

Social Dimension Implementation in Higher Education

Example of good practice from Norway

The example chosen is *Universell* ('Universal'), the Norwegian national coordinator of accessibility in higher education. An alternative description would be the national promoter for universal design, for individual adaptations, and for the Learning Environment Committees in higher education.

The assignments of *Universell* fall into two main categories – to contribute to promote better learning environments for students with disabilities and to provide advice and follow-up on the work of the Learning Environment Committees at the higher education institutions.

Universell was established in 2003 by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. It has two full-time staff and is located at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim.

Background

Since 1999, all Norwegian higher education institutions are required to have a contact person for students with disabilities, and also an action plan for disabled students to make each higher education institution (HEI) more accessible, and to create an inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities. Since 2005, all higher education institutions are also obliged by law to have a learning environment committee composed of both staff and students which is responsible for the overall learning environment of the institution.

Detailed information about services offered to disabled students by Norwegian higher education institutions can be found in the Higher Education Accessibility Guide (HEAG), managed by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. HEAG is a guide to disability support services in higher education institutions across Europe, see <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/heag>.

What does *Universell* do?

The original 2003 assignment was to:

- contribute to the higher education institutions' action plans regarding disabled students through follow-up on implementation and advice in connection with revisions
- offer support-on-demand to the higher education institutions
- develop and maintain a website
- organise seminars and conferences for higher education staff working on universal design and matters regarding disability

- represent the higher education sector on disability issues.

In 2007, a number of new assignments were added, linked to the promotion, generalisation and implementation of universal design in higher education. Universell should also encourage and promote the inclusion of universal design as part of the academic content of relevant study programmes, and follow up the work of the learning environment committees at the higher education institutions.

Universell is the Norwegian representative in the European Higher Education Accessibility Guide (HEAG) project, and was active in the establishment of the Nordic Network for Disability Coordinators (NNDC).

What are the results of the work of Universell?

- One result is the establishment and running of an active network for cooperation and exchange of best practice between disability staff in higher education institutions.

In addition, a similar network is underway between the members of the higher education institutions' learning environment committees.

- Another is an internet site, see www.universell.no, for cooperation, advice, and exchange of information on learning environment, universal design, and inclusive solutions in higher education. It contains a lot of useful information and advice, like a guide for the development of action plans for disabled students, and many examples of educational and technical adaptations that can be considered for students with various disabilities, as well as references to relevant policy documents and legal texts. The English part of this web page is rather modest, however, and mainly aimed at international students with disabilities that consider studying in Norway.
- A third result is that Universell provides a unique meeting place and training opportunities through national conferences and seminars both for staff concerned with disability issues and universal design, and for members of the institutional learning environment committees.
- A fourth result is valuable advice to the Ministry of Education and Research on the further development of higher education policies regarding learning environment issues, both in general and in relation to disabled students in particular.

Conclusion

As Universell is set up as a permanent unit, the results mentioned above are naturally preliminary. However, it is fair to conclude that a central unit, albeit small, has made a great difference for the attention given to issues relating to disability, learning environment and universal design, and for the professionalisation of the higher education sector in dealing with these matters.