%
Total	25,222	422	1,67%

Table 3

Number of Students by Disability Type (2012/13), UCSC Milan Campus

Condition / Impairment	Students	Freshmen	Total
Physical Impairment	53	17	70
Visual Impairment	20	7	27
Hear Impairment	20	6	26
Other (epilepsy, cancer, trauma…)	127	30	157
Psychiatric Condition	16	4	21
Dyslexia	90	32	121
Total	326	96	422

Inclusion. This step takes place during the student's first months at the university and it is a critical moment for each student. This time is even more critical for individuals with a disability. For example, in the case of a visual impairment (low vision or blindness) or in the case of a motor impairment, frequent movement from classroom to classroom across the university can cause serious difficulty. In another instance, a student with limited hearing skills can struggle to follow a lesson if there are many people in the classroom and, therefore, a lot of noise. In this specific moment, peer tutors from the service represent a key resource for students with disabilities and he or she is allowed to make explicit requests. These youths offer their help in the classroom by accompanying the students or helping them in some daily activities (lunch, toilette, etc.).

In this period of progressive "adjustment," one of the key points is to build agreement between the service and the student in order to develop a trustful relationship. The recognition that the service offers a place of welcome, where students can find competent professionals to answer their questions and solve problems, helps students feel like part of a university system that can be especially difficult and complex when it comes to inclusion. Facilitating the inclusion process means, on one hand, providing the students with a welcoming and open environment, and on the other hand, working to facilitate the conditions that allow these students to effectively pursue their course of study. Indeed, it is very important to inform individual professors of the specific needs of each student regarding his or her disability. Making contact with the professor, facilitated by the service, is very important because it allows teachers to meet the students and to implement teaching methods that enable students with disabilities to actively participate in class; to guarantee the students' rights and assure that requests are appropriate, the student can reach the professors and explain personal needs through the service tutor.

Step 3: Educational Supervision. The first few months of welcoming and attending class allow the student to begin a new experience. Providing support in the first year at university promotes a significant effort toward identifying strategies for including the individual into the academic world. The service team ensures continuous monitoring through individualized interviews over a short period of time in order to review, share, and change action plans. Specifically, in this step the tutor and the student analyze issues about academic life organization, identify possible solutions, and discuss the most appropriate method of study.

In this phase, based on their knowledge of an individual student's disability and the student-tutor relationship, tutors can offer an evaluation about the most appropriate method of study. During this supervision, different factors are considered: the difficulties of the student and special educational needs; cognitive and relational skills; and the need for alternative teaching methods and study tools.

To empower and support tutors and specialized professionals, the volunteers and students enroll in the National Social Service which organizes activities every year to raise awareness on inclusion and disability, involving faculty members and students. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" is one of the projects pioneered every year by the tutors, students, and volunteers. The initiative was launched 2011 by a group of students led by Professor Luigi d'Alonzo, delegate of the Rector for Disability and Inclusion, and by the educational consultants.

The initiative is part of the project, "Welcome for Inclusion," which aims to include youths with disability into university life. The idea for this project was born after a training course during which the voluntary students had the opportunity to experience disability, done at the Institute for the Blinds and called "Dialogue in the Dark." The significance of this experience stimulated them to recommend a similar activity to other students.

The event usually takes place in May in the university cloisters and it aims to making students aware of what disability is. More that 100 people take part in the initiative, which entails engaging in two types of simulation: a visual impairment and a motor impairment. Participants are accompanied by the Volunteers of National Civil Service and by students with disabilities. It is a powerful challenge for the participants as they experience the difficulties that students with disabilities have to face within the University on a daily basis. At the end of the event, all participants are asked to complete a survey to collect significant data on this experience.

In the 2012 version of "Put Yourself in My Shoes" 108 participants including 83 females and 25 males participated. The students belonged to all the University faculties, with a prevalence for the Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences. The majority of participants had not previously experienced similar situations and many of them were not aware of the existence of the Service for the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities and Dyslexia and the implementation of initiatives for students with disabilities. Participants indicated in the survey that their involvement was influenced by personal interests, curiosity, a desire to understand and meet other students with disability, and curricular and academic interests. All participants expressed a high level of satisfaction regarding the experience, defining it as exciting but also confusing and difficult.

Two focus groups were conducted in the days following the experience. A total of 20 students from different faculties participated. Students shared thoughts and feelings experienced in the experiential learning regarding stereotypes about disability. Two of the focus group participants were students with impaired vision who had been guides during the event. The discussion was extremely rich. According to the participants, the event helped them understand the way of life of the university students with disabilities and identify attitudes of empathy and help towards students with disabilities.

The questionnaire data and focus group participants' comments confirm the validity of the initiative. The faculty members recognized the importance of this experience, especially its effectiveness in allowing them to relate better to students with disabilities. The Service is considering the opportunity to design a specific event for the faculty and staff in order to gain a greater understanding and competence about students with disabilities.

The Service is looking forward to future activities and would like to extend the attendance of this project to the entire University staff. The message the Service wants to deliver, through these activities, can be summarized as follows: "If you don't notice the individual but only his or her disability, your attitude is ours and YOUR greatest disability."

Discussion

The Italian experience presented in this paper is an example of what the universities are trying to establish regarding the widespread inclusion of students with disabilities. Despite many areas of success, some limitations have been found and need to be discussed. First, due to the 2009 economic crisis and the renovation of the Italian educational system, universities have had lower budgets to support students' activities and services, in particular for inclusion (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010; Newman, Couturier, Jamie Scurr, 2004; Varghese, 2009, Lewis & Verhoeven, 2010). This crisis reduced funding for education from all sources – government, the private sector, and households. Consequently, student support systems, scholarships, and student loans have been severely affected (Varghese, 2009).

The cost of inclusive provisions can be expensive. Student services established by law can be difficult to fund. Furthermore, special supports such

as sign language interpreters, material translations, and technological devices are provided for free by the National Government until high school but not for the university or higher educational institutions. Local non-profit organizations, such as the Library for the Blind in Monza and the Institute for the Blind in Milan, provide a lot of support to university activities and students but their commitment is not sufficient to meet the needs of every student with a disability. In this way, the Service for Inclusion can have high costs and the total budget available for the service initiatives can be curtailed in times of economic difficulty. Although Italian governmental policies have defined the way to realize inclusion rights in full, the gap between the law and sufficient economic support that is currently available is significant. This gap can preclude the real implementation of higher education policies (Mircea & Andreescu, 2011).

An active intervention in higher education system is necessary and the Government needs to develop rules for establishing private and cross-border institutions and putting in place mechanisms to ensure high quality practices that promote inclusion. Given the limited resources available, funding priorities should focus on disadvantaged groups such as students with disabilities, to improve the overall equity in higher education (Varghese, 2009). The volunteers and the students enrolled in the National Civil Service are an important resource for universities but professionals, consultants, and technical aid are fundamental to raise the quality level of inclusion.

Secondly, the services provided by the Service for Inclusion should be available to others such as faculty and staff, high schools, foreign universities, and employers. Educational tutors are conscious that raising awareness of disability challenges is a long process, but they believe that the large participation of university initiatives is a strong sign of successful inclusion. It will be important to involve all the faculties, professors ,and administrative staff for a better understanding of what it really means to be a student with a disability. To widen positive experiences, the Service will soon offer its services to high schools as well as national and foreign universities. The goal will be to recommend the same kind of inclusive activities in those settings to better prepare students for university and to raise youth awareness of disability issues.

Thirdly, the Catholic University of Milan is part of an international university network that also involves the Service for Inclusion. The experience will be shared with Italian and foreign universities and a seminar will be organized during the next academic year for sustaining good practice exchange and productive considerations on what should be done in the future and from a collaborative viewpoint.

Another challenge is related to the presence of stereotypes on the Service accessibility. Students who request services earlier perform better academically than students who postpone seeking services (Lightner et al., 2012). However, some students do not feel they need a specialized service to enhance their academic performances as they begin their university education and do not utilize this resource. In particular, many students with learning difficulties (e.g. Dyslexia) are aware of their challenges but do not want to be involved in a service that is explicitly for people with disabilities because of the sigma it can bring (Mortimore, 2012). A highly scheduled freshmen year, a general feeling that things are going well, and a desire to forge an identity free of a disability were also reasons given for postponing services (Lightner et al., 2012).

Few Italian university services for students with disabilities have conducted research to date on inclusion in higher education (Da Re, 2012). Such research is strongly needed to raise awareness and publicize effective practices. The Service for Inclusion is cooperating with other centers in Europe to create a research study on effectiveness and challenges of university centers for students with disabilities.

Besides educational intervention, the Service also operates as a center of research. This research investigates models and educational practices connected to the process of social involvement within the context of higher education. This work is conducted under the supervision of the Study and Research Centre for Disability and Marginality of the Department of Education at the Catholic University of Milan. Both the Service and the Centre are directed by Professor Luigi d'Alonzo.

The Center conducts research and training activities on disability and social inclusion in schools and other educational institutions. Cooperation between the Service and other organizations is a fundamental link that creates a two-way consideration: the daily practice needs a breathing space of reflection and analysis that is done thanks to research activities, and the academic investigation requires an active debate with professionals involved in training and education. This type of cross-

organizational exchange results in more competitive and efficient learning outcomes and proposals.

Conclusion

Recently, individuals with disabilities have enjoyed increased access to the system of higher education, thanks to the opportunities offered by new technologies and designed support services. However, much progress has yet to be made and more work is necessary. The university involvement in policy and disability culture represents an inclusive perspective and establishes an interesting field of research that is not yet well explored in Italy. Interest in the university services and real opportunities for students with disabilities is growing within the world of research on the learning of adults with disabilities.

Indeed, the main thought should be not about the students but about the university system, which is the main actor in the inclusion process. In fact, the entrance into higher education is a critical time for students, who must acquire a way to approach adulthood as a new and complex reality. The university system is required to adopt an inclusive perspective that cares about the educational needs of students with disabilities. Foremost, the university system is made by its student population. Together, all members of the university can create an open attitude that facilitates the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and contributes to the human development of its students and the faculty and staff. The experiences of the Centre for the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities and Dyslexia at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart address these considerations. That said, we also recognized that further insights from research on effective practice analysis are needed.

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