

GUIDANCE MODELS AND PRACTICES ADOPTED INTERNATIONALLY TO PROMOTE THE EXPLORATION OF SKILLS RELATING TO THE EMPLOYABILITY OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES. A FIRST META-ANALYSIS*

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ABSTRACT: *Introduction:* Employability is defined as an interweaving of a person's human, social and psychological capital, mediated by situational variables, which allows individuals to enter the job market with a professional personal project (Grimaldi, Porcelli, Rossi 2014). Nowadays, young people enter the job market through long, precarious, and poorly contextualized paths, while the socialization processes become recursive, discontinuous, and fragmented (Lodigiani 2010). A key role can be played by guidance services, which can start at university, to meet the demands of the (many) young people who are discouraged and disillusioned to the point where they cannot even imagine a job while still at university. In the employability stakes, what is even more complex is the encounter between young people with disabilities and the world of work, due to the persistence of stereotypes and stigmas. *Research questions:* What are the intervention models and guidance practices adopted by university guidance services internationally to promote the exploration of skills relating to the employability of students with disabilities? *Objectives:* To analyse the main intervention models and guidance practices adopted internationally to explore the skills associated with employability in students with disabilities. *Methodology:* It was decided to carry out a theoretical analysis of 20 scientific articles concerning the models and practices adopted to explore the competences relating to employability in certain university orientation services for students with disabilities in Italy, France, the UK, and the United States. NVivo software was used (Richards 1999) to systematically explore the scientific literature. *Preliminary Findings:* A first scientific paper showed that, like in Italy and France, the «Competence Balance Sheet» (Ardouin 2010) is the guiding practice in the USA, while in the UK, it is the Career Guidance Approach (Reid, Scott 2010). In the literature, orientation models and practices are also closely linked to the various patterns of employability. *Final remarks:* The implementation of guidance counseling paths aimed at exploring the skills associated with employability among all students and graduates is crucial to the completion of a viable strategic action in the University's social function, as a part of new organizational models that take the plurality of learning opportunities into account.

KEYWORDS: employability, orientation, disability.

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1. Introduction

The theme of employability involves orientation, training, and work, as well as their various junctures. In the face of today's complexity characterized by recursive, irregular, and fragmented recruiting and socialization processes (Lodigiani 2010), guidance services can play a leading role, which can begin at university, to meet the demands of the (many) young people who declare themselves discouraged and disillusioned to the point that they are already unable to imagine a job during their university studies (Grimaldi, Porcelli, Rossi 2014). In the context of employability, there is an even more difficult encounter, namely, between young people with disabilities and the world of work, a match that is still very difficult to implement, and is sometimes even denied, since very often the persistence of stereotypes and stigmas, coupled with the lack of a genuine political and systemic will in applying and enforcing the norms, often makes the world of work inaccessible, or disinclined to change in its organizational culture. It is important to bear in mind the functional and cognitive characteristics, individual goals, and potential, in the academic and professional spheres of undergraduate students with disabilities when they are transitioning to the adult and professional life. Indeed, Carter *et al.* (2012) already pointed out that disabled students usually complete their university course without the skills, abilities, and experience, and sometimes even without the support, that would allow them to have concrete job opportunities. It is therefore essential to develop training and guidance paths at university geared to the employability of students with disabilities.

To understand which orientation patterns and practices encourage the exploration and advancement of employability and related competences of undergraduate students with disabilities in Italy and abroad, we chose to make a first meta-analysis of the Italian and international scientific literature on this subject, using NVivo software (Richards 1999), with the aim of systematically exploring a corpus of selected scientific material. An analysis was made of scientific literature from Italy, France, the UK, and the USA, since there is a proliferation of studies and reflections in these contexts in relation to the subject in question. Beginning from the Grounded Theory perspective (Glaser, Strauss 1967), with the support of the NVivo Software, the collected articles were coded, and the following analysis categories were formulated:

- The construct of employability in Italy, France, the UK, and the USA
- Employability orientation practices in Italy, France, the UK, and the USA
- Theoretical reference models based on orientation practices
- The relationship between skills and employability

In the process of the contribution, the subdivision of these categories will be intensified to achieve the enucleating of a core category from a qualitative meta-analysis, defined as 'Orientation as an educational task'.

1.1 The employability construct: a brief theoretical excursus and the Italian INAPP proposal

Back in the '50s and '60s, the term 'employability' had already appeared in the scientific literature. From a review by Cavenago and Martini (2012), it is apparent that the concepts of dichotomic employability and socio-medical employability were in use in those years to distinguish between 'manageable' and 'unmanageable' people based on personal predisposition and aptitude, and physical and mental health. The increase in unemployment in the 1970s called for the introduction of the term *workforce employment ability* with which the alignment (or misalignment) between the knowledge and skills possessed by the individual was categorized with respect to market demand. In the 1980s, the term 'employability' was adopted by companies to identify the flexibility of the workforce, which at that time became an indispensable competence for addressing the demands of a brand-new job market. In political and institutional spheres, the European Employment Strategy and the various EC documents that have been around since the '90s interpret employability as people's ability to enter the job market. It was from the '90s onwards that a proliferation of studies can be noticed on the issue of employability, seen as a multidimensional construct in which certain factors come together, both external ones related to the contexts of life and the job market, and the internal ones of individuals (Lefresne 1999; Forrier, Sels, 2003; Fugate, Kinicki, Ashforth 2004; Fugate, Kinicki 2008). In constructing employability, attention has sometimes been given to more contextual/objective aspects (the job market situation, the characteristics of organizations/companies, the number of changes in work, etc.) and sometimes to more individual aspects (personal characteristics, individual adaptability, flexibility, etc.) until patterns developed that interwove both factors (Fugate, Kinicki, Ashforth 2004; McQuaid, Lindsay 2005; Cavenago, Magrin, Martini, Monicelli 2012). Of particular interest is the definition of employability formulated by Grimaldi, Porcelli & Rossi (2014) as «the intertwining of a person's human, social, and psychological capital – mediated by situational variables – which allows individuals to venture into/re-enter the job market with a professional personal project obeying the context» (p. 58).

This definition reflects the employability model developed by IN-APP (National Institute for Public Policies Analysis), which considers individuals' biographical and curriculum data, their context, and their environmental and life conditions.

2. The Italian context: some examples of experimentation and good practice guidance

In Italy, the education of people with disabilities is based on a socio-bio-psycho-pedagogical approach that considers the cultural context, the physical and psychological wellbeing (but not only), and individual abilities. In the fields of accompanying study and orientation in higher education, the Italian system considers the relationship between the student and the consultant who will be co-responsible not only for the development of the student's university project but also their professional project. Particularly interesting in the Italian context is the approach and methodology of the Foro Italicco University of Rome, which focuses on the orientation of undergraduate students with disabilities towards the job market. The Foro Italicco University of Rome has an internship and job placement office where the professional experiences of the students during their Degree Course are collected, and advice is provided on the future possibilities of use. In general, the university offers two professional outlooks: specific training (internships) and recognition of the work carried out.

It is through the university's relationship with employers (companies, associations, etc.), regarding the availability and skills of the students concerned, that the internships become possible depending on the level of study. Meanwhile, the employer may also ask the university for a Trainee Profile that responds to their interests. Specifically, for disabled students, the internship and job placement office works closely with the Specialized Education support service. The main difference from other students is that the personal data on students with disabilities and related information are available from the Specialized Educator's Office. Overall, the students' skills and specific needs are examined in accordance with their social and educational development. Decisions on issues concerning people with disabilities are taken in agreement with the Support Centre, the Managing Director, and the individual student. The theoretical model for accompanying students with disabilities on which the orientation practices of the Foro Italicco University of Rome are based, was inspired by a pilot work developed by the Danish University of Aarhus. In the framework of the European Leonardo Project, *Univers'emploi* (2012), the four partner countries involved, France, Ireland, Italy, and Denmark, adopted this model.

The basic idea of the model was the inclusion of people with different learning modes, both in the educational system and in society, with an emphasis on supporting people in their transition from university education to work. This model was based on four key concepts: education, inclusion, learning and life project. The theoretical reference substrate, based on the capacity model developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2010) contains a very useful picture. This model, like the ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health Classification), focuses on people's abilities – or rather, on their potential. The concept of 'potential' is grounded in the theory of experimental learning by Peter Jarvis (1995) and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1927) based on human development. Guidance practices inspired by this model relate to Career Counseling and Career Coaching, according to a humanistic-existential approach where subjects are questioned, and meaning is given to their transition to the job market (*Univers'emploi* 2012a). In general, disabled students have low expectations regarding their future in the job market. They therefore need to examine and clarify their motivations and potential in relation to the job market. Career Focus is an extension of the students' field of opportunity in terms of access to professional realization. To achieve this, it is important for students to become aware of both their resources and potential, and the difficulties and challenges associated with future job placement. Consequently, the reflection must be on their disability status in relation to inclusion and exclusion processes, for example, to a future working environment. In this light, career counseling can therefore create a space for reflection on their professional project to activate a process of clarification and to be able to plan career goals (*Univers'emploi* 2012b).

In Italy, certain permanent orientation tools have been prepared for self-assessment by students with disabilities. For example, the University of Macerata (Formiconi, Nicolini, Regolo 2015) has developed an online platform that allows a disabled person to self-assess their knowledge, skills, strengths, and working conditions, to increase the specificity of the match between the specific professional profile of the candidate with disabilities and the various training and/or work fields, enhancing the characteristics and uniqueness of their competences. The various professional profiles are then operationalized by articulating them into: knowledge, skills, needs in working conditions linked to disability, plus a profile of their own intellect. The value of the platform is the active role of self-assessor played by the candidate in disability status, thereby becoming the key resource and not a person hired because of legislative obligation. In this sense, orientation assumes the value of a continuous and articulate process whose main purpose is the support of self-awareness and potential, acting

within the area of a person's proximal development to realize their own personal, social, and professional identity. The results of research conducted in collaboration with the Chair of Psychology of Education and Professional Orientation and the Centre for Orientation and Training of the University of Catania (Magnano, Paolillo 2008) on a representative sample of the population of disabled students at the Centre for Active and Participating Integration of the University of Catania (CinAP), included an exploration of the following components: professional values; working styles and motivation; thoughts on the future – self-image; perceived self-efficacy; the relationship between all the above dimensions. The tools used for research purposes were taken from the Portfolio for Assessment, Treatment, and Integration of Disabilities – ASTRID-OR (Sores, Note 2007). To these was added an instrument for self-image capture from the Guidance Questionnaire of the University of Catania. The synthesis of the results of this research reminds us of a fundamental concept: the importance for those in a 'peculiar' state to find a dimension in their personal and professional realization, including the Other, which lets them establish a relationship where they feel useful to another person, thus being able to play, but also to develop and expand their skills and abilities. It is the dimension of the meeting with the Other that subsequently justifies all the other aspects considered relevant to the work, such as the use of one's own skills, prestige, group work, professional creativity, economic security, involvement, and commitment. This is a first element of divergence with respect to previous surveys of samples of normative associates attending the same university (Magnano, Paolillo 2008), the centrality accorded even before their own self-realization (in terms of matching work to their own interests and capabilities), the ability to be of help to others. In addition, considering the characteristics of the group involved in the research, it was noted that the decision to face a university course in search of a job is a motivating factor in itself, implying, however, an important level of investment and interest in the future, and the will to be as independent as possible.

What emerges, therefore, is a second difference with respect to normative students: the extent to which independence is seen as a professional value for these subjects is at the basis of the scale of priorities (Magnano, Paolillo 2008). Qualitative data analysis showed the choice of the degree programme mattering more than the profession to which it aspired, while the professional experiences already gained (for some) also determined the respondents' decision. Thus, their targets remained strongly 'desired', as stages of a process aimed at obtaining their autonomy and independence to the greatest degree possible. For disabled students, the moment of impasse and greatest

pressure would seem to come later, when their training path has already been 'decided' or is about to end, and the choices to be made concern their own, already concrete, professional future. From an operational standpoint, therefore, it is necessary to think of the initiatives proposed by the departments as providing guidance to organize outbound paths for those students with 'peculiar' health conditions, who are in the process of graduating. This often means that they are working on scaling down the stereotypes or irrational ideas that are sometimes present and can impact their professional future, and above all their decision-making processes, ideas that still arouse some trepidation about the consequences of their actions, at times impeding unrealistic mental openness in dealing with the uncertainty and decisions associated with a professional choice. Therefore, a key result for disabled university students is the adaptation of means and the designing of future goals for their life (Nota, Rossier 2015). In addition, the use of inclusive modalities and achievements in everyday life can make for an inclusive university experience, a model of participation to be carried with them through life and with which the university prepares its students (Getzel, Wehman 2005).

3. Guidance on work and employability in France: Mission Handicap from a constructivist perspective

In France, the accompaniment of disabled students is based on the medical-social approach. Taking care of students through the services is subject to prior recognition of the disability, which includes a medical assessment. In French universities, Mission Handicap is a point of reference for disabled students, a key pillar, and the place where pedagogical compensation and coordinated construction of the professional project (orientation, reorientation, internships, university/work Alternance). The French universities' approach places the student as the centre of the 'accompaniment work'. Orientation is characterized here by a constructivist approach that gives greater weight to the student's relationship and life experience, and emphasizes problem-solving and an emphasis on student assessment with the delivery of a final response. This approach encourages individuals to tell their story, and to identify their own life and career themes. The consultant thus operates more like a biographer who interprets life rather than an accountant who coldly deals with passivity and activity. The goal of the orientation process is thus to promote empowerment, to enable students to deal with transitions and to govern their own career path. This occurs to the extent that the accompanying practice calls for the development of social skills, adaptation, relationalism, mobi-

lization, and participation in projects, facilitation of material, human and intellectual studies, all elements that are part of a global project. In other words, success in studies is a condition for professional success. (*Univers'emploi* 2012). The demand to accompany vocational training comes increasingly from the students themselves, when they present a problem and question their path. Whether they come to this point of reflection is either because they have been forced to quickly find a compulsory internship, they have to enter the world of work, or because they have been regularly questioned by Mission Handicap on issues relating to job placement and the idea that the road gradually continues, to start verbalizing their professional expectations and begin the project. Starting from the Mission Handicap model, the contribution of the *Univers'emploi* project methodology enabled inclusion of the activity in an integrated transition system focusing on the following dimensions: to foster students' accompaniment in terms of their 'becoming' professional, in any case, an openness to the world of work; to measure the evolution of the course begun by the student; to formalize the skills gained after an internship or work experience (usually done during the summer holidays); a bonding between the accompanying, orientation and job placement services; implementing regulations between universities and companies involving issues relating to the employment of students with disabilities. Employability in the French context is defined as the probability of retrieving or retaining a job. It depends on personal factors (aptitudes and abilities) and/or situational factors (job market, workplace accessibility and work methods, adaptability of workstations and organizational schemes, professional constraints, etc.) (Busnel 2010: 17). To promote employability, on 22 July 2013, by law, France introduced education in entrepreneurship into Higher Education and Research. Several analysts see in the 'Entrepreneurship University' the future of the university alongside its new 'third mission', connected with the world of business (Vorley, Nelles 2008).

4. *The Anglo-Saxon context: Career guidance services*

In British universities where there is an increase in students and graduates with disability status, career orientation services are provided which provide information, counseling and guidance in an accessible way to all students. These practices are based on the theoretical model of educational and vocational guidance (Reid 2010) that 'educates' students to build and explore the narrative of their own vocations. Furthermore, in the designing of career guidance services, people with disabilities are also involved as key eyewitnesses in the

co-designing of orientation activities. Equally important is the relationship with the career counsellor, who accompanies the student in pursuit of job opportunities and internships both during the university course and up to two years after graduation, as in the case of Brunel University. The university encourages feedback from all students on Career Guidance services. Some universities, such as Manchester Metropolitan University, have developed a peer mentoring system. This provides opportunities for disabled students to develop the social skills required by the workforce and promotes career guidance services. The realization of Career Guidance services in Anglo-Saxon contexts involves exploring the possible barriers to entry into the workplace in advance, including the problems experienced by students and graduates with disabilities. Loughborough University has set up a group of professional consultants in a career guidance service together with an employment centre intended to deal effectively with the problems of students with disabilities regarding job placement and to offer effective individualized solutions, as well as the pursuit of opportunities to do internships. For example, the University of Bradford provides all students with placement opportunities during the summer break. Students meet with a professional counsellor and together find suitable apprenticeship opportunities and before doing so, there is a preparatory phase to reflect on the planned tasks and activities. The consultants visit the host company and at the end of the internship experience a 'reflexive folder' is compiled in which the students report on the activities and the skills acquired that contributed to the construction of their professional project. In regard to the employability construct, the Anglo-Saxon literature tends to oppose a simplistic model of employability, that is, the model of the 'magic wand' – according to which a student is employable by virtue of his or her university education – a model of employability development that takes into account one side of the individual's potential in terms of self-cultivation and, on the other, the actual employment the individual has had, mediated by economic and social factors (Harvard 2010). There would then be factors linking these two dimensions of work experience, namely; the development of self-promotion and career management skills; the will to learn and reflect on acquired learning. Hence the need to create pedagogically-oriented spaces and places for reflection and orientation to employability.

5. The American context: skills-based guidance services

American universities offer their students with disabilities Career Counseling founded on a work-based learning model to help them

make decisions about their careers. Through interaction between work and study experiences, students can improve their academic knowledge, personal development, and professional preparation (Brand, Valent, Danielson 2013). The purpose of this service is to promote 'career readability', namely career readiness in the achievement and demonstration of skills that prepare graduates for a successful transition to the world of work (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2015). American literature highlights the importance of exploration and orientation skills, particularly for disabled students, in cases where they are considered incapable of working autonomously and this has a negative impact on their rates of employment (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). Employers cite employability skills as being the most important (Hart Research Associates 2015; British Council 2011). Lack of employability skills can contribute to a 'talent shortage' (Manpower Group 2012). Demonstration of employability skills is correlated with top hiring rates, job success, and profits (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, Moore 2015). The Washington Department of Education has elaborated a model of employability skills that could play a crucial role in university transition programmes for disabled students, for success in the job market. The framework for occupational skills consists of three principal areas of competence:

- Effective relationships that can be translated into effective relationship skills, i.e., those skills that help individuals interact effectively with clients, colleagues, and employers. In this area they associate interpersonal skills and personal qualities.
- Workplace skills that can be translated into skills in the workplace, i.e., those skills that enable successful performance of work assignments. This category includes resource management skills, information usage, communication skills, systematic thinking, and technological skills.
- Applied Knowledge, i.e., integration of the knowledge acquired in the academic context and technical skills put into practice in the workplace. This category covers academic knowledge applied to the working context and critical thinking.

6. Final remarks: The relationship between skills and employability for orientation as educational work

Despite the criticalities associated with the employment of university students in a disability state, our meta-analysis shows that the scientific literature highlights the fundamental role played by vocational guidance services to support the transition to the world of work through various instruments from Career Guidance to Career Counseling. However, in the international context, some of these

guidance instruments involve theoretical efforts to build specific employability models and related skills. It is possible to see how skills as the orchestration and mobility of knowledge and competences are transferred to various contexts and their elaboration contributes to the definition of employability and makes it possible. Nevertheless, it is impossible to establish a universal set of skills for employability, not only because these skills vary according to the job market segments and the stratification of roles, but also because the pluralism of the value scales for the quality of work is related to competences in different socio-cultural contexts. Meanwhile, in their diversity, these models emphasize both individual factors and abilities as well as external factors related to the socio-economic reality of the world of work. In addition to this, there is a need to carry out accompanying practices for the transition to the world of work of all students, characterized not only by a 'technocratic' orientation involving the compilation of psycho-attitudinal tests to be cross-referenced with professional profiles; the ability to apply curriculum vitae and motivational writing strategies, targeted research techniques, and self-marketing practices. In line with this, the use of the NVivo software has enabled the core category 'Orientation as an educational task' to enucleate orientation as a process that people put into practice to guide their relationships with training and work through development, in the lifelong and life-wide dimensions of Competency 3B recognizable as the ability to define and make plans for life and personal projects. We could consider this competence as 'reflective' since it supports individuals in interpreting their life giving it meaning and significance (OECD 2005).

Consequently, as highlighted by Grimaldi, Rossi, and Porcelli (2015), self-orientation skills (thinking and intentionally choosing one's own future), as well as those of design and self-design (life design) allow individuals to become employed, that is, to enter the job market with a professional personal project in tune with the context. Moreover, it is vital to value both the relationship with the working world from the viewpoint of Business – University Cooperation, and the promotion of support for human and social development in the sense understood in the Capability approach. This approach aims to restore people's dignity through the centrality of the human being as a set of individual aptitudes made up of opportunities, abilities, and their interaction with access to resources. Martha Nussbaum (2010) has drawn up a list of basic capabilities that are the same for all humans, trying to overcome the distinction between 'normal' people and people with disabilities, giving everyone the same rights. If, then, someone – whether disabled or not – cannot perform one of these key functions at the appropriate threshold level, society must create

the best way possible for him or her to do so. In this sense, people with disabilities are defined as having a capability set limited to their own goals, ambitions, and system of values. Therefore, from an educational perspective, we all have the potential to decide to be what we want to be, and the role of education is to enable this potential to be activated by creating an enabling environment (Ghedin 2009).

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