# Recognizing students with intellectual disabilities in higher education

Inger Marie Lid, Anna Chalachanová, Rosemarie van den Breemer & Anne Raustøl

Published online: 04 Aug 2024.

Submit your article to this journal 

View related articles 

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

THE POLITICS AND POLICY OF INCLUDING HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

∂ OPEN ACCESS    Check for updates

# Recognizing students with intellectual disabilities in higher education

Inger Marie Lid [a], Anna Chalachanová[a], Rosemarie van den Breemer[b] and Anne Raustøl[a]

[a]Faculty of Health Sciences, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway; [b]Faculty of Economy and Social Sciences, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Rena, Norway

**ABSTRACT**

According to Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), state parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. In this paper we focus on access to higher education for persons with intellectual disabilities and the recognition or non-recognition of these persons as students and learners. The year 2024 marks 30 years since the Salamanca Statement was adopted, and the system of inclusive education still faces many challenges. One challenge is that persons with intellectual disabilities have not yet been included in higher education, although they are included in primary and secondary education as students in special needs education. The aim of this article is to identify and discuss possibilities and obstacles that may be arise when granting persons with intellectual disabilities participation in higher education. Based on experiences from a single case study – a pilot project developing a higher education programme in human rights for students with intellectual disabilities – we examine possibilities and obstacles at the institutional level. Using Honneth's relational theory of recognition, we analyse the results with a focus on what can be learned from this project in regard to welcoming students with intellectual disabilities in higher education.

## Introduction

The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) marked a shift from special needs education to inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2019). The Statement emphasizes the right to education for all and focuses explicitly on students (children and adolescents) with disabilities. In 2021, UNESCO acknowledged that 'Disability affects access to education across all regions and income groups when education systems do not have inclusive policies in place' (UNESCO, 2021, p. 25). In this article, we will focus on access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. Primary and secondary education are basic prerequisites for higher education, but these will not be our focus here.

The year 2024 marks 30 years since the Salamanca Statement was adopted, and the system of inclusive education still faces many challenges. Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008) makes dealing with these challenges even more urgent, because the states party to the Convention are obliged to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (UN, 2008). Article 24 of the Convention (UN, 2008) specifies that 'States party to the Convention shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access

general tertiary education, (…) without discrimination and on an equal basis with others'.

Persons with intellectual disabilities have not been included in higher education, although they are included in primary and secondary education as pupils in special needs education. We will begin the article with a brief historical outline of the situation for this group in the primary and secondary system of education. The main part of the article will focus on higher education.

The empirical case for this article is a pilot project carried out in a Norwegian higher education institution (HEI), where a higher education course was developed on human rights for students with intellectual disabilities. Through their work in this pilot project, the first and second authors (project leaders) explored opportunities and obstacles in the system of education. The pilot project provides a unique lens through which to examine possibilities and obstacles to take part in higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. We also present the legislation and policy regulating the higher education sector in Norway. As we will argue below, obstacles are the product of a lack of policy and support structure for the inclusion of persons belonging to this group.

According to the World Bank and the World Health Organization's World Report on Disability, 15% of the population lives with disability; thus, disability is highly relevant for education at all levels (World Health Organization, 2011). Disability is often approached from within a biomedical discourse, which tends to emphasize *impairment* (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). In contrast, we take a citizenship and human rights approach to disability, emphasizing participation.

The article addresses education as a human rights topic and recognition of persons with intellectual disabilities in HEIs. The aim of the article is to identify and discuss possibilities and obstacles that can be faced when granting persons with intellectual disabilities participation in higher education.

The article starts with a brief historical background and description of the Norwegian context. Thereafter, we present the case: the pilot project that developed a higher education course for students with intellectual disability. Next, we present and discuss theoretical perspectives and method. We then describe, analyse, and discuss the findings before concluding.

## Historical background

In the early days of the developing Norwegian welfare state, children with intellectual disabilities, together with deaf and blind children, were acknowledged as individuals with learning potential under the Abnormal Schools Act of 1881, which established the right to education for 'blind, deaf and feeble-minded children' (Simonsen, 2003, p. 93). In 1936, students with disabilities were excluded from ordinary schools, leaving these individuals to the special education system, which at that time was not compulsory for municipalities to offer (Bondevik & Bostad, 2021).

Since 1881, two parallel systems in primary education have developed: those of special needs pedagogy and pedagogy. The system of special needs pedagogy has not worked well in terms of giving students the necessary skills and competence to be prepared for higher education (Gustavsson et al., 2017; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014). Persons with intellectual disabilities, who have been part of special needs education, are therefore not on an equal footing with others when applying for higher education. The level of competence needed to complete higher education also implies that not all persons will be able to meet the criteria for admission nor succeed in taking such courses. However, it has not yet been explored whether there are persons excluded from higher education that could meet the admission criteria and complete higher education.

Students have a right to special adult education according to their 'developmental potential' (Section 5–1 of the Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training, 1998). More knowledge is needed regarding how these educational systems work, not only formally but also in practice. Persons with congenital intellectual disabilities receive a pension when they turn 18 and are, as such, categorized as 'born disabled' (*født ufør*). This group affiliation grants the right to financial support – the disability benefit – but not to other types of social financial support or student loans.

## Higher education in Norway

We will now turn to higher education and examine the possibilities that persons with intellectual disabilities have to apply for higher education programmes in Norway. Higher education is a highly regulated sector. Unlike elementary and secondary education, higher education is not an individual fundamental right. However, all persons have an equal right to apply for higher education and shall have equal rights in the education system if they meet admission criteria. The general basis of admission is 'completion of Norwegian upper secondary school or other suitable education or combination of education and work experience' (Section 3–6 of the Act relating to universities and university colleges, 2005). To acquire general study competence, the student must have successfully completed three years of upper secondary school, or successfully completed vocational training and passed the study qualification subjects.[1]

Within the legal system, there is room for exemption from the formal regulation of admission to higher education due to disability or permanent illness. If a student can provide documentation proving that it was not possible to acquire general study competence due to such factors, the institution can grant dispensation and allow the student to be admitted to higher education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021).

This legal exemption for those who have not been able to meet the above requirement due to chronic illness or impairment was adopted under an administrative regulation concerning admission to higher education in 2021. This administrative regulation states in Chapter 3 on exemptions from requirements for general study competence that students with disabilities can get dispensation from the requirement for study competence.[2] The HEI must assess whether the student has the necessary conditions to complete the education programme (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021, Chapter 3).

The overarching framework of qualifications in the European Higher Education Area was adopted in 2005 (the Bologna Process). The different national qualification frameworks have been developed in order to be compatible with this overarching European framework. The Norwegian version of this European framework

covers three cycles: bachelor's, master's and doctorate. The qualification framework provides a threshold for what students are expected to document that they have achieved. According to this framework, the students' learning outcomes are divided into knowledge, skills and competencies.

Although social and societal inclusion of persons with disabilities is important for the Norwegian welfare state (Ogden, 2014), disability remains a risk factor for dropping out of education at all levels (Kermit & Holiman, 2018). The CRPD calls for universal design of products, environments, programmes and services, as well as for reasonable accommodation. Students in higher education have a right to individual accommodation, but the kind of accommodation is not specified, except for additional time for completing exams and access to audio texts (provided by the Norwegian Library for accessible literature (Tibi)) for students with sight loss and/or learning disabilities. In the Norwegian welfare state, such rights are individual rights based upon medical diagnosis. The right to individual accommodation is rather unspecified, and HEIs' duty to provide for universal design in the learning environment is too weak. There is thus not yet a sufficient system in place to secure the rights of students with disabilities in HEIs.

## Presenting the pilot project

The pilot project that forms the case for this article was carried out from autumn 2021 to autumn 2023. The project's idea was based on Article 24 of the CRPD and the right to access post-secondary education for persons with disabilities (UN, 2008). This project aimed to explore the possibilities of provisions in higher education courses for students with intellectual disabilities. The initial project group consisted of representatives from the City of Oslo, the first author, a professor at VID Specialized University, and the Norwegian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (NFU). The City of Oslo paid for the services of a recently graduated lawyer who worked with the project group in developing an application for project funding. Since there was no funding available for higher education for students with intellectual disabilities, project funding was necessary. When external funding from the Dam Foundation (Stiftelsen Dam) was in place, the first and second author shared responsibility as project leaders from August 2021. The pilot project was part of the Faculty of Health Studies at VID Specialized University, with support from the rector and the dean.

Project participants were recruited through information about the project at the HEI's webpage. During the first year, project leaders and a group of persons with intellectual disabilities who were interested in higher education worked together in co-production to plan the coursework. We refer to these persons as 'potential students'. During the second year, the courses were taught to students at the programme, these are referred to as 'students'. Formative dialogue research was an integrated component of the entire period. This entailed two kinds of co-production: (a) planning the courses in the 2021–2022 academic year – project leaders together with potential students; (b) carrying out the courses in the 2022–2023 academic year – project leaders educating students. This was carried out at two campuses, both in southern Norway.

Both the potential students and the students at the course were recruited through the website of the HEI where the project was located. Most of the students accepted at the programme had been active as potential students developing the coursework. The programme was not widely advertised; rather, persons came and applied for acceptance as the word spread. The project leaders experienced a great deal of enthusiasm from applicants, family members and the general public.

During the first year of the project, the project leaders worked closely with potential students to develop courses relevant to the students, including learning goals according to the qualification framework, working methods, exams and assignments. The overall topic of human rights created a frame for the development of the courses. Three types of courses were developed and taught:

a. a course in human rights and the everyday, developed together with potential students
b. a hybrid course on power and relations in practice, carried out with students in the master's programme in citizenship and co-operation; the course was developed with potential students and the teacher of the course in the master's programme
c. a course in inclusive and participatory research, developed by researchers and co-researchers from six universities and university colleges in Norway (Naku, n.d.)

We adapted the latter course for the higher education programme. The courses were carried out with two student groups at two campuses.

Each course was worth 10 ECTS points. All courses were pedagogically and didactically accommodated to meet the students' needs. In courses (a) and (c) above, the students took part in the coursework exclusively with other students with intellectual disabilities. Course (b) was offered on one campus as a hybrid design (O'Brien et al., 2018), where the students from the pilot project took part in the course

together with students from the master's programme in citizenship and cooperation. The different students worked together on an assignment about professional relations in practice. During the academic year, the project leaders worked closely with the students, paying attention to their needs for accommodation. Project leaders shared the pedagogical responsibility and also sat in the classes with students when not teaching. We hired student assistants on both campuses to help the students with practical tasks.

The courses were developed as individual courses, collectively comprising 30 ECTS points, equivalent to 1 year of part time education at 50% progression. The students were on campus for 10 weeks. In between campus-based classes, we offered lectures or supervision online. Each of the 3 courses consisted of 70 hours of teacher-led activities and 200 hours of student work. We used the above-mentioned qualification framework to generalize the higher education for this group of students, to make it easier for other HEIs to develop similar programmes for students with intellectual disabilities.

In total, two student groups at two campuses (five in each group) participated in the courses. All the students expressed interest in learning and appreciated being a part of this programme. Some students had personal assistants who assisted them with practical or personal tasks. Throughout the academic year, the project leaders maintained close contact (in person and by email) with the students in between on-campus classes to identify and accommodate their needs. This could involve explaining homework, meeting online, writing easy-to-read texts etc. A formative dialogue approach was carried out through the whole project.

The admission criteria were developed together with the administration. The students were expected to have attended upper secondary school for at least three years. Based on their CV and motivation letter, all students who applied for admission were invited to an interview where we gave further information to them and their families and discussed important aspects of the programme. All applicants were accepted in the programme, but two students chose to stop before completing it. All students passed their exam.

After having introduced the empirical case for this article, we now continue by presenting the theoretical perspectives and method used.

## Theoretical perspectives

Education is fundamentally relevant to citizenship. Access to education is important for citizenship, and persons excluded from education are often also excluded from citizenship. Education supports citizenship and democracy (Nussbaum, 2010) by educating for citizenship. Nussbaum's political philosophy has proved productive both in education and in disability studies and welfare research (Lid, 2015; Reindal, 2009). Of importance here is that higher education is valuable for formation and building democratic citizens. When groups and persons have poor access to education, this is a democratic problem and hinders equal citizenship.

The topic of this article is recognizing students with intellectual disability in HEIs, supporting equal citizenship for persons with disabilities. Therefore, theories on recognition understood as access to civil and political rights and duties are productive for analysing the findings. The concept of recognition has become important in highlighting the explicit relational character of justice and public morality. Justice requires not only a set of goods for each individual, but also giving a person appropriate standing in the eyes of others (Young, 1990). In the context of this article, we include perspectives from the German philosopher Axel Honneth, who 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).

Honneth here distinguishes between three recognition spheres: love, law and achievement (p. 137). These realms in capitalist society 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', respectively. In this article, we will refer to Honneth's equality principle and achievement principle.

In the analysis and discussion, we will apply a micro – meso – macro-level approach to distinguish between the role of individuals (micro level), education initiatives and institutions (meso level) and regulating government (macro level) (Boeren, 2019, p. 281). We use this analytical approach as a tool to identify and understand the obstacles and possibilities revealed through planning and carrying out the pilot project. The approach fits well with Honneth's three spheres (mentioned above). We focus on the institutional meso level, since this article discusses obstacles and opportunities for students with intellectual disability in HEIs. However, the individual micro level and the regulating macro level, as well as the linking of the levels, will be included where relevant.

Disability is both a medical and social – relational phenomenon. In essence, the medical model sees a person's impairment first and focuses on this aspect as the reason why a person with a disability is unable to access goods and services or participate fully in society (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). In our context, intellectual disability is the reason for exclusion from higher education. The Norwegian welfare state provides inhabitants with rights and financial compensation, such as special needs education and an individual plan in education based on a medical diagnosis. Thus, medical models are dominant in the context of the welfare state (Brennan et al., 2018).

The social model addresses structural inequalities and socially created oppression (Shakespeare, 2018). Disability is here understood as the consequence of barriers in society, such as lack of accessibility and discriminatory attitudes. Relational models, in turn, integrate individual and structural dimensions – and also focus on the individual – environment interaction in contexts – to understand disability (Lid, 2023). Disability is, accordingly, contextual and situational. The analysis and discussion sections illustrate and discuss this in the context of higher education.

The CRPD is based on an understanding of disability as a product of human – environment interactions (Lid, 2023; UN, 2008, Article 1). In this relational model, disability is presented as part of human diversity; it is seen through the lens of human rights and ideas about equality (Degener, 2017). Intellectual disability, such as a learning disability, is part of human diversity and therefore also needs to be accommodated for in higher education.

The human rights perspective recognizes the human dignity of people with disabilities and values human difference and diversity (Degener, 2016, in, Broderick & Ferri, 2019). In our opinion, relational models that take both individual and environmental factors into account are necessary when exploring opportunities and barriers for persons with intellectual disabilities in higher education. The education system has responsibility to support individuals and dismantle structural, environmental and attitudinal barriers. Relational models for disability also fit well with Honneth's relational understanding of social justice.

## Method

The aim of this article is to identify obstacles and possibilities for granting students with intellectual disability access to higher education. We here employ a case study design (Yin, 2018). The pilot project is the case and the unit of analysis, studied within a context of educational policy and regulation, where we focus on the obstacles and possibilities faced in carrying out the pilot. The pilot project was not an experiment, but rather an innovation in higher education. We approach it as a flexible, single-subject case study design (Yin, 2009, p. 62, 2018): an approach that is suitable when the case represents an unusual circumstance among other examples (Yin, 2018, p. 53). As it was the first of its kind in Scandinavia, the pilot project can be seen as an unusual circumstance. Taking a pragmatic approach, we adapted the single-subject case study design according to our context and research aim.

According to Yin, the unit of analysis and the unit of data collection may differ and create confusion (Yin, 2018, p. 102). In this study, the data include educational policy documents and experiences with interactions at institutional meso level by first and second author. We identified three units of analysis: regulative politics (macro level) is the main context in this article. The students' learning environment at the HEI (institutional meso level) is the main unit of analysis. The students' experiences (micro level) is to a lesser degree included in this article. The individual micro level and regulative macro level will be included when relevant.

The pilot project practiced an explorative approach to accommodation for a new group of students. Part of the process of accommodation is exploring possibilities for accommodation at the regulative macro level and institutional meso level. The context in the HEI where the pilot project was conducted is referred to as the institutional meso level. We seek to identify the obstacles and possibilities for the students in these processes of implementation. The first and second authors have first-hand information on the project. The empirical material was generated through formative dialogue research (Feinstein et al., 2010) by first and second author. Formative dialogue research is an approach in empirical research where the researchers are able to make changes in the project alongside the work in the project (Feinstein et al., 2010) This approach is therefore highly suitable for pilot projects. Formative dialogue research was carried out during the project and is included in the case. According to Feinstein et al. (2010, p. 8), formative dialogue research means giving shape to things so that people conducting research and evaluation can influence changes during a process, improvements can be made, and problems can be solved.

The data consist of fieldnotes, the first and second authors' log book with notes from meetings with students, and minutes from meetings at the administrative level. The students' perspective is included in other articles, as well as in newspaper articles, as students were interviewed by journalists about their experience as students in the programme (Chalachanová et al., 2023). In these interviews, the students spoke about their experiences being the first

students in a higher education programme for persons with intellectual disabilities in Norway. In the project, we also conducted group interviews with students at the end of each course. All courses were evaluated by students. The result of this evaluation guided the subsequent course.

The first and second authors had regular meetings with the administrative staff and faculty leadership during the pilot project. In addition, they had meetings with an external scholar from Nord University, to guide and reflect together during the process.[3] We also had meetings with the student administration, and the pilot project was presented at different meetings in the Faculty of Health Studies. In total, we have approximately 100 pages of minutes, notes and evaluation notes. We read and reflected upon these, guided by the research question, seeking possibilities and obstacles in granting persons with intellectual disability participation in higher education.

While the data were anonymized, it was not possible to fully blind them since VID Specialized University is the only HEI in the Scandinavian countries that is developing higher education programmes for students with intellectual disabilities. We have therefore refrained from including citations from minutes or notes.

## Challenges in research ethics

We here present and discuss the research-related ethical challenges experienced by the project leaders. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023) emphasizes that researchers should 'recognise and weigh the potential harms and risks relating to their research and its application and mitigate possible negative impacts' (point 2.3). One ethical challenge in this project relates to its status as a pilot project – it has not yet been acknowledged as a higher education project by the Norwegian government. While this does not pose a risk or cause harm, it necessitates reflection. The pilot project has demonstrated a need for this kind of education in Norway, as evidenced by the students' interest in learning. Knowing that these persons are not recognized as learners in HEIs, the temporality of the pilot project led to ethical reflection and discussions with the students.

One risk navigated in the project was that the students would not be recognized as students in HEIs. We mitigated this risk by including them in all phases of the project, including the formative dialogue research. The pilot project is characterized by co-production of knowledge. The main purpose of inclusive knowledge production is a transparent search for truth (Popper, 1971), which is the standard that should govern ethical reflection in practice. Over the last 20 years, it has been emphasized that

scientific truth-seeking must happen in close collaboration with the societies and persons the research will have an impact on (Jasanoff, 2017; Nowotny et al., 2003), as the concept of truth cannot be understood as an entity void of contextual and relational aspects, but only makes sense within communities and contexts. In this project, we have balanced truth-seeking, potential harms, and negative impacts on the involved students, and the importance of carrying hope in a balanced way by reflecting upon the unpredictability and uncertainty of the project together with the students.

An ethical relevant point concerns the closeness of the first and second authors to the material, as both were project leaders for the pilot project. We addressed this by inviting an external scholar to take part in the formative dialogue research and to reflect and write together with the third and fourth author. These co-writing processes enhanced the reflexivity of the project leaders.

The potential students who worked on planning the coursework and the students who wanted to participate in the research provided their free and informed consent by signing consent forms. The information was provided in a way that accommodated the students' needs. According to the practice for co-production of knowledge in research at this HEI, the potential students were paid for planning the coursework; the students who took the courses did not get paid to study, as students in general do not receive payment for studying.

In the formative dialogue research, we focused on the students' experiences to identify possibilities and obstacles at the institutional level. Being able to implement the pilot project as such demonstrated a possibility in higher education. However the lack of accommodation at the institutional level was an ethical dilemma, because the students were exposed to obstacles in the learning environment. We addressed the dilemma by having a dialogue with the students in collaborative working processes and striving to improve the accommodation in concrete situations throughout the project period. We learned alongside the implementation of the pilot project. The students with disabilities were used to facing barriers in the built and sociocultural environment, as these exist in all sectors and arenas. The coursework in which they took part provided a space in which they could reflect upon these barriers together with the project leaders, in which we also highlighted the barriers and contextualized them, historically and politically.

Research in this field requires an awareness of research integrity issues. Historically, academia's intention to protect the vulnerable has resulted in the perspectives of what is referred to as vulnerable groups being excluded from knowledge production

(National Research Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and the Humanities, 2021, point 31). This is an example of paternalism that is strongly rooted in a medical approach to persons with disabilities. According to our rationale, it is important to make the perspectives of persons with intellectual disabilities heard and their challenges acknowledged, which is an important step on the road to epistemic recognition. However, this motivation brings with it some ethical issues that we had to balance.

A pilot project is suitable for learning through experiences, and the formative dialogue research made it possible to make changes alongside working in the project. The students had influence upon any changes made during the project and were recognized as subjects of knowledge as well as co-researchers. The students were new to studying in an HEI and therefore, like many persons with disabilities, had to navigate barriers in the learning environment; we will return to these in more detail in the findings section. All the students were interested in co-working on the project. Moreover, in publications in which students are co-authors, they opted not to be anonymized (Chalachanová et al., 2023).

## Findings: obstacles and possibilities

The formative dialogue research provided opportunities to strengthen the supportive structure for the students at one campus and connect the pilot project student with other students at the other campus. The students in the pilot project, like all students, had to learn to adapt to some of the demands of higher education, such as individual study, submitting assignments and participating in group work.

The data from the formative dialogue research were analysed throughout the project, in dialogue with students, an external scholar and HEI administration, focusing on the support structure we were able to offer students at the institutional meso levels and the policy macro level. The findings presented here apply to different dimensions of the students' learning environment (e.g. pedagogical, physical, sociocultural, digital and organizational). We therefore present the findings related to the five aspects of the students' learning environment. These are all of importance for students making their way through higher education. According to the case study design, focusing on the institutional meso level, these five dimensions will here mostly be addressed at the this level, although the micro level and macro levels interconnect with the institutional level.

We begin by describing possibilities regarding the pedagogical learning environment. At a general level, the project revealed an important possibility: that the students experienced inclusion in higher education and appreciated being recognized as learners in a higher education programme. It was a pedagogical possibility to have close interaction with the students and facilitate their learning process. The project generated new knowledge for our HEI regarding the balance between universal design in learning environments and individual accommodation. There were pedagogical opportunities to accommodate for individual needs among students. We therefore believe that the programme contributed to their flourishing. In interviews with the national media, some of the students expressed this as important, mentioning passing exams and presenting assignments as valuable to them.[4]

A pedagogical obstacle, however, was that we as an HEI were not sufficiently prepared for the new group of students, as we needed to include their network to accommodate their learning process. Such experiences are reflected in other research (Lee & Taylor, 2022). The students found certain syllabi challenging to comprehend, so these were rewritten in simpler, more accessible language. Another obstacle was time as a limited resource, with regards to teacher-led activities.

There were mainly two teachers involved in the programme, which provided a valuable opportunity to get to know the students quite well. At times, the teachers had to take on a dual role as both educator and facilitator. The project enabled them to explore creative pedagogical methods, such as creating a visible timeline when teaching about disability and human rights history. In their assignments, the students used different methods, such as film, podcast, PowerPoint and written text. This diversity of pedagogical approaches and tools offered a variety of experiences for teachers and students. When considered in the context of university pedagogy, the learning outcomes are valuable with regards to educating students in general.

The physical learning environment consisted of one older campus and one newer campus. As the HEI hosting the pilot project, was open to learn from the experience, in order to improve the universal design of its buildings and environment, as well as its individual accommodation project leaders communicated from the project on a regular basis. However, there were also obstacles related to wayfinding, maintenance and accessible toilets and classrooms. In line with relational models of disability we accommodated students' needs in these areas by increasing the time for lunch breaks and adding time for both social interaction and taking care of individual needs.

The socio-cultural learning environment was influenced by less interaction with other students than originally planned for. At one of the campuses, the students had the opportunity to work together with other students; at the other campus, this was not

possible for practical reasons. We identified a bachelor's programme that would have been relevant to collaborate with for the students at the other campus; however, the time schedules did not align. When the students in the bachelor's programme were on campus, the students in the pilot programme were not – and vice versa. These kinds of practical and technical obstacles were unsurprising, as all education programmes share a limited number of rooms and education spaces.

Collaboration with other students was an important experience for the pilot students who got this opportunity. They were able to experience the life of other students, with meetings, group work, preparing presentations, answering questions after the presentations, sharing their knowledge and acquiring new knowledge together with other students. As for the other pilot students, we undertook other activities to support the belonging of the students in the university, such as always having lunch in the cafeteria on campus, and encouraged the students to take part in students activities on campus.

Students and project leaders also experienced digital opportunities and barriers. Online meetings with students worked well, and the digital lectures provided an opportunity for all students at both campuses to meet at the same time. The digital barriers concerned the use of the learning platforms, digital access and the exam system. Analysed in light of relational models of disability, the digital platforms were not sufficiently adapted to the needs of persons with intellectual disability. Teachers and students used the learning platform Canvas to upload and download lectures, assignments, timetables and other information. The design of the learning platform Canvas was less accommodated for students with intellectual disabilities. To accommodate the students' needs, we therefore used email and communicated with the students individually, which worked for the students but was more time-consuming for the teachers.

## Discussion

In this section, we discuss the findings in light of Honneth's relational theory of recognition by focusing on the two principles of law and achievement. When discussing the law principle, we distinguish analytically between a legal possibility at the macro level (de jure) and the actual right for concrete individuals in specific contexts at the institutional meso level (de facto). Our aim is to identify and discuss the obstacles and possibilities for these students in these processes of accommodation. The main focus of this article is to explore the possibilities and obstacles at institutional level in line with the above-described relational model and the human rights approach to

disability. Preliminary analysis indicates that there are barriers at the institutional level, both at university and state level. In order to secure and mainstream education, institutional support is necessary together with individual accommodation supporting students' learning processes.

The analysis alongside the project period indicated that pedagogical, social and administrative support was necessary to facilitate for students achieving ECTS. We had planned for such support and could provide for the students. According to other research we however recognize that use of ECTS points is not necessary for developing this kind of higher education (Bjornsdottir, 2017), as it is not a part of a bachelor's or master degree within the qualification framework.

Barriers emerge in the person – environment interplay. In terms of Honneth's differentiated and relational concept of recognition, we found obstacles and possibilities on different levels. For example, the project group always had to make sure that the room for meetings was accessible and large enough for wheelchairs, and that the accessible toilet was in working order. Persons using a wheelchair need space in order to move freely. Usually, administrative support at the HEI books the classrooms. Although all the classrooms are supposed to be accessible to wheelchair users, the project leaders had to check that this was the case. The group of students was small, which also meant that sometimes we were allocated smaller classrooms not appropriate for students using wheelchairs.

We planned for more interactions with students from other programmes than we managed to realize. The pilot project implemented one course as co-learning, together with students from a master's programme. The experiences of both the master's students and the pilot project students were good; however, they were dependent on individual effort and goodwill rather than institutional priorities and strategies.

In terms of Honneth's achievement principle, we realized when using the qualification framework that there was little room to sufficiently adapt this framework to the individual students' needs for accommodation. The HEI's Committee of Education holds the responsibility for the academic level of courses offered at the institution. The dialogue on the flexibility of the qualification framework belongs at the regulative macro level more than the institutional meso level. In spite of positive signals little has changed in terms of increasing the flexibility of the system to accommodate the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Not all persons should or must attend higher education, but it is fundamental to a just society that all persons have equal rights to education, including

applying for higher education (UN, 2008, Article 24). Important dimensions here are equal opportunity to access higher education and fair opportunities to take part in and complete higher education courses. International experiences and research in higher education inspired the project's development and content. Recent research (O'Brien et al., 2018) provided a framework for the pilot project, giving helpful knowledge about different perspectives on inclusive HEIs, including lived experiences, teachers' attitudes, and the political, structural and critical issues when establishing this novel type of education.

From the perspective of Honneth's (2003) relational theory of recognition, we can ask: Who is to change – the individual or the system? In the pilot project, our aim was to negotiate with the system so that the needs of the students with intellectual disabilities were accommodated for (Bjornsdottir, 2017). In this process we experienced resistance within the system, which in Honneth's theory concerns the legal principle. The students are, as persons with intellectual disabilities not recognized as epitomized students. We do not claim that all people need to go through higher education in order to be full citizens of society. But not being recognized as an individual with learning capacity, being excluded from the realm of higher education because of a group identity, seem unjust.

The problem then is that these persons are not recognized as a learner and as a knower. This is a lack of recognition that is justified by referring to the group identity rather than individual potential. By designing the project as co-production together with potential students and students, the participants were recognized as learners and as persons with relevant knowledge included in the formative dialogue research.

Historically, higher education is a battleground; new groups of academics have always met with barriers, prejudice and special group arrangements. There is often a fear in the system that when accepting historically underrepresented groups in academia, the quality of the system of education will be under pressure (Aavitsland, 2019). When working on this pilot project, we also faced resistance towards the inclusion of these students in higher education.

## Sector barriers as an exclusionary factor

Norwegian policies on inclusion are organized in line with the principle of sector responsibility (Chhabra, 2019). This means that the education sector is responsible for inclusion and equal access to education. Higher education is, as described above, characterized by sector barriers, such as assignments, exams and grading. Based on Honneth's (2003) perspective and analysis of this pilot project, students with intellectual disabilities are not recognized as equal in the Norwegian higher education system. As experienced in the pilot project, neither the pedagogical, physical, digital nor social learning environments accommodate students with intellectual disabilities. Recognition applies to both the regulative macro level and the institutional meso level and is experienced or not at the individual micro level.

If education and higher education are common goods, as in Norway, they should be accessible also for persons with intellectual disabilities. The welfare state should lead to a better quality of life, including for students in marginalized positions (Ogden, 2014). Therefore, the system of education can be identified as unjust when some individuals are excluded from admission to higher education (Oettingen, 2018). Lack of access to apply for higher education admission can be viewed in light of Honneth's (2003) theoretical perspective regarding who is excluded from the legal structure and positioned outside legal relations.

What the pilot project revealed is that the exclusion of these persons from the system of education is both legal and political, and when changing the system in order to include persons belonging to these excluded groups, we need to address both the legal and the political levels, together with the institutional level at the individual HEI. Referring to the relational model of disability, the individual condition of intellectual impairment gives the right to financial support (the disability benefit), but not support to participate in higher education. The experiences from the pilot project at the macro and meso levels indicate that persons with intellectual disabilities are invisible as learners in the system of education, perhaps for this reason. This is, we argue, a lack of recognition at the regulative macro and institutional meso level of these citizens as learners (Honneth, 2003).

According to Article 24 of the CRPD (UN, 2008), states party to the Convention shall ensure access to postsecondary higher education. As illustrated by the project, there are opportunities, but also manifold of obstacles that need to be addressed strategically and politically at all levels. This relates to all students with disabilities as inclusion in higher education is a principle formulating what kind of organisation we have chosen for our educational systems and ultimately for our societies' (Kermit & Holiman, 2018, p. 165).

There are positive opportunities but the legal and political hindrances, which we have described above, are substantial and can be described as a 'wicked problem' because there are many interdependent factors that make it difficult to solve. There are, however, also possibilities in the system as described and discussed above, which needs to be explored and developed further.

## Conclusion

The role of education in the Nordic welfare state needs to be reflected on from a disability perspective. Despite several decades of special needs education for pupils with intellectual disabilities, persons belonging to this group have not yet been included in higher education. Including this historically underrepresented group in higher education is a challenge at institutional level because the structure is not developed to facilitate for these students.

In order to welcome new groups of students in higher education, the regulative system at the macro level and the institutional systems at the meso level must adapt and accommodate this new group of students. When planning for the pilot project, we aimed to identify and discuss possibilities and obstacles in higher education. By identifying possibilities, we hope also to influence the education system in a backward direction. When persons with intellectual disabilities are being recognized as learners, they might be facilitated for in a better way in elementary and secondary education. This is not possible to measure at this point, but it can perhaps be evaluated if and when the work is continued as an integrated part of the higher education system. One important test case will be whether the admission system will make room for students with intellectual disabilities that have no grades from secondary school exams (Bjornsdottir, 2017).

In this article, we have focused on the possibilities and obstacles that emerged in a pilot project facilitating for students with intellectual disability in HEI. We have identified opportunities and barriers in the system of education and at HEIs related to all dimensions of the student's learning environment. Both UNESCO (2021) and the CRPD (UN, 2008) call for a policy supporting an inclusive system of education. It is the task of the sector to find ways to implement inclusive systems at all levels, including higher education. Based on the relational understanding of disability, it is necessary to acquire knowledge on the interaction between individual needs and the structural mechanisms that have the power to change laws and practices.

## Notes

1. There is also a 23/5 rule, which means that the applicant be at least 23 years old in the year of admission, has completed and passed the study qualification subjects and has at least 5 years of education or professional experience (Norwegian Universities and Colleges admission service's act relating to universities and university colleges, 2005).
2. In this project, we did not formally make use of this in the short term.
3. We wish to thank Oddbjørn Johansen contributing to the formative dialogue research by asking questions from outside the institution.
4. There were several interviews with some of the students in the national and regional media.

## ORCID

Inger Marie Lid 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1064-3600

## References

Aavitsland, V. L. (2019). The failure of judgment: Disgust in Arendt's theory of political judgment. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *33*(3), 537–550. https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.33.3.0537

Act relating to universities and university colleges. (2005). *Lovdata*. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2005-04-01-15

Ainscow, M., Slee, R., & Best, M. (2019). Editorial: The Salamanca statement: 25 years on. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *23*(7–8), 671–676. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1622800

ALLEA. (2023). *The European code of conduct for research integrity*. https://allea.org/portfolio-item/european-code-of-conduct-2023/

Bjornsdottir, K. (2017). Belonging to higher education: Inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *32*(1), 125–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2016.1254968

Boeren, E. (2019). Understanding sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 on "quality education" from micro, meso and macro perspectives. *International Review of Education*, *65*(2), 277–294. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09772-7

Bondevik, H., & Bostad, I. (2021). Ut av hjemmet - inn i hjemmet-. Når skole og hjem går sammen. In I. Bostad (Ed.), *Å høre hjemme i verden. Introduksjon til en pedagogisk hjemstedsfilosofi* (pp. 133–169). Scandinavian Academic Press.

Brennan, C., Traustadóttir, R., Rice, J., & Anderberg, P. (2018). Being number one is the biggest obstacle: Implementing the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities within Nordic welfare services. *Nordic Welfare Research*, *3*(1), 18–32. https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2018-01-03

Broderick, A., & Ferri, D. (2019). *International and European disability law and policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Chalachanová, A., Lid, I. M., Gerhardsen, A. M., Jacobsen, I. E., & Lindstad, A. T. (2023). Høyere utdanning for studenter med utviklingshemming – erfaringer

med utvikling av emne menneskerettigheter og hverdagssliv sammen med potensielle studenter ved VID vitenskapelige høgskole. (Higher education for students with intellectual disability – experiences from developing a course on human rights and the everyday together with potential students). *Tidsskrift for psykisk helsearbeid*, *20*(4), 330–336. 10.18261/tph.20.4.11

Chhabra, G. (2019). Two worlds, too apart to converge? A comparison of social regulation policies aimed at the employment of disabled people in Norway and India. *Alter*, *13*(2), 83–100. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2018.11.001

Degener, T. (2016). Challenges and compliance of the UN CRPD. In D. Estrada-Tranck (Ed.), *Human rights of persons with disabilities in international and EU law* (pp. 7–45). Academy of European Law.

Degener, T. (2017). A new human rights model of disability. In V. D. Fina, R. Cera, & G. Palmisano (Eds.), *The united nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities: A commentary* (pp. 41–59). Springer International Publishing.

Feinstein, C., Giertsen, A., & O'Kane, C. (2010). *Children's participation in armed conflict and post-conflict peace building*. Routledge.

Gustavsson, A., Kittelsaa, A., & Tøssebro, J. (2017). Successful schooling for pupils with intellectual disabilities: The demand for a new paradigm. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *32*(4), 469–483. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1328329

Honneth, A. (2003). Redistribution as recognition: A response to Nancy Fraser. In N. Fraser & A. Honneth (Eds.), *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange* (pp. 110–160). Verso.

Jasanoff, S. (2017). *Technologies of humility: Citizen participation in governing science* (1st ed., pp. 169–190). Routledge.

Kermit, P. S., & Holiman, S. (2018). Inclusion in Norwegian higher education: Deaf students' experiences with lecturers. *Social Inclusion*, *6*(4), 158–167. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i4.1656

Lee, C. E., & Taylor, J. L. (2022). A review of the benefits and barriers to postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education*, *55*(4), 234–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/00224669211013354

Lid, I. M. (2015). Vulnerability and disability: A citizenship perspective. *Disability & Society*, *30*(10), 1554–1567. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1113162

Lid, I. M. (2023). Citizenship and universal design. In I. M. Lid, E. Steinfeld, & M. Rembis (Eds.), *Rethinking disability and human rights. Participation, equality and citizenship* (p. 175). Routledge.

Magnus, E., & Tøssebro, J. (2014). Negotiating individual accommodation in higher education. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, *16*(4), 316–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2012.761156

Ministry of Education. (1998). *Act relating to primary and secondary education and training*. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1998-07-17-61

Ministry of Education and Research. (2021). *Administrative regulation (forskrift) on admission to higher education*. https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2017-01-06-13

NAKU. (n.d.). *Research course for persons with intellectual disabilities*. https://naku.no/kunnskapsbanken/forskerkurs-personer-med-utviklingshemming

National Research Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and the Humanities. (2021). *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities*. National Research Ethics Committees. https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/

Nowotny, H., Scott, P., & Gibbons, M. (2003). Introduction: 'Mode 2' revisited: The new production of knowledge. *Minerva*, *41*(3), 179–194. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025505528250

Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit*. Princeton University Press.

O'Brien, P., Bonati, M. L., Gadow, F., & Slee, R. (2018). *People with intellectual disability experiencing university life: Theoretical underpinnings, evidence and lived experience*. Brill Sense.

Oettingen, A. V. (2018). *Undervisning er dannelse* (Vol. 7). Aarhus University Press.

Ogden, T. (2014). Special needs education in Norway – the past, present, and future of the field. In B. G. Cook, M. Tankersley, & T. J. Landrum (Eds.), *Special education, past, present, and future: Perspectives from the field* (Vol. 27, pp. 213–238). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Popper, K. R. (1971). The moral responsibility of the scientist. *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, *2*(3), 279–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/096701067100200311

Reindal, S. M. (2009). Disability, capability, and special education: Towards a capability-based theory. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *24*(2), 155–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250902793610

Retief, M., & Letšosa, R. (2018). Models of disability: A brief overview. *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies*, *74*(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4738

Shakespeare, T. (2018). *Disability: The basics*. Routledge.

Simonsen, E. (2003). *Vitenskap og profesjonskamp: Opplæring av døve og åndsvake i Norge 1881-1963*. Unipub.

UNESCO. (1994). *Final report: World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and quality*. UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2008). https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd

World Health Organization. (2011). *World report on disability*.

Yin, R. K. (2009). Case study research: Design and methods. In *Applied social research methods series* (4th ed. Vol. 5). SAGE.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.