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'I have something to contribute to working life' – students with disabilities showcasing employability while on practical placement

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the practical placement experiences of students with disabilities who are attending professional higher education in Norway. Despite legislative regulations to promote equal opportunities, many students with disabilities face barriers to participation in higher education. In professional education, practical placement is a part of the curriculum. However, the transition from the campus classroom to practical placement puts an extra demand on the students to disclose their disabilities and request accommodation; it also puts demands on academic staff and placement supervisors to arrange support. Based on interviews with 14 students in teacher, social work and healthcare programmes, the study highlights the opportunities that placement gave these students to experiment with the demands of work, learn about their own capacity, and test out solutions for accommodation. Practical placement was also an arena where the students worked hard to develop and demonstrate their resources as proficient future professionals. However, due to structural barriers and insufficient planning, the students risked not being able to cope with the demands of placement and to demonstrate their proficiency. The study revealed that planning prior to placement was essential in providing optimal opportunities for students with disabilities to learn and to market their employability.

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) is among the most important facilitators to a successful transition to employment in general, and for people with disabilities in particular (Bø and Håland 2015¹; Legard 2012). In Norway, more than one in three in the 19–24-year age bracket attend HE (Statistics Norway 2018). However, the number of people with disabilities in HE is still disproportionately low (Legard 2009), and the employment rate about half that of non-disabled people (Bø and Håland 2015). Political visions of economic independence, as well as diversity in the workforce are expressed through the national goal of equalising the proportion of students with and without disabilities attending HE (Ministry of Social Affairs 2003).

According to national and international policy documents, people with disabilities should have the same rights and opportunities to choose education and future occupations as anyone else (Ministry of Social and Health Affairs 2001; United Nations 2006). In Norway, the Act Relating to Universities and University Colleges (Ministry of Education and Research 2005) requires educational institutions to provide students with necessary and reasonable accommodations of their learning

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environment and the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act specifies the students' rights to have their learning environment accommodated (Ministry of Children and Equality 2017). Still, disabled students report that they spend a considerable amount of additional time organising their own support and acting as their own coordinators in response to a lack of knowledge and insufficient communication among staff at all levels (Langørgen and Magnus 2018; Brandt 2011; Magnus 2009). A recent study among deaf students in Norwegian HE found that inclusion was reduced to an individual rather than an institutional responsibility (Kermit and Holiman 2018). Brandt (2011) revealed various consequences of the implementation of the HE Quality Reform in 2003: The modularisation of courses to spread the workload and assignments was a benefit for some, while 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. Social capital and personal coping strategies are found to be essential for students' educational success and transition to work (Grue and Rua 2013; Legard and Terjesen 2010).

Students with disabilities in professional education

Accommodating students with disabilities means that both students and educators have responsibilities. Students have the right to individual accommodation (Ministry of Children and Equality 2017). However, redemption of this right depends on students' requests; coming forward to make these requests is a complex process, and many students express difficulties in requesting support (Claiborne et al. 2011; Hong 2015; Nolan et al. 2014). For students in professional programmes, disclosure and accommodation issues need to be repeated due to different curricular practices in the working field. The risk of failing to fulfil criteria for suitability may affect how students with disabilities negotiate support in the university context and also at placement (Easterbrook et al. 2015; Macleod and Cebula 2009; Riddell and Weedon 2014; Stanley et al. 2011). Nolan et al. (2014) found that fewer than 30% of students revealed anything about their disability prior to placement. Academic staff and placement supervisors express lack of disclosure as a challenge, as this may easily lead to unfair judgements about the students' abilities, as well as raise concerns about risk and safety of future clients. It also limits the possibilities for planning and collaborating to accommodate students' needs (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013; Nolan et al. 2014; Rankin et al. 2010; Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011). Missing links of collaboration between the educational institutions and the practice field have been reported by several stakeholders (Botham and Nicholson 2014; Domakin 2015; Finch and Poletti 2014).

Another concern among educators is their lack of knowledge and time to support students with extra needs (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013; Langørgen, Kermit and Magnus 2020; Domakin 2015; Nolan et al. 2014). Tee et al.'s study (2010) among student practice advisors found that students with disabilities required 20% more contact time than their peers do. Research from a broad range of professions reveals a tension between the educators' responsibility to attend to students' rights while at the same time having to act as gatekeepers who are responsible for evaluating the students' standard of professional conduct (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013; Clouder et al. 2016; Evans 2014; Rankin et al. 2010; Sowbel 2012).

An educational pathway to a profession could provide students with disabilities with a unique opportunity to prepare for the work world through placement experiences (Cunnah 2015; Georgiou, Espahbodi, and De Souza 2012; Hill and Roger 2016). However, how students with disabilities are facilitated in professional education depends on the attitudes and knowledge of the individual gatekeepers the students meet (Bulk et al. 2017; Carey 2012; Díez, López, and Molina 2015; Hill and Roger 2016; Meeks and Jain 2018). Studies of professional students and practitioners with disabilities indicate their constant struggle against attitudes from colleagues regarding their ability to provide safe and effective services (Bevan 2014; Chacala et al. 2014; Griffiths 2012; Murphy 2011).

For people with disabilities, knowledge about the pathways to work is important for maintaining democratic values of inclusion and equality, and for broadening diversity in the workforce. Though increasing internationally, research regarding students with disabilities in HE is still limited, and even more so in the context of professional education. The aim of this paper is to generate knowledge

about enablers and barriers to professional education by exploring the placement experiences of students with disabilities attending professional undergraduate courses in social work, healthcare teaching.

The Norwegian context

In Norway, there is no tuition for higher education. For living expenses, students can obtain loans and grants from The Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund. Still, one third of the students have paid work while studying; more than 50% of those who work, their paid job is closely linked to their field of study (Hauschildt, Vögtle, and Gwosć 2018). From 22 years of age, students with disabilities can apply for benefits from The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV). The benefits are limited to 3 years, with the possibility of a one-year extension due to social or health problems.

It normally takes three years of full-time study to complete a bachelor's degree within the professions. A professional curriculum typically comprises on- and off-campus modules; this leads to frequent changes in the learning environment and limited time to accommodate to individual students' needs. The number and length of practical placements vary, with most programmes having two or three periods lasting 4–12 weeks. Designed in full-time blocks, a week on placement usually consists of four 7–8-hour working days and one day for self-regulated studies.

Several actors are usually involved in the placement education: the student, a lecturer responsible for the module, a placement coordinator at the educational institution, and sometimes a coordinator at the placement site, as well as a placement supervisor who is a professional in health and human services. Accommodating students is usually taken care of by a counsellor at the Accommodation service on students' request, while placement follow-up is the supervisor's responsibility.

Professions within health and human services set the standards for competence in their own profession. These criteria are reportedly vague, and the same is true for information and coordination between the stakeholders in the educational institutions and the field (Caspersen and Kårstein 2013). In addition to achieving the learning outcomes for each placement period, students are allowed no more than 20% absence from the stipulated work hours. Students in teaching, health- and social-care education are also under assessment for suitability (Ministry of Education and Research 2006), which is supposed to be a guarantee to both employers and service users that a graduate is fit for duty.

Current policies highlight a relative perspective of disability, where disability is not solely a product of impairment, but a phenomenon due to a discrepancy between personal capabilities and the demands of the environment (Tøssebro 2004). Thus, interventions are mainly characterised by compensatory approaches to accommodate students' individual impairment.

This study is part of a larger project addressing a knowledge gap concerning students with disabilities in professional education in Norway (Langørgen and Magnus 2018; Langørgen, Kermit and Magnus 2020). This article investigates the students' experiences from the placement context.

Research question

What do the students experience as enablers and barriers related to their practical placement periods?

Material and methods

Participants

Data was generated from individual interviews with students with disabilities who were studying healthcare social work or teaching at three university colleges. A written invitation was forwarded through counsellors at the Accommodation Service or through 'door openers' to the field, such as lecturers. Employing a purposive sampling strategy (Creswell 2013), we sought students with various

impairments affecting their studies who had completed at least one practical placement. This recruitment process led to 14 students with disabilities from eight professional programmes² who voluntarily, and based on informed consent, agreed to share their experiences.

The informants were from 22 to 37 years of age. Eleven had congenital disabilities and three had acquired disabilities; their disabilities were either visible or invisible. All experienced fatigue in their daily life, either as a bodily symptom or caused by the extra effort it took them to move, to process information, or due to pain, inflammation, etc.

Ethics

Prior to the study, approval regarding ethical and confidential protection of participants was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (Project number 36,533).

Methodology

The first author conducted the interviews, each lasting between one to two and a half hours each, at a location chosen by the participant. A semi-structured interview guide allowed for an element of consistency, but also permitted the informants freedom to share experiences of importance to them. The interview guide comprised four open-ended questions on respondents' background, current professional education, experiences related to placement, and reflections on their future professional career.

In order to explore the placement experiences in depth, a selective sample of two students, one with a visual impairment, Emma, and one with a mobility impairment, Marianne, were interviewed a second time; the second interview took place just after the students had completed a placement period. A third student with dyslexia was also invited for a second interview but did not respond.

Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) provided a systematic approach for analysing the interview transcripts from the audio recordings. The analysis was mainly conducted by the first author, although emerging codes, categories and themes were thoroughly discussed by both authors. While going through the transcripts, paragraph by paragraph, units of meaning that revealed something about the participants' experiences from placement were highlighted and given a code close to the informants' own words. The analysis involved moving back and forth between single interview transcripts and the data material as a whole, asking the iterative question: 'What is this about?' The next step included a process of interpretation of the condensed units of meaning, which revealed a pattern of subthemes with an over-arching theme. We analysed the students' narratives as openly and inductively as possible, keeping in mind the possible influence of our preconceptions. Further, we compared and interpreted our results in light of existing literature.

Findings

Our results revealed the placement period to be a time where the students with disabilities were *showcasing employability*. This overarching theme consisted of the subtheme *developing professional confidence* with a potential for the students to confirm their working capability, learn about their own capacity, become aware of their unique competency, and demonstrate their proficiency. Being in full-time placement was reported to be hard work where the students were walking the thin line between success and failure. The planning ahead of the placement period turned out to be crucial to making the most out of the opportunity to promote the students' resources as qualified students and future professionals. However, being included as a collaborator in a timely planning was not

a matter of course for all the students. The second subtheme, *planning the placement professionally*, revealed itself as an important prerequisite for the students' ability to showcase employability. Each subtheme will be described more fully in the sections that follow and illustrated using the students' own words.

Developing professional confidence

The students' choice of a professional education was based on their motivation and interests and, for some, was clearly strategic because it gave them the opportunity to try out their working capability in practice. The findings indicate placement to be a valuable arena where students with disabilities develop professional confidence that allows them to demonstrate their proficiency as qualified future professionals.

Confirming capability to work

For most professional students, concerns regarding their own working capability may be common prior to their placement period. However, the students in this study had an additional worry about how their impairment could affect their ability to do the tasks of the job and relate to the service users – the clients/patients/pupils they were to work with. Meeting the service users was a positive experience for the students, and all of them stated that they had been able to establish a trustworthy relationship with them.

The students used the placement periods to experiment with the demands of work and to find solutions to bridge the functional barriers they faced. As most of the informants were unable to have paid work alongside their studies, their experiences from placement were significant, here illustrated by Turid, who had a hearing impairment:

But the fact that there's been a lot of practical work has given me the opportunity to test how I will function in working life. And I've been able to [try] ... adaptations in terms of assistive devices and so on. And I've tested my own resources. I think many students do that through part time jobs while they are studying – jobs that are relevant to their studies. But I haven't been able to do much in that way. So the placement became my chance.

As they had concerns about their ability to provide safe and reliable services for the users, the opportunity to try out different strategies under supervision was found to be of great value, as Karen, a student teacher with a visual impairment stated:

So I was experimenting with different kinds of [professional] arrangements to figure out, well, ... what I can see and what I can't see, what I am comfortable with and what I'm not. And then I have the two others ... both the placement supervisor and a peer student, who are there making sure everything is appropriate.

The participants described success in doing the assigned working tasks, and several got positive feedback from their supervisors and colleagues. They generally grew more confident about their own resources and capabilities, knowing they have something to contribute to working life. Emma, who was studying social work, told:

So ... I've effectively functioned as a case manager. We [the students] behaved just in the same function as those who actually were employed as case managers.

Learning about own capacity

Prior to her placement period, Marianne, who had a mobility impairment, expressed worries about her working capacity and would have preferred to work part-time. She had the option of working shorter days, but that meant she had to extend her placement period, skip the one day a week allowed for self-study, as well as miss out on the final two weeks left for writing assignments. She decided to give full time a try and succeeded in pulling herself through the placement period but did not have any energy left for leisure and social activities during that period. Though describing it as a very hard period, Marianne was able to do it and she appreciated the experience because it made

her reflect on her future working capacity which, after placement, she estimated to be 50%. However, she had some concerns regarding the limited opportunity to do the placement work part-time:

In my opinion it should be possible to do it part time, considering there might be students with a reduced working capacity who can't work 100%, and then I think it's strange you have to go through a 100% practical period. Because I believe you can learn just as well, and maybe even better, by having a part time practical placement, if it's more adapted to one's health condition.

Another informant, Ellinor, who had acquired a brain injury several years ago, had tried a couple of professional studies without succeeding. She needed to have the workload divided over a longer period of time to prevent headache and fatigue but did not experience this to be a real option in her programme. Asked the question of what could have helped her, she spontaneously said: *If I miss something, it's actually a part-time study. Because then you won't feel so abnormal ...*

Students reported that working in the field full time left them with no other activities than working, eating and sleeping. They pushed themselves and were able to cope for the period set up, but at a cost. Several had to delay doing the assignments for the practice module, meaning they had to finish them when the next module of on-campus learning had started. Others who had days of absence due to illness had to make up those days by using their study days, weekends or time after the end of the placement period, here illustrated by Heidi with a hearing impairment:

To get my placement period approved, I had to catch up during the weekends. So now I have been working every single day for over a month. And even then I only just manage to keep up.

The students were in fact learning about their capacity 'the hard way'. They were walking a fine line, in danger of falling behind on the curriculum. Some of the students suffered illnesses after finishing their placement period. They related their ailments to the constant state of exhaustion, forcing them to discontinue the curriculum. These students, therefore, had to wait a year to pick up their studies at the stage in the curriculum where they had left off. One of the students who had such a leave continued studying part-time, which meant prolonging her education by one year, thus exceeding the 4-year limit for economic support she received from NAV.

Having a unique competency

The experience of growing up with a disability constituted a special and important body of expertise, which the students presented as an asset to their curriculum vitae. The knowledge they had gained by being users of the health and social service system provided an awareness of diversity to meet the different needs of the individuals they were going to serve, as here portrayed by Marianne:

Because I don't just see it as a disadvantage, it has also ... having reduced mobility has maybe let me experience how it feels to be different in society. Which is a neat experience to bring to the table if I am to work with people in similar situations, so ... kind of comes more naturally to understand people in similar situations. And I know a little about what kind of challenges they may face.

Another advantage many of the participants emphasised was their collaborating skills developed over the years as part of their disability experience. Karen, with visual impairment, explained:

I am very dependent on cooperating with others. Been doing that all my life, so cooperation is something I am really good at. And the same goes for communication. Me and my assistant for example ... We can't function together if we don't communicate.

Their backgrounds could also lower the threshold for the users to share their concerns. Karen continued:

It's maybe a little easier to open up to a teacher who's a bit different ... than a normal teacher ... [...] ... It's easier to raise the issue when you have something in common.

After graduating, Karen experienced that fellow student teachers contacted her to get her advice on how to accommodate pupils with disabilities. As disability issues had not been part of their curriculum, the disability awareness they had learnt by being in the same class as Karen turned out to be of great value.

Demonstrating employability

The students worked hard to make a good figure in order to be seen the 'right way' as a skilled and capable future professional. Establishing a good relationship with their placement supervisor and colleagues seemed essential. Some of them were offered a job whilst on placement, which confirmed their employability, like Vivian with significant ongoing illness: *I was offered a part time job [smiling] ... so they just looked at the effort I put in [not my impairment].*

However, due to lack of understanding and proper accommodation, some of the students were not able to demonstrate their ability to work in the way they would have liked to. Heidi was halfway through one of her placement periods when she was warned about possible failure because her supervisor and colleagues found her uncooperative. Her experience was that she could not follow up messages as she did not hear, and people in her work environment showed no awareness about her impairment. She felt she had to work extra hard to prove her employability:

I like to perform my job properly. I often do more than I should do, too, because I feel I have to compensate for my poor hearing.

Turid, with a visual impairment, highlighted the significance of sufficient resources to do the job properly, especially not being any burden at the placement site. She would have appreciated the possibility to require accommodations that gave her the opportunity to best market her employability. She requested a work assistant, a support available in ordinary working life, but not provided during placement.

Currently there's a focus on work assistance in ordinary work, but not in the field placements. And I'd like to see that, because they got no impression of how I could work optimally. I mean, I could be unfortunate and really become a nuisance for other co-workers, I could probably not do everything or be the resource that I could have been if I had a work assistant. And if I'd had that [work assistant] in my placement, they might have seen that «Goodness, that worked perfectly fine, that's great, maybe we should hire her afterwards».

Besides being able to show her best sides, testing out different kinds of support would also add important knowledge to Turid's professional confidence. By having had the chance to try out, she could provide employers with first-hand information sufficient to minimise any scepticism about hiring people with disabilities.

As many students with disabilities are not working part-time alongside their studying, placement also offered a good opportunity for the participants to get work references for later job applications. Most of them were aware that they had to sell themselves in a positive way to attract future employers. Karen revealed:

'You've got to be a bit smart too ... Because it adds a unique quality that no one else can offer. And then it's about selling it where you can.'

The sections above show the value of placement for students with disabilities to be able to demonstrate their working ability, both as an acknowledgement for themselves, but not least to be accepted as future practitioners by colleagues. Since there was a risk of not succeeding – either due to not being provided sufficient resources or due to supervisors and colleagues not seeing their capabilities – they worked extra hard to legitimise their place in their profession.

Planning the placement professionally

This theme displays how the experience of being included or not in the placement planning process had an impact on the students' opportunity to demonstrate proficiency. The students highlighted the value of a close collaboration between all parties, as well as the importance of an early dialogue.

Planning together

In order to make necessary arrangements for placement, the students had to reveal their impairment and to ask for support. As most of the students in this study lacked work experience and were unfamiliar with the demands of work, they found it difficult to define and express their needs, as told by Marianne.

I had meetings with the school in advance, about what kind of accommodations I required. But as I've never really tried a working situation before, I found it very difficult to articulate ... so I wasn't entirely sure at that point what I needed in order to take full advantage of my work capacity.

In this complex process of disclosing disability and requesting support, a trusting relationship with lecturers or placement coordinators who saw them and took the time to listen to the students' stories was found to be essential. Some of the students highlighted the importance of staff initiating a formal meeting to collaboratively discuss and plan the coming fieldwork period. The student could express his/her needs and concerns, and the placement coordinator, academic staff or disability counsellor could help the student to reflect on questions that the students did not think of themselves. Being included in the placement planning minimised the emotional pressure and made the situation more predictable. However, while some felt included in the planning process, others experienced the collaborative work with staff at the HE institution to be missing, which left them alone with many worries and lack of control.

Turid's placement coordinator had difficulties finding a placement that was willing to receive a student with a visual impairment:

I would have liked it to happen a bit differently. Because they [the educational institution] ... worked diligently and steadily to find me a spot for practical placement. But it was them working on it. And I was not really able to present myself, and talk about what I can do, and what I think will be more challenging.

Turid's experience highlights how important it is that students provide the placement supervisors with sufficient first-hand information about their disabilities and possible solutions to accommodate for their needs for extra support. Several of the informants emphasised the importance of the practice educators being positive to welcoming a student with a disability. Previous experience with disabled students appeared to have an impact on the attitude displayed in the work environment, as Marianne explained:

At that placement site they've had students before ... with reduced mobility and some of the colleagues have minor impairments, so they are used to accommodating so that people can make full use of their working capacity. It has a lot to do with the attitude of the employees ... that you see opportunities instead of limitations. That's important.

Participating in practical placement is about learning new skills and developing competencies. As the students wanted to make the most out of it, they had considerations regarding which type of placement would provide them with the best learning opportunities. Some of the students experienced no real choice of type of placement; there was no effort to match their interests, and the placement catered neither to curricular needs nor to academic preferences.

Timing the planning

Finding appropriate placement may take quite a lot of time. Timely arrangement of assistive technical aids caused challenges for some. Emma, having a visual impairment, experienced that her braille display could not communicate with the journal system used at her workplace. Several unsuccessful trials, as well as ongoing negotiations regarding costs, left her with much frustration and a feeling of not being able to achieve her tasks in an effective manner.

If they [the staff] start early ... and check out that everything ... or at least make an effort not to do it all at the last minute. Because that may avert quite a few complicated ... or impractical situations ... which basically means I can't perform my professional tasks in what's **really** a satisfying manner, because I can't access that computer system.

Another student applied for a placement project abroad, but had to withdraw as the time frame ahead of placement did not allow working out the necessary solutions for accommodation.

Learning from experience

Several of the students being 'the first of their kind' at their academic institutions, were clearly aware of their role as pioneers. By testing out and showing possibilities, they were models for the general society, to other students, the academic institutions, as well as to future employers. As the informants discovered that knowledge about disabled students in professional programmes was limited, they regarded their experiences as being significant for both educational institutions and future students with disabilities. Emma recommended that the university makes sure to evaluate and systematise student feedback, to be better prepared the next time a student with similar challenges applied for a course:

What's most important is to give information about what needs to be done, what has been working and what has not been working ... afterwards, I mean. So you can learn from it, for future reference. It's very important to keep track of what you've done, as this is such a new situation for all parties.

Discussion

The study reveals how placement turned out to be a valuable arena for students with disabilities to showcase their employability. However, due to structural barriers and insufficient planning, the risk of not being able to cope with the demands of placement and to demonstrate proficiency was imminent.

The students were aware of possessing a unique competence that could be an advantage and add an extra dimension to the diversity in the workforce (Cunnah 2015; Griffiths 2012; Murphy 2011). Their choice of a professional education was a strategic one because of the clear link to work. Unlike most of their peers, many of these students did not have the capacity to work while they were studying, this opportunity to learn about their capabilities was valuable, and thus contributed positively to students' perception of their own employability and self-worth, mirroring findings from Cunnah (2015) and Hill and Roger (2016).

Georgiou, Espahbodi, and De Souza (2012) found that the learning experiences, networking opportunities and demands of practice might be similar for students in general, but concluded that the work placement experiences might have a greater impact on how students with disabilities cope and achieve. Despite the valuable experiences they had while on placement, most of the informants in this study had been on the verge of giving up their chosen education due to various forms of hardship. In addition to dealing with the demands of their practice, dealing with their impairment or health challenges took much time and energy. As the number of days they could be absent from placement was very limited, they had to fill in the gap for sick leaves by using holidays, weekends or days for self-study. Several struggled to cope with the progression of their studies as they were constantly lagging behind their peers with their assignments. The design of full-time studies, with modules on- and off-campus that build on each other, made it difficult to do the practice part-time over an extended period. In spite of the staff's perceived willingness to accommodate, the solutions provided did not appear attractive if the students were going to follow the same progression as the others in their class. Even though part-time work is the most common accommodation for people with disabilities in actual work situations, in many professional studies, part-time work hardly exists as a real opportunity. All of the students had reduced capacity because of their impairment, and most of them planned for reduced work time after graduation. Nevertheless, in order to qualify for the desired profession, they had to 'survive' a three- or four-year full-time study. It seems like the students' strong will and motivation, in addition to social capital like family, friends and some staff, kept them going. One may wonder whether the opportunity to thrive in a professional career is limited to only the most resourceful students with disabilities.

A professional curriculum is designed to comply with international quality standards demanded by professional regulatory bodies. This might limit the local educational institution's opportunity to provide flexible solutions to individual students' needs (Jung et al. 2008). Some of the informants experienced that the claim of completing a certain number of hours at placement was given more priority than the professional content and learning outcomes. This raises the question of whether professional educators could focus more on what essential competencies should be achieved, rather than, for instance, the ability to endure a full-time placement. The notion of attendance during placement being part of the qualification requirements is problematic as it goes to a core of what it means to be competent and also places the students with disabilities under great strain and risk of failing (Macleod and Cebula 2009). Previous research displays a tension among educators concerning how to navigate reasonable accommodation without compromising a certain standard of proficiency (Carey 2012; Nolan et al. 2014). The standard is reported to be vague (Caspersen and Kårstein 2013; Sowbel 2011) and leaves individual educators with unspoken assumptions about the competence and range of roles a candidate must be able to fulfil (Bulk et al. 2017). Tynan (2006) uses the term *omnicompetence* to describe the generalist certification of a standard professional, who is expected to be capable across the full range of professional functions. This study reveals that students with disabilities had to accept the practice arena that was available, not the one that could have provided them with the best learning opportunities, or the one that met the learning outcomes specified for the placement.

Stakeholders within the professions might be unaware of how this lack of clarity regarding competencies in professional education and inflexible programmes might marginalise students with disabilities (Easterbrook et al. 2018). There are clearly some barriers in navigating the discourses of diversity and standardisation within the education in the professions. Schrewe and Frost argue that the professions must pay attention to what qualities make a certain profession and consider *'to what extent can individual variation around these qualities be supported before the very essence of the profession begins to dissipate?'* (Schrewe and Frost 2012, 1479). A discussion on syllabus and competences in professional education is of concern not just for the local educational institutions but should be raised to the national and international professional bodies as well.

For the students to make the most out of the practical placement, they highlighted the importance of being timely included in the planning process with staff and placement supervisors. However, most of them experienced no formal strategy from the HE institution to discuss upcoming placements; some were not included at all in the planning process. One could expect professional educations within health and human service professions to pay extra attention to user-oriented approaches. Yet, this seemed not to be the case for all informants, despite the educational institution's awareness of their disabilities.

Professional educators, on the other hand, have reported that lack of disclosure restrains their ability to plan and to provide support for students in practical placement (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013; Nolan et al. 2014; Rankin et al. 2010; Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011). This study demonstrates informants' insecurities about what support to request, as they did not know how their disability possibly would affect the work they were going to do. To lower the threshold for students to come forward with their concerns, the students recommended that the educational institutions be more proactive in initiating formal meetings. A stronger focus on learning opportunities and challenges for *all* students might facilitate dialogue and reflection among all parties, thus avoiding stigmatising the student with disabilities (Grimes et al. 2017).

One finding concerns the importance of communication between the parties involved in the practice education, as none have the whole picture. Several studies in the field of professional education argue for strengthening the collaborating links among stakeholders (Botham and Nicholson 2014; Rankin et al. 2010; Tee et al. 2010). A European study discovered that 15% of students have disabilities that significantly influence their study participation (Hauschildt, Vögtle, and Gwosć 2018). Knowing that students with disabilities require additional follow-up from

supervisors (Tee et al. 2010), we recommend that HE institutions assign sufficient resources for the time this requires.

Study strengths and limitations

Due to the limited number of informants and the importance of context, the findings from this qualitative study of course cannot be generalised. However, we believe the findings may have relevance beyond the professional context and contribute to existing knowledge about individuals with disabilities in HE in general. The voices of the informants in this article are representative of all the participants. The common experiences among the students, despite having different impairments as well as being from different professional programmes, provide rigour to the findings and are also supported by previous research.

The experiences of students who have left their professional courses because of barriers, or students who have chosen not to disclose their disability, are not in our sample. Neither are the voices of administrative and accommodation counselling staff, which could have contributed with important perspectives due to their key positions in collaborating with the students, lecturers and placement supervisors. The perspectives of academic staff and placement supervisors are investigated in another article (Langørgen, Kermit and Magnus 2020)

Conclusion

This study contributes to an existing knowledge gap about enablers and barriers to professional higher education for students with disabilities. Practical placement can be instrumental in enabling students with disabilities to showcase employability and increase awareness of the issues they may need to consider in relation to future employment. The structure of professional programmes, with short courses that build on each other and limited part-time options, may act as barriers for students with disabilities. We call for a greater intuitiveness on the part of professional educators, with a focus on the extra effort it costs students with disabilities to participate. To provide students with disabilities an equal educational opportunity, the professional HE and regulatory bodies must review their programme design and learning outcomes, as well as improve the collaboration between the stakeholders involved in the placement education.

Notes

1. All translations in the reference list from Norwegian are the authors' responsibility.
2. The informants in this study were recruited from the following professional programmes: nursing, disability nursing, social work, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, pharmacy, school teacher, driving instructor (driving instructors are subjected to a two-year course in Norwegian HE).

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