



THE INCLUSION OF D/DEAF STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF TURIN, ITALY: SERVICES PROVIDED, INDIVIDUAL PLANS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

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Abstract. The enrollment of d/Deaf students in the universities of Turin, Italy, has increased for the past 15 years. Each student is entitled to an individual plan and special educational services, such as sign language interpretation and specialized tutorships. However, results of this study highlight several issues, including high percentages of d/Deaf students dropping out from university and the lack of access to international mobility programs.

Keywords: higher education, Deafness, Sign Language, Erasmus, UNCRPD, university

Introduction

In the history of education in Italy, the 20th century will be remembered as the last stage of an age-old process of inclusion of d/Deaf people in the framework of educability, following the adoption of Law 17/99 approved by the Italian Parliament on 28th January 1999, after two thousand years during which d/Deaf people were regarded as individuals without language and thought (Chiricò, 2014). At international level, the 21st century opened with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), of which we are now celebrating the first ten years. The UNCRPD represents a fundamental milestone for the education and inclusion of students with disabilities in universities. Article 24 of the UNCRPD, in fact, focuses on education, and states that reasonable accommodations must be ensured by State Parties so that ‘persons with disabilities are able to access, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning’ (United

Nations, 2006: Art. 24.5). Following the UNCRPD, there has been a substantial expansion in higher education participation across Europe, with an emphasis on the inclusion of under-represented groups, such as students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This process is supported by the European Union and national governments and is driven by both social justice and economic concerns (Riddel, 2012).

However, international research focusing on this specific field began only in the late 1990s and only a few systematic studies are available, making it difficult to identify common and comparable indicators in a framework of different inclusion models in Western universities. Yet, arguably, it is possible to identify at least two consistent considerations emerging in the countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): the permanence of inequalities and a focus on special design.

While access to tertiary education for young adults with disabilities has improved significantly over the past decade in most OECD countries, inequalities are in fact persistent (Ebersold, 2012). The chances of success for these students in higher education are lower than their non-disabled peers, as well as their employment opportunities, especially for those whose disability is invisible. Inequalities may have both psychological and financial negative impact, and they can discourage from enrollment in tertiary education. Failure or delays can be sources of indebtedness and discourage students with disabilities from an active search for a job after university. Inequalities can represent a psychological burden as well, as a loss of self-confidence can be detrimental to future success, employment and social inclusion. These students require additional investments in time and energy, which can be heavy and isolate them from their peers. Additionally, failing or dropping out are often synonyms of professional exclusion and sources of vulnerability and poverty (Ebersold, 2008).

The second consideration is about universal design. The UNCRPD calls on State Parties to design universally accessible environments. However, universities are still very much focusing on individual impairments of the students, rather than on the removal of systemic barriers. Selection and guidance standards in higher education institutions are often combined with habits of categorizing particular groups of disabilities and producing “over-investment” and “overrepresentation” of compensation approaches (Benoit, 2013), with the risk of violating the principle of universal design.

The present study investigates issues of access to education, inequalities and universal design, focusing on d/Deaf students attending the three public universities of Turin (Torino), the largest city in Piemonte region, in Northwest Italy.

Methodology

This study was carried out using the current archive of the Institute for the Deaf of Turin¹⁾, which includes two documentary collections:

1. General documents about provided services, such as the list of d/Deaf students enrolled in universities, administrative documentation, etc.

2. Individual documents for each student, consisting of information related to health, individual academic plan and evaluation, etc.

Data were extrapolated through the examination of all the administrative and individual documents. Twenty-six d/Deaf students currently enrolled in university were subsequently asked to complete an online questionnaire focused on international mobility. The study was conducted following rigorous ethical procedures, all students were informed about the aims of the study, were granted anonymity, and gave their consent to participate in the research project.

The first 15 years of the specialized service in the universities of Turin

The University of Turin was one of the first Italian universities that, from the very beginning, provided a wide range of services for d/Deaf students. In fact, the enrollment of the first student with a hearing impairment, using Italian Sign Language as his mother tongue, and requiring specialized services to attend academic classes, examinations and to communicate with professors and administrative offices, dates back to 1999.

From that moment on, the number of d/Deaf students enrolled kept increasing, and the three universities of Turin (University of Turin, Polytechnic of Turin, and “Albertina” Academy of Fine Arts) now count between 25 and 35 d/Deaf students every academic year. A total number of 81 deaf students has been recorded in the University of Turin since 2000/2001. Following the initiative of the University of Turin, in the past few years the other two public universities began providing Italian Sign Language interpreting services and communication assistance: the Polytechnic University of Turin started in the academic year of 2010/2011, while the “Albertina” Academy of Fine Arts started in the academic year of 2014/2015. The majority of d/Deaf students are enrolled at the University of Turin, the largest of the local public universities; so far, both the Polytechnic University and the Academy of Fine Arts have provided services just to 3 d/Deaf students.

The enrollment of d/Deaf students in universities developed very slowly: during the first year of service delivery only one student could be counted; the following academic year there were seven d/Deaf students. The number remained stable for four years, until 2005/2006 when 19 students were enrolled. The number of d/Deaf students kept increasing, with 30 d/Deaf students in the academic year 2011/2012, and the peak of 36 students in 2014/2015. There are currently 32 d/Deaf students enrolled in the academic year in progress (Table 1).

At the beginning, the choice of university courses was concentrated in the humanistic area, with a prevalence of enrollments in Education Sciences. Today, d/Deaf students are enrolled in a number of different courses, as shown in Table 2.

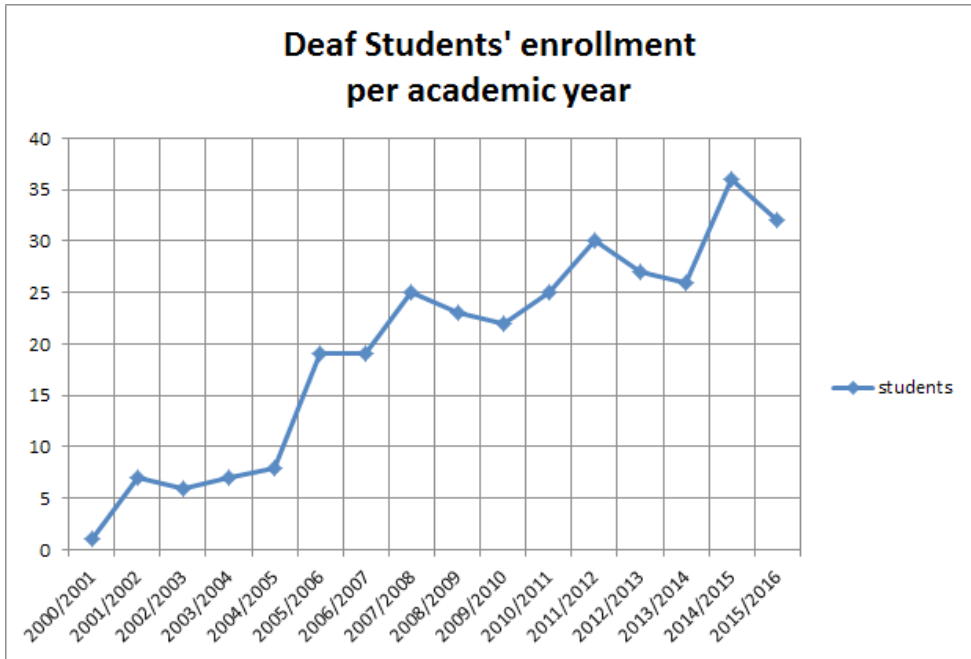


Table 1

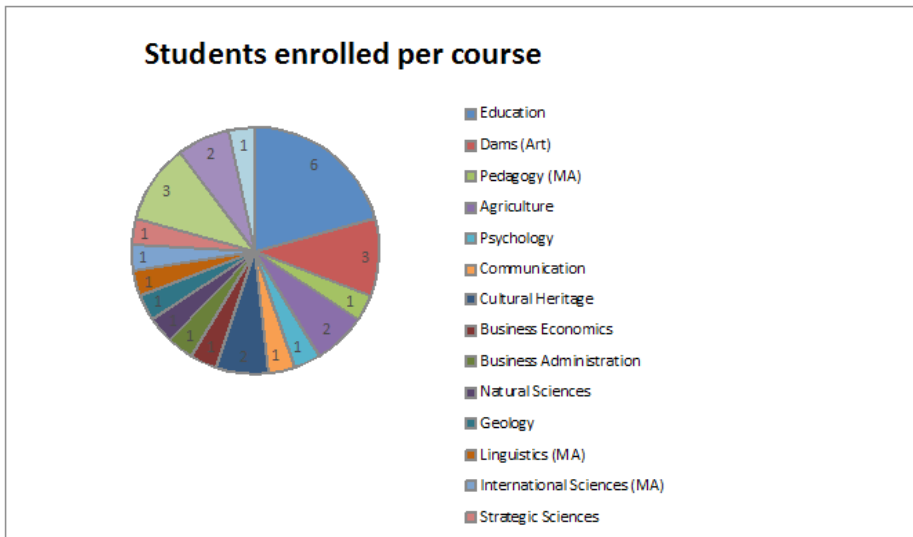


Table 2

Overall, the preference for the Education Sciences is highlighted in Table 3, which shows the number of d/Deaf students who have graduated since 2000/2001. Out of the 22 d/Deaf students who graduated, ten received a Bachelor’s degree (BA), four completed a Master’s degree (MA), seven are currently enrolled in a Master’s degree course, and only one student obtained a second level Master’s after the first MA degree.

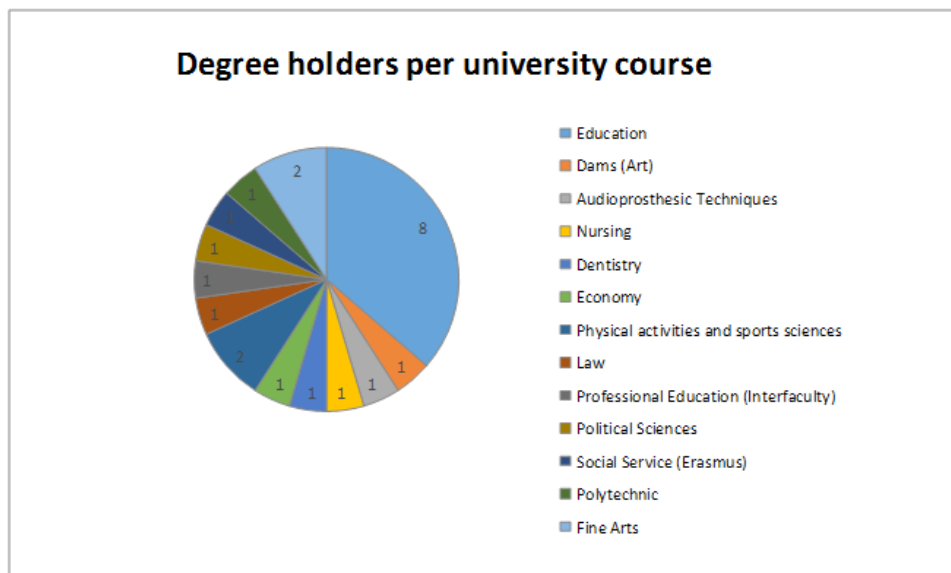


Table 3

The organization of the service

The service provided to each d/Deaf student is framed within an individual plan customized to each individual, and elaborated by the universities together with the Institute for the Deaf and each student. After the enrollment, the student has to apply for the service to the “Ufficio Disabili”, that is a Disability Advisory Service providing information, advice on disability issues, and general support. Following an initial interview, the individual plan is signed by the university, the Institute for the Deaf and the student: the plan includes type and amount of hours of specialized tutorship, sign language interpreting, and any other service required from the student in order for his/her needs to be met. The aim is to promote individualized and functional learning paths to each person and the participation of everyone in the university life. Given the highly personalized approach, there is no fixed amount of hours assigned to each student. Rather, d/Deaf students are provided with a weekly number of hours of tutorship, considering the function of the service and the goals that each student intends to achieve.

Each student is assigned to a mentor for the number of hours defined in the individual plan, and all mentors are specialized in d/Deaf Studies and d/Deaf education. The criteria for the service assignment, in terms of methodology and amount of hours per week, fit the needs expressed by each student, in order to promote individualized projects and self-determination. As previously mentioned, the approach is strongly personalized and the amount of weekly hours for each student is not predetermined: each semester, a number of weekly hours is agreed with the student (on average between six and 12). The service can be customized on the specific needs of each person (for example, interpreting service and communication assistance may be provided only for exams or for meetings with professors). The mentor can have very different roles, such as, translating lessons to Italian Sign Language, supporting the communication needs of oral deaf students, providing individual support for the preparation of exams, helping d/Deaf students to use university services and to communicate with teachers and administrative staff, as well as supporting communication with fellow students.

In addition to professional service, which is outsourced to the Institute for the Deaf, the Disability Office provides a peer tutoring service involving hearing students. Peer tutors help d/Deaf students by taking notes for them, working together with the interpreter to explain technical contents in specific subjects, and promoting their socialization in peer groups. Together, specialized mentorship and peer tutoring contribute to the creation of a comprehensive and diversified service, both in terms of quantity and modality, that fits very well d/Deaf students' individual needs, and that follows personal choices of each student. However, if we consider the average of the tutorship hours per academic year (even if it is an insignificant data considering the reasoned differentiation of the amount of hours for each student), we can see a reduction in recent years, as shown in Table 4. This reduction coincides with the recent period of economic crisis in Italy, and can be attributed to the national spending review policy, which reduced the amount of resources for the education sector. While the total amount of hours remained constant for several years, it is important to consider that the number of d/Deaf students is increasing, thus resulting in the reduction of tutorship hours per each student (Table 4).

Critical issues

Drop out

Drop out cases (34) represent one third on the total number of enrolled students (81) in the observed period. Many of them withdrew from university during the same academic year of enrollment or during the following year, but the majority of the students had been enrolled for many years in the university before dropping out. One of the main issues appears to be discontinuity, and d/Deaf students often seem to be confused about their educational path, changing several programs and courses. Arguably, this problem could be related to lack of proper guidance expe-

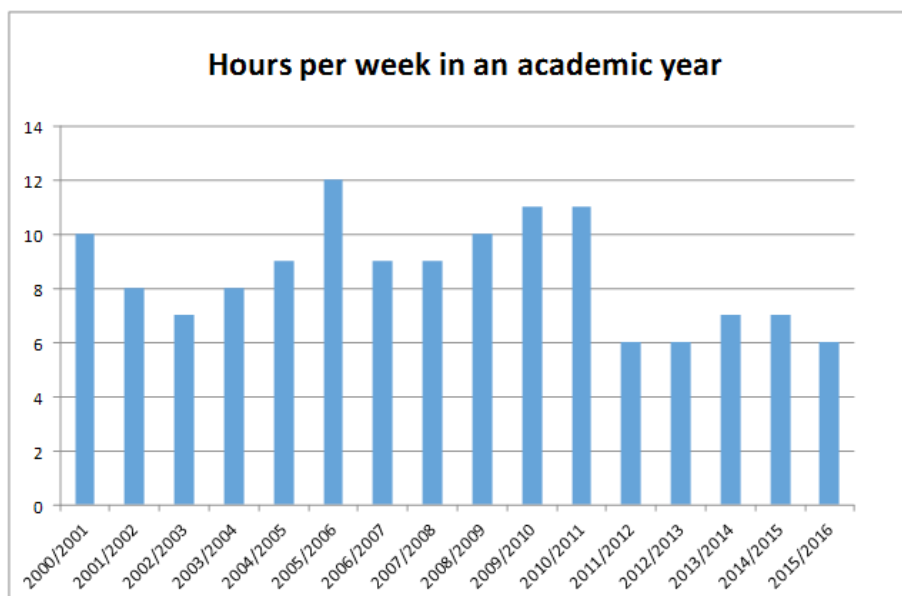


Table 4

rienced by d/Deaf students at the end of high school, when they have to choose a university course.

International Mobility and Erasmus

International mobility is a crucial point in our overview, as no d/Deaf student attended any Erasmus project in the past 15 years. The University of Turin once provided a service of communication assistance to a Spanish Erasmus deaf student, but no Italian students enrolled in the universities of Turin benefitted from a similar opportunity abroad. In order to analyze this datum, a questionnaire was sent to d/Deaf students currently enrolled in the universities of Turin. Results indicate that 42% of respondents are not familiar with the existence of international mobility programs. Of those who stated to know these programs, 57% are familiar with Erasmus and 43% know about summer camps abroad (Table 5).

Another important aspect to consider relates to the reasons preventing d/Deaf students from participating in international mobility programs. The majority of the students suggested two reasons: fear of not speaking a foreign language (42%) and difficulty in gathering information about these programs (42%). Another reason suggested by 33% of the respondents is the lack of clear information on who should be responsible for the provision of support to students with disabilities between sending and hosting universities (Table 6).

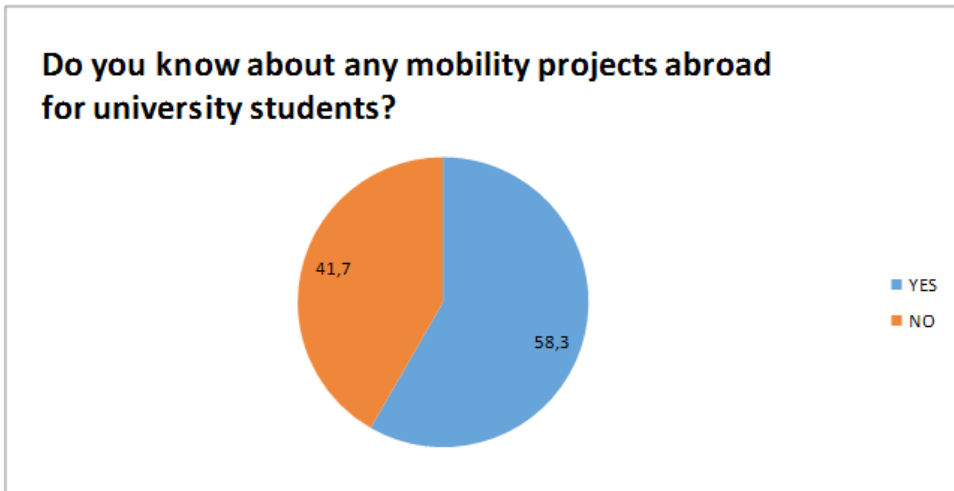


Table 5

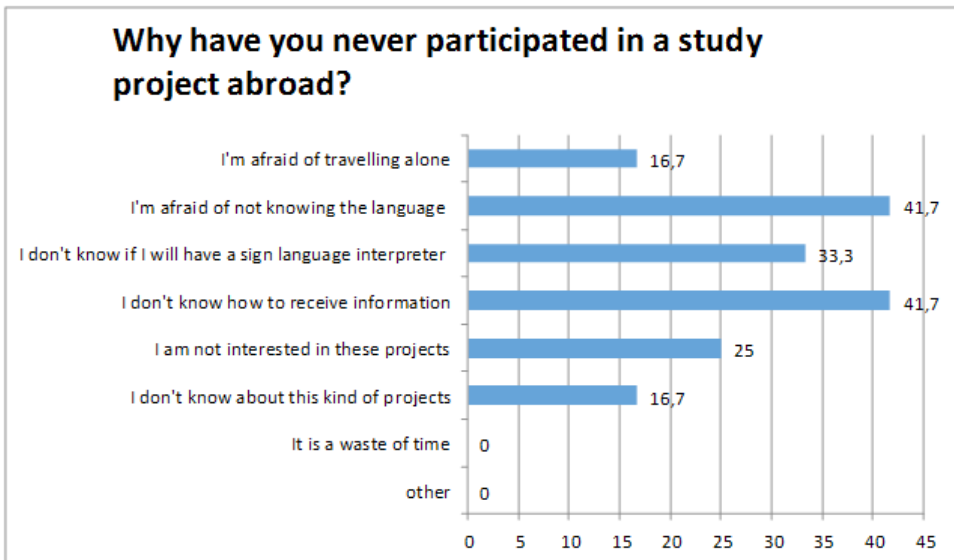


Table 6

Despite these issues, results of the questionnaire also show that the majority of d/Deaf students (73%) is interested in a future participation to study projects abroad.

Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that the universities of Turin are providing a wide range of different services customized to the individual needs and interests of d/Deaf students. The number of d/Deaf students has increased significantly and, on average, about 30 d/Deaf students attend university each academic year.

The services provided offer highly specialized activities in order to support d/Deaf students to:

- access lectures and the university activities they want to attend;
- communicate with professors, peers and administrative offices;
- be included in the university life with other d/Deaf and hearing students.

In order to customize the services to each individual, Sign Language Interpreters and Communication Assistants elaborate individual written plan, under the supervision of specialized staff and in collaboration with the Institute for the Deaf of Turin.

Despite certain success, it is clear that there are still a number of critical issues. Firstly, d/Deaf students on average take longer years to complete university: this finding requires further research in order to determine the reasons for this excessive delay. It is relevant to underline that it is an important issue as delays in completing university are also related to lower marks, and lower job opportunities.

Further efforts should be done to improve career guidance and the accessibility of information within universities. Lack of information is probably one of the reasons for the low rate of participation in international mobility programs, but also for poor choices at the enrollment stage. Greater efforts are also needed in career guidance and job placement services. Taking into account the necessary improvements in these areas, a systemic change is still required, and universities should view each student not as a temporary guest requesting on-demand services, but as an evolving person entitled to human rights, including the right to education.

NOTES

1. The Turin Institute for the Deaf is one of the oldest institution providing deaf education in Italy, founded in 1814 and still very active in the field. To know more about it: www.istitutosorditorino.org
2. Italian Parliament (28 January 1999,) *Integrazione e modifica della legge-quadro 5 febbraio 1992, n. 104, per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate*, Available at: <http://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/990171.htm>
3. United Nations (2006) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, New York: United Nations.

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