'We are just ordinary people working hard to reach our goals!' Disabled students' participation in Norwegian higher education

Abstract:	In this paper we shed light on the experiences of disabled students attending professional courses in higher education in Norway. The findings from this empirical study are based on interviews with fourteen students with diverse impairments, ranging from the visible to the invisible. They faced barriers that they resolved to address on their own, using their capabilities and working 'in silence' to meet the expectations of normal students in academia as strong and independent. In addition to their own motivation and self-determination, what facilitated their progress in their studies was that some of the staff and fellow students met them respectfully as ordinary students, while recognising their strain and providing support without calling attention to it. Leaning on the Nordic Relational Model of Disability, we call for greater awareness of the complex interactional processes between the disabled students and people in their social environment.

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- The disabled students had to disclose their disability and request assistance in order to get the necessary accommodations.

- The disabled students were 'coping in silence' to demonstrate that they were capable learners and fit to be future professionals.

- The extra effort in order to be regarded as capable students was bearable due to some of the staff and peers who acknowledged and supported them without calling attention to their disability.

- The disabled students' academic success depended on their own resources and others' attitudes and less on the formalised support by the higher education institutions.

- This paper suggests that as long as disability is regarded as an individual problem, barriers in higher education will remain invisible.

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Key words: disabled students, higher education, professional courses, participation, Nordic Relational Model of Disability

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is among the key factors promoting labour participation in general and specifically for disabled people (Molden, Wendelborg, and Tøssebro 2009[1]). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) underpins international legislation to promote participation and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Yet disabled students experience barriers to HE that are related to both their physical and social environments. An expanding body of knowledge, however, points to cultural obstacles. Several recent studies (Díez, López, and Molina 2015; Fuller et al. 2009; Lang 2015; Redpath et al. 2012; Vlachou and Papananou 2015), two of them multinational (Berggren et al. 2016; Biewer et al. 2015), and a review from nursing education (Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011), all suggest

that educational success depends more on the willingness of the people in the social

environment to support individuals' needs rather than a proactive approach taken by the

HE institutions to create an inclusive environment for the diversity of learners they

serve.

Replicating a study from 1997, Yssel, Pak and Beilke (2016) found that the

attitudes towards disabled students in US higher education have changed for the better

during the last two decades. Nevertheless, their research – as well as other research

from different country contexts over time – demonstrates that disabled students invest

more time and effort than their peers in coping with challenges they face in their

academic studies (Berggren et al. 2016; Gavira and Moriña 2015; Goode 2007; Mullins

and Preyde 2013; Roberts, Georgeson, and Kelly 2009). Students who require

adaptations in their learning environments have to request the necessary

accommodations. However, many are ambiguous about, or reluctant, to disclose their

disability due to fear of stigmatization, unequal treatment, or exclusion (Claiborne et al.

2011; Goode 2007; Magnus and Tøssebro 2013). In addition to problems regarding

access to on-campus learning facilities and assessment, students in professional courses

might face disclosure- and accommodation matters because practice education is part of

the curriculum (Cunnah 2015; Riddell and Weedon 2014; Stanley et al. 2011). As

student life is tightly interwoven with housing, transportation, social participation, and

leisure-time activities, managing issues related to disability in all these arenas may also

influence the students' academic work (Magnus 2009).

The context of higher education in Norway

Following an international trend, the student population in Norwegian HE is

steadily increasing; according to Statistics Norway (2015) more than one in three

among young people between 19-24 years of age are attending HE, compared to one in

eight thirty years ago. The number of disabled students is still disproportionately low (Legard 2009), despite political aims to equalise the participation rate to the level of other students (Sosialdepartementet 2003). While there is a lack of reliable data, Eurostudent IV estimated that 15% of students in Norwegian HE perceived that an impairment influenced their academic participation, and 5% reported it to be a major obstacle (Arnesen et al. 2011).

The Anti-Discrimination and Accessibility Act (Diskriminerings- og tilgjengelighetsloven 2008) in Norway states that students with disabilities have a right to suitable accommodations in their learning environments as long as there is no imposed cost-effectiveness-burden on the educational institution. The Act Relating to Universities and University Colleges (Universitets- og høyskoleloven 2005) requires educational institutions to adapt learning environments that meets the needs of individual students, to a possible and reasonable extent, without reducing the academic requirements of the course. It is up to the local HE institution to define the terms 'possible' and 'reasonable', which naturally leads to varying interpretations.

Principles of universal design are highlighted as the national strategy for making society accessible to all people and is mirrored in legal regulations across all sectors. The national coordinator of accessibility in HE, Universell, is coordinating the work to implement universal design and inclusive learning environments, as well as collaborating with Nordic and other European partners (Universell 2017).

As in the other Nordic countries, disability policies in Norway have been characterized by care provision and redistribution, where entitlements from the state have been distributed to the people with eligible grounds, such as disability (Tøssebro 2010). In the context of HE, students do not have any obligation to reveal impairment or health issues on application or entrance. Yet, entitlement to reasonable accommodation

depends on students' request, which mean they must go through a process of realizing,

accepting, disclosing and documenting their impairment.

Reasonable accommodations provided by the educational institutions are

claimed to be individually tailored, though presented through set lists. Accommodations

might be special provisions at exams, such as a PC or writing assistant, extended time,

and/or sitting in a separate room. The student might be given permission to sound

record from class or handed lecturers' notes in advance. Mentoring is usually restricted

to students with financial support from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service

(NAV), which also offers assistive technologies and sign language interpreters. The

Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille (NLB) produces the syllabus in

audiobook or Braille to students with impaired vision; other students having difficulties

reading printed text can borrow this if it is already available. In Norway there are no

tuition fees for higher education (in the public sector), and most students' living costs

are financed through loans and state grants provided by The Norwegian State

Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen), or for some disabled students by NAV.

In the Norwegian context, research focusing on disabled students in HE is

generally limited. Although perceived barriers were found to be similar for both

disabled and non-disabled students in professional courses (Kessel 2008), entrance to

HE was found to be more challenging for the former. Career guidance is a legal

requirement in upper secondary education: research, however, indicates this to be

inadequate or conditional as it depends on the personal knowledge and effort of each

individual counsellor (Legard and Terjesen 2010). The HE institutions are instructed to

take care of any accommodational issues for students with impairments or health

problems by providing counselling services, while responsibilities for carrying out

reasonable accommodations in the learning environments are put upon individual

lecturers. Nevertheless, disabled students report having to spend a considerable amount

of additional time organizing support and serving as their own coordinators in response

to a lack of knowledge and insufficient communication among staff at all levels (Brandt

2011; Magnus 2009). Brandt (2011) revealed various consequences of the

implementation of the HE Quality Reform in 2003: the modularization of courses

spreading the work load and assignments was a benefit for some, for others it led to

pressure to obtain required adaptations in time, or to exhaustion from struggling to keep

on track during periods of illness. Family resources, i.e. social and cultural capital, seem

to be important for educational completion and transition to work (Legard and Terjesen

2010), as well as for students' self-confidence and coping strategies (Grue and Rua

2013).

This study was part of a larger project addressing a general knowledge gap

concerning disabled students in Norwegian HE, and in the context of professional

courses in particular. The frequent changes in learning environments on- and off-

campus becomes an additional challenge for both the students and their collaborating

parties in professional education. This paper investigates what students experienced as

facilitators and barriers to their participation in the campus context. The students'

experiences from being on practice placement will be addressed in another paper

(forthcoming).

Theoretical perspective

Our understanding of disability is based on the Nordic Relational Model of Disability

(NRM), which has been guiding policy and practice for disabled people in Norway for

approximately 40 years. According to the NRM, disability comes into existence when

there is a discrepancy between the person's capabilities and the functional demands of

the environment (Tøssebro 2004). The relational understanding of disability indicates

that this is not a fixed category but rather a phenomenon constructed in space and time,

thus leaving a relative interactionist perspective (Gustavsson 2004). Gustavsson refers

to Morten Söder: '*It is impossible to understand the processes producing disability, and*

consequently exclusion and discrimination, without studying the interaction between the

individual and the context.' (Söder, in Gustavsson 2004:63). The NRM thus gives the

opportunity to a multi-level approach guided by an empirical sensitivity to what is going

on (Gustavsson 2004). To our understanding, the interactional perspective of the NRM

is mirrored in current international policy documents (UN 2006), and has much in

common with the social relational model of disability as well, as both include both

environmental and impairment factors. However, as we interpret it, the disabling

elements of the social relational are recognised as external barriers and oppression; this

is in contrast to the NRM perspective that focuses on interaction (Shakespeare 2014).

The concept of disability exists as a counterpart to normality. Some social

scientists are challenging this binary thinking surrounding disability and normality by

embracing differences and the diversity of human attributes (Shildrick 2009). Others,

however, raise concerns about deconstructing ideas of disability that risk disregarding

the lived experience of pain and fatigue caused by physical impairments and the

oppression caused by social arrangements (Shakespeare 2014; Vehmas and Watson

2014). Nevertheless, even in a changing society with new ways of viewing disabilities,

the traditional thinking around disability and normality still exists. Even though HE has

gone from catering to an intellectual elite student population to providing something

that is attainable by the general population, the old picture of the 'normal' student

persists and is projected by students, academic staff and society in general. However,

disabled students may not see themselves as 'disabled', since for them, disability is, in

fact, a normal state of life; they are accustomed to coping with their impairment and do

not see obstacles where others do (Watson 2002). Although they do not dismiss having

challenges that differ from those of other students, they perceive themselves as normal/

ordinary and want to be met and treated like everyone else (Berggren et al. 2016;

Jacklin 2016; Roberts, Georgeson, and Kelly 2009; Low 1996). In the context of

professional courses, the risk of being found unfit for practice may also affect how

students negotiate support to manage their disabilities in the university context and at

practice placement (Cunnah 2015; Easterbrook et al. 2015; Riddell and Weedon 2014;

Stanley et al. 2011).

Study design and methods

Ethical and confidential concerns related to participants' informed consent were

addressed, and the steps taken to protect their personal information were approved by

the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

Data generation

The study was designed within the perspectives of social constructivism, valuating

human experiences to be relative to the social context (Creswell 2013). Semi-structured

individual interviews were found to be an appropriate method that allowed the students

to share what was important to them and the researcher to follow up (Kvale 2007). The

interview guide consisted of four main open-ended statements: Tell me about your

background, tell me about your professional education, tell about experiences related to

being on placement, and reflect on your future professional career.

A written invitation to join the study was forwarded through counsellors at the

Accommodation Service at three university colleges in Norway and through other 'door

openers' to the field, such as lecturers. A purposive sampling led to fourteen students

undertaking professional courses who consented to participate. The first author

conducted the interviews, which lasted between one and two and a half hours each. The students chose the venue; most of them chose a meeting room on their campus, except for three who invited the researcher to their homes and one for whom a telephone interview was most convenient.

Participants

The 3 males and 11 women participating in this study were recruited from 8 professional programmes at the bachelor level[2]. In order to maintain and protect the informants' confidentiality, they were given fictional names. Among the 14 participants, whose ages ranged from 22 to 37, 11 had congenital and 3 acquired impairments that were either visible or invisible. All of them experienced fatigue, either as a bodily symptom or caused by the extra effort it took to process information, move, due to pain, inflammation, etc.

[table 1 here]

Data analysis

The students provided rich narratives, which were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Qualitative content analysis as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) provided appropriate guidelines for the analysis, which was conducted mainly by the first author. Emerging themes, codes and categories were discussed by both authors. The transcripts were read paragraph by paragraph, and relevant meaning units were identified. By approaching the data inductively and staying close to the students' own words, the condensed meaning units were used as preliminary codes. These we organized into categories that we later abstracted into themes by interpreting the latent meaning. The analysis involved movements back and forth between single interview transcripts and the data material as a whole. Asking the iterative question 'What is

going on?' we realized that the students were taking much responsibility to bridge a gap

to participation in their course due to a mismatch between the students function and

barriers related to environmental factors being physical, social, and academic. The

empirical material revealed discourses on the dichotomy of disability versus normality.

This represented a conflict for the students' identities as ordinary students, and at the

same time students with need for extra support, thus leading to complex interactional

processes with people in the HE environments depending on the ability of the latter to

perceive and recognize the disabled students' 'ordinary student status' versus 'disability

status' and to provide reliable support.

Building on two main themes, the overarching theme is *Bridging the gap 'in

silence'*. The theme *Being an ordinary student* comprises the two subthemes *Being

capable* and *Taking responsibility*, which illustrate how the disabled students worked to

fit into the expectations of the normal student in academia. The other main theme, *Being

seen as the person I am,* consisted of the subthemes *Being understood* and *Being

supported,* and illuminates the invaluable backing from some significant others among

staff and peers who acknowledged the disabled students as capable learners and relieved

some of their burdens.

[table 2 here]

Findings

Bridging the gap 'in silence'

The students faced barriers to their participation in academia due to both impairment

and environmental factors. Inspired by the NRM, the metaphor of closing the gap 'in

silence' is used to visualize the complex interactional processes that took place between

the students and persons in the HE environments.

Being an ordinary student

Being capable

For the study participants, HE was regarded as a normal pathway into adult life and

work, as Camilla, who has difficulties writing because of cerebral palsy, proclaimed:

> For me, education was a matter of course; all my siblings have done it, so why
>
> shouldn't I? It has never been a question.

The informants were like other students; they wished to use their resources, and by

choosing HE and a future occupation, they considered their own assets and interests.

Having been raised with great parental encouragement throughout childhood, several of

them had learned early on that there were no functional limits that should hold them

back, as Joachim, having a hearing impairment, related:

> Mom made me understand that if I wanted to do something I would be able to
>
> achieve it. But I would have to work for it. Nothing is out there for free.

The students were confident in their own capabilities; they knew they had resources –

both personal and social. Those with congenital impairments were used to functioning

with their impairments; for them, being disabled was their normality. When entering

HE, they expected, on the one hand, to be treated like everyone else – as ordinary

students – and rejected special treatment. On the other hand, they knew they were

different; they needed something more. As studying in HE was a completely unfamiliar

activity and as they did not know what their challenges might entail, it was difficult for

them to define their needs and to request accommodations. Some students had

difficulties explaining changing health symptoms; others neglected their invisible

impairments, as they were unseen and unwanted. Attributing their challenges to the hard

work of getting into HE for most students, the disabled students considered the extra

work load they faced compared to their non-disabled peers to be a private matter they

had to overcome, here illustrated by Emma, who has a visual impairment:

> That part was a bit strange. I was actually pretty insecure as to what I could ask for.
> When you become a student, you think that now, you're meant to stand on your
> own two feet and take responsibility for yourself, and that you shouldn't really
> make any requests from the institute. So I became apprehensive and didn't really
> ask for anything. I thought I'd just have to manage like everyone else to the best of
> my capabilities.

In primary through upper secondary schooling, the obligation to adapt to pupils'

individual needs of support is placed on the institutions. Starting HE represents a

transition to adult independent life, where managing activities of daily living, and

adapting to social and academic demands are expected. To protect their identity as

capable learners they were careful not to put any extra workload on the academic staff

by demanding support. In response to a lack of formal provision, most of them took a

proactive approach, trying to bridge the gap to participation they were facing. In the

ongoing negotiations between normality and disability, some of the students placed

their disability matters in the discourse of rights and discrimination. It seemed as though

claiming their rights tended to be more acceptable than asking for compensation in

regard to their individual impairments, as Emma said:

> Now I understand that, of course, I am within my rights to request lecture sheets in
> an accessible format, but I was a timid freshman, so I worried whether it was
> acceptable to ask for that.

The students entered HE confident in their own capacity to learn and to contribute to

society in their future working lives, but on their way through academia, the

opportunities to demonstrate their abilities were at risk. As the process of first finding

information and then applying and being accepted for appropriate accommodations took

time, about half of the students lacked adaptive assignments or technical aids for their

exams in the first semester. They experienced the situation as stressful and beyond their

control, and felt they were unable to demonstrate their newly acquired skills and

knowledge. An example is Marianne, whose handwriting is affected by cerebral palsy.

No one had told her that she could apply for a writing assistant:

> I felt that I wasn't able to demonstrate my abilities because I had to spend all my
> energy on the actual writing alone, while trying to concentrate on the question. The
> feeling I had after my examination was that I was going to fail because I wasn't
> capable of putting all my knowledge down on paper.

After having acquired a writing assistant for the next exam, Marianne stated: '…finally

I was able to show my knowledge'.

Taking responsibility

The disabled students spent much of their time and energy during their first few months

in HE worrying about accommodation issues and academic progress, such as whether

they could cope with a full-time schedule or would have to cut back to part-time

attendance. They reported difficulties in finding information about their rights, the

adaptations that were offered in the classroom and at exams, and who they should

contact for help. Most of the students suggested that their chosen educational institution

lacked knowledge about disabilities and the time to work out solutions. The students

were cautious to criticize the educational institutions and excused the staffs' lack of

knowledge and their time constraints. As adaptations or accommodations were delayed

or lacking entirely, the students took responsibility in order to participate in their

education, such as Heidi, who took both a humble and a solution-oriented position:

> I get them [staff], though . . . they have so much to do . . . and they get sort of an
> added thing . . . such as me, that they must show extra consideration . . . [. . .] . . .

> The University College doesn't have that much time to think of solutions. But if
> you present the solutions to them, it's easier for them to accommodate. It takes so
> much less time.

For several students who depended on technical aids, the unreliability of the technical

devices turned out to be one of the main barriers to their participation in the learning

environment. Heidi, having a hearing impairment, estimated that her opportunity to

fully participate in learning activities was reduced to about 40 percent of the scheduled

time during the first year because technical aids were either lacking, out of order, or not

being used:

> I constantly had to remind. I constantly had to be the one who left [the
> microphones] to recharge and things like that. And to look after all sorts of things,
> simultaneously as I was studying . . . while at the same time having challenges, so
> to speak. That is a huge responsibility.

Routines for circulating information about the accommodations they were entitled to

had a tendency to be weak or lacking. Several of the students reported feeling like

'broken records' because they had to constantly repeat their particular needs in new

situations or simply because lecturers forgot about their situations between each

interaction. One approach, patiently reminding, with support from fellow students, was

illuminated by Emma, who had a hard time teaching her lecturers to provide Powerpoint

presentations in a format accessible for her computer's software:

> It takes some time ...[for the lecturers] I understand... and it's a little hard to
> remember how important it is [careful to criticize]. So, we've spent some time
> reminding different lecturers that it's important then… But, they have become
> pretty good after all…

When Emma did mobility training on campus the week before term started, she realized

the signs for rooms inside the building were lacking Braille format. In order to be as

independent as possible, she decided to do the sign marking of rooms herself, with the

mobility trainer, instead of waiting for it to be done by the staff.

The students anticipated a heavier workload in HE compared to upper secondary

school, but as they did not have any frame of reference, they relied on their motivation

and will, and spent time and energy to overcome the learning barriers they experienced.

Karen, who finished her teacher training despite a visual impairment, described her

experiences this way:

> Because it's a struggle . . . it's a vast bureaucratic jungle you must get through, and
> it's not as though you can knock on a door and ask, 'Excuse me, what support is
> available to me?' You must know before . . . in advance. There will be no one
> serving answers on a silver platter. You must find your way through the social
> service system on your own and search here and there . . . and rejections and
> another round and. . .[. . .] . . . And there are a lot who give up in advance, if they
> don't have enough resources to . . . and creative enough to find solutions. And
> motivation is the greatest strength you have. So if you're uncertain about whether
> or not to study, you won't make it.

To fit into the normality expectations of the independent student in academia and to

demonstrate their capabilities, the students took responsibility for minimizing the effects

of their individual impairments. Some of the students also talked about themselves as

role models paving the way for other disabled students. By regarding the efforts they

made in order to cope as being important for other students as well, they made their

struggles worthwhile and thus reduced the focus on their individual challenges as

something special. As we analysed the data, our image of the students as heroic could

conceivably be perceived by the academic staff as well. Thus, the disabled students

were seen as resourceful young adults who took responsibility on behalf of themselves

and others. Nevertheless, they were 'walking the line', where the expenditure of extra

time and energy being their own coordinators and accommodators, put them in a

vulnerable position of risking failure.

Being seen as the person I am

Being understood

As most of the informants had been on the verge of giving up their studies at one point

or another, all of them reported that the open-minded, attentive, and genuinely caring

attitudes of some of the staff were of fundamental value for their disability disclosure

and subsequent academic progress. Here, as told by Ellinor, are thoughts about one

person who took the time to really see her and who believed in her capabilities after she

had acquired a brain injury:

> I'm thinking he's been the classic 'The One Person Who Made a Difference', the
> one person who says: 'You can manage this, we'll just sort out so and so – you can
> do this!' And I think many with impairments need that.

However, there are many examples in the students' narratives about ignorance and a

lack of effort to accommodate the students' needs. Staffs' attitudes were displayed in

various ways, from active opposition experienced by a few students to a more common

lack of awareness or hesitancy. Kristine, with dyslexia, had major problems reading the

comprehensive curricula, especially English texts. When she was seeking some of her

lecturers for help, she was met with: 'You just have to read and try!' What she

described as a turning point was one lecturer who eventually saw her struggle and

actually tried to help by informing her about assistive aids and personal support, not just

insinuating that she was the one that had to pull herself together.

Karen reflected on how people's perceptions of her were affected primarily by

her visual impairment rather by her other qualities. She said that she constantly had to

prove her capability because people around her did not believe in her ability to perform

certain activities because of her visual impairment. Living with an impairment for many

years, the students were adept at managing and coping in daily life. This high level of

coping could, in other situations, lead to a concealment of their struggles, as Karen

continues:

> I function relatively well in everyday matters, so you don't really notice my vision
> is impaired. I think it was hard for a lot of people to remember. That can easily lead
> to the occasional misunderstanding here and there.

Karen's experiences shed light on one of the great dilemmas that disabled students face

on their way through academia: On one hand, they try to compensate and to function as

well and as ordinarily as they possibly can to prove themselves worthy of their place in

academia and live up to expectations of normal students. On the other hand, they have

to prove their special needs related to their impairments in order to be trusted and to

obtain the necessary accommodations. But if they do so, they risk being regarded as

incapable of undertaking a professional course of study. The tendency of persons in

their social environment to understand disability as a fixed category instead of

contextually affected how the students were met.

Being supported

The students mostly considered staff as being forthcoming and making individual

accommodations when requested. However, the arrangements seemed to depend mainly

on the goodwill of the persons they happened to meet on their way through academia

and not on a proactive strategy by the educational institutions. Karen reported that her

grades, after six years at the same educational institution, clearly reflected that some

teachers did not really want her there, as they did not make any attempt to accommodate

and facilitate her learning. Ellinor described feeling like a number among all the athletes

in her courses who requested special arrangements; she experienced that academic staff

were fed up with accommodating students involved in high-level sports, and acted in a

restrictive manner towards everyone. Ellinor's individual needs were thus not met.

Some of the students we interviewed felt that they were not being included in the

decision-making regarding their case or that accommodation requests were neglected or

forgotten. They reflected on the paradox of attending a professional course teaching

human rights and inclusion with staff who failed to act according to the ideology they

preached.

There were also a few examples of students feeling welcomed by the way they

were received by the educational institution, such as Joachim, with a hearing

impairment:

> The faculty has been very considerate of me as a student . . . [and know] how to
> facilitate. There was already an audio induction loop in place in the lecture hall
> when I arrived, and on the wall there's an information board on where to sit to get
> the best reception possible. That's equipment that all the students benefit from . . . I
> mean, speakers and microphones. In that regard, I feel that the faculty has done
> what they can.

A learning environment designed for all influenced how Joachim experienced his

entrance into HE; he felt he was treated seriously and welcomed just like any other

student.

Although revealing incidents of ignorance, the informants all highlighted the

support they received from fellow students as being of great importance for proceeding

in their studies. Their peers helped them in many ways, such as reminding the lecturers

to follow up on the students' requests for accommodations, capturing messages and

taking notes, lending hands, and carrying bags in the transfer between buildings and

classrooms, as revealed by Turid, who has a visual impairment:

> My classmates don't have any [formal] responsibility, but they took it upon
> themselves anyway. They have been crucial . . . there are so many moving stories.
> Good people. They have done much and more for me to pull through. I wouldn't
> have done that without my classmates.

Many of the students reported a general feeling of acceptance and inclusion in the

classroom and group work, as well as in their social life. Some of the informants had

mentors who were fellow students that were paid for helping them with certain study

activities. In these cases, the importance of a complementary relationship of equal

partnerships learning together was emphasized. Heidi, being a mature student,

explained:

> She [the writing assistant] was very young, had never done nursing before. So I felt
> in a way that we both benefited. She asked me for work and life experience, and I
> kind of got assistance typing in return. That was very decent. A win-win situation
> for both of us. I wasn't just the one receiving assistance, but I was able to give a
> little back. That feeling was considerable, to say the least.

What helped the students to continue their studies were the psychological and practical

support they received from some of the staff and peers who met them as ordinary

students and, at the same time, were able to see their need for support and helped them –

but doing so without making a big deal out of it – just working 'in silence'.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of disabled students attending

professional courses in Norwegian higher education. Facing barriers to their study

participation, the students took a proactive approach, using their resources to cope, thus

carrying the burden of bridging the gap between their function and environmental demands. The findings revealed complex processes of negotiating an identity as ordinary students with some extraordinary needs working hard to fit into the normality expectations of the strong and independent student in higher education. What facilitated participation was the experience of being recognized and supported by some significant persons in their social environment.

The students in this study entered HE being confident about their own capabilities. They anticipated that studying would be challenging, but they were not prepared for the extra workload due to disabling barriers. Identifying disabling barriers is a prerequisite for arranging support on an individual level; the disabled students had to refer to a functional loss to be accepted as someone 'deserving' of accommodations. This study, like previous studies (Claiborne et al. 2011; Goode 2007; Fuller et al. 2009; Jacklin 2011; Redpath et al. 2012) has shown that this process is not straightforward. According to the law, the onus to request accommodation is on the student. This can easily become an excuse for the staff, as they expect the student to come to them first. The students did not know what opportunities existed and what rights they had; they struggled to find information and persons who could assist them, as well as defining what needs they might have in the new context. When they finally found a person they trusted who could possibly help, they anticipated support to be provided. Instead, they experienced this as unreliable since the information flow did not always work, lecturers forgot what they were supposed to do, and the technology was either not used or unstable. Similar findings are also reflected in other country contexts (Claiborne et al. 2011; Díez, López, and Molina 2015). The students thus spent time and exerted energy minimizing disabling barriers to achieve the grades they deserved by being their own coordinators, echoing Brandts' finding from evaluating the 2003-Quality Reform in

Norwegian HE more than a decade ago (2011). Similar to Easterbrook's participants

(2015), the students in our study were dependent on the staff to be seen as capable and

fit for professional practice, and as they wanted to prove themselves worthy of their

place in academia, they were careful not to cause any extra workload for the staff.

By taking responsibility and coping 'in silence', they minimized the disability

label and demonstrated their independence, much in line with what Low found (1996).

They were so good at adapting and coping that their struggles might have been

concealed from their counterparts. The HE staff were probably not aware of – or not

willing to see – how much responsibility the students were taking. Gabel and Miscovic

(2014) wrote about 'the architecture of containment' to describe what happens when the

obligation to initiate action to solve what is considered to be a student's functional

problem is put on the individual. The traditional expectation in academia of the strong

and autonomous student, along with a general attitude in society towards people

actively taking responsibility for their own lives, may thus be reinforced by the

students' proactive approach.

The study seems to mirror a trend that many young disabled people in Norway

have been facing since birth: personal and social resources appear to be key factors in

promoting societal participation from childhood to adult life (Grue and Rua 2013;

Legard and Terjesen 2010). Such experiences might have influenced the students'

confidence in the system and thus an expectation of being the main actors in relation to

the HE system. Interestingly, we note that Berggren et al. (2016) discovered Swedish

students also taking on much responsibility, using a humble approach when

compensating for failures of the higher education institutions' ability to follow up

students' rights to accommodation. In comparison, the students from the United States

were claiming their rights. This difference, we presume, reflects the contexts of those

countries' different political approaches to disability: the Nordic welfare model focus on

social regulation through redistribution versus the American focus on removal of

environmental barriers to avoid discrimination.

Barriers in HE still seem to predominantly comprise affairs that the individual

must resolve on his or her own, thus echoing recent research (Berggren et al. 2016;

Goode 2007; Mullins and Preyde 2013). When the regulatory conditions are practiced

by an individual deficit approach, the students' academic success depends on the

understanding and willingness of the people they happen to meet, and is not a result of a

formal strategy adopted by the educational institution (Berggren et al. 2016; Díez,

López, and Molina 2015). As the disabled students take on responsibility, the

importance of self-determination skills in order to participate is paramount (Getzel and

Thoma 2008; Yssel, Pak, and Beilke 2016). While international and national

legislations and regulations prescribe equal rights and opportunities for all, one may

question, as Biewer et al. do, whether HE is still primarily for the most resourceful

disabled students.

The students struggled to cope and to fit into the 'normality frame' of academia,

thus the oppressive mechanisms may not have been obvious to either the students or the

staff. The more successfully they coped with their studies, the greater the chance that

the inadequacy of the system would not be visible, and the greater their expenditure of

effort to compensate. This put them in a vulnerable position, where the risk of not

succeeding was imminent. As all of the students had been on the verge of giving up

their studies due to hardship coping, those staff and fellow students who saw them and

tried to help were crucial. What made their support particularly significant was that they

understood the strain the students were struggling without treating them as being

different from others. The students did not hide the fact of impairment, but they did not

want to be exposed to processes of 'othering' – they wanted to fit in, be ordinary.

Paradoxically, to get access to accommodation they had to attend to an identity as

disabled, to be 'un-normal' in order to become a 'normal' student, i.e. to participate on

an equal level as their non-disabled peers. The response from the people in their social

environment can either build up under this othering, or can make students feel

welcomed. Key allies who make the effort to learn who the students are, and who are

devoid of disability prejudice thus become momentous. To use Gill's statement: 'They

want acknowledgment of who they are' (2001:364). The trustworthy relationship with

some significant others – as in this study being family, peers and some staff – is

invaluable in enabling the students through their courses. Such relationships have been

described by several researchers (Berggren 2016; Biewer et al. 2015; Gavira and

Moriña 2015; Gill 2001; Jacklin 2011; Magnus 2009; Vlachou and Papananou 2015).

Listening to the experiences of disabled students in both this and other studies, we

maintain this to be an issue that still lacks attention.

Analysing the students' narratives we were inspired by Honneths' work 'The

Struggle for Recognition' (1995) where he described three spheres of interaction that

affect the development of social esteem and social integration: The students had

experienced recognition through childhood and adolescence through parental love and

belief in their capabilities. Historically, time has worked for recognition through rights-

based laws and regulations on inclusion, equality and democratic rights. Social

appreciation is still a goal remaining to be achieved in the HE and human service

culture that disabled students are now a part of. Following Honneth, it is interesting to

recognize the students' experience of being acknowledged by their peers. These

students are the 'new generation' who have grown up in the same playground, not

segregated as was common practice 30 – 40 years ago. They have been raised in times

of a society opening up for the diversity of human beings. One can expect the new generation of professionals to contribute promising developments towards a more inclusive society in general and within the professional culture in particular.

How can the HE institutions design a system that embraces the diversity of learners without othering some students because of disability? Due to the complexity of barriers to participation, there is no straightforward answer to this question. Universal design of the technical and physical environment, as well as pedagogic approaches could easily have solved many of the obstacles the students in this study were facing. Still, universal design will not be enough to bridge the gap; impairments have effects that the individual students must cope with through personal strategies, assistive technologies or other accommodations (Shakespeare 2014). It is difficult to see how some of these entitlements can be distributed without going via eligibility by medical criteria. However, our point is that the disabled students should be met, first and foremost, as persons with valuable experiences, as well as persons with need of some extra support, downplaying the 'othering' because of disability.

We have used the NRM to understand and visualize the findings. The situation of disabled students in HE is complex, where the individual factors such as students' impairment and personal traits interact with environmental factors on different levels – policy, culture and physical environments. We suggest putting a greater focus on learning for ALL students recognizing that different ways of learning require different means. The diversity of learners provide an opportunity for HE institutions to put into practice the ideologies they are teaching about inclusion, user participation and diversity. The diversity also provides a potential for learning from people with experiences different from the mainstream non-disabled 'habitants' of HE. Following Lang (2015) and Storr, Wray and Draper (2011) this requires academic staff to

understand disability as contextual and focuses more on students' capabilities and

competencies rather than on their deficits or fitness. In line with both Gavira and

Moriña (2015) and Yssel et al. (2016), we call for intuitiveness from staff on the extra

effort it costs disabled students to participate. The HE institutions must initiate the steps

needed to bridge the gap by improving collaborative links between students and staff, as

well as heightening knowledge about disability and implementing inclusive teaching

and assessment methods (Díez, López, and Molina 2015; Lang 2015; Mullins and

Preyde 2013; Redpath et al. 2012; Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011). The responsibility to

do so should be placed on staff, on both the organisational and relational levels.

Study strength and limitations

A strength of the study is the students' common experiences. Our findings are mirrored

by other researchers and reveal insight from a diversity of impairments and health

challenges, and from several professional programmes. The voices of those students

who chose not to disclose their disability or who left their professional education

because of a lack of support, are not included in this sample. Neither are the

perspectives of staff and placement supervisors, who might have provided other views.

The findings pertain to a Norwegian frame of reference. Still, we regard them as being

of value in guiding practice and future research in similar contexts.

The scope of this paper was narrowed to focus on the disabled students' study

participation primarily in the campus context. The placement part of the professional

curriculum with frequent change of learning environments do however constitute some

challenges in professional educations that need to be explored in future studies.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Impairment
Elisabeth	Female	36	Significant ongoing illness
Joachim	Male	23	Hearing impairment
Ellinor	Female	32	Cognitive impairment
Marianne	Female	23	Mobility impairment
Andrea	Female	23	Dyslexia
Peter	Male	23	Attention Deficit Disorder, mental health impairment
Emma	Female	22	Visual impairment
Turid	Female	26	Visual impairment
Heidi	Female	37	Hearing impairment
Karen	Female	26	Visual impairment
Camilla	Female	23	Physical impairment, dyslexia
Liv	Female	26	Significant ongoing illness
Arne	Male	25	Cognitive impairment
Kristine	Female	22	Dyslexia

Table 2: Findings outlined by overarching theme with main themes and sub-themes

Bridging the gap 'in silence'	
Being an ordinary student	***Being seen as the person I am***
Being capable: Regarding education as a matter of course. Being confident in own resources. Regarding disability as a private matter. Expecting to be independent.	*Being understood:* Recognized as capable learner with need for extra support by others that captured the contextual feature of disability.
Taking responsibility: Being own coordinator and accommodator. Using and showing resources. Acting for own sake, as well as paving the way for others.	*Being supported:* People helped as best they could, but without 'othering' because of disability.