

How Students Negotiate Individual Accommodation

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

In line with the idea of reasonable accommodations set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), higher education institutions in Germany offer disadvantage compensation (Nachteilsausgleich) to disabled students. However, current data shows that only around a fifth of disabled students make use of it. Based on interviews with 33 students who used individual accommodations at a German university, this study reconstructs the arguments students used to justify their decision to use or not use individual accommodation. The findings build on existing research which has highlighted that students fear stigmatisation and exclusion when using accommodations, and refer to discourses of fairness and deservingness. The analysis reveals that students must navigate different expectations and discourses in various interactions with peers, family members, academic staff, and the public. As these discourses undermine the use of accommodations, they display a major barrier to inclusion.

Full paper

Since Germany ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2009, inclusive higher education has been an established policy aim. Consequently, universities are faced with the question of how to achieve inclusion. Based on the concept of reasonable accommodation set out in the UNCRPD, Germany offers Disadvantage Compensation (Nachteilsausgleich) as a formalised form of individual accommodation. Students can obtain modifications to their assessments or be permitted to use auxiliary aids based on medical certificates (Gattermann-Kasper & Peschke, 2023). However, a recent study found that only around one-fifth of disabled students make use of these provisions in German higher education (Steinkühler et al., 2023). Therefore, one could argue that individual accommodations may not provide sufficient inclusion in higher education. But why do students forego their right to accommodations and the opportunity for inclusion?

Previous studies have attempted to explain the low uptake of accommodations in other countries by demonstrating that accommodations require disclosure and personal effort, are associated with bureaucratic obstacles, and may result in stigmatisation and exclusion (Lyman et al., 2016; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014). Furthermore, these researchers have identified discourses of deservingness and fairness as being significant in the context of using accommodations. However, the author is not aware of any investigations that focus on these specific discourses and how students use them to justify their use or non-use of accommodations. Therefore, the author attempts to address this research gap.

In answering the research question of how students negotiate individual accommodations, this paper attempts to understand why the uptake rate of accommodations in Germany is low, and how, as academic staff, we reproduce discourses that hinder the use of accommodations and, consequently, the inclusion of students in higher education. The analysis draws on 33 narrative interviews with students who used individual accommodation at a German university, conducted in 2022 and 2023 (Rosenthal, 2018). These interviews were evaluated using the knowledge analysis approach developed by Rainer Keller (2024) in the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse.

Preliminary findings show that experiencing disability in higher education involves a variety of negotiation processes. Students ask themselves and discuss with others how disadvantaged they are and whether using accommodations is legitimate or fair. These negotiation processes are not limited to a specific time or stage in a student's life. Rather, students are confronted with these processes throughout their time in the education system, often from primary school onwards.

When discussing the possibility of using accommodations, as well as the amount and form of these, students referred to fairness, deservingness, appropriateness, and the requirements of their future position in the labour market. These discourses appear to be influenced by social networks and interactions with academic staff on an individual level. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that students neither adopted nor accepted all of the discourses they encountered. Nevertheless, they had to find a way to navigate them because they perceived them as influential. Even students who were granted accommodations had to negotiate their use with fellow students, their wider social networks and academic staff. Many students reported fearing negative responses, as using accommodations would disclose their situation to their peers and academic staff. Furthermore, regarding the organisation and implementation of these accommodations, some students said that they did not want to create an additional workload. Overall, they lacked understanding of the necessity to disclose their medical condition to lecturers.

Although the discourses that students referred to varied to a certain degree depending on the culture of specific fields of study and the assumed requirements of future labour market positions, they shared an understanding of deservingness, fairness and appropriateness. Nevertheless, it was through individual interactions with others that

issues were resolved and students were able to assert their right to accommodation. Therefore, as academic staff, we can and should play our part in deconstructing barriers and facilitating inclusion. Nevertheless, this will take time. Consequently, relying on individual accommodation as a central measure of inclusion seems questionable. Providing inclusion based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning — thus in a way that neither requires individual effort nor disclosure — could be one way to address the issue of low uptake of individual accommodation. Ultimately, however, higher education and society as a whole must overcome ableist discourse to provide genuine inclusion, reduce competition between academics, lessen pressure on everyone and create a more sustainable working environment.