



A multi-stakeholder perspective on inclusion in higher education: Ruling on fragile ground

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Inclusive education
Disability
University
Workshop
Co-learning

ABSTRACT

In higher education, there is a lack of consistent provision for the needs of students with disabilities. This study explores the decision-making processes that lead professionals to either take or avoid inclusive actions, such as implementing universal design, granting accommodations, or making academic adjustments. Six workshops were organized and attended by students with disabilities, lecturers, support personnel, and other relevant stakeholders. The stakeholders suggested the topics and invitees for the workshops, shared their views, and learned from each other. The audio recordings from the workshops were analyzed using various techniques from constructivist grounded theory. The results showed that professionals often lack the necessary knowledge to include students with disabilities in higher education. Furthermore, there are barriers to collaboration and obtaining information, which hinder attempts to bridge the gaps. Unclear responsibilities and ignorance provide a fragile ground for decision-making and an opportunity for opting out of inclusive acts.

1. Introduction

On average, 15 % of European students report having a disability that limits their studies in some way (Hauschildt et al., 2021). Failing to provide necessary accommodations can have a devastating impact on their academic success (Kim & Lee, 2016; Madriaga et al., 2011; Reyes et al., 2022) and even lead to dropouts (Quinn, 2013). It is crucial to facilitate access to student facilities and accommodate students' needs to ensure their success. This is especially important for students with disabilities since they are more vulnerable to socioeconomic inequalities (Abebe et al., 2019; Myhr et al., 2018). Higher education can significantly impact their entrance to the labor market (Ballo, 2020) and thereby help prevent economic marginalization.

However, several studies have reported inconsistency in providing the necessary facilitation and accommodations for students with disabilities to thrive in higher education (Claiborne et al., 2011; Hauschildt et al., 2021). Some students face architectural barriers, a lack of adapted learning materials, and professionals who appear unwilling to adjust their ways of teaching (Martins et al., 2018; Moriña, 2017; Moriña & Orozco, 2021; Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023). Furthermore, the commitment of professionals toward the inclusion of students with disabilities varies, as some prioritize inclusion while others seem reluctant to put in

the effort (Edwards et al., 2022; Jeannis et al., 2020; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014; Martins et al., 2018).

The importance of providing necessary facilitation and accommodation for students with disabilities in higher education, and the inconsistency in doing so, calls for a need to explore why and how this inconsistency occurs. Studies have highlighted some crucial factors that can influence inclusive practices, including the attitudes of professionals toward disabled students and the need for training in inclusive practices (Collins et al., 2019; Goodall et al., 2023; Habtes et al., 2012; Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Martins et al., 2018; Moriña, 2017; Moriña et al., 2020; Svendby, 2020; Yan & Sin, 2014). Yan and Sin (2014) found that professional training in inclusion and social pressure, for example from parents, other teachers and the community, better predicted the intentions to include than the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Furthermore, Shine and Stefanou's (2022) research found that teachers with favorable views regarding working with students with disabilities and those who feel equipped to do so are more willing to accommodate them. Also, Goodall et al. (2023) found that professionals, even when holding positive views on including students with disabilities, considered students with disabilities as less likely to graduate and less suitable in performing relevant work tasks compared to students without disabilities.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2023.100311>

Received 21 August 2023; Received in revised form 23 November 2023; Accepted 28 November 2023

Available online 7 December 2023

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However, few researchers have investigated the processes underpinning the professionals' decisions about whether to perform inclusive actions such as implementing universal design or providing accommodation in higher education from a qualitative perspective. This study aims to explore the decision-making processes of professionals regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education.

Recent studies have suggested collaboration between relevant stakeholders as a topic for further research concerning students with disabilities in higher education (Goodall et al., 2022; Moríña & Orozco, 2021; Nieminen, 2023). This aligns with the present study as inclusive education requires the involvement of not only teachers but also other stakeholders (Kendall, 2018; Moríña & Orozco, 2021; Moríña, et al., 2020; Mutanga & Walker, 2017). This study is based on the descriptions and explanations obtained from various stakeholders holding distinct roles and responsibilities. Further details are provided in this article's material and methods section.

1.1. Studying the process of including students with disabilities in higher education

For this article, a professional is defined as someone in a paid occupation related to including students with disabilities in higher education or the transition from student to employment. This includes teachers and others in positions promoting inclusion, such as those who provide disability aids or those responsible for disseminating information about disability services. In the context of disability, we adhere to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), including those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which, when combined with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006). In the present study, inclusion would be the process of identifying and removing these barriers to presence, participation, and achievement for groups at risk of marginalization, exclusion, or underachievement (Ainscow, 2016). For example, barriers can be reduced or removed by making buildings and school materials universally designed, adapting the curriculum to the student's needs, or offering aid to compensate for areas where the student may need support.

Delving into the inclusion process is essential to understand how decisions regarding inclusive actions are made. When studying processes, one examines the continuous adjustments people make to adapt to changes in the conditions for their actions and interactions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Thus, it is not only the result of the process that interests us but also the various conditions that contribute to the process.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Theoretical underpinnings

Based on the epistemology of constructivism, this study suggests that individuals construct meaning through their engagement with the world around them. According to this view, the meaning of objects and phenomena is not inherent, but instead assigned by people based on their unique experiences and perspectives. As a result, different individuals can construct different meanings, even when considering the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Constructivist inquiry begins with experience and explores how it is constructed by examining multiple perspectives, connections, and limitations (Charmaz, 2014). The theoretical perspective is founded on the principles of symbolic interactionism. This perspective is based on three fundamental premises. Firstly, humans tend to act towards things based on the meaning they associate with them. Secondly, the meaning of things is derived from social interactions with others. Finally, these meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process (Blumer, 1969). The theoretical underpinning has influenced the commitment to methods and methodologies. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the process under study, we

adopted a multi-stakeholder approach using workshops for interaction and knowledge construction. We were inspired by participatory research in conducting workshops (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). We invited the stakeholders attending the workshops to suggest discussion topics and stakeholders to invite. However, when analyzing the gathered data, we were primarily influenced by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) in the approach to the analysis. We used several instruments proposed by Charmaz (2014) to highlight processes and find connections. Consequently, the present study combines these two approaches and is not a complete participatory research or grounded theory study. In chapters 2.2 and 2.3, we describe the participants' involvement in the workshops, while in chapter 2.7, Analysis, we elaborate on the use of tools from constructivist grounded theory.

2.2. The design of the Collaboration Forum workshops

The material of this study was collected through the Collaboration Forum. The Collaboration Forum comprised six workshops held between December 2019 and June 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshops were conducted digitally via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2019). The Collaboration Forum's project team comprised six associate professors, doctoral research fellows, one master's student, and two student representatives. They planned and facilitated the Collaboration Forum workshops. The project team and the several Collaboration Forum participants were associated with one of the largest universities in Norway. The Collaboration Forum workshops had two purposes. Firstly, they aimed to generate research data from multiple stakeholders about the "Pathways to the world of work for students with disabilities in higher education." Secondly, they facilitated co-learning, co-creation, and development of competence among participants (Shamsuddin et al., 2021; Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017). By sharing and combining thoughts, experiences, and knowledge, participants could see their opinions from different perspectives. This approach enabled participants to benefit from the workshops. To maximize their benefits, we asked participants in each workshop to suggest topics for the next one and potential invitees who could shed light on them. The project team reviewed the various proposals and made the final decision on which ones to pursue. Since the participants suggested the topics, they were relevant to their roles and interests rather than the needs of the researchers. However, this also benefited this study's research, increasing stakeholder ownership and making the data timelier and more impactful (Groothuijsen et al., 2023; Van Veen et al., 2013). The themes of the workshops that were held are presented in Fig. 1.

2.3. Participants and user involvement

To get material to answer the aim of the study, we organized Collaboration Forum workshops involving professional and lay experts from various fields, such as higher education and employment (Gibbons, 1999; Nowotny, 2003). The participants were strategically selected based on their ability to provide a unique perspective on the topic of the Collaboration Forum workshop. Although the stakeholders in the Collaboration Forum suggested stakeholders to invite, the project group made the final decision on who to invite. Stakeholders with prominent involvement, experience, or knowledge were recruited by direct email from project group members. A total of 46 unique stakeholders with significant experience in education, pedagogy, social services, or employment participated in the discussions in different workshops. Please refer to Table 1 for a list of workshop participants.

To fully understand the professionals' inclusive practices and processes, the perspectives of students with disabilities were also necessary. To cover a broad student perspective, we created three digital student discussion groups, each holding six students, that discussed upcoming topics before each workshop. One or more students from each group attended the Collaboration Forum as a representative of the student discussion group. The students were recruited through various digital

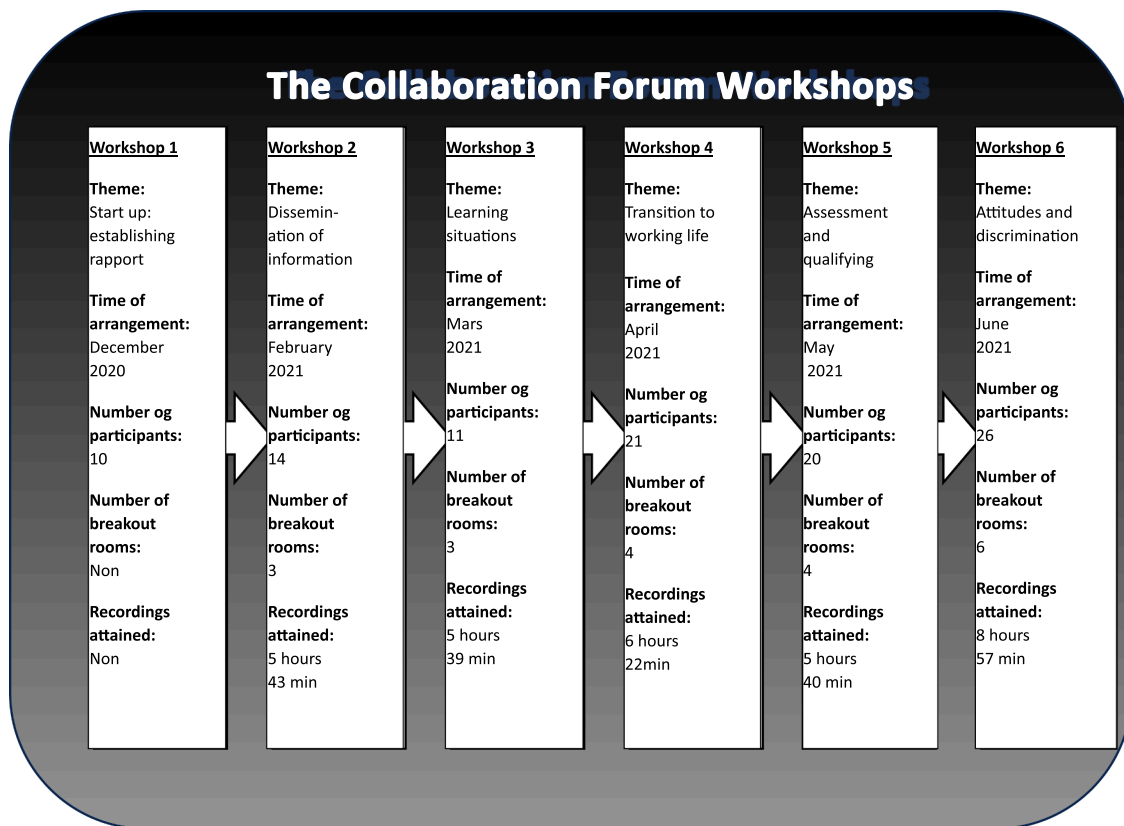


Fig. 1. The Collaboration Forum Workshops. The figure displays workshop themes, the number of participants, breakout rooms, and recordings gathered at each workshop.

advertisements on Facebook™ and the university's communication platforms. They had a wide range of impairments and experiences from multiple study programs within the university.

2.4. Implementation of the workshops

Each Collaboration Forum workshop lasted 3.5 h and was divided into three parts: introduction, discussions in breakout rooms, and summary in plenary. The introduction included a rapid presentation of the participants, a summary of the discussions in the student discussion groups presented by student representatives, and one or two brief lectures (approximately 10 min) concerning the workshop topic. For the discussion, we purposely divided the participants into 3–6 breakout rooms in Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2019), including a mix of at least one student and 3–5 professionals with experiences from different fields, professions, and organizations. Members of the study's project group facilitating the breakout room discussions were provided suggestions for questions. However, they were also instructed to draw on points raised by participants during the discussions. The last part of the workshop, the summary, was reserved for summing up the most exciting points of view from the breakout rooms, the discussion of unresolved questions, and suggestions for topics and participants for later workshops. This enabled the participants to learn, discuss, and reflect on perspectives from other breakout groups.

2.5. Ethics

All the participants were thoroughly informed and gave written consent to participate in the research project before attending the workshop. The study has been reported to and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, and the gathered data was processed accordingly.

2.6. Data processing

Workshops 2–6, including discussions in breakout rooms, were audio recorded, resulting in 32 h of recording. The first workshop was not audio recorded as the main interest was to develop a positive rapport amongst the participants, laying the foundation for upcoming workshops. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. A unique identifier was applied to each participant in the transcripts.

2.7. Analysis

To study processes and theorize actions in the data material, we chose a qualitative exploratory design for the analysis using several techniques from constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014). After each workshop, the researchers discussed their initial understanding of the data material in order to adjust questions and themes in the following workshop. All transcripts of workshops, including breakout rooms, were initially coded by the first author using the CGT approach. Initial coding in CGT entails studying data fragments closely for analytic import, preferably line-by-line, to generate as many ideas as possible in the early stages of analysis. Gerunds were used to build actions into the codes to illuminate the processes described by the stakeholders (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). The first author derived and constructed focused codes, starting with the summary and introduction parts of all workshops and proceeding through all breakout rooms. The analysis of transcripts was repeatedly discussed and further developed with the co-authors and the project group (including two students with disabilities and several professionals described in Section 2.2) during the respective stages of the analysis. As such, the analysis was a process of co-construction, which is compatible with Charmaz's (2014) understanding of the development of knowledge using CGT. Analytic memos were written throughout the analysis (Keane, 2021). Three categories

Table 1
Participants in the collaboration forum’s workshops.

Role	WS1	WS2	WS3	WS4	WS5	WS6
Career advisor i.u.	–	–	–	1	1	1
Disability office representative i. u.	1	1	–	1	1	1
Disability organization member o.u.	–	–	–	1	1	1
Educational development unit i. u.	–	–	1	–	–	–
Employees with impairment o.u.	–	–	–	2	1	1
Employer/manager o.u.	–	–	–	1	1	–
Examination office i.u.	–	–	–	–	2	–
Facilitator for work-life inclusion o.u.	–	–	–	2	–	2
Lecturer i.u.	1	3	3	2	2	2
Management i.u.	–	–	–	–	–	2
Practice supervisor o.u.	–	–	–	1	2	1
Responsible for dissemination of information i.u.	–	2	–	–	–	–
Student discussion groups representative i.u.	2	3	3	4	4	8
Student politics representative i. u.	–	–	–	–	–	2
Suitability Committee i.u.	–	–	–	–	1	–
Support provider of accommodation and aiding equipment o.u.	–	–	–	1	1	1
Support provider of social services and labor o.u.	2	2	2	2	1	1
Services for lecturer support for universal design and accommodation i.u.	4	3	2	3	2	3
Total number of participants	10	14	11	21	20	26

Note: The table displays the number of participants with associated roles in each workshop. WS = Workshop. i.u. = participant/services located inside the university. o.u.= participant/services located outside the university.

and associated subcategories were constructed by constantly comparing text, initial codes, and focused codes, reflecting on memos, and discussions. The NVivo computer software (QSR International, 2020) was used in initial coding to ease the moves between codes and text for constant comparison. Some examples of initial codes and focused codes are presented in Table 2. The three categories constructed through analysis are presented in Table 3.

2.8. Clarifications for the presentation of the results

To enhance anonymity, details about participants’ roles or expertise are not conveyed in the results. We have labeled all teaching staff, regardless of their academic title, as lecturers when singled out from the broader group of professionals. Additionally, to ease reading, students

Table 2
Examples of codes from the subcategory ‘Relying on preconceptions: knowledge and attitudes’.

Example focused codes	Example initial codes
Depends on positive attitudes.	Believes that rejection to adapt exam is based on attitudes. Believes it is all in people’s heads. Claims attitudes underlie everything.
Is interested.	Is passionate about universal design of teaching and assessment. Wants to become familiarized with universal design and facilitation. Wants to learn more about facilitation.
Is not interested/does not concern them.	Anticipates that cultural change will be met with resistance. Experiences that few study leaders think it is important to facilitate. Claims people believe universal design does not concern them.

Table 3
Results: categories and subcategories.

Category	Uncovering a weak foundation	Attempting to close the gaps	Ruling with limited competence
Subcategory 1	(Not) knowing the obligations.	Needing enforcement.	Relying on preconceptions: Knowledge and attitudes.
Subcategory 2	(Not) knowing opportunities in tools and resources.	Struggling to inform.	Accepting or waiving based on eligibility, fairness, and disproportionate burden
Subcategory 3	(Not) detecting students with disabilities and needing accommodations.	Restrained by confidentiality.	

with disabilities are simply referred to as students in this article unless otherwise specified.

3. Findings

This chapter presents the findings regarding professionals’ decision-making process. Based on the findings, we have constructed Fig. 2, which places "Acting" at the top. To act means to take any measures for inclusion, as described in chapter 1.1. Below "Acting," there are three considerations that stakeholders expressed. If the act failed to meet any of these considerations, the professional would not act. However, it would be implemented if the act was deemed just, fair, and not too burdensome. This assessment primarily relied on the knowledge and attitudes of the professionals, which again were influenced by their competence, institutional enforcement, and support from their colleagues. In the following chapters, we will describe the levels of the figure, starting from the bottom and working our way up to the decision.

3.1. Exposing a weak individual foundation of knowledge

This chapter delves into the foundational knowledge and skills professionals must possess to perform their duties effectively. It also highlights the shortcomings that have been identified in this area. The findings reveal inadequate familiarity with laws and expectations, a lack of proficiency in universal design and accommodation, a lack of awareness of available support systems, and difficulties in identifying students who are facing challenges and the barriers they encounter.

Both professionals and students with disabilities believed that they had a role to play in making the university more inclusive. However, they needed to be aware of what was expected of them to be able to act on this responsibility. Many stakeholders were not familiar with the laws and regulations related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, and they believed that their colleagues were in the same situation. Therefore, the workshops thoroughly discussed various acts of legislation related to universal design and adaptations. For instance, in the plenary introduction of workshop no. 3, one of the participants gave a brief presentation on the requirements for universal design and the professionals’ responsibility to help, and that universal design was not something that students should have to request.

The analysis indicates that the stakeholders believed that the concept of universal design, diverse teaching techniques, and early intervention could prevent the need for individual adaptations. They believed that this approach could also benefit students who are not classified as disabled. However, the stakeholders also expressed that professionals must acquire more skills to implement universal design effectively. While new assistive equipment was becoming more accessible, educators needed to become aware of its existence and familiar with its features to take advantage of it. The stakeholders noted that a lack of

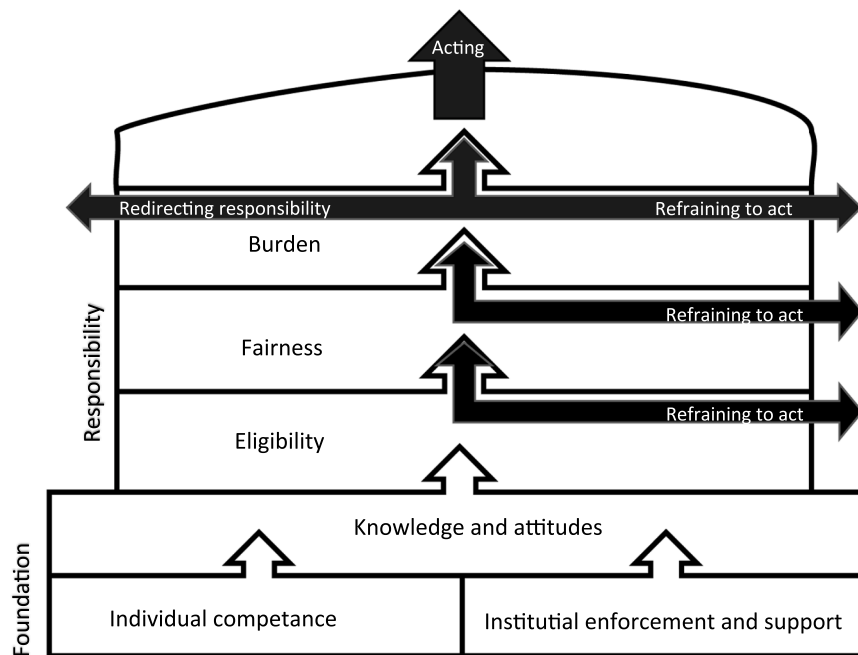


Fig. 2. The Decision-making process.

The figure displays the foundation decisions on inclusion are made on and the assessments professionals feel responsible for making. "Refraining to act" refers to the decision not to take action or to withhold from doing something.

knowledge and skills made it difficult to provide universal design. Similarly, when professionals encountered students who required accommodation, they often lacked the skills to provide the best support. Although some helpful examples were presented, accommodating students with disabilities was still described as rare and out of the ordinary. This made it difficult for professionals to gain experience and provide best practices. In such instances, collaborating with experienced colleagues is considered to be of immense help.

The expertise that some participants exhibited and spoke of proved that there were skilled employees and established assistive services at and adjoining the university. The university's facilitation office and facilitation managers at each faculty were examples of services assigned to help students and lecturers. Although the services were not short of work, many students and professionals were unaware of them and what they could offer. Some professionals with significant expertise in accommodating needs were unaware of this and only learned about facilitation managers in the workshops. An external stakeholder with competence in accommodating people with disabilities expressed her shock concerning this bizarre lack of knowledge within the university:

I think it's surreal that not even those who have researched, worked on, and investigated how students with disabilities experience their studies [at the present university] have discovered facilitation managers. And then we expect teachers working in a completely different field to know about and convey this? Of course, they do not!

The analysis showed that academic staff and support services needed to collaborate more, as well as collaborate more with students who need accommodation. Both professionals and students emphasized the importance of consulting students to better understand potential problems and prepare accordingly. However, consulting required knowledge about the students and their disabilities, which many were unsure about. Some disabilities, such as using a wheelchair, were easy to identify, but others were not. Both students and professionals demonstrated uncertainty about the specific nature of different disabilities. Some lecturers were reluctant to invest more time identifying students when they already had a heavy workload, as one professional said:

There may be some who don't know they need help. How do we pick those up? How persistent should we be? And how much knowledge can

we be expected to have about various conditions and problems? As the course manager, we have ninety students, right? There are, after all, limits to how easy it is to identify people.

The professionals experienced that the challenge of identifying students often led to learning about their needs too late to provide sufficient accommodation.

3.2. Exposing cracks in the university system

In the previous chapter, we presented the foundations of individual knowledge, which were found to have some worrisome cracks or gaps. This resulted in professionals lacking essential tools for inclusion. In this chapter, we will move to the right side of the base in Fig. 2 to explore institutional enforcement and support. By doing so, we also explore the origin of the gaps in individual knowledge and the different stakeholders' perspectives on the barriers and facilitators to closing them. The analysis explores the professionals' surroundings and the stakeholders' reflections on who is responsible for keeping them updated, the struggles of disseminating information and competence, and concerns when dealing with confidential information.

During discussions, there was a frequent concern over the responsibility of making professionals and students aware of their rights and requirements. The analysis highlighted the need for a more explicit determination of responsibility on all levels to ensure enough knowledge and understanding of legal obligations. It also revealed a mismatch between the university management and other stakeholders' views on facilitating and enforcing accommodation and universal design. While the university management believed that they were ahead in the field of inclusion and were working towards achieving universal design and suitable adaptations at all levels, several stakeholders disagreed and felt that the university did not prioritize accommodation highly enough. The analysis indicated a need to prioritize inclusion, both as a cultural and an economic priority. The management was seen as an instigator that could create a positive, inclusive environment through resources, culture, expectations, and directives. The stakeholders urged the management to act and enforce inclusive practices within the university, such as putting pressure on their employees, as stated by this university staff member:

From a teacher's point of view, I don't think it's about opposing. It's simply a matter of lack of knowledge and then perhaps a bit of discreet enforcement. Or maybe it doesn't need to be so discreet either. From the management: This is how we do it. Everyone must use a microphone.

If management made inclusion a priority, staff members would understand their role in facilitating the inclusion of students better. Additionally, some professionals and students found students to be helpful in reminding them of their duties to promote inclusion. Thus, to ensure that the professionals fulfilled their obligations, both students and professionals needed to possess the necessary knowledge. However, the analysis revealed a struggle to reach out with and acquire this knowledge. This resulted in a gap between the extensive information available and the actual knowledge held by the professionals expected to utilize it. There was a belief among the stakeholders that these gaps could be bridged through proper training. Since lecturers often started teaching without extensive pedagogical education, new teachers were required to undergo pedagogical training within the first two years of employment. However, the current tutoring and courses offered to new lecturers were considered insufficient and did not provide enough attention to disability issues. Therefore, stakeholders called for better pedagogical training and guidelines to be provided. Those staff members who had not recently been hired needed to make an effort to obtain knowledge by requesting information or training, or by looking up information themselves. This, combined with a substantial workload and scarcity of time, resulted in them opting out of pedagogical training. Competing with other tasks, training became reserved for lecturers with a particular interest in inclusion.

The directing of information towards lecturers, support staff, and students was emphasized as crucial. However, some stakeholders questioned why the information did not reach those who would benefit from it, leading to speculations that the university might withhold the information. One possible reason stated was that the university may not have the resources to handle the consequences of students becoming aware of their rights and opportunities. A member of the university staff suggested that this also could have affected the deadline to apply for accommodations:

It's that application deadline for accommodation -it is awfully early. But then there is the question of: Do we have enough resources to handle applications, to ensure that the need for help is met? So, there's so much stuff like that intertwining.

Professionals responsible for disseminating information about accommodations and universal design, on the other hand, claimed to be doing their utmost to reach both students and staff and were interested in finding solutions to do so. While the provision of information to both professionals and students was considered equally important, informing students was the topic that received the most attention in the Collaboration Forum workshops. Discussions about reaching professionals were primarily superficial; for example, "courses with better content should be provided," while discussions about reaching students were more extensive.

Also, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was found to be a common cause of frustration. Many professionals lacked knowledge about the current regulations and saw confidentiality rules as obstacles to disseminating information and collaboration between professionals. Some stakeholders held the impression that no information about students and their disability could be shared with other professionals. However, others believed conveying information was acceptable if the student agreed. The analysis showed that the fear of breaking the rules or suggesting any changes to the regulations hindered collaboration among the professionals. Valuable information and experiences could not be shared due to the fear of violating the rules, as was exemplified by this member of the university staff:

Is there something I should be aware of in my classes? I do not receive information about that. That makes it quite demanding. And the students believe that if they have spoken up once, the information will be passed on. But it is not like that. There are watertight bulkheads

where information does not pass. Everything is so shrouded in secrecy that it sometimes makes you cringe.

The stakeholders needed a system that would properly disseminate information about disabilities and helpful tips. Without such a system, the students were the only information source. To make necessary adjustments in a timely manner, it was essential for students to be aware of their needs and to notify professionals in advance. Therefore, different ways of encouraging students to disclose their needs were discussed, including asking students to report problems during classes or filling out a form with a section for disclosing relevant information before a course or class began.

3.3. Ruling based on knowledge and attitudes

As we move up in Fig. 2, we encounter the ruling process. The process involves the decision-making ability of the professional tasked with making the final call on inclusion. As depicted in the figure, the decision-making process is heavily influenced by the knowledge and attitudes held by the professional towards the situation. We will start by examining the grounds on which stakeholders based their decisions and then move on to the assessments they made before finalizing their decisions.

Responding to requests from participants in both the student discussion groups and the Collaboration Forum, the final workshop was dedicated to the theme of attitudes and discrimination. Attitudes were perceived to be at the root of the inclusion or exclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, as explained by this student:

I have faced a lot of challenges with my study advisor, while the biggest challenges for others have been in their contact with the examination office. There are very large variations in which disabilities people have, which faculty they belong to, and so on. I believe the most important aspect, and this is at the heart of it all, is attitudes.

In the present study, participants claimed to be both interested in inclusion and to have good values and attitudes, believing that there should be room for individual accommodation. Some claimed to go to great lengths to facilitate this, but discrepancies arose in stakeholders' views about others. On the one hand, stakeholders responsible for teaching universal design claimed that universal design was a topic of high interest, and lecturers and students referred to lecturers as a group of well-meaning individuals who were genuinely interested in helping the students. On the other hand, students and professionals claimed that some professionals were not interested in inclusion or did not consider it their responsibility. Stakeholders attributed this discrepancy to knowledge and structural issues. Although professionals were still considered to be good at heart, their lack of competence and the difficulties in obtaining and acting on information sometimes prevented them from taking measures to ensure inclusion. Therefore, participants believed there was a vital connection between competence and attitudes, where the two reciprocally influenced each other. The professionals could only make judgments based on what they knew. When deprived of crucial knowledge about disability and inclusion, poor attitudes arose. Ignorance of obligations and needs could hinder professionals from taking the necessary steps to ensure inclusion, as stated by this university employee:

At present, most impairments are invisible. They are not possible to spot unless the students disclose the impairments themselves. And standing on the other side of the desk as a subject teacher, I believe it is easy to suppose that "I guess no one is in need of it", because it is not in plain view.

Professionals had the power to act or refuse to act based on the competence they had achieved, their preconceptions, and their attitudes. In other words, they could make well-informed choices with sufficient competence. Otherwise, professionals would have to make decisions with whatever tools they had acquired, including their own attitudes and those of the people surrounding them.

3.4. Ruling on fragile ground

The decision-making process is illustrated in the upper part of Fig. 2, where each level had to be checked before taking any action. Students with disabilities have diverse needs, so each request had to be evaluated individually. Professionals responsible for providing accommodations had a lot of power and responsibility in deciding whether to facilitate it. The decision-making process for accommodating students with disabilities was complex, and professionals had to consider eligibility criteria and legal requirements.

Professionals were required to evaluate whether the students had a disability covered by the legislation. Students who provided documentation of their needs from a medical practitioner were entitled to some accommodation. However, the extent of such accommodation was subjective. Some stakeholders aimed to define the minimum that had to be offered, but the heterogeneity in challenges and needs complicated this.

University professionals were conflicted about how easily students should be able to access aids and accommodations. While some spoke for students' needs to try out different accommodations to find the proper support, others believed that easy access could lead to students asking for more than they were entitled to. This university employee argued that the university's financial situation should be taken into consideration and advocated the withholding of some information until contextualized needs were clearly stated:

Some, though not many, come presenting their diagnosis and ask, "What can I get?" So, we ask, "What are your needs? What are you asking for?" And they'll be like, "No, what can I get?" In the end, we give in and tell them what we can offer, such as this or that software. They are provided with the equipment. But afterward, it turns out that they have not used it because they did not need it. They just wanted it because they could get it. I then think that it is a bit of a wasteful use of resources. So, I think raising awareness of the actual needs is important. "What do you need in order to do this?"

It was, therefore, essential to filter eligible requests to ensure that aid was not provided unnecessarily.

When determining suitable accommodation for students, professionals had to consider whether it would affect meeting academic requirements. The university's priority was to produce graduates with the necessary skills, and ensuring that academic requirements were met was emphasized by both university staff and external participants. For occupational education, some professionals believed it was essential to assess whether the student was well-suited for the type of work they were training for.

Furthermore, any accommodation had to be fair, promoting equality without causing unfair advantages for the students with disabilities. Being a student, even without a disability, was considered difficult for most students. Exams, for example, constituted a situation that was not optimal, regardless of whether they had a disability or not. Some stakeholders believed personalized assessments for each student were not feasible. In contrast, others claimed that assessments based on eligibility, suitability, and fairness were too strict and biased toward attitudes that did not adequately reflect competence.

During the process, professionals had another option to opt out by claiming that accommodation would be a "disproportionate burden." While most participants found accommodation to be expensive and time-consuming, a university employee disagreed with the notion that universal design and accommodation would cause unbearable costs for the institution:

Approving one extra hour [of exam] for the student is not that expensive. And it is not that expensive to provide a license for assistive software. Putting up some extra walls, making room for 20 rather than 200–300 students, is not that expensive. It is not that expensive to extend a submission deadline. It might cost a bit if you, for example, were to arrange an oral option enabling elaboration after a written exam. And OK, an extra hour or two must be provided by teachers now

and then. And yes, mentors and translation services are a bit costly. There is a kind of hierarchy to initiatives, too. But is it really terribly expensive?

However, it was difficult for individual professionals to provide accommodations due to gaps in knowledge, obstacles in obtaining necessary information and skills, and limited resources such as time and supportive tools. In some cases, providing accommodations, therefore, became a disproportionate burden for the professional, as it required neglecting other tasks. This could make it too costly or burdensome to accomplish universal design and accommodation.

When professionals found acts of inclusion burdensome, they had the option to refuse to act altogether or redirect the responsibility to others. The allocation of responsibilities was often unclear, leaving stakeholders unsure who should possess the necessary information and expertise. This made it possible for them to redirect the responsibility to others deemed more suitable and refrain from developing their expertise. Responsibility could be redirected to other professionals or even students since students were seen as a good source for informing or teaching professionals how and why they should provide inclusive education. However, if the arrangement was perceived as just, fair, and manageable, it would likely be carried out.

4. Discussion

By identifying multi-stakeholder perspectives, we have gained a broad insight into the decision-making processes underpinning individual professionals' choices to perform inclusive actions, such as implementing universal design or providing accommodations in and around a Norwegian university. Overall, the analysis indicated that these decisions stem from careful considerations based on available knowledge and the attitudes of the stakeholders and the people surrounding them. The foundation of knowledge, support, and resources available shaped the lens through which these individuals viewed and acted upon their responsibilities. This foundation had crucial cracks and flaws, making it a fragile foundation for making decisions.

One such crack exposed is the gaps in the knowledge needed to include students with disabilities in the university. The findings regarding these knowledge gaps are in line with other studies. Similar gaps are found in several recent studies, not only in Scandinavian countries (Langørgen et al., 2020; Nieminen, 2023; Sanderson et al., 2022; Svendby, 2020) but also worldwide (Aguirre et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2019; Martins et al., 2018; Moriña & Orozco, 2021; Moriña et al., 2020; Mutanga & Walker, 2017; Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023). For decades, research has consistently highlighted the need for professionals to be better informed about policy developments, available services, and how to work appropriately with students with different impairments (Claiborne et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2009; Silver et al., 1998; Tinklin & Hall, 1999).

To mend these gaps, the stakeholders in the present study emphasized the need for mandatory inclusion training and strict enforcement to create a culture of inherent inclusion. This aligns with the findings of other studies, such as Silver et al.'s pilot study from 1998, in which faculty members stated that for universal design to be effective in higher education, the university community and culture must undergo a complete transformation in its approach to instruction. However, they did not seem hopeful that such a change would be feasible (Silver et al., 1998). In another study, Aguirre et al. (2021) found that inclusion acts were optional and dependent on goodwill. Similarly, Moriña (2017) and Moriña and Orozco (2021) have argued for mandatory training. However, the plea for compulsory training is inconsistent with the findings of Kendall (2018), where only a minority of the participants believed that training should be mandatory.

Another flaw highlighted by the present study's analysis was that the university's efforts toward inclusion were not being enforced properly. The lack of mandatory training, coupled with issues related to finding information and accessing support, suggests that the university's

commitment to inclusion was low. Some stakeholders believed that including students with disabilities was not a priority for the management, which led to doubts about the university's commitment to inclusive measures. This, combined with the knowledge gaps they thought existed among their colleagues, might imply that the professionals experienced a lack of social pressure toward performing acts of inclusion (Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020).

The analysis is unclear on whether the university prioritized inclusion of students with disabilities, as there was disagreement among stakeholders. The Collaboration Forum included many skilled individuals holding positions that could be beneficial for promoting inclusion, indicating that necessary resources were in place. However, this is only useful if the decision-makers are aware of them. It is important to remember that if people perceive a situation as real, it is real in its consequences (Merton, 1948; Thomas & Thomas, 1928). If the professionals with decision-making responsibility do not believe that inclusion is expected or feasible, they will likely refrain from facilitating (Shine & Stefanou, 2022).

In the present study, the attitudes among professionals were considered crucial for the decision to include. Most professionals' attitudes toward inclusion were presumed to be positive. The stakeholders wanted to accommodate and aimed to do so because they believed it to be helpful for students with disabilities. They saw inclusive measures, such as universal design, as actions that could reduce the need for individual adaptation and that would be helpful for all students. Adapting for students could also benefit professionals since they would gain experience practicing inclusive measures. This is in line with other research, which, although inconsistent, mainly indicates that professionals have positive attitudes toward including students with disabilities (Elbeheri et al., 2020; Guillemot et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2018; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). Other studies have found helping students with disabilities to be a rewarding experience (Martins et al., 2018; Moriña et al., 2020). Moreover, the knowledge and experiences gained about students with disabilities improve the learning environment for all students, which has been linked to greater student satisfaction (Aguirre et al., 2021; Moriña et al., 2020; Pérez-Esteban et al., 2023).

However, we also found that professionals' attitudes were influenced by their knowledge. Lack of knowledge resulted in negative attitudes. Even when the stakeholders claimed to be interested in inclusion and wanting to help, they saw the need to consider acts of inclusion very thoroughly before making decisions. It was suggested that some adjustments were unjust, uncalled for, unfair to other students, or could lead to a reduction in meeting academic requirements. The belief that facilitation can be unjust or counterproductive is also apparent in other studies (Cook et al., 2009; Kermit & Holiman, 2018; Langørgen et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2018; Mutanga & Walker, 2017; O'Shea et al., 2016). The assessment was considered to be complicated. This is consistent with Langørgen et al.'s (2020) study, where academic staff and placement supervisors were burdened with the responsibility of assessing the suitability of students with disabilities, often feeling unsupported. Consequently, they ended up judging these students even more harshly than their peers (Langørgen et al., 2020).

The present study's analysis highlights that many decisions regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities are made on a weak basis. According to the stakeholders, many professionals were unaware of their obligation to include such students or lacked the necessary skills and resources. In these cases, they had multiple assessment options that could justify their decision to refrain from acting. They could deny the request for accommodation if it were not entitled, unsuitable, unfair to others, or too burdensome. Unfortunately, studies have shown that refraining from acting places the responsibility of facilitating the legal right to education on the students themselves (Brandt, 2011; Kermit & Holiman, 2018; Langørgen & Magnus, 2020; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014). We also observed that responsibility was shifted to students in the analysis. Strategies to engage students in overcoming barriers to

inclusion were frequently proposed. For example, even with the knowledge gaps that were exposed among professionals, reaching the students with information ended up being most thoroughly discussed. The stakeholders saw students as suitable for informing and guiding the professionals on how to do their job concerning inclusion. This additional responsibility to facilitate their own inclusion can make it even harder for students with disabilities to complete their studies (Kermit & Holiman, 2018; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014; Nieminen, 2023).

4.1. Further implications

The issue of inadequate support for students with disabilities has been persistent for decades, which we believe is unacceptable. The present analysis indicated flaws in the decision-making process due to the foundation on which professionals constructed their decisions to include students with disabilities in higher education. We believe that addressing these flaws requires a multi-level effort, including the dissemination of information, support, and resources. To ensure that professionals do not opt out, including students with disabilities in higher education must be prioritized. To achieve this, professionals must discuss and agree on guidelines for determining which students are entitled to accommodations, which are inappropriate, and which accommodations would constitute an unreasonable burden. Further research is necessary to clarify the expectations of professionals so that they can better understand and fulfill their roles in promoting inclusion for students with disabilities.

The overall responsibility for the university fulfilling its tasks related to inclusion and facilitation rests with the university management (Connolly et al., 2019). For inclusion to be successful, we believe that management must communicate clear expectations to employees and provide training, time, and support to facilitate inclusion measures. Many of these measures could be unnecessary if the surroundings and teaching environment are universally designed. In Norway, universities have a duty to ensure that their general functions have a universal design (Equality & Anti-Discrimination, 2018). The management should ensure compliance with this law.

4.2. Methodological considerations

The present study has many strengths. We included a wide range of stakeholders, which helped make the discussions more diverse and fruitful. To facilitate this diversity, we divided the stakeholders into smaller groups and instructed the facilitators to encourage participants to share their opinions. Throughout the project, the stakeholders actively suggested themes and workshop participants. Overall, we argue that these actions contribute to strengthening the study.

However, the context in which the data was constructed had some limitations. The study was conducted in a single university, and the Collaboration Forum had no authority to make formal changes. The participants supported each other, aimed to understand each other, and co-learned instead of promoting themselves or the group they belonged to. Therefore, it is possible that the workshop setting and the participants' composition affected the results so that stronger opinions towards other groups were toned down to avoid confrontation. Individual or group interviews with less diverse stakeholders could have resulted in different outcomes.

In CGT, the data collection and analysis are usually done simultaneously. The further explorations and theoretical sampling is performed to illuminate tentative categories derived from the researcher's analysis (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). We chose to deviate from this, as we wanted to involve the stakeholders in identifying the knowledge needs and which stakeholders to invite. All data were, therefore, initially coded after the final workshop had been completed.

Like most qualitative findings, the present results are based on interpretation and should be treated as such. The data is based on how the stakeholders perceived topics related to students with disabilities

and their journey through higher education and into employment. The researchers analyzed the collected data based on their interpretation while attempting to grasp the stakeholders' views without interfering (Charmaz, 2014). Inviting stakeholders to participate in the analysis and presentation of results would have increased the research's validity (Cornwall, 1995). However, due to the limited time available for collaboration beyond the workshops, they were not included in this study phase. Furthermore, inviting only some stakeholders could have resulted in a lack of diversity in the analysis. However, the study's preliminary results were presented and discussed with the regular workshop attendees, a university research group focusing on inclusion, and researchers at a disability conference. Also, the present findings align with further research conducted in Norway and worldwide, indicating that they may be applicable in a broader context.

5. Conclusion

We add to former studies by bringing a collaborative multi-stakeholder perspective on the decision-making processes of professionals regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. The analysis identified critical concerns, including a lack of knowledge among professionals responsible for inclusion and inadequate enforcement and support from the structures they rely on to do their jobs. This created a fragile ground for the professionals' decision-making. When making decisions, professionals assessed the fairness and justness of including students with disabilities while also considering whether the measures would create a disproportional burden. However, unclear responsibilities and ignorance made decision-making challenging and allowed for opting out of inclusive acts.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Grammarly in order to correct grammar and ensure better text flow. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication

Disclosure statement

The authors have no competing interests to declare. The project was funded by the Research Council of Norway in 2020, grant number 303710.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Tone Ristad: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Jørn Østvik:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Sissel Horghagen:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Lisbeth Kvam:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Aud Elisabeth Witsø:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere appreciation to the project team for sharing their valuable knowledge and actively participating in implementing the Collaboration Forum. They are particularly grateful to Gemma Goodall and Anita Blakstad Bjørnerås for their insightful suggestions and productive discussions. Above all, the authors thank the stakeholders who participated in the Collaboration Forum and its associated student discussion groups and generously shared their opinions and expertise with us.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.ijedro.2023.100311](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2023.100311).

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