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# Academic and Professional Guidance for Tertiary Students with Disabilities: Gathering Best Practices throughout European Universities

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## Abstract

The exponential increase of students with disabilities enrolled at universities of different countries has urged these institutions to enable some services geared to their guidance, both academic and professional level. However, the international literature shows that these initiatives, in some realities, are still disconnected from the broader socio-economic context. In order to find possible solutions to this issue, the objective of this research was to explore, in an international level, initiatives related to the academic and professional guidance of students with disabilities. In this direction this case study has been realized with the participation of 81 tertiary students with disabilities, 14 academic counselors and 68 professional mentors from Italy, France, Ireland, Denmark and England. The overall analysis of the results emerged from this research has allowed identifying, in an international perspective, the strengths of each reality explored. The reflections on these elements have directed the proposition of indicators which can contribute to the scientific and academic communities on the implementation, evaluation and monitoring of a potential academic and professional guidance program for tertiary students with disabilities.

## Keywords

Disability, University, Guidance, Individual Plan, Labor Market

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## 1. Introduction

The democratization of the access to the highest educational levels and the promotion of concrete opportunities

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for professional insertion are not truly in operation within many social, economic and cultural contexts worldwide, which is looking for ways to stimulate social progress in a more inclusive way [1].

Particularly regarding the access to the Educational system, the results of the last round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows the increase of the enrolment, the longer permanence of the people within educational system towards the higher education and, especially since 2003, most countries have maintained or improved their perspective based on equity of access for all, even if it happened discreetly [2] [3].

However, even if we are in this mentioned context, the international report “Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators” highlights that there are more than 46 millions of people unemployed throughout the OCDE countries, the rate of young population without a job is still high and the access to the social services is not enough for the most rate of the population [4].

Within this context, it is possible to deduce that the promotion of the access to the highest educational levels is not enough to ensure for the students, considering also those ones who are in tertiary level, their professional insertion, especially if the institutions does not offer programs for academic and professional guidance which aims to match with the territorial’s interests within they are immersed [5]-[7].

This frame becomes more evident and delicate to intervene when we consider the demands and exigencies of the students that are with disability, even if there are evidences which indicate the difficulties to precisely identify the number and the several existent profiles in this population, the scientific literature, the national and international reports indicate a common denominator among every OCDE’s country and their key partners: the significant augmentation of their enrolment rate at the university [5]-[13].

For these conditions, we cannot ignore the fact that the current moment represents the results of several particular initiatives that are thought in the history. Until the 1970’s, most of young people with disabilities has not accessed ordinary schools and, consequently, the highest educational levels, such as universities [14] [15].

From 1980’s, the promotion of the access of the people with disabilities to the university has increased exponentially and the referential literature has indicated yet a political tendency to develop specific programs to support people with disabilities at the transition from school to the university and to the world of work [16]-[20].

Throughout 1990’s, some authors has remarked the importance to implement the improvement of these services in order to promote the scholar success of the students with disabilities through the realization of concretes professional experiences [21]-[26]. In that context, it was highlighted the conviction that people with disabilities represented an economic potential that should be considerate and, additionally, offered adequate support to overcome their difficulties [8].

In the 2000’s, from this movement, it was observed an increase of the number of such services within the universities [7] [15]. Parallel to this phenomenon, tertiary students with disability felt more need to invest in their training and to practice their skills in a professional environment [27]-[29]. This led to the need to improve the prospects, policies and practices within the university context to assist students with disabilities to realize their life project [30].

Currently, opportunities for training and professionalization of people with disabilities, therefore, have expanded significantly in order to make it possible to offer the labor market new professional profiles with skills, needs and particular characteristics which, until then, were not such common, either to the employers, either to the society.

As against, this population, which represents a rate of 16% of people with disabilities in working age, encounter many obstacles in which there is the conviction that their conditions of disability has always a negative effect on the results in the labor market and, therefore, there is a higher probability of this population being in unemployed conditions [31]. Furthermore, the risk of poverty is significantly higher for people with disabilities (21.1%) than those without disabilities (14.9%) [32].

In this context, despite the efforts, universities still develop restricted and disconnected stock from the broader socio-economic context [33]. Afterwards, the European Union took a solid position to support the active participation of people with disabilities in society and the economy. This is evident in the “Action Plan of the European Council 2006-2015” for the promotion of rights and full participation of people with disabilities in the society” and in the strategy “Europe 2020”, which aims to create a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth to build a society that includes wholes through new behaviors and practices to ensure our future [34] [35].

So it must be, however, that such work should be done not only within schools but also at the universities and in the workplace, to have a vocational education and training that meets the requirements of global socio-economic context [36] [37].

It means that the prerogative of the need to promote, among others, the orchestration of the accessibility in the higher education and the guidance for the professional insertion of this population, currently, appear to be a necessary and irreversible process in a current context where the application of professional capacities become increasingly a social, economic, political and cultural need for the progress of the nations.

On this basis, the question arises: how universities, over the years, are being organized to promote access and support people with disabilities in order to guarantee a congruent training to their expectations and to the requirements of the market working?

In this sense, the main objective of this study was, from the identification, to gather and systematically analyze the good practices adopted by French, Italian, English, Irish and Danish universities about the academic and vocational guidance of students with disabilities, to propose a methodology of accompaniment and support that enable an effective orchestration of accessibility into the Higher Education and the world of work.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. The Research Approaches

To achieve the objective of the present study, this one was carried out on the ground of French, Italian, English, Danish and Irish universities, considering the daily environment of tertiary students with disabilities. So this is a case study that is a research method which is based on the harvest of various sources of information using more detection instruments and it is recommended when it is necessary to deepen certain themes [38].

Based on this perspective, the study presented here was particularly developed through the European project “Univers’ Emploi”<sup>1</sup>, the Ph. D program “Culture, disabilità e inclusione: educazione formazione” and the “Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação Especial”<sup>2</sup>. Given the fact that the object of the study is taking place in several countries, the methodology of the study was divided into two main approaches: longitudinal descriptive case study (in France, Italy, Denmark and Ireland) and an exploratory case study (England and France).

The research carried out in Italy, France, Denmark and Ireland can be characterized as descriptive because the goal was to make a complete description of a phenomenon which, in our case, is around the academic and vocational guidance for tertiary students with disabilities, taking into account the organization and the people involved [38].

After analyzing a period of two years in the context of each country, the case studies which have been conducted could be defined as longitudinal, since this was an investigation that has required a prolonged presence of the researcher in the everyday environment to understand a plurality of experiences [39].

### 2.2. The Participants of the Study

*The longitudinal descriptive case study (The Univers’ Emploi Project):*

*Students with disabilities, universities and the respective counselors:* based on the enrolment year, the type of disability and gender, 81 students were selected to compose the sample of this study: 21 students in France (University of Strasbourg, University of Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, and University of Montpellier 1); 20 students in Italy (Università degli Studi di Roma “Foro Italico”, Università degli Studi “Roma Tre”, Università degli Studi di Messina); 20 students in Denmark (Aarhus University); 20 students in Ireland (The Trinity College of Dublin and The University College of Cork). It is important to emphasize that the study has had also the active participation of 14 counselors, whom were the responsible for the “Disability Services” of the universities involved.

*Professional Mentors:* In order to effectively collect the elements inherent in the transition of students with disabilities towards the labor market, some responsible for companies (public and private ones), associations and institutions (in various spheres) were aware about the objectives of the project, prospecting also the approach

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<sup>1</sup>The project “Univers’Emploi” aimed to propose responses to the objective of the Action Plan 2006-2015 of the European Council for the people with disabilities (action line n 4): “to facilitate efficient and effective transitions between different phases of education and between education and employment”. The project has been coordinated by Prof. Serge Ebersold (INSHEA-France) and, particularly in each country involved, by Prof. Lucia de Anna (Università degli Studi di Roma “Foro Italico”-Italie); Prof. Willy Aastrup (Aarhus University-Danemark) and Prof. Declan Treanor (Trinity College of Dublin-Irlande). For further information, please access: <http://universemploi.inshea.fr/>.

<sup>2</sup>Under the coordination of Prof. Lucia de Anna (Università degli Studi di Roma “Foro Italico”-Italy), Prof. Charles Gardou (Université Lumière Lyon 2-France) and Prof. Enicéia Gonçalves Mendes (Universidade Federal de São Carlos-Brazil), the Ph.D. thesis “Orientamento accademico e professionale degli student universitari con disabilità: prospettive internazionali” has been developed by Prof. Leonardo Santos Amâncio Cabral (currently full professor at the Federal University of Grande Dourados-Brazil).

among university and territory. Once familiar regarding these aims, they agreed to delegate professional mentors in their respective workplaces that could follow tertiary students with disability during their activities. A total of 68 professional mentors were involved in the two years of the study.

*The exploratory case study (In France and England):*

*The universities and the respective counsellors:* As part of the development a Ph. D. thesis, the Doctor Europeanus provides international mobility to conduct research activities in a third country [5]. The researcher was able to realize a two-month stay in France at the “l’Institut National Supérieur de formation et de recherche pour l’ éducation des jeunes Handicapés et les Enseignements Adaptés (INSHEA)” and one month in England, at the University of Northampton. During this mobility, some professors<sup>3</sup> has collaborated linking the researcher with heads of services (Mission Handicap; Disability Services) and Job Placement (Secteur Professionnel, Career Services) of two French universities (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 and l’Université Paris Descartes-Paris 5) and two British universities (University of Northampton and University of Cambridge).

## 2.2. The Collection and Data Analysis

*For the longitudinal descriptive case study (The “Univers’ Emploi” Project):*

*Observation:* The data collected through observation has been analyzed according the presence and absence of predefined indicators (student, teacher and family’s participation; involvement of peers; participation of internal services; involvement of external services; evaluation/monitoring tools; the duration of the guidance; additional comments), and also on the basis of the principles of analysis of recorded data [40]. Elements inherent in the general organization of services, academic and vocational guidance activities and about the students themselves have been also analyzed.

*Interviews:* Items identified by interviews with students, through the assessment protocol, were organized in four categories, based on the model proposed by the University of Aarhus (Denmark) and agreed by all universities involved in this study: 1) academic aspects 2) cognitive aspects 3) social aspects 4) individual aspects of students [41].

*Questionnaires:* An analysis indicators form was developed to analyze the data collected and to bring out the reflections elements [5].

*For the exploratory case study (In France and England):*

*Interviews:* The semi-structured interview has been applied to those who are responsible for the Mission Handicap and Secteur Professionnelle (in France) and the Access Team Ability/Disability Services and the Career Service (in England).

*Anecdotal records:* allowing describe the events, avoiding any evaluations or interpretations.

*Sample questions:* these ones were prepared to ensure the consistency of information collected.

Therefore, we can say that the present study has, substantially, a qualitative character, since there is a set of methods which are particularly sensitive to develop a systematic study around the participation process and the changes that takes place within the university and in the labor environment [39].

## 3. Results

The systematization and analysis of the data collected during the realization of the European project “Univers’ Emploi” and the mentioned doctoral thesis, have allowed to read and understand several contexts regarding to the organization of academic and vocational guidance programs for students with disabilities adopted by some universities and companies from France, Italy, England, Ireland and Denmark and also about the various issues identified during this process [5] [42].

### Developing the Academic and Professional Individual Plan

#### 3.1.1. The Academic Guidance

Without no pretension to generalize the analysis results to the countries involved in this research, our effort has been dedicated, in this first moment, around the systematization of the information about the professionals involved in the Disability Services and the Job Placement Services of the explored universities particularly known

<sup>3</sup>In France, by the Prof. Éric Plaisance (Université Paris Descartes-Paris 5) and, in England, Prof. Cristina Devecchi (University of Northampton).

as an important references regarding academic guidance process of the tertiary student with disabilities, particularly about: the involvement of the student, teacher and the family, the comrades of internal and external services, assessment instruments and duration of the guidance. As a result, the **Table 1** shows the presence or absence of practices implemented by those universities, regarding academic guidance of students with disabilities:

From the evidence gathered on academic guidance, shown in the **Table 1**, we can say that: 1) in all the countries studied, students and teachers are involved in the academic orientation process; 2) at the universities explored in England, France, Ireland and Italy, there are other services and other students whom are involved in further supports in order to promote academic guidance; 3) In Italy and England, the family of students is more evidentially considered in the academic orientation process.

In addition, this study allows us to strength the conviction that the most important phase of the academic guidance is when the university or the labor market welcomes a student with disabilities. The university counselor and the company mentor must have the skills to individualize, in a holistic approach, the bio-psycho-social and educational aspects of the students without dropped them, encouraging their active participation [5] [7] [43].

From the first phase of reception and construction of the interpersonal relationship between student and counselor, it is possible to develop, with the active participation of the student, an Academic and Professional Individual Plan.

However, to prevent the role of academic mentor in an individual way in this process, it is important not only to actively involve the student, but also to build and maintain a link between the expert of Disability Service, with other university and territorial services. Some authors also emphasize the importance of the collaboration between teachers, faculties and academia to exchange information [15] [44]-[46]. In addition, the family is also taken into account in this process, particularly in Italy, compared to other universities studied during this study.

From an educational point of view, the initial assessment and monitoring can provide important elements which, if analyzed according to the approach of Universal Curriculum Design, can contribute to the reduction of differences between instructional strategies for all and those for people with disabilities. This reinforces the concept of educational accessibility for all and scheduled based on the approach of lifelong learning and active involvement [15] [47].

### 3.1.2. The Professional Guidance

In this perspective, the same elements can be presented in **Table 2** concerning, particularly, initiatives for the

**Table 1.** Practices implemented by universities explored within the frame of academic guidance program for students with disabilities.

	Academic Guidance									
	Disability Services					Job Placement Services				
	IT	FR	UK	IE	DK	IT	FR	UK	IE	DK
Student Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Professors Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family Involvement	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-
Colleagues Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	-
Internal Services Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
External Services Involvement	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Assessment tools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guidance Duration	From Initial Time	From Initial Time	From Initial Time	From Initial Time	From Initial Time	During	During	During	During	During

**Table 2.** Practices implemented by universities explored as part of the vocational guidance program for students with disabilities.

	Professional Guidance									
	Disability Services					Job Placement Services				
	IT	FR	UK	IE	DK	IT	FR	UK	IE	DK
Student Co-Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Professors Co-Involvement	✓	-	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Family Co-Involvement	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-
Enterprises Co-Involvement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Internal Services Co-Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Co-Involvement External Services	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Assessment and Monitoring tools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guidance Duration	Initial Time	During	Initial Time	Initial Time	During	During	During	During	During	During

promotion of vocational guidance for students with disabilities:

From the evidences gathered on Professional guidance, presented in **Table 2**, we can say that: 1) the professional sector of universities explored in all countries involves students and teachers in the vocational/professional guidance process; 2) within universities explored in France, Italy, England and Ireland, the service involves other university structures; 3) in the case of Italy, the student's family is taken into consideration; 4) The internship offices and the Job Placement offices of all universities studies involves the student and use assessment and monitoring specific tools; 5) In the universities studied in Italy, France, England and Ireland, the service involves professors from other university structures and territory; 6) Surprisingly, the data indicates that the territory of enterprises are still disconnected of the career guidance initiatives for tertiary students with disabilities.

In addition, this study supports the fact that it is essential to involve political figures in the career/professional/vocational guidance initiatives for students with disabilities to make it easier to mobilize local associations and entities companies.

It is also necessary to disseminate information on access and special courses opportunities, responsive services, internships and job offers. The contact opportunities between the student and their reality could be improved by practical case situations, or in situations of official competition or in courses and learning. Moreover, there is also strong demand from employers for train tertiary students "willing to work" [48] [49].

This reinforces the importance of building a concrete career plan that meets the requests of each context, based on the approach of lifelong learning, taking into account, among others, academics and social skills of the student, the self-determination, autonomy, vocation and professional experiences [50].

The world of work demands, moreover, not only that the student has the academic abilities but also be able to acquire professional skills, whether professional, ethical values, communication skills, flexibility to adapt to change, interpersonal skills, set goals, social abilities and problem solving [51]-[53].

However, the study identified that students fear being marginalized in their academic career and to be considered incompetent by their peers or by their recruiter. Therefore, some students sometimes feel down and do not dare talk about their disabilities, especially in the workplace [54].

This attitude concerns the characteristic of self-determination which is not only about to expose their conditions, but also in reviving seek additional support, being determined to overcome obstacles, in self-knowledge, self-assessment and reflection in self-efficacy, decision making, in independence and autonomy which reflects directly on academic achievement and student's career [55].

In order to stimulate the self-determination and the involvement of the student, the mentor must be able to perceive how to identify the best strategy for building a trusting relationship with the student aiming to define his career. In this sense, each context must be analyzed in order to overcome the culture of marginalization and negative discrimination because this allows the student to be aware of the conditions and thus facilitate updating of support and actions appropriate to each context [56].

To set up guidance programs, so, it is important to stimulate the student to have conscience as part of a labor market in constant changes. Be creative and innovative means to be resilient and able to adapt to different situations in life, including the university and the world of work [57] [58].

In a lifelong learning approach, students should be able to understand their own value to the society of knowledge and the production in which we live. It is important to promote initiatives that enable the student to advise their own knowledge, skills and needs, at the university and world of work.

We must see the human being as an indefinite reality and always open, exceeding the temptations of simplistic dualism (ability/disability, normal/abnormal), categorization and mechanical definitions [59].

The guidance of the students must be a process during which their skills are stimulated in order to overcome situations of stigma and low self-esteem [60]. These situations have a direct effect on the transition to the world of work. Students should especially benefit from conditions enabling it to implement its civic sense and responsibility to participate in community life [7] [61] [62].

Considering that each context seeks, in its way, to meet its own requirements, the purpose of the study is not the one to identify a single model or seen better, but to identify in each country and identify good practices for effective inclusion of people with disabilities in university and the world of work, while strengthening the social role of the university, whose aim is to prepare students for their civic life.

The results of this study, therefore, allow us to assert that academic and professional guidance program for a student with disabilities must be considered in a holistic approach around the student's skills, the context of the university, the disability and career services, the territory, and when it is necessary, working with the family. At the end of this study, based on positive discrimination, has been possible to collect the best practices around this issue that might be considered to activate, stimulate or enhance similar initiatives.

Despite identifying these elements, the aim of this study was not only to identify the organization and the technical aspects, but to highlight all individual empirical, interpersonal, academic and professional aspects of the actors whom are involved in the transition process to the university and to the world of work.

From the analysis carried out in different contexts, which is intended to introduce some key elements that could be considered to activate, stimulate and/or enhance similar initiatives. That is to say that beyond discussions with the research groups of the Univers' Emploi European project and the presentations in local contexts of each country, it was possible to identify common elements that are considered essential to enable the synergy of the accessibility and the support for tertiary students with disabilities to their professional insertion (**Figure 1**):

Thus, we can say that to build an effective and appropriate guidance process, it must that the relationship between student and mentor be realized through: 1) promoting enabling environment for communication; 2) stimulation of the active participation; and 3) confidence, which will allow the student to feel more at ease to understand his personal, academic and social environment.

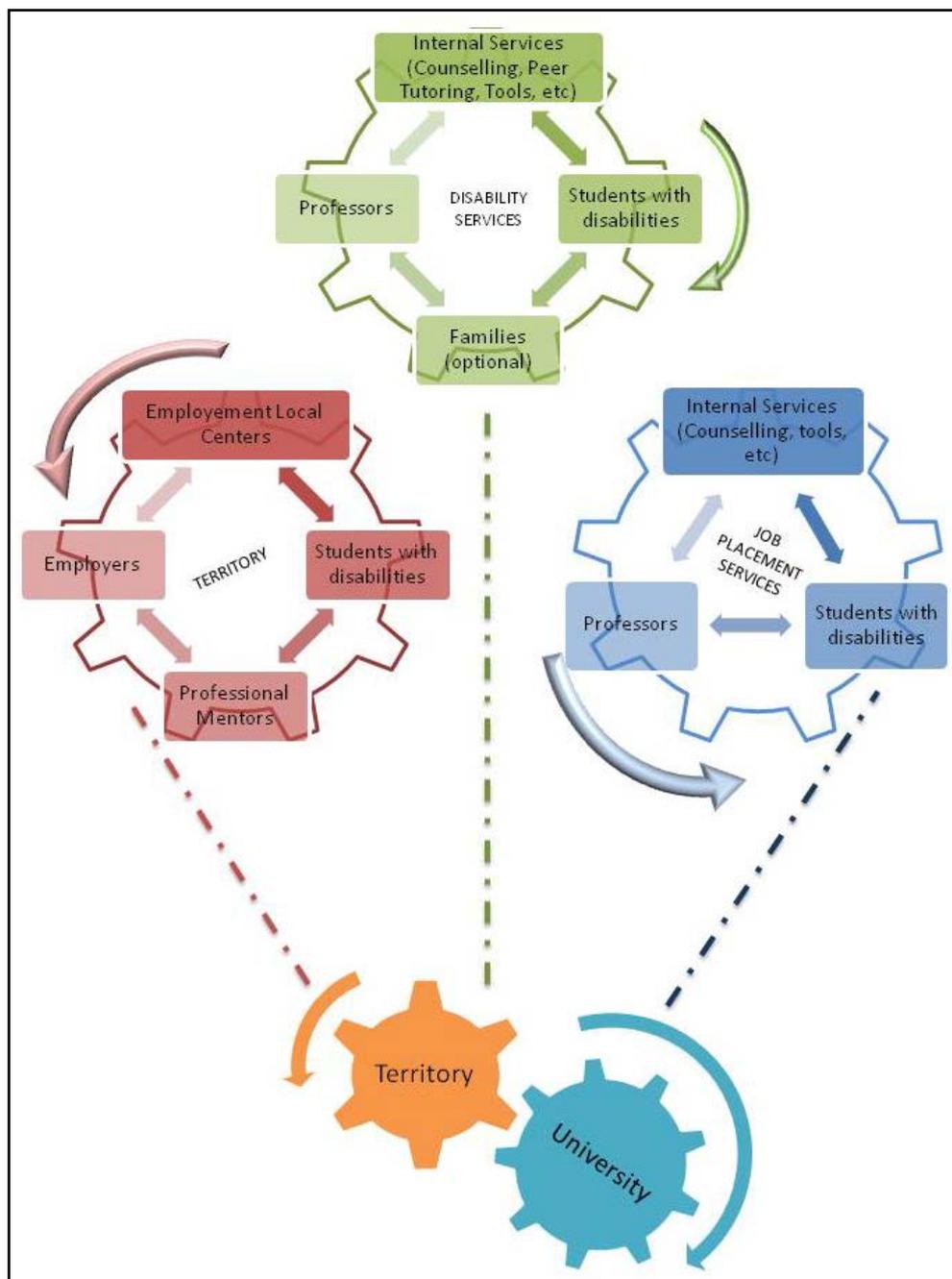
In particular, based on the results obtained, it can be said that to establish a university and vocational guidance program, it is necessary to activate, stimulate and improve the following aspects:

- 1) The synergy between departments, and collaboration between university and territory;
- 2) The organization and culture of inclusion at the university;
- 3) The context of interpersonal relationships between stakeholders so that he will be favorable;
- 4) Self-determination and motivation;
- 5) The skills and needs of the student.

In this direction, the following indications are also presented to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on the occasion of the release of Univers' Emploi project.

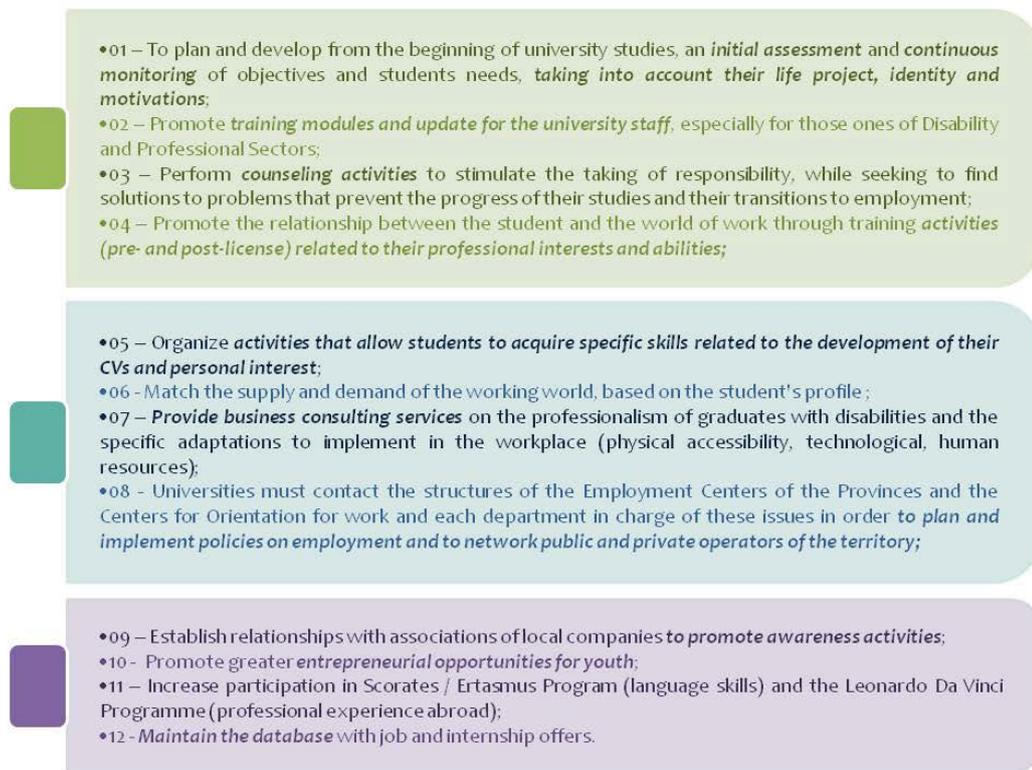
#### 4. Final Considerations

The presentation of the overall results and insights obtained from the data collected, not only helped to develop an international dialogue on the theme of this research, but also to offer new instruments providing to the institution



**Figure 1.** The synergy of the access and the professional guidance of tertiary students with disabilities.  
Source: Own elaboration.

concerned elements that this study in **Figure 2** has identified as fundamental to establish an academic and professional guidance program for students with disabilities [5]. Moreover, from a scientific perspective, the study shows that it is important to develop research that takes into account the different themes inherent in this debate: 1) monitoring of practices implemented during the study; 2) establishment of longitudinal studies of the beginning of the course; 3) identification of the territory's requirements; 4) organization of career services; 5) adaptations to the university and the labor environment; 6) dissemination and accessibility of jobs; 7) discrimination in the world of work; 8) Social Security for Disability; 9) family counseling; 10) evaluation will follow; 11) empowerment; 12) matching between professional capacity and the world of work; 13) building a network between



**Figure 2.** Essential elements on the guidance for tertiary students with disabilities. Source: Own elaboration.

the territory and universities; 14) self-determination.

In the perspective of the results presented here, of the experience around the problematic of the academic and vocational guidance for students with disabilities and from the existing indications for improving transition programs [63] and the Ph. D. thesis developed on this theme, we offer a group of indicators that could be used to the different university structures to organize a monitoring of their own academic and professional guidance program for students with disabilities [5].

Our intention, therefore, has been to continually contribute to the scientific community and the different realities, through the proposal of discussions, supported by the literature, aiming to develop not only support methods, but to present possibilities and tools for the practical implementation of guidance programs that effectively enable the orchestration of the access, permanence and success of students with disabilities in the higher education and world of work, developing ways for their own life project.

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