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Disabled student ambassadors promote inclusion in Norwegian higher education: building competencies and strategies for the future

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ABSTRACT

Disabled students encounter complex barriers to participation and inclusion throughout higher education and face challenges transitioning into employment. This study has engaged eight disabled university students in participatory action research. The students, in collaboration with university researchers and staff, have developed and implemented actions at a Norwegian university. The study aimed to explore the students' experiences of being ambassadors to promote inclusion. Data were generated through participatory observation with field notes during actions, sound recordings of reflection meetings, and a focus group discussion. A reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the construction of four themes: confronting and overcoming the challenges, adding value and being a resource, building strategies to control stigma, and translating knowledge and actions towards inclusion. The results demonstrate the individual and societal value of including student voices to change for more inclusive practices, where disabled students are empowered and build competencies and strategies for the future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Disabled students; higher education; co-creation; participatory action research; student voice; student ambassador

Points of interest

- This study shows the importance of involving disabled students in decisions that concern them and calls for change in how disability is viewed and addressed in higher education.

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- Through collaboration with researchers and staff at the university, students felt empowered in planning and carrying out actions that could change learning environments for the better.
- The students' involvement in promoting change at the university gave them opportunities to display their knowledge while also developing skills they could use in the future.
- While met with recognition and respect from staff and other students at the university for their role in advocating for change, the students were still worried about future employers finding out about their impairment.
- There has been little work on the involvement of disabled students in the promotion of inclusion alongside their studies. Future research should investigate the positive and negative effects of this involvement.

Introduction

Equal opportunities to participate in education and working life is both a human right as well as a cornerstone to individual and societal welfare (European Commission 2010; J. Sachs et al. 2021). Despite political visions of equal opportunities and barrier-free societies (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006; Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act 2017; European Commission 2010; NOU 2020: 3), students with impairments are less likely to graduate higher education compared to peers without impairments (Kim and Lee 2016; Pingry O'Neill, Markward, and French 2012), and face barriers when transitioning to employment (WHO 2011; Nolan and Gleeson 2017; Goodall et al. 2022). Higher education is an important gateway to employment, and for disabled people it influences positively work participation more significantly than for non-disabled people (Molden, Wendelborg, and Tøssebro 2009).

State legislation in Norway promotes equality across all sectors of society by, for instance, prohibiting discrimination based on a person's impairment (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act 2017). This legislation is reflected in the University and University Colleges Act (2005, §4-3) which states the universities' legal responsibilities to ensure equal learning and educational opportunities for all. Still, students with impairments encounter numerous challenges throughout higher education. Many work beyond their capacities and miss out on social activities (D. Sachs and Schreuer 2011). Experiences of not fitting in are common (Hauschildt et al. 2021). Stigma, a term describing the various hidden and visible attributes culturally and socially perceived to be discrediting characteristics of individuals or a social group (Goffman 1963), presents a major barrier for students, and, consequently, challenges their

identities through harmful stereotyping and misconceptions (Lightner et al. 2012; Kraus 2008; Sapir and Banai 2023). Furthermore, students often face complex barriers related to disclosing the impairment, which, in turn, is a prerequisite for receiving support and accommodations (Marshak et al. 2010). If prepared to disclose the impairment, finding information about campus services and requesting accommodations are still challenging and time-consuming processes (Magnus 2009; Langørgen and Magnus 2018). With a documented need, students can receive 'reasonable accommodations' (University and University Colleges Act 2005, §4-3). However, accommodations are mainly targeted towards academic participation, through providing compensating measures and aids, such as extended time on exams or using a computer (NTNU 2019). As such, higher education institutions are criticized for conceptualizing disability as a medical, individual concern, placing the burdens and responsibilities on the students (Nieminen 2022; Liasidou 2014). This medical understanding of disability contrasts to the social and relational conceptualizations, where disability is understood as a dimension of human difference, instead of a 'defect', and where disability occurs due to the lack of inclusive environments (Shakespeare 2017; Tøssebro 2013). Experiences during higher education shape students' self-concepts, beliefs and identities (Kraus 2008), yet little is done to create arenas that promote social participation, belonging and positive identity development for disabled students (Gorard et al. 2006; Shpigelman et al. 2022).

Co-creation and co-production are terms describing the active involvement of communities and citizens as stakeholders in decisions affecting their lives, and in the design and delivery of solutions and services they themselves use (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018). To reach political goals of inclusion, universities must develop strategies and support on campus that build on students' experiences and capacities, and that actively involve students in developing inclusive practices (Nolan and Gleeson 2017; Kraus 2008; Bjørnerås et al. 2022). Including students in decisions and democratic processes can have multiple benefits. As well as empowering students, such inclusion has the potential to generate physical, attitudinal, and social changes and provide socially and locally relevant knowledge (Agarwal et al. 2015; Bessaha et al. 2020; Luthuli and Wood 2022; Bjørnerås et al. 2023).

This study has co-creatively engaged disabled university students as ambassadors. The term 'ambassador' was adopted to place recognition on how the students' experiences and competencies can represent, communicate, and promote disabled students' voices and interests. The students further developed and shaped the role and responsibilities of being an ambassador through the process of this study. It's not uncommon for universities to engage student ambassadors, usually with the aims of utilizing the competence of experienced students to strengthen participation for under-represented individuals (Ylonen 2012; Green 2018). However, a recent review

(Bjørnerås et al. 2022) found that disabled students are seldom given such roles. Thus, this study aims to explore the process through which the student ambassadors, in collaboration with researchers and university staff, implemented actions to promote inclusion. The study has focused on the students' perspectives throughout this process, and addresses the following research question:

What are the disabled students' experiences and reflections with developing and implementing actions to promote inclusive universities?

Research process

Study design and context

The study was conducted and analyzed through a qualitative interpretive framework. The authors adopted a social constructivist viewpoint, which seeks to understand lived experiences forming through interactions in the complex interplay of culture and history (Creswell 2013). Participatory Action Research (PAR) guided a co-creation process involving disabled students and researchers at a Norwegian university. PAR builds on a collaborative approach to research and takes action to promote social change (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007). PAR also seeks to enlighten people about their own situation through learning processes, and emancipates individuals from mechanisms limiting their lives (McTaggart 1991). Through a previous study, a series of co-creation workshops were held during spring semester 2021 (Bjørnerås et al. 2023). Here, ten students representing different ages, genders, faculties, and impairments participated together with two academic researchers. Based on students' experiences and the current evidence-base, barriers for participation and inclusion in higher education were identified. The co-creation workshops resulted in an action plan to be implemented in the fall semester 2021. The present study explores the co-creation process, focusing on the student ambassadors' experiences when implementing the planned actions.

Recruitment

The initial recruitment process took place December 2020 – January 2021. During this time, an e-mail providing details of the ambassador intervention was sent to approximately half of all students at the university, and flyers were placed on billboards around campuses. Students were invited to contact the first author if interested in participating. To be eligible, students had to be enrolled in a bachelor or master programmes and identify as disabled. Recruitment for this study mainly occurred within the existing group of student ambassadors who had been involved in the co-creation workshops in the prior study. Information letters were developed in collaboration with the

student ambassadors, and seven out of the ten students continued their participation in this study. An additional student was recruited through contacting students who had expressed interest in participating in the previous study.

Participants

Eight students participated where four identified as females, three as males and one as non-binary. They were aged between 22 and 35 (mean 28.8) and the majority were Scandinavian. They represented different bachelor ($n=5$) and masters ($n=3$) programmes across five faculties at the university. The participants, presented here with pseudonyms, self-reported the following impairments, as well as mild mental health issues which recurred among several of them: Physical/mobility related impairment ('Philip' and 'Ailo'), dyslexia ('Nora'), ADHD ('Alex' and 'Ailo'), Asperger syndrome ('Markus'), hearing related difficulties ('Hannah'), vision impairment ('Ailo') and myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome ('Ingrid' and 'Emma').

Ethical considerations

Participation was based on voluntary informed consent (Health Research Act 2008). All participants were provided with an information letter which informed them of the methods for collecting data, confidentiality, and withdrawal procedures. Carrying out actions publicly can somewhat mean relinquishing anonymity. The information letter stated what actions were planned, giving students an idea of what exposure could mean and they were encouraged to reflect on their standpoint regarding exposure. In participatory processes, ethical vigilance by researchers is crucial (Lid and Rugseth 2019), and are considered in the discussion section. The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Data Services (reference number 450502).

Actions implemented

The action plan co-created by ambassadors and researchers in the previous study was presented to the ambassadors who participated in the current study. The process started with student ambassadors prioritizing actions according to what was important for them, feasibility, and their own capacities and dedication to follow through. The actions implemented through this study are presented below. One researcher (the first author) facilitated the implementation of the actions throughout the process.

- *Arenas for socializing and building a fellowship*
Students were granted access to a location on campus by the department communication staff, which the ambassadors named The

Embassy. A digital instant messaging platform (Slack software) was established and administrated by ambassador Emma throughout the process. The arenas were also used to plan upcoming actions and reflect on actions taken.

- *A checklist for inclusive teaching*

Ambassadors agreed on six requirements for inclusive teaching that were displayed on paper and the university website, where the communication staff collaborated with the ambassadors on the design, production, and website programming. A Braille reading student designed text in Braille format on the paper version, where a QR code directed to the website. Ambassadors placed the checklist in auditoriums, lecture rooms and offices around campuses.
- *Initiate change and collaboration with relevant stakeholders*

Three meetings with the staff from the university disability services (DS) were arranged, where Alex, Philip, Ailo, Emma, Markus and Hannah participated. One of these meetings resulted in information about accommodations being published on every course website. Three meetings with communication staff were arranged, where Ailo, Emma and Markus participated to identify barriers in digital communication and to design the checklist for inclusive teaching. Two dialogue conferences were arranged by the researchers, where representatives from the DS, The Norwegian Labor and Welfare Organization, and the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills participated. Emma, Ingrid and Alex participated with presentations and in discussions with the stakeholders.
- *Awareness-raising video*

The video was an action that was planned, but not fulfilled, and aimed to provide staff and students with disability-knowledge. In the video, student ambassadors wanted to visualize how different disabilities could come to existence in a typical learning environment and was intended to be available through the university website. Insights to why the video was not implemented can be found under the sub-theme 'Taking control of information' in the result section.
- *Promoting student voices in research processes*

The researchers in this study continuously invited the ambassadors to take part in aspects of the research process. Ambassadors attended multiple meetings with the researchers, shaped the processes of research, co-authored research articles and conference abstracts, and attended as co-presenters at conferences.
- *Sharing knowledge and experiences with students*

The collaboration with the DS led to ambassadors joining DS staff at an introduction lecture about accommodations for students starting university. Philip, Nora, Hannah, and Alex volunteered to plan a

contribution to the lecture, and Alex and Hannah volunteered to be the presenters. Philip and Ailo were, on two different occasions invited by course lecturers to promote disability awareness, where they presented their knowledge and experiences. These presentations created an interest from the audience which resulted in Ailo and Alex arranging an 'open house' at The Embassy where students could come and ask questions or just talk to a student ambassador.

- *Sharing knowledge and experiences with university staff*
Ambassadors were invited by the university's Head of Department to raise disability-awareness at a department meeting. Emma, Hannah and Alex participated where they presented the checklist for inclusive teaching to 66 university staff.
- *A student organization*
At the end of the intervention period, the ambassadors' efforts resulted in them establishing a student organization to continue their work.

Data generation

Data were generated from June 2021 to February 2022 and collected through sound recordings of reflection meetings ($n=3$), supplemented with field notes. The first author observed ambassadors during actions, and small-scale interviews and reflection sessions were conducted before and after actions using field notes. A focus group discussion ($n=1$) was held at the end of the study period to summarize experiences and reflections generated by the actions. The first and last author and two ambassadors were involved in developing a semi structured interview-guide and as moderators in the focus group discussion. One student, prevented from taking part in the focus group, submitted a reflection note based on the interview guide that was included in the analysis. Sound recordings of the reflection meetings and the focus group were transcribed by the first author and resulted in 122 typed pages.

Data analysis

The transcribed material and field notes were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes embracing and utilizing the researchers' subjectivity and the ability to critically reflect upon how it influences the research process (Braun and Clarke 2022). Starting out inductively, the transcribed material and field notes were read repeatedly by ABB, EL and SH while marking sections of the text and taking notes. Moving through both inductive and deductive phases, the authors proposed initial codes through several meetings. Codes were organized into potential themes where all authors, including two student ambassadors, took part in meetings to discuss the development of themes. Themes were checked according to the data, where themes were

developed or rejected and consequently named and defined. The themes constructed are the products of the authors' epistemological viewpoints, experiences, and interpretations. As such, in acknowledging a social constructivist viewpoint and a relational understanding of disability (Tøssebro 2004), the researchers were sensitive to the social and environmental mechanisms when interpreting the data. All authors worked on the final construction of themes through the last stage, and continuously reviewed the manuscript drafts. All student ambassadors were invited to provide feedback on the final draft.

Results

The analysis aimed to explore disabled students' experiences and reflections when developing and implementing actions to promote inclusion in higher education. The analysis constructed understandings grouped into four themes: confronting and overcoming the challenges, adding value and being a resource, building strategies to control stigma, and translating knowledge and actions towards inclusion.

Confronting and overcoming the challenges

The first theme presents how the ambassadors approached the challenges of taking on additional tasks as ambassadors while managing university life. Participation can add stress to an already challenging situation, but also presents opportunities for mastering and developing competencies.

Taking the step outside the comfort zone

Many of the actions planned by the ambassadors entailed holding presentations for students and staff to share knowledge and promote awareness of the misconceptions and harmful stereotypes surrounding disability. However, the enthusiasm for planning actions was higher compared to participating in their implementation, and most ambassadors were reluctant to take part in presentations. The implementation of actions relied on the ambassador's participation and, as such, they continuously took the step outside their comfort zone. To support and encourage the ambassadors, time was spent on preparations. For instance, Alex and Hannah were given a tour of the facilities where the DS introductory lecture was to be held and practiced their presentation, reflecting, and discussing the content. They also discussed their fears and planned strategies to overcome them. For Alex, it was the fear of forgetting what to say, and they planned how they could cover for each other if one person froze. With the support from a fellow ambassador, Alex faced his fears:

When I stood there the first time, I just went blank. What was I saying again? It felt awful! It was very scary to stand there, almost alone in front of 20 people. But

thanks to Hannah, it turned out very well. We took turns. So, it was a very good experience doing it like that.

Ambassadors considered that they mastered the challenges and as they received positive feedback from the students and staff attending, they ended up holding more presentations than initially planned. Committed to speak to one group of students, Hannah and Alex decided to join the DS with another student group later that day based on the positive experience of contributing important information, as Alex indicated:

Well, I guess I liked it, talking about it. I don't know. It was kind of fun, and it felt nice, maybe making a difference.'

Ambassadors were engaged in situations throughout the process where they were challenged to take steps outside their comfort zone. Facing one's fears can come with a cost, but also offers rewards of experiencing a meaningfulness of their actions and the generation of self-confidence.

Finding the time and capacity

Volunteering to plan and carry out actions depended not only on the ambassadors' wishes and dedication, but also their resources to do so. Challenges finding time to participate in extracurricular activities were present for all ambassadors. For some, their capacity was a barrier to participating, thus resulting in unequal ambassador representation across actions. The flexible participation was valued by the ambassadors, and even enabled participation as Ingrid illustrated:

I was allowed to participate according to my capacity, and it's been essential for me to be able to participate at all. This semester I had to prioritize differently to manage full time study progression, and I have felt maybe not contributing enough. That's unfortunately the case with limited capacities.

It was often the case that ambassadors were prevented from taking part due to conflicting study or personal obligations. Although ambassadors were encouraged to desist from tasks exceeding their capacities, withdrawing also potentially presented an extra burden for the remaining ambassadors left to carry out the actions. Ambassadors asserted that the safe and understanding group environment facilitated an acceptance for not being able to participate, however not without feelings of guilt as Emma described:

My disability is that I'm tired a lot, so I can't always participate. I have had, not a bad conscience, but some feelings of guilt. But at the same time, it's such a safe environment because everyone knows what it's like to have challenges. So, it's ok to say; 'No, this time I can't participate.' You don't feel any pressure, and that's very positive.

Ambassadors demonstrated self-determination when considering their capacities and choosing whether to participate or not. Taking part also

presented opportunities for experiencing support and understanding. Processing experiences, sharing concerns or strategies, and advocating for a common cause can create energy as well. Markus reflected on his experience of taking part, and how it had provided him with a safe space where he could lower his shoulders:

I think it's nice. Relaxing. You lower your shoulders, almost like doing yoga in a way. You're so tense all the time, and you come here, and it's just..., but I notice the same when I speak to others on the spectrum, that you just let go. And it's wonderful!

The theme has presented some challenges, but also the rewards of engaging disabled students as ambassadors. In crossing lines of discomfort and perhaps experiencing a tug of war between their dedication and capacities, the ambassadors have gone to great lengths experiencing the significance of their actions and believing in their cause. The foundation of a safe environment and the strong fellowship between ambassadors generated an individual and collective force, essential for moving forward. Although some actions pushed ambassadors outside their comfort zone, participation also provided opportunities for peer support and developing self-competencies.

Adding value and being a resource

This theme presents how student ambassadors gained confidence in their abilities, viewing their experiences with disability as a resource and their competencies as valuable and welcomed.

Possessing valuable experiences

With first-hand experiences of mechanisms that hinder or facilitate inclusion, ambassadors acquired an understanding of the measures required for promoting change. Being ambassadors offered the students opportunities to utilize their previous experiences together with new understandings and reflections. Ambassadors were alerted to how their experiences can be used to make a difference for other students, and that they can be someone for other students to relate to. Hannah reflected on their contribution to the DS introduction lecture:

I think it was a smart move to include us [in the presentation]. As new students it can be a bit scary, or maybe they question if it's necessary to request accommodations. Then, it's helpful that both Alex and I said that it takes time to get accommodations. So, it's better to just do it, then consider if you need it later. Instead of waiting, like I did. That's not so smart.

Ambassadors felt their experiences and voices added value to the university environment. They noticed the power they hold to be role models for

other students and demonstrated a commitment to enlighten others. Philip, for instance, received positive feedback from peers after his presentation. As such, he experienced both a societal and personal value of being an ambassador:

It feels good, and it is a lot of fun. It's nice that it can be of significance for others.

Through interacting with students and staff, ambassadors experienced an attentiveness for their stories and the resources they hold. Being a co-presenter at the research conference, Ingrid noticed the effect that her personal story had on the audience. Ambassadors received attention and invitations, and noticed a positive energy when they shared their stories with others. They experienced that their actions led to changes and gained a belief in their abilities to make a difference. Alex reflected on their significance:

I believe the small steps we have taken now have made a big difference.

Ambassadors asserted that their presence and voices met a need in higher education, and that their background became an expertise valued by students and staff when working towards inclusion.

Turning from a limitation to an advantage

The actions and reflections created changes towards ambassadors' own conception of disability. With previous experiences of a universal understanding of disability as something negative and being dependent on others for help, ambassadors articulated notions of possessing an advantage. Identifying as a resource, Emma illuminated this:

You feel that you are a resource just because you have those experiences, and therefore you can help others.

Seeing the relevance of their knowledge, ambassadors associated their experiences with disability as a positive and a strength. Ambassadors highlighted how such experiences provide a person with empathy, inclusive attitudes, and knowledge of coping strategies, as well as skills for handling hardship and adapting to new situations – an extra resourcefulness that should be appreciated by an employer. The students asserted that, through being ambassadors, they no longer identified as someone devalued, trying to disguise their impairments, but as someone being acknowledged, respected, and needed. Ingrid illustrated this, with optimism for conceptual changes in the future:

To display something I normally hide, and that it is considered a resource, has been very valuable. Imagine if a future employer could view my experience with illness as a resource on the same level as other experiences.

Previous experiences of being devalued contrasted with the ambassadors' experiences of being competent consultants and guides towards inclusion. Challenging current structures and understandings of disability, ambassadors experienced that they possessed key knowledge, which was valuable for students, staff and for their future employment. Actions provided them with skills in presenting, advocating, and building competencies for the future.

Building strategies to control stigma

Although the ambassador role presented opportunities for acceptance and recognition, their status was context-sensitive, where the students still feared misconceptions, and practiced different strategies to control stigma. This theme presents the way ambassadors fought dilemmas of exposure and disclosure and where concerns of strengthening stereotypes and negative consequences of disclosure prevented them from implementing actions in specific arenas but prepared them with strategies for the future.

Deciding on disclosure statement

While carrying out actions, ambassadors with invisible impairments met dilemmas of how to present themselves, – whether they should present their impairments or not. Some wanted to avoid limiting themselves to a potential label, whereas others felt their diagnosis was as a significant part of their identity. Some openly shared specifics related to their impairment, which was perceived to create greater learning opportunities in situations with peers during which others could potentially relate. Others maintained a focus on the barriers and how they had worked around them, as an opportunity to actively role-model a disapproval of stigmatizing labels. As indicated by Markus, the ambassador role presented them with opportunities to distance themselves from both stigmatization from others and self-stigmatization:

But that's the point of what we are doing. To display the person instead of the impairment. (...) not just erasing yourself as a person. It becomes a negative cycle. You talk about it all the time. You think about it all the time. It creates this effect back on yourself. So, I chose not to [disclose].

Being ambassadors, students were in positions of exposure, and dilemmas of what, and how much, to expose were recurring in actions and discussions. On the one hand, students were concerned that disclosing could expose them to stigmatization and misconceptions. On the other hand, however, not disclosing could be equally stigmatizing. Markus asked Hannah and Alex why they chose to disclose at the presentation with the DS, whereby Hannah replied:

...if you say it [the impairment], people will stop wondering about what's going on. I feel the same, as Alex says, it's hidden. What's the problem? What's the diagnosis?

Then people don't have to wonder. (...) I often think, that if I hide it or neglect to tell someone, I'll incur more stigmatization than if I'm open about it.

Their choice to disclose was also reflected upon the day of Hannah and Alex's presentation with the DS. While waiting to present to the second student group they modified their content to include disclosure strategies as well. Different strategies and opinions were put forward by the ambassadors, but they all agreed that it was important to have control over where and when to disclose, and to whom.

Taking control of information

Ambassadors with invisible disabilities had previously found themselves in situations where other students had shared information about them, for instance their diagnosis, and, as such, deprived them of the choice of disclosing. Not knowing what had been said about them, they felt forced to disclose so that they could control the narrative of their impairment. Losing information control and the potential negative consequences of disclosing was a recurring issue when planning the video. One concern was related to the fear of drawing on, and hence reinforcing, stereotypes. The most prominent, however, was the fear of losing control over the choice of disclosing, as Hannah stated:

You want to be the ruler of that yourself. If you are going to be part of a video, you'll lose some of the control over whether you want to disclose. That's something to be aware of.

Ambassadors feared that disclosing in the video could cause challenges when transitioning into employment, as problematized by Alex:

We discussed consequences of potentially disclosing diagnosis in a future employment situation for instance, and if this video can generate a problem. (...) I fear that it can spin out of control. In five years, someone has discovered the video, and you haven't mentioned that you have ADHD. And then, suddenly, it's a problem.

Fear of information reaching future employers prevented ambassadors from going forward with the video, although ideas for safeguarding their anonymity were discussed such as hiring actors or censoring personal identifiable information. Nevertheless, the video generated reflections about future job interview strategies. The power to control disclosure and information about oneself was crucial. With information control, ambassadors could settle employers' potential disability concerns. Information control for Hannah meant turning the disability into something positive:

I have thought it through if I am to disclose. (...) I have all of it, everything prepared if there are questions. I have it all worked out! And it will be turned into a positive thing. Because I am going to get that job!

The theme has presented experiences with exposure and how it presented dilemmas that stopped ambassadors from disclosing in some situations. Disclosure was a double-edged sword for the ambassadors. Information control can be obtained by both disclosing and not disclosing, but misconceptions and stigmatizing behavior can occur regardless. Ambassadors were familiar with situations where they were deprived of control of information. It was important for ambassadors to control information and disclosure, as well as to prepare strategies for the future.

Translating knowledge and actions towards inclusion

This theme presents the way student ambassadors were able to identify missing information and how to reach students and staff through stories and translations. Through interaction and collaboration, ambassadors conveyed knowledge to promote inclusion.

Identifying where information is lost

Through the actions taken, ambassadors discovered disability information and support within the university. They became aware of the resources they had previously thought were lacking and were surprised that they didn't learn about them when they started studying. Ambassadors identified how information was not conveyed in ways that reach students. One major issue was how disability information was not presented on the main page of the university website, but conveyed through separate disability pages, not reaching the general student. Markus for instance, reflected on the information barriers:

They [the university] have all this information, but it's just totally unstructured, is hidden and you spend way too much time searching for it. Many just give up and never receive the help they need.

Additionally, communication channels and learning platforms lacked inclusive designs. The ambassadors were involved in designing information text about accommodations that were published on all course websites. The ambassadors considered this to be a significant change for enabling easier access to accommodations and signaling the diversity of students at the university. The importance of information reaching students is illustrated by Emma's reaction when seeing the information published for the first time:

You know what? If I have seen this when I first started studying! I might have been finished now!

The ambassadors identified gaps where information and knowledge do not reach the people in need of it. Seeing how student voices are not included in design processes, ambassadors asserted themselves as being an

important piece in bridging the gaps. Emma highlighted how students with disabilities' perspectives were not included:

But the thing is, they [university staff] haven't talked to..., many of the initiatives that exist are not developed together with us. In collaboration with..., they don't include what it means to be a student, in a way. And specifically, a student with an impairment.

One example Emma described was how she had trouble filling out forms related to receiving accommodations. With adapted study progression, it can be hard to identify which study year she is in. Experiencing that she does not fit in the forms generated just another gap in the system. Digitalization and system optimization thus could provide gaps in information and barriers to support. Ambassadors commented that the digital system is impersonal, prevents interaction and generate specific barriers when it presupposes that students fit in or identify with predefined categories. For disabled students who navigate multiple demands and are unfamiliar with the possible accommodations, opportunities for personal follow-ups and talking to an advisor can be important, as Hannah described:

I miss the old system that's not [the digital system], because it's so impersonal, in a way. Some things are ok to be processed through a computer, but I think it was better the time I was appointed a student advisor.

The ambassadors shared a frustration with struggling to navigate the information on digital communication platforms. Ailo relied upon google-searching to find accommodations and support and were dependent on reading tools to be able to navigate the university websites. Information not being in a logical place, represented by illogical symbols and too many clicks and reroutes, excluded Ailo from reaching the information. Ambassadors reacted to the unworkable structure on the course websites, where Ailo struggled to find the DS contact information:

The thing is, I can just find one thing at the time, on that page [the course site]. I google-search things, and if that thing is not there [on the front page] I will not find it. It is often the course sites that I find, and if it's not in that box, guess who wouldn't be able to contact them.

Gaps in the way knowledge is conveyed prevented disabled students from reaching the information and support that they needed. They were left with a feeling of being excluded from information and alienated by the system.

Bridging the gaps

Ambassadors discovered how they were able to reach students and staff through sharing their knowledge and personal experiences. Ambassadors were able to raise awareness of barriers to university staff, and the

collaboration led to understandings from both sides. Joining the DS introduction lecture, the DS staff questioned why they had not included the students' perspectives before and praised the ambassadors for establishing the support and accommodations and including personal aspects to reach the audience. In meetings with communication staff, ambassadors provided feedback on the design of the university website, where they identified the fonts, colour contrasts, symbols for quick navigation and the general composition of text as elements reducing their ability to access information. The communication staff had never thought about someone relying on the symbols to navigate university websites, and, in turn, made the ambassadors aware of the restrictions they encountered. In website design, for instance, the communication staff were obliged to follow the university's house style when selecting fonts and colours for websites. Still, ambassadors felt that the personal experience they presented generated change and that they were an important voice towards translating knowledge between students and staff.

After the checklist for inclusive teaching was completed, it was presented by the ambassadors to staff within different arenas, and was perceived as more efficiently communicated when accompanied with a person sharing their experience, as Hannah stated:

One thing is to present the checklist, but another thing is to see why it's important, and who it is actually benefitting. It adds something personal, in a way.

Ambassadors collaborated with staff and experienced that their presence promoted awareness of student diversity. The ambassadors with less visible impairments considered their involvement to generate attitudinal changes, as Emma illustrated:

The three of us presenting, we don't have a physical, visible disability. So, I think it's important to show people that many things can be an impairment, even if you don't see it. (...) and those you might see in the auditorium, might need accommodations.

The ambassador's stories were met with attentiveness, not only from staff, but also from peers. Bringing personal experiences enabled peer-to-peer learning and gave students someone to relate to. Reflecting on their presentation, Alex felt their contribution of personal stories added greater impact to the DS introduction lecture, and noticed how students, according to Alex, 'woke up' listening to fellow students instead of an authority:

In my experience, us presenting to fellow students awakened them. It was like, it didn't come from an authority, but from fellow students. Somethings were a repetition of what the accommodation service said, just in our own way.

Ambassadors interacted with each other, students, researchers, as well as administrative and academic staff at the university. They took on a

responsibility and were met with attentiveness and responsiveness from the students and staff. The peer-to-peer interactions opened for relating, knowledge sharing, and could lead to lowering the threshold for students to request accommodations. The power hierarchy often found between staff and students was counterbalanced as ambassadors, through their presence and actions, developed new paths in translating knowledge, becoming mediators between students and staff.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore disabled students' experiences and reflections when developing and implementing actions to promote inclusion in higher education. Through being engaged in this study, the students participated in meaningful activities in an arena where they could display their competencies, indicating empowering outcomes and opportunities to build competencies and strategies relevant for the future.

Opportunities for disabled students to display their competencies and to be empowered seem to contrast with the academic and social structures many of them meet through higher education. The medical understanding of disability is a dominating structure, where students are approached as 'different' and a 'problem to be fixed' (Nieminen 2022, 3) and left responsible for their own inclusion (Langørgen and Magnus 2018; Magnus 2009). Although universities are obliged to promote equal learning opportunities for all students through universal designed solutions and individual accommodations (University and University Colleges Act 2005, §4-3), there seem to be obstacles from turning policies into inclusive practices. Results from this study indicate a need for universities to involve students in decisions and democratic processes that concern them. Such strategies are suggested as important steps towards inclusive practices and social justice (Kraus 2008; Liasidou 2014).

Engaging disabled university students in co-creation processes have the potential to change the understandings of people involved and be transformative (Bjørnerås et al. 2023). Needham and Carr (2009) use the term 'transformative' as the most effective level of co-production of services where power is relocated, and the delivery is user-led. The co-creation process in this study has transformed structures of practice and power, created new relationships and ways to collaborate, and has facilitated situations where concepts of disability were re-thought. It has influenced the higher education community as well as awakened and empowered the students involved. Paulo Freire's term 'conscientization' describes these awakening and empowering processes occurring in people collaborating, and through which, a greater humanity can be obtained (Freire 2005). Hooks (2003), in line with

Freire, draws attention to the oppressing structures of education where building relationships and promoting dialogue are crucial for just communities and successful pedagogy. The students in this study were placed together to co-create. Ambassadors pushed limits and went through with more actions than planned. Their powers grew in line with the increasing sense of fellowship, commitment and power being shared. They discovered their rights, and a responsibility to influence processes and developing solutions towards inclusive educations. Within Marxist theory, such awareness can relate to groups developing a 'class consciousness' and, furthermore, a mobilization through collective action (Fantasia 1995). Co-creating thus meant that the actions were rooted in the ambassadors' ideas which raised ownership and awakened a collective responsibility and a strong sense of solidarity, being the force that drove them.

The empowerment the ambassadors felt, however, did not simplify the process of disclosing the impairment, where they continuously attempted to control information about them. Goffman (1963, 115) refers to the term 'information control' as one of several strategies stigmatized individuals employes to manage stigma to protect their social identity. To hide symbols of stigma, using 'disidentifiers', can also be practiced, where people experiencing stigma, give others the impression that they do not belong to the stigmatized group (Goffman 1963, 115). The need for self-censorship among disabled students is a known issue within universities (Baron, Phillips, and Stalker 1996; Lightner et al. 2012). Sapir and Banai (2023) found that students with invisible impairments, who face the dilemmas of self-censorship, actively create an identity as abled, striving to keep up with the ableist culture of higher education. Universal design is a documented strategy for promoting learning and inclusion for most students (Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin 2015), as well as inclusive learning environments that will lower the requirements for students to disclose the impairment. Although universal design is an important key to inclusive educations and an institutional and societal responsibility (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act 2017; University and University Colleges Act 2005, §4-3), the progress towards integrating such principles moves slowly and are more-often practiced by individual forces, in a bottom-up approach (Knarlag and Olaussen 2016). As such, the structures triggering the urge to practice self-censorship are present throughout higher education, and for the students in this study, when reflecting on their future transition into employment. The student ambassadors' reluctance to disclose an impairment for future employers is not unfounded, as strategies of downplaying the impairment are considered favorable (Østerud 2022). However, the student ambassadors were placed in positions where they had to take a stance in matters of disclosure, and were able to collectively reflect upon, discuss, test and develop their disclosure strategies. Implications from this

study draw on the value of providing such opportunities for students in guided and safe environments.

The barriers disabled students face through higher education, remain present when transitioning to employment (Goodall et al. 2022), where the culture of ableism continues (Østerud 2023). Studying beyond capacities can lead to missing out on opportunities available for other students (D. Sachs and Schreuer 2011). In Norway, students with impairments can receive extra funding through their studies, but this prohibits them from taking paid jobs during their education (Forskrift om utdanningsstøtte 2020). Limited chances of acquiring relevant work-related experiences during education presents another barrier to reach employment, and in turn, financial security. In this study, ambassadors had opportunities to network, build relationships with staff and other students, learn about campus services, advocate, and develop self-competencies and research experience. A systematic review, looking for factors associated with retention and success for disabled students, identified self-competencies (self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-determination) and support from university staff, family or peers as the most significant (Moriña and Biagiotti 2022). Universities providing opportunities for students to build self-competencies and skills, social connections and to gain confidence in their abilities is suggested as key to promote participation for this student group (Moriña and Biagiotti 2022; Petcu, Van Horn, and Shogren 2017). Given the marginalization and discrimination that disabled students face through education and on their paths to employment, the implications provided by this study – along with others - highlight the value of providing opportunities to build experiences as stepping-stones into the world of work (Goodall et al. 2022; Nolan and Gleeson 2017).

Research often points to the lack of knowledge and awareness surrounding disability among university staff. However, interactions with disabled students can result in heightened awareness, inclusivity, and diversity-minded attitudes (Svendby 2020; Cameron and Nunkoosing 2012). Through the current study, ambassadors asserted that they had influenced staffs' knowledge and attitudes. Increased faculty awareness and knowledge of characteristics and needs of disabled students is considered a key strategy in promoting inclusive higher educations (Getzel 2008). Having disabled people present, visible as fellow human beings, can promote awareness and create learning opportunities as demonstrated in this study. Consequently, this presence can in turn generate healthier work and educational environments where more diversity-aware attitudes and language are practiced.

Ambassadors identified where disability information and knowledge is lost. This is in line with Gabel et al. (2016) who found that disabled students considered disability information on university websites is hidden and unavailable. Educational institutions provide information under disability-categories, and as such, students not identifying within the disability terms can consider

the information as not relevant for them (Lister, Coughlan, and Owen 2020). The majority of students do not disclose disability when starting university (Newman and Madaus 2015), and there is estimated to be a hidden population of students non-disclosing (Grimes et al. 2017). The language and terms that are used play an important role in if and how students receive or act upon disability information. This study demonstrates the importance of including user voices to influence the design and the delivery of solutions, as well as the potential of showcasing experienced role models.

Numerous practical and ethical challenges with engaging this student group in interventions requiring their active participation have arisen throughout this study. Having limited capacities can, for some, make it problematic to become involved in further time-consuming activities. Ambassador interventions can therefore present just another burden for students. This study has, however, demonstrated that incorporating flexible strategies for participation (e.g. digital platforms for communicating) can facilitate participation, also when students' capacities are limited. However, the intervention depended strongly on a facilitator to prepare and arrange for implementing the actions. High levels of user involvement in all processes of practice and research are idealized, and are often demanded for services and research to be considered user-led and inclusive (Martin 2010; Needham and Carr 2009; ICPHR 2013). This study needed to carefully consider the 'idealistic approach' versus shielding the students from unnecessary, burdensome work, without depriving participants with the opportunity to take on and master challenges. Future interventions should consider offering credits for ambassadorial work, reducing the additional demands placed on the students as well as recognizing their contributions.

The implications of this study point clearly towards rethinking ways for universities to be inclusive, where collaborative efforts and showcasing disabled students' voices and competencies are practiced. There is a need to reevaluate approaches and dispose of the excluding mechanisms in higher education institutions (Sapir and Banai 2023). Universities are in unique positions to promote a paradigm shift where students' voices are valued and showcased, influencing the wider society (Leake and Stodden 2014). The findings in this study calls for utilizing disabled student as ambassadors to mobilize a collective action against the oppressing and marginalizing structures within higher education; an action that is crucial to the promotion of social justice and change.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the empowering potential of engaging disabled students as ambassadors. They participated in the creation of more assessed and democratic universities, and these processes and decisions affected their lives and identities and ensured access to their fundamental rights. The results indicate specific, individual benefits for the student ambassadors that

concern building competencies and strategies relevant for the future. Through this study, arenas and roles for active and equal partnerships were created. Barriers have been broken in relation to how they viewed themselves within the context of their environment, where experiences of hardship have been converted into a resource. The study provides rationale for continuing to include disabled students' voices to benefit higher education environments on an individual, social, and organizational level. Universities need to rethink the level of democracy when developing inclusive practices and include the people it concerns in collaborative, emancipating ways. Creating arenas for disabled students' active participation is a crucial link in a symbiosis for participation and inclusion to commence, ensuring the just, inclusive, and sustainable university. In other words, a university that truly embraces the call of disability activists: 'Nothing about us, without us!'

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