External accomplice factors in university success: Narratives of graduates with invisible disabilities in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the external factors that have influenced the university success of graduates with invisible disabilities and the recommendations they make to universities to encourage students with disabilities to stay and successfully complete their degrees. This qualitative study involved interviews with 15 graduates from eight Italian universities. The results identified family, peers, faculty, and disability offices as the main factors that influenced their continuation with university studies. Recommendations included the need to provide more information to both students with disabilities (about the services that universities offer to support them) and faculty (about the students with disabilities they have in their classrooms and the necessary accommodations). These factors can be seen as levers for inclusion that benefit the whole university community.

1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) faces the challenge of ensuring not only access for students with disabilities, but also their retention and the completion of their degrees (Couzens et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2022; Grimes et al., 2017). It has been reported that inclusion in universities is a process that requires further development, as there continue to exist many barriers that must be overcome (Cage et al., 2022; Chipchase et al., 2023). These obstacles are not only attitudinal or methodological, but also architectural and political (García-González et al., 2021). Despite the persistence of these barriers, other studies show that universities and faculty develop inclusive practices, describing what they do to attain the inclusion of their students, as well as how and why they do it (Moriña, 2022; Carballo et al., 2022; Sánchez-Díaz & Morgado, 2023). In addition, other studies have described the successful trajectories of university students with disabilities, identifying the factors that have contributed to these experiences (Carballo et al., 2022; García-González et al., 2023; Nel et al., 2023; Sánchez-Díaz & Morgado, 2023).

1.1. University success and factors that promote it

Remaining and succeeding at university is not a utopia, as there are students who achieve successful university graduation trajectories (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022). In Russak and Hellwing's (2019) study, success is perceived by graduates with disabilities as a process that depends on multiple factors, being a complex, dynamic and subjective concept. Success is related to the ability to set realistic and achievable goals (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Russak & Hellwing, 2019) and to the ability to persist on the attainment of

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pre-set goals despite the difficulties that may be encountered (Accardo et al., 2019; Sniatecki et al., 2021).

Success can also be measured through tangible and concrete outcomes, such as good academic evaluations, getting the desired job, financial independence, or acceptance by others (Russak & Hellwing, 2019). It also involves finding a balance between academic obligations and social life (Accardo et al., 2019). In other words, success is not only about academics, as it also involves living one's own university experience with peers and participating in other university spheres, such as social, sporting or cultural activities.

The factors that lead to success are multiple and can be internal or external. Internal factors are related to individual characteristics and strengths of people, such as self-determination (Garrison-Wade, 2012) and self-efficacy (Francis et al., 2019). External or contextual factors may include social networks, such as family, friends and classmates, faculty, and disability offices (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Russak & Hellwing, 2019), or help from other professionals external to the university (Grimes et al., 2019).

In relation to external factors, the family has been studied as the first and fundamental support for students (Couzens et al., 2015; Gow et al., 2020). Such support can be emotional, such as believing in them or encouraging them to move forward, although it can also involve financial and academic support (Francis et al., 2019; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Gow et al., 2020). Among the most relevant factors are also university peers. It is true that students with disabilities often find it difficult to establish new relationships and feel stigmatised by their peers (Edwards et al., 2022; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Shpigelman et al., 2022); however, studies show the importance of peers, their empathy and support, having good relationships with them, and their presence in everyday life on campus (Couzens et al., 2015; Gow et al., 2020; Mayo Pais, 2021).

In universities, the importance of the disability offices is highlighted, which, according to Shpigelman et al. (2022), can provide information about rights, support in bureaucratic procedures and also academic and emotional help to feel included. Students recognise the importance of asking for these services (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Lyman et al., 2016).

Another aspect valued by successful students is the opportunity to establish good relationships with faculty members (Accardo et al., 2019; Getzel & Thoma, 2008), the use of inclusive and helpful methodological strategies by them, and their availability, empathy and understanding.

1.2. Hidden disabilities and the dilemma of disclosing or not disclosing the disability

The reality of universities is that this is a new formative stage, different from previous ones, in which students have to demonstrate greater independence and self-determination (Naudé et al., 2022). In the case of students with disabilities, once they enter university, they have to be proactive, identify themselves to the disability offices and request the accommodations they need (Couzens et al., 2015; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Parsons et al., 2021).

Disabilities can be visible or invisible when they are not perceived at first sight (Couzens et al., 2015). In the international literature, invisible disabilities include mental disabilities, chronic illnesses, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (LD), with dyslexia being the most common (Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Richardson, 2021). In some countries, such as Italy, the latter are not considered disabilities but disorders; in others, however, they are identified as disabilities and students are entitled to financial support (such as free tuition fees) or necessary accommodations at university (Clouder et al., 2020).

In the case of invisible disabilities, students face the challenge of whether or not to disclose their disability (Moriña, 2022). Not all students disclose their disability and then decide to renounce the accommodations they are entitled to by law (Grimes et al., 2017; 2019). The reasons that lead them to remain invisible are different (Moriña, 2022): in some cases, it is a consequence of a considered choice after weighing risks and benefits (Melián & Meneses, 2022); others students decide to hide their disability due to previous negative experiences in other educational stages, as well as to the opportunity to live a university experience without social stigma (Gow et al., 2020; Kendall, 2016); in other cases, they find it painful to show their disabilities (Mullins & Preyde, 2013); for others, there is no identity belief linked to disability, especially in the case of learning disabilities, and they simply see themselves as having limitations in certain areas (Connor, 2012). In addition, sometimes, although they initially report it, they subsequently do not use the necessary accommodations or feel uncomfortable doing so, as they do not want to feel different (Lyman et al., 2016).

When disability is not disclosed, not receiving the necessary accommodations, as teaching practices are often not inclusive or based on the principles of universal design for learning (UDL), there is a risk of not achieving academic goals and dropping out of university (Moriña, 2022). In fact, the use of accommodations is often associated with greater success during studies (Grimes et al., 2017).

1.3. HE and disability in Italy

International publications on disability and HE in Italy are not frequent (Bellacicco & Parisi, 2021). In Italy, as in other countries, the number of university students with disabilities is progressively increasing (ANVUR, 2021; Biggeri et al., 2020), as a result of laws and legislative decrees. For example, Law 104/92 already regulated educational inclusion, and also referred to HE. This was complemented in 1999 by Law 17/99, guaranteeing specific technical aids and a tutoring service, establishing the figure of a rector's delegate in each university. In 2010, Law 170/2010 for the inclusion of students with LD recognised dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography and dyscalculia as specific learning difficulties, and it guarantees, at the different educational levels (including university), flexibility with the use of adaptations or compensatory instruments, as well as appropriate forms of assessment during exams (Law, 2010). In addition, Italian legislation provides for a full exemption from tuition fees for persons with a degree of disability of 66 % or more.

According to ANVUR (2021), 36,816 people with disabilities were enrolled in Italian universities in 2019/20, accounting for 2 out of every 100 people enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate, Master's or PhD courses. Of these, only 18,380 (49.9 %) of people with

disabilities had visited the disability offices. Despite legislative provisions, Italy continues to experience barriers that hinder the path toward inclusive education and the learning and participation of students with disabilities (Biggeri et al., 2020).

For students with disabilities, the role of HE in their educational, social and employment inclusion is essential, as it provides them with opportunities for independent living, social experiences, and professional and quality-of-life improvements (Accardo et al., 2019). For this reason, it is important to analyse the external or contextual factors that students recognise as useful in their university career for the completion of their studies. This study contributes to the scarce research conducted from the voice of Italian graduates, as most studies have been carried out from the perspective of students with disabilities, focusing on barriers to inclusion and in other countries (Grimes et al., 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2017). In addition, this article explores not only contextual factors, but also recommendations that graduates make for universities to help increase the number of students with disabilities to remain and complete their studies.

2. Method

This study is linked to a larger project which used a qualitative methodology. The overall purpose was to explore the personal and contextual factors that contribute to the university success of graduates with disabilities. In this article we exclusively analysed which external factors were key in the university trajectories of Italian graduates with invisible disabilities. Specifically, the research questions were two: (1) What are the external factors that facilitate university success? (2) What recommendations can be made to universities to encourage more students with disabilities to remain and complete their studies?

2.1. Participants

The participant selection was carried out through diverse recruitment means that ensured the inclusion of key participants in the study. In order to gather the sample of participants, 55 Italian public universities were emailed to contact the rector's delegate for disability/LD, the disability offices or faculty members. Different Italian associations of people with disabilities or LD (such as AMICI ITALIA, FIABA ONLUS) were also contacted and an Italian website on Instagram was created for the visualisation of the project and the dissemination of information. Finally, the snowball technique was used and the participants disseminated the project information to other graduates who could be interested.

The participant selection process for this study employed criteria-based sampling, following the methodology outlined by Patton (1987). The inclusion criteria encompassed graduates with invisible disabilities from any Italian university. The target population consisted of individuals who had successfully completed their academic studies no later than the academic year 2016-2017. The sampling strategy extended to graduates from diverse fields of knowledge, representing different disciplines within higher education. Gender diversity was crucial, with participation open to graduates of any gender. Additionally, participants were required to express availability to participate in the study, ensuring a committed and collaborative cohort. This approach to participant selection aimed to capture a diverse perspective on the experiences of graduates with invisible disabilities in the Italian academic landscape. This study excluded students whose disability diagnosis report had been recognised after they completed their university studies.

In addition, the criterion for inclusion in the sample was that the disability should be hidden, and it was decided not to ask this directly during the contact phase, for sensitivity reasons. This meant that not all those who contacted us were eligible to participate and, therefore, some of them could not participate. Therefore, in order to increase the sample, it was added to the cover letter of the project that participants with disabilities and LD were sought, and this facilitated the contact with a few more graduates. These criteria were ultimately applied to the 41 students who were contacted and responded.

The final sample consisted of 15 participants from eight public universities (Table 1): nine women (60 %) and six men (40 %), aged between 23 and 44 years (29 years average age). The predominant disabilities in the sample were LD (7 participants, 46.7 %), chronic health (5 participants, 33.3 %) and mental illnesses (3 participants, 20 %). Most of the participants (9) graduated in Social Sciences and Humanities (60 %), 4 participants graduated in Science and Technology (26.6 %), and 2 participants graduated in Health Sciences

Table 1
Participants.

Code	Gender	Age	Disability type	Area of study
P1	W	27	Chronic Health	Health Science
P2	M	24	LD	Social Sciences and Humanities
P3	M	27	Chronic Health	Science and Technology
P4	M	24	LD	Science and Technology
P5	W	24	LD	Social Sciences and Humanities
P6	M	26	LD	Science and Technology
P7	M	33	LD	Health Science
P8	M	29	Chronic Health	Social Sciences and Humanities
P9	W	39	Mental Health	Social Sciences and Humanities
P10	W	26	Chronic Health	Social Sciences and Humanities
P11	W	31	Mental Health	Social Sciences and Humanities
P12	W	28	LD	Social Sciences and Humanities
P13	W	23	LD	Social Sciences and Humanities
P14	W	31	Chronic Health	Science and Technology
P15	W	44	Mental Health	Social Sciences and Humanities

(13.4 %).

2.2. Instrument

A semi-structured interview script was developed to analyse external factors that could act as facilitators for achieving university success (Table 2). This script was validated by experts (both faculty members with and without disabilities and staff from disability offices). Prior to conducting the interviews for the study, the interviews were piloted with graduates who did not participate in the study.

All interviews were individual and virtual, using Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, or Google Meet. One of the participants was interviewed via phone call. Each interview lasted 50 minutes on average and was audio recorded, transcribed and returned to the participants, who were allowed to change anything they considered necessary.

2.3. Data analysis

For the analysis of the results, a coding system was designed ad hoc and the MAXQDA software was used. We followed the proposal of Miles and Huberman (1994), whereby once all the interviews had been transcribed, we read the information in depth and then made sense of the information by assigning codes to the text fragments, according to the established system (Table 3). To guarantee the reliability of the data analysis, the transcripts were returned to the participants, who reviewed them and approved the transcribed version. Moreover, to ensure the reliability of the data analysis, all information was coded by the three authors of the article. The data that generated disagreement in the coding were discussed to reach consensus.

2.4. Ethics in research

This study was approved by a ethics committee. Informed consent was used to inform the participants about the aims of the research and to explain that participation was voluntary, and that the confidentiality and privacy of their data would be respected. In addition, codes were used to ensure anonymity.

3. Findings

3.1. What are the external factors that facilitate university success?

3.1.1. Informal factor: family
Most of the participants ($n = 11$) identified the family as the most important external factor for their permanence and successful completion of university studies. From the family, they highlighted the help from their parents, which could be financial, such as paying university fees, paying for books and being able to live in the family home during their studies without having to look for a job or rent a flat. This helped them to achieve the academic objectives and finish their studies, as they were able to dedicate themselves exclusively to studying:

> From an economic point of view (without the financial support of the family) I would never have achieved it, because I would have had to work at the same time, and, because of my dyslexia, I would never have been able to graduate on time (P2).

This support provided by the family was also an emotional help (motivating and trusting them, helping them in managing other aspects of daily living, not judging them, etc.), and an encouragement to keep going and to persevere despite the difficulties: "*They told*

Table 2
Interview script.

Relevant questions from the interview script
Who helped you (external factors) to stay and complete your studies? How?
Did your family support you to remain and complete your studies?
Who helped you and how?
Do you think you would have achieved the same results if they had not helped you? Why?
If you had a partner, did he/she help you to stay and complete your studies?
How did they help you?
Do you think you would have achieved the same results if they had not helped you? Why?
Did your friends help you to stay and complete your studies?
Who and how did they help you?
Do you think you would have achieved the same results if they had not helped you? Why?
Did you receive any kind of help from the university?
What kind of help did you receive?
How do you value it?
Did you receive support from outside the university?
What recommendations/proposals would you make to the university to make it easier for an increasing number of students with disabilities to complete their university studies?

Table 3
Code system.

Code	Description
Family	How family influences retention and success at university.
Partner	How partners affect retention and success at university.
Friends	How (non-university) friendships influence retention and success at university.
University (Disability office)	Whether support services were used (type of curricular adaptations made and type of support).
University (Student support programmes)	Other programmes and resources offered by universities (excluding those included in the disability offices). For example: welcome days, student associations, cultural and sports activities, psychological support, etc.
University (Staff)	How administration staff support students during their studies.
University (faculty members)	Attitude of faculty, curricular adaptations, teaching characteristics, methodologies, etc.
University (classmates)	Inclusion in class, peer relations, academic support and sense of belonging.
External organisations and professionals	Professionals and external entities that offer support and adjustments during the university stage.
Recommendations	Advice on how the university can be more inclusive.

me: 'come on, you can do it, don't give up, you can do it, we are at the end', like coaches in a football match" (P7).

In addition, it was an unconditional support, since the participants felt autonomous in their universities, as their families gave them freedom of management, asking them only to be constant with their studies and to be responsible with their decisions.

On some occasions ($n = 5$), siblings also offered emotional help as encouragement not to drop out, as well as academic support in some exams: "*Well, my sister also graduated and, yes, she encouraged me not to give up, to continue…*" (P15).

3.1.2. Informal factor: partners

Only seven participants had a stable relationship with a partner during their university studies. In these cases, the partner was a source of emotional support, as they shared happy moments and difficulties, and helped them to prepare for exams or to manage the stress caused by their studies. The participants valued their help and presence positively, especially from an emotional point of view. Sometimes the support was even financial: "*My boyfriend helped me, without realising it, giving me support, stimulating me, motivating me to always keep going, in short, not to give up*" (P12).

3.1.3. Informal factor: friends

Seven graduates highlighted the importance of friendships outside the university. Friends made it possible to talk and share university experiences, ensured moments of fun and listening, gave advice and even helped with studying: "*My friends supported me morally and also helped me to study, even though we were in different faculties; we sometimes studied together and, even when there were oral exams, we went over things with each other*" (P6).

3.1.4. Formal factor: university, disability office

A fundamental pillar in the university experience of many graduates was the disability office. Of the 15 participants, 12 went to this service, which contacted the participants to advise them on accommodations that could be made and addressed any difficulties that might arise through mediation with the teaching staff. The reasonable accommodations that students used were: extra time during exams ($n = 7$), the support of a tutor to study ($n = 7$), and a human reader (a person who reads the written exams aloud) ($n = 1$): "*The university helped me by giving me a tutor, who enabled me to study lessons that I wasn't sure about, do exercises…*" (P5).

Despite this support offered by their universities, not all participants ($n = 3$) attended this service, due to a lack of information, since they did not know about the office, did not think they needed these services or were embarrassed, "*… I never informed myself about disability offices, also because I told you I was ashamed, so I wouldn't have used them anyway*" (P11).

3.1.5. Formal factor: university faculty members

The participants valued faculty members as both obstacles and facilitators. Those who did not help the participants were considered to lack information and training about the law, disability and mandatory accommodations ($n = 6$). However, in the different university experiences, the graduates found faculty who acted as facilitators and were able to support them in completing their studies ($n = 12$): "*I owe it all to an angel I met during my studies, and she was my lecturer*" (P15).

They valued moments of understanding, where faculty members understood the students' needs and wanted to help them by finding out what they could do and what reasonable adjustments could be made: "*The faculty understood my problem, they understood that I wanted to fight and so they made themselves available to me*" (P7).

The participants commented that most of their faculty members did not know that they had students with disabilities, since the participants did not disclose their disability. They only did so in cases of extreme necessity, for example, when they had to be absent due to an operation ($n = 4$). However, they had faculty members who helped them by being flexible, approachable and empathetic, and by making the necessary accommodations. This attitude was considered to be due to their human condition or good predisposition, rather than to laws or university rules: "*I would say that the main characteristic was the humanity and empathy they had… My faculty members didn't know anything (about my LD), I mean, I always attended classes in the shadows*" (P4).

3.1.6. Formal factor: university, classmates

Peers were decisive in many cases ($n = 10$). They emphasised their constant presence and their spontaneous and disinterested help. They sometimes provided notes when they could not attend the lectures.

> It often happened, unfortunately, that I couldn't attend class, but they always provided me with the notes or the material that I was missing; so, yes, from that point of view, I feel that my classmates helped me, yes, absolutely (P3).

Others spent time together sharing opinions and experiences about faculty and exams. They even organised study groups to help them cope with certain exams: *"...We always studied together... It meant specific help, emotional support, but above all, the fact of saying `look, I'm going to help you', that's when I felt it..."* (P13).

The classmates represented the possibility of living the full university experience and not feeling alone along the way. They helped to relieve stress, offering the opportunity to share doubts and worries, to let off steam and to achieve a sense of belonging at their universities: *"I also got support from my classmates because, with them, it's like we are a family, because we help each other out"* (P6).

3.1.7. Formal factor: university, resources offered

Although the universities offered resources, the graduates with disabilities, despite valuing them as interesting, stressed that they were hardly ever decisive in their university experiences and did not facilitate the completion of their studies. However, they highlighted participation in events or trips organised by their universities ($n = 7$), such as conferences, online seminars and Erasmus scholarships. Three participants were not able to experience campus life, due to illness or to the fact that they either lived far away or were already working.

On the other hand, the support that most of the graduates ($n = 8$), with the exception of the participants with LD, considered fundamental and essential in their university studies was the partial or total exemption from paying university fees due to their recognised degree of disability. Without this possibility, some ($n = 4$) would not even have been able to enrol at university, nor would they have considered doing so or continuing their studies, *"I would never have been able to do the degree if I had not been recognised as having 75 % disability. I wouldn't even have had the money to do it here in my city..."* (P15).

3.1.8. Formal factor: external organisations and professionals

Some graduates ($n = 7$) also felt supported by entities and professionals outside the university, such as associations or public health centres. For example, one participant had found an association and felt strongly supported by it, and another participant actively collaborated in her association. In some cases, the support involved turning to these entities as a form of distraction, to better live the university stage, as academic support to study or prepare for exams, or as a fundamental help at a medical and health level: *"I always received help from them, from the dyslexia centre, and they helped me to make, let's say, to see this problem with less difficulty"* (P6).

3.2. What recommendations can be made to universities to promote more students with disabilities to remain and complete their studies?

Firstly, the graduates ($n = 6$) highlighted that students must be aware of the different services of their universities and the disability office. Therefore, an effort should be made to make this information visible and available to all interested persons: *"I think that, in general, the university lacks clearer publicity; if you need something, you have to look for ways in which the university can support you"* (P11).

In particular, the participants stated that it would be helpful to promote the services, publicise the reasonable adjustments and all the proposals that universities offer, and contact students immediately after enrolment without waiting for them to find out on their own, since they may never do it.

> If you enrol at the university, they ask you for the level of disability and then the faculty should be informed. This could be a good move, but if you expect a student to raise his hand and say 'excuse me, I have a problem', that's not going to happen, and that's the difference between visible and invisible disabilities (P14).

The participants also advised to inform the faculty members without expecting the students to do so ($n = 1$), or to encourage the students to do so ($n = 2$).

> Try to get the faculty members to talk about dyslexia at the beginning of the course. This would be good because the dyslexic student enrols but might not present the certificate, because he/she is ashamed, because he/she does not want to... not all of them want to struggle. Moreover, they may arrive at the university tired, they have struggled all through high school, and they cannot cope with it any more, that's enough.... (P12).

Informing faculty members at the beginning of the course, and not only for exams, would allow organising a series of lectures that could be based on the use of multiple learning strategies, such as the use of more visual and audio materials, respecting different learning styles, and concept mapping during the lectures or afterwards in group activities: *"More slides with pictures and fewer words. ... Through videos, through pictures and through things, videos that make you understand something. ... and also, audios"* (P7).

Another recommendation was related to distance learning. Some participants ($n = 3$) appreciated the online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it helped to reduce anxiety or some of the problems related to disability. Maintaining the possibility to attend classes remotely could help to avoid travel costs and organisational difficulties for those who did not live close to the campus.

Maintain distance learning, i.e., maintain co-presentiality, or allow a choice between attending in person or attending at a distance. It is true that distance learning might takes away opportunities for socialising, but, especially for those who commute to university, it also reduces those efforts to get to the university, in terms of both cost and time (P10).

Finally, one participant recommended the importance of providing a psychological support service for all students, with and without disabilities.

4. Discussion

Becoming a university student is a significant milestone for people with disabilities. University systems in many countries have made efforts to guarantee access for students with disabilities, and are also advancing in actions that promote their permanence and the completion of their degrees (Carballo et al., 2022). Although there are still many barriers to be broken down, we also know that the outlook is hopeful, as more and more students with disabilities are accessing and completing university degrees (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

Being a university student implies facing a new formative stage in which the student is expected to be self-determined, that is, to govern and have control over his or her life by setting clear goals and outlining the steps to follow in order to achieve such goals, being proactive, solving problems, making decisions, and believing in his or her abilities (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). This is certainly not a skill that all students master, and, in some cases, especially in invisible disabilities, it can hinder the university journey. Thus, when such an important personal factor as self-determination requires learning and training, contextual factors can compensate and influence college retention (Russak & Hellwing, 2019). There are some factors external to universities that HE has little influence on, such as families, partners or friendships. In our study, these are important, especially families, for financial and moral support (Francis et al., 2019; Gow et al., 2020), although there are other contextual factors specific to universities that have been critical, such as disability services, faculty and peers (Grimes et al., 2019).

In terms of disability services, without these, graduates participating in different studies would not have received the accommodations that enabled them to study on an equal footing with their peers (Getzel and Thoma, 2008; Grimes et al., 2019; Lyman et al., 2016; Shpigelman et al., 2022). For graduates, it was a critical support to pursue. While these may be available to any student with a disability, sometimes they are not easy to access, either because they are not aware of their rights or because they do not want to disclose their disability. The latter is the case for students with invisible disabilities. The desire to live a university experience like any other classmate, without prejudice or stigmatisation, or not considering that they need this support, leads them not to disclose their disability and study like any other student, without the support they are entitled to and need. In many cases their trajectories are not easy, and they have to make an extra effort to achieve their academic goals (Clouder et al., 2020).

There are several recommendations that could be made to universities regarding this factor. Firstly, it would be necessary to make the services visible and show these to the students from the moment they access university, as well as to let them know that proactivity is expected from them (Grimes et al., 2021; Shpigelman et al., 2022). In other words, they are the ones who must ask for support and not the other way around. This is something new for students, since, in previous stages, this has not been the case. Therefore, this information should be visible on university websites, social networks, infographics and self-training guides. Summer courses or workshops could be organised in the first weeks at the university to learn all this and also to train self-determination skills.

Universities should also commit to the social model of disability, inclusive education and UDL (Grimes et al., 2017; Pérez-Castro, 2021). This would undoubtedly prevent the dilemma of whether or not to disclose the disability, which would be a minor issue, as a student would not have to consider the need for others to know about their disability. Environments would be accessible, valuing diversity and recognising that students have multiple abilities and learn differently. In fact, it has been shown that learning is better, and motivation increases if content is presented in different ways and media (Grimes et al., 2021). Services such as peer tutoring, the possibility to record lessons, more time or flexibility in the delivery of assignments (Pérez-Castro, 2021) could also be offered, which can be beneficial for all students.

This would undoubtedly influence the work of the faculty, who would plan syllabi designed for all students with diverse methodological strategies, technological resources and multiple materials. As in our study, other authors agree on the need for faculty members to have a human, facilitating and empathetic profile (Accardo et al., 2019; Carballo et al., 2022). The emotional component when teaching is fundamental, and that which may be inherent to some can also be taught to others. For this reason, it would be advisable for universities to train their teaching staff in diversity as a richness, in active and participatory methodological strategies, and in how to teach with affection and emotions. However, training alone is not enough, and thus our study also recommends informing. In other words, faculty members should know from the outset that they have students with disabilities and that they should not have to wait for the disability service to provide this information, since the fact that the reasonable adjustments arrive too late is precisely due to the fact that the syllabi are not based on UDL (Moriña, 2022; Grimes et al., 2017).

A final factor for educational and social inclusion is classmates. In line with the results of other studies (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Couzens et al., 2015; Mayo Pais, 2021), the importance of peers, who become friends with whom to share good times or difficulties, was confirmed in the present study. They are not only an academic support, by sharing notes, learning together or preparing for exams, as they can also be the greatest social support at university. For this reason, students should be valued as a human resource in the classroom. Faculty members could use methodologies such as cooperative learning to encourage peer learning. Universities could also promote inclusion and success through peers. Awareness and information campaigns could encourage university students to be aware of disability and to value and learn from diversity.

4.1. Limitations and further research

The present study has some limitations that must be pointed out. Firstly, the small sample size implies that the results cannot be representative of all university graduates with disabilities. It would be useful to be able to expand this number and learn about the experiences of other graduates with hidden disabilities. Secondly, not all internationally recognised invisible disabilities are considered disabilities in Italy, for example, LD. For this reason, it was considered appropriate to add LD to disability to include them in the study and increase the number of potential participants.

Future research could explore, in a polyphonic approach, from the perspective of the different external agents that influence university success, their perceptions on how they influence university success.

4.2. Conclusions

The external factors explored in this study can be allies of educational and social inclusion. Family, friends, partners, disability services, teaching staff, peers and external entities have helped the graduates in this study to access, remain in and successfully complete their degrees. Designing, developing and evaluating actions to encourage these factors to act as levers for inclusion for the benefit of the entire university community is the challenge that today's university systems are currently facing.

Although progress has been made in initiatives that favour the permanence and completion of studies, the predominant teaching models still need to be transformed, in order to prevent the need to disclose a disability, and, from the beginning, the subjects should be planned and designed for all, with no exceptions.

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Anabel Moriña: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Laura Tontini:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Víctor H. Perera:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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