Between crisis and pandemic. The role of ICT in the Roman university context: evidences in relation to the UN convention

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The proposal returns the first research outputs of the doctoral thesis "Universitabile", based on the relationship between educational inclusion (Ainscow and Miles, 2009) and ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Starting from a review of the literature on the role of universities as places of inclusion and confrontation with diversity (Bolt and Penketh, 2016; Moriña and Gavira, 2015), the main inclusion strategies implemented by the Roman universities: La Sapienza, TorVergata and RomaTre, are analysed through a mixed methods approach (Mauceri, 2019). However, the contribution focuses on the interviews administered to the operators of the dedicated services, addressing the issue of barriers and facilitation mechanisms. In this context, ICT, during Covid-19 emergency, acted as a facilitator allowing people with disabilities and SLDs to benefit from distance learning, presenting new perspectives for the realisation of the learning process, a fact that emerges from the voices of the professionals involved, as can be seen from the following excerpt: "we have young people who studied and finished their thesis with the tutor from home, sharing the Word file of the thesis in drive and editing it in real time". In this sense, as found by Tsatsou (2020), the inclusion of persons with disabilities can be facilitated by the use of digital technologies. An opinion shared by Valentini (2008), who emphasises that the use of digital technologies is a prerequisite for the development of concrete solutions, these "break down boundaries and create a new deterritorialised space that can be accessed by a broader range of users than that represented by traditional students" (ibid.,17). A process significantly accelerated by the pandemic that provides the basis for rethinking technology in the light of the concept of Universal Design, "an approach to the design of technologies that pays greater attention to the concept of universal usability" (Fiocco and Martinati, 2002, p.232). With this in mind, it is appropriate to make specific reference to the UN Convention (2006) that assures to "persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others, access to the physical environment, to transport, information and communication, including systems and technologies" (UN, 2006, art.9) reading it in parallel with the EU Strategy 2021-2030, which recognises, among the main guidelines for the concrete realisation of inclusive contexts, understood as accessible physical and virtual environments, the strengthening of ICT, implementing digital access through the preparation of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2021, art. 8), which provides for the allocation of resources to guarantee an accessible digital environment, in order to prepare inclusive digitalised learning modes, promoting the concept of universal design for all. The Strategy's recommendations also find references in the Italian legislation, in fact, as

early as 1992, Article 8 of Law no. 104 provided, for the inclusion and social integration of persons with disabilities, measures to make the right to study effective "with particular reference to educational and technical equipment, programmes, specialised languages [...]" (Law no. 104/92, art. 8, lett. d). The provision was supplemented and further delimited by Law no. 04/2004 laying down provisions to facilitate disabled people's access to IT tools, aimed at guaranteeing the right, in particular to disabled people, to "access all sources of information and related services, including those that are articulated through IT and telematic tools" (Law no. 4/2004, art. 1, para. 1). The law then provides, in Article 2, a definition of accessibility to IT tools, as well as further specifications on the concept of assistive technologies, to be understood as "tools and technical solutions, hardware and software, that enable the disabled person, by overcoming or reducing the conditions of disadvantage, to access the information and services provided by IT systems" (Law no. 4/2004, Art. 2, par. 1, letter b), providing for digital texts for state schools, an aspect which, in the state universities that are the object of this study, has not yet been fully realised, as can be learnt from the words of the service providers for students with disabilities and SLDs who took part in the survey: "What always emerges is this rigidity of the publishing houses, the conceding where it is needed...The accessible material [...] we always buy the hard copy".

Despite the evidence presented, technology, if conceived as a facilitator but designed only on the basis of the characteristics of able-bodied users, can be a hindering factor because, by completely replacing classic modes of socialisation, it risks becoming a powerful instrument of exclusion. As a university community, it would be appropriate to think about the reduction of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017), implementing forms of blended didactics, not considering it the panacea of "all evils", since its abuse could lead "in germs to a reversal of perspective, which from the anti-discriminatory strategy and the egalitarian ideal risks opening the door to the most extreme differentialism" (Piccone Stella, 2003; p. 65).