

Training for university teachers on intellectual disabilities: an exploratory investigation

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Abstract

The paper outlines the first results of an exploratory survey on Italian teachers' training needs for teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in higher education environments. The survey, conducted through a questionnaire called *Questionnaire on formative needs of university teachers about educational resources for students with intellectual disabilities*, is developed within the framework of the Erasmus+ project TUT4IND, which involves Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Serbia and Spain. The questionnaire was administered through an electronic work form, by means of the Google Drive storage service. The study involves a sample consisting of 150 Italian university teachers. This study aims at detecting three types of information. First, at a general level, it concerns the presence, within the universities involved in the survey, of training to educate teachers in the integration of students with intellectual disabilities, as well as teachers' perception of the relevance of these initiatives. The second type of information is related to the contents of the training which are perceived by teachers as relevant with respect to the development of their teaching skills. Finally, we intend to detect the perception of the relevance of the methodological-didactic contents and inclusive didactics. The detection tool consists of a closed-ended questionnaire, administered online. The results of the study constitute the prerequisite for the development and implementation of training courses geared towards the professional development of university teachers in the field of intellectual disabilities, with particular attention to the following: the ability to set up inclusive learning environments, the selection and didactic transposition of knowledge, the identification and application of didactic strategies, with a view to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, as highlighted by Agenda 2030 (Goal 4). The paper is divided into three parts. The first part clarifies the focus of the research by placing it in the international context and describes the state of the art of Italian research in this field. The second part describes the methodology of the investigation: the instrument used in the survey, the methods of administration and the research sample. In the third part the results of the survey are presented and discussed.

Keywords: higher education, university teachers' training, intellectual disabilities, inclusion, exploratory survey.

Resumo

O artigo descreve os primeiros resultados de uma pesquisa exploratória sobre as necessidades de formação de professores italianos para ensinar alunos com deficiência intelectual em contexto de ensino superior. O inquérito, realizado através de um questionário denominado Questionário sobre as necessidades formativas de professores universitários sobre recursos educativos para alunos com deficiência intelectual, é desenvolvido no âmbito do projeto Erasmus + TUT4IND, que envolve a Bélgica, Itália, Portugal, Sérvia e Espanha. O questionário foi aplicado por meio de formulário eletrónico de trabalho, por meio do serviço de armazenamento Google Drive. O estudo envolve uma amostra de 150 professores universitários italianos. Este estudo visa detetar três tipos de informação. Em primeiro lugar, a um nível geral, diz respeito à presença, nas universidades envolvidas no inquérito, de formação para formar professores na integração de alunos com deficiência intelectual, bem como à percepção dos professores sobre a relevância dessas iniciativas. O segundo tipo de informação diz respeito aos conteúdos da formação que são entendidos pelos professores como relevantes no que diz respeito ao desenvolvimento das suas competências pedagógicas. Por fim, pretendemos detetar a percepção da relevância dos conteúdos didático-metodológicos e da didática inclusiva. A ferramenta de deteção consiste num questionário fechado, administrado online. Os resultados do estudo constituem o pré-requisito para o desenvolvimento e implementação de cursos de formação orientados para o desenvolvimento profissional de professores universitários na área da deficiência intelectual, com particular atenção para os seguintes: capacidade de criação de ambientes de aprendizagem inclusivos, seleção e a transposição didática do conhecimento, a identificação e aplicação de estratégias didáticas, com o propósito de garantir uma educação de qualidade inclusiva e equitativa e promover oportunidades de aprendizagem ao longo da vida para todos, conforme destacado na Agenda 2030 (Objetivo 4). O artigo está dividido em três partes. A primeira parte esclarece o foco da pesquisa, colocando-o no contexto internacional e descreve o estado da arte da pesquisa italiana neste campo. A segunda parte descreve a metodologia da investigação: o instrumento utilizado na pesquisa, os métodos de administração e a amostra da pesquisa. Na terceira parte são apresentados e discutidos os resultados da pesquisa.

Palavras-Chave: ensino superior, formação de professores universitários, deficiência intelectual, inclusão, pesquisa exploratória.

1 Introduction

The paper presents the first results of an exploratory survey on Italian teachers' training needs for teaching learners with intellectual disabilities (ID) in higher education environments. The survey has been developed within the framework of the Erasmus+ project TUT4IND, which involves Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Serbia and Spain. This project is addressed at teachers and professors at the university level, to improve their knowledge about intellectual disabilities, the specific educational needs related to them, and the different possibilities in adapting their courses for the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. As a matter of fact, professionals of education do not usually feel prepared enough to attend properly to people with special education needs, especially in high education levels. This situation is due to a lack of training in strategies that deal with attention to diversity within grades that give access to university environment as professionals.

To fill this gap, a Pilot Course Curriculum will be designed, comprising a wide range of transversal courses, methodologies and resources for the adaptation of their official

curricula and teaching materials to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities, including practical internships. In order to share and exchange methodologies and good practices, a white paper with the guidelines to implement the designed course at the European level will be created, together with a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) including the generated contents and other resources. These final outputs will be made accessible through a website in order to be available to everyone from different parts of Europe, interested in using them.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part clarifies the focus of the research by placing it in the international context and describes the state of the art of Italian research in this field. The second part describes the methodology of the investigation: the instrument used in the survey, the methods of administration and the research sample. In the third part the results of the survey are presented and discussed.

2 Background

As college becomes an increasingly important prerequisite for employment, the issue is gaining more and more relevance and the main reasons are the following. On the one hand, people with intellectual disabilities have a limited participation in higher education (universities) due to the lack of adapted resources. Although a range of efforts have been already carried out in different countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia and Ireland (Bjornsdóttir, 2017) to help facilitate access to the university for people with intellectual and/or autistic spectrum disabilities, these students seldom perform and learn successfully at Higher Education environments.

On the other hand, growing enrollments of students with disabilities in postsecondary education (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010; Snyder & Dillow, 2010), along with recent key legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) in the United States and the directions and goals outlined in the Agenda 2030 (in particular Goal 4) in Europe, have generated considerable interest in research on accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities, including intellectual ones.

With regard to Italy, in compliance with specific regulations, actions have been taken in favour of students with disabilities also within the university (Aleandri & Giaconi, 2012). Since the framework law 104/1992, protection policies for students with disabilities or with specific learning disorders have been widespread. In particular, Law 17/99 led both to the establishment of University Offices (D'Alessio, 2017), together with the figure of the Rector's Delegate for Disability issues, and to the creation of the CNUDD (National University Conference of Delegates for Disability). The mission of the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities is to support the University's commitment to equity and diversity by providing support services such as:

- mentoring and orientation services for students with disabilities;
- provision of grants and materials;
- allocation of an Ordinary Financing Fund;
- appointment of a Delegate of the Rector for Disability.

Specifically, Law 17/99 encourages the design of individualised pathways for disabled students through suitable technical and teaching aids, specialised tutoring and equivalent tests. This law opens the way to a process of awareness of diversity within higher education institutions. Since it was promulgated, we have started to make universities accessible not only from a structural and architectural point of view, but also from a didactic point of view through teaching materials in alternative formats, individualised and personalised lessons, tutors' support for students and so on. As stated by the Italian scientific literature (for example, de Anna & Covelli, 2018; Bellacicco, 2019), a series of pieces of research were conducted on diversity and inclusion in universities, with almost exclusive reference to students with motor and sensory disabilities or with specific learning disorders (DSA). Thanks to the existing legislation, universities provide indeed support to students with disability (in particular, physical-motor and sensory disabilities) to ensure they can access and participate in university courses so that they can meet all the academic requirements to graduate. On the contrary, little space is reserved for students with intellectual disabilities, whom some activities are dedicated to, but without any complete scientific reports. Although there has been increasing interest and recent program development in this area, there is little research that explores the teachers' training needs and models for planning training courses. That is why we can state that higher education for people with Intellectual Disabilities is still an emerging area of research in our country.

Below we summarize the main Italian scientific studies related to this topic taking into consideration the following:

- the difficult participation of students with intellectual disabilities;
- the needs from the perspective of inclusion.

2.1 The difficult participation of students with intellectual disabilities

As outlined above, the Italian regulations are attentive to the needs of students with disabilities or learning difficulties. Nevertheless, parents' opinions detected in various exploratory research carried out with questionnaires highlight the difficulties their children (especially those with ID) face when entering university. Once they are eligible to enter university, many students with disabilities complain about the lack of qualified tutors and the obligation to identify themselves as “disabled” compared to their peers, in order to obtain services that are essential for their participation in the learning process. Moreover, a poor attitude of many teachers to change their teaching according to their students' difficulties and/or in consideration of different learning styles is highlighted. The tacit and widespread belief is that once students entered university everyone should learn the same way.

Within this context, the scarce existing literature highlights the shortcomings in the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities, for whom there are no specific projects apart from a few pilot experiences of considerable significance. This is the case of the project titled “Università Ventuno” developed by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (further information available at <http://tv.unimore.it/in-unimore/in-primopiano/item/1294-desu-e-universita-21-i-primi-due-studenti-laureati-di-un-progetto-pilota-rivolto-a-giovani-con-disabilita-cognitive>).

The project is designed in the following steps: 1. identification of potential interested students; 2. selection of teaching courses/programs that can arouse interest and curiosity

in students with intellectual disabilities; 3. negotiation of an agreed office timetable in which each student is constantly supported by an educator graduated in the same course.

2.2 The needs in the perspective of inclusion

Inclusive education is the educational imperative of the 21st century. This implies ensuring quality education for all students and in all educational institutions. A context can be defined as inclusive if it is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities not only have access to university, but also are successful in university courses, at least in terms of satisfaction and personal growth (Bellacicco, 2019).

The almost complete lack of literature on this subject highlight a misunderstanding about the notion of “inclusion” (Cottini, 2017). This concept is often confused with the limiting idea of providing some sort of assistance to disabled students as for the compulsory education (e.g. the support teacher). On the other hand, a university institution can be considered inclusive when it is ready to reshape its system to foster the wellbeing and the participation of all its students, or when it shifts the focus from the number of disabled students to being open to the qualitative improvements that may be necessary to ensure more inclusive spaces, teaching methods and teaching and administrative staff (Garbo, 2013). In addition to those already mentioned, the factors identified to pursue these goals are the following:

- Taking as theoretical reference the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (Aquario, Pais, & Ghedin, 2017; Cottini, 2019) and the Capability Approach (Biggeri, Di Masi, & Bellacicco, 2019), which stress the importance to meet the different needs of all students. The shared belief is that what is adjusted for students with special needs may end up being useful for others.
- Supporting the training of all lecturers in order to foster the evolution of university teaching towards inclusive didactics. It is necessary to rethink traditional transmission models because, as evidence proved, generating innovation for all implies going beyond the individual approach to Special Educational Needs (De Anna & Covelli, 2018).
- Bolstering the incoming orientation for students taking into account their motivations, basic skills as well as their personal self-determination.
- Focusing on possible career opportunities which for students with intellectual disabilities may not necessarily be related to the achievement of the qualification. Regardless of the final degree, attending a university course may in fact be useful to acquire expendable skills in different work contexts. In this regard, the University of Urbino is planning a university and community training curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities and autism. Persons at the highest institutional level (Rector, Rector’s Delegates, Heads of degree courses) are involved in the project, and this means the possibility of implementing actions in the degree courses. Our proposal provides for incoming orientation activities in order to allow students to express their preferences and help them in the choice of what best suits their individual potential. The training curriculum will last 12 or 24 months and will involve attending lessons at the university, as well as a professional internship where students will have the chance to learn by doing. At the end of the course students will have two options: if they wish they can continue

their academic career. Otherwise, they will obtain a certification of the acquired competences.

In order to maximize the growth of student mastery and self-efficacy, structural changes on an organizational, educational and cultural level are thus to be introduced, with a view to reducing the risk of exclusion for all students. What is hinted at in the little existing literature is that the university institutions should begin to design university courses that can be suitable for all students, including those with intellectual disabilities. Strengthening support systems for higher education students in the planning phase, and not just in response to emergencies, could improve inclusive spaces and practices for all students with disabilities, including those with intellectual ones. Within this framework, a first step in this direction is to identify the formative needs of university teachers, related with the teaching-learning process for people with intellectual disabilities in higher education environments.

3 Detection tool

The questionnaire, called *Questionnaire on formative needs of university teachers about educational resources for students with intellectual disabilities*, has been created for identifying formative needs of university teachers, related to the teaching-learning process for people with intellectual disabilities in higher education environments. The data collected are part of the framework analysis foreseen within the Erasmus+ project “TUT4IND”, whose main object is the development of training courses aimed at university teachers for the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. The project involves universities, research and technological development institutions from five European countries: Italy, Belgium, Portugal, Serbia and Spain. The same questionnaire was administered in all the countries involved. To invite the teaching staff of the Italian universities to participate in the online survey, the Universities of Urbino and Calabria, Italian partners of the project, prepared a joint letter, which clarified the meaning of the investigation and the design framework within which we have moved.

The letter was sent to the Delegates for the inclusion of students with disabilities from all Italian universities and to some scientific societies (for example, SiPES, the Italian Society of Special Pedagogy). The questionnaire was administered through an electronic work form, by means of the Google Drive storage service.

The investigation tool was built with the aim of detecting three types of information and is therefore divided into three parts. The first part contains questions concerning: socio-demographic aspects, questions relating to the teaching sector, the relevant University and Department, the training to educate teachers in the integration of students with intellectual disabilities, as well as teachers' perception of the relevance of these initiatives, and, finally, the services existing in each University to support teachers and students with intellectual disabilities in their university paths. The second part consists of 30 items towards which the respondent shall indicate, with a score from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important), the importance s/he attaches to the specific teaching contents to people with intellectual disabilities in the university environment. Finally, the third part intends to identify the skills and personal training possessed at the time of filling in the questionnaire: it consists of 7 items towards which the respondent must indicate with a score from 1 (fewest value) to 5 (most value) the degree of agreement / satisfaction with him/her current situation. The second and third sections also contain three open-ended

questions, in which the respondent is asked to provide suggestions regarding the transversal training aimed at university teachers, teaching and inclusive methodologies and, finally, specific training.

3.1 Sample

The survey involved the Italian Universities, chosen in the three geographical areas of our country (23% universities in the North of Italy, 14% in the Central, 63% in the South). The sample that participated in the research is made up of 150 university teachers, with an average age of 48.36 years ($ds = 9.53$) and an average teaching career of 16.89 years ($ds = 9.10$). 45% of the survey participants are male, 54% female and 1% does not specify the gender. As for the academic role, 56% of respondents are full and associate professors, 33% are assistant professors, 4% contracted professors and 7% PhD. 47% of them teach technical-scientific disciplines and 53% humanistic-social disciplines. Most of them (96%) teach in a public university, while 4% in a private university.

3.2 Results

Analyzing the answers provided in the first section of the questionnaire, “General information”, we can observe that 81% of the sample declares that they have never received specific training to teach students with intellectual disabilities, despite the fact that the majority of the sample (52%) stated that they taught students with intellectual disabilities; of these 43% report having taught university students with disabilities and 9% to non-university students. Regarding the question “Does your university provide support activities (training, counseling, etc.) for teachers teaching students with intellectual disabilities?” 40% answered “I don’t know”, 31% “no” and 29% “yes”. Furthermore, most of the sample (90%) said that training on intellectual disabilities could be important for improving their teaching activity. Regarding the question “Does your university provide any kind of assistance service for students with intellectual disabilities?” 71% answered “yes”, 6% “no” and 23% “don’t know”. To the question “Do you think that, with minimal support, people with intellectual disabilities can attend University?” 89% replied “yes”. This result is confirmed in the item “Do you think it is useful to build an ad hoc university path for students with intellectual disabilities?” 69% answered “yes”.

As for the second section of the questionnaire, “Cross training”, as we can see in Figure 1, most of the sample recognizes the importance of training contents reported in this part of the questionnaire in the training aimed at university teachers on intellectual disabilities (ID), in particular, as regards items 1 “Knowledge related to ID”, 2 “Specific conditions and information relating to the learning processes of people with ID”, 4 “Tools and techniques to develop the motivation to learn”, 7 “Principles of didactic and educational inclusion” and 8 “Projects to improve the quality of life of people with ID”.

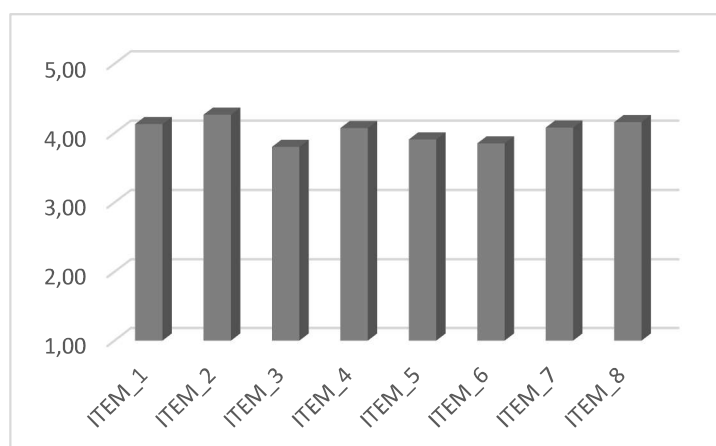


Figure 1: Average of the answers in “Cross training”.

Analyzing the answers provided to the items related to teaching and inclusive methodologies, a common response emerges from the teachers on the importance of receiving training on the different inclusive teaching strategies, in the teaching aimed at people with intellectual disabilities (cf. Figure 2). Even for the items of the “Specific training” section (see Figure 3), most teachers recognize the importance of the training contents indicated in this part of the questionnaire, in training aimed at teaching staff.

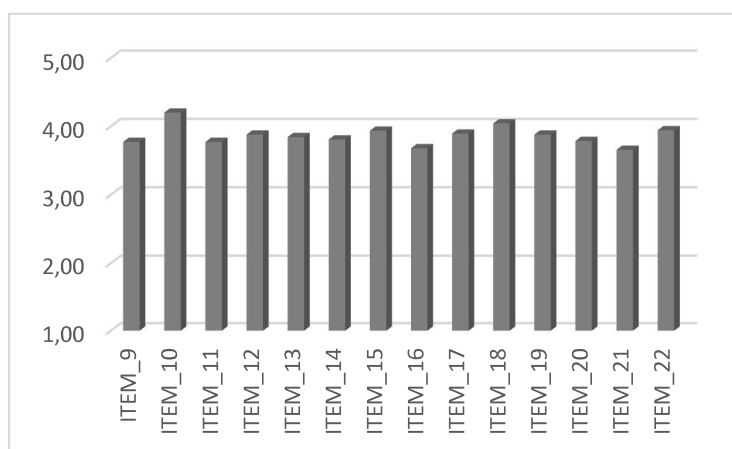


Figure 2: Average of the answers in “Didactics and inclusive methodologies”.

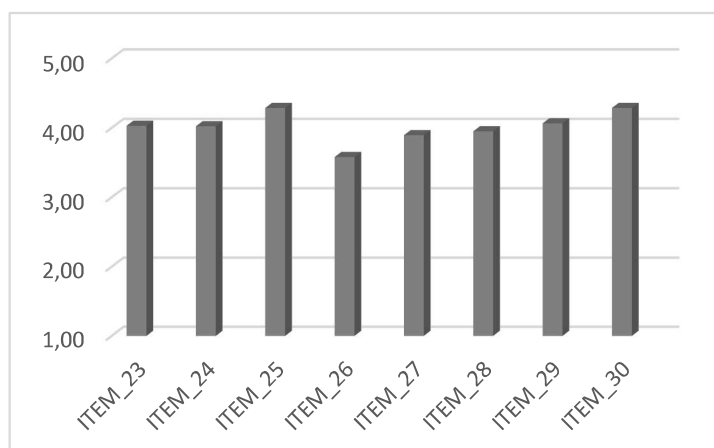


Figure 3: Average of the answers in “Specific training”.

In the analysis of the answers provided in the last section of the questionnaire, “Skills and staff training”, in which respondents were asked to assign a score between 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) to the degree of agreement with / satisfaction to the current situation of the subject, we can observe that to the question “Do you think that your current training is adequate for the educational needs of students with intellectual disabilities?” 54% give a score between 1 and 2. Regarding the question “Do you have time to devote to training on inclusive education issues for people with intellectual disabilities in the university environment?” 16% provide a score of 1; 27% have a score of 2; 36% a score of 3 and 21% a score between 4 and 5. In the question evaluating inclusion in the university setting “Are you aware of how much inclusion is present in national and university educational policies?” 39% give a score between 1 and 2; 24% a score of 3 and 37% score between 4 and 5. Moreover, as regards the skills necessary to teach people with disabilities, we can observe that to the question “Do you think you have the minimum knowledge and skills necessary to teach people with intellectual disabilities?” 46% attribute a score between 1 and 2; 30% a score of 3 and 24% a score between 4 and 5. These data are confirmed in item 36 “Do you think you have the minimum knowledge necessary to adapt teaching materials and teaching spaces to people with intellectual disabilities” (40% score between 1 and 2; 30% score equal to 3; 30% score between 3 and 4) and 37 “Do you think you have the minimum knowledge necessary on specific learning methodologies and strategies to adapt teaching to people with intellectual disabilities?” (49% score between 1 and 2; 24% score equal to 3; 27% score between 3 and 4). In analyzing the answers provided to the question “Do you think you have the minimum communication skills to teach people with intellectual disabilities?” 31% provide a score between 1 and 2; 31% a score of 3 and 38% a score between 4 and 5.

3.3 Discussion and conclusions

The collected data portray the current state of the Italian University with respect to the training of teachers on issues concerning intellectual disabilities and, in general, inclusion.

It is interesting to note that 43% of the respondents say they have taught students with disabilities in the university environment, even though they have never received specific training (81% of the survey participants declare that they do not have training on the topic investigated). This means that the presence of students with intellectual disabilities in our universities is not an isolated and rare event. Even if the investigation cannot be considered exhaustive, it must be said that it can be the beginning for the construction of a database on disability in the university environment. In Italy, in fact, there is no statistical collection of data of this type. While statistics on school inclusion of students with disabilities are produced every year, the same is not done for the university. The latest statistics available date back to the 2014-2015 academic year and do not provide information regarding the enrollment and attendance of university courses for students with intellectual disabilities (Censis, 2017).

In general, we know that since the mid-90s of the last century, the access of students with different disabilities to the universities of western countries is an increasing reality (DZHW, 2015; OECD, 2017; ANED, 2018). Among the factors that explain the reasons for this appreciable increase are: the democratization processes in education systems; the progressive implementation of the principles of equity and equality of opportunity, for which it is recognized that higher education can help reduce socio-economic inequalities;

the belief that higher education represents a strategic lever not only for personal fulfillment but also for cultural and professional qualification (Pavone, 2018). In Italy, with the approval of Law no. 17/99, a new time came based on a more systematic approach to inclusion policies of university students with disabilities and with specific learning disorders, whereas in the past only sporadic interventions had been encountered, prompted by individual cases. In these two decades, the academic institutions have taken steps to guarantee, from an increasingly inclusive perspective, support for the attendance of study courses. In particular, each university is committed to providing specific services, individualised treatment during the lessons and for passing the exams, as well as innovative courses, both through its own design, organizational and teaching structures, and through dedicated ministerial funds (Valenti, 2019). Here we find rather alarming the data that emerges from this survey and that sees 31% of the sample declare that in their university there are no support services and activities (training, counseling, etc.) for teachers teaching students with intellectual disabilities and 40% declare they do not know, while 71% of the sample says they know that their university provides some kind of assistance service for students with intellectual disabilities. This means that universities should enhance both teacher training activities on intellectual disabilities – that 90% of the sample consider important – and teaching support actions. In general, it must make us reflect that, precisely in Italy – which represents a worldwide model of inclusion of people with disabilities in the various educational levels – 39% of the sample declares that they do not know how much inclusion is present in the our educational policies at university level and 24% to know it “enough”.

With respect to teaching, respondents expressed a general agreement on the importance of using inclusive teaching methodologies, such as, for example, universal design for learning, cooperative learning, project-based learning, case studies, gamification and other active methodologies, augmented and alternative communication tools and techniques, etc.

The results of the survey, together with those obtained in the other partner countries of the Erasmus+ project “TUT4IND”, form the basis for the development and implementation of training courses geared towards the professional development of university teachers in the field of intellectual disabilities. The design of such training courses will take into consideration the ability in particular to set up inclusive learning environments, the selection and didactic transposition of knowledge (Martini, 2005, 2011, 2018), the identification and application of didactic strategies, with a view to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, as highlighted by Agenda 2030 (Goal 4).

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