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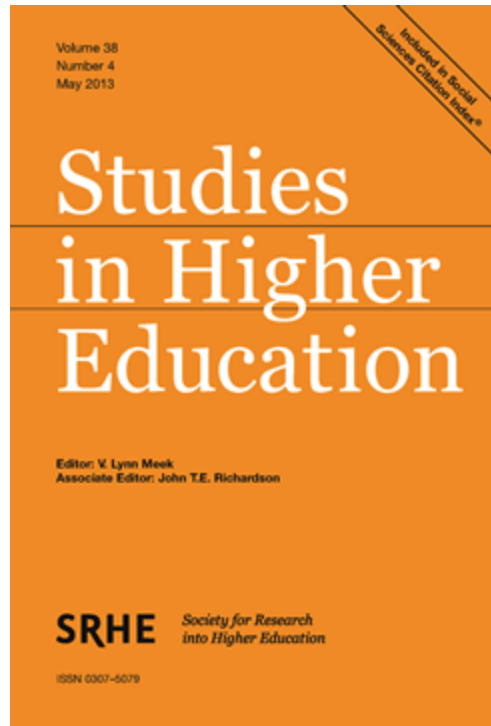
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Disability and higher education: assessing students' capabilities in two Italian universities using structured focus group discussions

In the last three decades, inclusive disability legislation has led to an increasing number of students with disabilities entering higher education. However, barriers to the full participation of students remain. This article presents evidence from studies conducted in two Italian universities. Drawing on the Capability Approach, the goal is to analyse the experiences of students with disabilities and to assess their capabilities in academic life. Participatory research methods were adopted using structured focus group discussion techniques. Fifty students with different type of disability participated in the study. Two major findings emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data collected, including: (a) the essential value, in the experience of the students, of being able to use educational spaces, move around outside of the campus and socialize; and (b) low levels of capabilities for students with visual disabilities compared to those with mobility issues, which means that academic inclusion is not for all.

Keywords: University, Disability, Capability Approach, Participation

Introduction

Since the middle of the last century, recommendations from international organisations increasingly promoted the establishment of educational settings that are equal and open to diversity (UNESCO 1994). Regarding individuals with disabilities, the United Nations (UN)' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN 2006) granted full enjoyment of human rights in all areas of society, including the right to academic inclusion and lifelong learning. This position was reaffirmed in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which emphasised the importance of ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for persons with disabilities by 2030 (UN 2015). Like other European countries, Italy sought to design and implement legislation that focuses on the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher

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3 education (HE). Law n. 104/92 (*Framework law for assistance, social integration, and*
4 *rights of persons with disabilities*) and Law n. 17/99 (*Integration and modification of the*
5 *5 February 1992 framework law, n. 104*) define the legislative framework; in addition, in
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10 2009, Italy ratified the 2006 UN Convention. These intense reforms have encouraged
11
12 progressive growth in the number of SWDs at universities over the years. Data from the
13
14 Ministry of Education, University and Research reports that people with disabilities
15
16 attending post-secondary institutions numbered 26,091 in 2016/17 compared to 4,839 in
17
18 2000/01 (the first year in which data is available).
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21
22 Investment in lifelong learning is thought to significantly affect the quality of life
23
24 of persons with disabilities. A successful university experience is associated with an
25
26 increase in capabilities and achievements (Walker 2015) and far-reaching social and
27
28 economic benefits; for example, data identifies a positive link between HE attendance
29
30 and the employment rate (ANED 2018; CPS 2017). It follows that education is highly
31
32 relevant for individuals and society given its intrinsic, instrumental and positional roles
33
34 in promoting capabilities (Nussbaum 2006; Brighthouse and Unterhalter 2008; Authors
35
36 2014).
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41 Although the protection of SWDs' right to education in the university has been
42
43 recognised in many countries and student support services are an important resource in
44
45 many universities (Fleming, Oertle and Plotner 2017), studies show that people with
46
47 disabilities still encounter barriers in academic contexts (Moriña 2017). The challenges
48
49 they face include architectural barriers, despite improvements in physical infrastructure
50
51 (Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2018; Moriña and Morgado 2018). Furthermore,
52
53 previous research highlights obstacles related to teaching, learning, and assessment,
54
55 especially when it comes to lectures and classes, coursework and exams (Fuller et al.
56
57 2004). Madriaga et al. (2010), who surveys both disabled and non-disabled students,
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2
3 suggests the experience of SWD is greater in terms of the amount of time required for
4 coursework, note taking and reading course material (amongst other things).
5
6 Interestingly, however, many of the challenges that characterise the academic experience
7 of SWDs are also shared by those without impairments (e.g. all participants identified
8 negative sentiments in their engagement with faculty members and teaching practices).
9
10 More recent studies show that lecturers do not always provide audio recordings of lessons
11 or offer notes or slides prior to a lecture; nor are they always responsive to changing their
12 teaching style or adapting curricula or modes of assessment (Moriña Díez, Gavira López,
13 and Molina 2015; Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová 2015; Kendall 2016). Therefore,
14 one form of barrier facing SWDs is the lack of awareness amongst faculty members of
15 their different needs (Redpath et al. 2013; Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2018).
16 Literature on faculty attitudes found that lecturers positively endorse inclusive
17 instruction, but do not seem to implement corresponding strategies; in general, they lack
18 confidence in their knowledge of Universal Design for Learning and disability policies
19 (Lombardi, Vukovic, and Sala-Bars 2015; West, Novak, and Mueller 2016). In addition,
20 SWDs seem experience social exclusion because of the negative attitudes of peers and
21 teaching staff or due to avoidance reflecting uncertainty about how to respectfully
22 approach them. Yet, little research has addressed this topic (e.g. Papasotiriou and Windle
23 2012).

24
25
26 These negative practices disadvantage SWDs. Their academic careers are
27 characterised by relatively delay or failure to complete degree courses and inferior
28 academic performance (Sachs and Schreuer 2011; Kilpatrick et al. 2017). In contrast, a
29 study conducted by Richardson (2009) analysed disability as a predictor of academic
30 success among students earning their first degree and found that “disablement per se does
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3 not play a significant role in predicting whether an individual student obtains a good
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5 degree [*defined as a first-class or upper second-class honours degree*]" (134).
6

7
8 To our knowledge, few studies have investigated the experiences of SWDs in the
9
10 Italian context while considering their perspective¹. Unlike the literature on school
11
12 education, Italian research focusing on HE is largely unrecognized at the international
13
14 level.
15

16
17 This paper has two aims. The first is to operationalize the Capability Approach
18
19 (CA) through participatory methods, i.e. structured focus group discussions (SFGDs), in
20
21 the HE context. The second is to assess the capabilities of SWDs by applying the SFGDs
22
23 in two Italian university: Padua and Turin.
24

25
26 The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, the relevance of the CA
27
28 for understanding the experiences of SWDs in university settings is considered. The
29
30 second and third sections present the research methodology and set out the research
31
32 questions. And the fourth and fifth sections consider the data and analyse the results.
33
34

35 36 37 **Theoretical framework and methodology: the Capability Approach and disability**

38
39 Most existing studies on inclusive practices in HE institutions have approached this topic
40
41 using a social model of disability (e.g. Moriña Díez, Gavira López, and Molina 2015;
42
43 Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2018). According to this perspective, society restricts
44
45 participation in the economic and social spheres of people with disabilities (Oliver and
46
47 Barnes 2010). This approach suggests that in the academic context, disadvantage and
48
49 social exclusion experienced by SWDs are the results of attitudinal and environmental
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51 barriers.
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60 ¹ One exception is CENSIS 2017, but this is only a quantitative study.

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2
3 Drawing on this perspective, we use an approach that usefully complements the
4 social model to explore disability in HE. In doing so, we build on the CA developed by
5 Amartya Sen (1992, 1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) in an effort to explore the voices
6 and aspirations of SWDs (Hart, 2013).
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11
12 Our model stresses the achievable functionings (or potential capabilities) that
13 people have reason to value. The capability approach supports an agency-oriented view
14 that emphasizes the relevance of people's ability to live the life they value (Sen 1999) and
15 to influence their own lives as well as those of others (Sen 1992). Within the CA, the
16 SWD capability set (achievable functionings or opportunities to function) is determined
17 by individual conversion factors (including age, gender and type and level of impairment)
18 and their interaction with the social and environmental conversion factors linked to
19 education systems and the specific institution and context (Terzi 2005). The CA considers
20 how individual factors such as wheelchair use interact with the design of the environment
21 the person lives in and the person's valuable ends (Terzi 2011). In other words, disability
22 is a deprivation of capabilities resulting "from the interaction of an individual's (a)
23 personal characteristics (e.g. age, impairment) and (b) basket of available goods (assets,
24 income) and (c) environment (social, economic, political, cultural)" (Mitra 2006, 237).
25 Consequently, the CA focuses on disability as one variable of human diversity and
26 highlights its impact on people within institutional and social settings (Reindal 2009).
27 This new perspective can enrich the social model and its recent integration with the right
28 based approach found in the 2006 UN Convention (Author 2011; Trani et al. 2011).
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51 In (higher) education, disentangling the CA process enables us to identify which
52 factors – given individual, social and environmental conversion factors and their
53 interactions with institutions, resources and services – reduce the opportunities of people
54 with disabilities to exercise valuable beings and doings. For these reasons, this research
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3 focuses on the nature of impairments and their impact on academic experiences, in line
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5 with the findings of other studies that recognise “it is, perhaps, erroneous to talk of
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7 disabled students as though they were a single population” (Fuller, 2004, 315). The CA
8
9 can give university students – with their values, skills, and aspirations – a central role in
10
11 the process of analysing education systems, because it is centred on the students
12
13 themselves and their capabilities.
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15

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17 From a broader perspective, the CA is able to embrace the complexity of various
18
19 phenomena related to HE (McLean and Walker 2012; Boni and Gasper 2012; East,
20
21 Stokes, and Walker 2014). For example, it promotes new criteria (such as agency, well-
22
23 being, participation, empowerment, equity, diversity, and inclusion), based on key values
24
25 of human development, for assessing university activities and better orienting a university
26
27 towards social justice (Boni and Gasper 2012). Moreover, unlike the human capital
28
29 perspective – which sees education as just an instrument for increasing economic growth
30
31 (Sen 1999) – the CA and human development perspective views HE as a public good that
32
33 promotes flourishing lives (Boni and Walker 2013). In the CA, the inclusion of people
34
35 with disabilities in universities is crucial, because it enables the development of
36
37 capabilities to fulfil SWDs aspirations and promote agency and tools that are fundamental
38
39 for active citizenship (Halvorsen et al. 2018). In this way, universities can become
40
41 concrete “conversion factors” in the students’ life projects (Author 2012).
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47 A range of participatory methods can be used to make the CA operational (Author
48
49 2019); in this paper, we examine the opinions of SWDs through SFGDs. This method has
50
51 been selected for its flexibility and is considered in the following section.
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54 55 **Methodological approach: the structured focus group discussion**

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57 The Structured Focus Group Discussion, introduced by Author (2014) within
58
59 Opportunity-Gap (O-GAP) Analysis, has been used by several authors to operationalise
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1
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3 the CA in different areas, such as quality of life assessment, disability and rehabilitation,
4
5 health barriers assessment and project evaluation (see, for example, Author 2018).
6
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8 This particular participatory method is flexible and enables a general and direct
9
10 evaluation of individual functionings (outcomes) and capabilities (achievable
11
12 functionings) within a system such as education, collecting data and information on the
13
14 capability or real opportunity levels of SWDs as well as capturing obstacles and
15
16 identifying enabling factors. At the same time, this method provides researchers,
17
18 participants and policy-makers with useful information for planning and evaluating the
19
20 impact of certain policies, initiatives or acts, and for indicating the factors and services
21
22 that facilitate or inhibit final outcomes within the education system.
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24
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26 The method itself combines the classical setting of a focus group with a matrix
27
28 scoring system (Catley et al., 2008), but is "structured" through a series of steps involving
29
30 a sequence of actions and questions that are largely fixed and therefore replicable in a
31
32 clear and defined way, which permits comparability (Author 2018). The 'fixed' structure
33
34 of focus groups does not diminish the ability to adapt the elements of analysis (e.g.
35
36 educational sub-dimensions), the context, the typology of intervention, the characteristics
37
38 of SWDs and the factors and services that promote disabled students' learning and
39
40 university life.
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44 The structured discussion takes place in a dialogical, collaborative and explorative way
45
46 with the aim of creating a "community of inquiry" (Author 2012) in which participants,
47
48 questioning their own convictions, help to create new knowledge and awareness of their
49
50 reality. Moreover, participants in such discussions have a propensity for taking
51
52 responsibility with respect to their positions (Author 2017).
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56 For any operationalisation of the capability approach, it is necessary to select the
57
58 relevant dimensions of well-being to be utilised in the analysis (Author 2011). This can
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3 be done using different methods (Author 2019, table 1). Therefore, prior to any SFGD, it
4
5 is important to carefully select dimensions after a thorough desk-analysis of the context,
6
7 literature and data collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews or standard focus
8
9 groups with key informants. The alternative is to give participants (in this case, the
10
11 SWDs) the opportunity to directly select the most relevant dimensions for analysis via
12
13 focus group discussions.² At the end of the process, each element and dimension of the
14
15 matrix must be clearly defined and shared to ensure validity and reliability for all those
16
17 who took part in the various SFGDs.
18
19

20
21 At the beginning of each exercise SFGD, each relevant dimension relating to
22
23 education is captured and confirmed through a participatory ranking exercise with the
24
25 students.
26
27

28
29 The selection of participants is based on the heterogeneity and representativeness
30
31 of SWDs. This is essential for the internal validity of the tool and external validity of the
32
33 results. Moreover, the heterogeneity of participant reduces the number of SFGDs needed
34
35 (Author 2014).
36

37
38 The information and data to fulfil the SFGD matrixes are collected via
39
40 participatory focus group discussions in which SWDs were asked to express their own
41
42 view and share their opinions regarding their academic lives. The final scores reflect the
43
44 outcome of the debate in the focus discussions with SWDs: a dialogical mean value.
45
46 Although the SFGD is a participatory and qualitative tool, it is possible to quantify and
47
48 systematise the results of the discussion by devising a scoring method consisting of a
49
50 sequence of structured questions that can be displayed in a Matrix (Author 2014). This
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57 ² Each dimension can be clarified further through the identification of sub-dimensions and the
58
59 addition of related elements according to the criteria and the target established by the
60
61 researchers, while still ensuring the researchers' ability to synthesise the methodology
(maximum 10-12 dimensions) with the aim of allowing effective and in-depth debates.

1
2
3 facilitated concretising the methodological procedure to be followed in each focus group
4
5 session, allowing for comparison.
6

7
8 The matrix in Table 1 assembles the collective answers from debates among the
9
10 participants of focus group discussions (Acocella 2012) and reduces ambiguities and
11
12 distortions often attributed to traditional focus groups. The rows of the matrix correspond
13
14 to the dimensions of analysis or outcomes previously identified, i.e. the functioning or
15
16 dimensions of well-being. The columns refer to different (ideal) typologies of students
17
18 and/or policies, target groups or services and initiatives.
19

20
21 These profiles are *ideal types* and are distinguished according to individual characteristics
22
23 and identities (individual conversion factors such as disability) that influence the results
24
25 of actions taken in terms of opportunities and final outcomes. The use of ideal type
26
27 functions to obtain a partial abstraction from the participants of SFGDs helps avoid self-
28
29 referential responses based exclusively on personal experiences – i.e. the ‘quasi-impartial
30
31 spectator argument’ (Sen 2006; Author 2014).
32
33

34
35 Each cell of the matrix thus represents the level of capability for the corresponding
36
37 ideal type of student (column) and for each sub dimension of inclusiveness in the
38
39 university courses (row).
40

41
42 Scores are awarded on a scale from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 10 (where
43
44 1 is ‘Not at all important’ and 10 is ‘Very important’). These scales were previously tested
45
46 (along with other possible scales) among students with similar characteristics to ensure
47
48 the scale producing the most consistent results and detailed evidence was adopted (Author
49
50 2012). During the SFGDs the scoring system was explained to participants and subjected
51
52 to open debate and scrutiny. The final specification of the score in each matrix cell (i.e.
53
54 the assessment for each question included in the matrix) is based on collective discussion
55
56 and group answers by students (rather than on individual answers as in a standard
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3 individual questionnaire). This gave students the opportunity to debate openly through a
4 public enquiry, open-up to different points of views, and reflect on the results and
5 different types of disability.
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10 The matrix structure adds value to the method in terms of comparing the results
11 across different focus group discussions, as it ensures the same sequence of questions.
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13

14 [insert table 1]
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18 The application of this method to our research was based on the active
19 involvement of informed SWDs, who were called upon to collectively discuss and
20 analyse specific contexts, services and situations – particularly with reference to
21 functionings and capabilities relevant for higher education and University accessibility.
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28 **Research context and aims**

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30 The research was carried out in two Italian universities, Padua and Turin, which
31 have a long tradition of providing services and accommodations to SWDs (Author 2017).
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33

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35 The Universities of Padua and Turin have similar characteristics: they are both
36 regarded as large institutions in terms of the number of students by the Italian the Ministry
37 for Education, University and Research. During the 2014/2015 academic year, the
38 reference period for the present study, 586 SWDs were enrolled in Turin and 501 were
39 enrolled in Padua. In both cases, the proportion of SWDs in the two institutions was 0.9%,
40 which is roughly the same as in other post-secondary Italian institutions.
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49 The specific research aims were to (1) identify relevant capabilities for SWDs in
50 HE; (2) assess the level of opportunity to function in each of these dimensions; and (3)
51 analyse the role of different factors, resources and barriers that affect opportunities to
52 realise personal and educational aspirations at university.
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60 **Data Collection and analysis**

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3 The SFGD method was adapted to the research context and followed eight specific
4 steps (Figure 1):
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6
7 [insert figure 1]
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11 Step 1. Researchers conducted a CA oriented literature review to identify dimensions that
12 describe the well-being of SWDs in the university context (Nussbaum 2000; WHO 2001;
13 Walker 2006; Spreafico 2013). The eight dimensions identified were:
14
15

- 16 (1) Teaching and learning
 - 17 (2) Mobility inside and outside the campus
 - 18 (3) Interpersonal relationships (during academic activities and leisure time)
 - 19 (4) Counselling and career development
 - 20 (5) Access to information
 - 21 (6) Respect
 - 22 (7) Health (also mental and spiritual)
 - 23 (8) Empowerment (to be an empowered and active agent)
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38 Step 2. The SFGD participants were identified through theoretical sampling. A
39 heterogeneous group was selected in terms of gender, type of disability, department of
40 study and year of study at the university.
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43 A total of 38 SWDs from the University of Turin participated. A further 12
44 students from the University of Padua took part in the SFGD. In both cases, only students
45 assisted by disabilities services were recruited, as, it was not possible to contact
46 individuals who did not seek the assistance of support services despite having declared a
47 disability at the time of enrolment.
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56 The participants from Turin consisted of 21 women and 17 men; 12 had mobility
57 problems, 11 had mental-behavioural disabilities, 9 had visual disabilities and 6 had
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3 hearing disabilities. The participants from Padua included 6 men and 6 women; 4 had
4 mobility problems, 2 had visual disabilities, 2 had hearing disabilities, 2 had down
5 syndrome and 2 had multiple disabilities. In terms of field of study, SWDs in our sample
6 were enrolled in the humanities (50% Turin, 60% Padua), social sciences (37% Turin,
7 30% Padua) and natural sciences (13% Turin, 10% Padua). Students with learning
8 disabilities were not included in the study.
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17 Step 3. In both Universities, three levels of SFGDs were conducted. All of these
18 SFGDs were audio-recorded. During the first, researchers asked SWDs to describe their
19 daily routine at the university and to map out their activities. A list was constructed to
20 gather these activities under specific themes representing the central dimensions of well-
21 being.
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28
29 Step 4 and step 5. The second level focused on ranking dimensions (step 4) and
30 opportunity assessment (step 5). In step 4, students ordered the dimensions from the most
31 to the less relevant to express how valuable each dimension was perceived. Meanwhile,
32 in step 5, the groups of students with the same impairment assessed their opportunity
33 level for each dimension by using a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important).
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41 Step 6. The third and final level of SFGDs focused on evaluating the impact of
42 Disability Services, academic staff and interactions with peers on the ability of SWDs' to
43 participation in HE. SWDs responded to the following question with respect to their
44 interaction with Disability Services, academics and peers: How do they support the
45 opportunity level of a student with a disability? (depending on the type of disability; Table
46 2). This makes it is possible to analyse their respective contributions – whether positive,
47 negative or non-existent – to the well-being of SWDs.
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56 [insert table 2]
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3 Step 7. The data collected in steps 4 to 6 are analysed. Numerical scores make it
4 possible to quantify the analysis and are useful for comparability synthetic outcomes of
5 two universities.
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10 Step 8. Investigating narratives from which the scores are derived is core to the
11 analysis; it produced qualitative explanations of the processes behind the expansion and
12 contraction of participants' capabilities and opened up space for dialogue between SWDs.
13
14 It was vital and instructive to collect detailed information on the mechanisms that support
15 capabilities which involved taking extensive notes and comparing any differences of
16 opinion amongst students.
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24 In this study, quantitative scores in opportunity levels have been used directly,
25 without any statistical tests, to compare different disability groups in both universities.
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28 Transcribed focus group discussions were imported into the qualitative analysis
29 program N-Vivo 10, and were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
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35 **Results**

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37 The first set of results relate to the co-construction of a situated and contextualised
38 list of dimensions of well-being for SWDs (Table 3).
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41
42 [insert table 3]
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44 Several differences emerge if the lists compiled from scientific literature are compared
45 with the lists generated by SWDs:
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- 50 (1) the dimensions increase from 8 to 9;
- 51
52 (2) SWDs did not indicate that empowerment is an important dimension nor did they
53 mention health;
- 54
55 (3) SWDs flag the importance of a new dimension: 'the usability of spaces' (spaces
56 with adequate furniture and technologies) for moving around and working;
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3 (4) SWDs separated the teaching (didactic) dimension from the learning dimension;
4
5 (5) SWDs reformulated the dimension of interior and exterior mobility to include two
6
7 different concepts: “accessibility” to indicate movement within the university and
8
9 “mobility” to show mobility outside the university.
10
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12 The analysis of student responses also reveals the importance of new dimensions
13 for success in the academic life. For many participants ‘usability’ is a priority for
14 example. One noted:
15
16

17 All libraries should have a location accessible with speech synthesis, even to scan. Why do we have
18 to go to Disability Service? In other libraries there are computers, but we cannot use them because
19 they don’t have the right programs (student with visual impairment, Turin)³
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25 In addition, mobility generally was seen as a significant and necessary condition
26 for participation within the university:
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29 I meet more hostility with the buses than inside the University. In addition to talking about inclusion
30 in the university, it is necessary to consider the difficulties to get there (student with mobility
31 impairment, Turin)
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35 An interesting result also emerged in the ranking of the dimensions. Students regarded
36 the most important dimension as teaching, while the second most important dimension
37 depended on the nature of their disability. For students with mobility impairments, it was
38 accessibility, while those with visual impairments indicated mobility, those with hearing
39 impairments indicated learning and those with cognitive/mental impairments (other
40 disabilities in Padua) indicated access to information.
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49 Meanwhile, levels of opportunity varied according to university attended and type
50 of disability. The radar graphs presented in Figures 2 and 3 represent the opportunity level
51 assessed by the students with the same impairment attending the same university for each
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59 ³ The quotes employed in this article have been selected to illustrate the analysis and do not
60 constitute a complete evidence base.

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2
3 dimension. The results point to “dialogical mean values” of the opportunity levels
4 expressed during step 5. The area delineated by the dotted lines shows the levels of
5 opportunity in the various dimensions or capability set available to SWDs in academic
6 contexts.
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13 [insert figure 2]
14

15 The data reveals that the University of Turin (Figure 2) provides opportunities to further
16 participation for students with some types of disabilities, while for other disabilities
17 (especially for students with visual impairment), it has not yet fully succeeded in
18 implementing strategies that enable their participation. Teaching, learning and respect are
19 generally evaluated positively by all SWDs, others like guidance and mobility did not
20 always receive positive scores.
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29 In line with the quantitative data, most of the participants discussed positive
30 experiences with their lecturers (in the learning dimension). Faculty members seem
31 willing to offer alternative methods of assessment, especially if the students advise them
32 of their difficulties:
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38 I need extra time. It is difficult to find the right solution in these things, but I spoke with my lecturer
39 and everything went smoothly (student with mental-behavioural disability, Turin)
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42 During lessons (the teaching dimension), the support of a personal tutor came up
43 repeatedly in the SFGDs:
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47 The teachers are helpful. They ask if there is a need for any adaptations, for example regarding the
48 use of videos with subtitles, but then it is difficult for them to consider them. For me, to get to class
49 without the tutor had become a waste of time (student with hearing impairment, Turin)
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52 Typically, participants reported an atmosphere of tolerance and respect:

53 If we consider the absence of discrimination and marginalization, the judgment in the dimension of
54 respect is very good (student with mobility impairment, Turin)
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3 On the other hand, some participants expressed concerns about travelling in the
4 city. A student described specific difficulties with mobility:
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7 Around the university there is no tactile paving even to pay it, not even at the stops near the
8 University, perhaps only in one. Yet at the stop where all the buses arrive, there is nothing (student
9 with visual impairment, Turin)
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13 For the University of Padua (Figure 3), the data refers exclusively to mobility and
14 visual impairment. Differences are observed in the students' dimensions of well-being,
15 especially regarding respect and socialisation. Students with mobility impairments
16 perceived the University as more respectful than students with visual impairments. The
17 "dialogical value" of the opportunity levels expressed by the first group is 8 while for the
18 second group it is 5.
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27 In high school I was isolated and bullied. Now I feel positively about university inclusion. I have
28 found new friends who meet in class (student with mobility impairment, Padua)
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31 Teaching and learning dimensions also received positive evaluations. The
32 University of Padova organizes a General Course for an Inclusive University open to
33 teachers and administrative staff every year.
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38 I went to speak with the professor. I explained my problems, and we agreed upon an oral exam
39 (student with mobility impairment, Padua)
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42 Furthermore, Disability Service offers a peer tutoring service to assist the students
43 throughout the learning process. This support is seen as a necessary condition for coping
44 with lessons:
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48 The tutor helps me in classroom; he takes notes and we study together (student with mobility
49 impairment, Padua)
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52 SWDs remain critical of the mobility situation. For example, a student reported:
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54 The mobility service doesn't exist in my town. Even taking the train is complicated. Very often my
55 grandparents bring me to the university (student with visual impairment, Padua)
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59 [insert figure 3]
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3 The available data makes it possible to compare the two universities in terms of the levels
4 of opportunity indicated by students with mobility problems (Figure 4) and visual
5 disabilities (Figure 5).
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10 [insert figure 4]

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12 [insert figure 5]

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14 Both universities reveal the capacity to remove obstacles to students' participation. If we
15 look at this process from the perspective of students with mobility impairments, we find
16 the same opportunities for participation in both contexts, with a fairly positive evaluation
17 of nearly all dimensions of well-being. If we look at it from the perspective of students
18 with visual disabilities, the opportunities vary according to academic context. The
19 University of Turin seems to be more sensitive to diversity and relationships: socialisation
20 and respect (dialogical mean for both dimensions=7). In contrast, Padua is better placed
21 to facilitate dimensions like teaching, learning and accessibility (dialogical mean for each
22 dimension=7).
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35 Despite the efforts in offering different type of provisions, for the students with
36 visual disabilities some dimensions remain problematic, especially with respect to their
37 aspirations to move and study independently. The participants again emphasize, for
38 example, the difficulties derived from little or no signposting in Braille, as well as the
39 lack of tactile-plantar paths within the university (the accessibility dimension):
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46 I would give a very low rating; if you are blind, everything is inaccessible here. There is no indication
47 in Braille; therefore, you must necessarily request the accompanying service (student with visual
48 impairment, Turin)
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52 Students also pointed to the lack of specific teaching adaptations:

53
54 The teachers have always been available; of course, they should better explain graphs and formulas,
55 otherwise a personal tutor is necessary (student with visual impairment, Turin)
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58 Other participants added that developing a sense of belonging is more challenging:
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3 No lack of respect, but it is as if we were living in two completely separate worlds (student with
4 visual impairment, Padua).
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8 **Discussion**

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10 Personal experiences allow students to reformulate their participation in HE articulated
11 in nine dimensions. The list generated by the students emphasises the importance of
12 interior and exterior mobility (“accessibility” within the university and “mobility” outside
13 the university), adds a new dimension to lists advocated in the literature (the “usability”
14 of spaces), and confirms that socialisation and respect are among the most important
15 dimensions for students.
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24 For SWDs, accessibility by itself is not enough. Just because a space is architecturally
25 accessible does not mean that it is usable: having a suitable space, one that is large enough
26 and equipped with the technology necessary for studying is vital for ensuring that SWDs
27 can participate in university life.
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33 If we then examine the ranking of the importance attached to dimensions and the
34 levels of opportunity, we see that these differ in both universities depending on the nature
35 of the disability and the dimensions considered. The situation is very different if we
36 analyse the levels of opportunity for students with mobility disabilities in the two
37 universities and compare them to levels of opportunity for students with visual
38 disabilities.
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47 If socialisation is excluded, the levels of opportunity for students with mobility
48 impairments are roughly the same in the two universities, as opposed to the levels of
49 opportunity indicated by students with visual disabilities, who hold very different
50 perceptions. This difference may reflect the efforts that the two universities have made in
51 facilitating the participation of students with mobility impairments, a disability for which,
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3 thanks to the involvement of associations campaigning for people with disabilities
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5 (Shakespeare 2014), there has been a more inclusive attitude towards for some time.
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8 However, for students with visual disabilities, participation appears to depend
9
10 heavily on the context in which they study and live. For a student with a visual disability,
11
12 choosing to study in Padua or Turin results in different capabilities to function in virtually
13
14 all dimensions; this means that uneven practices continue to occur between academic
15
16 staff, departments and institutions (Tinklin and Hall 1999; Holloway 2001).
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19 Nevertheless, one aspect experienced in both universities concerns the fact that
20
21 the mobility dimension – or rather, the obstacles that SWDs encounter in travelling to and
22
23 from university (while subject to some variation) – is among the most critical factors that
24
25 hampers participation. More emphasis needs to be placed on tailored services that
26
27 facilitate personal mobility if equal participation in broader aspects of university life is to
28
29 be ensured for SWDs. Furthermore, specific issues arise for students with visual
30
31 disabilities. The lack of tactile paving at bus stops and train stations and the lack of
32
33 academic information in Braille greatly reduce mobility opportunities and create
34
35 dependence, which undermines personal autonomy and other goals. Previous studies tend
36
37 to focus on the architectural barriers within institutions (e.g. Holloway 2001; Redpath et
38
39 al. 2013). Just recently, research has investigated the problems SWDs face in trying to
40
41 reach academic institutions (Moriña and Morgado 2018), but the specific problem of
42
43 visual barriers (outside and within the campus) remains poorly documented within the
44
45 literature (Lourens and Swartz 2016).
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51 The results of the study indicate positive assessments in terms of learning
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53 opportunities. Participants reported that their universities were supportive and provided
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55 accommodation to meet their needs during exams, in accordance with existing legislation.
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58 In terms of the teaching dimension, the most important form of support for
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3 students are the tutor provided by Disability Services. The high quantitative score
4 assigned by SWDs in this dimension reflects the tutor support. Students cannot choose
5 whether to use the tutor's support; it is considered essential also because lecturers do not
6 seem to be committed to implementing inclusive practice of teaching. These results
7 describe a little knowledge by lecturers towards providing curricular adaptations similar
8 to those documented in other HE systems (Moriña Díez, Gavira López, and Molina 2015;
9 Kendall 2018), confirming that teaching remains an area of particular concern.

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19 Finally, the fact that the participants did not point to the empowerment dimension
20 or emphasises the importance of physical, mental and spiritual well-being can be
21 interpreted in one of two ways. The first explanation is that they do not value their
22 university experience in terms of well-being or empowerment. In fact, SWDs may not
23 think that their university's is responsible for supporting these functionings. Teaching is
24 the relevant priority, as the rankings suggest. As Soorenian (2014) points out, access to a
25 university degree is fundamental for being able to compete in the employment market.
26 However, when it comes to the empowerment dimension specifically, it is also possible
27 that adapting to academic contexts has reduced the ability of students to perceive
28 university well-being as connected to the fulfilment of their own agency. In fact, studies
29 suggest that university policy-makers have only marginally involved people with
30 disabilities in the creation of the services and institutional policies implemented on their
31 behalf (Luna 2009; Beauchamp-Pryor 2013). The fact that the voices of SWDs have
32 rarely been considered by universities may have affected their aspirations for authentic
33 and meaningful participation in the academic world.

34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 **Conclusion**

56
57 This study has identified several spaces in which gaps emerge between the lived
58 experiences of students and what they value in HE. First, issues such as socialisation,
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3 mobility outside of the university and the usability of spaces (traditionally poorly
4 studied), must be better addressed by Disability Services in HE to guarantee equal
5 capabilities and well-being for all students – especially for those with visual impairments.
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10 Second, while academic staff seems to make reasonable adjustments for exams, the
11 teaching experience is above all supported by the tutor support. Training all lecturers in
12 disability awareness and the adaptation of their teaching styles to the needs of SWDs is
13 likely to be essential for implementing a universal learning design. Finally, to empower
14 SWDs on the campus, universities should seek feedback from students and encourage
15 them to participate in such initiatives (it is worth recalling that only 12 students from the
16 University of Padua agreed to take part in this research). As Sen (2009: 17) has remarked,
17 “the focus of the CA is not just on what a person actually ends up of doing, but also on
18 what she is capable of doing, whether or not she chooses to make use of that opportunity”.

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31 In this respect, the SFGD method is relevant for making the CA operational, as it
32 opens up spaces in which SWDs can exercise their agency by creating a “community of
33 inquiry” (Author 2019). The SFGD method engages students in all phases of the research
34 and encourages them to adopt the positions of quasi-impartial spectators to reduce the
35 risk of relying solely on personal experiences that might tarnish insights. The SFGD helps
36 reduce the ambiguities and distortions attributed to traditional focus groups (Acocella
37 2012; Author 2014). The comparability of results across different focus group discussions
38 is a key advantage of this matrix structure, which ensures the same sequence of questions.
39 Moreover, SFGDs aid detailed and in-depth analysis of opportunities and barriers,
40 evaluating the capabilities and functionings with quantitative scores and qualitative
41 narratives. It follows that the use of SFGDs could be useful, as this study shows, for
42 obtaining reliable information and data as well as contributing to the empowerment of
43 SWDs.
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6 **Declaration of interest statement**
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8 The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research,
9 authorship and/or publication of this article.
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For Peer Review Only

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Figures

Figure 1 Research phases

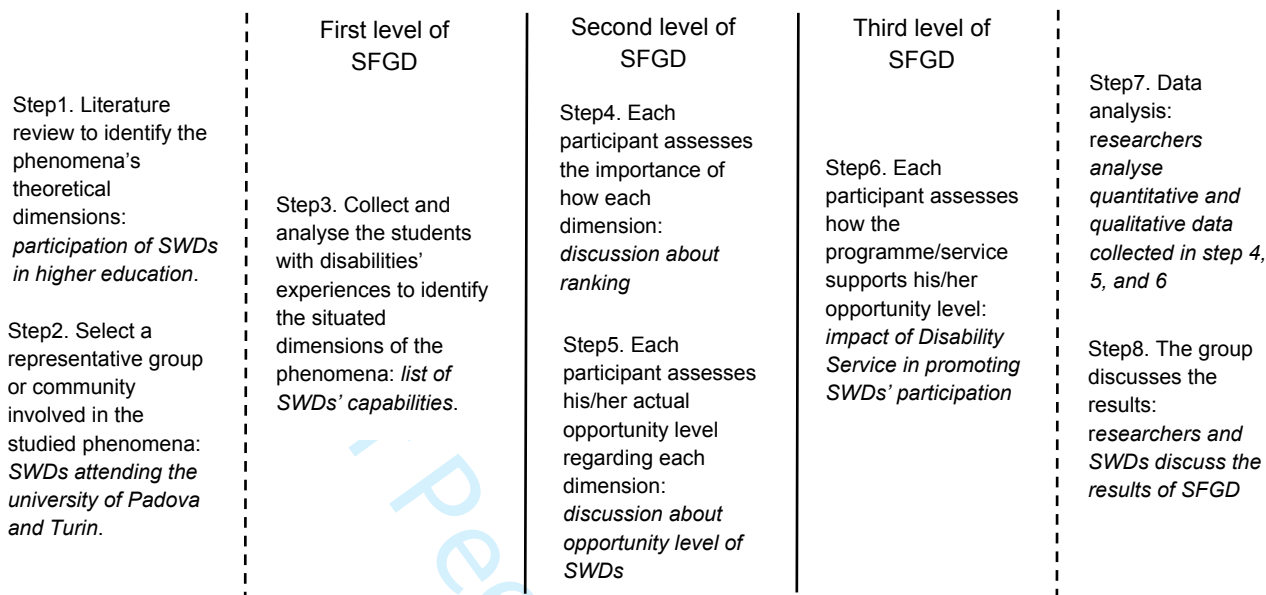


Figure 2 Levels of opportunity for students with disabilities at the University of Turin (N=38)

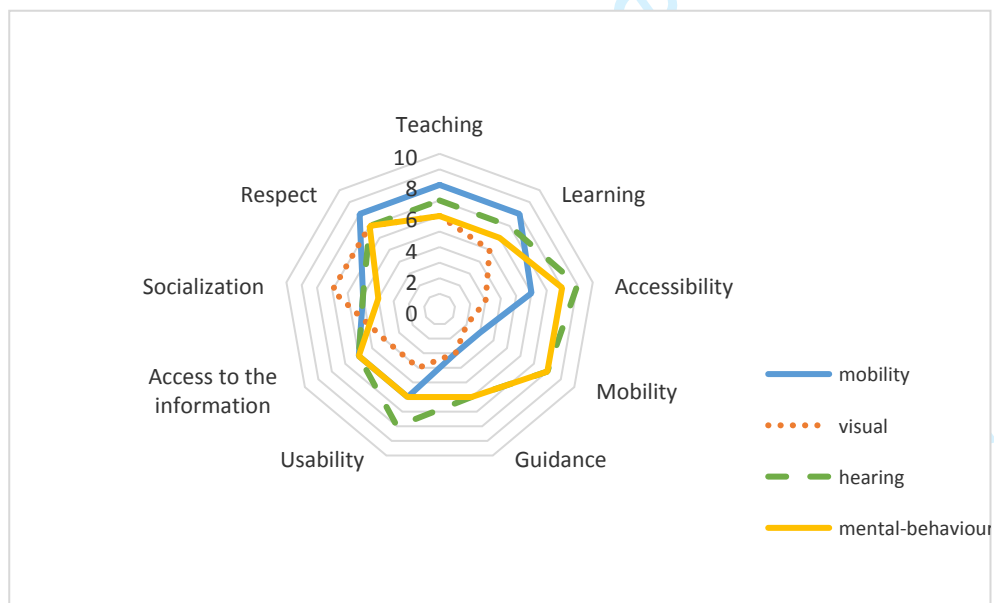


Figure 3 Levels of opportunity for students with disabilities at the University of Padua (N=12)

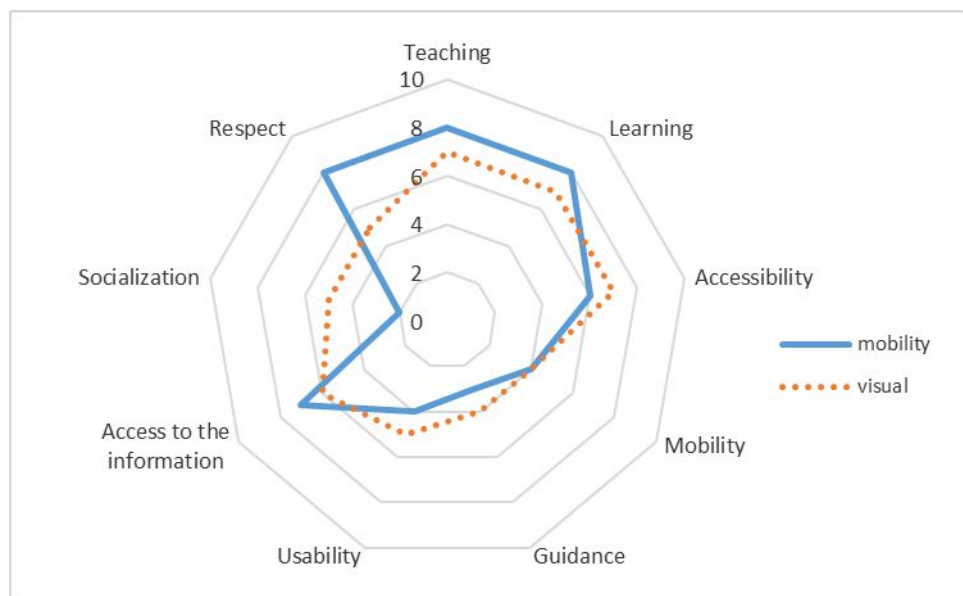
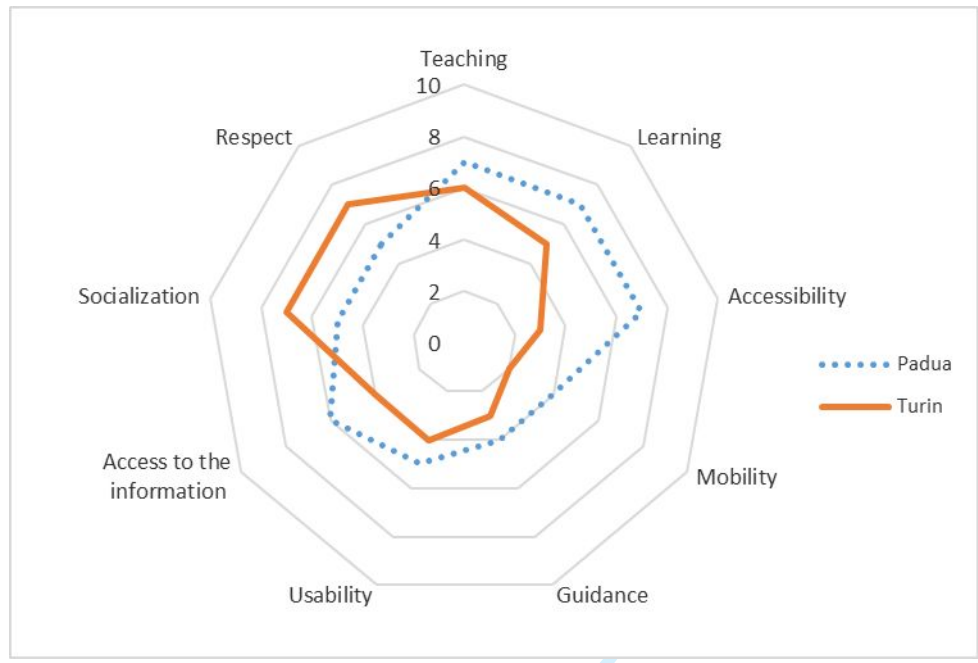


Figure 4 Levels of opportunity for students with mobility disabilities, comparison between the two universities



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Figure 5 Levels of opportunity for students with visual disabilities, comparison between the two universities



Review Only

Figure 2 Levels of opportunity for students with disabilities at the University of Turin (N=38)

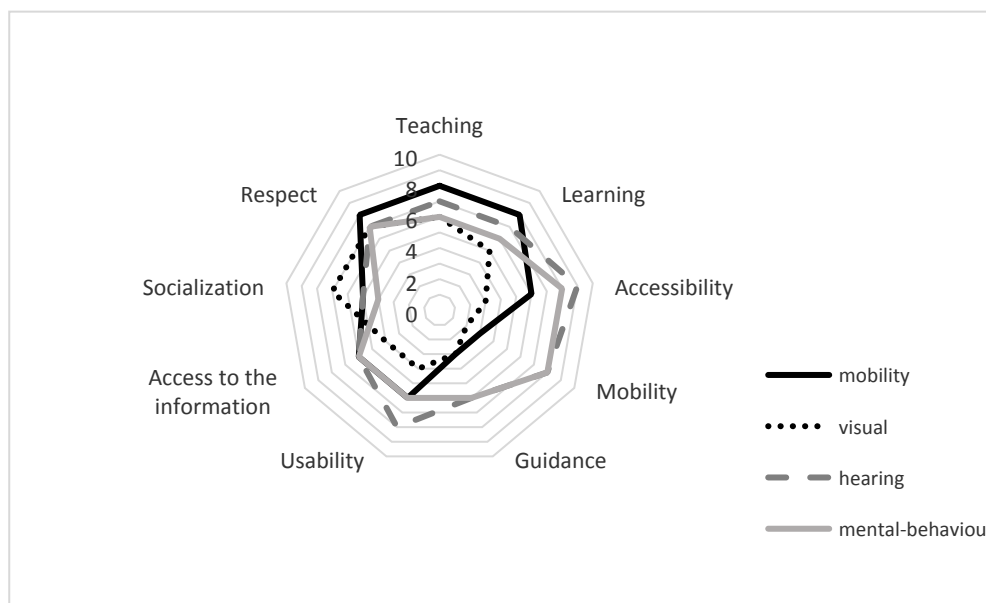


Figure 3 Levels of opportunity for students with disabilities at the University of Padua (N=12)

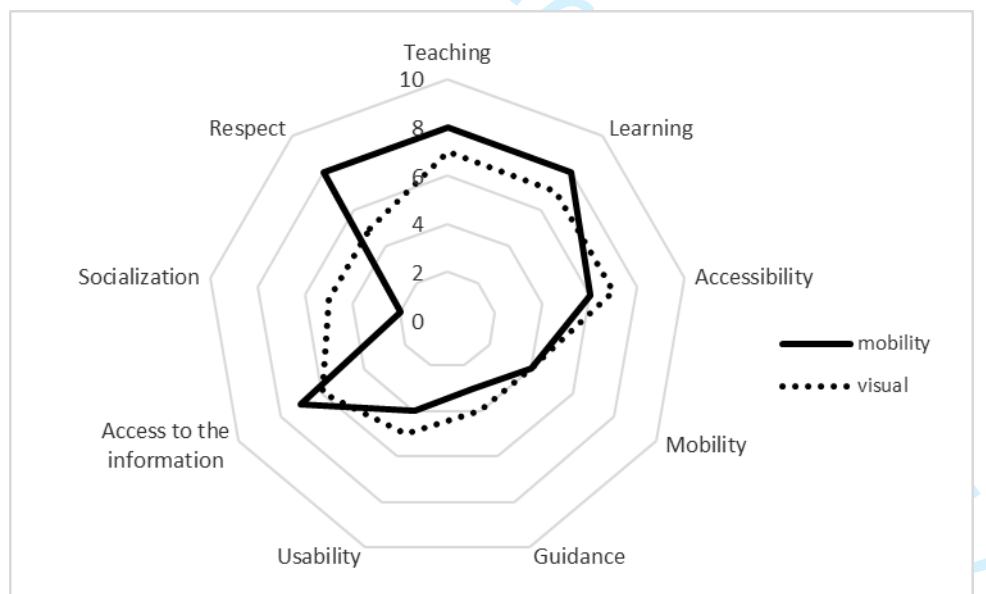


Figure 4 Levels of opportunity for students with mobility disabilities, comparison between the two universities

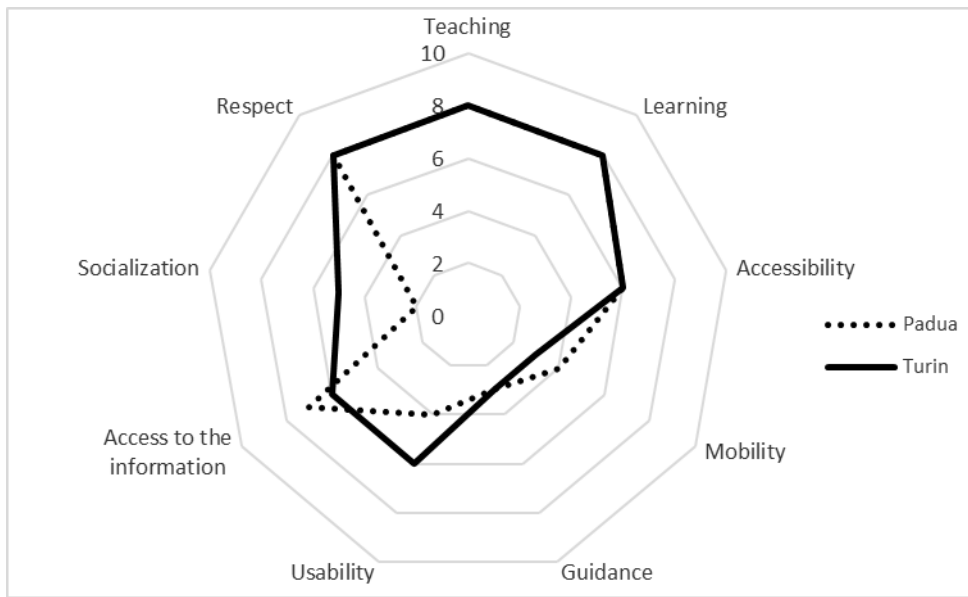


Figure 5 Levels of opportunity for students with visual disabilities, comparison between the two universities

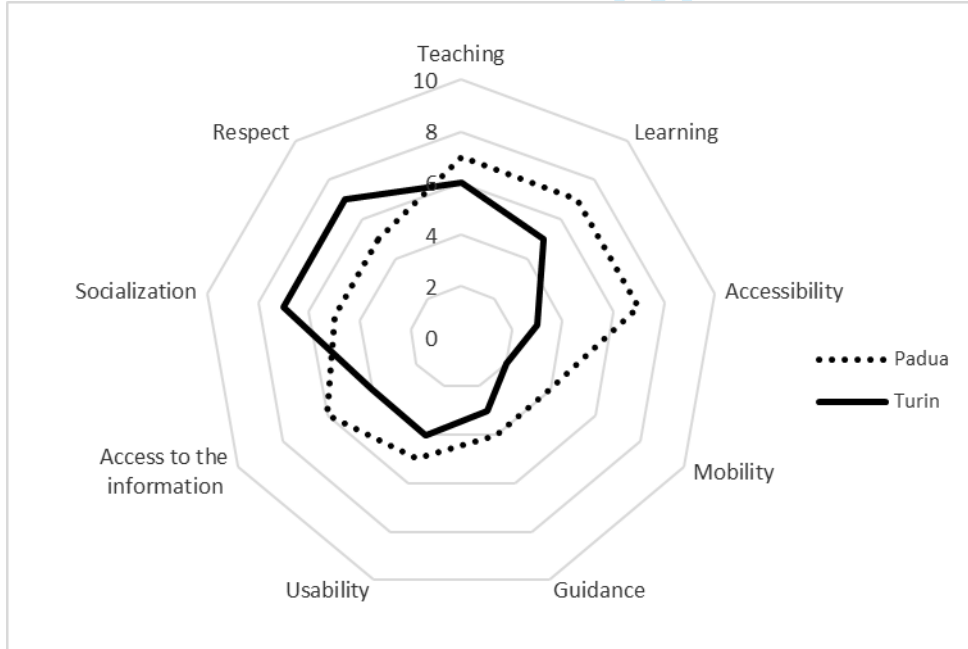


Table 1 Simplified SFGD Matrix

Ranking	Opportunity level (today)	Assessment in terms of opportunity level
How important is each dimension?	Which is the student opportunity level today?	How does the program/service support the student opportunity level?
Dimensions		

Table 2 SFGD Matrix designed with the students with disabilities

Dimensions	Ranking	Opportunity level according to disabilities		Assessment in terms of opportunity level		
		Mobility	Visual	Tutor/ Disability Service	Faculty Staff	Peers
Teaching						
Learning						
Accessibility						
Mobility						
Guidance						
Usability						
Access to the information						
Socialization						
Respect						

Table 3 Comparison

Scientific literature list	SWD list
Teaching and learning	Teaching
Interior and exterior mobility	Learning
Interpersonal relationships and leisure time	Accessibility
Counselling and career development	Mobility
Access to information	Guidance
Respect	Usability
Well-being	Access to the information
Empowerment	Socialization
	Respect