



## EDITORIAL

# ‘We Are Students: Experiences From Our Student Lives at a University in Norway’

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## 1 | Introduction

The pilot project, Higher Education in Human Rights for Students with Intellectual Disabilities was externally funded by the foundation DAM<sup>1</sup>, developed in cooperation with the Norwegian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities<sup>2</sup> and Oslo municipality. It aims to develop study courses for students with intellectual disabilities in Norway's higher education system. The development of the pilot project is based on Article 24 in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), which reads: “States Parties recognize the rights of persons with disabilities to education. To realize this right without discrimination and based on equal opportunities, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning” (United Nations 2006, article 24). The change towards a more inclusive education goes back to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), an international consensus regarding the need to provide equal educational rights to persons with special education needs. Inclusive education is discussed and presented in different ways. One of the ways of communicating inclusive education is in light of a so-called narrow and broad definition of inclusive education (Haug 2017). While the narrow definition includes children/ persons with special needs (Haug 2017), the broad definition includes all marginalised groups in vulnerable positions regarding their access to education (Nelis, Pedaste, and Šuman 2023). The narrow definition sheds light on including persons with special needs in mainstream education and their participation and educational/pedagogical accommodation that allows the students to reach their educational potential (Nelis, Pedaste, and Šuman 2023, 2). The pilot project is a possible

contribution within the aspect/field of narrow definition of inclusive education. The development of the courses in the pilot project was otherwise inspired by the work of O'Brien et al. (2018). The book brings knowledge of theoretical underpinnings and practical examples of the development of higher education courses and provisions of higher education for students with intellectual disabilities in different countries. The first chapter of the book lays out models of organisation of higher education for persons with intellectual disabilities and describes three models: The fully inclusive model (where the students attend the same classes as their peers), the both segregated and inclusive models (where the students experience both a segregated and inclusive models), and the segregated model (the students are thought in segregated classes on the university ground) (Neubert et al. 2001 in O'Brien et al. 2018, 11). The pilot project tries out two of the models, the hybrid model and the segregated model as described by O'Brien et al. (2018). In this article, we do not focus on these models but rather on the educational journeys of two of the students at the pilot project to shed light on the importance of identifying students' experiences to identify and form a higher education offer that is suitable for the students based on their past experiences.

The pilot project consists of two phases, each lasting approximately 2 years. During the first phase (2021–2023), we developed and conducted three courses: Human Rights and Everyday Life; Worldviews, Values, and Professional Relations; and a course called Doing Research Together.

In the second phase, the project group developed two additional courses: Human Rights and Everyday Life II and Practical

## Summary

- Adults with intellectual disabilities in Norway lack opportunities for higher education.
- A pilot project at one university college seeks to develop higher education courses accommodating students with intellectual disabilities.
- Two of the students, Tone and Ingrid, wrote accounts of their educational journeys.
- They wrote about their experiences in kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, and their experiences as students at a university college.
- This retrospective of their educational journeys is essential for a better understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities as learners.
- Two researchers, who are also project leaders and teachers at the pilot project supported Tone and Ingrid in their writing. They asked questions, translated the stories to English and helped with the structure of the stories.
- In the end, we summed up the students' learning experiences.

Placement (vocational pathways). Other project activities shed light on the development of pedagogical tools, course plans, didactic facilitation, social support, and so forth. Formative dialogue research was a part of the project, and experiences from the cooperation with students and the development of the courses are conveyed in different ways. Students took part in development of the courses together with the project group (Chalachanová et al. 2023; Lid et al. 2024). Collaboration and research within this project were represented in varying ways, including conference participation, newspaper articles, radio interviews, and podcasts. We tried to write and present collaboratively (teachers and students) if possible. This article highlights two students' educational journeys and what was found to be critical during their educational process. The students' educational journeys highlight their earlier experiences in education and help us to view their educational journeys in a broader lens and inform development of the activities within the pilot project.

## 2 | The Norwegian Context

In general, persons with intellectual disabilities in Norway have no access to higher education. Some people with intellectual disabilities take part in postsecondary offerings of Norwegian folk high schools, which provide a variety of courses and subjects without exams or grades (Fokeshogskole n.d.). To access higher education institutions, a potential student must acquire so-called general study competence, which means that they must have completed 3 years of secondary school or vocational training and passed qualification subjects. In addition, there is a so-called '23/5' rule, which means that an applicant must be at least 23 years old, have at least 5 years of educational or professional experience, and have completed qualification subjects (Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service's Act relating to universities and university colleges, 2005, Lid

et al. 2024). There is also room for exemption from these general admission criteria due to disability or permanent chronic illness. The university must review whether they can provide dispensation based on the applicants' documentation of why they could not acquire general study competence (Regulations on admission to higher education 2023). Persons with intellectual disabilities are in a vulnerable position, because they usually do not receive grades during secondary school, which means that they are considered ineligible for higher education. This article is based on experiences of students at the aforementioned pilot project that aims to explore the possible higher education provisions for these students.

### 2.1 | Working with the Article

This article was inspired by the work of Stephanie Walker and Macdonald (2018): 'My Life as a University Student' published in the book, *People with Intellectual Disabilities Experiencing University Life: Theoretical Underpinnings, Evidence and Lived Experience* (O'Brien et al. 2018). In the current article, two teachers/researchers and two students worked together. Teachers asked the students whether they would like to work together and develop their stories in a dialogue with support. We explained the journal and the purpose of the special issue to the students. We constructed the story over time by asking questions about different parts of the students' educational trajectory. The process of writing adhered to the following construct. First, the researchers asked the students to describe their schooling—from kindergarten to university. Next, they asked the students to write about the university, why it was essential for them to become students, and how they found out about the pilot project. We talked about cooperating with the development of the courses and Tone Brynildsen's and Ingrid Eid Jacobsen's student roles, what they liked and did not like, and what they thought was challenging to navigate. Below you will find Tone's and Ingrid's stories. At the end of the paper, we will review their stories and sum up the knowledge gained from their educational journeys.

### 2.2 | Tone

#### 2.2.1 | Kindergarten

I was born in 1981 in Stavanger. It was Easter and I was born on Good Friday. We then lived in Hinna, but we moved to Vaulen when I was one and a half years old. I grew up in Vaulen, Stavanger, and have lived there all my life. I have always lived with my mother and father. I have no siblings, but I have many cousins, aunts, and uncles, who have been important to me all my life.

My parents were always conscious of me spending time with other children. Therefore, we were always on holiday with friends who had children my age. I was also often with my cousins.

I started kindergarten when I was 1-year-old. Then, I first went to one kindergarten for a few years. I went there with some

friends whom we knew well. I sometimes played with them after kindergarten. We also went on holiday together. The last 2 years before I started primary school, I went to a different kindergarten.

In kindergarten, there were always Christmas tree parties when it was Christmas. In the summer, there were summer parties. We also had a carnival where we dressed up and painted ourselves. It was great fun.

I always had big birthday parties with many children of the same age. I played a lot with three of my friends, two girls and a boy. The girls sometimes stayed for a sleepover. The boy was a neighbour, and we were in the same class at primary school. One of the girls and I were together a lot, and we went on a tour together. Later, when I went to school, we went horseback riding and we were scouts together.

### 2.2.2 | Primary School

I went to primary school in Vaulen. I had a contact teacher and one assistant. I remember all the teachers I had there, and I enjoyed the school. I had contact with two buddies (mentors) in the sixth grade when I was in the first grade. I also had lessons with a special education teacher. I remember two girls from my class as good friends at Vaulen Primary School. They were both at my house a lot, and I was at theirs. I also went horseback riding first with one girl, who I knew well. Later, I went to Rogaland riding school with three friends from the class. We were also sometimes together after school.

My parents fought for me to be integrated into mainstream classes throughout my school years. They always contacted the school well before I was due to start a new school.

When I started in first grade at primary school, they were in contact with the principal and pedagogical-psychological municipal service (PPT) at Vaulen Primary School one to 2 years in advance.

I went to a speech therapist in primary school to learn how to pronounce words correctly. I also went to a speech therapist when I was in kindergarten. PPT followed up with me. I also had to practice words from the speech therapist.

There was no one else with Down syndrome or other disabilities at the school.

It was exciting and fun at Vaulen Primary School. I did a lot of schoolwork at home. It wasn't always fun, but it helped me learn, and I liked it.

I often watched or observed the other students when they played or did things together. When I got home, I often repeated what was done at school. That's how I learned. I also participated in play at school, but I practised at home as well.

When I left primary school, the class took a trip on the school ship SS/Elida (sailboat) for several days. It was very nice. Some of the parents were there, including my father.

## 2.3 | Junior High School

The same thing happened when I was going to high school: My parents prepared the school before I started.

The teachers brought me in front of the class and asked if I wanted to tell a little about myself. I was the only one asked to do that. I prepared it at home first. The students showed me a lot of sympathy and support. The students in my class were kind. We ate together during breaks. I was with someone in the class during the big recess. I was also accompanied home from school by some pupils who lived near my house.

When I started junior high, the class went on a trip to get to know each other. We spent the night there and walked on the Old Post Road (old historical coastal road) the next day.

Some of the students from the primary school I continued with to secondary school, and new students joined.

In junior high school, it became more difficult during recess. Someone was bothering/teasing me a bit. They joked with me a bit, and I didn't quite understand. It's been a long time, and I don't remember everything. It was not the students in the class who teased me. It was difficult for me then. But the teachers were friendly. My contact teacher was very kind. I also liked teachers in mathematics and science. The science teacher made up different stories when we had a day out. He also had his dog with him sometimes. I enjoyed those classes. I had extra teachers who took me out for some of the classes.

At junior high, the parent contacts created a dance group and disco for the class. There, we learned to swing dance, which was nice. I was also at prom.

I liked math, Norwegian, and social studies. English and science were also lovely. The gym and swimming were also fun. When I started secondary school, we went on an overnight trip to get to know each other. I was involved in everything the others did, but I had quite a few private lessons. It was an excellent class. The teachers were good, and I learned a lot in math, Norwegian, and English. I got pretty good. I read books and wrote short stories. I became fond of reading books and still am. I went to England with my mother and father during the holidays to practice English.

I had confirmation together with many from the class and in the neighbourhood. I also went to choir called Ten-sing at church with students from the class and others. I liked that.

## 2.4 | Secondary School

When I started upper secondary school, I was in a so-called group of four with others with disabilities. I wouldn't say I liked it there. I wanted to continue with the students I had gone with before and whom I knew.

I dropped out and had a small job with my father for the rest of the year. It was a challenging year. My parents fought for me to continue in the ordinary and upper secondary school classes. My case was presented at the Storting (parliament) and was

dealt with by the Civil Ombudsman. My parents engaged a lawyer to help us continue in a regular class in secondary school. The Norwegian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (NFU) was also strongly involved in my case. After this process, in which we were successful, I started at St. Olav Upper Secondary School in Stavanger studying health and social studies. It was a lovely year with excellent students and teachers. I was in a group of eight students. We went on cycle trips together, and I had some of the students visit me at home. We also had a closing party in my garden. Afterward, I spent 4 years at Bergeland Upper Secondary School in a regular health and social studies class. There were many lovely teachers and students there. I took part in the parties together with the class.

We also went on a study trip to Aarhus in Denmark. That was exciting. The teachers also asked me if I wanted to tell a little about myself. I prepared it at home first. I received a lot of support from the students at Bergeland as well. I didn't have much contact with the other students outside of school hours, but I was always involved when activities were organised. What was a little silly was that all the students had to change premises because Bergeland Upper Secondary School had to be refurbished. Then I went to school in the middle of the city center. It was a bit unsafe to be in the city center, and there were some bad episodes with bullying at the bus station when I was going to take the bus home. We were out in practice in several places, such as nursing homes, kindergartens, etc. I liked the subjects: psychology, nutrition, and anatomy. I have gone to school for many years and received an education. I studied health and social studies and became a nursing assistant. I have always liked going to school, but sometimes it was not so much fun during recess. It was a bit difficult for me.

## 2.5 | Adult Years

During my adult years, after I finished upper secondary school and trained as a nursing assistant, I eventually got a job at Frue Old People's Home. I interned there in high school and got a job there afterwards. I worked there for 10 years. It was enjoyable and exciting. I learned a lot there and became good at making beds and helping clean the washrooms. I also had to fold clothes in a laundry room and was alone there. It was a bit difficult, and I got bored sometimes in the basement. Later, I worked a bit at a daycare center. I helped older people, e.g. with bingo and setting the table. I also occasionally went on walks with the residents.

After I had worked in a nursing home for many years, I got a job at Nova Print. I also worked there for quite a long time. My father also worked at Nova Print. At Nova Print, I worked in the canteen. I prepared food for those who worked there together with another person. When Nova Print changed premises, I started shopping for the canteen. It was a fun job. Nova Print changed locations once more, and then I worked on the same thing, purchasing food for the canteen. I also started washing and vacuuming the premises. I scanned bills and shredded papers. I also worked in production there. I enjoyed the job. After Nova Print, I started working at a daycare center in Tasta, Stavanger. I worked in the canteen and shopped every day there. I worked from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. and worked there for 3 years until September 2022. Then they had to close the canteen because they moved to another location.

Fortunately, I found out about the study at university college. I was called for an interview and got a place. I started studies at university college that same autumn. I have now taken a year of studies at university college and will continue in the autumn. I'm looking forward to it. At the same time, I hope the municipality will find me a new job soon. I am on leave from there for the time being. *HELT MED*,<sup>3</sup> which helped me to find a job in the municipality, is helping me to look for a new job. I will have to watch their website and see when they post jobs. I want to be independent and manage myself, and I want to be able to be with others. Everyone has the right to get help to be a part of the society. Going to school to learn with others and get an education is essential. This is how we develop. It is important to go to regular school and regular classes. Then we learn from each other, and everyone gets to know everyone. For me, it was essential to be with the students in my regular class and learn from them and with them. It will be easier to get a job when I have an education, and it is easier to explain what I think and mean. It is essential to manage yourself and not depend on others. It is also important to get help to decide what you can manage yourself and what you need help with.

## 2.6 | Friends

I have had many support contacts and am still in contact with some. I have known one of them since I was 17 years old. She was my support contact and is a good friend. We have had a lot of fun together. I have visited her where she lives many times, and she sometimes visits Stavanger. The last time was this summer.

I have a lot of fun together with the support contact I have now. We go for walks, and we cook together. She doesn't live far from where I live, so it fits very well. We go to the theater and concerts. She is a teacher and is good at helping me with what I do with my studies at university college.

I also have contact with my cousins and second cousins. I have good contact with one of them. We have a club together, and it's very nice.

## 2.7 | The Idea of Being a Student at University

I worked at Tasta Day Center in Stavanger Municipality. They moved to a different location, and there was no canteen there. That's why I had to stop working there. I worked until the end of September 2022. At the same time, I found out about the study at university college from an employee at *HELT MED*. I always wanted to go to more schools and learn more. This suited me very well. It was my parents who helped me. They contacted the university college, and I was interviewed. Then I got a place in Stavanger. My one cousin told me a lot about studying. She is a professor of physics at the University of Manchester. Studying was exciting and instructive. I know many people who have studied, both in my family and friends.

It's nice to learn new things and meet new people. Learning more is vital so we can develop and understand more. It was exciting, but I felt a little insecure at first. I didn't quite know what it would be like to study. I was thrilled, but I was also a

little afraid. I thought it would not be easy, and I would have to do a lot of reading and writing. I didn't fully understand what the study would be about before I started.

## 2.8 | About the Student Role: What Is It Like to be a Student and Study?

I like studying. Getting to know the teachers and the other students is very nice. We have learned a lot this year. It is an exciting topic that we have gone through, and I have learned a lot. I feel more confident when speaking and presenting. When I made podcasts about my life, I gained better insight and remembered things better. It was also great fun and educational to work with master's students on the topic of power and balance of power. History was exciting. I enjoyed the lectures and working on the assignments. It is essential and good to work with the other students. It is educational both for us and the other students. There aren't many of us in our group, so getting input from others is nice. The teachers are lovely and good at arranging things well for the group. Having an assistant in the class who could also help was good. They helped us find the room we were supposed to be in. It can sometimes be challenging to understand everything the class talks about, especially when it is fast, and the material is difficult. I need to repeat complex texts and material and get explanations of difficult words. If someone talks a lot in class, it can be challenging to concentrate. There aren't many of us in the group, so being with other students is excellent.

I get help from my parents and my friend to explain and understand complex texts and words and some help in formulating sentences when I work on assignments. Sometimes, I need help to understand the tasks. I read myself, but I ask for help with difficult things. My parents applied to the Employment and Welfare Agency (NAV) for support. We thought the Milieu Service could help, but NAV refused the request. They have nothing to do with schoolwork. People with physical disabilities often receive such support, so I was a little disappointed because it would have been nice to have the help.

With my support contact, having time for other activities such as trips, cooking, and going to the cinema is also lovely. Therefore, I also wanted the Milieu Service to support my student role so I can do fun stuff with my support contact, not just school assignments.

Someone I know told me that studying was fun and that they had a lot of social interaction with the other students at university, but we didn't. It's a bit of a shame, I think.

I like studying at university college. I enjoy discussions and having them after the lecture is good. However, it can be challenging to participate in discussions sometimes if someone talks a lot. Then, I can lose concentration and forget what I'm going to say. In particular, I think it is not easy online on teams. We can learn from discussions, since people have different opinions. Then, we learn about what others think. I like that. This is how we develop.

I don't dread homework and reading. It was before the study started that I thought like that. I like reading. Reading is fine, but understanding difficult words can be difficult. That is why it

is good to have texts with explanations and illustrations. I also like texts with exercises. Then, I get to reflect and think through the material differently. When I can repeat and get help and ideas from others, I learn from it.

I want to be with the other students at the university college and have more social interaction with them. Maybe it's a good idea to have lunch together and work on a project together. I would like us to have more contact with them. I have talked a little with other students. In the canteen, I had some contact with other students, and I like that. Can the milieu workers at the school be a resource? I read online that they have various offers and social activities. I can also be a resource, and perhaps help when activities are organised!

I've become better at finding my way around the building now. I have a good sense of place.

I want to be part of the environment at university college. Could other students help us with assignments? Then we could, for example, stay longer at school sometimes. Walking and talking to the other students can also be fun. A 'buddy' arrangement could be an idea.

The milieu service from Stavanger Municipality refused to help with studies and schoolwork. I think that's wrong. There is little help for us, and the system is not very flexible. NAV should work on making it more user-friendly.

Is there study time at the university college? This means that available professionals/other students could help after school (e.g., in the library).

I like being with the other students and in the group. It is better to work together with others rather than alone. Lectures and discussions are the best. Afterwards, everyone must be allowed to say something and take part in conversations and discussions.

The texts we read should be in Bokmål (one of two standard forms of the Norwegian language).

I liked history. It was fun to read and watch films about the history of people with disabilities. Power and balance of power was also an excellent topic. The course in research was also fun.

I liked the podcast assignment very much, but I want some assignments submitted as podcasts. What was nice about the podcast assignment was that it was about my life. I remembered things again from my life. It was great fun telling others about it. It has become easier for me to talk and to present.

The email notifications from teachers worked just fine.

It is essential for me to feel safe. That's when I learn best. If it doesn't work on teams, it can become difficult.

## 2.9 | About Course Development

It has been exciting and fun to take part in development of the courses. We can talk together and discuss things, and everyone

can give input. This is how I can understand and influence the courses and get ideas from others.

Everyone who participates brings different ideas and input. We learn from that. We also get to contribute so that topics become subjects that interest us. We can also influence the way we work. Some learn best from lectures with assignments, some like working in groups with others, others like working online on teams and others with films.

Sometimes, it was difficult to understand what was said and what the different people meant when we were all on teams. It's best for everyone to be together.

### 3 | Ingrid

#### 3.1 | Kindergarten and Primary School

I went to kindergarten from the time I was about 1-year-old. First, I went to a small family kindergarten with four other children and then I went to a municipal kindergarten. I think I got the help I needed in kindergarten.

I started at the regular primary school when I was 7 years old. I even attended the 5th grade there. I went to a regular class with about 20 others. I had my own assistant who helped me with practical things. I mostly followed the regular teaching, but they weren't always very good at arranging things for me. Among other things, there was a lot I couldn't do because of my vision problems.

I think the teacher didn't want to pay attention to me because she thought it would affect the other students in the class. Another thing that was difficult was that there was outdoor school/trip day every Monday, regardless of the weather. I had to take part in that, even though it was not so easy to get there with a wheelchair. I sat a lot in silence and became very cold when I was not feeling well. Fortunately, I had understanding assistants so we could avoid participation in outdoor activities once in a while.

I had a few friends but didn't have much contact with that many since I couldn't be involved in much of the school activities.

#### 3.2 | Junior High and Upper Secondary School

From 7th grade, I started at a special school, Frydenhaug in Drammen. I went there until the 10th grade. Here I received better-adapted teaching, and I enjoyed it quite well. I was in a good class, and Frydenhaug was a good school for me.

In upper secondary school, I first spent a year in design and handicrafts in a regular class. It didn't work very well; I didn't get very good adapted teaching. There was quite a lot I couldn't take part in, or I thought was difficult, but I liked colour theory and flower decoration. I had my own assistant who helped me, but I did not have very good contact with the other students, apart from a couple who had some of the same needs as me.

After this, I started in a special class at Drammen secondary school. What I think was problematic about this class was that we were kept to ourselves and were not integrated with the 'normal' students at school. We didn't even eat in the same canteen. Here, I received adapted teaching, but much of the programme was adapted to students with greater problems than me, so I didn't really learn much. I also didn't like the teachers very much and felt they made me feel dumber than I was.

After I completed upper secondary school, I spent several years as a daytime student at Folk High School.<sup>4</sup> First, I took 1 year at Buskerud Folk High School learning writing and then 3 years at Oslofjord Folk High School in Sociology on Street Level and in Music Production. I thought that was very nice. Even though I didn't live at school with the others, I made good contact with others and felt welcomed. The other students accepted me for who I was. I could participate in most of the teaching there.

#### 3.3 | Becoming a Student

I think it was good to start at university college. There were many exciting topics, even if some of it can be a little difficult to grasp and understand. Sometimes slightly difficult words are used. It has also been exciting to be involved in planning the study and taking part in conferences.

It has been very exciting, educational, and fun to be involved in developing the subjects and a completely new study. I am proud to have been part of this process and to be able to pave the way for other students in a similar situation as me. It has been nice to be able to participate digitally. Some words have been difficult to understand.

I have always liked to learn. I got tips from my brother about this study. As I like to learn new things, I signed up. The topics we learn about are relevant to me, exciting, current, and educational. It is exciting to be a student, as I gain exciting and important knowledge. I enjoy being part of an environment at university college and participating in a pilot project. It is nice to attend a course that is adapted to my abilities, where I get to convey the course matter to my level of knowledge and my abilities.

This is a class where I was well received and where the students and teachers saw me for who I am and not just the wheelchair. I was disappointed that we as a group did not talk to other students at the university college, either in the canteen or in class. I am also disappointed that the syllabus was not tailored for me and that it is not always available as an audiobook.

#### 3.4 | Summary/Learnings From Tone and Ingrid

Both Ingrid and Tone stressed the importance of attending school and being interested in learning. We got to know Tone and Ingrid as learners and witness their interest and joy when learning. They mentioned the joy of reading and spending time with other pupils during their educational journeys, social activities, and more. Both stories also revealed the struggle

around the need for accommodation and the importance of family support in enabling the opportunity to participate in education. UNESCO report from 2021 says “Disability affects access to education across all regions and income groups when education system do not have inclusive policies in place” (UNESCO 2021, 25). Supportive structures include both the attitudes of teachers and the system of education with build-ings, programs, and pedagogy (Shakespeare 2018). Pedagogical support structures such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning, as called for by both Tone and Ingrid. For Tone, her parents often had to fight for her rights at school. In *Being Heumann*, Judy Heumann writes about her mother fighting for her right to go to the local, ordinary school (Heumann and Joiner 2020). Ingrid and Tone have several family members with whom they could talk about education and studying. For them, taking part in higher education would be a natural path if it were possible.

Reading between the lines, we were able to access some of the backstories of the educational journeys of both students that can help us to understand Tone and Ingrid when developing the courses at the pilot project. We get information about how they preferred to learn and also what kind of barriers did they experience during their process of learning. In Ingrid’s story, we sensed her frustration with the lack of willingness to facilitate her needs when taking part in an outdoor day at school or when she felt the teaching was not adapting to her needs or when she thought she was being perceived as less clever than she was. For Tone, the tensions regarding her educational journey were visible in different ways, i.e. her parents’ fight for her rights, bullying during recess or on the bus, and not meeting with classmates during secondary school. Tone writes about her network and the importance of her vast network of friends, support contacts, and family. However, in general, this can apply to all students. According to Shakespeare (2018), the support of children with disabilities in school is to improve the education sector as a whole (Shakespeare 2018). Working in this pilot project together with the students have identified important aspects of the institutional responsibility to support students learning (Chalachanová et al. 2023). The experiences of the students also identified ableist aspects in the higher education institution and difficulties in getting with reasonable accommodation (Dolmage 2017, 53–54). When opening the university for students with intellectual disabilities, the limits of accommodation emerged.

Reading about Tones and Ingrid’s experiences attending higher education institutions was interesting. They identified several important variables for their everyday life at university college. While Tone was not keen on working online, Ingrid liked it a lot. However, both Tone and Ingrid miss talking to other students and being a part of a broader learning environment at the university. In correlation to the models of education applied by O’Brien et al. (2018), our students are interested in exploring the hybrid or even inclusive models of inclusive education. In article (Lid et al. 2024), we highlight the barriers that we have experienced during this pilot project. The aim of the aforementioned article was to bring attention to diverse experiences when developing courses in higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. Tone thought that she could be a resource in that area. She also described how the welfare system

(NAV) would not approve studying as a valid support condition even though participation in higher education could improve her chances of getting a job. This means that adults with intellectual disabilities are by the system not met as potential learners, and higher education system is a system not recognised as developing area for adults with intellectual disabilities. They are perceived as different and not as learners or persons with academic aspirations. Research shows that persons with intellectual disabilities are in education mostly met with low expectations (Snipstad 2020).

Both students brought important information about what is essential for them to enjoy their university life. Together, we recognised many gaps at our university college when it comes to accommodating students with intellectual disabilities, such as the importance of having peer support, having a good dialogue with the students, access to audiobooks, the opportunity to socialise with other students, and the chance to create opportunities to try out different pedagogical tools, such as podcasts, films, as assignment, and exam forms. It is often a challenge for students with intellectual disabilities to show that they have met the demands according to the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and competences) because most exams and assignments call for written texts. We also learned that it was meaningful for the students to participate in the development of the courses and, in that way, influence activities, assignments, and learning goals.

To access higher education, primary and secondary education are fundamental. In this article, we therefore have focused on the pilot students’ educational journeys. The article gives room for rich firsthand experiences of Ingrid’s and Tone’s educational trajectories so that scholars and teachers can become familiar with what these students think is important to them, what they appreciate, and what they need. Higher education institutions as well as policy makers need to pay close attention to the students’ histories to build a more inclusive system of education at all levels.

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### Ethics Statement

The project is approved by SIKT, Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Foundation DAM. DAM is an acronym for Deltakelse, Aktivitet and Mestring which can be translated to Participation, Activity and mastery.

<sup>2</sup>The Norwegian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (NFU) is a national advocacy organisation that fights for the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in society ([nfu.no](https://nfu.no)).

<sup>3</sup>The HELT MED foundation contributes to diversity and inclusion by creating workplaces for people with intellectual disabilities, developmental disorders and learning difficulties.

<sup>4</sup>Norwegian folk high schools are postsecondary schools without exams or grades. The pedagogical focus is on students' motivation, and students can choose a line of special interest, for instance, in travelling, music, theatre, etc. (Folkehøgskole 2024).

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