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Negotiating individual accommodation in higher education

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This article discusses ways of understanding the processes involved when disabled students negotiate accessibility in higher education. Despite legislation for universal design and political aims to increase the number of disabled students, individuals themselves have to take initiatives to obtain needed reasonable adjustments. Findings are drawn from a study of everyday lives of disabled students. Research methods employed were: time geographic diaries, in-depth interviews and focus groups. Findings include issues of disclosure and stigma management, supports provided with a twist of ambiguity, and experiences of combatting for individual accommodation. The process of negotiation is discussed in terms of traditions in higher education, the burden individual accommodation in practice place upon disabled students, and the need for changes based on universal design.

Keywords: disability; higher education; stigma; universal design; individual accommodation

Introduction

Higher education is in itself important and also strongly associated with labour-market participation. Norwegian research suggests that among disabled people, higher education is one of the most common facilitators for a successful transition into employment (Vedeler 2009). The employment rate of disabled people with higher education is twice that of those with compulsory education (Bø and Håland 2010) and the impact of higher education on employment is significantly stronger than for non-disabled people (Bliksvær and Hanssen 2006; Molden, Wendelborg, and Tøssebro 2009).However, research also shows that among disabled people, fewer begin higher education, more quit early, and fewer continue onto Master and PhD levels (Bliksvær and Hanssen 2006). Thus, the issue of disabling barriers to higher education appears clearly of policy relevance.

Existing literature suggests that the problem of barriers in higher education is multifaceted, varies by type of impairment, and is related to all phases of a study process (Berge 2007; Borland and James 1999; Brandt 2005, 2010; Fossestøl and Kessel 2000; Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Stamer and Nielsen 2008). Furthermore, everyday life issues outside higher education institutions constitute challenges that in practice hamper progress in higher education (Magnus 2009). Lack of information during the application process and lack of accessibility appears to

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affect choice of study places and subject areas (Anvik 2006; Berge 2007; Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela 2004). Some disabled students experience barriers on a day-to-day basis because of for example distances between campus buildings, heavy doors, stairs, poor acoustics or the absence of microphone facilities (Stamer and Nielsen 2008; Kessel 2008; Li 1998).

In their study, Fuller, Bradley, and Hall (2004) found that 44% of the disabled students reported barriers in lectures. The experience of students in need of more time when listening and writing was that teachers spoke and/or changed the PowerPoint presentations too quickly. Others mentioned challenges during discussions and in particular if the student is unable to see the teacher or fellow students. For some, it is also difficult to lip-read and take notes at the same time (Borland and James 1999). Students with impaired vision found that even though teachers were asked to use letters that were easier to read, speak plainly, or give the student copies of notes prior to lectures, the requests were often forgotten (Berge 2007). There remains an unfulfilled need for accessible course reading material (Fossestøl and Kessel 2000; Berge 2007), including unsolved copyright issues related to electronic versions (Chrysostomidis 2004). IT learning management systems tend to be inaccessible for people with certain kinds of impairments, in particular visually impaired students (Berge 2007; Brandt 2005; Fuglerud and Solheim 2008; Seale, Draffan, and Wald 2010), and thus represent the risk of creating a technological divide (Konur 2007). Compulsory fieldwork appears to constitute a particular excluding aspect of some subject areas because of poor accessibility to buildings, transport, equipment and also attitudes (Jung et al. 2008).

The aim of this article is, however, not primarily to contribute to the description of the barriers people with different kinds of impairments encounter in higher education. The aim is rather to explore how disabled students negotiate accessibility issues at higher education institutions in Norway. Such negotiations take place in a context of disabling barriers, prevailing images of what a 'normal' student is like, and also policies of inclusion and support. The role of individual accommodation is of particular contextual relevance.

Accessibility policies and practices in Norwegian higher education

In Norway disabled students have an equal right to education. According to Stortingsmelding (White Paper) No. 40 (2002–2003), the aim is to increase the participation rate of disabled people in higher education to the same as that for other young people. Higher education, including accessibility issues, is regulated by the The Higher Education Act (Lov om universiteter og høyskoler, 2005). According to this law, all higher education institutions are instructed to take the necessary steps to ensure that disabled students have the same access to education as their non-disabled peers, and to adjust the physical learning environment to meet the principles of universal design (§ 4–3). Furthermore, since 1999, all higher education institutions were required to have an action plan for accessibility and to provide a contact person for disabled students (Stortingsmelding [White paper] no. 8, 1998–99). Today, higher education institutions are also required to provide a Disability Service informing and advising students on adjustment possibilities and rights. This may involve counselling when applying for higher education, information about financial support, assistive technology, individual accommodation of exams, assistance like a person

taking notes, making copies, transfer at campus, etc. The students find information about the service on the web site of the institution.

In Norway there is no reliable registration of numbers of disabled students in higher education. Knarlag and Jacobsen (2000) estimates that 4.5% of the students need substantial accommodation (as personal assistance for practical help at campus, special assistive technology etc.), and about 8% needs some accommodation. According to the 2007 survey on living conditions of disabled people, 10.5% of all aged 20–29 with a higher education degree fit a broad disability definition (Molden, Wendelborg, and Tøssebro 2009).

Although universal design is seen as important for inclusion in higher education, accessibility involves more than the physical environment. Issues such as the curriculum, information technology, teaching approaches and forms of assessment also need to be taken into consideration (Knarlag 2008). This is rarely seen in Norway, which may be related to an observation noted in the UK: among university employees, disability and accessibility is mainly associated with wheelchair users, which in turn leads to poor accessibility for people with less visible impairments (Chard and Couch 1998). It is also the case that for some individuals, universal design principles will hardly meet all individual accessibility needs. Individually tailored accommodation is needed. The Norwegian law takes this into account by providing disabled students a right to individual accommodation (The Higher Education Act, 2005, cf. also the Act on Accessibility and Discrimination, 2008), which goes beyond the physical environment.

Both the policies on universal design and individual accommodation are in keeping with the environmental turn (Altman 2001) in the understanding of disability, represented by, among others, the UK social model (Oliver 1990) and the Nordic relational model (Gustavsson, Tøssebro, and Traustadottir 2005). The issue is not medical treatment of the impairment but to accommodate the environment to a broader range of people. In practice, it is the right to individual accommodation that constitutes the paramount part of the context of the negotiations of accessibility in the everyday study life of disabled students. This is partly because progress towards universal design is slow, but also because it is through individual accommodation that the individual can solve his or her accessibility problems in the short term. The experience of barriers is related to issues not (yet) solved by universal measures, and will in many cases not be solved by this strategy. It is furthermore a part of this context of individual accommodation that it falls upon each student to take initiatives and negotiate with institutions what is needed in terms of meeting their particular requirements, with the support provided by the Disability Service office of the University. The context is thus much in line with what Chard and Couch (1998) reported from the University of Liverpool: the institution worked on adjustment on a case-by-case basis, and only when forced to, in response to students' requests. It is also in line with a lack of awareness about disability issues that was found in a study at a Scottish university (Riddell and Weedon 2009).

Theoretical perspectives and research review

Our point of departure is that disabled students need to be proactive in order to improve accessibility in their individual case. They will also have the burden of proof. Findings in existing research suggest (see below) that this is likely to trigger

reflections which relate to stigma management (Goffman 1963), questions about eligibility and deservingness, and possibly also judgments from others as to what extent a person with such needs is able to complete the study programme, undertake paid work, and match their chosen profession (Jung 2002).

The theory of stigma (Goffman 1963) discusses how a discredited attribute affects social interaction and becomes a 'master status.' It affects reactions from 'the others' and strategies employed by the person with the discredited attribute. According to Murphy (1987) such processes is 'less a by-product of disability than its substance' (113). The impairment itself is inconvenient but the social processes triggered are much more pervasive, involving prejudice, the likelihood of being seen as a stranger, or that other people simply withdraw from interaction. The question of attitudes is however contested. In a research review, Söder (1990) maintains that prejudices coexist with attitudes such as solidarity, support and pity. He argues the case of ambivalence: 'People are ambivalent because of conflicting values that are both deeply felt and not easily handled in concrete situations' (236). The ambivalence nevertheless means that uncertainty and withdrawal are likely consequences, but also that disclosure, being an outsider and support are interwoven.

Regarding the strategies employed by people with discredited attributes, stigma theory makes a clear distinction between visible and non-visible attributes. People with non-visible impairments have the possibility of avoiding disturbed interaction patterns by non-disclosure; by passing as 'normal.' A number of international studies have found that disabled students, whenever possible, prefer not to inform about impairments and how they are affected in their everyday lives (Collins and Mowbray 2005; Jung 2002; Litner, Mann-Feder, and Guérard 2005; Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2005; Riddell and Weedon 2009; Stanley et al., 2011; Stockholms Universitet 2006). Disabled students want to be seen and understood in the same way as other students. Riddle et al. (2005) found that disabled students negotiated an identity they could accept and, if possible, rejected the identity of 'disabled' as this was seen as devaluing. The main issue in our context is however the interplay with individual accommodation. If you do not disclose the impairment or your discredited attribute, you are also likely to be denied individual supports, including individually tailored adjustments. An individual adjustment is based on demand and that you are seen as deserving it according to explicit or implicit eligibility criteria.

Some research reports suggest that the issue of disclosure of unwanted attributes vs solidarity and support is a real dilemma for some disabled students. Stamer and Nielsen (2008) for instance, showed that among Danish students with invisible impairments, many were afraid of stigmatization when claiming individual accommodation. In a study of chronically ill female students, Jung (2002) found that accommodation was seen as necessary in order to complete studies. At the same time such accommodation brought with it fears about the way they were perceived by others, and also possible suspicion about their needs and motives. There is also research reporting that disabled students refrain from using technology or other equipment in order not to disclose impairments (Low 1996, Seale 2012). Seale (2012) found that some disabled students disliked being recommended assistive technology based on their disability label. Martin (2010) reported that students with mental health difficulties did not disclose their problems due to fear of stigma and discrimination. The consequence was difficulties in meeting deadlines, and some had received exclusion-warning notices. On the other hand, those few students that

had disclosed their mental health condition to university staff members received the assistance needed to be able to submit their work within expected time limits.

Whether impairments are visible or not, a request for individual accommodation can easily be perceived as a way of raising concerns about you being a 'stranger'; different from what a student is expected to be (Brandt 2005; Fuller, Riddell, and Weedon 2009; Jung 2002; Riddell et al. 2005; Stockholms universitet 2006, Roberts 2009). Higher education systems can be intolerant or ignorant towards people deviating from the image of what a 'normal' student should be like (Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela 2004). Disabled students in Denmark claim that they are not a part of the consciousness of the universities (Stamer and Nielsen 2008). The subjects in this study also described what they perceived as lack of knowledge about impairments from other students and lecturers. It was, for instance, hard to impart an understanding of why they needed accommodation due to pain or distances between campus locations.

All systems of individual support employ explicit or implicit eligibility criteria. Such criteria are needed to prevent misuse. Thus, when applying for supports the individual will always run the risk of being met with suspiciousness and rejection, to be considered not 'deserving.' The interaction with the support system itself can be experienced as a barrier. This is for instance a typical finding in research on families with disabled children. Tøssebro and Lundeby (2002) argue that even though services in themselves are seen as helpful and of a reasonable quality, the process of getting access to the services is a main source of frustrations among families. Research on disabled students reports findings that can be interpreted in line with this. Requests for adaptations can bring about disparaging comments, suspiciousness, and rejection of presented needs (Berge 2007; Brandt 2005; Fuller et al. 2009; Fuller et al. 2004, Holloway 2001; Moswela and Mukhopadhyay 2011; O'Connor and Robinson 1999; Rao 2004; Shevlin et al. 2004). This does, however, co-occur with support and good intentions.

Requests for individual accommodation also raise concerns related to fair or equal treatment. This will be an issue for the support system, but also for the student, with a rather awkward twist, as favorable treatment rather than equal treatment. The students in Jung's (2002) study expressed discomfort because they were afraid of benefiting from what they perceived to be an unfair advantage, and also of the judgment of other students and staff members who might question the fairness and legitimacy of the accommodation (Shevlin et al. 2004). Some dyslexic students expressed discomfort about what they perceived as jealousy from peers (Seale 2012). These students had the right to access to certain technology that other students did not. Furthermore, for students with an invisible impairment, the fear of being perceived as someone with an unfair advantage is likely to be escalated.

The theory and research outlined above suggest that negotiations about individual accommodation take place in a context with a number of interwoven elements. The right for support interacts in practice with the possibility that processes of stigmatization are aroused. One runs the risk of being met with suspiciousness, jealousy and rejection, or simply as a stranger. And even if such reactions do not occur, the fear of it is an issue. Thus, the social role of a disabled student is likely to be pervaded by stigma management but one can also experience helpful support. The aim of the empirical work reported in this article is to explore such processes and experiences in Norwegian higher education.

Study design and methods

The material in this article was drawn from a study of disabled students exploring how various restrictions influenced their participation in studies and everyday life (Magnus 2009). The intention of the project was to describe and understand disabled students' everyday lives as shaped by individual preferences and barriers encountered. The participating informants and methodological approaches employed in this article correspond fully to that project and are described as such.

Nineteen students between the ages of 20 to 44 participated. They studied different subjects at a university or a university college in one Norwegian city. Impairments of participants included: mobility restrictions (seven students), hard of hearing (two students), partially sighted (two students), chronic illness (six students) and learning difficulties (two students).

Invitation letters were sent out via counselors at the Disability Services to students that had consulted the service, letters were also placed on the websites of organizations run by/for disabled people, and other relevant institutions. The Privacy Ombudsman for Research (NSD) ethically approved the study.

The study employed three methods of gathering information. As a starting point, participants were asked to write a *time-geographic diary* for one week (Ellegård and Nordell 1997). In essence, the diary method shows the connections between time, space and activity, where activities are the main focus (Ellegård and Nordell 1997). It maps routines and preferred activities in a social and geographical context.

Following completion of the diaries and their analysis, *in-depth face-to-face interviews* were conducted. The interview method was inspired by McCracken (1988) and Holstein and Gubrium (1995), who represents different but overlapping traditions. The starting point of the interview was topics from the diary, followed by themes prepared in an interview guide. The interview guide was built on topics such as the process of admission to higher education, the start of studies, to be a student, everyday life, and reflections on the future.

Common topics from a number of interviews were subsequently discussed in *focus groups* (Halkier 2003; Krueger and Casey 2000). Three focus groups were formed and each group met three times. The students talked openly about their experiences, both as a student and in terms of their everyday life experiences.

Analysis was inspired by the grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006). However, the development of an entirely new theory was not the main focus. With no expectations of discovering a new reality, we instead set out to construct an understanding of the everyday lives of disabled students in collaboration between students and researcher. The methodology developed by Charmaz (2006) was adapted to meet the particular requirements demanded by the material. The method focuses on identifying processes, activities and meanings, to provide understanding and to explain complex phenomena. The findings reported here addresses a set of issues raised in this research process related to the negotiations of individual accommodation.

Findings

The few things disabled students have in common are that they are students, they have some kind of impairments and they experience environmental barriers. The

disability may involve a need for extensive support in studies and other everyday life activities, or just a need for extended time at exams. But all have to take the initiative to get the support or adjustments they need. What was found in this study was that the process of acquiring individual accommodations frequently took the shape of negotiations, both self-negotiations and with the social environment. Parts of the process were dependent on whether the impairment was visible for other people or not. The reported findings illustrate aspects of this negotiation process. It starts with students' reflections on whether to disclose or not to disclose impairments. Disclosure is a precondition for individual accommodation, but it may also involve rather ambiguous social processes, which is discussed in the second section. The last section concerns the resistance some students meet when asking for reasonable adjustments. All together, these negotiation processes involve a risk that students sometimes do not want to take.

Student reflections on disclosure and non-disclosure

Some students have an impairment that is not easily seen or discoverable, such as poor vision, poor hearing, ADHD, epilepsy, chronic pain, mental health difficulties or other chronic diseases. According to research reports (Kessel 2008; Fuller et al. 2004), students with invisible impairments constitute the majority of disabled students. They can also choose to pass for 'ordinary' students. However, these students are likely to need support beyond that enjoyed by all students, for example, shorter working sessions or assistance during breaks. Some will need individual accommodation in particular learning situations, such as the use of sound transmission or adjusted work areas. After gradually realizing disabling barriers, the subjects with non-visible impairments went through a process of reflections on what to disclose about oneself and to whom. They placed great importance on the need for accommodation while simultaneously fearing negative consequences such as possible isolation, being seen as stupid, acquiring disability as a master status, or not seen as 'the real me.'

Eli, a technology student, chose to be silent about her diagnosis when she started her studies.

> After many years of struggling and tears, I finally have managed to keep friends. I have friends who do not know that I have ADHD, who look upon me as a normal person. It was so important for me...

She feared these friends would redefine her if she told them about her impairment:

> I want them to know me as ME, and not ADHD-me.

As long as she handled social situations and refrained from talking about her troubles, Eli passed as a typical student. She feared that disclosure could lead to exclusion from the student group, but also that people would think they knew a lot about her. It placed her at risk of being interpreted in ways she had no control over. In her own words:

> First you can be kept out. In addition, other people assume they know a lot about you.

Eli was worried about the social identity she assumed would accompany a disclosure and was afraid the stigma of ADHD would become her 'front,' thus disturbing the personal identity she wanted to be associated with. Such worries do have support in research. According to Jung (2002), unconscious judgments are likely to be activated when a person is identified as disabled, thus increasing the risk of being stereotyped.

Helga shared the worries of Eli, however, her reflections were in particular related to a perceived incongruence between disability and the typical student role. She described a disabled person as someone unable to fill a traditional student role. She saw a risk both for being regarded with pity and also of exclusion. One way to cope with this incompatibility was to remain silent about her disability.

> You don't want others to see that you are disabled. You don't want to be treated like that. The worst case is if someone feels pity for you. My experience is that most students speak about their own success, and would, most of all, like to be together with other successful people. And I can't be a part of that if they see me as disabled. I will not be accepted, and then I will not have anyone to work with. It's so important to have someone to cooperate with.

After some years, Eli talked about her ADHD to some fellow students. To inform just a few people in whom she had confidence was Eli's way of handling the situation. This is a strategy which, according to Goffman (1963), is common in cases where the consequences of impairments are not easily concealed or there is a risk of involuntary disclosure. And involuntary disclosure was exactly what Helga had experienced. She has epilepsy and some fellow students were present during a fit. Afterwards, she felt they withdrew from her, among others excluding her from planning for group work and information on appointments. It is hard to be certain about why this exclusion took place, in particular since some students report supportive reactions after disclosure. She did however perceive a connection and later on only told others about the impairment when she felt it was absolutely necessary. She found it too risky and, for most of the time, she had no problems passing as 'normal.'

The issue of disclosure is, however, not only raised with regard to verbal information to fellow students. It is also about equipment, individual accommodation or other attributes that signify impairment or deviance. Assistive technology is not only a tool that eases everyday life at campus. It may also be a sign of disability. Camilla knew that she would benefit from a tape recorder at lectures because of her dyslexia, but she was unwilling to use it. She was afraid other students would think she was 'stupid.' Her fellow students were informed about her reading and writing difficulties, but she imagined that a tape recorder would magnify her impairment in the eyes of others. To be seen taking notes as the professor was talking, just like other students, was a way of minimising her difference in the eyes of fellow students. She knew this choice meant she would have no chance of passing all the exams on time. In spite of this, Camilla chose not to use a tape recorder. Instead, she planned to take an extra year to re-sit the exams she failed.

The signification of objects, including assistive technology, changes with the context or over time. A dictation machine in a GPs office is no problem, but may be so in a class-room. Some years ago the use of a personal computer was rare during lectures. It was used most often by students having problems writing and therefore seen as assistive technology. Today, nearly all students have their own computer. Helen, a student with rheumatoid arthritis has recently begun to use the computer in class:

> It is more common now. But in the beginning I would not have used it because I would have been set apart from the others. You don't want to be different. You want to be like the others in the crowd; be an ordinary student.

The quote illustrates the ambiguous nature of technology and accommodation. Söderström (2009) found that technology in some contexts can make it possible for young disabled people to present a preferred social identity and in other contexts make the individual stand out as different. One of the participants in the study of Riddell and Weedon (2009) heard other students talking in negative terms about a student with a laptop, which in this context was a sign of disability. He did not want this to happen to himself. Lupton and Seymour (2000) argue that technology has to match both the individual needs for adaptation, *and also* individual needs for self-presentation. In keeping with Camilla's reasoning, the young people in Söderström's (2009) study used technology if it maintained similarity but refrained from use if this was not possible. As also found by Seale (2012) the students in the current study showed caution on the use of technology or other equipment that could be connected to disability. In this way, they could control what was passed on about themselves.

Support – with a touch of ambiguity

However, for many students the option of passing is not relevant either because of the type of impairment, that necessary assistive technology is readily visible, or because they are not in a position to refrain from individual accommodation. Disclosure is necessary to obtain support or individual accommodation, and although many fear exclusion, the reactions from the social environment were often quite supportive, however, frequently not without ambiguity.

Kjetil was active in student organizations. He suddenly fell ill with a chronic disease which meant his health condition varied from day to day. He would have to cancel meetings in the organization with almost no notice. He felt that he had to inform his fellow students. At the same time, he talked about the uncertainty he felt about informing others.

> I thought that I am still the same guy, regardless of the disease or not. At the same time it is tabooed being sick, and I thought, … why do they need to know? Is it necessary? But I decided that if I am open about it, I may get an understanding of why I can't participate in everything. And now there is full acceptance of the fact that I, at short notice, may have to withdraw from meetings.

Kjetil resisted being a person others feel sorry for, and he was uncertain if they would meet him as they did before if they knew about his disease. He turned out to be happy that he told them. Now and then they asked him how he felt, without an expression of pity. He felt they cared in a way he could handle, and he could do the work he liked representing students at the university college. Other students also talked about positive experiences when discussing individual accommodation with staff members, both administrative and academic. Helen talked about both positive and negative meetings with staff members. The positive experience to which she referred was meeting (what she termed) 'resource people.'

> A resource person is good at seeing. I talked to one of them about the last paper, which I had failed, and she said, 'this is not a problem. You have to do what is the right thing for

> yourself, and tell me if you need me.' That was great for me and it makes things a little bit easier. That is one of the main reasons why I still am a student at that department.

And she continued:

> When people try to understand and make adjustments, it gives you a push and helps to put up with the challenge. You can't bear it if you know you will be met by a face telling you: 'oh, is it you again, are you coming to make it even more complicated for us?'

Being at risk of negative feedback, students quickly perceived how they were seen by others, signals of welcoming or of non-acceptance. It also affected choice. Helen decided to continue her studies at a department where she experienced support. Helens perspective is in line with what was found by Fuller et al. (2009) in their study of four universities. Students appreciated staff approachability, helpfulness, flexibility and a supportive attitude. Such attitudes made it easier for students to disclose and talk about impairments and also the need for reasonable adjustments.

The university's Disability Service was frequently referred to as a place of support and also information concerning rights and possibilities:

> Nobody told me about the support service. I thought it was meant only for students that could not walk. One day I read about it in the university newspaper, and contacted them. They helped me getting extended time during exams and I got an office to myself where I can read and take the rest I need during the day. (Helga)

The students in this study expressed confidence in and supportive contact from the Disability Services. The people working there gave advice on what could be offered to ease their situations and strategies for successful applications. A common thread running through the stories of these students is on the one hand the uncertainty they felt about informing about their particular needs, and on the other, experiences of being taken seriously. They could discuss possible solutions and were given information about what could be done or not.

> It means quite a lot, that someone takes interest in how you manage your everyday life. You can be in contact with someone that has knowledge about laws and regulations, so you can find solutions. . . . And they believe in me! They believe me when I tell them that something is a problem. That was great! (Eli)

The supports that students talked about were, however, not without ambiguity. Toril, Elisabeth and Knut are three examples. Toril was a Master's student. She knew what she needed in order to accomplish her studies. Due to movement restrictions, Toril used an electric wheelchair, and she had a personal assistant to help in practical matters. During exams she had an extra hour. When talking about the process of getting individual accommodation, she said:

> It was not a problem for me to get the accommodation, and the person at the examination office obviously had a kind of. . .well, not sympathy, but she was all right and I got what I needed and all that. While another person I know, studying the same subject as me, did not have an impairment that you could see, and the answer she got was: 'No, that is not possible.' And to me they said: 'This is no problem,' and 'how great!'. . .

Toril was grateful for the accommodation she received but disliked the fact that she was treated favorably compared to a student with invisible impairments. Elisabeth also expressed discomfort about unequal treatment. For instance she asked a professor for a copy of the lecture notes, because she had cerebral palsy and had problems taking notes. She did not tell him that she also had dyslexia. She was told she would get the copies. A fellow student standing beside her was asking the same question, arguing that he had dyslexia. This student was denied the notes. The situation of the two students was fairly similar, but they had different diagnoses and received different answers. Elisabeth said:

> I felt awful because I had told him [the professor] I had cerebral palsy! That was a classic example of stigmatizing!

Toril and Elisabeth were met in ways that could be understood as supportive. They received the adjustments they asked for. At the same time they experienced that other students were denied the same adjustments, without an intelligible explanation of why, but most likely because the impairments of the other two were not visible. The visibility thus appeared as a sign of 'deservedness.' But deservedness is not just positive. It is also a sign of how the social environment looks upon your impairment. It has a touch of pity and stigma which was reinforced by the unequal treatment. Both Toril and Elisabeth expressed feelings of discomfort related to this. Their experience could also be understood as an extension of how non-disabled people understand disability, as tragedy (Oliver 1990), and many disabled people feel ambiguity by support based on such perceptions of disability. The label disability is also why many resist disclosing their impairment and refrain from reasonable adjustment (Fuller et al. 2009).

In the case of Knut, the ambiguity was not related to unequal treatment compared to other disabled students but that he, nevertheless, had to play up to implicit ideas about deservedness. Knut suffered from extensive low back pain for which he had been provided office space, an adjustable chair, a table and a foot-rest. With such aids, he was able to work long hours without much pain. Students at his study level were, however, not entitled to have office space. Thus, he shared space with students that were at a further stage. They asked him why he had been allocated the place, and he told them about his back pain. They accepted his explanation, and often they asked him if he was in pain or how he was. He found it difficult to answer. If he said he did not have pain he was afraid they would think he did not need the adaptations. He found it difficult to explain how the furniture prevented pain.

> I cannot say that all the time. I feel it is easier to defend the place by saying that I have pain.

Knut saw himself in the eyes of his fellow students and answered them in the way he felt they would accept. The fact that Knut received physiotherapy treatment increased his credibility. Knut also experienced being questioned by one of the professors about future work options. By disclosing his impairments, Knut put the professor in doubt about his career choice. Knut felt confident about future work but was afraid he was seen as someone occupying a study place for no reason. He felt that he had to prove his case by achieving good results.

The examples in this section illustrate that people do experience support but also that support frequently has a touch of ambiguity. In other cases, the problem is not ambiguity. Descriptors such as exhibition of impairment, hassle, and thresholds to the support system fits better.

Combating for individual adjustments

When entering higher education, students have little experience on how the system for individual accommodation works. Some will have expectations based on their experiences from secondary education. They turn to someone that appears relevant in the new context: this might be the professor, the person responsible for exams, or a fellow student. Some people are supportive but the opposite may also be the case. Camilla contacted the faculty staff as soon as she entered the university college in order to discuss the adjustment she needed because of her dyslexia. She knew from previous school attendance that during exams she was entitled to sit in a room by herself, to have the examination questions presented orally, and to be permitted to use headphones with music because that helped her concentrate. At the university college, she was told that she could not expect to get what she required. The staff member told her that they had tried this before, that it was expensive, and the department did not feel this was the right thing to do. After a while, Camilla turned to the Disability Service for help and the necessary adjustments were agreed upon. Still, Camilla felt that the person who had rejected her in the first instance was distrustful about the information Camilla provided.

> I can understand why they have to be suspicious, because there is some cheating. But for me it all gave this negative impression. You are new in town and have to find your way around and fix it all by yourself. She was so negative. . . . I found it really stressful.

Other students reported similar experiences. Kari used hearing aids. She knew that listening to lecturers in big auditoriums could be difficult, and brought a frequency modulator. This meant the professors had to use a microphone that was connected to her hearing aid. She was surprised by the barriers she encountered when asking professors to use the assistive technology.

> It was hard for me – asking them to use it. I had to carry the equipment to the university every day. Then I had to go down to the rostrum and ask the professor to use it. If he was having a good day he cooperated. If he was not having a good day, he did not. So I had to stand in front of the other students arguing my case. I would say, 'it would be nice for me if you used it, because then I can hear what you say – otherwise I must go home and read.' . . . I could never take it for granted that they would cooperate. I had to prepare my arguments every time.

After six months Kari stopped going to lectures and for two years she studied by herself. When the student groups became smaller at more advanced levels, it became easier for her to participate. For Kari, assistive technology reduced barriers, but the people she met could put up new ones by refusing to use it.

Camilla and Kari had invisible impairments, which may have had an impact on the responses. What the staff members saw was a student, just like other students, asking for adjustments such as: examination questions to be presented orally, permission to use headphones with music, or a microphone for the professor. The

response was typically one of surprise and refusal, and for students like Kari, a feeling of exposure, even exhibition:

> When you are standing there in front of all the other students and they (the professors) reply so loudly that all the others can hear as well, 'no, I do not want to be bothered to do this.'

Other students reported similar experiences when asking permission to use a tape recorder or when teachers 'forgot' students sitting by themselves during exams. Such experiences are easily perceived by students that they do not belong, or that they are not a part of the consciousness of the institution as found in the study of Stamer and Nielsen (2008).

Discussion

Higher education has traditionally been a place for middle class young people free of characteristics that could be seen as deviance or nuisance. This may influence expectations and practices even though policies regarding disabled students have changed in recent years. In contemporary Norway, it is a political aim to increase the participation rate of disabled students to the same as that for other young people; the institutions have an obligation to have action plans for inclusion of disabled students and to provide a Disability Service to help individuals. According to the Higher Education Act, institutions are required to adopt principles of universal design. This article has explored the experiences and reflections of disabled students in this area of tension between unaltered traditions and more recent policy aims, and in particular related to negotiations about individual accommodation.

A majority of disabled students have the option of passing as 'normal' without disclosing their impairment, and as shown in this paper, many do, even if that means that they have to plan for extra years to re-sit exams. Others chose to inform a few trusted people on a case-by-case basis. The reasons for this reluctance to disclose information about impairments is fear of being stereotyped, pity or exclusion. They fear deviation from the image of the typical student. Such reflections suggest that the issue of stigma management is very real. The consequences are limited access to individual accommodation and thus problems in academic progress. Some refrain from using assistive technology for the same reasons. This also means it is likely that students who really try to 'pass as normal' probably would not volunteer to take part in studies such as the one reported here, and thus, that the incidence of passing as 'normal' is underestimated.

For students with visible impairments, passing is not an option, and also students with invisible impairments sometimes chose disclosure. The experiences appear to be mixed. Some report support whereas others describe requests being turned down in the first instance, suspiciousness regarding needs, and professors forgetting or unwilling to provide simple adjustments or assistance. The support also coexisted with an inflicted feeling of being a nuisance. Some felt bad about the support they were provided because the same support was denied other people with the same need which was less readily observable. Others experienced reactions that were perceived as doubts regarding career choice and future employment opportunities. In short, they developed a sense of not belonging, that they were matter out of place (Kitchin 1998). On the other hand, many reported good experiences with the Disability

Service, and also that this service approached the issues more in keeping with a relational model of disability, focusing on needed changes in the environments.

This article has demonstrated the ambiguity and ambivalence involved in disabled students' negotiations on reasonable adjustment, and also resulting reflections on identity, disclosure or passing, and the role as a disabled student, as someone that not quite belongs. The resistance students meet when asking for accommodation is an obstacle to higher education, in spite of legislation and political aims promoting inclusion. It is also a way of pushing people into an undesired and societally devalued role. Higher education has long traditions adapted to the image of a typical student, which matches neither the necessity of special accommodation nor the requirements of universal design. In order to make higher education a place for disabled students, it is probably necessary to reduce the importance of individual accommodation and the burden and onus this in practice places on these individuals. Instead higher education institutions have to address the issue of a generally more inclusive environment that is universal design.

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