ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

Recognising Disability in Higher Education

A Human Rights Perspective

INGER MARIE LID

A timely and clear-minded view of the politics of inclusion in higher education.

Jan Grue, *Professor of Sociology, University of Oslo*

In this cogent, accessible book, Lid reminds us of the importance of thinking about and supporting access to higher education for disabled people as a human right. She draws on the CRPD and rich anecdotal evidence to contemplate the individual, local, and global implications of legislative enactments and personal and institutional efforts to make higher education institutions more accessible. This book should be necessary reading for advocates and students and scholars alike.

Michael Rembis, *Director of the Center for Disability Studies at The State University of New York, University at Buffalo and author of* Writing Mad Lives in the Age of the Asylum

In this book, Inger Marie Lid, a professor living with disabilities, examines the realities and experiences of disability in higher education institutions in Norway and beyond, offering a personal perspective. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* is used critically to help readers understand the relational nature of disability. The book is useful for understanding our reality.

Hisayo Katsui, *Professor in Disability Studies, University of Helsinki, President of the Nordic Network on Disability Research*

Recognising Disability in Higher Education

Exploring and addressing disability in higher education, this key title focuses on education as a human rights topic. It provides empirical examples and analyses selected national policies in global contexts to discuss how to facilitate equal access to higher education for students and academics with disabilities.

Based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the author demonstrates how to facilitate equal access to higher education and raise awareness of disability as a human condition and an aspect of diversity in higher education. This book discusses dilemmas with regard to implementing universal design and individual accommodation in order to facilitate for diversity of individuals among students and staff.

With chapters covering implementation of the UN CRPD, ableism, recognition theory, disability, universal design, and individual accommodation, this book focuses on the institutional perspective – what are the universities' responsibilities and how can universities and teachers respond by implementing and practising inclusive policies? It is ideal reading for anyone interested in addressing the topic of disability in higher education.

Inger Marie Lid is Professor of public health and rehabilitation with a focus on interdisciplinary disability research, citizenship studies, and universal design at VID Specialized University. Lid has published books, articles, and edited books in interdisciplinary disability research, citizenship, human rights studies, and participation.

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To Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, for creating space and place for recognition and solidarity and for seeing the wonder.

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Preface

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education, including higher education. According to UNESCO, participation in higher education has increased significantly over the past 50 years globally from 10% of youth and adults worldwide in 1970 to 40% in 2021. However, this change does not fully include persons with disabilities on par with others. UNESCO argues that disability affects access to education in all regions when the education system does not have inclusive policy in place.

Since this CRPD was adopted in 2006, the states parties to the convention have submitted initial reports to the CRPD committee, describing how the states adhere to the convention. The initial report to the CRPD committee is a mandatory document that state parties to the convention submit within two years of ratification. These documents give a formal status and progress in fulfilling the obligations in the CRPD. In this book, selective initial reports are examined with an interest for how different state parties have addressed equal access to higher education for persons with disabilities.

This book is written from a Norwegian perspective and includes the Scandinavian context and beyond when discussing how higher education can welcome persons with disabilities as students, faculty members, and staff. The initial reports provide the book with examples of how the CRPD is transported from a global to a national level, which I refer to as a re-contextualisation of the convention in diverse contexts.

In 2026, 20 years after the CRPD was adopted, there is still a need for policies and mechanisms to support equal access to higher education, which is an arena of democratic importance. Based on a human rights perspective and recognition theory, the book aims to be transformative by pointing at how the structural level of higher education better can accommodate for persons with disability.

In nuancing analytically between macro-meso-micro levels, access to higher education is discussed with a focus at the institutional meso and individual micro levels. The macro level is described as the common

human rights anchored in the CRPD, adopted by 193 parties, including the European Union. The convention gives a common point of reference and human rights framework for the analysis and discussions. The meso level is the institutional level where universities as institutions interpret and implement strategies for inclusion. Selected strategies are included and discussed in the book as examples of institutional responsibilities for access to higher education and research.

The micro level is represented by micro examples of access or barriers and how these are navigated by students, staff, and educators. By including micro examples and national initial reports to the CRPD committee, the book has a focus on the meso-micro dynamics.

The primary audience of this book includes but is not limited to educators and students at university pedagogy courses, institutional administrators, student affairs, policymakers, scholars, and students in interdisciplinary disability research, pedagogy, law, social sciences, political philosophy, and general readers with an interest in disability, human rights, and higher education.

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Each writing and research project is collaborative, both directly and indirectly. In writing this book, I have engaged in dialogues and discussions with colleagues, research groups and friends over several years. I am grateful to my academic home, VID Specialized University, who have granted me with good working conditions, excellent librarians, encouraging colleagues and leaders and financial support for open access publication of this book. In the context of the Citizen's Project - Everyday citizenship for persons in vulnerable life situations (CitPro), I have discussed aspects of the book and explored the dynamics of citizenship inclusion and exclusion.

Topics and chapters have been discussed in more detail with Halvor Hanisch, Michael Rembis, Anna Chalachanová, Brynjulv Norheim, Leslie Swartz, Patrick Kermit, Oddgeir Synnes, Ryan Froese, and Vilde Lid Aavitsland. Professor Ilaria Garolfo has provided me with information on the Italian higher education system and Professor Alberto Arenghi provided me with the example used in the micro example in Chapter 5.

I have used Chat GTP for Polish - English translation of journal articles and discussed details with associate professor Beata Borowska-Beszta.

I also wish to thank my editor Sarah Hyde, who encouraged me to write this book when we met at the European Conference on Education Research (ECER) in Glasgow in 2023.

Finally, I express my deepest thanks to Ole A. Kvamme, education researcher and educator of teachers at University of Oslo, for never saying no to reading text and discussing challenges and specific topics over and again.

1 Perspectives on disability and education

According to the WHO, 16% of the population lives with a disability. In the US, 13% of the civilian adult population reported having a disability in 2021 (American Community Service, 2022). In the European Union, 26% of the population reported in 2023 that they had limitations in usual activities due to health problems (which constitutes having a disability), with 7% reporting severe limitations (Eurostat, n.d.). The number of students with a disability will be approximately 13–15% depending on context and place. It is therefore a social justice issue for higher education institutions to support students with disabilities. Both students and staff face disabling barriers at campus and in higher education institutions. Some of these barriers will be identified and discussed in the context of this book. UNESCO has developed strategies for promoting inclusion in the education system. The most recent is "Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education" (2021). Several countries have adopted national laws to prohibit disability-based discrimination in the education system, including higher education.

This chapter introduces the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), which serves as a foundation for this book on recognising persons with disabilities in higher education. According to the convention, disability is contextual and "results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others," (CRPD, Preamble, e). Thus, disability emerges as relational, the result of person-environment interactions. As of 2025, the CRPD is ratified by 192 states and the European Union. I will return to this definition of disability below, under the "Disability models" section. The CRPD's understanding of disability as a result from the interaction between persons and environments is crucial. According to the legal scholars Lisa Waddington and Andrea Broderick, the CRPD has changed the understanding of disability in the EU towards a social-relational understanding (Waddington & Broderick, 2024). I will call this a relational, inter-actional, or social-relational model of disability, and it will be applied and discussed throughout the book's chapters.

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Higher education is an arena of inclusion and exclusion. Persons with disabilities include persons with physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment and persons with neurodivergence. As disability is contextual, the accommodations for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities must also be contextual. For example, for some students, access to higher education is necessary. Whereas for others, individual accommodation in terms of a new programme will be needed. This book focuses on access to higher education in general. It is however necessary to recognise that in some contexts, developing new programmes is necessary to gain access to higher education (Lid et al., 2025).

Disability has been an exclusionary factor in education in most countries and regions due to lack of access and accommodation. This goes for all levels of education. For example, a recent Finnish study documented that equal access to higher education is far from reality in Finland, and there is not enough knowledge on why this is the situation (Katsui et al., 2024). In Nordic countries, access to higher education is not recognised as a universal human right. However, access to apply for higher education is a right. In most countries, including the Nordic countries, merits from primary, secondary, and further education are precondition for applying to higher education. If you do not have formal evaluation in terms of marks from further education, dispensation is needed to get admission to higher education. Primary, secondary and further education are in many countries divided into special needs education and ordinary education. This divide might cause problems for access to post-secondary education as the training and pedagogy in special needs education is often poorer than in ordinary pedagogy. This book is not on special needs education nor on primary and secondary education. It is however necessary to recognise the problems with earning merits in special need education as a background. Special needs education provides the formal training for applying to higher education for only very few students (Bjornsdottir, 2016). Therefore, special needs education possibly puts the student in a worse off situation as compared to students who have graduated from ordinary education.

Thus, all levels of the education system are of importance for access to higher education. In this book, the focus is on access to higher education and the right to seek and apply for higher education. Persons without good enough marks (or any marks at all) from further education, such as high school, are not eligible to apply for higher education in Nordic contexts without dispensation. As noted, in these contexts, access to higher education is not a right. Rather, to be able to apply for higher education is what constitutes equality of opportunity.

All students do not become professors, but all professors have been students. So, to have disability diversity in faculties at all levels and in all

roles, disability among students must be recognised and welcomed. Due to scoliosis, I needed individual accommodations at lower secondary school. As a student, when I was diagnosed with a chronic disease, the reaction from the university was more of a rejection than acceptance, as many other students have also experienced. The university could not, or did not think it was necessary to, accommodate my needs. Today, looking back as a professor, I recognise that the social peer support, inner motivation and love for research, learning, and teaching were the reasons for why I graduated and returned to the university as a PhD scholar 13 years after graduation, starting a career as a researcher in interdisciplinary disability studies. This was in 2007; the year Norway signed the CRPD, which also became topic of my research.

This initial chapter will lay out disability in its complexity, explain disability models, and address the call from UNESCO to establish inclusive policies in the education system. Strategies for inclusion is the focus of this chapter. Here I will sketch out important aspects of inclusive policies. These will be elaborated upon in the following chapters. In this introductory chapter I will use my own experience from within the education system and higher education. I grew up, live, and work in the Norwegian welfare state, which is similar to other Nordic welfare states with rather generous support for their citizens (van Gerven, 2022).

In the following six chapters, the CRPD as a global political human rights treaty is contextualised in various national contexts. To be realised human rights, the convention must be implemented in contexts, where people live, study, and work.

Disability models

The CRPD employs a model of disability as relational, the product of an inter-action. According to this model, disability emerges as a result of person–environment interactions, meaning that the situation, context, and the interaction itself are important for if disability emerges (Waddington & Broderick, 2024; Lid, 2023; Shakespeare, 2018). Disability may hinder the individual to take part in valued activities such as education and paid work.

Disability is and has been understood differently in different disciplines and contexts. A human rights perspective on disability is supportive of an affirmative conceptualisation of disability by recognising disability as part of the human condition, of life as it is. A brief note on terminology is here at its place. I will use both persons with disability and disabled persons in this book. My focus is on the human, the individual person, and the social–relational interaction within a complex environment. The British disability researcher Tom Shakespeare has pointed at the difficulty in finding one single term for describing people with different life

experiences and conditions (Shakespeare, 2018, p. 5). Disability is a multi-level concept and a human experience. At the ontological level, humans are diverse, and life comes with different abilities during the life span and between different individuals. Disability is an aspect of human diversity. The environments we live in accommodate for some and less for others, thus the context individuals live in influence upon what the person can do and to what degree disability emerges.

Since the rise of Western medicine, disability has predominantly been understood in medical terms focusing on individual health status, diagnosis, and impairment (Stiker, 1999). Different medical models of disability are employed in welfare states, where the costs of impairment and chronic disease are paid for by the welfare state through individual services, devices, and disability pension. However, framing impairment, chronic disease, and disability as individual issues is not sufficient for understanding the complexity of disability as a hindrance to participation in various life arenas. Medical approaches and models do not address disability-based discrimination or disabling barriers in society at large based on an analytical distinction between the person with impairment and disability as discrimination that hinders inclusion and social, cultural, and political participation. Social models of disability focus on environmental barriers that hinder participation. Involving both individual and environmental aspects, relational models focus on how environmental barriers in interaction with individuals lead to restriction in participation.

Disability as restriction of participation cannot be reduced to individual medical factors alone. Disability-based exclusion emerges from environmental, socio-cultural and political barriers. Social and relational models share, according to Shakespeare, a political commitment by promoting social inclusion and removing barriers that hinder participation (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 2). Such models understand disability as contextual, relative, and as a product of a person–environment interaction broadly spoken. These models differ in the understanding of the individual. According to social models, the environmental barriers are sufficient for understanding disability, whereas relational models include the individual factors and see both the individual, the environment, and the interaction between these as necessary for understanding how disability emerges in concrete contexts.

We can thus study theoretical explanatory *models* of disability starting with medical and social models and thereafter relational or interactional, as included in the CRPD. After having introduced and briefly described the medical, social, and relational models, I now describe and discuss how these operate in the context of higher education, using Norway as an example. Norway is a rather small country with 5.6 million inhabitants with a welfare state that takes responsibility for the health and education of its citizens. Norway ratified the CRPD in 2013 and

incorporate the CRPD in the human rights act in 2026. Still the medical model of disability has a central position in the Norwegian welfare state, and the use of medical models has been commented on and criticised by the UN CRPD committee in its comments on the Norwegian initial report (UN, 2019).

Today, the different disability models work in different geographical and cultural regions. However, a common ground is the interactional or relational model of disability used by the CRPD and described above (United Nations [UN], 2006; Waddington & Broderick, 2024). Disability relates to real people in real contexts and is also influenced by prejudices and socio-cultural understandings. In the context of higher education, the individual aspect is the student, the teacher, and the administrative personnel, whereas the environmental aspects include higher education as academic institutions, policy area, and micro-interactions in classrooms, auditorium, and between faculty members. The interactions take place at different administrative levels. Therefore, in the next section, I will distinguish between the micro, meso, and macro levels (Lid, 2023).

Micro, meso, and macro as analytical approach

The main analytical contribution of this book is to distinguish between macro, meso, and micro perspectives when focusing on the recognition of persons with disability in higher education. I position myself as a Norwegian professor working in interdisciplinary disability and citizenship research, and a woman with, often invisible, disability related to chronic illness. The micro perspectives presented in this book are described as contextual micro examples. I use my own experience, constructed examples, examples from the literature, and from academia. The institutional meso perspective is most focused on in this book, discussing how the higher education institution addresses disability issues and does or does not facilitate accommodations. The macro perspective is represented by international political documents such as the CRPD, initial reports from state parties, and policy documents from UNESCO. Such political documents are developed from different contextual perspectives and become, as international political documents, universal. To have effect, the international documents need to be re-contextualised in contexts, by materialisation or, if not, they are not referred to, disappear, and are not contextualised or applied.

There is little information on higher education in the states' parties' initial reports, as primary and secondary education are given priority. Therefore, I have selected a few countries where there actually is information on higher education, either in CRPD reports or in national research reports. Each chapter in this book has a section called "global context," which can seem like a contradiction in terms, as the global is not a context

but precisely global. However, here I use these sections to examine how selected countries in different regions and welfare states respond to the CRPD and UNESCO policies. These responses are read as instances of re-contextualisation. This international policy level is also the macro level of this book, and I examine how the different national structure responds to the international macro-level policies. The national examples used can either be formulated as direct responses such as the National initial reports to the CRPD committee, which is sent no later than two years after the convention entered into force for the country that is party to the convention. It can however also be more indirect. For example, in a national report on access to higher education for students with disabilities. I employ examples from the Nordic countries, and beyond, such as Italy, South Africa, Ireland, Poland, and Malta. The Nordic region is included, because it represents the geographical and political context in which this book is situated. The other countries referred to all have a focus on disability in higher education.

Higher education is a highly regulated arena. National legislation and international obligations govern higher education at the macro level. The analytical framework I have developed and used in other publications (Lid, 2023) can be described as in Table 1.1.

In this book, disability is seen as contextual and relational, as described above. A context is best described as multi-layered, as policy and law influence upon contexts. For example, what happens at campus and in a classroom, and what persons are to be present in a classroom as professor and student, is regulated by law and policy. Therefore, the diversity of a classroom and the diversity in academy is a result of different factors, such as admission to higher education, access to campus and social services available for students and employees.

The disabling barriers that persons with impairment encounter include architectural, digital, pedagogical, psycho-social, and organisational barriers. These are described as five dimensions of the work- and learning environment are included in the Norwegian law on universities

Table 1.1 The analytical distinction between the macro meso and micro level for implementing the CRPD in contexts

Macro level	Human rights treaties such as CRPD, international obligations such as SDG and UNESCO. National legislation.
Meso level	Institutional legal or political responsibilities interpreted and implemented at the higher education institutions, at institutes and faculties, syllabus, and curricula. Campus area and buildings, ICT programmes, and platforms.
Micro level	The student, faculty member and administration, micro-interactions regarding teaching and education.

and university colleges as dimensions of the student's learning environment (Ministry of Education and Research, 2024). I will use these dimensions when discussing learning and work environment in the chapters to come and also include socio-cultural dimensions.

This introduction and the subsequent chapters will address the topic at a macro, institutional meso, and micro level.

A human rights approach

Higher education has both intrinsic and instrumental value. Education is both about individual formation and preparation for paid work by developing learning skills, competences and knowledge. Education, including higher education, is strongly related to human rights and social justice. The right to education has been included in the human rights corpus since the first 1948 declaration, which in article 26 reads "Everyone has the right to education" (UN, 1948). According to this convention, higher education "shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (UN, 1948, art. 26). Equality of opportunity is included in the 1960 UN Convention against discrimination in education (UN, 1960, art. 4). According to this convention, higher education should be made "equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity" (UN, 1960, art. 4 a). "Individual capacity" is not further described.

In order to learn, one must be recognised as a learner by a system of education, teacher, family, and classmates. The state must facilitate for all children and young persons to access arenas for learning, such as public schools. But the family must also realise that their child has a learning potential. The parents of the disability rights activist, Judith Heuman (1947–2023), fought for her right to go to the neighbourhood public school (Heumann, 2020). For many children and young persons, access to the ordinary school is a condition for inclusion in local community. It is however necessary that the socio-cultural and pedagogical environment is supportive for each individual student's learning potential. There are many risks and vulnerabilities in the system of education, risks for exclusion throughout the trajectory of education. If the family does not understand the child as a learner, access to education is hindered before it even starts. And, on the other hand, if the education system fails to recognise for example deaf children as learners, it is very difficult for the family of the child to provide a good learning environment for their deaf child. The child and family need support from the state and education institutions. This also goes for higher education. When a child is not recognised as a potential student, this child will probably get less support from their teachers.

The political dimension is important as human rights are not yet realised for persons with disabilities. The lived reality to which the terms "persons with disabilities" or "disabled people" refer to can be described in

different ways. Students and staff with disabilities are both visible and invisible, and living with visible and invisible disabilities. In other places in the text, the term *disability* is used more generally to describe a social group and, by referring to the human rights concept, which underscores that persons with disabilities are subjects in human rights treaties on par with others. The term *disability* at the individual level also describes a situatedness of the individual, a way of living. Regarding the individual conditions, I adhere to the comprehensive definition of persons with disabilities described in the CRPD article 1:

> Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.
>
> (UN, 2006, article 1)

The different micro examples, as well as the examples employed from different global contexts, will illustrate the topics discussed from a multitude of individual and institutional perspectives. By this, throughout the book I acknowledge the diversity within the global minority represented by persons with disabilities. For all persons, equal access is experienced as a totality entailing different elements, such as housing, transport, services, campus, pedagogy, attitudes, etc. Not all these elements are important for all, but access as holistic and coherent is most often necessary and can be described as a "chain". Breaches on the accessibility chain lead to physical or attitudinal barriers. Therefore, equal access in the context of this book is understood as both multiscale and complex. The macro, meso, and micro analysis is relevant as is the chains of access at each level, the institutional meso level is most important for my purposes. Access emerges from complex interplays involving the individual and the environment, not as a single event but in and as processes.

The rights ensured by the CRPD are not stronger or more robust than the state parties are willing to implement. I here propose that accessibility, understood as equal access to resources for persons who are different, can be described by the metaphor of a *bridge*. According to the CRPD, accessibility makes out the positive duty to ensure equal rights. Equal access then, I will argue, bridges the gap between having rights and being able to practice one's rights. Accessibility forms the obligation of state parties to the CRPD to support the citizens positive freedom, which is different than an account of freedom as freedom from restrictions. In the context of disability, freedom for the individual is often dependent upon support such as services or assistance (Bostad & Hanisch, 2016). The recognition of persons with disabilities as rights-bearing subjects in the CRPD is precisely the reason why access is necessary for bridging the gap between

having rights and being able to enjoy the rights. Thus, the convention point towards a positive understanding of freedom rather than a negative.

This book situates the CRPD in the human rights context. The first article provides the purpose of the convention and the definition of disability quoted above. The purpose is described as protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms and promote respect for the inherent dignity of persons with disability. Article two provides definitions of central concepts and article three lays out the principles guiding the implementation of the convention. Among these eight principles are non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, equality of opportunity, and accessibility (UN, 2006). Article 24 on education, point 5 reads: "States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning" (UN, 2006). When adhering to this article, the states parties to the convention needs an awareness of what makes out barriers and support for persons with disabilities in higher education.

The global context

The states ratifying the convention are responsible towards each other; there is no supranational body enforcing the implementation of the CRPD or other UN conventions. The interpretation of the convention is up to each nation state to decide, since the states party to the convention are sovereign states. The Committee on the CRPD is the body of independent experts monitoring the implementation by the various state parties to the convention. State parties are obliged to submit reports to the committee regularly. Some of these reports are referred to in this book, describing how the various countries contextualise the convention. Several of the articles of the CRPD are of relevance here, but most notably article 24 on education.

The convention is a universal document that is implemented in different national contexts. The purpose of such international documents is to be implemented and practised rather than to remain as abstract political documents (Habermas, 2010). Both the UN Agenda 2030 with the 17 SDGs and UNESCO are influenced by the convention, for example the most recent UNESCO report "Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education" (UNESCO, 2021).

The human rights perspective on disability is here discussed regarding the state's responsibilities for implementing equal access to higher education. Equal access is an important facilitator for seeking admission to higher education. By giving examples from different welfare paradigms for example Europe, Scandinavia, the Global South and the USA, topics like social class, gender, universal design and individual accommodation, access to public transportation, welfare services, personal assistance, individual

devices, and health services are discussed as preconditions for access to higher education. The book thus includes intersectional perspective. I base the discussions on international research, policy reports, and states initial reports to the UNCRPD committee. These reports are published in UN Human Rights treaty database, and give an insight into how the countries, when ratifying the convention, evaluated their own status.

There is a growing body of research on disability in higher education, both empirical, historical and theoretical (Dolmage, 2017; Felder, 2023; Katsui et al., 2024, Kermit & Holiman, 2018; Kershbaum et al., 2017; Kim & Aquino, 2017). I will engage with the most relevant research for the purpose of this book throughout the chapters. The growing body of research and policy reports are promising because research and documentation can, when related to practice, lead to societal changes at the structural level. There are however so far not good enough instruments available for monitoring the implementation of the convention globally.

The importance of education

Central to the philosophy of pedagogy guiding this book is the recognition of all persons as learners, and that the needs for accommodation and facilitation for learning differs between different students. It is part of the human condition to learn; we all have potential for learning. This potential needs to be acknowledged and facilitated for by educational institutions. Persons have different ways of learning and also use different means of communication in order to prove learning outcome. Individual adaptation of learning processes must take this plurality and diversity among students seriously. Higher education and earning grades in higher education rely on the ability of the student to document the learning outcome. This documentation is facilitated by examination and assignments. Both writing and talking are necessary skills students must have and develop in almost all forms of education. In Western education systems, originality is also important—students must write in their own words and write longer theses at Bachelor's and Master's levels. Artificial intelligence will probably lead to changes, but earning grades without documentation of learning outcomes will probably not be a result. Therefore, it is an important aspect of individual accommodation to open up for different modes of exam and assignments. I will return to this in Chapter 5 on universal design and individual accommodation.

Education is important for everyone, and not least for persons with disability as addressed above. When learning together with peers, the individual can flourish and develop as a human together with other humans. In many countries, the primary and secondary special needs education has not given sufficient formal competences for applying for higher education. If special needs education does not provide what is needed to continue in to higher education, special needs education risks to keep children and

adolescents out of further and higher education. This is also a democratic problem because education is important for democracy and for access to resources such as paid work and social relations. Education is also an arena for participation and for recognition. Historically speaking, being educatable was an important dimension for being recognised as a citizen. The social disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities today are to some extent influenced by the lower education level and lower rates of employment (Felder, 2023, p. 423).

Access to higher education is important for realising social and political justice in different global contexts. I take Nordic countries as prime examples because these countries have well-organised welfare states and still face disabling barriers in the area of education. I am especially interested in higher education as a precondition for access to paid work and valuable roles in the society. Most of the concrete examples will be examples at the institutional meso level or contextual micro level.

Outline of the book

The aim of this book is to discuss disability in higher education in light of the CRPD and with a focus on both student and employee perspectives. The book is thus normative in aiming to support the implementation of the CRPD in higher education contexts. I wish to challenge exclusionary practices and the neglect of the topic, and to provide arguments for how a human rights perspective can support equal access to higher education for students with disabilities. After this introductory chapter, I present the theoretical perspectives of the book in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I present and discuss the institutional responsibilities for recognising disability in higher education. Chapter 4 discusses the counterpart of recognition, namely misrecognition, often also referred to as ableism. In Chapter 5, I present and discuss the universal design strategy as included in the CRPD, and thereafter in Chapter 6 I return to recognition, discussing building and sustaining a culture of recognition of disability in academia. Chapter 7 discusses higher education and knowledge production from a democratic perspective, with an emphasis on building knowledge for society. The postscript is a conversation with professor Halvor Hanisch, a colleague with disability discussing possibilities for a more inclusive academia.

The pedagogical take on the book is organised as follows. Each chapter offers a specific topic and illustrates this with a micro example. Each chapter also has an analytical reflection of the topic at a macro-, meso- or micro level. The discussions include theoretical perspectives on the topic addressed. Higher education is a global concern, where researchers, students, and academic staff relate to international research and education. Mobility is also an important aspect of higher education and research. Implementation of the CRPD in different global contexts is therefor discussed.

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2 The significance of recognition

Introduction

Recognition is a key term in this book, and my understanding of recognition is inspired by the German philosopher Axel Honneth's work. The overall theoretical approach of this book therefore has recognition theory as developed by Honneth as an important reference. His theoretical contribution is criticised and further developed by, among others, Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Miranda Fricker. Since my interest here is on recognising disability in higher education, Honneth is used for this purpose, and not as a philosopher of pedagogy, where his contribution has proved productive at a more general level. In this theoretical chapter, I first briefly introduce Honneth and thereafter give a short presentation of Martha C. Nussbaum. Nussbaum's contribution gives a perspective on the importance of education for democracy. Both Honneth and Nussbaum make out this book's theoretical foundation. The rest of the chapters will apply these theoretical perspectives to discussions of specific aspects of disability in higher education related to institutional responsibilities, misrecognition, universal design, cultural aspects, and a more comprehensive discussion on the meaning of building knowledge for a diverse society. In my understanding of the role of education supporting democracy and participation in democratic processes, Honneth and Nussbaum offer theories that go fairly well together. Fundamental for recognition here is recognition of persons with disabilities as potential and actual students and staff in higher education institutions.

I will discuss problematic aspects of Honneth's theory and also show how recognition in education can address them. Honneth (1995), in developing his social theory with normative content (p. 1), does not include disability as a human condition and the social struggle of persons with disabilities as part of his sphere of interest. His theory of struggle for recognition has, however, proved valuable to researchers in disability studies (Felder, 2018; Hanisch, 2013; Kermit, 2019; Lid et al., 2025). I will, therefore, in this chapter outline the theory of recognition as I read

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Honneth, and discuss and critique the theory from a disability research perspective. At the end of this chapter, I will include perspectives from Martha Nussbaum.

Disability as a universal human condition

Who is and who is not to be recognised as equal persons? This ethical and political key question is and has been discussed in political philosophy and ethics from various perspectives. Those who were able to engage in such discussions were predominantly men and some women with access to resources such as property, time and money. As pointed out by Virgina Woolf, in order to think and write, one needs a room of one's own and enough money (Woolf, [1929], 2017). Today, as more people have access to resources such as education and time to think and participate in knowledge production and democracy, more individuals are recognised as equal persons and citizens. This development can be seen as an expansion of the understanding of who and what social groups are to be recognised as equals.

Honneth notes that individual rights in modernity are no longer grounded in role expectations, for example the male role. Instead, individual rights must "be ascribed in principle to every human individual as a free being" (Honneth, 1995, p. 110). This is an expansion of individual rights to a universal inclusivity. All human beings, in principle, are to be recognised as an individual with rights. By expanding individual rights to the universal level, Honneth's theory of justice can be seen as a human rights approach. When discussing expansions of social relations of recognition and expansions of the relations of mutual recognitions (Honneth, 1995, p. 93), Honneth also focuses on empirical foundations of the social struggles for recognition. I will in this book apply his theory on persons with disabilities as a social group based on the human rights informed argument that disability can be seen as political and social discrimination and suppression. This perspective is fundamental for the global adoption of the CRPD. The disability rights movement is small, but significant and works at the international level. The social struggle for recognition of persons with disabilities, and disability rights organisations, is a fight for equal rights and for rights as citizens, both globally and in local contexts. The documentary "Crip Camp" (Lebrecht & Newham, 2020) describes and documents the disability rights movement in the US, from its start in the 1960s and to today's situation, which includes stronger legal protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

The American political philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum has focused on the role of education for building and supporting democracies (Nussbaum, 2010). Nussbaum also engages directly in the question of justice for persons with disabilities (2006, 2009; Terzi, 2005). Education is valuable in itself and a formal condition for continuing through the system of

education and access to paid work. Education at all levels is a pathway to freedom and valuable roles in society. Nussbaum is concerned about the role of education in building democracies. In most societies, education is a precondition for entering into valuable professional roles and thus also a precondition for economic freedom. Honneth and Nussbaum can deepen each other and will be referred to throughout the remaining chapters.

Examining the role of the CRPD in the struggle for recognition

Honneth proposes a differentiated theory of recognition: namely, that "experiences of injustices be conceived along a continuum of forms of withheld recognition – of disrespect – whose differences are determined by which qualities or capacities those affected take to be unjustifiably unrecognized or not respected" (2003 pp. 135, 136; Lid et al., 2025, p.74). Honneth distinguishes between three spheres of recognition: love, law and achievement (p. 138). These realms entail forms of social relations in which members of society can count "in different ways and according to different principles on reciprocal recognition" (p. 142). These principles entail "Love" (the central idea of intimate relationships), the equality principle (the norm of legal relations), and the achievement principle (the standard of social hierarchy) (p. 143), alternatively called the spheres of "love and friendship", "respect", and "self-esteem" (Lid et al., 2025, p. 74). I will here predominantly engage with the second principle, the norm of legal relations, and explore the CRPD as a universal dimension of legal relations. I will however also engage with the third principle, self-esteem.

I apply a micro-, meso- macro-level approach to distinguish between the role of individuals and interactions at the micro level, higher education systems and institutions at the meso level, and international bodies such as the UN CRPD and UNESCO at the macro level. This structuring is inspired by universal design research and educational research (Boeren, 2019, p. 281; Lid, 2023). As I have argued in Chapter 1, equal access to higher education must be implemented at the institutional level in order to have an effect at the micro level, for students, faculty, and staff. At the legal level, implementation of the CRPD in different national legal structures can be seen as an expression of legal recognition (Honneth, 2003). According to Honneth (1995), the struggle for recognition is determined by universal ideas, in which individual actors see their particular experiences of disrespect eliminated (Honneth, 1995, p. 163). Furthermore, Honneth argues that there must be a "semantic bridge" between the impersonal aspirations of a social movement and their participants' private experiences of injury, and this bridge must be sturdy enough to enable the development of a collective identity (Honneth, 1995, p. 163). The emergence of social movements then, according to Honneth, hinges on a

shared semantics that enables personal experiences of disappointment to be interpreted as effecting a "circle of many subjects" (Honneth, 1995, p. 164). Moreover, when

> ideas of this sort have gained influence within a society, they generate a subcultural horizon of interpretation within which experiences of disrespect that had previously been fragmented and had been coped with privately can then become the moral motives for a collective 'struggle for recognition'.
>
> (Honneth, 1995, p. 164)

I here interpret and test disability and disability discrimination as a particular experience of disrespect and experience of injury and the CRPD as a "semantic bridge" that can enable the development of a collective identity. In this perspective, the struggle for equal rights fought by disability rights movements can be interpreted as a struggle for recognition. Moreover, the implementation of the CRPD can be interpreted as a legal recognition of persons with disabilities and even solidarity. This scheme I here introduce will be developed, and discussed in various chapters. The CRPD addresses disability-based discrimination and obliges state parties to the convention to support the equal rights and freedoms of persons with disabilities. The convention provides researchers, governments, disability rights organisations, and individual persons with concepts and a language to understand disability as a political and human rights issue rather than as a medical condition or an individual problem.

In the following chapters, the CRPD is used as a point of reference globally and as a common language and conceptualisation of disability as a product of the person–environment interaction. I am thus approaching the CRPD as a semantic bridge and exploring the potential of the convention to support disability as a social identity forming a social movement struggling for recognition. My discussion of aspects of Honneth's theory is not intended to be comprehensive or fine-grained. Rather, I aim at focusing on a few aspects of this theoretical contribution that needs to be addressed from a disability perspective. My contribution here then is more of a sketch where I specify what I see as challenging than a critique of Honneth's theory as such.

Reciprocal recognition as a challenge

Honneth asserts a reciprocity in the relationship of recognition based on rights (Honneth, 1995, p. 110). This is what above was referred to as *reciprocal recognition*. Individual subjects recognise each other as "capable of autonomously making reasonable decisions about moral norms" (Honneth, 2003, p. 110). Honneth is here making an explicit positive and

an implicit negative claim. The explicit positive claim is that actors as individual subjects recognise each other. The implicit negative claim can be reformulated as those who are not capable of making reasonable decisions about moral norms are not capable of mutual recognition. According to the Dutch philosopher and translator of Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition*, Professor Joel Anderson, "The object of respect (including self-respect) is an agent's capacity to raise and defend claims discursively" (Anderson, 1995, p. xv). This capacity to raise and defend claims must be exercised in order to become a basis for self-respect. Anderson then asks what it could mean to have a capacity one cannot exercise (Anderson, 1995, p. xv). Seen from a disability perspective, there are numerous examples of persons having the capacity to raise claims, without being able to exercise this capacity. This is exactly why the CRPD is important. The convention addresses the gap between having a right, such as right to education and capacity for education, and not being able to exercise this right.

I will now examine this in more detail. Having a capacity for something, for example to raise and defend claims, and to exercise this capacity is not the same. The capacity to raise and defend claims is universal, but the ability to exercise this capacity is contextual and depends upon the person and the environment and the interaction between the person and the environment. Consider a deaf person living in an oral environment. For this person, with no access to learning and practising sign language, he or she does not have the ability to raise or defend claims. This is because raising and defending claims are communicative and linguistic practices that take place in social contexts. Without access to a common language, the person does not have access to a means of communication for raising or defending claims. Also, a person with no verbal language will face barriers for raising and defending claims without access to augmented, alternative communication. A person using a wheelchair is dependent upon access to campus and accessible campus buildings in order to have equal access to higher education. Building on the relational model of disability explained in Chapter 1, what the person can do and be, depends upon the environment and universal and individual accommodation. Education plays a role in building a capacity to raise or defend claims. We are born with a potential for this, but in realising the potential, education matters. When we, as children learn to read and write, we also learn to relate to history, to the world and to each other. We learn to understand ourselves as one among many and to navigate as person among persons in systems and dynamics of power, limits, and possibilities. Education is a precondition in contemporary societies to know how to raise and defend claims that can be recognised by others as such.

Recognition can be seen as ambivalent as we need to seek recognition on others' terms and not on our own terms (Stahl, 2021, p. 161). This means that the recognition takes place in social contexts informed by

values and practices. These practices of mutual recognition are based on common values and societal practices that are learnt and developed in social settings such as the school system and at micro level in families. Education as formation and knowledge on societal issues plays a role in the dynamics of mutual recognition and misrecognition. Honneth does not in his theory address the importance of education for reciprocal recognition. But the mutual recognition presupposes, I will argue, some level of education as we recognise each other as persons respecting the law. Access to education is relevant for a person's abilities. If one is misrecognised as a learner and have been excluded from education, one is perhaps not aware of one's rights and responsibilities and of the legal sphere in general. Disability is seen as an individual characteristic that hinders the individual in realising their potential. Persons with impairment face attitudinal and practical obstacles in everyday situations, which reduces the individual's learning in educational contexts (Kermit & Holiman, 2018). In many contexts, children and adults with disabilities have been misrecognised in education and as learners (Fricker, 2007).

Disability therefore can hinder a person in exercising one's rights. When thinking of the individual's capacity in an individualist way, there are many individual persons that face hindrances. A better alternative, therefore, is to understand the person's capacities in a relational way. In feminist philosophy, several have argued that autonomy must be reformulated as a relational concept (Lid, 2022; Mackenzie, 2019). Martha Nussbaum (2006) is one of the few political philosophers who include disability as a human condition in a theory of justice. Together with Amartya Sen, Nussbaum develops the *capabilities approach*, focusing on what a society, aiming for justice, owes to its citizens. Nussbaum's understanding of human dignity is universal, covering all humans. On the basis of universal human dignity, Nussbaum proposes a rather detailed and concrete theory of justice with a focus on the responsibility of states and institutions for realising all persons' right to live a life worthy of that dignity (Lid, 2023; Nussbaum, 2006). Nussbaum's capabilities approach supports a relational understanding of self-determination, and I will argue, also a relational understanding of reciprocity that can give content to Honneth's expansion of equality. If we acknowledge the importance of relations for persons to develop and flourish, we can also acknowledge the significance of relationality in reciprocal recognition. According to Nussbaum, individuals live in relation to others and can only be thought of as part of such relations. This ontological concept of human as relational leads to a specific human vulnerability because what we need the most is often not part of what we can control. The political democratic structure therefore needs to address this relationality when providing necessary support for each individual living in the society. Nussbaum starts her political thinking in this embodied vulnerability and anchors the human

dignity precisely in this embodied vulnerability (Nussbaum,2006). As a contribution to theories of justice, the capabilities approach is a human rights approach providing a concrete proposal of what justice for individuals can look like and what the state's responsibilities are to achieve justice for its citizens. The link to education is obvious. Education is among the goods of a just society to offer for its citizens and important for individuals to flourish and contribute to the society. How far the state's responsibility goes in accommodating individuals is to be decided in context. The social and relational dimension of the capabilities approach is valuable for a further discussion on how to practise recognition as mutual. Taking the relationality as a position, I will argue that it is not up to the individual alone to enter into relations of mutual recognition. Governments and institutions have a responsibility to make it possible for individuals with different capacities and abilities to engage in relations of mutual recognition. The accommodation for this can be linguistic in terms of using sign language, braille, or alternative augmented communication, providing services and personal assistance, or guaranteeing equal access to arenas such as education, culture, and workplaces.

Example from Finland

In Finland, disability accommodations in universities have not yet been integrated into higher education institutions. Based on empirical studies, researchers found that students with disabilities including learning disabilities experience barriers and obstacles that are pedagogical, physical, and organisational (Katsui et al., 2024). Reasonable accommodation is often not in place, and the CRPD, which guarantees reasonable accommodation, is not well known among students, staff, and teachers. Students experience lack of understanding of their needs, especially those with invisible disabilities, and having a medical diagnosis makes it easier for some to obtain accommodation. Katsui et al. (2024) found that "reasonable accommodation measures are not systematic; they are sporadic and greatly depend on individual teachers and their attitude" (p. 36).

Finland ratified the CRPD I 2016. This example based on student's experiences in Finland illustrates that the convention is still used to a limited degree in higher education contexts. The convention is not known, and persons with disabilities as well as institutions are not aware of their rights. Does this mean that the human rights approach has been unsuccessful? Part of the answer with regard to the Nordic welfare states lies in a strong trust in the welfare state and less understanding of the importance of rights (Brennan et al., 2018). But this is not the full answer, part of it is probably also that disability as a political concept and persons with disabilities as a social group are less acknowledged.

Global context

The implementation of the UN CRPD led to globalisation of the disability rights discourse (Heyer & Mor, 2019). The global expression of the UNCRPD is recontextualised in different regions and countries and adapted to the welfare state or state regulations. For example, in well-organised welfare states such as Nordic welfare states, medical models of disability seem to be successful because policy based on medical models support of individuals by use of compensatory measures, although without a comprehensive human rights understanding of disability (Brennan et al., 2018). With the history going back to the 1960s, UNESCO has been focusing on access to higher education as a human rights issue for decades, as documented in Chapter 1. A more recent report is the 2021 UNESCO report *Reimagining our future together*: *A new social contract for Education*. Here, UNESCO states that without inclusive policies in place, disability affects access to education across all regions and income group (UNESCO, 2021, p. 25). The CRPD can be instrumental for getting such inclusive policies in place in Education systems across the world and regions, if implemented. Higher education and research are linguistic and live by words, concepts, models, and understandings. As a semantic bridge, the CRPD can provide models and understandings that support dismanteling of disabling barriers in higher education.

Discussion

Honneth's theory of justice does not, as Nussbaum's, include a specifically disability perspective. This lack cannot be interpreted as the theory fails to recognise persons with disabilities as equals. The counterpart to Honneth's concept of recognition is Miranda Fricker's concept of misrecognition (Fricker, 2018). I will engage with this concept later, in Chapter 4. However, it is necessary to include Fricker's concept here in discussing Honneth's reciprocity claim from a disability perspective. As a starting point for the discussion, persons with disabilities are, according to the CRPD, equal human beings with the same inherent dignity as all humans (UN, 2006, article 1). However, the conditions for entering into mutual relationships of recognition are different as there are disabling barriers in all societies that hinder the equal access to valorised arenas, such as education, including higher education. Nussbaum's theory of justice, the capabilities approach, and her understanding of the importance of education provide some tools for dismantling barriers (Nussbaum, 2006, 2010). The capabilities approach provides a tool for how societies can support justice for persons with disabilities by adapting to the individual needs and supporting individuals through accommodations. Fundamental for Nussbaum's theoretical contribution is that all individuals should be supported in

flourishing in one's own way and choose for themselves what they understand as a good life (Nussbaum, 2006). The kind of support needed must be decided within each national and institutional context. What is of importance is that Nussbaum's theory of justice takes a disability perspective when focusing on the subject of justice, the person. For Nussbaum, self-respect is not anchored in the individual alone but has a social basis, described as part of the capability "Affiliation", which is to relate to and engage in relation with other beings. Nussbaum describes this capability as "Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to others" (2006 p. 77). Here, the social basis of self-respect is recognised as necessary for a person, instead of expecting the person to develop the self-respect alone. This social base, I will argue, is developed in formal and informal settings. One of the fundamental formal settings is education. As students and pupils, we learn to respect both the other and ourselves. To be treated as dignified beings is not just happening in solitude, but rather is part of the formation process that is fundamental in education. We are formed and form each other as equal and dignified beings.

The capacity to assert claims is seen by Honneth as a basis for self-respect but is in his theory more individualistic. Individuals are recognised for their particular abilities and traits (Honneth, 1995, p.178). Honneth's theory of recognition has proved valuable for disability scholars (Felder, 2018; Hanisch, 2013; Lid et al., 2025). We must however examine if his theory also contains a bias regarding human abilities. Since disability became a political, social, and human rights topic, not least through the globalisation of the disability discourse through the CRPD, Honneth's theory of recognition opens up for an analysis of the struggle for recognition as relevant to the struggle for social and political justice as fought for by disabled activists and advocates. The CRPD can be seen as a common language that can raise awareness and point at common goals. As a UN convention, it goes beyond the disability communities and is a convention recognising the full human rights for all persons, including persons with disabilities. The CRPD thus provides both grammar and structure for recognising the rights of a group of persons who have not been recognised as rights bearers.

Summing up

Recognition theory is relevant together with Martha C. Nusbaum's perspective on disability justice and the democratic importance of education. These theoretical approaches have differences, for example with regard to the role of the social. Here Nussbaum acknowledges that self-respect has a social basis, which is less explicit in the theory of recognition as developed by Honneth. These theories, however, align well as both are human

rights–oriented approaches to social and political justice for persons in marginalised positions.

The CRPD, as a common semantic bridge, can raise awareness of the exclusionary mechanisms faced by persons with disabilities and support a social struggle for their recognition in society fighting for justice for persons with disabilities. Social justice in this context is not to be reduced to a negative concept of freedom as equal access is dependent upon positive mechanisms such as accommodation for diversity and individual adaptation in concrete situations. Advocacy and peer support are also important in the context of higher education. Role models, such as professors and staff with disabilities, can strengthen the feeling of belonging in higher education. A student with disability was once using the term "home court" when describing how this student felt about the university campus after two years as a student. The role of students, professors and professionals with disability can be of importance for supporting the sense of belonging to higher education rather than having the experience of not fitting into academic contexts.

For the purpose of this book, I will use the theory of recognition as formulated by Honneth and mostly focus on legal and solidarity dimensions. I will however also include Nussbaum's works and thereby slightly twist Honnet's theory in a more disability-friendly direction by arguing that society and institutions have responsibility for enabling all persons to achieve the same rights. In order to do that, persons with disabilities must be recognised as equals in mutual recognition characterised by relations.

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3 Institutional responsibilities

Introduction

Higher education institutions are built and developed by humans to facilitate teaching and education as social enterprises. Those who teach and receive education are concrete human beings of all genders, ages, and diverse abilities and disabilities. This has not always been the case, as for centuries higher education was only accessible for the elites predominantly men. Still there are old universities in the US and the UK, where there are not toilets for women on each floor because there were fewer women employees and students. Access to toilets is a good indicator of representation because all humans need to use toilets daily, and these facilities are often gender-divided. With more women on campus, there is a need for more toilets for women or unisex toilets.

As I described in the introductory chapter, the main analytical perspective of this book is a micro meso macro approach to the topic of disability in higher education. "Persons with disability" is a social group category. As humans, we are embodied and have different abilities and impairments that also change throughout our lifespan. The various environments in higher education institutions comprise rooms, buildings, public spaces between the buildings and socio-practical spaces such as libraries, restaurants, gyms, toilets, and group rooms. In addition, spaces and services outside campus are also of importance for access to higher education, such as dormitories, public transportation, and health and welfare services. The learning environment of students and the work environment of faculty and staff have architectural, digital, pedagogical, psycho-social, and organisational dimensions (see Chapter 1). When discussing the institutional responsibilities for accommodating persons with disabilities in higher education, these five dimensions will be applied.

Disability is not a fixed status in direct opposition to being able-bodied. The border between persons with and without disability is porous, and throughout lifetime most of us experience some form of disability, either for a limited time or for life. This does not mean that all are

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disabled, but one can argue that all social contexts are contexts where disability is relevant. The UN SDGs calls for disability-sensitive and inclusive learning environments for all (UN, 2015, Goal 4, target a). In this chapter, I will explore disability in higher education contexts and show what disability-sensitive and inclusive learning environments can look like in higher education institutions. This is important because persons with disabilities are underrepresented in academia among students, graduates, and professors (Murray, 2021, p. 20). The exclusion starts early, as children and young people with disabilities remain underrepresented in school and consequently do not enjoy wide participation in higher education (UNESCO, 2023, p. 4).

This chapter focuses on what a relational model of disability implies in terms of knowledge needs and universal, individual and contextual accommodations. I here also provide real-life examples of barriers and facilitators based on the needs of a diverse group of students through their educational journey. In this chapter, I mostly focus on the institutional responsibilities for facilitating a diverse groups of students rather than staff and teachers. The examples used will take different perspectives illustrating disability, diversity, and contextual variations in specific geographical and political contexts. The human rights perspective on disability is discussed regarding the states' responsibilities for implementing equal access to higher education. Individual accommodation, welfare services, and personal assistance are discussed as preconditions for access to higher education.

Institutional responsibilities for accommodation

I here focus on the structural meso level, higher education institutions and infrastructure. At this level, knowledge of structural barriers and facilitators is important for developing inclusive systems of education. In Norway and Nordic countries, the principle of sector responsibility is implemented in politics. This implies that the sector of education is responsible for building inclusive policies and practices.

Lack of accommodation in lower primary and secondary education affects admission to higher education. Those who wish to apply for admission to higher education must offer a successful student journey through the system of education as a precondition for admission. In the context of this book, this aspect is not included because my main focus is on accommodation for persons with disability in higher education. One important part of the student journey is to prove learning outcomes in an exam or assignment. Students at all levels are expected to document their leaning outcomes through mostly written and oral assignments and exams. Other modes of communication that can be used are sign language, braille,

augmentative and alternative communication, and plain language. Accommodation by use of the for the student best suited language is thus an element of the successful student journey.

One very early example of writing using augmentative and alternative communication is the 1957 autobiography by the young Norwegian woman Rikke Steenbuch, who at the age of 19 published her autobiography titled "I live too" ("Jeg lever også") (Steenbuch, 1957). Here she describes how she, by using a spelling plate, communicated each letter and word to her teacher, who wrote down the text. Steenbuch used her left hand to point at each letter, and as her teacher put the letters together to form words, she wrote in her own words (Steenbuch, 1957, p. 15). This was also how she communicated with family and friends.

Disability as a human condition becomes contextual at the micro level. Individual disabilities or impairments can be visible and invisible. In order to facilitate for equal access for diverse individuals, both individual and universal accommodation is necessary. A good and comprehensive universal design will often minimise the need for individual accommodation, but never fully exclude the needs for individual adaptation and accommodation. I will discuss universal design as accommodation further in Chapter 5. Some universities in the US have changed the name of disability services to access services.[1] "Access service" focuses on the socio-spatial environment, whereas "disability service" focuses on the individual person with disability. In order to get individual accommodation either related to communication or other, the student often must give an individual-based reason, which is most often a medical diagnosis. The student must disclose a disability, chronic illness, or impairment to someone at the university. This can be the professor or administrative staff. If a student discloses a disability to the professor, this comes with a price. As for myself, when I was a student, and told my professors about my chronic illness, I was met with lower expectations than my fellow students. As one of my professors told me afterwards, there was no use in spending time on supervision and support since I would not have an academic career due to my health condition. I got the accommodation I needed but the cost of this was less academic support.

When accommodating for access, universities are facilitating support for individual persons, thereby opening up universities and academia and combating exclusionary mechanisms that have led to misrepresentation of persons with disabilities at all levels of academia. If approximately 15% of any population live with disability, we could perhaps expect 15% of students to have disabilities. If this is not the case, there are likely structural reasons for this misrepresentation of persons with disabilities in higher education. The Norwegian directorate for higher education and skills found that universities and university colleges are not sufficiently aware of their legal obligations for counter-acting disability-based discrimination

and accommodating students with disabilities (Olaussen et al., 2025). This lack of awareness of legal obligations for accommodation cause barriers that hinder equal access.

Micro example

This micro example comes from the Norwegian professor and disability scholar Jan Grue and is an experience from his student life. He explains in a personal note:

> I was studying Russian language and there was a strong expectation from the institute that we as students should go to Russia for a stay during our studies, at least for a month. However, there were no facilitation for me as a wheelchair user. It was expected that I could go, and I was responsible for the accommodation I needed without institutional support. I manged to do this; it was however an experience filled with ambivalences. In order to manage, I hired two of my peer students as assistants. They lived in an apartment in the city of St. Petersburg while I lived at the university area. I was dependent upon them for support for getting out and about, buying food etc. I brought a manual wheelchair as I did not think it would be possible to manage an electric wheelchair. What surprised me, was the total lack of interest for my needs from the University institute together with a strong expectation that I would go to St. Petersburg for the stay. This experience made me realise that this course and education was not for me. I changed accordingly to another coursework.[2]

This micro story is recognisable for many students. They are left alone by the university with the task of taking responsibility for the accommodations they need. This is what happens when there is no policy in place dealing with accommodation issues. As described in this case, accommodation that aims for inclusion has a cost, economic and existential. Here, Grue has resources tohire his peer students, but still this kind of asymmetric dependency has an existential cost, which is ambivalent.

Inclusion is important for society, and it does have a cost. In the example above, the university could have assisted Grue in his stay abroad as a student and paid the price for equal access. According to economist and capabilities approach theorists, Amartya Sen, the disadvantage experienced by disabled people should be compensated for by the provision of goods needed to achieve the same opportunities as peer citizens (Terzi, 2005). In the case described above, providing assistance to student Grue at that time would have given him equal opportunity to study abroad as his peers.

The relational model for disability can be used as a model for inclusion (Grue, 2023). Inclusion (Latin: *in-clusio*) means literally to be closed in, enclosed. When we talk about inclusion in political contexts what is meant is to be part of, to participate. Inclusion can mean to be part of the people broadly spoken, to be part of, included in democratic institutions and systems, such as education systems. Inclusion sometimes has a price, such as developing accessible pedagogical materials, adapting digital platforms to individual devices used by persons with sight loss, and maintaining outdoor areas for access. Someone must pay for this material inclusion measures.

We can examine who pays the price for the inclusion as seen from two perspectives, either the institution or the individual. The institution has the formal responsibility, but the student has the strongest interest in inclusion taking place, as this micro narrative from Grue exemplifies. Most student does not have access to resources to pay the price for inclusion and is therefore left out. Grue has resources and takes responsibility for his inclusion both financially and practically, with the costs, precarities, and the unpredictability that follow (Grue, 2021). In the next section, I will present and discuss the Italian case as an example of inclusion measures taken.

Global context: The Italian case

The CRPD is, as other UN conventions, a text document describing rights for the citizen that is supported by the state. States that are part to the convention are responsible for implementation towards one another. The logic is that the universal text of the different articles can be implemented in different national contexts. Therefore, the CRPD is both universal and contextual. The text, with preamble and the 50 articles, are to be implemented in all kinds of political contexts. Thus, the question regarding responsibilities of the nations and institutions can only be answered contextually rather than at the general level.

I will now turn to Italy and the Italian system for an illustrative example at the meso level. Italy is interesting as the country have implemented a structure for facilitating for students with disabilities. It is mandatory to appoint a Disability Officer in each Italian university (Law No. 17 of 28 January 1999). The law also focuses on the activities to be carried out in favour of disabled university students and provides for the allocation of state funding dedicated to the implementation of the policies that individual universities decide to adopt.

Italy has at the macro level a legal system that has led to implementation at the institutional level. When in 1999 issuing the law providing for the integration of students with disabilities into universities, the Italian government took responsibility for improving access to higher education through establishing a system of support (Maggiolini & Molleni, 2013). The law, which was adopted some years after the UN Decade for Disabled

(1983–1992), outlines specific measures the universities must take to support disabled students. The most comprehensive institutional measure is *The Rector's Delegate*, which is the point of reference for issues relating to inclusion and disability both outside and within the University. Externally, The Rector's Delegate is the point of reference for all local organisations dealing with disability, including regional bodies for the right to education, local administrative bodies, organisations, school offices, secondary schools, associations, businesses, and employment agencies. According to professor Ilaria Garolfo[3] at Trieste University, the Delegate's approach is always to prioritise measures aimed at empowering people with disabilities and combating ableist stereotypes and all other forms of discrimination, including intersectional discrimination. In addition, the Delegate supports the autonomy and self-determination of students, promoting their educational success while respecting their dignity and personal freedom. The Delegate is responsible for coordinating all activities of the services dedicated to students with disabilities, as well as monitoring and self-assessing the quality of these services. The Delegate, in collaboration with other departmental representatives, supports students during the orientation phase and promotes regular meetings with students who use the services offered, both to listen to their opinions and to highlight new needs and, if necessary, plan changes to certain procedures or the creation of new services. I will give some specific examples of how the Rector's delegate support students with disabilities below and in Chapter 5.

Institutional awareness

The Italian case is an example of legal and institutional responsibility for inclusion. It is an institutional responsibility to be aware of legal acts and national and international policies, and yet this often fails, as I will show is the case in the two Scandinavian countries Denmark and Norway. It is perhaps a paradox that the Scandinavian countries fail on recognising the rights of students with disabilities. The welfare states are well organised, however, the medical framing of disability seems to be stronger than a human rights framing. In 2019, the CRPD committee evaluating Norway criticised Norway for not recognising the rights of persons with disabilities and still maintaining a patient perspective on these groups (UN, 2019). Moreover, social inequalities that affect access to higher education have an even stronger impact on students with disabilities (Nifu, 2023). Persons who have minority background and first-generation academics have poorer access to higher education and fewer opportunities to succeed in the system of higher education than those who come from academic family backgrounds (Nifu, 2023). Therefore, policies for inclusion must build on intersectional analysis and address multiple barriers, including socio-economic and cultural barriers.

For the legal and otherwise structural recognition to be efficient, knowledge and awareness about these structural mechanisms at the institutions is crucial. For this reason, disability needs to be included both in university pedagogy courses and in the university structures with regard to curriculum, pedagogy, architecture, and the organisation at large.

In Denmark, a report from 2022 indicated that about 11% of the students have disabilities. The report shows that these students have a higher risk of not graduating, they do not thrive at the university as their peers do, and poor access to the learning environments affects their learning outcome (The Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science, 2022). It is possible that the poor access to the learning environment leads to a higher risk for dropping out of higher education trajectory without earning any grades. The report refers to such experiences described above as "unintended consequences" of the existing organising of accommodation for students with disabilities in higher education (The Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science, 2022, p.10). Thus, the institutional structure is not adequately designed for supporting students with disabilities. The intention is not to exclude students with disabilities, but the result seems to be such exclusion.

When examining the Italian case and Scandinavian situation together, the legal structure in Italy seems to provide a more robust system when implemented in academia. However, one problem in the Scandinavian context can be a lack of awareness at the structural level about the responsibility for building a structure supporting inclusion. With this lack of awareness, both the missing institutional responsibility for realising the rights of persons with disabilities and the lack of inclusion that leads to exclusion of students at the micro level can be interpreted as "unintended consequences". There is, thus, a failure to react adequate to the situation and a failure to recognise exclusion as a structural problem. There are shortcomings of different systems, and the Italian can be criticised for being individualistic if not implemented together with strategies for equal access at campuses. What is exemplary n the Italian case, is the recognition of the institutional responsibility for inclusion that lies with the system of the Rector's delegate.

Implementing inclusive policies in pedagogical practices

If higher education institutions neglect or are unaware of the rights of students, faculty, and staff with disabilities, these persons will face barriers and even discriminatory practices at the individual micro level, in interpersonal interactions and in the built environments. Persons with disabilities, are, as described in Chapter 2, not yet fully recognised as a marginalised social group. The CRPD is instrumental in supporting the formation of persons with disabilities as a social group experiencing discrimination and

exclusionary mechanisms. This is a basis for developing policies for inclusion of persons with disabilities, as called for by international bodies such as the United Nations. These policies must, however, be implemented at institutional levels in different nation states with different national laws and welfare systems. Inclusion has a price, both political and financial. We therefore must examine who pays the price for inclusion.

UNESCO focuses on "Affirmative action measures" as compensation for social inequalities and to promote disabled people's participation. Such actions "stand out as critical actions to enforce the right to higher education" (UNESCO, 2023, p. 7). As described in Chapter 1, the learning environment consists of material, digital, pedagogical organisational, and psycho-social dimensions. Affirmative action measures are relevant in all these areas and must target a broad range of people with disabilities. Recognising that disability is a broad spectrum, affirmative action measures is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Such measures can include pedagogical support, access to easy read literature, use of sign language interpreters and flexible education using digital platforms together with on-campus teaching. The Italian measures as described earlier are targeted to fit students with different disabilities and are flexible in structure. One example of affirmative action measures can be found in the Italian policy supporting students with disabilities in higher education.

According to Maggiolini and Molleni (2013), many Italian universities have implemented "Specialized Tutorial Services" to support higher education inclusion (Maggiolini & Molleni, 2013, p. 252). These services are removing barriers, coordinate activities and initiatives and address the individual needs of the student in the most appropriate way. The student's journey through higher education levels includes factors on campus and address the students' individual needs in the most appropriate way by using diverse tools and mechanisms (Maggiolini & Molleni, 2013, p. 252). Implementation of the Italian law builds a structure at the universities with the earlier mentioned deputy rector, Rector's delegate who monitor, coordinate, and support initiatives at the university (Maggiolini & Molleni, 2013, p. 252). By this structure, Italian universities provide implemented policies to support students with disabilities which can also be seen as an example of the universities taking responsibility for paying the price for inclusion and offer affirmative activity measures.

There are however also factors in the intersection between university and society that influence access to higher education, such as access to health and welfare services, inclusive pedagogy, access to campuses, access on campuses, disability friendly learning environments, financial support, emotional support, and peer support. When the university as an institution does not take sufficient responsibility for accommodation for the student, then the individual with disability must do the work of inclusion (Grue, 2023). This is perhaps one reason why students with disabilities

who also have individual resources are more likely to graduate with a degree from higher education than students without access to resources, as described in the Norwegian report above (Nifu, 2023).

Reasonable accommodation seems to be a challenge in the education sector. One reason for this might be that accommodation is not to compromise learning outcomes. The question of universal and individual accommodation has to do with pedagogy and pedagogical strategies supporting the learning outcomes of students. While accommodation for learning is among the professors' pedagogical responsibilities, there are limits to accommodation. What is and is not seen as reasonable individual accommodation sometimes is seen in light of what is referred to as *the academic standards*. These are contextual and change over time. The use of digital learning platforms and teachers support in facilitating for access to curriculum texts can work as an example. Blind students and employee need technical support and accessible web design to access learning digital learning material, whereas students with learning disabilities often need easy read texts or pedagogical accommodation of the learning material, digital or physical. The accommodation for understanding is seen as more problematic than technical or digital accommodation.

One example illustrating this is that the University of Malta has a Disability Student's Support Unit but does not offer Learning Support Assistance with the justification that the adult and working life demand that the person is as independent as possible (United Nations, 2014, p. 26). Not offering learning assistant in the university can be interpreted as a risk for lowering the standards at the university by educating individuals who are not sufficiently independent. This expresses an understanding of independency as non-relational.

Facilitating for learning is also a field of practice and knowledge which in present time is part of many university courses for academic personnel in university pedagogy. In these courses, individual accommodation and universal design of learning can be discussed systematically. Here also the policy of the university can be discussed and practised. In Norway, courses in university pedagogy are mandatory for those who become university teachers. At an institutional level, such courses can make up a good context for implementing policies of inclusion in the university classroom and discussing experiences.

In 2025, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), which are relevant for disability inclusion, are under pressure both as values and as institutional policies. The second Trump administration in the US stopped all DEI initiatives and obligations, including in higher education. The CRPD is not ratified by the US government; therefore, this termination of DEI initiatives and practices will have immediate effect. Diversity and inclusion among students and staff relate to the freedom to choose one's life and follow up on plans, dreams, and opportunities. The legal and institutional

responsibility for supporting individual freedom is, however, not crystal clear. If a person who is blind or using a wheelchair is applying for higher education, it is up for discussion what the responsibility for the university to facilitate the student's needs is and what are the student's own obligations.

In the Italian context, the student can apply for peer support and decide what support is needed, as described above. As with the micro narrative of Jan Grue, the university did not take responsibilities for his needs when going to Russia as part of his Russian language studies. Internationalisation is welcomed by universities, but it is often the student's responsibility to facilitate for the practical needs when studying abroad. Students with disabilities in need of personal assistance run the risk of having to pay themselves for taking personal assistants with when going abroad for study.

Elements in inclusive policies

According to UNESCO, "Disability affects access to education across all regions and income groups when education systems do not have inclusive policies in place" (2021, p. 25). We therefore need to discuss what are the necessary measures when developing "inclusive policies". Applying the macro-meso-micro scales, we can identify necessary measures at different administrative levels. At a macro level, inclusive policies are formally in place internationally, as implemented in the Human rights treaty article 26 (1948), and in the CRPD article 7 and 24. However, implementing such international treaties in national legislation and policies at the institutional level is necessary in order to be effective. This is what Italy is doing by implementing the mechanism of a Rector's Delegate for disability in each university. Together with the microlevel mechanism of peer tutoring, students enrolled at the same university as those with support needs offer time and expertise in exchange for salary and experience (Maggiolini & Molleni, 2013, p. 253).

The peer tutoring is flexible and can be given one-to-one interactions or in larger groups. It is the student who decides what kind of support is needed. I experienced this peer tutoring system when invited to Trieste university in 2017 to give a lecture at the celebration of The UN international day for persons with disabilities, December 3. The translator of my lecture was a blind student, and I was asked to send my manuscript early, so the translator could go through it together with the peer tutor. At the event, the student interpreter was well prepared for translating my lecture from English to Italian for the audience present in the auditorium. Today, the translation will perhaps be taking care of by use of AI, but still a person will need to go through the translation and validate.

The Italian legal and structural system addresses important aspects of the learning environment, such as pedagogical, social, digital, and organisational dimensions. As a measure directed towards the individual micro

level, it must be implemented together with strategies for equal access to campus. A challenge in many national contexts is how to build bridges between the student's needs as students and their everyday lives in the community and city where they live as students. Here, recognition is important. Both the state and the universities must recognise persons with disabilities as students and potential learners in order to provide the services needed to successfully graduate.

Accessibility as a chain

As seen from a micro perspective, equal access to higher education involves a multitude of elements working together to build equal access for different individuals. There is a complexity here, which involves institutional responsibility with regard to buildings, pedagogy, socio-cultural factors, and organisational aspects. In this complexity, discrimination law has limits. When going through the cases on discrimination in higher education processed by the Norwegian Anti-discrimination Tribunal since 2018, only 6.5% of the cases concluded with breaches in higher education contexts. Half of these cases concluded with lack of reasonable accommodation and half with lack of universal design of digital platforms and tools.[4] I see this as an indication of a need for active and coordinated strategies for increasing access to higher education beyond the minimum legal demands. Acknowledging that equal access is experienced as an unbroken chain where everyday life and living conditions support education and work life, higher education institutions together with local communities can realise education as human rights for the individual.

Notes

1 I thank Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Disability Studies at The State University of New York, University at Buffalo, Michael Rembis for this information.
2 Personal correspondence with Grue June, 2025, the example is also described by Grue, 2021.
3 Personal correspondence with professor Ilaria Garolfo May 2025.
4 I examined all cases processed by the tribunal from 2018–2024.

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4 Misrecognition and ableism

Introduction

Education, including higher education, is valuable both in itself and because it gives access to other goods, such as paid work and positions of power. The aim of this chapter is to discuss more directly possible hostility towards persons with disability in higher education institutions. The chapter identifies and discusses mechanisms excluding persons with disabilities at the micro and institutional meso level. I here use the term *misrecognition*, referring to what Honneth describes as "experiences of injustices [can] be conceived along a continuum of forms of withheld recognition – of disrespect – whose differences are determined by which qualities or capacities those affected take to be unjustifiably unrecognized or not respected" (2003, p. 135).

Withheld recognition of persons with disabilities in the system of higher education can be interpreted more directly as misrecognition. I argue that such withheld recognition, or misrecognition, can be seen as a consequence of understandings of disability as merely an individual problem rather than as a social justice topic that needs to be addressed by inclusive policy measures. Most campuses have barriers in their built environment. I will discuss universal design more comprehensively in the next chapter, Chapter 5. Here the focus will be on mechanisms in higher education that risk excluding, often unintentionally, persons with disabilities. These mechanisms are integrated in the work and learning environment, as described earlier in Chapter 1.

There is a growing literature on the conditions of persons with disabilities in higher education as seen from disability perspectives (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Price, 2011). Students in many countries who are in need of individual accommodation must disclose medical information about themselves, with the risk of being met with exclusionary mechanisms and lower expectations as to what they can achieve. I therefore in this chapter analyse disability hostile aspects of higher education as culture and as work environment for students, faculty members, and administration.

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Globally, few professors and other employees in higher education live with disability. In the US, only 3.6% of tenure track professors have disabilities (Dolmage, 2017, p. 23). The representation of people with disabilities among faculty and staff is thus lower than the average of 15–20% persons with disabilities in the general population.

There are no statistics on employees with disabilities in Nordic countries. However, Denmark, as well as the rest of the European Union, has statistics for students with disabilities. These are based on self-reports (Eurostudent). There is little statistical evidence based on relational models of disability describing the status in higher education. However, self-reports from students indicate that there is a growing number of students with disabilities in higher education. Neglect of disability as individual experience, identity, and as part of human diversity can lead to a fear of disclosing disability among students and faculty. I will start out by presenting and discussing ableist aspects of higher education. Next, I link these aspects to micro and meso levels. Friction, barriers, and exclusionary mechanisms often experienced at micro levels must be addressed at the meso level where the institutional responsibilities lie. I will use a micro narrative as an example and also discuss misrecognition with reference to initial reports from state parties to the CRPD.

Misrecognition

Misrecognition of persons with disabilities is often referred to as *ableism* (Campbell, 2019; Lid, 2022). Ableism can be described as a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical, and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human (Campbell, 2001; Lid, 2022). According to Brown and Leigh (2020), *ableism* is used as a theoretical framework and lens to theorise and make sense of individual experiences, which I here refer to as experiences at the micro level (Brown & Leigh, 2020, p. 4).

Ableism is an academic concept, dependent upon critical theories and analysis. Higher education is therefore both a context where ableist prejudices thrive and cultures where research and critical thinking can disclose ableism in structures and in micro contexts.

A neglect of disability-based discrimination can work as ableist mechanisms. Universities seek the most able, interpreted as the *best* candidates and risk practising disability-based exclusion both in recruitment processes and in supervision and evaluation of students at the individual and relational micro level, where recognition and misrecognition take place. Thus, the disability scholar Jay Dolmage (2017) suggests that universities as institutions express hostility towards disability and have made persons

with disabilities the objects of studies (Dolmage, 2017). However, as I will return to below, universities are also the sites where disability studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary field of knowledge and persons with disabilities have become subjects of knowledge.

Disability-based discrimination in higher education

The CRPD defines discrimination based on disability as:

> "Discrimination on the basis of disability" means any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of disability which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. It includes all forms of discrimination, including denial of reasonable accommodation.
>
> (UN, 2006, article 2, 3)

This definition uses the terms *distinction*, *exclusion*, and *restriction* as synonyms for *discrimination*. In some national legislation, such as Dutch law, the term "distinction" is preferred to discrimination (Waddington & Broderick, 2024). National laws on discrimination have, to varying degrees, included disability-based discrimination. For example, it was not until 2009 that the Norwegian law on discrimination recognised the existence of disability-based discrimination. In the context of this book, I will use the term *discrimination*.

Disability will often put an extra burden on the individual person in terms of pain, mobility restrictions, or extra effort needed to participate in different public arenas (Kimball et al., 2017; Price, 2011). Structural barriers and poor accommodation can worsen the problems associated with the impairment for the individual person. Therefore, structural accommodations for disability can improve equal access to higher education. Examples of disability-based discrimination in higher education can be refusal of individual accommodations or being met with lower expectations than other students or employees.

Acquisition of knowledge, formation, teaching, and critical thinking are the main purposes of higher education's practices. Ableism in higher education keeps persons with disabilities from taking part in this work. It has been argued that higher education institutions were established in the same historical period as institutions and segregated schools for persons with disabilities, and that these different forms of institutions mutually conditioned each other (Dolmage, 2017). Consequently, disability is what higher education is not. Higher education is elite resources, knowledge, and skills, whereas disability is incompetence disadvantage and lack of

resources. Such hypothesis is interesting but also insufficient. There was an optimistic approach to what children and persons with disabilities could learn and do in the 19th century, leading to special schools and special education where new forms of communication such as sign language were used. This pedagogical optimism was followed by the medical approach to disability, where the focus no longer was on what the person could learn but rather on how the person could be cured, and if not, institutionalised.

Discrimination in higher education can take the form of misrecognition as a learner, meaning as *educatable* by seeing the person with disability as not educatable. At a micro level, misrecognition works as microaggression and hostility towards persons with disabilities, such as misrecognition of their contribution and competences. Disability studies mark the ambivalence in disability and higher education. On the one side, there are exclusionary mechanisms in higher education excluding persons with disability. On the other hand, academia is a practice and a field where such exclusionary mechanisms can be identified, discussed theoretically and contextually, addressed and criticised. Academic work provides freedom for the individual to explore, learn, teach, and develop new theoretical understandings that thereafter and if implemented into practice can underpin political changes.

Micro example

There are several disabled scholars in disability research, and some have written on their pathway to and through higher education (Grue, 2021; Wendell, 1996). It is however a risk to identify as disabled both in work life in general and in higher education, a risk I am familiar with at a personal level as a person living with often invisible disability (Grue, 2024; Garland-Thomson & Lid, 2023). Identifying as disabled or coming out as disabled is therefore also often discussed and reflected upon by scholars (Kershbaum et al., 2017). Sometimes one does not have a choice because one needs accommodations, but the accommodations needed may be refused. When accommodations are refused, staying in a given position, for example as professor, can be difficult. I will use my own experience as micro example here. For myself, I chose not to disclose my invisible disability as an early career PhD scholar and associate professor. This was primarily because the invisible disability gave me a choice not to disclose and because finding a context for disclosing was not easy, as individual accommodations were seldom necessary. Not disclosing perhaps gave some privileges, however, the flip side of the coin was that I could not use my individual experiences in my research and/or teaching. I was in a way misrecognising myself as a disabled academic because I did not give myself access to my own experiences and therefore could not engage

publicly using my own situated knowledge. When realising this restriction, I found ways to include individual experiences in teaching and writing.

There is a risk when disclosing disability because one can be associated with negative expectations to persons with disabilities (Gillberg, 2020, p. 13). I do not think of it as a social responsibility to come out as disabled, but rather that it is situating oneself as a researcher and a matter of transparency. For example, when reading the British Professor Tom Shakespeare's book *Disability. The basic*, it is highly relevant that Shakespeare can use his own experiences when developing an academic understanding of disability as multifactorial (Shakespeare, 2018, p. 19). For the purposes of my own work, framing disability as relational is dependent upon my own perspective on the shortcomings of both social and medical models, together with the human rights awareness turn in disability studies.

The personal experiences are relevant for how we think critically and constructively and for how we sense the world we live in. It is therefore not possible, in my view, to establish an absolute epistemological border between the thinker as subject of knowledge and the phenomenon or object of knowledge. The disability scholar Halvor Hanisch has, by use of recognition theory, argued for understanding recognition of persons with disabilities as a recognition of difference (Hanisch, 2013). This recognition of difference is, following Hanisch, intertwined with universal dignity and thus have a potential for combatting misrecognition.

Global context

I here describe the macro level as global, with an interest in how documents and reports at this macro scale is recontextualised in different institutional contexts. As described in Chapter 1, UNESCO, as a transnational actor, has addressed higher education as a human rights issue since the 1960s, which today is more than 60 years ago. Still however, when reading the different national initial reports to the CRPD committee, few countries included higher education in their reports. Most countries include education, with reference to the CRPD article 24 on education, but few address higher education specifically. I am afraid that this is not just accidental but relates to misrecognition, at the structural level, of persons with disabilities as envisioned students and academics. When a disabled person graduates, this is often seen as an extraordinary accomplishment, which it might be, due to the lack of accommodation in higher education. This void, the lack of experiences from persons with disabilities in higher education, is an interesting finding, indicating that this social group of individuals are not epitomised as potential students or academics by the society and thus also not by the system of education. More specifically this can also give an indication of why the special needs education has structural shortcomings. The special needs education does not prepare the

individual for higher education, and there is often no higher education provision for persons with, for example, learning disabilities. For persons with sensory, mental, and physical disabilities, it is often too difficult to go through higher education due to material, digital, pedagogical, psychosocial, and organisational barriers, including lack of accessible housing and transportation and individual tailored service provision. These different barriers make it difficult for individuals to navigate in the higher education system, which is a world where one is not expected to be accommodated for. Higher education can thus be described, with reference to the American disability scholar Nancy Mairs, as a world that does not want disabled persons in it (Mairs, 1996).

Advocacy and self-advocacy as counter force

When students enter higher education, they also take on the transition from high school to higher education institutions. In doing this, students must familiarise themselves with a new system of support and accommodation. As most higher education institutions envision their students as able to enter in and pass through the education and fulfil their exams, the institutional readiness for support and accommodation is perhaps low. In many countries, such as the US and Norway, students must disclose their impairments and request accommodations by taking the role of self-advocate (Scott, 2019, Bjørnerås et al., 2025). In the Norwegian context, scholars found that deaf students spent so much effort striving for accommodation at micro levels that it had a negative impact on their learning outcomes (Kermit & Holiman, 2018). These findings are referring to the relational model, and indicate that students pay the price for inclusion themselves. Having to pay the price for inclusion increases the risk for dropping out before graduating. Common experiences seem to be that persons with disabilities are navigating a complex landscape in higher education involving all dimensions of the learning environment.

There are also structural hindrances embedded in the system. Higher education used to be available for the few, aiming at educating the privileged. Today, as I will discuss in Chapter 7, universities are educating citizens at all levels. As UNESCO has been focusing on for decades, education, including higher education, is a human rights issue. Still, however, persons with disabilities are in general excluded from higher education institutions. One factor explaining this exclusion lies in the importance of higher education standards. Universities may be worried that if too many students need accommodations, there is a risk of lowered standards. Equal access for students with disabilities is thus seen as a risk for lowering standards. This was the case also when racial minorities were taking their place in the system of education in the mid-20th century (Aavitsland, 2019).

Role models are important also in academia. As professors and members of the faculty at universities and university colleges, we are both embedded in academia as culture, and we widen it. Persons with disabilities in all arenas need to know their rights in order to have them realised. However, knowing one's rights is not enough, according to the relational models of disability. The structural level is also important for realising rights. Universities and higher education institutions must also know and recognise the rights of persons with disabilities. In practical settings, higher education institutions in all regions and countries must know of and recognise the rights of students with disabilities. If this is really happening in practice, the CRPD can lead to widening the human rights discourse in this area.

There seem however to be little impact on practice. As pointed out in Chapter 3, when taking a closer look at robust welfare states such as the two Scandinavian countries, Denmark and Norway, we see that in these countries, higher education institutions are often not aware of the rights of persons with disabilities and how these rights apply to higher education. Lack of awareness of the rights of students with disabilities has been without risk for universities in terms of, for example, lawsuits. The individual rights are thus weak. This is also the case in other countries. There is potential in student democracy and advocacy groups for persons with disabilities at universities. Such advocacy work can be a result of a more active use of the CRPD and other legal instruments in the academic sector. Not knowing the legal and political obligations at the institutional level is a barrier for realising the rights at the micro level. This can be interpreted as misrecognition of persons with disabilities as learners on higher educational levels.

Focusing on rights and duties by advocate groups might shift the agenda to a recognition of the responsibility of inclusion and non-discrimination that lies on the higher education institutions. Telling stories from micro-level about discriminatory practices and resistance towards such mechanisms can help identifying ongoing discriminatory practices at the institutional level. For example, the barriers in Danish and Norwegian universities described in Chapter 3 are experienced at the micro level, often in interactions between student and teacher, employee and leader. The responsibility for dismantling of the barriers is dependent upon structures and policies, as noted by UNESCO. When there is "lack of policies in place for support, disability affects access to education in all regions" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 25). This goes even for well-organised democratic welfare states such as Nordic countries. The intention is not to exclude, but the consequence of organisational barriers in the system of education leads to exclusion. If persons with disabilities are excluded from higher education and research, this is both a social justice and an epistemological problem.

Academia as a resource for recognising disability as a field of knowledge

Academia is influenced by ableist structures, and it is precisely as academics we can analyse this situation and address it as a problem. Misrecognition of persons with disabilities, which can be defined as ableism, has developed into a field of research in academic contexts, as described above. Thus, a transformation from protest into curriculum takes place when a professor teaches ableism to the students. Ableism as academic topic also has the potential to create awareness about this kind of discrimination and lead to transformation of practices.

Academia provides resources for understanding oneself and the social world (Grue, 2021, 2024; Hanisch, 2013; Mairs, 1996). Disability as experience needs words and concepts to become an experience recognisable for others and site of embodied knowledge. This process is what the American disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes and discusses in her essay "The story of my work: How I became disabled" (2014). Here, Garland-Thomson describes how other people looking at her body made her develop an account of herself as disabled (Garland-Thomson, 2014). She "became disabled" as an analogue with the position taken by de Beauvoir, regarding one is not being born a woman but one become a woman in the society (de Beauvoir, 2015). When studying feminist theory at graduate school in the 1980s and read Simone de Beauvoir, Garland-Thomson saw herself as disabled (Garland-Thomson, 2014). By being present as a student at the graduate school, Garland-Thomson thinks critically and, involving her own situation, recognises that her own situation, as a woman with a different embodiment, can be understood as a social and political situatedness that is worthy of academic reflection and scrutiny. She becomes a disabled academic, one of the most prominent disability research scholars and her work has been fundamental in developing this critical field of study further. The university context provides her with texts, concepts, and critical reflection to be used in developing new academic work and asking new questions. The legacy of Garland-Thomson work is social, critical, ethical, and political. Through her work and publications, she has shown why it is productive to take one's place in academic contexts and develop new knowledge.

Knowing one's rights is important at the individual micro level and even more so at the institutional meso level where the universities and academic sector must be aware of the rights of persons with disabilities. Therefore, the social recognition of persons with disabilities is crucial. Disabled academics can be role models both at universities and in general by paving ways for disabled students and discuss exclusionary mechanisms in academia. Also, by being present as academic with disability, one can be a pedagogical example rather than an exception or an exceptional

person. Here there is a challenge in that resources at the individual level are necessary to graduate and to request accommodation. The pedagogical example risks disappearing in exceptionalism.

The importance of relational models

This book discusses recognition of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions and systems. The counterpart to recognition is misrecognition, which is the focus of this chapter, or in other words, ableism. Misrecognition of persons with disabilities works at micro and meso levels, either excluding individuals in micro-interactions or by excluding individuals and groups based on structural or organisational mechanisms. Which model for disability that is used when establishing statistical material matters. Medical information at the level of individuals gives information on what medical diagnosis students live with, but it does not give information on needs for support and accommodation. Relational models cover the human–environment interactions in specific contexts and can therefore give information about support needs and how accommodation such as implementation of universal design affects access.

At the European level, the European court has moved from a medical individualised model of disability as impairment to what is referred to as a social-contextual model of disability based on the CRPD, article 1 (Waddington & Broderick, 2024, p. 8). This is what I refer to as a relation or inter-actional model. In Australia, the dominating model for disability is medical, which influences how persons with disabilities are met in higher education (Pitman et al., 2023). According to Pitman et al., persons with disabilities are underrepresented in higher education. By using the medical model approach, the underrepresentation can be identified. However, this approach is insufficient for delivering support and develop policies of recognition that incorporates structural factors (Pitman et al., 2023, p. 337). In Australia it seems, as also in many other countries, including the Nordic, medical models are used in higher education in order to define who is entitled to accommodation.

To recognise persons with disabilities in higher education means to accommodate for equal access to higher education in all five dimensions of the learning and work environment, as described earlier in Chapters 1 and 3. The organisational dimension has potential to develop better solutions for accommodation as this dimension binds together the different elements higher education institution and system consist of. In the change of name mentioned in Chapter 3, from disability service to access service at some US universities, lies a potential to change from medical approaches to disability to relational and structural approaches asking what can be changed for offering equal access to all diverse students, staff, and faculty members.

Summing up

I argued earlier in Chapter 2 that education is a precondition for entering into mutual relations of recognition, according to Honneth's relational theory of justice. If not recognised as educatable one is left out of reciprocal relations with one's peers. Misrecognition in higher education can lead to misrecognition as fellow human and citizen in the society. Martha Nussbaum's theory of justice, the capabilities approach, focusses on the responsibility of a society and nation state that strive for justice have to support its citizens to flourish on their own terms and live good human lives. In the context of higher education, this means making the needs for accommodation as flexible as possible.

How far the duty to accommodate reaches in the context of higher education is a question that needs to be answered in context. What is a necessary if not a sufficient condition for this inclusionary work is to acknowledge the need for structural changes in higher education systems to accommodate for a more diverse group of students. I have in this chapter argued that relational models of disability are productive for understanding the structural mechanisms that, if not intentionally but in practice, have made it more difficult for persons with disabilities to be in academia than it is for others. Such mechanisms at the structural level can be organisational, physical, socio-cultural, pedagogical, and digital. Moving from misrecognition to recognition, therefore, has structural and political impact on both the design of inclusive measures and how these measures are framed theoretically.

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5 Contextualising access

Universal design and individual accommodation

Introduction

According to the pedagogue and environmentalist David Orr (1993), curriculum is embedded in every higher education building and instructs as powerfully as any course taught in the building. This can be interpreted as a normative quest for coherence between what the values of higher education are and how these values are practised. For example, there is a mismatch between teaching universal design on campus and not attempting to develop a fully accessible pedagogy and campus buildings. Many campuses used for higher education teaching, both old and new, are to some degree inaccessible for students, staff, and faculty members with disabilities. Since the CRPD entered into force in 2008, the institutional responsibility for establishing accessible buildings is now anchored at the macro level in the states party to the convention. In order to be effective, this responsibility must be recognised at the institutional level by each higher education institution. One strategy for implementing equal access is universal design of buildings, environments, housing, education, ICT, public transportation, and more. Universal design is defined in the CRPD article 2:

> "Universal design" means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. "Universal design" shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed.
>
> (UN, 2006, article 2)

The aim of universal design is usability on equal terms for all individuals, especially those with different abilities and impairments. When planning and designing environments, products, programmes, and services, usability and equal access must be considered and be integrated in the design process. The definition is humanistic and human rights based rather than

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merely technical, by its focus on *usability* for all persons to the greatest extent possible (UN, 2006). What is designed is intended to be usable by different individuals. The disability model that underpins universal design is relational (Lid, 2023; UN, 2006). As a design strategy, universal design offers tools for navigating the person–environment interaction.

When designing buildings, environments, products and services, the designers and the design process must acknowledge human diversity as a target group for the design and persons with disability as part of humanity, as stated by the CRPD principles (UN, 2006, article 3). The design process should include different perspectives, including user's perspectives. In this chapter, the universal design – individual accommodation dynamics will be explored in the context of higher education including the dimensions of the learning and work environments.

Universal and contextual

Universal design strategies are relevant to very different contexts, such as campus areas, teaching practices with digital platforms, and sociomaterial learning environments as such. The human–environment interaction which takes place in different arenas can be interpreted on different levels of implementation. The term *universal*, in universal design, draws attention from the specific characteristics of one human being to a general vision of design for all human beings. The term *usability*, however, draws attention to the micro level, where the person–environment interaction takes place in specific contexts. In the CRPD definition of universal design, the dynamics between the universal and the contextual are present. I here focus on the meso level, where implementing universal design is an institutional responsibility for higher education institutions.

This implementation is bridging the universal and the contextual by interpreting universal design in contexts comprising policy and practice. As an a-contextual macro concept and design strategy, universal design is expected to be implemented in very diverse contexts all over the world and in very different kinds of environments (Smith, 2023). Therefore, the *universal* stays in a dynamic relation to the *contextual*. The diversity within the group of persons with disabilities is wide, including physical, mental, sensory and intellectual disabilities, neurodivergence and chronic illness. One design strategy therefore cannot respond to all different individual needs. Both universal design and individual accommodation are necessary when the aim is equal access.

As seen in a human rights perspective, access to higher education must be practised as access on equal terms. However, access to higher education is based on individual merits from primary and secondary education and on access to material, social, and financial resources. In addition, when

pursuing higher education, one must have a place to live, access to literature and financial resources to cover living costs and services needed. Many universities request tuition from their students. In some countries, such as Norway, there is no tuition at public universities and the student's living cost can be covered by a student loan system where students apply for a loan from a state bank. Some medical conditions may prevent an individual from applying for a student loan because the person is entitled to a disability pension and can be supported by the Labour and Welfare service (Langørgen & Magnus, 2018). Other medical diagnoses, such as ADHD, entitle students to a larger loan because the student is not expected to take paid work while studying. There are thus economic barriers and facilitators that hinder or enable equal access to higher education. Due to word limit, I will not address these financial issues here, just state that they are important for equal access to education.

This book includes an international perspective but is situated in a Norwegian context. In Norway, there are two administrative definitions of Universal Design. One is national, defined in the Norwegian Act on equal status and discrimination and in the planning and building act with technical specification. The other is the human rights definition included in the CRPD article 2 as quoted above. Both are valid. The Norwegian definition reads as follows:

> "Universal design" means designing or accommodating the main solution with respect to the physical conditions, such that the general functions of the undertaking can be used by as many people as possible, regardless of disability.
>
> (Ministry of culture and equality, 2018, § 17)

By operationalising this definition, the implementation of universal design is more technical with specific limitations and with a narrower object of universal design as compared to the CRPD definition. The Norwegian definition is also less processual, focusing on universal design as a measurable threshold concept. However, this legal definition also includes the humanistic and evaluative dimension focusing on usability, meaning that what is designed should be usable for as many people as possible. The CRPD is from 2026 incorporated in the Norwegian Human Rights act, and the Norwegian definition is to be interpreted in light of the more comprehensive human rights convention. A possible mismatch between implementing the Norwegian legal definition and a more processual holistic approach implementing the CRPD definition of universal design can be addressed by strengthening the human rights dimension. Universal design is not a panacea and does not solve all problems of barriers and misrecognition in higher education. Regardless of which definition is used, individual accommodation is often necessary together with

universal design to reach a level of equal access and usability, as illustrated by the Italian example described below and in Chapter 3.

As a human rights concept, included in the CRPD, universal design addresses material and non-material aspects of higher education. As an implemented strategy at the institutional level, universal design is important and can improve accessibility for students and employees with disabilities. In addition, each higher education campus is part of a local neighbourhood with local administration, local plans for winter maintenance, public transportation, and level of social, health, and welfare support. For example, some students in Norway are hindered from getting to campus during the winter because of insufficient maintenance (Bueso, 2025). Only a few of these students address the problem to the university administration.[1] The Youth Handicap organisation argues that the local government knows that this happens every year and therefore should plan for good winter maintenance. At a practical level, it is difficult for the universities to take responsibility for the environment outside the universities, even if this aspect of everyday life is crucial for freedom of mobility on a daily basis. Digital education and home office increase flexibility but are not good solutions alone, since the social aspect of education and teaching is missing in them. Some American universities, for example in New York State, close the campuses when there is a heavy snow coming and shift to remote education during times of inclement weather, which seem to be a better solution.

Example at micro level: Spatial access to education through individual accommodation

As described in Chapter 3, in Italy, each university has a *Rector's delegate* on disability issues. This person, who is a professor, coordinates accommodations for students with disabilities and students with learning disabilities, which is regulated by a separate law. This policy system is the contextual background for the following example at the micro level from the university in Brescia, Italy. This university was founded in 1982. The following describes a spatial and organisational individual accommodation in the physical learning environment for one student. The example is narrated by Professor Alberto Arenghi, who is also the Rector's delegate.

> The university in Brescia had a student with a severe disability. I wrote to the university's Administration and described that the student needed a specific kind of accommodation. The university arranged meetings with all the professors and the staff who are supporting this student, so they could facilitate for this student, supporting the learning outcomes of the student with fewer practical problems. We accommodated the

> student by giving all lectures in the same room, instead of changing rooms throughout the semester, which is the usual practice. Next to this room there is a smaller room with a bed and a table where the student can rest and get support from friends. Both these rooms are near to the elevators that are in connection to the garage.

According to Arenghi, the University of Brescia wanted all students to have the best possible situations because the university is committed to and strives for equality. Arenghi describes the responsibility of the University and says, "If we do not accommodate the students, I think it is better to avoid speaking about equality". Arenghi continues that a second argument for the accommodation in addition to securing the rights of the student is safety and security. It is easier to plan for evacuation if the same room is used instead of different rooms.[2]

This is an example of induvial accommodation that can be practised as integrated in universal design solutions. Another example is access to usable toilets. As all universities need to have toilets that can be used by all students and employees, the university also needs to accommodate a wide range of persons and individual devices. Some persons need to have toilets for adults using a bed instead of a wheelchair, and it can be a part of a universally designed campus to offer one or two such toilets depending on how big the university is and facilitate for persons in need of such toilets to be located nearby.

Global contexts

The micro example from the University in Brescia exemplifies a consequence of the implementation of the CRPD in Italy and in the EU with regard to reasonable accommodation. An increased focus on accessibility as included in the CRPD has perhaps motivated more universities to include persons with disabilities as students and employees. Implementation of the convention then can lead to a change at campuses towards more visible disability-friendly campuses. Article 3 of the CRPD presents the eight general principles guiding the implementation of the convention. These principles include freedom to make one's own choices, non-discrimination, respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity and equality of opportunity (UN, 2006, article 3). As seen from the perspective of higher education, these principles all work towards dismantling barriers in higher education. There is however still insufficient knowledge on what is needed to accommodate for persons with disabilities in higher education institutions. What is obvious, due to the diversity among all of us humans, is that there needs to be a flexible and processual approach to both universal design and reasonable individual accommodation in higher education institutions.

As described in Chapter 3, a Danish working group documented that approximately 11% of students have a disability, and that these students have poorer access to the learning environment than their non-disabled peers (The Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science, 2022). Several of the barriers the students face impact their learning outcome. Worries about physical and social access also impact the upstart of the education. The Danish working group recommended that higher education institutions inform the students about what options they have before the start of their studies (The Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science, 2022, p. 10). Worries about access is a shared experience between many living with disabilities, and the transition periods from secondary education to higher education and from education to work are especially vulnerable.

There are many insecurities experienced by the individual in such transitions. The person must learn new welfare support systems or navigate barriers in new and unknown environments. The insecurities relate to what support is offered and how to address barriers at the structural and contextual levels. The Danish working group's identification of the institution's responsibility for giving accurate information about accommodation and socio-spatial access will be useful and should be followed by strategies for dismantling barriers that hinder access. Some countries and universities have resources available for accessibility measures at the universities. In some countries, among them Norway, the universities are obliged to have an action plan for universal design. Some universities also have a contact person for students with disabilities. When a country is implementing the CRPD and the universities are implementing universal design, it can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of persons with disabilities as students and staff as expected participants of academic life, teaching, and culture.

I have in this chapter included examples at the institutional meso and contextual micro level from Italy, Denmark, and Norway. I will now present and discuss the disability policy implemented at one University in South Africa, Stellenbosch University, which has ten faculties and five campuses. The presentation is based on reports to the UN CRPD Committee, disability policy of the university, and published research.

According to the initial report to the CRPD Committee (2014), there is funding available for universities to improve or expand facilities and infrastructure for students and staff with disabilities (Initial report South Africa, 2014, p. 48). There are support services available for students with disabilities at 11 higher education institutions. The South African universities were obliged to provide universal design infrastructure and audit during 2014 (UN, 2014, p. 48). If such audits are carried out systematically and in cooperation with persons with disabilities, they can be a productive way of building knowledge for transforming policy and making a difference in the lives of people with disabilities (Mckenzie et al., 2014, p. 5).

Stellenbosch university celebrated 100 years as a university in 2018. This year the university found both challenges and strengths in the university's disability support service. The strengths included that the disability support service engaged students and staff when difficulties occurred. Among the difficulties were little disability awareness among faculty and staff and that planning for inclusion from a disability perspective was insufficient (Ferguson et al., 2019, p. 4). In 2018, the university adopted Stellenbosch University Disability Access Policy, which included students, staff, and visitors (Ferguson et al., 2019, p. 4). The policy "offers an overarching framework for promoting universal access for people with disabilities. It does this by designating appropriate structures, guidelines and processes that guide the inclusion of people (staff, students and visitors) with disabilities on campus" (Stellenbosch University, 2018, p. 6).

The understanding of universal design and definition of disability in the Stellebosch university policy are both based on the CRPD framework. The policy is therefore an interesting example of implementation of the CRPD as an international convention, transforming it to a local institutional context. What is also an interesting aspect of the Stellenbosch disability policy is the inclusion of visitors. As described in Chapter 3, and the micro example of Jan Grue, being a visiting student with disability a lot of responsibility was put on him as an individual student as neither the university he was studying at nor the university he was visiting took responsibility for his needs as a student with disabilities using a wheelchair. Stellenbosch university expresses a duty to take responsibility for the needs of visiting students and professors, which is necessary for a university striving for inclusion and equality of opportunity.

Implementing a universal strategy in different contexts

Universal design as a human rights strategy anchored in the CRPD has a democratic potential in building on recognition of all persons as equal. However, without balancing universal design with accommodation, the strategy implemented as a sole solution to dismantle barriers risks creating new barriers. For example, large bathrooms with enough space for a wheelchair user are difficult to use for a blind person or a person with poor balance and are also not sufficient space for a person who needs a mattress for private hygiene. As described in the micro example in this chapter, individual accommodation is often needed together with universally designed solutions. Persons with disabilities are part of human diversity, and the diversity among people with disabilities is rich and differentiated. A blind person meets different barriers compared to a wheelchair user or persons with mental health problems, neurodiversity or learning disabilities. This is one reason why the humanist dimension of universal design,

as usability at the micro level, should be interpreted in light of human diversity and not reduced to technical standards.

As an international convention, the CRPD can lead to new understandings of disability focusing on socio-relational aspects rather than individual and medical. As argued by Honneth (1995), the social movement is necessary for claiming rights as a social group. Persons with disabilities face barriers and discrimination at structural levels and micro contexts precisely as disabled. The barriers faced may not be intended, but the result is that they exclude persons with disabilities from access and participation in arenas such as higher education. Universal design and individual accommodation shift the focus to the responsibility of the state and the institution. When implemented, universal design has the potential to address structural barriers. The language of rights and duties used in disability contexts is important, but not sufficient. Claiming one's rights does not in itself lead to political changes. The states party to the CRPD are obliged to each other to enforce the rights guaranteed by the convention. When implemented in different national contexts, the implementation is influenced by national legal interpretations, as we saw was the case with the Norwegian legal definition of universal design. There is no super-national political level, but the convention does provide the international society with a common language of rights, access, barriers, discrimination, and equal status.

These are fundamental human rights and interpreted in a disability perspective in the CRPD. What this interpretation offers, I will argue, is a transformative approach to human rights focusing on the importance of *access* to enjoy one's rights. This aspect is new and innovative. The CRPD is the first UN human rights convention which explicitly addresses *access* as a human right topic. By doing so, the CRPD acknowledges the importance of the human factor in human rights and that this human factor is anchored in human diversity. The convention also has an intersectional perspective by addressing both children and women specifically. Both children and women with disabilities are, in some contexts, extra vulnerable considering enjoying the human rights and duties. I take this also as evidence of the human diversity explicitly embedded in the core of the convention.

It is also from a human diversity perspective that universal design can be a problematic concept. Universal design is valuable by focusing on the universality of all humans as diverse individuals and the importance of general usability of all that is designed. There is however a risk that a general conception of human is replaced with a general conception of "person with disability". The micro level focus on usability can mitigate the risks of a technical implementation of universal design. Access to resources and arenas on par with others is necessary for being recognised as equal citizen among other citizens. Equity and equal access is the aim of universal design.

From strategy to curriculum: Teaching universal design as interdisciplinary subject

The CRPD is not stronger than the different states party to the convention allow for, but strong enough to enable access to higher education when implemented in policy documents and practice. The implementation of universal design is dependent upon research and interdisciplinary knowledge. The last part of this chapter therefore focuses on teaching the CRPD and universal design in interdisciplinary contexts. Teaching in higher education is research based, and there is a growing literature on teaching universal design and access (Burgsthaler & Cory, 2008; Lid et al., 2023). Teaching universal design and individual accommodation is interdisciplinary and includes theories of justice, human rights research and practice, design processes, architecture, law, health, social services, and pedagogy among others.

In my approach, I link universal design to disability studies as the site where universal design comes from. Following Garland-Thomson, "Disability is everywhere once you know how to look for it" (Garland-Thomson, 2022). The quotation points at the universality of disability, which has to a large degree been neglected in many disciplines so far. By teaching universal design in disciplines such as the law, the humanities and pedagogy, a renewed approach to individuals and barriers is possible, a shift from disability-based exclusion to inclusion in various arenas.

As described above, universal design addresses both individual and environmental aspects, and the interaction between these. And perhaps most important here, it shifts the focus from the individual with a diagnosis or disability to the individual–socio-material environment interaction. Therefore, the concept is interdisciplinary and addresses human, environmental, technical, and digital factors. Ethics is also highly relevant, as universal design is about human beings who use what is designed. It is an ethical problem when a design practice or design solution excludes persons from using it on equal terms. Since the design practice of universal design is as complex as most design practices, the focus on usability is both practically and ethically important.

Over the last two decades, I have been teaching universal design topics anchored in interdisciplinary disability studies, in different education programmes such as architecture, product design, education, health, rehabilitation, and theology. As a complex and practical strategy, interdisciplinary knowledge is needed when implementing universal design in contexts. Pedagogical, technical humanistic, ethical, practical, and health knowledge is needed, just to mention some. Since the CRPD entered into force, universal design has become more important also in education (Burgsthaler & Cory, 2008).

Design is a human task to solve needs and problems and to encourage flourishing and activity. For example, access to library services must be

available for blind students and students with sight loss. If the literature is inaccessible for blind students, this is experienced as a barrier at the micro level, but the problem is solved at the institutional level. In my research and teaching, I distinguish between using the term universal design at the meso and macro levels and usability at the micro level. The aim is equal access and social justice. In interdisciplinary learning environments, the student's background and education provide them with their specific knowledge base to understand and integrate universal design into their disciplinary knowledge, skills, and competences.

This chapter does not include a comprehensive presentation and discussion of universal design for learning, in which there is a growing body of literature. Instead, I have been discussing briefly universal design an interdisciplinary concept and strategy. When teaching universal design as theory and practice for diverse students both design theory and disability theory is of relevance. A universal design didactics will also be necessary to accommodate for learning for different learners.

universal design and individual accommodation have limits in terms of how design solutions and processes can meet human individual needs. When implemented, new challenges and questions arise, as the Italian micro example shows. Is this a part of a universal design solution or is the spatial access measures taken only an individual accommodation solution? Discussions on what is possible to achieve, and for who, are ethically and politically relevant and must involve scholars, stakeholders, and end users such as people with disabilities. The dynamics between standardised and contextual solutions does not have one answer but must be addressed and responded to in contexts.

Summing up

I have argued that universal design must be implemented as a human rights concept in tandem with individual accommodation. The institutional responsibility for implementation is crucial and necessary for an experience of usability and equal access at the micro level. The CRPD offers a common language and strategy for mainstreaming implementation in diverse and different national contexts. When working on universal design strategies, an interdisciplinary and processual approach with inclusive audits and evaluations to implement improvements can prove to be efficient.

Notes

1 Universitas18.01.2025https://www.universitas.no/norges-handikapforbunds-ungdom-oslostudentene-rullestolbrukere/studenter-blir-innesperret-i-dagevis/383793.
2 Professor Alberto Arenghi, private conversation, spring 2025.

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6 A culture of recognition

Introduction

Persons with disabilities as a social category includes individuals with bodies and health conditions that differ both from the majority and within the social group. Disability is diversity. Thus, disability-based discrimination and barriers must be combated and dismantled through a multitude of strategies and measures. The consequence of such an understanding is to develop flexibility in higher education institutions that can meet the needs of different persons. When recognising that there are barriers that hinder persons with disabilities to succeed in higher education, a moral imperative to support persons with disabilities emerges (Yuknis & Bernstein, 2017, p. 15). The relational understanding of disability as emerging in contexts acknowledges that disability often leads to restriction of participation in concrete contexts. Disability is however also a significant aspect of being human that gives perspectives and experiences of value for the individual and for society and institutions. At the embodied and existential level, disability is a condition for human life. Described in medical terms in the CRPD, the word impairment is used in the first article, as described in Chapter 1.

Impairment is a negative laden word, meaning the state of being damaged or weakened. The CRPD uses in article 1 the term impairment to describe the individual dimension of disability as "physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments" (UN, 2006). There are few positively laden words and concepts to describe this individual dimension. Moreover, there is a kind of linguistic confusion in that this first article of the CRPD uses both "persons with disabilities" as a social group category and "impairments" describing the individual's condition. As I see it, this can be a fruitful linguistic confusion as it displays an inherent lack of clarity in this field of knowledge and human experiential topic. At the social group and political level, *persons with disabilities* is a suitable term to use when referring to what is common among those belonging to the group or

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identified by others as part of the group. The individual level described by the different impairments mentioned in the CRPD article 1 provides categories and concepts for the individual experience of impairment. Disability is thus complex and can be approached politically as a hindrance for participation and existentially as a life experience.

This chapter explores and discusses what kind of structure can be helpful supporting students, faculty, and staff. Drawing on international experiences, the chapter discusses what policies for inclusion in higher education can look like. This chapter will include practical measures regarding implementation of the CRPD and universal design at the institutional level and reasonable accommodation at micro levels, based on the evaluation of the implementation done by the UN CRPD committee. The aim of the chapter is to discuss experiences from different global contexts and add to the knowledge base supporting inclusive higher education.

Higher education as cultural context

There is not one unified culture in higher education institutions, but academic culture is characterised by values such as openness, critical thought, curiosity, discussion, and competitiveness. In higher education as a workplace and a site for studying, teaching, and research practices, recognition and misrecognition of persons with disabilities take place in this specific cultural setting. Recruitment processes of faculty members rely on the individual merits of the candidate applying for the position. However, being in a position to apply for academic jobs builds on a successful pathway through the education system. If the academic culture is characterised by non- or misrecognition of persons with disabilities, then the individual with disability risks to drop out or be excluded already as an undergraduate student.

Academia is for practical purposes, an institutional context characterised by competitive cultures. Competition can therefore also be described as an academic value. *The meriocratic myth*, which describes upward social mobility as depending only on individual merits such as talent and hard work, regardless of structural factors and barriers, is persistent in academia (Wilde & Fish, 2025). Structural barriers in academia therefore are often overseen or neglected as important. When examining gender perspective in academia, scholars from French academia address what they refer to as "negative values" (competitiveness, self-affirmation, dominance) and how these have a negative influence on women's experiences in academia (Aelenei et al., 2020). The context of the study was exploring how self-enhancements, competitiveness, and sense of belonging in academia are experienced by women. The study was based on the paradox that even if women have a higher enrolment percentage in higher education, women's interest in seeking an academic career in the sciences

decreases during their doctoral studies (Aelenei et al., 2020, p. 374). It seems as if academic competitive cultures are prioritising individuals with individual resources to thrive when there is a strong focus on individual merits, excluding others.

Focusing on the cultural aspects of recognition and misrecognition in higher education at meso- and micro dynamics, there is one common aspect of disability that unifies many persons with disabilities. This unifying aspect can be found in an experience of marginalisation, being different. In socio-cultural contexts, being different from a majority often provide the need to navigate barriers and hindrances on a daily basis. Examples of this is when the society the person with disability lives in fails to dismantle barriers or respond to the need for support services or compensational measures. The result then is lack of recognition of the barriers and lack of support as real hindrances.

Disability diversities

When living with disability, one often needs to plan ahead to be sure that what one intends to do also is practically possible. The language describing these experiences is often negative laden, such as barriers, exclusion, and discrimination. But disability is also for many a valued form of social and individual life and should not be reduced to problems, negative experiences, and need for assistance and support. One can flourish and live a good life enjoying relations with others (Hanisch, 2013). As described by Shakespeare (2018), the disability experiences differ between individuals at the micro level depending upon access to resources such as good economy, education, paid work and private life, living conditions, and access to services. The cultural aspect of disability is related both to being able to live and flourish on one's own conditions and to being valued as the person one is in socio-cultural contexts instead of being seen as *other* or different from the perspective of a more generalised majority.

Recognising disability as diversity in higher education means to recognise, welcome, and facilitate for the different embodied and existential experiences of students and employees living with different minority bodies (Barnes, 2016). Embodied difference is what is to be expected among humans. A problem arises when certain embodied persons are privileged over other and differently embodied individuals. When imagining humanity, diversity is the best expression. Normality is however persistent as the human image such as the *Vitruvian man* as drawn out by Leonardo da Vinci in the 1490s (Hamraie, 2017). This picture has been used as a template in architecture as a kind of common ground for who the person inhabiting the built environment is and what kind of embodiment this person has. The embodiment of the Vitruvian man is privileged over the embodiment of a person of short stature or wheelchair user, as argued in disability and universal design research (Hamraie, 2017).

The diversity of embodiment leads to different experiences of the built environment that is specifically targeting academic culture as spatial. University and other higher education institutions have spatial design as auditorium with stairs instead of flat floors and pulpits with steps up for the lecturer to teach from. This architectural design is communicating that the lecturer is above the students or at the centre of attention. The design also prioritises those who navigate stairs as students entering the auditorium or as teacher entering the pulpit. The design gives a problem with access, as discussed in Chapter 5. The problem with accessibility is not that all human beings have different embodiment, human diversity. The problem is a lack of accommodation for human embodied diversity. There is, for example, the idea of higher education as literally speaking, dependent upon taking steps up, up to the entrance of the building or up to the catheter. The stairs and steps illustrate how academia as culture and also as persons belong one step above the rest, as the metaphor of the ivory tower, a disconnected and elitist environment. Such steps intend to elevate and give privileges to certain bodies but leads to physical barriers to other.

Today, research and also education are social enterprises. In pedagogy and didactics terminology such as tilted classrooms, seminars and student active learning processes are practised. These are all formats that challenge the lecture from the catheter as the best way of teaching and learning. Digital platforms take over for classroom learning and some courses are taught as fully digital, which also influences upon the academic culture. All such changes are relevant when striving for equal access. When recognising that persons with disability are among students, staff, and faculty, the quest is for a disability inclusive university.

Constructed micro example

To illustrate how culture and informal relations are often important for access to resources such as support, interest, and encouragement in academia, I have constructed a micro example that build on anecdotic individual experiences of not being found fit for career in academia. This constructed example involves both a gender and disability perspective:

> M. is a scholar from the global south not from an academic background, working in a Scadinavian university. S/he is also queer and is facing minority stress regarding gender and ethnic background. M. is in a vulnerable position as employed on term basis for the time period when working on a project. However, M is also an excellent scholar and contributes to the faculty with valuable research and knowledge in teaching and publishing. In spite of this, M is never encouraged to apply when there are vacant positions at the faculty. Other are chosen for permanent positions before M. The professors do not recognise the potential of M. as a knower and as a valuable member of the faculty.

Recruitment processes have formal and informal aspects. Professors do not recognise the academic potential of all students. As a student of theology in the 1990s, I experienced that my male fellow students were recognised as future PhD students rather than female. This was a time when women had equal access to theology, but few women were scholars and professors. As a woman and student with chronic illness, there was little chance to be recognised as a person with academic potential. If academic cultures are characterised by lack of recognition of persons with disabilities as knowers and learners, there is a risk that even faculty members hide their disability status, which makes it even more difficult for students and others to disclose. This can also be the situation for genderqueer persons and persons from ethnic minority backgrounds. With an explicit diverse recruitment strategy at higher education institutions, there will be a more diverse group of faculty members to educate and support students at all levels. Many of us see the potential in persons that are like us thus, perhaps disabled faculty members either directly or indirectly can support disabled students better than a non-disabled faculty. Informal selection is integrated into universities' formal recruitment practices and can open doors to an academic career. Those who are not encouraged, find themselves on a more difficult position with an insecure trajectory to an academic position.

The importance of the structural level

Informal selection takes place at the micro level in interactions between the professor and the student. The formal dimension of recruitment is however strong as universities through recruitment processes facilitate for equal treatment. The applicant takes active part in applying for a position, that is, a position as a PhD fellow or scholar, and the university facilitates for objective evaluation of the applicant. There are however risks that these recruitment processes can include discriminatory elements. A minor study of student's experiences points at a need for training university staff in disability awareness (Kendall, 2016) Training staff in disability awareness could be part of the university pedagogy courses. At such courses, the pedagogy and didacticts are at the centre, and therefore, this is also a situation where university teachers can discuss and learn about disability inclusion at the campus and in the classroom.

There is a growing body of research on access to higher education for students with disabilities (Brewer et al., 2025; Madaus, 2011; Oslund, 2015). This book positions itself as transformative, discussing how higher education can better meet the needs for students and employees with disabilities. The underlying assumption is that there are fewer persons with disabilities in higher education institutions at all levels than expected based on how many persons lives with disabilities. In striving for changing this

situation, empirical research is valuable, especially research that can be translated into "advocacy, policy, practice and products" so that research can "act as a springboard for human rights instruments such as the UNCRPD" (McKenzie et al., 2014, p. 2). Much empirical research stays with the research community instead of being used practically for policy development and discussed publicly.

In the Norwegian context, a recent study (Svendby, 2020) about lecturers' teaching experiences with students with invisible disabilities in higher education found that the lecturers lacked awareness about disabilities among the students and that they also lacked competence in inclusive teaching (Svendby, 2020). This lack of awareness and competence among the lectures increased the risk of students with disabilities dropping out of the education programme. I will return to this in the discussion section. Taking a look at the structural institutional level of countries that have ratified the CRPD examining how or if they take on the responsibility for developing an inclusive system of education at all levels, it is possible to see some measures that are implemented, such as disability support services.

Disability support services at universities offer support to students with disabilities, where the aim is to meet the students' individual needs. Students often must disclose their medical diagnoses to receive support, which is ambivalent, as this can lead to a risk of exclusion. One reason for why disclosure is complicated is that disability is experienced differently and intersects with other aspects of the person's identity (Kershbaum et al., 2017). This means that disclosure can be especially risky for persons who have a weaker sense of belonging to academic culture. Measures are focusing on the micro level rather than at the structural meso level and are often practised without realising the ambivalence and risk. Facilitating student support services is decided and designed at the institutional level, but when practised, it occurs at the individual micro level, providing support for individual students.

In order to engage the structural level, there must be dynamics between individual needs and experiences and an attentive institution. Meeting the needs of students and staff with disabilities can lead to a change of the institution. Such changes towards a more disability aware university are motivated for both legal and political changes and priorities. In the context of the USA, there has been a growth in disability services at the universities over the last 25 years, serving approximately 11 % of the student body who identify as disabled (Madaus, 2011). Today, this number of students is growing, as is also the diversity among students with disabilities. The number of students with learning disabilities, mental disabilities, and students on the autism spectrum is also increasing (Madaus, 2011).

The disability support systems support students in academia as it is. Academia is however not a fixed reality across time and contexts, but

changes over time. Disability as a human condition and political concept is rather new in academia, for example, most British universities were inaccessible for most students and staff with disabilities until the 1990s (Barnes, 2006). From the 1990s till today is not a very long-time span, and over these years, many universities have established disability support services or started to acknowledge that students with disabilities face marginalisation and discrimination. It is now time for changing the discourse by focusing on how to dismantle physical, digital, pedagogical socio-cultural, and organisational barriers in higher education. Such a change in perspective entails, I will argue, also a change in academic culture towards a structural and holistic recognition of disability in higher education. We need to take the relational or interactional model of disability seriously and think about disability in higher education in more relational terms. Higher education as a public arena and as an institutional system can, better than it does today, facilitate students and employees with disabilities. In examining how we need to ask new questions about disability both as object and subject of knowledge and as part of academic culture.

Both recognition and misrecognition take place in cultural settings and specific contexts. Interestingly, several countries that have policies for supporting persons with disabilities in higher education, such as Italy, the USA, and South Africa, adopted the policies before the CRPD was launched in 2006. The CRPD can however strengthen the focus on disability in higher education and research and on translating research into policy and practice. Implementing the CRPD in higher education can contribute to building a culture for recognition of persons with disabilities as students and employees in higher education.

According to the American disability studies scholar, Garland-Thomson, "bodies are always situated in and dependent upon environments through which they materialize as fitting or misfitting" (2011, p. 598). A student and a professor are situated, embodied persons who may or may not fit with the expectations that the society and culture have of those roles. Also, as I described in Chapter 5, the buildings express who is fitting or not fitting by the architecture and design of auditoriums, classrooms, and toilets. The concept of "fit" and "misfit" works well with the relational model for disability (previously discussed in Chapter 1), which includes the individual and the environment and the dynamic interplay between the two to understand disability. This metaphor of fit and misfit spells out differently at the micro- and meso-level. At the micro level, the person with disability faces barriers, which indicates that this person was not anticipated as a student or professor. At the institutional level, the misfit displays as lack of accommodation material, digital, or social-cultural. One example of such a misfit at the material level is the design of the canteen area, which can be difficult to handle for blind persons or wheelchair users. Consequently, if it is difficult to use the canteen area, the

person misses out on social and cultural interactions that take place during the lunch breaks and become more social isolated in the everyday life at campus.

Moreover, Garland-Thomson (2009) has focused on the importance of recognition arguing that recognition is "the cornerstone of an ethical political society" referring to the political philosopher Nancy Fraser. To be recognised is to be seen as and accorded the status of fellow human, to become familiar (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 158). I have discussed similar aspects of recognition in Chapter 2. In order to be seen as a fellow human, it is necessary to be present in arenas such as education and higher education. Literary speaking, being present is to be in common valued arenas, such as in academia, without being misrecognised as a stranger or misfit in this shared arena. This can be described as a sense of belonging to this specific arena or context. As described earlier in this chapter, the academic culture can delimit the sense of belonging of those who do not adhere to the competitive values of academia.

Being visibly disabled and having to use different modes of communication or individual assistive devices can hinder the development of a sense of belonging. The art historian Georgina Kleege, who is using Braille, discusses how there is a risk in using Braille in public, because it is associated with blindness and disability. When arguing against such a negative approach, she envisions that "disability can begin to be understood as just another facet of the human condition, another way of moving through space, reading, communicating and being in the world" (Kleege, 2006, p. 217). In the discussion section, I will attend to promising approaches to disability as a potential in academic cultures, through a change of the culture.

Global context

Following up on who does and does not experience belonging in higher education institutions, I turn to a study discussing the intersections of disability and social class (Wilde & Fish, 2025). This study is based on job-adverts and interviews and focuses on recruitment practices. In the job-adverts and interviews with disabled working-class academics and university staff, researchers found that there was much discussion around the culture of academia, and intersectional barriers were described as related to cultural norms (Wilde & Fish, 2025, p. 10). The marginalising mechanisms were seen as most salient in recruitment practices. And, on the other side, culture was also important for those who stayed in academia, such as flexibility and autonomy and connecting with other disabled (Wilde & Fish, 2025 p. 11). Academia is thus also a place for building and nurturing the sense of belonging. Also, the formation aspects of higher education such as being a place for reading, teaching, and life-long

learning was valued (Wilde & Fish, 2025, p. 16). Among the recommendations suggested by the researchers are valuing of diversity and mentoring of people belonging to marginalised groups. The report thus addresses the importance of higher education institutions to recognise barriers that are faced by academics with disabilities and working-class background.

This focus on first-generation academics is especially important as education has become almost a condition for taking positions in contemporary societies. The UK initial report to the CRPD committee describes that Disability allowances are available for individual support direct to the individual student to help with extra cost as a result of the disability (United Kingdom, 2011, p. 42). The amount is dependent upon the individual needs. In England, students also can have support from the institution they attend.

In this section, I will also present one of the strategies for inclusion in higher education in Ireland, because this differs from many other practices. Irish universities practise an alternative admission scheme to higher education called the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) (Ireland, 2020, p. 44). DARE "offers places under reduced criteria to school leavers who have experienced additional educational challenges because of disability". In 2020, more than 4000 students were offered a place in DARE. Ireland also has a *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2021*, which has led to an increase in participation rates of students with disabilities. As the initial report shows, Ireland provides a strategic framework for increased inclusion in higher education.

Discussion

There are epistemological implications of not recognising students with disabilities in higher education: the knowledge produced and taught is less representative when fewer individuals take part in knowledge production and teaching. This is one reason for why inclusive higher education is important. Another is the human rights dimension, not having access to higher education on par with others is discrimination. If disabling barriers either in the system, the built environment or in the institutional culture is what makes out the barriers, then changes are necessary. In contemporary societies, education is a precondition for access to resources such as paid jobs. What this chapter indicates is hat cultural factors are important for graduating and not dropping out. It can be subtle cultural practices that can foster either belonging, estrangement, or something in between, such as invisibility. Recognition is, as pointed out by Garland-Thomson about being seen as a fellow human, being familiarised. If this is true, there might be a risk for exclusion even with inclusion strategies.

In a recent report evaluating the Irish DARE programme, the researcher found that there is a higher representation of persons with

affluent economic status among the recipients of the DARE scheme (Farrell, 2024). There was also a vulnerability towards students under the DARE scheme feeling isolated and excluded and that one problem is that the DARE process focuses primarily on the student's difficulties and inability to perform on par with their peers (Farrell, 2024, p. 36). Here we are at the core problem of special accommodations: they are difficult to integrate into the existing culture. Thus, people who receive special accommodations risk being excluded through the mechanisms that aim to include them. This perhaps paradox is, as I see it, the main reason for why a change in culture is needed in order to achieve full inclusion. Following the CRPD, article 3, the principles guiding the convention, persons with disabilities are "part of human diversity and humanity". This then must be the norm for designing all institutions of importance for humanity, such as higher education institutions. These must be designed and built for welcoming persons with disabilities.

When there are few persons with disabilities among faculty and administration, it might be difficult to recognise these experiences as valuable in academia. Thus, these experiences risk becoming hidden experiences and hidden knowledge, and the person, be it faculty member, administration, or student, does not have free access to disability as a site of knowledge and therefore cannot step forward as a subject of knowledge. Disability, for this reason, risks to be "other" in academic contexts. This alienation and othering have, I argue, epistemological consequences. Also, for the sake of freedom of research, recognising disability is important. Misrecognising disability is misrecognition of sites and subjects of knowledge, and disability is reduced to object of knowledge only, as it, with some important exemptions in critical disability studies and humanities, is today, for example, in medical disciplines and to some extent in social sciences.

In order to create a culture for recognition of persons with disabilities and other marginalised positions in academia, we need more concrete examples and narratives, both good examples and examples of hindrances, either formal or informal at structural and individual levels.

Summing up

There is still a lack of awareness of disability in higher education among educators and staff. The first generation of inclusion policies have proved to have exclusionary risks as embedded in the mechanisms supporting inclusion. In acknowledging this, we should seek to facilitate more comprehensively for disability as part of the human condition by strengthening aspects of academic culture such as critical thinking, flexibility, and community building and criticise other aspects, such as competitiveness, and the myth of self-sustaining academics.

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7 Building knowledge for society

Introduction

The past 100 years have come with a radical change in higher education and research in terms of diversity and inclusion. In 2025, there is a broader spectrum of people who participate in higher education as students and educators. Still, however, higher education lacks inclusion at all levels of persons with disabilities. Lack of inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education leads to marginalisation of disability perspectives in research and teaching. As I showed in the introductory chapter, UNESCO has focused on inclusion in higher education since the 1960s. In 1994, the UNESCO Salamanca declaration was adopted (UNESCO, 1994). This declaration is still a point of reference for many who are working for inclusion in education (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022).

In recent years, the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) was inspired by the CRPD in its focus on persons with disabilities as a marginalised group. In terms of education, the SDG goal 4, *Quality education*, focuses on equal access to all levels of education for persons with disabilities (UN, 2015). After 10 years of following up the implementation of these goals, and 20 years after the CRPD was adopted in 2006, still much remains in order to have a disability sensitive system of higher education across all global regions, as indicated by the initial reports to the CRPD committee.

Human rights as plural, relational, and individual

Human rights are rights that the individual possesses simply by being human. However, as argued by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, these rights are of little worth unless an organised state is willing to protect these rights for the individual (Arendt, 2009; Lid, 2010). The state guarantees the rights of the citizens through commitments to human rights treaties such as the CRPD. However, it is not crystal-clear what kind of rights human rights treaties protect. The CRPD renews human rights treaties by

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focusing on a specific social group with a short history in human rights treaties. "Disability" became a political and human rights concept globally with the 1981 International year for disabled people. Following law scholar Frédéric Mégret, the CRPD "produces a unique vision of human rights, one which is grounded in a plural, relational concept of the human in society" (Mégret, 2008, p. 274). He sees the CRPD as "a unique opportunity to rethink how we conceive of the human rights of all" (Mégret, 2008, p. 274). According to Mégret, the anthropology of human rights is relational. The convention is universal in nature, and when changing the focus from a general "all people" to a specific "this group of people", here persons with disabilities, the anthropology of human rights shifts from general to be informed by disability as a human condition.

As I have shown in earlier chapters, several countries approach disability in medical terms, asking the individual student or employee to provide a medical diagnosis in order to receive accommodations. What Mégret addresses is that the CRPD, by emphasising dimensions of community, care, sociability, vulnerability, and assistance, indicates that the convention addresses all humans as humans with (potential) disabilities instead of a minor group of persons with disabilities. Disability therefore should not be seen as an inherent characteristic of individuals. Instead, the frontier between persons with and without disabilities is porous (Mégret, 2008, p. 274). Interpreted in this way, the CRPD enriches the understanding of the human in human rights by including disability as a fundamental human condition.

In order to integrate experiences from persons with disabilities as part of general public knowledge, the slogan "Nothing about us without us" has been important. The slogan is also a normative position meaning that those who are affected by a policy or practice should be able to participate in knowledge production and policymaking. The slogan is inspired by civil right movements, and its power is based on opposition to disability oppression by self-determination and control (Charlton, 1998). As a normative position, "Nothing about us without us" is read as a call for participatory approaches in research.

Teaching in higher education is research based. Therefore, it is also important to examine access to knowledge production in a society. Traditionally, research was carried out in universities by trained professors and scholars, which is referred to as mode 1 research (Nowotny et al., 2001). Over the last decades, knowledge is produced in collaboration between researchers, governments, business, civil society, and other stakeholders. Knowledge production also includes perspectives of marginalised groups not recognised as knowers, such as persons with disabilities, including intellectual and learning disabilities (Brynildsen et al., 2025).

Inspired by Honneth, I in this book propose an interpretation of the CRPD as a linguistic bridge providing concepts and a common language

to describe disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities as a social group. The convention has been instrumental in changing the global discourse on disability towards a human rights discourse. Recognition then serves the aim of eliminating social discrimination that hinders universal basic rights (Honneth, 2003, p. 163). This is an approach that relates to both the individual and group level. Disability-based discrimination impacts individuals as members of the social group "persons with disabilities". Moreover, Honneth's approach to justice is relational due to the importance of intersubjectivity and reciprocity.

Supplementing Honneth's recognition theory with a theory of justice that explicitly includes justice for persons with disabilities, I turn to Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach developed together with Amartya Sen (Nussbaum, 2006). Education is, according to Nussbaum, fundamentally a democratic, rather than instrumental concern. She focuses on education as formation of the democratic citizen and offers a reflection on the state's responsibilities towards its citizens. Both the CRPD as a linguistic bridge that can raise awareness about disability-based discrimination and disadvantage and the capabilities approach are fruitful for rethinking human rights from a disability perspective. Nussbaum examines the government's responsibility for developing and supporting human capabilities. Following Nussbaum, it is the state aiming for justice that is responsible for the citizen's right to take part in society on their own terms (Nussbaum, 2006). Not being part of the system of education and, in the next phase, working life excludes from entering valued roles in society and can also exclude from being recognised as equal citizens in the society.

Therefore, it is crucial that not only states party to the convention, meaning the national macro level in the countries signing or ratifying the convention, are aware of the practical implications of the convention but also democratic and social institutions. The institutions govern the mechanisms that can lead to a change towards inclusion and equity in higher education. In this final chapter, I discuss how accommodating persons with disabilities in academia can inform and change how we build knowledge for societies characterised by diversity. The CRPD, even if targeting a social group, provides a structure for supporting the rights of diverse individuals. As Mégret (2008) also argue, the social group "persons with disabilities" is porous and can, theoretically and practically, include us all.

The Australian philosopher Catriona Mackenzie (2019) has discussed the dynamic between the individual and social groups. She holds that "our individual identities are constituted by interpersonal, familial and social relationships and intersecting social group memberships, and through processes of enculturation into specific linguistic, political and historical communities" (Mackenzie, 2019, p.146). It is as individual humans that we

have human rights. However, the social group level is as important by clarifying what vulnerabilities are experienced by different people and therefore what is needed for human rights treaties to respond to the specific vulnerability. Seen in a disability perspective, access to enjoy one's rights is crucial due to the manifold of attitudinal, material, and sociocultural barriers experienced by persons with disabilities.

Access to knowledge production

There are many empirical studies and reports documenting that students with disabilities are worse off than their peers in all regions (Kershbaum et al., 2017; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Waterfield et al., 2018). This unjust situation has consequences for career opportunities and leads to fewer professors and staff with disabilities. Practice is changed through changes in policies. When going through the initial reports to the CRPD committee, it became clear that many countries did not mention higher education in their report to article 24 on education, which indicates low expectations for persons with disabilities in higher education.

Some countries, such as Italy and the UK, have adopted anti-discrimination acts targeting disability-based discrimination and access to higher education prior to the CRPD, which entered into force in 2006. The convention has, however, been instrumental in strengthening the focus on access to higher education globally. As all countries party to the convention are obliged to send initial reports to the CRPD committee, there is concrete information available, which I have used as empirical material in this book.

The university educates citizens to take professional roles and responsibility in the society in all sectors and at all administrative levels. Inclusive education is therefore fundamental for diversity in professional work, both in the public and private sectors. Educating in diverse student environment prepares for diversity in work life. Disability as diversity challenges the frontiers of accommodation, as academic work requires persons who can fulfil the job. Some scholars have thus asked if there is room for academics with migraines, depression, panic attacks, and changes in cognitive processing (Kershbaum et al., 2017, p. 322). If education is both a democratic and an instrumental concern, such human conditions should be facilitated for through institutional support and recognition of the interdependency between academic staff and the institution. How to work with access and inclusion is a policy task at the meso level and is enacted at the local level (Kershbaum et al., 2017, p. 323). If efficient, a change of policy involves both of these levels.

Higher education and research impact society by building knowledge to be used by society. Moreover, education is a precondition for freedom of speech and democracy. Without skills in reading and writing, it is

difficult for the person to understand and actively participate in shaping society. According to the capabilities approach, being able to "effectively participate in the political life which includes having the right to free speech and association" is among the capabilities citizens should have access to enjoy (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 77). Such skills can be taught and practised in relation to support persons. A place to live and access to welfare services are thus conditions for participating in higher education for persons with disabilities who need welfare services.

Both research and education are value-based tasks important for society as a whole. I have described and discussed the Italian policy of inclusion in higher education in Chapter 3, as an example of affirmative action measures to support inclusion. The Italian law supporting inclusion in higher education is value-based and focuses on each person's potential for contributing to society and developing skills that contribute to their identity and are relevant to employment (Maggiolini & Molteni, 2013, p. 250). Building knowledge for society as a diverse society and educating citizens are among the missions of higher education. Pedagogical values underlying inclusion policies are of equal status and education is a human rights issue. Inclusive education, where students learn together with their peers with and without disabilities, is more valuable than segregated learning practices.

Education can offer people the means for reciprocity, meaning access to be seen as familiar to people, using Garland-Thomson's term, referred to in Chapter 6 (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 158). To be recognised is to be seen as one of the "we" that society is made up of, and therefore it is important that persons with disabilities have equal access to education, including higher education.

Micro example

Higher education prepares citizens for professional and valorised roles in society. If disability hinders someone from successfully going through their education, they are also hindered from finding roles in society. In Norway and some other countries, there are professional suitability assessments of students in professional educations such as nurse, teacher, church minister, and more. The following example is from teachers' education in a Norwegian university.

> A blind student, Frode Stenrud, was excluded from the practical part of the education because of his blindness. The university argued that it was not possible to accommodate for this student. The main reason was that in order to take on leadership for the class, it was necessary to be able to see the students. After the case had become a public media case, a school leader contacted Stenrud and offered to arrange practice at the leader's school. The practice situation became a positive experience, and the learning outcome for the student was rich. After the

> period of practice, Stenrud faced problems related to a national exam where the national body responsible for the exam do not know how to facilitate for equal access to the exam. Consequently, and in order to keep the student place, the student chose to apply for a leave of absence to check the opportunities for individual accommodation at the individual exam. In his period of absence, Stenrud loses study progression and will graduate one year later than his peers. Thus, Stenrud as a student pays the price for accommodation by waiting and checking himself what opportunities there are.[1]

According to the CRPD article 24, states party to the convention should take appropriate measures to employ teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or braille (UN, 2006, art. 24). If there are no accommodations for students with disabilities in teacher's education, there will not be trained teachers with disabilities, and children with disabilities will not have necessary role models in professional roles. Following the convention on this part calls for a dynamic integration at the micro and meso levels. Here, the micro level represents disability diversity as part of humanity, whereas the meso level represents the institutional responsibility for accommodating this diversity among students. These administrative and social levels influence one another. Institutional responsibility for accommodation involves accommodation for diverse persons with sensory, psycho-social, physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities. When facilitating teachers with disabilities, it is crucial to integrate a disability perspective in the institutional responsibility for accommodation in teacher's education.

Many educational programmes involve a practical component, such as an internship. When deciding on necessary accommodations both in education and in practice, an assessment of needs must be carried out (Waddington & Priestley, 2021). Disability assessments are often carried out based on medical and individualised models of disability. This is evident for example when a medical diagnosis is requested from the person who applies for accommodations. Relational models of disability enable contextual analysis where the person, the environment, and the person–environment interaction are taken into consideration when assessing needs for accommodation. Moreover, a relational and contextual approach to assessment of needs for accommodation is more in line with the CRPD than medical and individualised approaches (Waddington & Priestley, 2021). However, disability assessment processes address administrative borders in applying relational models for disability assessment. I will return to this in the following section.

Three phases of building inclusive higher education

We can describe the pathway to a more inclusive higher education in three phases. The first phase is the exclusionary phase, where only exceptional individuals with disabilities managed to graduate from higher education

institutions. In this phase, the independent living movement was growing in countries such as the US and Denmark. One example is the independent living activist and university teacher Ed Roberts (1939–1995) who contracted the polio virus at the age of 14. Roberts, who used an iron lung, was the first student with significant disabilities at Berkeley University. He and a fellow student, who was a wheelchair user, and started the year after Roberts, helped craft a new civil rights movement for disabled people starting the year after (Danforth, 2020). Today at Berkeley, there is a universally designed campus, the Ed Roberts campus, which celebrates his legacy and keeps his vision of the importance of community work. He referred to striving for inclusion as "working toward our preferred future" (Stapleton, 2023).

The second phase occurs during the beginning of this century, with the implementation of the CRPD, around 2005–2025. This is a phase where universal design and individual accommodation regulate practices, and individualised disability accommodation is often grounded in medical diagnosis in most countries. In this phase, the human rights discourse has become global through the implementation of the convention. However, there is still not a fundamental change in how the institutions of higher education treat persons with disabilities. The system is characterised by barriers in the work- and learning environments. The rights guaranteed by the convention are not very strong as financial costs limit the duties of the institutions.

The third phase, which could be more promising, however still unrealised, comes when accommodation is built into institutions and structures. This means that experiences of persons with disabilities at the micro level influence the development of systems and structures at the meso level and universal design solution is implemented in tandem with individual accommodation. Phase three is dependent upon institution's structural policy for dismantling barriers. Knowledge of the barriers experienced by different individuals is necessary together with interdisciplinary research-based knowledge. When developing accessible universities, the micro-level knowledge must influence the structure and institutions in a way that recognises disability as a human condition and part of humanity. The relational model of disability calls for us to acknowledge the responsibility for developing a system of education that welcomes all learners.

Legal implementation in different contexts

I will now turn to legal implementation and explore to what degree this can support a change at the structural level. Implementation of the CRPD in different national contexts is practised as a kind of re-contextualisation of the convention as it is integrated in the national legal context. The convention addresses discrimination based on disability. However, discrimination is also understood differently and not used as a meaningful framework in all countries. Implementation of laws has different consequences in

different countries. In a recent study on disability anti-discrimination law in Sweden and the US, the role of law as a tool for social justice is examined (Sepulchre, 2025). Sepulchre (2025) found an ambivalence towards disability anti-discrimination law in European countries (p. 3). I have in Chapters 1 and 3 discussed how medical understandings of disability are still present in the work market and education in spite of the relational or inter-actional understandings of disability underpinning the CRPD. Following Sepulchre, disability politics is best understood as *layering*, meaning that new laws and policies are added to existing frameworks (Sepulchre, 2025, p. 4). The existing frameworks, as seen in the Nordic countries, can remain in specific administrative policy areas, such as health, welfare, and care.

One problem might arise when an old layer restricts the use of newer layers. For example, old medical models of disability understand people with disabilities as "patients" rather than recognising them as equal citizens. This is the result when a human rights lens is overlooked. In the Nordic countries, the medical model for disability is used by the administrative level in order to compensate for the inequalities in opportunities persons with disabilities experience (Brennan et al., 2018). The individual in need of accommodations must give a reason for this need, and the accepted reasons for accommodation will usually be a medical diagnosis. If a student has dyslexia, this student can have more time for exams and assignments. The same goes for work. A professor with, for example, mental health problems who needs an individual office or workplace must provide a medical diagnosis or recommendation from a general practitioner.

Global context: Poland

I now turn to examining the implementation of the CRPD in Polish higher education. The Law on Higher Education in Poland obliges higher education institutions to "enable disabled people to fully participate in the education process and research", and to "specify conditions of didactic process taking into account the needs of disabled students, including the obligation to adapt studying conditions to types of disability" (Poland, Initial report, 2014, p. 46). What is interesting here, is both that Poland includes research together with higher education, and that the studying conditions should be adapted to types of disability. There has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities in Poland (Gilga, 2015). In order to be acknowledged as disabled in Poland, one must obtain a specific disability certificate according to the level of disability (Struck-Peregończyk, 2015, p. 106).

The system of support for the students is directed towards all levels of higher education, including the PhD level, teacher's education, and social work. This policy is anchored in the Polish law on higher education, and implementation of the principle of equal access to education requires universities and university colleges to take action (Gilga, 2015). Even though the system seems flexible because it accommodates different types of

disabilities, there are restrictions in regard to who is recognised as disabled. Persons with dyslexia are not yet included and thus do not get individual accommodations and support. The same is true for people with chronic illness and those who have been injured (Gilga, 2015). The policy has been critiqued for being more theoretical than practical (Lejzerowicz, 2019). What is interesting though is that Poland acknowledges the right to higher education and research for persons with disabilities, as stated in the CRPD 2014 report and based on the law on higher education.

The Polish interpretation and re-contextualisation of the CRPD allow for specific individualised support. More actions are however necessary and recommended to be compensatory and individualised (Gilga, 2015). Poland, as Italy and other countries had adopted a law on access to higher education prior to the CRPD entered into force. This was perhaps inspired by the political change in 1989 and onwards leading to democratisation.

The universities are places for knowledge production for the societies they are a part of, embedded in, critical to and dependent upon. In a democratic society, knowledge production is a democratic task. Knowledge, according to ethical research norms, shall be of use for the society and for the citizens. Moreover, knowledge should build on insights from the citizens. When developing institutions, the knowledge base must be inclusive and accessible, which is important for democracy and for meeting knowledge needs. Historically, persons with disabilities have been objects of knowledge and included in research as research data (Spivak, 2016). As objects in research, there have been no voice filling in what knowledge is needed as seen from a disability perspective.

With the adoption of the CRPD, new fields of knowledge need open responding to the fundamental question of how societies can support persons with disabilities in living good human lives. Following Jan Grue, paid work is an index of citizenship (Grue, 2024). It is difficult for people outside of the work force to experience belonging in society on par with others. Therefore, there are ambivalences in the generous Nordic welfare state because disability pension keeps people outside of paid work as an important arena for recognition and societal relations with peers. In complex societies, education is a condition for work. As persons with disabilities have less education than their peers, lack of education is one factor that hinders being hired on a permanent basis with social securities following with paid work. According to UNESCO, participation in education has increased enormously over the last 50 years, without removing social inequalities in education (UNESCO, 2021). One consequence is an unjust distribution of education as common good. This is the main reason for why we should care about unequal access to higher education that has not been improved enough to make a difference even 20 years after the adoption of the CRPD.

Discussion

Disability in higher education is more often seen as a problem rather than as important for knowledge production (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 70). This is still the case even 20 years after the CRPD was launched by the UN. Is the language of human rights limited? Does this mean that solidarity is more necessary? It is important that the individuals know their rights, and it is important even more so that the institutions know the rights of the individual, but a fully inclusive university sector must also build on solidarity (Honneth). Recognising disability as an inherent part of humanity needs to be considered when planning and designing institutions.

Kershbaum et al. (2017) called for an interdependent institute where the institutional level takes a responsibility for inclusion, and the academic staff support each other. There are however also limits in the academic work force. The above-mentioned third phase can enable changes in the structural level, meeting the needs for a diverse group of persons without falling into endless, individually based navigations of barriers well known and documented.

The problem with individual-oriented and medical diagnosis-based accommodation is that this approach places a heavy burden on the individual who seems to be in a position where one has to fight for accommodation in each new situation. For example, when going abroad as a student on international programme or when moving to a new city and university for study. After graduating, the person with disability again has to fight for accommodation in work life to have equal opportunity to get a paid job. Seen in the perspective of the relational model of disability, each university, workplace, public transportation, and student's dormitory must expect students with disabilities to be part of the diversity. This is not an unexpected diversity, this is how we are and who we are as humanity. Solidarity therefore should be part of the human rights approach to avoid individualisation of the human rights. The relational aspect of our lives is mirrored in the relational aspect of human rights. Finding ways and practices to support persons with disabilities as wanted in higher education can shape societies towards valuing diversity.

Summing up

Access to higher education is an institutional and political responsibility, a human rights issue, and a personal matter that directly influences the lives of individuals. I have illustrated this personal level by micro examples throughout the text. This book therefore addresses access to higher

education for persons with disabilities at structural and individual levels exploring the dynamics between these administrative levels. I leave the book sharing a personal experience from my own student years.

My own trajectory through the system of higher education was pedagogically significant as I learnt the importance of institutional support and the vulnerabilities students with disabilities face. After being diagnosed, with a chronic illness I experienced that the welfare state administrators expected to "take over" my future plans as I lost the study loan financing that I have had until then. One year later, I earned my degree in contemporary theology with a thesis in eco-theology and environmental ethics, with financial support from the national rehabilitation support. The graduation enabled me to apply for a PhD scholarship 13 years later, which then led to a position as an associate professor and thereafter full professor. One significant change with potential to improve this situation that has happened since is the adoption of the CRPD. The convention has globalised disability as a human rights issue and enabled recognition of individual struggles and experiences as significant social justice and discrimination issues.

The convention has however had limited effect so far. To be more efficient, higher education institutions must take stronger responsibility for the implementation of the CRPD in higher education contexts. One way forward is to recognise that persons with disabilities belong in higher education at all levels and positions.

Note

1 I thank student Frode Stenrud for this information.

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Postscript

Looking back, thinking of the future

A conversation with professor Halvor Hanisch

In this conversation, I am asking Hanisch about his pathway through higher education and into positions as a professor of disability research, reflecting on obstacles as well as the value of being part of higher-education institutions. Hanisch is a professor at VID Specialized University, a colleague and friend. In this short conversation, we go deeper into the individual, micro level perspective and examine the costs and benefits of entering into higher education and research.

Inger Marie Lid: I wanted to have this dialogue with you as we are both professors with disabilities with different histories. You live with Cerebral Palsy (CP) and have had disability since birth. I got chronic illness as a young teenager and again as a grown up. I have used my own history as a micro example in the book chapters. I now want to discuss this topic of disability in higher education in more depth with you. You have moved successfully through primary and secondary school and higher education with a masters in sociology and one in literature as well as a Ph.D. in sociology.

You hold that research indicates that persons with disabilities need higher education more than the average population.

Halvor Hanisch: Yes, in spite of that, persons with disabilities participate to a lower degree in higher education. This has substantial negative impacts on the lives of persons with disabilities with regard to paid work and to avoid poverty. Polemically I will say that persons with disabilities are not welcomed in the higher education system. If welcomed, their presence in higher education would have had an impact on the design of

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the system and practices in the higher education system. This is to a little degree the situation today.

I.M.L.: I discuss this in Chapter 7: the need to shift from a system of individual accommodations and disability support systems to a system that is developed to welcome persons with disabilities as valued participants, valued students, faculty and staff.

H.H.: The test if someone is welcome is if the system actively welcomes you. At present, the system of education is perhaps not actively excluding but also not very welcoming. A more welcoming system could provide, for example, barrier-free designs and accessible elevators at the material level. Another example concerns the possibility to rest. If you as a student need rest during the day, this can be facilitated for, but it is not an option at the general level for all. The general modus of universities implies a template of academic person at universities, and this person does not need rest. This is the difference between a welcoming and not-so-welcoming academic environment.

I.M.L.: All of us who today are professors with disabilities have gone through a not-so-welcoming system, but few have written about their way through education and higher education.

H.H.: One perhaps see this as a past part of life, looking ahead rather than taking a reflective look at the years in education ahead of entering a position. Jan Grue, a professor and writer, has written about this, developing the metaphor of "the forest". Through childhood to adolescence to adulthood, it is for many of us the situation that we have found a path or a way from not being welcomed to a position of high social status, simply speaking. For me, it is as if I have a kind of ghost in my thoughts. Or perhaps a mirage-like, unclear memory, reminding me that when I got away from the "special world" and became more socially accepted, graduated, received a stipend and became full professor, then I left most of my childhood friends; those what were my friends when I was at the other side of the forest, before I got through the forest on my own. Knowing that the others did not make it through the forest, I also know that those who did not go through higher education and did not get a job had to face those problems that graduation helped me avoid. This is similar in some respects to the so-called social class mobility journey, where you leave the context, you come from and elevate to a higher social class by leaving the others behind. For me, this is not an easy story to tell. In practice, I do not know how to tell this story without presenting it as they did something wrong, whereas I made the right choices and so

I made it. This is a dynamic that makes it difficult to tell the story of higher education. It very easily becomes stories of individual success. I do not think I am alone in thinking these thoughts.

I.M.L.: This is similar to my own experience of having a chronic disease. It was expected that I would take a disability pension and find my place as a patient. Choosing higher education at that time depended on leaving others with the same medical condition as me behind and hide among the academics in the academic culture. This was easy as this was a culture of critical thinking, reading and writing that I was drawn towards, but at the time, it was difficult to be both a patient and an academic.

Higher education becomes the vehicle for transition from patient to person for those who can enter paid positions.

H.H.: There is one element that is different from the social mobility analogy: Thinking of the past, in the primary school, I recall that I did not feel welcome and that there were not many children like me. At the same time, those children, who were like me, were the ones I had to leave behind. Hence, there is more to it than the escape. At first there is no one who is similar to you, who looks like you, Then, voluntarily or not, you are placed in a separate world together with those who are similar to you, It is then, not initially, that it becomes clear that they are the ones that you have to leave. This is almost a disability-specific situation. It is also linked to an ambivalence in these cerebral palsy social groups. On the one hand we assisted and helped each other. At the same time, the norms that created the process of not-being-welcomed were enforced by internal justice in the group. The road to success is to do what the so-called non-disabled does, look like them, dress like them and so on. Here is a deep ambivalence in this dynamic between belonging to a group and that the road to success is to leave the group, to escape from the group. This is important and explains some of the unwillingness to tell the story about our way through the higher education system.

I.M.L.: Can this also shed light over a lack of solidarity, that the disability movement is not yet a strong social movement?

H.H.: Yes, I think the escape dynamics can give poor conditions for solidarity to the group and perhaps also to ourselves. In addition, my experiences with success in higher education, I am invited to this dialogue because of my success as a professor. And this success is individual. The condition for this

success is many hours alone in my messy dorm room with too much chocolate reading the texts I was supposed to read. I do not know if it had to be like this, but what works in order to be able to function in a system that does not welcome you as you are, is not solidarity. Solidarity helps in the long run because solidarity can lead to changes in the system. But in the short term, for me as a student, it did not feel important. I found the solution in my own life as an individual. For many of us, having academic success is preconditioned by a lot of work, individual work. For instance, I do not have any hobbies. Many of my academic peers have hobbies. But when the individual work you have to do costs so much, and is so exhausting, there is little room for solidarity. The important question is what I can do to avoid getting too exhausted at my exam. True or not, this is more important for you than the structural features at the university. An even if you manage to have changes at the university, that will not happen until after you have graduated, so it will not help you.

I.M.L.: So, the story about the pathway through higher education is a rather boring story about a lot of work and loneliness?

H.H.: Yes, loneliness and also rationalisation. Many of those I know without disabilities have been spontaneous through their student years. I had to know exactly what to study, where to live; we need to plan ahead and have a plan for what to do. The story about a successful path through higher education is marinated in everyday planning. So yes, a lot of what you need to do to navigate through a not-so-welcoming world is rather boring work. When I had a period with pain as a student, there was little help from the university because it took place during the term, and they did not have any measures to take after the term had stated. The only thing I did was to plan for reading of texts and live a boring life. This worked, but it is not an interesting story to tell. I had a lot of pain, and there was no help, so I had to stay more at home alone. Stories like these are not spectacular survival histories but boring tales of practical problem solving. These are rather grey stories about steady nudging and pushing the system in order to get what you need.

I.M.L.: In thinking ahead, is it possible to move past the first phase of democratising of higher education, where only exceptional individuals with disabilities make it through the system, such as the law scholar Ed Roberts in Berkeley with polio and using an iron lung. And the next phase, the second, would be where limited universal design, medical models and individual accommodation are regulating the field,

which have limitations as I have discussed in this book. A third phase then, will be a university that is universally accessible and actively welcoming towards students, faculty and staff with disabilities. What do you think is necessary to move from level two to three?

H.H.: The crucial question is if the inequalities in the system of education decreases. If the second phase worked as intended, I would have been positive towards this approach. This is for me an empirical question, the second phase approaches do not work as well as we hoped they would. We, therefore, as you say, probably need to move forward to a third phase. Second phase approaches are responsive towards problems. First you need the problem, and then you respond to the problem. Whereas, as I understand the third phase, these are more welcoming and affirmative approaches. A third phase would also force us to revisit our ideas about the student and the academic. For some students for example what is a well-written text, is it writing the way the professor writes? These standards can be difficult to live up to for some students. Moreover, we need to accept also that welcoming students, faculty and staff with disability has costs, both in higher education and in the education system as a whole. For example, I have a son who also has a disability. Facilitating for my son in primary school means providing a special needs school for my son. I think this is OK, resources should be used to give him and others like him a good system of education. However, this can have a cost for others. To accept this, the thinking of the second phase is not sufficient. Now, it feels as if we as a society only accept universal design and individual accommodations if it costs as little as possible. A welcoming higher education system will have to spend money on being welcoming. We do need to prioritise equal access also with regard to finances and economic priorities.

I.M.L.: We have done that already when changing from educating the elites to educating the broader groups of people. That change had costs.

H.H.: And the costs also had a negative impact on the more luxurious students when democratising the universities. The resources allocations have been changed before. It is possible to do this again. If higher priority is given to persons with disabilities, this may lead to less priority given to other students. But it is necessary to do more than just a little bit. If you want to succeed in developing a welcoming university and higher education sector, then what is needed is actually a lot.

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