

223 The German “Disadvantage Compensation” as an Instrument of Inclusion in Higher Education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Inclusive higher education in Germany relies on the *Disadvantage Compensation* (Nachteilsausgleich) as a form of institutionalised individual accommodation to support students with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses. Based on medical certificates, the examinations can get modified, or the students can be allowed to use auxiliary aids. Answering the question, in how far the German *Disadvantage Compensation* is experienced as an instrument of inclusion by students themselves, this inquiry reconstructs the study experience of students with chronic illnesses and/or disabilities who were granted *Disadvantage Compensation* at the University of Kassel in Hesse, Germany. The analysis draws on more than 30 narrative interviews that were conducted in 2022 and 2023. The interviews are evaluated following the Grounded Theory methodology. The inquiry aims on adding up to existing knowledge about the study experience of students with chronic illness and/or disability with implications for higher education teaching and learning.

Full paper

While inclusive higher education is an established policy aim in Europe and many other countries, universities are confronted with questions of how to achieve inclusion. Generally, they implement a mixture of measurements of universal design and individual accommodation to achieve a higher level of inclusion for the rising number of students with chronic illness and/or disability. International research showed that individual accommodation is both, necessary to meet the diverse needs of students with chronic illnesses and disabilities, and effective in reducing their disadvantages (Salzer et al. 2008, Sharpe et al. 2005). However, it also showed that individual accommodation presents a challenge to the students (Magnus/Tøssebro 2013) and is not experienced as an effective instrument of inclusion in higher education by all students (Kendall 2016, Bartz 2020). Further, there is a high non-take-up rate of individual accommodation (Lyman et al. 2016). In Germany, inclusive higher education relies on the *Disadvantage Compensation* (Nachteilsausgleich), an institutionalised form of individual accommodation. Based on medical certificates, the examinations can get modified, or the students can be allowed to use auxiliary aids. As the best 2 study showed, 29% percent of those who experience disadvantages related to their studies in 2016 and 2017 applied for *Disadvantage Compensation* (Deutsches Studentenwerk 2018:10).

The following investigation focusses on those, who were granted *Disadvantage Compensation* at the University of Kassel in Hesse, Germany. Asking the question, in how far the German *Disadvantage Compensation* is experienced as an instrument of inclusion, the inquiry reconstructs the study experience of students with chronic illness or disabilities. The analysis draws on more than 30 narrative interviews that were conducted in 2022 and 2023. The interviews are evaluated, following the Grounded Theory methodology. The inquiry aims on adding up to existing knowledge about the study experience of students with chronic illness or disabilities, as well as about potentials and problems of individual accommodation to inform decisions on policy changes and inclusive teaching in the future.

Preliminary findings show that the experience of *Disadvantage Compensation* is depending to a large extent on the information about individual disadvantages, social networks, the lecturers and the access to medical certificates. All these factors can be barriers that prevent both, the application for Disadvantage Compensation and the effective use of Disadvantage Compensation as an instrument of inclusion.

Information about individual disadvantages and the existence of *Disadvantage Compensation* is essential for applying for this form of individual compensation. This information can be acquired by own experience or in interaction with others. Thus, social networks are of special relevance for students with chronic illness or disabilities. Further, students need a medical certificate to apply for *Disadvantage Compensation*. While most of the students regard this

requirement as manageable, some students were confronted with major problems. They had to visit specialists that were hard to reach, had to pay for their certificates themselves or had to renew their certificates annually. In case those points culminated, students experienced the requirements as major barriers that could even lead to dropping out of university. As soon as the *Disadvantage Compensation* is granted, the students must inform their lecturers to agree on a specific form of compensation bilaterally. While the students explained that many lecturers tried their best to fulfil their needs and provide fruitful amendments to the exam situation or form, others were less benevolent and understanding.

Beneath these organisational aspects of *Disadvantage Compensation*, the experience of illness and disability in higher education is accompanied by a variety of negotiation processes. Students ask themselves and discuss with others, in how far they are disadvantaged and, further, in how far a compensation for their situation is legitimate or fair. Negotiation processes as such are neither limited to a specific time nor stage of the study experience or experience of illness and disability. Rather, students are confronted with these negotiation processes during the whole time they are part of the educational system, often starting in primary school. Regarding this aspect, the current organisation of *Disadvantage Compensation* in Germany as dependent on bilateral arrangements between the lecturers and students seems rather problematic. Many students reported that they feared negative responses and did not want to generate “extra workload”. Further, they expressed a lack of understanding for the necessity to inform lecturers about their medical conditions. Thus, the preliminary findings show that, while some students who were granted *Disadvantage Compensation* do experience it as an effective instrument of inclusion, others still conquer barriers. These are partly dependent on how this form of individual accommodation is organised in Germany.

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