

Gatekeeping in professional higher education in Norway: Ambivalence among academic staff and placement supervisors towards disabled students

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Despite legislative regulations, many disabled students face barriers to their participation in higher education. In professional education, the requirements for placement practice add to the barriers for both students who need to disclose their impairments and request special arrangements, and staff who need to make the arrangements to accommodate to the students' special needs. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of academic staff and placement supervisors on supporting disabled students in professional programmes within health care, social work and teaching. Data was generated from focus group discussions with 13 lecturers who worked with students on campus, and 8 professionals who supervised students during practice placement. The results indicate an ambivalence among the staff and supervisors regarding working with disabled students. This ambivalence seems to be triggered by conflicting roles and values, unclear outcome measures to evaluate the students, a lack of knowledge of how to accommodate, time constraints, insufficient institutional support, as well as a lack of openness regarding disabled students in professional courses. The results call for an increased awareness of how complex processes in the structural and cultural environments affect students' disclosure of disability and the collaboration between the stakeholders.

Keywords: Higher education, professional programmes, disabled students, disclosure, accommodation

Introduction

Global antidiscrimination and inclusion policies, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD (United Nations 2006), have contributed to an increased number of disabled people attending Higher Education (HE). However, the number remains disproportionately low in Norwegian HE (Legard 2009). A growing body of international research suggests that educational success in including the diversity of learners depends more on individual persons' willingness to support students' needs, rather than on a proactive approach

taken by the HE institutions (Berggren et al. 2016; Biewer et al. 2015; Díez, López, and Molina 2015; Fuller et al. 2009; Gabel and Miscovic 2014; Hughes, Corcoran, and Slee 2016; Lang 2015; Redpath et al. 2012; Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011; Vlachou and Papanou 2015).

Necessary adaptations of learning environments usually depend on disabled students' own requests. Many students, however, are reluctant to make such requests. This might be due to students not identifying with the disability category or regarding their disability as a private matter, being unaware of support or finding the access process complex, or fearing stigmatization or unequal treatment (Fossey et al. 2017; Grimes et al. 2018; Hughes, Corcoran, and Slee 2016). For students in professional education, the risk of not filling suitability criteria may affect how they negotiate support in the university context and at placement (Clouder et al. 2016; Cunnah 2015; Easterbrook et al. 2015; Ridell and Weedon 2014; Stanley et al. 2011). Nolan and colleagues (2014) found that fewer than 30 % of the students disclosed their impairment prior to placement. Lack of disclosure may lead to unfair judgements about the students' abilities (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013) and negatively affect planning and collaboration to support the students (Kendall 2017; Nolan et al. 2014; Rankin et al. 2010; Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011). Students report lack of awareness and limited knowledge about disability among placement supervisors and academic staff (Hill and Roger 2016).

Research displays a tension between the professional educator's responsibility to facilitate students' learning and attend to students' rights, and the responsibility to evaluate students' professional standards (Bulk et al. 2017; Carey 2012; Evans 2014; Nolan et al. 2014; Rankin et al. 2010). Suitability criteria are reported to be unclear, leaving educators with inconsistent assessment guidance (Sowbel 2012). Clouder et al. (2016) found a discourse of ambivalence surrounding students with mental health issues in health and social care educations.

Academic staff and placement supervisors show concerns about their knowledge and time available for supporting the students (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013; Domakin 2015; Kendall 2017; Nolan et al. 2014; Tee et al. 2010). Lacking institutional support, individual educators are left to navigate their own path through legislation and conflicting professional demands (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya 2013; Carey 2012; Domakin 2015). Faculty members' personal beliefs regarding the success of disabled students in HE seem to be predicted by their knowledge of legal responsibilities and the support they get from their institutions (Zhang et al. 2010).

The situation of disabled students in Norwegian HE is sparsely investigated in general, and even less so in the context of professional education. Three qualitative studies (Magnus¹ 2009; Brandt 2011; Langørgen and Magnus 2018) revealed that students, in response to a lack of knowledge and insufficient communication among staff at all levels, spent a considerable amount of additional time organizing support and serving as their own coordinators.

Our research investigates the professional education of disabled students from the perspective of academic staff and placement supervisors, intending to answer the question: How do academic staff and placement supervisors experience working with disabled students?

The Context

Our understanding of disability leans on the Nordic Relational Model of Disability, understanding disability as a discrepancy between individuals' capabilities and the demands of the environment (Tøssebro 2004). Disability is thus not solely a product of impairment, but a contingent phenomenon occurring at a certain time and place often due to socially created barriers.

Disabled students in higher education

Even though principles of universal design are highlighted as the national strategy of making society accessible to all people, the disability policies in Norway are still characterized by redistribution and care provision to people with eligible grounds (Tøssebro 2010). For example, students must be able to refer to a diagnosis or an impairment to come under protection of the antidiscrimination law; the approach to minimize the functional gap is on strengthening the individual by compensatory strategies. HE institutions in Norway are legally obliged to provide a reasonable extent of necessary accommodations for individual students' needs (Universitets-og høyskoleloven 2005, Diskriminerings-og tilgjengelighetsloven 2008).

Norwegian educational institutions are required to provide a counsellor service to handle issues of accommodation. While some arrangements are delivered by this service, following up in class and at placement are the individual lecturer's and supervisor's responsibility. However, most lecturers lack special pedagogical competence to support disabled students, and there are no requirements for field supervisors to have any formal pedagogical education.

Professional education

For a range of professions such as nurses, social workers and physiotherapists, higher education typically lasts for 3 years (40 weeks per year). Students qualify through theoretical courses and practice placement; thus the curriculum involves frequent changes of learning environment. The number and length of placements vary between the programmes; most of them have 2-3 periods lasting 4-12 weeks.

Lecturers teach the theoretical courses, where students' competency is assessed through written or oral exams. A volunteer professional acts as student's supervisor during practice

placement; this role comes in addition to normal professional duties. While the formal responsibility to evaluate the students' knowledge, skills and general competence during placement is on the educational institutions, this evaluation also depends on the recommendation of the placement supervisors, who base their fail or pass on vague evaluation criteria (Caspersen and Kårstein 2013).

In addition to ensuring that students achieve learning outcomes, as well as keeping the absence to a maximum of 20 %, HE institutions are obliged to undertake ongoing suitability assessment of the students (Regulation Relating to Suitability Assessment in Higher Education, 2006). The members of the professions are self-regulating, i.e. they set the standards for competence in their own professions, including qualifications for graduates.

Methods

Study Design

This study was part of a larger project about disabled students attending HE education in health care, social work and teaching. The study is based on focus group discussions (FGDs) with lecturers and placement supervisors.

Data Generation

Five semi-structured FGDs were conducted in 2015: three with lecturers (N=13) who had been working with disabled students on campus and two with placement supervisors (N=8). The FGDs lasted two hours and were moderated by the first author together with a co-moderator taking notes. At the start of the FGDs, we introduced four topics for discussion: experiences from collaborating with disabled students and other stakeholders, accommodating the students,

evaluating the students and, finally, disabled students as future professionals. A thematic interview guide was used to assure the topics were covered. The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to further analysis.

Participants

Participants in the FGDs were recruited from bachelor programmes within health care, social work and teaching at two university colleges. Lecturers and placement supervisors who had been collaborating with disabled students received a written invitation either directly from the first author, or forwarded through door openers to the field (accommodation service counsellors, placement coordinators, lecturers). A purposive sample of 21 participants from 10 professional programmes² consented to attend (one male and 12 females). To facilitate the FGDs, we invited people with common roles into the same groups – lecturers and placement supervisors respectively (Barbour 2007). The groups, however, comprised participants from different professions to broaden the experiences and cover diversity within the groups. All participants were experienced lecturers and supervisors, whose age ranged from 35 to 65. Ethical and confidential steps regarding informed consent, and protection of personal information, were approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Data Analysis

The qualitative thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) guided the analytic process. The first author did most of the step-by-step work; emerging codes, categories and themes were discussed by all three authors. In order to become familiar with the data, transcripts were read and re-read several times, alongside notetaking. The coding started inductively, coding interesting features across the whole data set. These codes were then collated into potential

themes.

The FGD participants talked about the **conflicting roles** of being a student's teacher/supervisor and sometimes therapist, as well as evaluator. Another theme was the **professional competency standard**: What could be reasonable accommodation and how should students' performance be evaluated without compromising the standard? Other main themes were students' lack of **disclosure of impairment**, and the participants' **insufficient resources**, as well as **missing collaboration links**. Some recurring narratives were about **the good students** they had followed up who had made it through the professional education despite their impairment. Asking the iterative question 'What is going on?' we sensed a **reluctance** among the participants to involve with disabled students. In the next stage, we used a more deductive approach, trying to find patterns in the data that could describe and explain this reluctance.

Findings

The 'reluctance' among the focus group participants to get involved with the disabled students seemed to be triggered by conditions related to cultural and structural environments. We present the findings under the following themes: *The Professional Competency Standard*, *Conflicting roles and values*, *Lacking knowledge*, *Time constraint*, *Alone and responsible*, and *The elephant in the room* – a silencing of certain issues related to disabled students.

The Professional Competency Standard

Qualification requirements were a recurrent theme in the FGDs. This included evaluation of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, attitudes and behaviour which should ensure the competence of the students to deliver qualified and safe services. Some participants referred to the requirements as explicit and to be obeyed, while others mentioned that the requirements were

vague and open for interpretation.

We don't have a method of measurement, so to speak. A student can receive an excellent evaluation one period, and then get a very bad... and maybe not pass the next. So it is a problem indeed. Within a placement period they may establish some relation to the supervisor, or the supervisor has a completely different scale of evaluation than the one they meet the next period. (lecturer)

How much accommodation the students could be offered without jeopardizing the more or less defined standard of competence, was left to the individual lecturer or placement supervisor to interpret. If a student required a particular placement facility, or could only work part-time, this could clash with what some regarded as their responsibility, as commented by one lecturer: *'We educate stud... candidates who should be able to perform any type of work. They're not certified for one specific position, or to be able to work only 50 %'*. If, for example, a teacher student with a hearing impairment who had only practiced in schools for deaf people, was still granted a diploma qualifying for teaching in elementary school, they could not guarantee the student's competence to fill the skills as required by the profession. Even though it was implicit that the student would seek employment within the limits of his or her competence, some of the focus group participants felt obligated to guarantee students' competence to future employers. When telling about past students who received approval, despite the impairment creating challenges, participants repeatedly emphasized how clever these students had been. Our overall impression was that the participants possessed an image of what a professional should 'look like', which conflicted with students in e.g. wheelchairs, with learning impairments, or mental health conditions. So as not to create any doubt that this person could still be certified, the students therefore had to demonstrate their capability more than other students.

They must be resourceful students in other fields. That they compensate in other areas. Such as the one who studied with us, she was very clever, reading all the books almost as soon as she got them. So, she did very well. (lecturer)

The clever student was termed as *'theoretically strong', 'brilliant', 'talented', 'accurate', 'positive', 'eager', 'motivated', 'interested'*. Such students demonstrated self-awareness of their impairment, and would avoid tasks out of reach. This was the prototype of the student they could safely allow into their profession.

Conflicting roles and values

Another repeated theme in the FGDs was the dilemma between being a tutor versus therapist. These roles could be hard to separate, especially in situations where the mental status of the student was crucial in achieving a pedagogic development. Most of the focus group participants were aware that they had neither the expertise nor the desire to have a therapeutic relationship with students, however some expressed an expectation (from both themselves and others) to apply their professional skills to help individual students.

The participants talked about the importance of diversity in the work force, and that many people with impairments could contribute in various professions. On one hand, they expressed a wish to help disabled students through education towards future working life. On the other hand, they felt a responsibility to assess the student's ability to perform the given profession in a safe and trustworthy manner for users, employers and colleagues.

Some are struggling a lot, and then they're going to be working with children, for instance. Then what is my responsibility? Of course I'm thinking: 'I will give her the opportunity. And I do need to see some development during the placement period.' But I've only got six weeks! And I don't know what will happen after that. You feel a lot of responsibility in relation to their ability to handle that job. You don't know in three years – if it works, right?

And then you're supposed to be the one with the responsibility to fail her; not to pass the practical, or to be a licenced preschool teacher. It's a huge burden sometimes. (supervisor)

Several placement supervisors told about sleepless nights and much worry over students there was 'something wrong with', who they struggled to understand and support. Some experienced this task as being so demanding that they considered giving up their position as supervisors.

In their interaction with the students, the lecturers and supervisors juggled between ideological values, such as inclusion and diversity, and juridical regulations to maintain students' rights and avoid discrimination. This, while simultaneously keeping the professional standards as entrusted by society. They expressed difficulty determining which demands should have priority and which group they were most responsible to: the students and their future careers, the users and their need for competent and reliable services, or colleagues' and employers' need for co-workers who could be relied on to maintain the responsibilities of the profession.

Lacking knowledge

Both participant groups expressed a lack of knowledge on how to relate to students with various impairments. Mental health was particularly mentioned as an area where the participants felt inadequate. One lecturer told how she instinctively responded when a student with mental health difficulties contacted her about accommodation: *'Oh, well then I need to read up on this! What does that actually mean?'* Some lecturers with a background from mental health care or being experienced counsellors, found themselves being summoned by colleagues or directing students from colleagues who felt insecure about dealing with students with mental health conditions.

One lecturer talked about the difficult role as 'messenger between experts', where she had to book classrooms with special technical facilities or convey technological requirements, even when this was unfamiliar to her. A placement supervisor revealed she had resorted to

Google to learn how to guide a blind student. These experiences indicate that professionals from health care and social services feel they are expected to be familiar with accommodating people with various impairments. It seems the expectation comes from within as much as from the surrounding environment, and may express an unconscious fear of exposing their own lack of knowledge.

In all FGDs, narratives showed the participants' initial impression of some disabled students as incompatible with professional behaviours, while the students' knowledge on how to accommodate their individual impairment had changed these perceptions. One lecturer illustrated her contact with a student with cerebral palsy, whose fingers 'went all in separate directions': '*At first it was like "How are we supposed to do this?" ... It may seem difficult for us, right [to handle tubes, instruments etc].*' However, the student conquered the opposition by contributing knowledge and finding solutions on her own.

So she was very clever at finding solutions for herself. But she was so talented, which made it so easy to work with her. It was like 'Fine, I need this and that', you know. There was no whining with her.

Time constraint

Some of the lecturers recalled having to alter their classes due to special requirements of a single student, or finding the teaching itself prolonged by the necessity of a sign language interpreter.

When a student requested an accommodated placement, the course coordinator had to spend additional time seeking out an adequate location to suit the students' needs, including extra meetings, phone calls and/or visits on-site. Accommodating disabled students required much time that was not incorporated in the lecturers' schedules. Even though they, in theory, had the option of time off in lieu, they claimed this was difficult in practice. Notably, one lecturer

questioned the effort and time invested to accommodate students she perceived as not being able to achieve the grade and get a job. This was at the expense of other students:

There are meetings, and following-up of the student. Contacting the placement for instance, or facilitating, delayed hand-ins, repeated messages, and all this that fills your head and steals your energy. I feel I should rather spend more time teaching those who stand a chance, in a way. Even though ... I want to help... I want to support. So, it's more about where to draw the line. Between when I should help out, and when I should say 'enough is enough'.

Questioning students' suitability to practice heightened participants' ambivalent attitudes against getting involved. Both lecturers and supervisors described supervisors' hesitation to accept students with known impairments for placement, because it would lead to more work and extended responsibility.

Both groups also described challenges in adequately evaluating and documenting cases of doubt, within the limited timeframe of a placement. The temporal structure of the professional curriculums, with one to three months in placement, replaced by short courses on campus, also meant that nobody would really follow up on the students over time.

Alone and responsible

The FGDs reflected frustration over a lack of resources and an unclear system for sharing responsibility. One major motivational factor behind participating in the FGDs was the opportunity to speak up with the hope that it could improve the current state:

I think it must be highlighted, in order to be valued, the work that is a part of the education for these professionals. To have a more thorough supervision. And this requires resources.
(lecturer)

According to another lecturer, it seemed as though the teacher who happened to be course

coordinator when a disabled student showed up, ended up responsible for 'the case'.

Is it so that we're left with it... we happened to be the person the student first contacted? Because there's no system in place to pick up on such cases. I too feel it ends up pretty random. The person who receives the message then has to do the lifting. I feel there's no...organ you can report to, which informs about certain resources. Maybe it's something with the structure, the organisation of this, which leaves us left with it...the individual teacher...[...]... It's kind of the person who happened to tutor the last period. Because if we drop the ball, there's no one who'll pick it up again.

This statement shows the relatively ad-hoc structure for following up on students with disabilities. Several lecturers acknowledged leaving the responsibility to evaluate the students' practice performance to the placement supervisors. The supervisors, on their side, expressed being isolated from the educational institution, several of them missing both the information and support to handle difficult dilemmas regarding individual students. One of the educational programmes (nursing) had established a closer cooperation between the academic and practice fields, where they emphasized having one lecturer following the student, including visiting the placements in every period and therefore participating in the evaluation of the students. These factors appeared to have had a positive effect on all parties when individual issues arose.

The elephant in the room

As the focus group participants understood current regulations, information about individual students' disabilities could not be given to a third party without the explicit consent of the student. This also applied to other employees within the same institution, as well as between the academic and placement institutions. The lecturers justified their limited transfer of information to the placement supervisors, referring to the requirements of confidentiality and arguing that the students should be allowed to start the placement period with a 'clean sheet'; difficulties in one

placement were not necessarily relevant in the next. Although students were recommended to report their accommodational requirements, many failed to do so, leaving the next supervisor or lecturer unaware of any challenges revealed in previous practice placements. The supervisors expressed their frustration over receiving many students in need of extra support, without being given the opportunity to prepare in advance. The lack of a collaborating link with the educational institutions as well as vague evaluation criteria, affected the final and difficult evaluation of the student, which often were based on relational and emotional factors and left much unsaid. Some lecturers had received phone calls from supervisors after an ended placement period, with apparent concerns regarding the qualifications and professional conduct of the student, but also with the expressed desire that the student not be informed they had been in touch.

When the supervisor calls me after an ended placement period and shouts at me, because I failed to provide information they could have used to accommodate. The arrangements would have looked different then. They didn't discover the necessity until late in the period, because it takes a while, and then the time's up. And then we have our discussions internally too: How much should we ask about? And to establish a decent system where any concerns, regardless of which, we should ask this and that question, or talk to the supervisors. How can we do that? I feel this is missing, you know: what can we say, what can't we say. In my opinion this is really very difficult. (lecturer)

The duty of confidentiality was an obstacle for a functional cooperation. Both lecturers and supervisors expected students to be open about their problems, but reciprocal feedback – between lecturers and supervisors and students – was apparently difficult. It seems as they were loath to ask directly, fearing the unnecessary labelling of a student.

Our data reveal that disabled students was a sensitive topic to discuss openly at the educational institutions. Confidentiality aside, it appears that academic staff felt bound by an

idea of political correctness and that questioning a student's suitability for working life was not acceptable.

My opinion... it's such political correctness: We must include everyone, and everyone must get a job. We're all reluctant to question it. So you sort of... you see the student through. You go one year after the next, until you finally have to throw in the towel. (lecturer)

Several lecturers remarked that participating in the focus groups, protected by a shared moral of confidentiality, was a good opportunity to share concerns and experiences regarding disabled students which they deemed politically incorrect. In one of the groups, the participants showed concerns that many students experience social expectation to complete a professional education, without actually being suited to do so. They talked about the costs in time and money they and society in general spent to accommodate 'dead-end' students, either because the student failed the required qualifications, or because they ended up unemployed after finishing their degree. Not to mention the personal and financial defeat it was for the student who came short. In their opinion, some students should definitely be talked out of their professional education, but this was not an acceptable topic:

I don't think it's much talked about. When is enough enough, so to speak. When are we pressuring these students into even more stress? ... [...]... We're creating failures if we keep on trying and trying... [...]... I'm very politically incorrect when I say this, and it's terrifying, I'll be struck down for saying it, but I mean, I believe we have to say it. (lecturer)

Internal policing to behave politically correctly and not discriminate against anyone, together with ideological principles of inclusion and diversity in addition to client confidentiality, hovered as a judicial and normative cloud over the topic. Some focus group participants saw themselves at the mercy of recent years' development of an increasing number of students with 'additional

requirements' in addition to stronger students' rights.

Discussion

We interpret the 'reluctance' among the lecturer and placement supervisors to get involved with the disabled students to be more an ambivalence than active opposition, following a continuum from openness via uncertainty, scepticism, evasion, distancing, to resignation and reluctance. This ambivalence seemed to be triggered by situations where the professional educators had to handle complex juridical, ideological, professional, and pedagogical issues in a context of missing collaborating links and time constraint. The findings will be discussed using an eclectic theoretical approach to the cultural and structural environments of the participants.

We lean on Scott's (2008; 2014) description of institutions as comprising three pillars: The *regulative*, which includes legislation and rules, the *normative* pillar we understand as the ideologies of health and human service professions, the *cultural-cognitive* pillar refers to how the members of the HE community act based upon their interpretation of the context.

In balancing competing demands of inclusive higher education and maintaining the professional standard, the lecturer and placement supervisors must defend their gatekeeping role to students and colleagues in academia and professional practice. The regulative directives put a strong obligation on the professional educators and limit their space of discretionary judgements. Thus, the regulative pillar, such as attending to the students' rights, seemed to have precedence over the set of rules and values at the normative pillar. These regulations could be interpreted as something that interferes with the self-regulatory status of the professionals and threatens their ability to 'keep order in the lines', and created ambivalent attitudes towards students with disabilities.

The lecturers and placement supervisors reported being left alone with the responsibility to use their discretionary judgement to handle competing demands and dilemmas under the pressure of time. Inspired by Dworkin's metaphor of the doughnut (Dworkin 1978 in Molander and Grimen 2010), we try to illustrate the discretionary space of liberty to judge, decide and act. In this context – in circumstances of many uncertainties – the professional educators dealt with a doughnut with a huge hole surrounded by a narrow 'belt of restrictions' (Molander and Grimen 2010). To keep the doughnut from crumbling, the lecturer and placement supervisors become 'rigid'. To justify their judgements when assessing students' capability, the gatekeepers depended on the students convincing them by being outstanding. The excellent disabled student who managed on his own was easy to let pass.

To understand the mechanism in the context of professional higher education we further look to Deal (2007), who utilizes a term developed from Critical Race Theory, which he calls *aversive disablism*. In spite of improvements in policies and systems to facilitate inclusion and prevent discrimination against disabled people, more subtle forms of discriminatory behaviour still exist. A person might have learnt acceptable non-prejudicial behaviour – or as we interpret: to act politically correctly – while still having negative feelings and beliefs regarding disabled people. Deal (2007) proposes that a conflict exists between these negative feelings and the personal self-image of being fair and non-prejudiced. This conflict may cause the person to avoid contact with the disabled person and thus contribute to explaining the reluctance to becoming involved with the students with disabilities. According to Deal, human actors may not be anti-disabled, but rather pro-non-disabled. This form of racism is often unintentional and the actors do not recognize themselves as prejudiced (ibid). Söder (1990) explains avoidance responses in

terms of *ambivalence* rather than prejudice: ‘*People are ambivalent because of conflicting values, that are both deeply felt and not easily handled in concrete situations*’ (Söder 1990: 236).

The silencing of the topic and insufficient information flow were explained by confidentiality. While students’ right to privacy is important to maintain, one can also interpret professional secrecy as an ‘excuse’ for inaction. Students’ non-disclosure of disability was one of the most frequently discussed themes in the focus groups, and is an on-going issue in the current research literature, as presented in the introduction. Students’ awareness of the importance of openness and willingness to discuss barriers they faced in their learning, was regarded as key to collaboration. If the student was open, it meant he or she showed insight into how their impairment could affect professional performance and not be a risk for the users in their practice. In this way they showed responsibility and honesty, which seemed to be the most valued personal attribute to professional work. If the students came to the lecturer or supervisor to discuss personal support, this triggered instincts of caring in the educators. This led to a collaborative relationship where they found solutions to almost everything. However, the student had to come to them first, which presumed the student had developed disability awareness to the extent that they were ready to request support. There was little reflection among the study participants about the complexity of disability and on how they possibly could facilitate disclosure. Students sensing an ambivalence and risk of being filtered out of their education might indirectly inhibit students from disclosing. Coping without accommodations could potentially have a negative effect on the outcome of their professional education.

Disadvantages experienced by disabled students in professional HE may thus not be a direct result of impairment, but rather a result of attitudinal barriers. Students’ disclosure of impairment could lead to more work, and could explain why professional educators were not

more proactive in their contact with the students. The extra work required became a personal responsibility added to an already full time table. It appears that HE institutions have not taken into account the new generation of diverse learners, and educational institutions continue to be permeated by an elitist expectation of the hard working independent student.

The professional educators emphasized the importance of diversity that could contribute important knowledge into the health and human service professions. However, they did not reflect on how this diversity could be addressed positively in their own pedagogical approaches, providing good examples of inclusive practices to future professionals. If we presume HE to be pervaded by a discourse that keeps a lid on complicated dilemmas around disability, we maintain that the educators are not actually acting the ideology they are teaching.

Recommendations for change

This study displayed an ambivalence among lecturer and placement supervisors towards working with the professional education of disabled students. The participants reported handling competing demands and dilemmas under circumstances of time pressure and discretionary judgements. Thus, the strong and clever disabled student that managed on his own was easy to work with. We seek more awareness on how the structural and cultural environments affect the interaction between the stakeholders. In line with Scott (2008; 2014) and the body of current research (Berggren et al. 2016; Bulk et al. 2017; Carey 2012; Díez, López, and Molina 2015; Evans 2014; Fuller et al. 2009; Sowbel 2012) HE staff stands out as main actors in forming equal opportunities for disabled people. The self-governing status of the professional bodies implies the authority to influence the cultural-cognitive, normative and regulatory pillars of an institution. As professionals occupy a variety of roles as institutional agents at different levels, commitments to change the situation need to come from within.

So what can be done to improve the situation? First and foremost, it is important to recognize and challenge ‘the elephant in the room’, in other words the tendency to silence the subject of disabled students in professional HE. Gabel and Miskovic (2014) call attention to such discourses of disability in their institutional analysis of higher education. Instead of making disability the ‘problem’ and thus maintaining stigma and inhibiting the students from requesting support, we propose to focus on learning opportunities and challenges in relation to professional practice for all students. Supporting previous research, the study displays an urgent need for routines that facilitate a closer cooperation and continuity between the parties, i.e. academic staff, placement supervisors and students (Carey 2012; Domakin 2015; Hill and Roger 2016; Rankin et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013; Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011).

Limitations and future research

Due to the limited number of participants and contextual background, this study cannot be generalized. In spite of this, we believe the findings will be of interest in similar educational environments. The strength of the study lies in the common topics shared by participants across professional programmes.

Future research should investigate the experiences of academic staff and placement supervisors from a broader population. The voice of administrative and accommodation counselling staff is not in this sample. As these staff hold key positions to collaboration among the lecturers, placement supervisors and the disabled students, their perspectives should be of particular importance. The focus of future studies should also be on the perspectives of disabled students.

Notes

1. All translations in the reference list [from Norwegian] are the authors' responsibility
2. The focus group participants were from the following professions: Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Nursing, Teacher Education, Sign Language Interpreter, Kindergarten Teacher, Radiation Therapy, Bioengineering, Social Work and Disability Nursing

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