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"Breaking a vicious cycle": the reproduction of ableism in higher education and its impact on students with disabilities

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Introduction: Despite the widespread promotion of inclusive learning environments, students with disabilities have to exert time and effort in gaining accommodations and proving themselves as competent individuals. In following up a factorial survey experiment that found that students with disabilities are considered less likely to achieve their educational goals compared to students without, this study explored how understandings of inclusive education and disability are constructed within Norwegian higher education institutions.

Method: Nineteen employees across 10 universities participated in focus group interviews. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three themes were generated: (1) determining the role of the educator, (2) knowing how, when, and why to grant accommodations, (3) calling for action from the university.

Discussion: Overall, the findings suggest that understandings of inclusion are ambiguous and characterized by juxtaposing ideals. The participants' accounts illustrate how they are tasked with promoting inclusion while simultaneously protecting their respective professions. Thus, despite being considered a resource based on their diversity, students with disabilities are still expected to fit into an environment designed for mainstream learners. In discussing these findings in light of ableist theory, we argue that more action is needed on a systemic level to restructure how inclusive education is understood and practiced.

KEYWORDS

ableism, focus group interview, higher education, inclusive education, students with disabilities, university employees

1 Introduction

With growing diversity among student populations, the rise of digital and hybrid teaching, and varying forms of assessment, higher education is becoming an increasingly complex arena for both students and staff alike. Determining what inclusive education entails in the context of university environments is thus a challenge for all actors involved.

In Norway, universities are legally obligated to ensure that the learning environment is designed according to the principles of universal design ([University and University Colleges Act, 2005](#), § 4–3). A universally designed learning environment for higher education may be understood as an institution where the physical campus and learning spaces, learning materials, learning activities and assessments are designed in a way that

as many students as possible can access them. Further, universities are required to provide information and communications technology (ICT) solutions that meet the principles of universal design (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act, 2017, § 18). In the context of ICT solutions within education, electronic learning platforms, digital teaching material and online curriculums should all therefore be accessible to as many students as possible. Solutions such as subtitled videos, alternative text in visual information, and text that is legible for screen readers are all examples of how ICT solutions can meet universal design principles. However, recent studies show an overall lack of understanding regarding universal design among university staff, both on an international (Márquez and Melero-Aguilar, 2022; Sanderson et al., 2022) and national (Ristad et al., 2024b) level.

In addition to adhering to universal design principles, universities are required to consider the provision of individual accommodation for students with disabilities. The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act states that students have the right to reasonable individual accommodation, as long as this accommodation “does not impose a disproportionate burden” (2017, § 21). Here, the burden is assessed in regard to its effect in dismantling barriers for the student, the associated costs, and the resources of the undertaking. Thus, the provision of accommodations is very much dependent on university staff and their interpretation, knowledge and understanding of disability and accommodations. Studies from within Norway illuminate this issue. Langørgen and Magnus (2018), for instance, found that students with disabilities struggle to find information on accommodations and often have to cope alone ‘in silence’ as a means of demonstrating their capability. More recently, Ristad et al. (2024b) found that professionals’ decisions regarding the provision of accommodations are often made on the basis of little knowledge, and with a lack of skills in being able to implement inclusive measures. These issues, however, are nothing new. A recent literature review of 59 studies on this topic, spanning 10 years of research across 20 countries, identified consistently occurring barriers related to the denial of accommodations, negative attitudes from peers and staff, and concerns regarding disclosure (Goodall et al., 2022). Thus, the evidence-base signals a clear need for change in how inclusion is conceptualized and practiced in higher education.

The current study follows up on the results from a quantitative, factorial survey experiment that was conducted to explore the attitudes of higher education employees toward students with disabilities in higher education and different types of professions (Goodall et al., 2023). Results from the study indicated that attitudes toward making arrangements for students with disabilities were positive, with the exception of students with autism. However, respondents considered the likelihood of students with disabilities completing higher education and gaining employment to be significantly lower in comparison to students without disabilities. Further, while motivation was an important factor in the perceived success of students, students with disabilities who were described as being “very motivated” were sometimes rated lower than students without disabilities who were described as “struggling with motivation.” This points to the issue of students with disabilities sometimes being judged solely on the basis of disability, despite any merits or desirable characteristics they may have. This issue—along with the lower expectations for the students with disabilities in general—warrants further investigation.

2 Aim

The aim of this study is to generate knowledge on how understandings of inclusive education and disability are constructed among employees in Norwegian higher education institutions. More specifically, the research questions are:

- What experiences do higher education employees have with facilitating for students with disabilities?
- What factors do higher education employees believe facilitate or hinder the success of students with disabilities?
- What do higher education employees see as the main challenges or concerns in creating inclusive university environments?

Given the complexity of higher education, we sought to explore the perspectives of individual employees from different universities and fields of study as a means of creating an overall picture of the system as a whole. “Employees” in the context of this study are individuals employed at the university who have some form of contact with students, whether it be through teaching, supervision, or administrative tasks.

3 Theoretical framework

We adopt ableism as the theoretical lens for our study. Ableism concerns the value given to ideal, species-typical traits and abilities (Wolbring, 2012). It is a concept where normality is favored, and those deemed different on the basis of (dis)ability—as well as race, gender, economic status or age—are seen as less valuable to certain societies and cultures (Brown, 2020; Wolbring, 2008). Given that people with disabilities do not meet society’s norms of how humans should function (e.g., on a physical, mental or cognitive level), they are othered and thereby discriminated (Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2012). However, ableism concerns more than discrimination; it is an ideology of how we must live, work, and contribute to society. As Campbell describes, “Ableism is not just a matter of ignorance or negative attitudes toward disabled people; it is a trajectory of perfection” (Campbell, 2009, p. 5).

Ableism in higher education can be understood in the context of what Dolmage (2017) terms *academic ableism*. In describing higher education as a neoliberal industry, one in which human capital is prioritized over all else, Dolmage argues that academia “powerfully mandates able-bodied and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 7). Others have also commented on academia’s market-oriented nature in which overwork and high achievement are valued (Leigh and Brown, 2020; Macfarlane, 2021), and disability is seen as a liability (Marom and Hardwick, 2024).

Given the influence of neoliberalism on higher education, it is of no surprise then that universities often view disability through a medical lens, i.e., an individual problem to be diagnosed, treated and cured (Lindsay and Fuentes, 2022; Lombardi and Lalor, 2023). This medical view contradicts more progressive models of disability, such as the Nordic Relational Model of Disability, in which disability is not understood as an individual problem, but rather a mismatch between a person’s capabilities and the surrounding environment (Tøssebro, 2004). In the context of higher education, disability is created by barriers in the learning

environment, rather than being an issue with the individual student. However, dominating policies in higher education often require that a student takes responsibility for gaining medical verification of their disability, disclosing it to the university, and applying for accommodations (Nieminen, 2022). In other words, students with disabilities have to prove their disability—a process which can be exhaustive, degrading and time-demanding (Marom and Hardwick, 2024). As such, higher education “remains a site of privileged knowledge production that continues to be inaccessible to many” (Leonhardt, 2024, p. 3).

Here it is important to consider issues of access in relation to the term *inclusion*. As Leonhardt (2024) argues, formal access to higher education is just one aspect of ableism. While every fourth student in Norway has a disability (SSB, 2018)—thus suggesting people with disabilities have access to higher education—evidence indicates that Norwegian students with disabilities nevertheless face discrimination (Langørgen and Magnus, 2018; Ristad et al., 2024b). It is therefore important that inclusion is not defined by rates of attendance alone. To do so would be to adopt a market-driven, performative approach to inclusion (Stentford and Koutsouris, 2021); one of which is in line with a placement definition (Nilholm and Göransson, 2017). Rather than understanding inclusion as the placement of students in education (Nilholm and Göransson, 2017), our approach to inclusion is rooted in rights-based legislation such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006). Here, it is more appropriate to view inclusion in light of a participation model, where focus is placed on belonging, accessibility and involvement (Edström et al., 2024). Thus, we must direct our attention toward the exclusionary practices that students with disabilities are often subjected to, whether these be the denial of reasonable accommodations (Shpigelman et al., 2021; Strnadová et al., 2015), discrimination from peers and staff (Grimes et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2023), or expectations that demand students with disabilities work harder than those without (Bettencourt et al., 2018; Goodall et al., 2022).

Given its focus on how certain groups are othered, ableism is an appropriate theoretical framework for untangling these exclusionary practices. Further, ableism can be used as a framework for understanding how notions of ability are socially shaped and culturally produced within higher education (Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012; Leonhardt, 2024). Thus, by applying an ableist lens to the current study of how ideas of inclusive education and disability are produced among university employees in Norway, we hope to gain an understanding of how individual perceptions given in the focus groups may be influenced by larger systemic and political structures within Norwegian higher education.

4 Method

4.1 Study design

While the findings from the factorial survey experiment indicate that expectations for students with disabilities are significantly lower than students without disabilities (Goodall et al., 2023), there is a tendency for quantitative research to oversimplify complex, social phenomena. Therefore, we deemed it appropriate to follow up on these findings using a qualitative, explorative design with the use of focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are considered to be a rich source of information for collecting data, as they stimulate group discussion and interaction among participants—thereby prompting

spontaneous, genuine responses that reflect the reality of the group in question (McLafferty, 2004; Vaughn et al., 1996).

In adopting a social constructionist approach to our work, we seek to generate knowledge on how understandings of inclusive education and disability are socially constructed within the complexity of higher education (Burr, 2015). In acknowledging there is no one universal truth on what constitutes inclusive education, we focus on how different understandings of ableism, inclusion and education may be created through language, expression, and interaction (Burr, 2015).

4.2 Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited from a pool of survey respondents who had indicated they were willing to be contacted to participate in a focus group interview. Of the 2,189 respondents, 511 were happy to be contacted. Given that interviewing all 511 respondents was not feasible, a random selection of these respondents was contacted with an invitation to one of four focus group interviews with a consent form attached. The first author sent an invitation to 77 respondents in early May 2022, which resulted in 10 positive responses. Another invitation was sent to an additional 60 respondents 1 week later, which resulted in an additional 10 respondents.

While 20 participants were recruited, one participant was unable to participate on the day of the interview due to unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, a total of 19 employees participated in this study.

4.3 Ethical considerations

This study received approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research data (reference number 906240). Participants were sent an informed consent form when invited to participate. This form informed participants that the interviews would be recorded, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, as long as their data was still identifiable. Participants were given assurance that neither they nor the institution they are affiliated with would be identifiable in the transcripts nor any publications from this study. Oral consent was gained at the beginning of each interview to check that all participants were happy to proceed. The interview transcripts were anonymized, and all raw data (interview recordings) were deleted at the end of the project period.

4.4 Data collection

Four authors (GG, OMM, AEW and LK) designed a semi-structured interview guide with the following topics for discussion: overall thoughts on and experiences with students with disabilities in higher education; factors that help and hinder students with disabilities in completing higher education; reasonable accommodations; motivation; disclosure; and ideas for what should be done going forward. These topics were chosen based on findings from a recent literature review on the barriers and facilitators students with disabilities face in higher education (Goodall et al., 2022), as well as the findings from the factorial survey experiment (Goodall et al., 2023). Given that motivation and disclosure were such important

factors in the respondents' evaluations of students, we wanted to explore these topics further. The full interview guide can be found in the [Supplementary material](#). Participants were sent an overview of the question topics 1 week prior to the focus group interviews.

Four focus group interviews were conducted digitally on Microsoft Teams in June 2022. All interviews lasted approximately 60 min and were conducted in Norwegian. Two researchers were present at each interview (see [Table 1](#)). After the interviews, the recordings were sent to an external transcription service "Din Transkribent." Transcripts were then sent to the researchers for analysis.

4.5 Analysis

In an endeavor to generate concrete implications for further action in higher education, we used a codebook approach to thematic analysis as a means of applied research ([Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2022](#)). More specifically, we utilized techniques from template analysis ([King, 2012](#)), as well as [Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's \(2006\)](#) hybrid approach to inductive and deductive coding.

First, the team (GG, OMM, AEW, LK) met to devise an initial codebook (shown in [Table 2](#)) consisting of deductive codes. These codes were developed from findings from a literature review ([Goodall et al., 2022](#)), ableist theory, and findings from the factorial survey experiment ([Goodall et al., 2023](#)).

The codebook was used as a template in the coding of two of the four transcripts. During this round of coding, the researchers worked independently in applying deductive codes from the codebook while simultaneously generating inductive codes. The researchers then met to discuss (a) whether the deductive codes were relevant to the dataset and (b) the inductive codes generated in this initial round of coding. We found that the code "Othering" was not relevant to the dataset, and therefore decided to remove this code.

On an inductive level, three new codes were generated (shown in [Table 3](#)). First, we found that there was much discussion beyond the context of disability. For instance, participants questioned what it means to be an educator, thus prompting us to develop an inductive code for "Understanding of education." In addition, while we had intended to code data on accommodations under the deductive code "University policy and procedures," we found accommodations to be a complex issue which warranted a code of its own. Finally, we deemed it necessary to generate the code "Visibility," which concerned the representation of students with disabilities in Norwegian higher education.

The first author coded all four transcripts using the final version of the codebook, while checking for any potential inductive codes across the two transcripts not included in the first round of coding. No further inductive codes were generated.

The first author then developed integrative themes deriving from meaningful clusters of codes. This was done in lines with applied research to generate themes which could be used as concrete

TABLE 1 Overview of focus groups and researchers present.

Focus group (FG)	Number of participants (P)	Participants' department/study program	Researchers
1	5	Social work; Microbiology; Geography; Culture and language sciences; Norwegian language	LK and OMM
2	4	Pedagogy; Intercultural studies; Machine, building and material technology; Biomedicine	LK and AEW
3	5	Humanities; English language; Physics and technology	LK and GG
4	5	Childhood education; Human resources education; Lecturer education; Physics and management; Sign language and interpretation	AEW and GG

TABLE 2 Initial codebook with deductive codes.

Code	Definition	Description
Disclosure	The decision or act of informing others about one's disability/disabilities	Participant refers to the process of disclosure, as well as outcomes (both positive and negative) associated with disclosure
Othering	A person is treated or perceived differently based on their attributes (disability, gender, ethnicity)	Participant describes or gives examples of how a student has been/may be treated or perceived differently (e.g., discriminated) on the basis of their disability, gender, ethnicity, or other personal traits
Resources from others	Resources including support, tools, inclusive behaviors, and positive attitudes from those other than the student	Participant describes or gives examples of available resources at the institution, support from others (e.g., professors, administration, family, friends)
Student action and behavior	Decisions, actions, and behaviors displayed by students in connection to completing their education	Participant describes or gives examples of actions taken by students, e.g., the means by which they try and find support, whether they appear to be motivated
University policy and procedures	Organizational structures within the higher education institution that guide procedures and policy	Participant refers to procedures, guidelines, systems put in place by the institution that guide teaching, supervision, provision of accommodations
Choice of education/profession	Implications linked to the choice/decision of pursuing a certain discipline (e.g., medicine, sociology, STEM)	Participant refers to suitability, challenges, concerns and/or potential future prospects connected with a certain profession
Understanding of disability	Perceptions toward and attitudes surrounding disability as a whole, as well as different types of disabilities	Participant discusses or gives examples of thoughts, attitudes toward or experiences connected with disability, as well as different types of disabilities

implications for future research and practice (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Initially, four themes were generated. These themes concerned the role and responsibility of the educator; the complex process of providing accommodations; the need for resources and action on a systemic level; and the issue of making both disability in particular, and diversity in general, more visible. These themes, their names and how they should be reported were discussed within the group. After much discussion and re-reading of the dataset, the authors decided that the last theme concerning making diversity more visible was not substantial enough to be an entire theme. Instead, it was combined with the theme concerning the need for action from the university. The order of the three final themes was then discussed as a means of deciding on an overall narrative which we wanted our report to portray. A coding tree illustrating how the codes are associated with these themes is presented in Figure 1, along with example quotes.

The first author produced the first draft of the report which was subsequently shared with all co-authors. All authors then met to discuss this first draft. The first author then led the writing of subsequent drafts of the manuscript, and, together with the co-authors, produced a final version of the manuscript.

4.6 Research team and reflexivity

The research team consisted of five associate professors with varying levels of experience (from newly hired as an associate professor to having worked in the role for several years) and varying disability status (from no disability to physical or mental health issues). While we used a codebook approach to thematic analysis rather than reflexive thematic analysis, we still acknowledge and embrace the subjective nature of performing such analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). As we are situated within the context of higher education, it is important to recognize that our varying experiences with teaching, supervision, and disability—as well as our prior experiences of being higher education students ourselves—will have influenced the research process. This is addressed further in the discussion.

5 Results

Three themes were generated through analysis: (1) Determining the role of the educator; (2) Knowing how, when, and why to grant accommodations; (3) Calling for action from the university. These themes, as well as their respective subthemes, are illustrated in a

thematic map shown in Figure 2. This map shows how the themes and subthemes are not independent of one another; they are interconnected in a complex process that surrounds understandings of inclusive education and disability.

5.1 Theme 1: determining the role of the educator

A prominent finding across the focus groups was that questioning the notion of inclusive education prompted the participants to reflect over what it means to be an educator. In higher education, where most teaching staff have research obligations in addition to teaching duties, defining one’s role and responsibilities can be difficult. The uncertainties within this role are represented by three sub-themes: (1) “professional” vs. “personal” guidance, (2) practicing inclusive teaching, and (3) protecting the profession.

5.1.1 “Professional” vs. “personal” guidance

Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on what is expected of them in regard to the type of guidance they should be providing students. Professional guidance was believed to entail academic supervision and help with the syllabus, as opposed to ‘personal’ guidance, which the participants equated with emotional and psychological support. In reflecting over collective understandings of student support, one participant felt they had a different mindset to their colleagues:

I had for example a student who started all supervision sessions by having to cry for 20 minutes (...) my advisers said, “*Just get rid of her. She needs to go. This is not your job; you are not a psychiatrist*” (...) I said [to the student], “*I cannot help you with that. I’m not a therapist, I’m not a psychologist (...)* But I can help you with the professional stuff, if that helps.” She got through it. (...) But my point is that (...) there was so little understanding among my colleagues. (FG1:P5)

Here, the participant distinguished between being able to offer professional guidance as opposed to psychological support. While acknowledging that she could not help the student with her psychological needs, the participant criticized the dismissive attitudes of her peers. The remark “*This is not your job*” may reflect wider understandings of what is expected of teaching staff in their professional role. These expectations were addressed by another participant:

TABLE 3 Inductive codes.

Code	Definition	Description
Understanding of education	Perceptions toward and attitudes surrounding education, including roles and responsibilities of the actors within educational environments	Participant discusses their own role or the role of others in educational environments, discusses responsibilities of themselves or others, or discusses their perception of how education ought to be planned/executed
Accommodation	Perceptions toward the aims, use, outcomes, and implications of accommodations	Participant describes or gives examples of how accommodations have been granted/denied, used, experienced, or perceived by either themselves or others
Visibility	Whether students with disabilities are well-represented in higher education, and whether higher education staff encounter them	Participant refers to the representation, or lack thereof, of students with disabilities in their own classes or the university as a whole

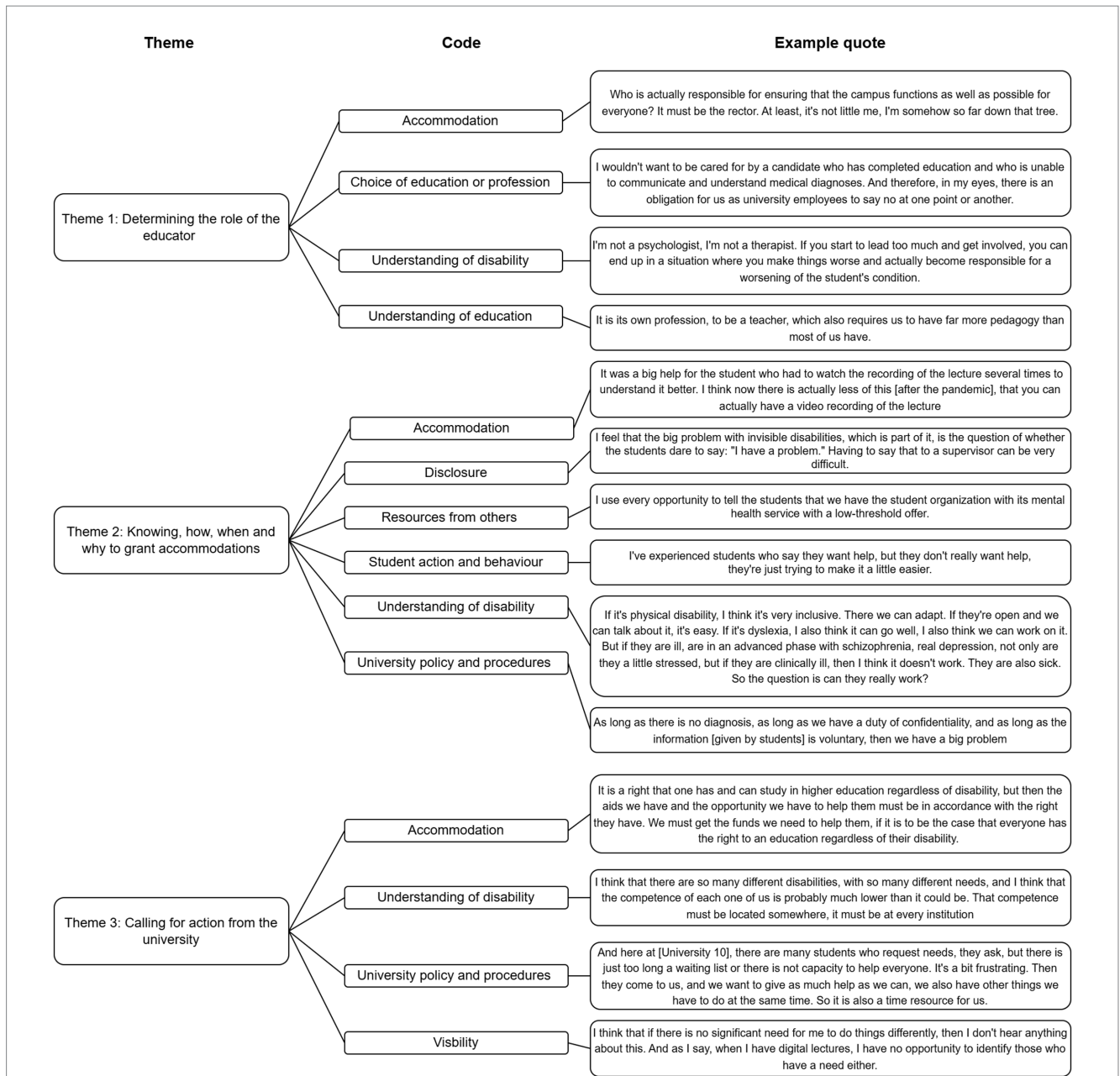


FIGURE 1
Coding tree.

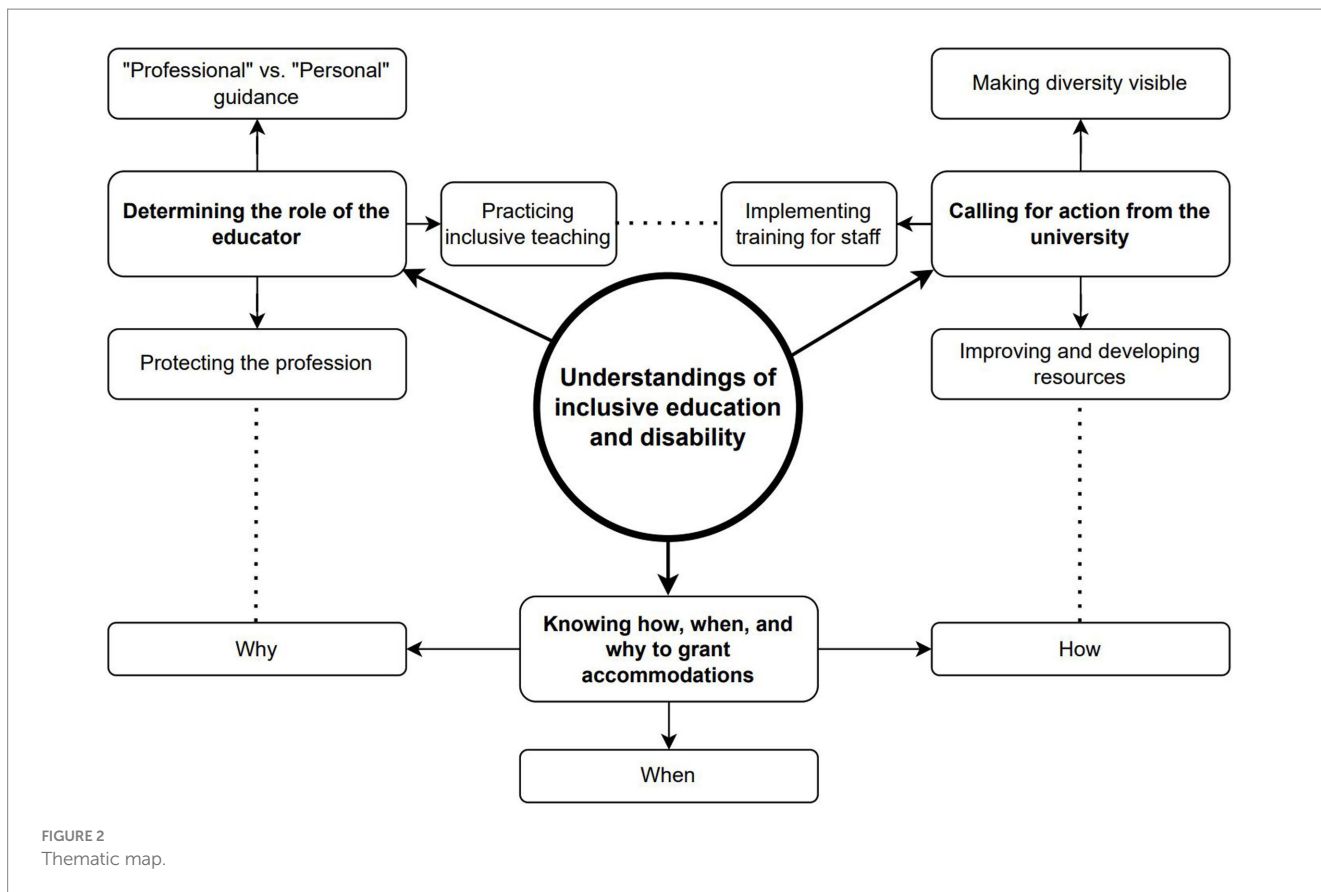
What I experienced at [another university] is that people are so focused on their research and publications, that they forget to be fellow human beings. When you are an educator and work with people, you are expected to be a fellow human being as well. Here at [University 1], I experienced that people are very concerned about their students and make arrangements for them. (FG1:P1)

According to this participant, providing accommodations is not an explicit expectation from the university, but rather an inherent trait of being a “fellow human being.” In other words, university staff should accommodate for students because it is the morally right thing to do; not necessarily because it is a demand of one’s role as an educator. The university’s lack of instruction concerning student guidance is reflected in a comment from another participant, who

argued that educators are hired in academia on the basis of their publications and achievements within research, rather than on the basis of their supervisory skills:

I have raised this [issue] several times – we do not have any training on it. You become the supervisor of a Ph.D. or master [student] because you are academically skilled. It has nothing to do with your interpersonal skills. You are just thrown into the deep end, and you have to sink or swim. (FG1:P5)

The participant’s use of the metaphor “sink or swim” illustrates how educators are expected to navigate their role as an educator on their own accord, with insufficient support from the university. With little direction on supervising students, it is of no surprise that



understandings of what an educator should be differed on an individual basis (for example, the choice to be research-driven versus a “fellow human being”). Despite this lack of consensus, however, there was a notion that educators within the university cannot offer the same kind of support that students may have received during secondary school:

Higher education is – to a greater extent than secondary education – “sink or swim” (...) We [university staff] have less responsibility for them [students] than what teachers in upper secondary schools feel they have. (FG2:P1)

Here, it is interesting that the phrase “sink or swim” is used by another focus group, but this time in relation to the students rather than staff. According to this participant, it is the students who have to manage their academic journey on a largely independent basis. Other participants also reflected on the lack of support that students in higher education receive compared to secondary school, with one participant placing emphasis on the lack of pedagogical training that university staff have:

I am, for example, strongly opposed to calling myself a teacher. It is its own profession, to be a teacher, which also requires us to have far more pedagogy than most of us have. It also suggests that students expect the same level of care as [they receive] in school. We cannot provide that [at university]. We cannot do that. (FG1:P2)

The above quote illuminates the ambiguous role of being an educator in higher education. While teaching is a formal requirement of the role, it

is interesting that this participant does not consider themselves a teacher. Further, it is interesting to note the use of different terminology in describing the role of the educator. In likening the provision of accommodations to the provision of care, university educators may be distancing themselves from inclusive practices, given that “care” and “therapy” fall within the realm of healthcare rather than pedagogy.

5.1.2 Practicing inclusive teaching

In discussing their role as educators, participants reflected on the challenges and uncertainty connected to practicing inclusive teaching. First, participants questioned the level of responsibility assigned to their role in teaching:

I do not know if I have had students here with disabilities, and I can also say that I have not received any training on it (...) But it is not my responsibility to intervene (...) It is not explicit that we should think about these issues. (FG1:P4)

In the above quote, the participant states that there is no explicit expectation that educators should take disabilities and inclusive teaching into account; thus, it is not considered a responsibility. There was also an assumption among some participants that if no concerns had been risen by students, then it was not necessary for teaching staff to change their teaching methods/practices: “I think if there is not a substantial need for me to do things differently, then I do not hear anything about this” (FG4:P5). On the contrary, some participants felt it was indeed the responsibility of the individual teacher to facilitate inclusive learning environments:

It has a bit more to do with inclusion, that there is no discrimination against individual students. It falls very clearly on the individual teacher (...) to facilitate a learning space that is beneficial for those with disabilities. (FG4:P5)

Other participants discussed inclusive teaching in terms of accessibility. In discussing the technical skills required to make teaching material accessible, numerous participants felt that they did not hold the necessary competence required. During one focus group interview, discussion concerned the duty and ability to subtitle videos:

(...) If you have digital teaching it is legally required to include subtitles, but we do not have the resources to do that. You break the law all the time, because it simply takes forever to subtitle things. (FG3:P2)

Another participant added:

I was told exactly this, that I have a lot of people using the lecturers, and all of them have to be subtitled and you have to do it yourself. There is no service, I cannot subtitle videos unfortunately – unless you give me a professional who can do it. Otherwise, I will continue to break the law for years to come because I cannot subtitle things. (FG3:P3)

Here it is interesting that both participants referred to breaking the law, as if the responsibility for making material accessible lies with the individual teacher, rather than the institution. These participants were aware of the students' rights to accessible teaching materials, but due to a lack of time and knowledge, they acknowledged that such adaptations are not always feasible. However, even in cases where participants knew what needed to be done to promote inclusive teaching, accommodations were sometimes considered a "hassle":

It would be nice if we could initially create things that work well so that you do not have to think so much about accommodating, because accommodating is a hassle (...) We had a student who used a sign language interpreter in class, and then the interpreters needed the material to be finished in a reasonable amount of time before the lecture was to take place, because they both need to know a little about the content and perhaps check which signs to use for which words (...) as a teacher, yes, it happens that you are ready about 10 minutes before the class starts, and now you get a new deadline that is a day or two in advance [of the lecture]. And it's a hassle, you just have to admit that. (FG3:P1)

To this participant, the need for facilitation implies a need for an increased amount of planning; something which the participant describes as a "hassle." While this quote may suggest that educators do not have adequate time to prepare lectures, it may also be interpreted as an example of ableism. In this participant's case, if they cannot practice their teaching in the way they do for 'mainstream' students, it is considered a hassle. Thus, students who have a need outside that of what is considered the norm may be seen as a hinderance. Despite knowing why the interpreters need the teaching material in advance, the participant was honest in saying they are normally prepared for a class only a few moments before it starts.

Given that lectures need to be planned regardless, the issue may not lay with time constraints, but rather with how time is structured, and which tasks are prioritized over others. This links to the previous subtheme, which illustrates how universities provide little guidance on what is expected of educators, and what their role in inclusive education actually entails.

5.1.3 Protecting the profession

The final subtheme concerns the participants' duty to maintain professional standards among their respective study programs. Participants expressed their roles as not only educators, but also as gatekeepers of a profession:

We are giving them a bachelor's degree, but also a title, and an authorization for a profession, and that's often where the doubt comes in, whether students with disabilities will be able to work in that profession. (FG3:P1)

This duty was particularly pertinent to health professions, with patient safety being considered to trump all other factors. Here, participants commented on the difficulty of adjusting internship periods so that students with disabilities could be accommodated for: *"If it does not work in practice, they will not make it through"* (FG3: P1). Thus, even in cases where students displayed potential, participants were aware of the standards that are in place to protect the safety of others:

I have to be sure that the healthcare worker I am training is capable of dosing medication correctly. This leads to a dilemma because the student might be motivated and everything. But if the person in question fails to fulfil the basic requirements that subsequently put people in danger, there is a duty to say, *"Sorry, this might not be the path for you."* (FG1:P2)

It was clear from the focus groups that the participants considered their role as an educator as being to prepare students for the world of work in which they will enter, and potentially fail this student should they be seen as a risk to others. However, one participant raised an important point concerning society's perceptions of certain professions being unattainable for people with certain types of disability. While the participant referred to "obvious" examples (*"You do not become a fighter pilot if you cannot see"*), they acknowledged a potential prejudice that exists on a societal level:

It's about changing perceptions – certainly, deaf people can become teachers (...) I know deaf nurses, social workers, and even some visually impaired social workers. But my point is, partly it's about the individual [student] and their motivation, and partly it's our collective perception of what people with disabilities can do. (FG4: P1)

This comment addresses how perceptions of limitations and ability are socially shaped, and here the participant recognizes that these perceptions may be overshadowing the abilities that an individual with a disability may have. This reflects a potential shift in attitudes surrounding ability and suitability, and that professions themselves may be becoming more diverse. Another participant in the same focus group added:

(...) it's been said several times, we need students who come from different backgrounds and who are a strength. The whole study program gains a little more knowledge from other people's points of view. (FG4:P2)

In suggesting that study programs can benefit from diversity, this participant implied that universities ought to be more inclusive. Thus, this subtheme represents the duality between educators wanting to uphold the standards that their respective professions require, while simultaneously wanting to promote inclusion. This complex juxtaposition between protecting standards and promoting inclusion can be understood further through the next theme, in which the reasoning and means by which accommodations are provided—or denied—are explored.

5.2 Theme 2: knowing how, when, and why to grant accommodations

In Norway, all students have the right to reasonable accommodations. In asking the participants for their interpretation of the term *reasonable*, discussions were centered around issues associated with the entire process of granting accommodations. Participants discussed a wide range of measures for providing accommodations, which included providing video recordings of lectures, allowing students to present in smaller groups, providing separate exam rooms, installing stair lifts, granting deadline extensions, or ensuring sign language interpreters are present in lectures. However, knowing the extent to which these accommodations should be provided, and understanding the process of providing such facilitation is not always clear. This process is represented by three subthemes: (1) Knowing how, (2) Knowing when, and (3) Knowing why.

5.2.1 Knowing how

Knowing how to provide accommodations was largely dependent on type of disability the student has, the extent to which individual educators were willing to bend rules set by the department, and whether the student decides to disclose a disability. First, there was resounding agreement across all discussions that it is much easier to know how to provide accommodations for a student with a physical disability as opposed to those with mental health issues or less visible disabilities:

I think Norwegian institutions are, in general, very good at accommodating for physical [disabilities]. Impaired sight, hearing and wheelchair [users] – all of these are well taken care of. There is no one who doubts or asks questions or judges someone because they are in a wheelchair. But when it comes to mental health, we may have some catching up to do. How well received one is with depression, anxiety, ADHD, [or] autism varies (...) these things tend to categorize a person. (FG3:P3)

Acknowledging that students with mental health issues or less visible forms of disability may meet prejudice—or “doubt”—from others points to the general lack of understanding that surrounds these types of disabilities. According to the participants' accounts, this lack of understanding often resulted in individual educators making accommodations on their own accord, and not necessarily in line with

the study program's guidelines. For example, in sharing their experience of adjusting the study program for a student with suspected ADHD, this participant described how they went against guidelines that were set by them and their colleagues:

If I had followed the guidelines that we actually have, then the person in question would not have had anything left from that semester at all (...) I created quite broad parameters for when and what was to be submitted, so that the student would at least have the chance to sit the exam (...) I did stretch what my colleagues and I had actually agreed upon (...) First by granting an extension, and, secondly, by approving something that was perhaps of a smaller scope than expected. (FG2:P1)

The above quote illustrates how the success of the student may have been dependent on the actions of this individual educator. However, arranging on an individual basis was described as problematic, particularly when the student progresses further in study program:

I have also made adjustments for some students, but I have said: “*I am the one doing this, it may be that others do not do it at all.*” But I think it could also be a difficult situation for the entire department if we do it based on individual agreements. There will be no clear expectations, and it will be very personal depending on who they [the students] meet (...) (FG2:P3)

Another issue regarding the process of facilitating raised by the participants was the lack of information that teaching staff receive on individual students. Many felt that they could not facilitate without information on a student's disability:

As long as there is no diagnosis, as long as we have a duty of confidentiality, and as long as the information [given by students] is voluntary, then we have a big problem. (FG1:P5)

Given the university's obligation to maintain confidentiality, several participants stressed that it is the student's responsibility to disclose their disability in order to receive accommodations. One participant argued, for example:

But if the student pulls themselves together and gets over the threshold of reaching out and seeking help ... it's difficult. There are certainly some who should do it who do not (...) It's difficult to admit to others that you have a specific psychological problem that prevents you from performing at a normal level. (FG1:P3)

Others felt that students with disabilities should disclose, not only for themselves, but for future students with disabilities:

I completely understand that it is hard to somehow have to wear that label [of being disabled]. But if more students take up that fight, they help those who come after them. There is something ideologically good about it, that you make the path a little easier for those who follow. (FG3:P1)

Despite the positive intentions of the latter quote, these accounts from the participants highlight the pressure that is often placed on

students to disclose; something that may be interpreted as reflective of the medical model of disability. According to these participants, disability is a problem belonging to the individual student. Suggesting that students may be prevented from “performing at a normal level” by their disability illustrates this point further, whereby mainstream students are considered the ideal. Further, the language used in these quotes (“taking up the fight” and “pull themselves together”) evokes the sense of accountability placed on the students for ensuring their own inclusion, rather than holding the institution responsible.

5.2.2 Knowing when

Not only do staff need to know how to accommodate, but participants also emphasized the importance of knowing *when* to provide accommodations. A common experience shared by numerous participants was that of students asking for help too late, for example:

And if they speak up, it is often when they have failed the exam. Then they come [and say]: “yes, but I have dyslexia.” Yes, unfortunately, I cannot do anything about it when you do not speak up. (FG3:P3)

Again, this indicates that the responsibility for receiving accommodations lays with the student. Despite the fluctuating nature of disability, students are expected to disclose their need for support at the beginning of the semester: “*If you find out that you need to take action in the middle of a semester, then it’s a little late. Then it is difficult to make the necessary changes*” (FG4:P5). This illustrates that disability is seen as a problem with the individual—not the environment. Rather than considering that a learning environment’s impact on student participation may only become apparent over a period of time, universities expect students to begin the semester knowing exactly how their disability will affect their participation and what can be done so the issue is fixed.

An additional challenge described by the participants is knowing at what instances in the study program accommodations should be provided. Exams were of particular concern, where participants felt that they were less flexible in what they could do. The rigidity of the study program also provided little flexibility in accommodating for mental health issues:

We have 70 students, so it is difficult to adapt to each and every student. Physically, it is simple, but mentally, there is a certain rhythm that we have to follow in order for a course to work. If someone is struggling with anxiety or depression, it becomes difficult because we have [obligatory] course days. If they are sick and cannot come to the lab, there are a few days available afterwards. But if they are used up, then they are used up (...) We cannot provide extra lab days or such things on an unlimited basis. (FG2:P3)

This quote once again highlights the difference between accommodating for physical and mental disabilities. While it is clear how physical disabilities can be easily accommodated for, the rigidity of study programs means that fluctuating disabilities or mental health issues cannot be accommodated for within the structure of the program, or, as the participant describes, the “rhythm” that must be followed.

5.2.3 Knowing why

According to Norwegian legislation, the provision of accommodations must be assessed against the cost, burden and effectiveness of removing barriers for the student ([Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act, 2017](#), § 21). Such assessment is very much determined by the individual employee, meaning that they often decide whether students are granted accommodations. This final subtheme addresses the reasons for providing, or alternatively, denying students accommodations.

First, several participants acknowledged that providing accommodations is a duty they must fulfill, despite not having adequate resources to do it:

We are perhaps stricter in the exam situation than in everyday study life, but it is also a matter of resources. We do not have enough resources to facilitate as well as we might wish to. (FG3:P2)

While a lack of resources was an issue for some participants, others were skeptical toward students receiving accommodations for several reasons. First, some did not think students with disabilities should receive advantages over other students:

(...) in exams, the academic requirements should not be compromised. And it should not be the case that one benefits from the arrangement. At least that’s the framework we follow when we handle cases, so it’s at least very clear that they should not have academic advantages. (FG3: P1)

This indicates that educators may not understand the extent to which students with disabilities are disadvantaged in the first place. The purpose of accommodations can be considered as providing students with disabilities equal opportunities for learning. However, rather than seeing accommodations as a tool for the removal of barriers, it is apparent that accommodations are instead considered as an advantageous. A similar comment was made in regard to practical placements:

And then there is consideration for practice (...) The accommodations should not become an inconvenience for the other students. I do not know if we have any official boundaries like that, probably not, but at least there is a boundary in my head. (FG3: P1)

Not causing an inconvenience to the other students can be interpreted to mean that the student with a disability must fit into the learning environment without disrupting the education of students without disabilities. Another concern was that of students “taking advantage” of the system. Linking back to the educator’s role of protecting the profession, participants felt that it was important to uphold standards and ensure that students are meeting these standards. One participant explains:

(...) I’ve encountered students who say they want help, but they do not really want help, they are just trying to make things a little easier. Not necessarily that they are trying to cheat. But it feels that way, like they are saying, “*I need accommodations*,” but when they get accommodations [they say] “*but can’t you just ...*,” I can’t just do that. You have to do that work yourself, I can accommodate,

but I'm not going to write it for you, I'm not going to lower the grading standards because of you. (FG3:P3)

This sentiment is reflected by a participant in another group, who said, “*We try to be as kind as possible, but we do not want to be taken advantage of either.*” (FG2:P4). Here, the participants stand their ground in ensuring students meet the demands of the course. However, other participants were reluctant in providing accommodations not due to students receiving advantages, but due to concerns regarding the student's future. In recollecting on an instance where a student with autism was excused from having to participate in group work, one participant shared their thoughts on how accommodations may hinder a student's progress:

We have done similar things in other contexts as well, that students will not have joint presentations, but will do them in smaller digital rooms, for example. It can work. At the same time, I do not feel completely confident about the future, because I really want to be able to help those students test their limits and confront their issues. I have tried to communicate that, but it can be difficult for the students. (FG1: P3)

Here, the participant clearly has good intentions in wanting to help students. However, in saying that students should “confront their issues,” it is clear to see how the medical model of disability influences staff perceptions. Disability is viewed as an individual problem which needs to be dealt with, or, as the participant described, “confronted.” Further, encouraging students to “test their limits” reflects the ableist expectation that students must work beyond their capacity in order to be successful. The consequences of getting students to test these limits—even when accommodations are granted—can be further understood through a scenario which was shared by another participant:

We have a student who had anxiety attacks with a diagnosis and everything. She received accommodations for the oral exam, so she had the course coordinator, who was also her seminar leader and supervisor, with her. She knew him well, so she was in his group for the oral exam. She got an A, but she had an anxiety attack regardless, so the nurse had to come and take care of her. So despite the accommodations and a good grade, she collapsed anyway. (FG1:P1)

The situation above provides an example of how ableist expectations of hyper productivity govern assessments. Students are often expected to overwork at the expense of their own health and wellbeing—e.g., “she collapsed anyway.” Such situations indicate the need to question what the purpose of accommodations is, and what the outcomes should be. Is the provision of accommodations intended to remove barriers or to ensure good grades? Are students solely meant to succeed or to also have a positive educational experience? These are issues that need to be addressed on a systemic level, which ties into the next theme—Calling for action from the university.

5.3 Theme 3: calling for action from the university

The participants felt that there is much to be done before higher education can be considered inclusive. Their suggestions and concerns

are given across three subthemes: (1) Improving and developing resources, (2) Implementing training for all staff, and (3) Making diversity visible.

5.3.1 Improving and developing resources

First, there was a clear indication that current university systems are failing students with disabilities. A lack of time among staff and long waiting lists of students who request support meant that participants feel they cannot always provide adequate support to students who need it:

There are many students who request help (...), but there is just too long a waiting list or there is not capacity to help everyone. It's a bit frustrating. (...) We do the best we can, but then we try to refer them on to the right people, and they come back to us. (FG3:P5)

In describing how students often have to seek help in multiple places without success, it was clear that it is not just a lack of time or capacity that hinders the provision of support, but a lack of coherence within the university's system. This issue may be explained by the lack of information not only among students, but among staff too. There was a resounding agreement that the university ought to improve resources for providing information to both staff and students. For example, while some participants were aware that information regarding accommodations exists, they felt that this information was not easily accessible. In sharing an experience of a student not receiving information on accommodations until their fourth year at the university, one participant called for the development of a resource bank for students and staff alike: “*We need more structured information, and it needs to be normalized in a different way*” (FG1:P5). The need for significant change was also suggested by another group, in which one participant argued for more dedicated spaces and funding in order to support students without the need for external actors such as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV):

We would also have liked to have a budget at [University 8] that was dedicated to facilitation, so that we could, for example, pay to have mentors for the students. Because now they have to go to NAV, and they have to be 23 to get it, it's so strict. So we could have done many more small things for the students over a shorter period of time, without there having to be so much organization, such as through NAV, for example. Which could have meant that they get a little better follow-up and closer follow-up, over a certain period of time (FG3: P2)

Finally, in recognizing the efforts that students often must exert in arranging their own accommodations, another participant in a different group called on the university to provide resources so that the responsibility for accommodations does not lay with the students:

So if we manage to change the collective perception, I believe that many more people will achieve much more and at a lower cost to themselves, because it is often a responsibility that is shifted onto them (the students). They must take care of everything. They must make sure they have interpreters. They must make sure someone takes notes. [Let us] get these things arranged automatically. (FG4:P1)

Here, the participant argues for a change in not only organization, but also a change in societal perceptions. While it was clear in the previous theme that there are many educators who believe the responsibility of accommodations does lay, to a large extent, with the students, the participant in the above quote shows how understanding of this responsibility may be shifting. Such an understanding is perhaps something that can be promoted through training—the topic of the next subtheme.

5.3.2 Implementing training for staff

While a lack of information and structured organization from the university was described as one issue, a lack of knowledge was described as another. Several participants commented on the need for guidance on how they can adapt their teaching to meet the needs of students with disabilities, for example:

For me, it is easier to teach or supervise if I know how I can better adapt my supervision or teaching, but at the same time, I understand, it can be a bit stigmatizing if they [the students] are very open about it and what kind of disability they actually have. (...) As a supervisor and teacher, I would like to have knowledge about it because it is easier for me, but whether it is easier for the student is another matter. (FG4: P2)

While the participant recognizes the difficulty in getting the student to disclose a disability, it is once again implied that the responsibility for receiving help lays with the student. However, there was also much discussion on universal design for learning (UDL), and how universal design principles may remove any need for students to disclose. Some participants commented on the value of implementing universal design procedures within higher education, and argued how this would reduce the need for individual accommodations:

If we had focused more on universal design, then we would need less accommodations. And this would benefit everyone, and especially students with disabilities. (FG3:P1)

While universities in Norway are legally obligated to ensure that the learning environment is designed according to the principles of universal design ([University and University Colleges Act, 2005](#), § 4–3), it was clear from the focus groups that the participants were unclear on what universally designed teaching actually involves:

The frustrating thing about it, at least for me, is that I do not really know what it means to have universally designed teaching, because I do not have any [students with] disabilities that I know of, so I do not know how. You might think if you record video, then you can subtitle it – that's the only thing I can think of. Or contrast in PowerPoint. But is that really what it is to have universally designed teaching? What does that mean? (FG3:P3)

In the above quote, the participant implies that universally designed teaching is only relevant when students with disabilities are present. The participant has not felt the need to deliver universally designed teaching as they have not had, to their knowledge, any students with disabilities in their class. This misunderstanding of

universal design was reciprocated by another participant in the group, who felt that implementing universally designed teaching is an unwarranted use of resources, given the possibility that there may not be any students with disabilities in future classes:

We also see this with our subject teachers, it's also a matter of resources. They have to use more resources to accommodate a student, for example. So they also need help and resources to implement this with universal design. (...) Many feel that it is somewhat hopeless to have to accommodate or have a universally designed teaching when they have a student with a disability for one semester, and then there are four semesters until the next time, or perhaps they never get that type of student again. So, I have at least heard that this can cause some frustration. (FG3:P2)

Rather than seeing universal design as something which can benefit all students—regardless of disability—this participant communicates the idea that universally designed teaching environments are specifically aimed at students with disabilities. This misunderstanding may represent wider perceptions of universally designed teaching environments, and perhaps explains the reluctance some educators have in implementing it. Therefore, even if training on universal design is provided, it is not guaranteed it will be practiced. Thus, changing staff perceptions on how UDL may benefit all students is important. Further, several participants saw value in inclusion and diversity, which is addressed in the next subtheme.

5.3.3 Making diversity visible

This final subtheme represents how participants believed that efforts should be made toward promoting diversity within the university. Several participants described students and staff with disabilities as “role models,” who could help pave the way for a more inclusive environment in the future. One participant shared their experience of first-year sign language students who were hard of hearing attempting to pass as non-disabled until they were made aware of inclusive measures at the university:

And when we show them [the students] that there are sign language interpreters and that there is captioning, they slowly dare to open up and tell us how they have experienced things in the past (...) So, I think breaking a vicious cycle is pretty important here. The sooner we get it [openness on disability] integrated into the system, the easier it will be for generations that follow. (FG4: P1)

While the eagerness for students to be open about their disability may once again be placing pressure on them to disclose, it is important to reflect on the participants' suggestion of “breaking a vicious cycle.” This vicious cycle may be understood as the discriminating and arguably ableist perceptions of disability that characterize higher education today. However, the idea of creating an openness on a collective level—among both students and staff—evokes the idea of an imagined future where people would not need to pass as non-disabled nor hide their disability. Further, the participant suggests that this openness may be facilitated through showcasing the use of tools and solutions for creating an equally accessible learning environment for all (e.g., through sign language interpreters and captioning). Other

participants saw diversity as important to shifting focus on the resources that students with disabilities have:

I think if we are not going to make use of all those unique backgrounds, if you are not helping students bring that to the table, then we are missing out on an opportunity. It's about sustainability, that people should be able to utilize the resources they have and contribute with the resources they have. (FG1:P5)

Another participant in a different group also commented on students with disabilities being a resource for other students:

From one perspective, they may have reduced functional abilities in some areas. But at the same time, they also have many resources from their lived experiences, which we should perhaps focus on promoting, precisely as a resource also for fellow students. (FG4:P1)

However, seeing disability or diversity as a resource presents a risk of students continuing to be othered. It is apparent that there is a thin line between recognizing diversity for its value and glorifying the struggle that people with disability often face, as represented by the following quote:

I find that most people with disabilities are actually more motivated than those without disabilities. Because first and foremost they want to show themselves and the world that they can actually achieve something anyway. If you get a result, you get a job, and they actually have to spend more time studying than students without a disability. (FG1: P1)

While having positive intentions, this quote illustrates ableism that is often latent in people's perceptions of disability and inclusion. The remark "they can actually achieve something anyway," implies that people with disabilities are expected to not succeed in the first place. Further, the fact that students with disabilities have to spend more time studying in comparison to those without a disability is not something which should be celebrated nor promoted. However, it is important to note that while ableist comments existed on a latent (and sometimes explicit) level, the participants were generally positive toward the betterment of higher education. One participant commented on the importance of raising awareness on an institutional level, not only on disabilities, but for all minority groups:

We have spoken from our positions as teachers, [but] I think that some of these issues quickly become individualized. It is about us and what we do, with change coming from the bottom up because we are the ones who interact with the students. I think that the type of knowledge that you produce through this project, getting it out, communicated and sparking debates at an institutional level about the challenges is hugely important. I would definitely say that higher education is not inclusive, and I think there is a long way to go before it becomes so. Not just for this group, but for others who are underrepresented. (FG2:P1)

In arguing that there is "a long way to go" before higher education can be considered inclusive, this participant raises the importance of elevating issues experienced on an individual level up to a wider, systemic level.

6 Discussion

Overall, the findings from this study illuminate the ambiguous nature of inclusive education. The participants emphasized the importance of diversity in higher education, yet their understandings of what inclusion entails were mixed. Participants spoke about universal design and individual accommodations without being explicit on what these approaches mean, and they often blended understandings of the two. While some participants saw inclusion as the implementation of universal design principles which could relieve students of the burden of having to arrange accommodations on their own accord, many understood inclusion to mean the facilitation of individual accommodations—something which demands more of the student. In their work on inclusive pedagogies in higher education, [Stentiford and Koutsouris \(2021\)](#) argue that inclusion has had little applied relevance for educators in their everyday practice, since the term *inclusion* is so complex and open to interpretation. It is of no surprise then that the current study found understandings of inclusion to be incredibly varied.

Further, the participants' understandings of disability were largely influenced by the medical model of disability and the ableist expectations that are connotated with it. Other studies have made the same observation, commenting on how policies within higher education are based upon medical understandings of disability, whereby disability is seen as an individual deficit that needs to be treated ([Lindsay and Fuentes, 2022](#); [Lombardi and Lalor, 2023](#); [Nieminen, 2022](#)). Moreover, a key finding of the current study is that ableist expectations do not affect students alone, but employees in addition. Higher education was described as having a "sink or swim" nature in relation to both students and staff. This suggests a collective perception of higher education, one of which is perhaps influenced by ableist expectations concerning productivity and performativity ([Leigh and Brown, 2020](#)).

Returning to the idea that ableism can be used to understand how ideas of disability are socially and culturally constructed ([Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012](#); [Leonhardt, 2024](#)), we use ableism to make sense of the participants' understandings of disability and inclusive education; first in relation to ableist expectations placed on students, and then in relation to how staff are influenced by an overarching, ableist system.

6.1 Ableist expectations of students created by staff

First, it is important to stress that while the participants' comments reflected ableist ideals, they were positive toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. The interpretation and discussion of the participants' remarks are not to criticize the individuals who took part in this study, but rather to give attention to how academia reproduces ableist expectations and ideals on an institutional level, which shape how students with disabilities experience education.

The findings indicate that staffs' understandings of inclusive education are influenced by ideas of individual adaption and accommodation. While some participants recognized universal design as being beneficial to all students, others likened universal design practices to individual adaptations, seeing them as time consuming and

only necessary if there were students with disabilities in the class. This latter understanding contradicts the intention of universal design for learning, which is to remove the need for individual accommodation by designing learning materials and spaces in a flexible way that is accessible to all learners (Rose et al., 2014). While the implementation of universal design principles would remove the need for students to disclose a disability, the participants' emphasis on individual adaptations meant there was a clear expectation for students to disclose their disabilities in order to receive help. Thus, as pointed out by Nieminen (2022), the overreliance on individual accommodation holds students with disabilities accountable for their own exclusion. By requiring students to disclose a disability in order to access accommodations, students are forced to decide between identifying as different and risk stigmatization, or, alternatively, passing as non-disabled and trying to cope regardless of the barriers in their path (Grimes et al., 2020; Langørgen and Magnus, 2018; Nieminen, 2022). It is therefore clear that modeling inclusive education on individual accommodations does not dissolve the exclusionary practices that students with disabilities are often subjected to.

Furthermore, disclosure is a complex and oftentimes daunting experience for students with disabilities (Marom and Hardwick, 2024). Recent evidence suggests that many students with disabilities—especially those with less visible disabilities—choose not to disclose as a means of remaining unseen and thereby unlabeled, even though this may mean jeopardizing their university experience (Moriña, 2024). However, despite acknowledging the difficulty students may face in disclosing a disability, many participants in this study felt that being open could be of benefit to not only the students, but to study programs as a whole. The participants saw students with disabilities as potential role models and praised them for being more motivated and working harder than other students. Despite the positive connotations associated with these perceptions, they can also be interpreted as a glorification of struggle. This issue is addressed by Campbell (2009), who notes that ableist views of inclusion can imply that people with disabilities must strive to overcome their impairment in order to meet normative standards set by society.

While participants want to promote diversity and have students with disabilities be role models, these students are nevertheless expected to adhere to the university's guidelines and standards as they exist to date. As Brown and Ramlackhan (2022) note, the fluctuation of disabilities means that academics cannot always meet expectations to be able-bodied at all times. Further, while some participants felt constrained by the rigidity of their study programs and procedures, other participants were so set in their current ways of teaching that anything other than the norm was described as “a hassle.” This, again, indicates that higher education is an arena predominately designed for the “ideal student” (Goodley, 2014). Thus, students deviating from this ideal have the responsibility of fitting into the university as it is.

The idea that students must fit into the university's current environment is reinforced by participants' reluctance in providing accommodations due to concerns of students receiving advantages over other students. Evidence suggests that students with disabilities are aware of these concerns, as many avoid requesting accommodations as not to appear as less competent or be subjected to discriminatory attitudes from other students (Grimes et al., 2020; Shpigelman et al., 2021). Further, while Norwegian legislation outlines students' rights to reasonable accommodations as means of making a learning

environment accessible, the findings of this study suggest that focus is predominantly placed on the individual student rather than the surrounding environment. As an alternative to providing accommodations, the participants in the current study expressed their desire for students to “test their limits” and “confront their problem”; comments that resonate with neoliberal environments driven by productivity and excellence (Brown, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Goodley, 2014). ‘Fitting in’, then, for many students with disabilities will involve working beyond their capacity, often at the expense of their own health and wellbeing.

The fact that participants view inclusive education and disability in this way may be explained by what Leigh and Brown describe as academics' “moral commitment to the academy” (2020, p. 174). Here, discussing the way in which internalized ableism is reproduced within academia may shed light on why ableist expectations are influencing current practices of “inclusive” higher education.

6.2 Ableist expectations of staff created by the institution

Firstly, the findings indicate a lack of consensus on what is expected of university educators in facilitating an inclusive learning environment. The participants in the current study spoke of limited time, a lack of resources, and a lack of guidance from the university concerning their roles and responsibilities in providing inclusive teaching. Such findings are in line with recent studies that suggest university staff are hindered in adopting inclusive approaches to teaching due to organizational issues (Bunbury, 2020; Marom and Hardwick, 2024; Ristad et al., 2024a). Nevertheless, numerous participants held themselves accountable when they could not design their teaching in a way that aligned with current regulations on accessible teaching materials (e.g., “*I will continue to break the law for years to come*”). This suggests that staff may place blame on themselves, rather than holding the institution responsible.

The results also illustrate the uncertainty that university staff feel in their role as educators. From not being prepared to supervise students to not knowing what universal design entails, it was clear that educators' ability to promote inclusive learning environments was hindered by a lack of guidance. These findings are concerning given that in 2016, the Norwegian government introduced new requirements for pedagogical competence among academics in higher education (Meld. St. 16, 2016–2017). As a result of this, Norwegian universities were required to develop mandatory programs that could help employees acquire pedagogical competence and ensure the development of good teaching. However, a recent study of such a pedagogical program at one Norwegian university found that staff were not allocated the necessary time to complete the program by their departments, and that demands of their job role made it difficult for participants to fully commit themselves to the program (Hektoen and Wallin, 2024).

Further, understandings of inclusion are made more complex by the potential tension that educators face in their roles. The findings suggest that, on the one hand, educators feel that they must protect their respective professions by upholding standards and adhering to the rigid, strict structures of the study program set in place by the institution. Yet, on the other hand, policies and legislation concerning universal design and accessible learning environments prompt educators to promote inclusion; implying the

need for flexibility within a system which allows for little versatility. In describing lecturers as “gatekeepers” of study programs, Langørgen et al. (2020) found that these competing demands create ambivalence toward working with students with disabilities, triggered by conflicting roles and values. Further, the authors found that lecturers are often left alone to deal with this ambivalence, lacking knowledge and support from the institution (Langørgen et al., 2020). This is in line with the findings of the current study, with participants being left alone to “sink or swim” in the supervision of students. This dual role of protector of the profession and promoter of inclusion can be further understood in terms of what Goodley describes as the “curious paradox of inclusive education” (2014, p.101). According to Goodley, to be inclusive is to meaningfully involve all learners, which does not align with education as a process characterized by ableist standards. This paradox may explain the tension that educators face in their juxtaposing roles as protectors of the profession and promoters of inclusion.

Finally, given the lack of clarity in the role of an educator, it is important to discuss how expectations of university staff to be inclusive may be reinforcing ableist ideals. In their recent work on defining the “inclusive lecturer,” Moriña and Orozco (2022) argue that developing inclusive teaching will be difficult due to universities becoming increasingly demanding—especially in terms of research activity. Therefore, it is important to question what action can be taken on an organizational level. In their work on internalized ableism, Leigh and Brown (2020) raise the question: “How can we preach wellbeing when we model anything but?” (p. 167–168). It is thus essential that future work explores how academia’s environment of ableism and overwork may be addressed on a systemic level.

6.3 Tackling the reproduction of ableism on an organizational level: implications for future research and practice

This study provides several implications for future research and practice. First, higher education will not be inclusive as long as disability is understood within a medical framework of individual deficit and responsibility. Rather than making individual adjustments on the basis of disclosure, the implementation of universal design principles would benefit all students, regardless of disability. Other researchers have also argued for a critical re-thinking of accommodations through exploring how a shift away from individual accommodation to universal design principles may defuse ableism (Collins et al., 2019; Spier and Natalier, 2023; Marom and Hardwick, 2024). While there is limited evidence documenting the implementation of UDL principles in higher education (Fornauf and Erickson, 2020), there are examples of universities actively engaging in applying the principles of UDL as part of their everyday practice. Trinity College Dublin, for example, recently used UDL principles to develop an online interactive map (TCD Sense Map) that provides detailed information on sensory characteristics and access across campus (Treanor et al., 2024). In a Norwegian context, researchers and student ambassadors at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) recently developed a checklist for inclusive

learning that has been placed around auditoriums, classrooms and offices across the university’s campuses (Bjørnerås et al., 2023). While such evidence points to the adoption of UDL principles in practice, further research is needed to assess the impact of these resources on students’ and staffs’ experiences of inclusion.

In addition to providing resources and guidelines on universal design, there also needs to be a larger discourse on what the role of an educator is. Further research is needed to understand why university lecturers and professors may not identify as teachers, despite teaching being a central part of their job role. In terms of practical implications, universities ought to be doing more to help educators manage this role. This may involve alleviating time pressure, re-structuring the workday, reprioritizing work tasks, and providing staff with resources to make their teaching material finished, accessible, and available in advance of lectures. Moreover, in arguing that inclusive education ought to be treated as an institutional obligation, Svendby (2024) calls for not only the implementation of obligatory training for lecturers, but also concrete guidelines and dedicated workhours for the development of inclusive skills.

Finally, while studies have called for more research on how ableism is experienced by academic staff (Lindsay and Fuentes, 2022), it is necessary to widen this to the entire university body, i.e., students included. Moreover, this research ought to capture the experiences of all marginalized groups within academia—not only those with disabilities.

6.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it may be assumed that the educators who participated in this study are positive toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. It would have been of interest to gather the perspectives of those who are less open to the idea of inclusive education.

Another limitation is that we did not ask the participants if they had a disability or identified as disabled. Such information may have added another dimension to the findings. However, we did not wish to put participants in a position where they may have felt pressured into disclosing or hiding their disability. Further, knowing a participant identified as disabled may have led to other participants in the group being more mindful or limited with their comments on disability.

In thematic analysis, the researcher is seen as having an active role in the generation of data (Braun and Clarke, 2022), and thus it is important to reflect on our role as researchers in the collection and generation of data. As educators at a Norwegian university, and therefore peers of the participants, we may have influenced the participants’ responses during the interviews. Therefore, it was emphasized at the beginning of each interview that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Additionally, participants may have felt comfortable speaking to other individuals who could perhaps relate to their situation. It is also important to acknowledge that the results are the interpretation of the authors. Thus, our prior experiences with and understanding of higher education will have influenced this interpretation. However, through team-based coding, the joint development of themes, and a collaborative writing process, we endeavored to create a narrative that was representative of the participants’ views.

Finally, our choice of using the concept of ableism as the theoretical framework for the study presents potential limitations that must be addressed. As academics committed to the ongoing betterment of higher education, our choice of theoretical framework could appear as an arbitrary one intended to promote our own agenda. Moreover, ableism is rather broad in its definition. Therefore, using the concept of ableism as a framework presents the risk of over-generalizing its application to the findings in the sense that any action or comment which does not align with said agenda is considered ableist. This further presents the risk of one's discussion becoming accusatory in nature, rather than a well-balanced reflection that is representative of the dataset and research questions at hand. Through our discussion of the findings, we have aimed to achieve the latter.

7 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore understandings of inclusion and disability in higher education. The results highlight the ableist nature of the entirety of academia and indicate that ableism is something internalized by staff and reproduced, impacting the educational experiences of students. Educators are expected to promote inclusion while adhering to the rigidity of institutional policies and procedures, all with very little to no support from the university. Thus, understandings of what inclusion entails and how to promote inclusion are mixed and often misinformed.

In sum, it is clear that inclusion is welcomed as long as it does not disrupt the university's current ways of working. Students with disabilities, despite being seen as a resource, are expected to fit into a learning environment designed for the 'ideal', able student. As Lombardi and Lalor (2023) argue, inclusion is characterized by integration into normative practices and policies of the institution. In planning future action on how these practices and policies may be challenged, it will be important to ensure we do not demand so much of university staff that we continue reinforcing the ableist practices that dominate academia today. While training and increased resources for staff will help to promote inclusion to a certain extent, it is ultimately on a systemic, organizational level that ableist norms and a culture of hyper-productivity can be fought.

Data availability statement

The raw data (interview transcripts) supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 906240). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

GG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. OM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. AW: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. SH: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. LK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Methodology.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1504832/full#supplementary-material>

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