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Transforming Undergraduate Education from Below: How Students Make Disabilities Visible and Universities a Working Space for Themselves

Transformer l'enseignement universitaire à partir des marges : comment les étudiant·e·s rendent visibles les handicaps et se réapproprient l'université comme espace de travail

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Abstract

When young people acquire a higher education entrance qualification and transition to university, they experience a biographical turning point. This holds even more for people with disabilities. On campus, students must navigate barriers and discrimination. Many European universities have started to improve campuses, curricula, and social activities and have developed diversity agendas that focus on gender, age, and migration. However, they have rarely reached out to persons with disabilities. To examine how students experience barriers while entering their undergraduate programs, this paper focuses on the experiences of students with disabilities in German and Austrian university undergraduate programmes. We combine the analysis of institutional offers with life stories. Four life narratives of undergraduates in diverse majors at different German-speaking universities give insights into how students with disabilities manage the transition into academic training and undergo subject formation. How they contact fellow students and negotiate with academic staff and administrative bodies depends on their individual circumstances. The analysis shows that high school experiences, family support, knowledge and acceptance of disability compensation, and their willingness to disclose are central. The binding of support to medical reasons is primarily responsible for the challenges students encountered in their studies. The students must develop their sense of belonging and self-identify as disabled. Inclusion-sensitive programmes and measures thus reduce barriers. Accordingly, social factors come to the fore when removing barriers in academic training.

Résumé

Quand des jeunes obtiennent une qualification leur permettant d'accéder à l'enseignement supérieur, leur entrée à l'université représente un tournant biographique. Ce passage est particulièrement marquant pour les personnes handicapées. Sur les campus, les étudiantes et étudiants doivent faire face à divers obstacles et discriminations. Bien que plusieurs universités européennes aient commencé à améliorer leurs infrastructures, leurs programmes d'études et leurs activités sociales, en intégrant des politiques de diversité axées sur le genre, l'âge et les migrations, les besoins des personnes handicapées restent souvent ignorés. Pour comprendre comment les étudiantes et étudiants vivent les difficultés liées à leur entrée dans les programmes de premier cycle, cet article explore les expériences de personnes handicapées dans des universités allemandes et autrichiennes. L'analyse met en relation les dispositifs institutionnels avec des récits de vie. Quatre témoignages d'étudiantes et étudiants inscrits dans différentes disciplines et universités germanophones illustrent comment ces personnes traversent la transition vers l'université et construisent leur subjectivité. Leurs interactions avec les autres étudiantes et étudiants, le corps enseignant et les services administratifs varient selon leur situation personnelle. L'étude révèle que les expériences vécues au secondaire, le soutien de la famille, la connaissance et l'acceptation des mesures de compensation du handicap, ainsi que le choix de se déclarer comme personne handicapée, jouent un rôle central. L'exigence d'une preuve médicale pour accéder au soutien constitue un obstacle majeur. Afin de faire face à ces difficultés, les étudiantes et étudiants doivent développer un sentiment d'appartenance et s'affirmer comme personnes handicapées. Les programmes et mesures axées sur l'inclusion contribuent ainsi à réduire les obstacles. Ainsi, les facteurs sociaux deviennent essentiels pour favoriser l'accès à la formation universitaire.

Keywords

students with disabilities, barriers to higher education, ableist expectations, disability accommodation, personal study assistance, subject formation

Mots-clés

Étudiantes et étudiants handicapés, obstacles à l'enseignement supérieur, attentes capacitistes, accommodements pour les personnes handicapées, appui individualisé à la formation, construction de la subjectivité

Accessible Universities? The Entry to Higher Education of Students with Disabilities

Drawing from personal narratives, this paper gives insights into disabled students' school careers, identity formation, orientations, and ambitions within academic organisations when they enter university. When young people acquire a higher education entrance qualification and transition to university, they experience a turning point in their identity.

Transitions are understood as moments in individual lives that create or reproduce social inequalities and risks of social exclusion. Therefore, institutional actors are concerned with supporting individuals in transitions. (Stauber et al., 2022, p. 3).

This turning point is even more significant for people with disabilities. Even though German-speaking countries have ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; UN, 2006)*, many institutions have not implemented the right to inclusive education in the past 15 years. The German and the Austrian school systems are considered disability segregating: many students with disabilities attend specialised schools that do not lead to higher school qualifications (Powell & Pfahl, 2019). Only a minority of school leavers with disabilities fulfil the admission requirements for a university degree programme. On campus, students must navigate barriers and discrimination.

Although German-speaking schools have begun to improve their campuses, curricula, and social activities, and have developed diversity agendas that include gender, age, and migration, they have, rarely reached out to persons with disabilities (Powell & Pfahl, 2018; Rothenberg, 2012). Despite progressive regulations on examinations and disability accommodations within the EU higher education programmes, ableist structures

and attitudes of universities remain dominant (Ennuschat, 2019). Concerning academic training, 16% of all university-level students in Germany (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung [BMBF], 2023) and 12% of students in Austria (Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Wirtschaft [BMWFW], 2016a) report having a disability that makes studying challenging. Regarding undergraduate programmes in Germany, a social survey report indicates that approximately 23% of the students interviewed experienced disability during their studies (Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung [DZHW], 2023, p. 123). The number of classified undergraduates remains much lower. Consequently, disability accommodations are seldom requested, and support is even less often granted (BMBF, 2021).

Many students face inaccessible environments when entering their studies. In order to examine how students experience these barriers, we first describe the situation for students with disabilities in German and Austrian universities through survey data. Secondly, we combine the analysis of institutional offers with the life stories of disabled students in the theoretical framework. Thirdly, we describe the sample and methods to observe subjective experiences in higher education institutions. The fourth section analyses four life stories of undergraduates in diverse majors in different German-speaking universities with and without inclusion policies. The academic training during the entry phase of students who self-identify with various disabilities and trauma is discussed and reflected upon in the conclusions. Our guiding question is as follows: How are educational opportunities shaped over the course of an individual's life, and how do universities, from

a disability studies perspective, become an “inclusive social space” (Rupelt et al., 2016, p. 216) of education?

Universities’ Inclusion Policies for Student Participation in Germany and Austria

Participation of people with disabilities in higher education has been a topic of interest for 20 years (Powell et al., 2008). Still, higher education and equal access to academic training have received little attention in German-language research on inclusion.

The ... higher education system – unlike the school system – does not have any special systems for people with disabilities. Higher education is a shared process for people with and without disabilities. (Klein & Schindler, 2016, p. 7; the authors’ translation)

In Germany, universities have been legally obliged since the 1970s to ensure that “disabled students are not disadvantaged in their studies and can take advantage of university services without outside help if possible” (section 2, para. 4, Hochschulrahmengesetz [HRG]; the authors’ translation). Whereas Austrian universities are tasked with “the pursuit of education and autonomy of the individual through science ... in the joint work of teachers and students ... in an enlightened knowledge society” (section 1, para. 1, *Austrian University Act*; the authors’ translation). The guiding principles provide for gender equality, equal social opportunities, and the needs of students with disabilities (section 2, paras. 10–12, *Austrian University Act*). Additionally, a ban on discrimination against disabled students has been in effect in Austria since 2005 (section 4, para. 1, *Austrian Federal Disability Equality Act*).

In light of this, universities have invested in structural accessibility, created counselling services, and established regulations for disability compensation.

(Klein & Schindler, 2016, p. 7; the authors' translation)

Accommodations may include extra time for examinations or a single room to take an exam. The prerequisite for receiving accommodations is that students must apply for it individually for every course they attend or exam they take, which is a significant barrier. Despite difficulties during their degree, students often study without accommodations due to a lack of clarity regarding the eligibility requirements and the low chances of them being met. More than half of the students also want to avoid stigmatisation through special treatment (Deutsches Studentenwerk [DSW], 2018a, p. 176). While in both countries, the *UN CRPD* requires equal opportunities, accessibility, and anti-discrimination for people with disabilities in education and professional qualifications, individual accommodations for students with disabilities are granted based on a diagnosis and health-related deficits. This ties universities to a “socio-legal and limited concept of disability” (Dannenbeck & Dorrance, 2016, p. 26; the authors' translation).

Standards of Support Services of German and Austrian Universities

German-speaking universities are part of a European university network and must adhere to legal standards on accessibility. To comply with these standards, German universities adopt the concept of “reasonable accommodation” on a case-by-case basis. The individual university concerned is responsible for enforcing these accommodations. The following shows that an accessible design of the universities' structures (Powell & Pfahl, 2018), procedures, and offers is still pending (Klein & Schindler, 2016, p. 13).

Students with disabilities face numerous challenges as they pursue their degrees.

Students with disabilities are more likely to leave the university track and enrol in universities for applied sciences or other tertiary educational tracks than non-disabled students: they put their studies on hold more often or drop out of their degree programme (DSW, 2018b). Their course of study is thus described as “atypical” by the educational system.

This mismatch between available services and students who can access and benefit from them is evident as follows. In Austria, the national student social survey recorded the situation of disabled students as follows: 6% stated that their disability was visible to others when they first met (BMWFW, 2016a). Only 17% of all students know about the services offered by the representatives for students with disabilities at the universities (BMWFW, 2016b). Hence, regardless of the severity of their disability during their studies, more than half of the students in Austria do not turn to notable contact persons to alleviate their difficulties. Conversely, this also means that the universities remain unaware of many students’ needs for support, as knowledge of this only becomes known when individuals apply for accommodations in person.

Regarding recorded disabilities, the new German federal survey shows that students’ disabilities mainly result from movement impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments or deafness, mental illness, long-term physical illnesses, partial performance disorders or other impairments caused by tumours, as well as autism (BMBF, 2023). However, most students with disabilities surveyed cite mental illness as a barrier (65%), followed by chronic illnesses (13%), mobility impairments (3%), visual impairments

(2%) and hearing impairments (1%) (BMBF, 2023). More than half of the students with disabilities state that they experience significant difficulties in studying, particularly those students with severe impairments and mental illnesses (DZHW, 2023).

Questioning the Quality of Barriers Experienced by Students

But how do students experience the barriers they face? To date, there has been no systematic, qualitative empirical study on the subjective views and the quality of students' development while studying at universities in Austria or Germany. Why certain support services are accepted and promote participation as well as performance, or why they do not, remains unclear. The available surveys provide a rough picture of the situation of students with disabilities. However, they do not reveal the needs and expectations that students with disabilities have when they arrive at university, how they experience their everyday life, how they perceive the offers of support, and what kind of support they need to participate and perform in their studies.

German-speaking universities are oriented towards the Harnack principle in research and teaching: only the best should come and stay. The democratisation of university education in the 1970s, when higher numbers of students and more students from lower socioeconomic classes entered universities, did not alter the meritocratic structures and rules. At the university level, students must study within a predefined study plan that structures the modules to be learned from semester to semester, aiming for performance and quality control. Students must keep a certain pace and adapt their interests and learning needs to the courses offered each semester (Przytulla, 2021). Forming campus friendships and networks is challenging for all students (Castrodale &

Zingaro, 2015; Robinson & Henner, 2018). However, challenges arise for those dependent on care who use personal assistance, not because of health-related issues, but due to social acceptance. Most students non-disabled students are unfamiliar with the personal assistance their disabled peers require. Students who receive support can feel isolated from their fellow students: they report that the presence of an assistant often hinders contact with their peers (Straub & Schmidt, 2024).

This paper adds qualitative research results focusing on students with health conditions and disabilities in German and Austrian universities. It is unclear how higher education institutions and universities respond conceptually, organisationally, and practically to the (increasing) heterogeneity of their students (Dannenbeck, 2018). Thus, the quality of the universities' institutional offerings is studied by conducting life stories of students with disabilities as they enter their studies.

Studying Life Course Experiences of Undergraduates to Understand Transitions

To better understand how educational opportunities for disabled students are shaped in their life course, we turn to life story analysis and reflect on the power of institutions in biographical decision-making. Life stories capture the individual's experience; they shape their self-expectations and how they address themselves and others. Every life story leads to a specific interpretation of the personal past, present, and future (Völter, 2015), as actions, personal life plans, biographical experiences, and decisions shape it. Thus, life stories provide insight into how a person responds to institutions and integrates themselves into a social and economic environment. In turn, life stories offer insight into a person's scope for action within a given structure, i.e., the

abilities and limitations that shape personal life in educational institutions. Patterns of interpretation and action, in turn, are formed in heterogeneous contexts, i.e., in primary socialisation instances, such as the family, and secondary ones, such as school and friendships (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Life Stories in Education

Like other educational institutions, universities form a social space that becomes an integral part of an individual's social world (Buchner, 2021; Price, 2024). We approach students and their life stories upon entering the university, focusing on the processes and structures of the individual life course (Schütze, 1983). We assume that specific structures exist that can be found in diverse life courses, particularly in experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation (Goffman, 1986). With regard to the young women with disabilities who we met, this approach helps to show subject formation in gendered expectations. The “subject must ... be understood in the context of those structures whose power determines their biography even against their will” (Edelstein, 1999, p. 35; the authors' translation). Due to given social structures and subjective patterns of interpretation and action (Bosancic et al., 2022), students with disabilities experience university expectations differently than students without disabilities. It is assumed that the students' cases we will analyse, regardless of their academic level, will find themselves on a continuum of attributions of ability and inability by others and themselves. Thus, significant experiences are made in academic training (as in other educational institutions). For students with disabilities, these are associated with discrimination.

We adopt an interpretative approach to follow the considerations of institutional life course and its theoretical perspectives on socialisation, discrimination, and subject formation. Institutions form a social context of exclusion and inclusion through socio-structural positioning and categorical attribution (Schürmann & Pfahl, 2022). Self-thematisation must thus be interpreted as subjective-objective patterns (Reichert, 1994). They are oriented toward the social structures and discourses that enable students to act within a given social hierarchy and institutional rules (Schürmann & Pfahl, 2022). This also means that the “researcher’s location-bound perspective must be reflected ... a reflection on one’s categorisations” (Buchner, 2018, p. 131; the authors’ translation). In our case, that meant two women researchers—one who uses a wheelchair and one who does not—who addressed students to participate in interviews. The researcher’s disability led to occasional discussions on the (in-)visibility of disability. Some participants compared the quality of discrimination that students with disabilities experience, depending on the situation. In line with the interpretative paradigm, the data—understood as artificial data produced in a textual manner (Deppermann, 2013)—was collected through the transcription of narrative interviews. The participants were informed of the research’s goals and agreed to participate in the interview. Original names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity before interpreting the texts in collaborative data sessions.

Qualitative Study Sample

We studied the life stories of 18 students from four different German and Austrian universities to describe how universities as institutions affect the students’ self-perception and how others perceive them. We invited students who self-identify as disabled to

participate in narrative interview settings. The narrative interviews (Schütze 1983, 2016) included questions on the educational biographies. They were conducted individually, in person and online, between 2016 and 2023, covering a diverse sample of students. The students came from diverse family backgrounds; their ages ranged from 23 to 39. They have worked hard to access universities in Germany and Austria and lived with very different impairments: three people were visually impaired, one identified as deaf, another as hearing impaired, eight students lived with mobility impairments, two people with chronic illnesses, and nine people experienced psychosocial disabilities, including one female student who self-identified as neuro-diverse (Straub, 2025). The qualitative empirical study gives insights into students' subjective perspectives on their school careers, decision-making, and ambitions within academic organisations. This research is characterised by a participatory approach (Flieger, 2009), which, through the one researcher's experience of disability, gains access to research, so to speak, "on both sides." Thus, the one researcher's lived experience of disability can generate different knowledge than non-disabled researchers.

Transformations from Below: Case Study Analysis

In the analysis, we contrast the biographical narrative and the institutional opportunities in the life stories to identify how the students' self-positioning (Bosančić et al., 2022) is shaped. The temporal structure of the narrated life story is examined: "The life story is a sequentially ordered superimposition of larger and smaller process structures that are sequentially ordered in themselves" (Schütze, 1983, p. 248). From this, the biographical turning point of university access is focused: Students with a seemingly

“smooth” vs. a “bumpy” entry to university are analysed, as well as a “fight for recognition” and “ongoing struggles” in the study. Interpretative methods are applied to the individual case (Griesehop et al., 2012), which are used to widen the context and variate possible actions used to understand and evaluate the conditions of the student’s self-relations (Reichert et al., 1994). The study aims to provide a transnational investigation of educational pathways in Austria and Germany. Both countries have segregated school systems, making access to tertiary education difficult.

Beginnings with Barriers: Case Analysis of Lisa, Robert, Lara, and Lisa

Lisa Ries¹ studied Theology at a German university with inclusive policies. She was 27 years old and a wheelchair user with high support needs at the time of the interview. After visiting a regular grammar school, Lisa Ries changed to a specialised school with boarding facilities because no regular secondary school in her neighbourhood agreed to ensure her daily care. Since the age of 12, Lisa has had personal care to support her mobility and learning, which the boarding school delivered. Her mother initially wanted to protect Lisa from a stigmatising setting in special education, but when the state covered the expenses, she agreed to offer Lisa the best educational opportunity. Eventually, this paved the way for Lisa Ries to attend university. She did well at school, so her school registered her as an external examiner for the Abitur (high-school certificate). At the boarding school, Lisa became aware of a university with strong, inclusive policies. Staff

¹ All names cited in this text are not original names, but pseudonyms.

members of the university's disability office visited the school and introduced her to independent living. They provided access to barrier-free student housing and helped her to find a team of personal assistants. Additionally, they offered Lisa student assistance to start her studies. Thus, Lisa Ries's university experience began immediately after graduating from her boarding school. This transition was enabled by the one school in Germany that cooperates with the one university in Germany that supports students with severe disabilities in independent living and their studies. She remembered that

They [the disability office of the university] helped me to get a barrier-free apartment and a place to study. [They] offer three days of 'taster studies' once a year, where they explain what helps. They offer for students with disabilities: where rooms are, where you can go, also, [they] try to make it possible for you to get a taste of the courses, i.e., seminars that you find interesting. They also helped me to get in contact with the right people so that everything worked out. And they accompanied me throughout my studies. (Interview with L. Ries)

In addition to practical and administrative help, she described an important space for exchange with students with disabilities, which she actively engaged with. Lisa Ries became part of a self-help group of students with disabilities to discuss their experiences and share activities regularly: "It was nice because you always had a framework where you knew 'Okay, I can chat again this week'" (Interview L. Ries). Lisa also mentioned the living space in her student residence as an essential opportunity for meeting with others in the barrier-free apartments accessible to her. The student housing offered opportunities for encounters with different students, so she was able to make friends and find a peer group

in her new student life: “That was not such a problem because I lived in a student hall of residence, because we had an elevator and I could also visit [the people I knew] in their apartments, or we went to the pub down in the basement” (Interview L. Ries). This social space enabled friendship with other students. Lisa organised her personal assistance in a network and develops the idea that her study life is a “give and take.”

The institutional experiences in this life course show how Lisa positioned herself and relates to others at a university. Her family offered emotional support to Lisa: They respected her in all parts of herself. Similarly, Lisa navigated her study experiences without negatively evaluating her body or person. Through institutional socialisation, she was encouraged to perform as a student and interact with fellow students. Nevertheless, Lisa continued to feel responsible for ensuring her participation at university. When fellow students assumed that she might never be on her own and is occupied by personal assistants, Lisa explains that there was a need and room for friendship in her life. Rather than visiting others, she invited fellow students to come to her apartment. There, she was free and independent and encountered friends who did not share her disability experience but want to meet with her.

Thanks to the university's inclusive institutional support, Lisa Ries had a relatively smooth start to her university studies. However, she experienced barriers in social interactions with fellow students who are unfamiliar with the presence of personal assistants. Engaging with other students and making friends requires energy, time, and accessible social spaces. The university's structural accessibility helped her meet people, build friendships with them, and pursue her studies successfully.

Make Yourself Heard: Robert's "Bumpy Entry" and Fight with Audism at University

Robert Bacher, aged 24, studied medicine at an Austrian university that has no inclusive policies. He was born in Germany and identified as a child of deaf parents (CODA). His parents are deaf and decided to let Robert have a cochlear implant at a young age. When he is with his family, he signs with his parents and communicates verbally with his grandparents. Robert attended an inclusive primary school and followed the standard curriculum. His class specialised in educating hearing-disabled and hard-of-hearing children in spoken language. Robert's first language was German sign language, but in school, he learned a foreign language.² When he started school, his family decided to fit him with a cochlear implant (CI).³ Being taught spoken language in school and the wider family, Robert learns to cope with the CI. He used accommodations to transition to a regular secondary school and complete his Abitur. After a voluntary social year, he wanted to study medicine at an Austrian university, where it is not necessary to have excellent school grades because all candidates take an entry test for the study programme. At school, Robert could request additional time to complete his exams. He encountered difficulties when mobilising the same strategy at the university level.

I had a conversation with the vice-rector and my disability officer and five or six other people who then took me by surprise with a lawyer and all sorts of things. And the first thing the vice-rector asked me was: 'Why was I studying medicine at all with

² Sign language and spoken language differ in grammatical structure.

³ Hearing with a CI enables auditory signals to be perceived, but not automatic speech comprehension, so rehabilitation and hearing training are an essential part.

my disability? Why was I not studying something else? As a severely disabled hearing-impaired doctor ... And what I wanted to do with it. (Interview R. Bacher).

The university denied Robert's right to higher education. He was advised to change his choice of studies. Robert then got legal advice from his parents to enforce the university's legal obligation to adjust for barrier-free access. He requested a time extension, but the university rejected this form of accommodations and instead offered he take exams in a separate room. After discussing this with the decision-makers, Robert had no choice but to try his exams without a time extension and in a separate room. Robert succeeded in taking the exam and started studying medicine.

Nevertheless, a derogatory attitude towards deaf people was evident at the university. A purely medical understanding of disability dominated the entry experiences of Robert, who was never once considered an individual with enormous strengths and potential. Instead, he was described from day one only by perceived personal deficits by the institution. Robert narrated his experiences with discrimination and reflected that he must constantly justify himself and his situation. Even though he had succeeded in acquiring access to studying medicine, he still felt rejected. This also affected his ability to communicate with fellow students, which resulted in him withdrawing from campus life. When meeting others who use CI, he did not engage in private discussions with them or form alliances against discriminatory practices. Over five semesters, Robert studied alone, supported by his family and old-school networks. He studied mainly off-campus with poor results. His evaluation of the technical aid offered by the university is ambivalent. Shortly

before he was at risk of failing his program, Robert realized he needed to adapt his learning strategies. He starts to follow lectures better if the instructor used a microphone:

There is a microphone that [I] can clip onto the lecturer that then transmits the voice directly to my implant without detours via loudspeakers or the poor acoustics in the lecture halls I have only been using it since this semester, and it works great Before that, I did not use it because it is very tiring for my concentration, and I always thought, 'I will not go to the lecture anymore, I will learn everything alone at home.' (Interview R. Bacher).

When he used this microphone, Robert can hear the lecturer's voice as if he were wearing stereo headphones. However, he was unable to engage with fellow students or participate in course discussions and peer conversations. This explains why he does not discuss social interactions in the interview, besides a few comments on fellow students. Indicating communicative exclusion during his studies, Robert experienced barriers at the prototypical place of study, the lecture hall.

In school education and as part of the family culture, Robert identified as a CODA, developed self-confidence and self-worth, and learned that others are valuable and important. As a university student, however, he was not part of a peer group of (deaf) disabled people. He is aware of his exclusion from campus communication but did not fully understand his educational needs. He had no opportunity to share his study experiences with others and was only occasionally in contact with fellow students. When a possibility of failure forced him to change course, he adapted to the campus situation. In

this environment, Robert required additional energy and time to utilise his academic skills and adapt the study conditions to his needs.

Challenged Learning by Fear: Lara Develops a Disability Identity during Her Studies

Twenty four-year-old Lara Selb studied Sociology and Psychology at an Austrian university. She was the first in her family to begin an academic career. Lara reported that she began to feel different as early as primary school. She remembered repeating the basics of mathematics because of a lack of understanding the material. Nevertheless, she was eager to learn, and the teachers liked her. Pressure from her parents to excel at school led to increased self-pressure, which she tried to hide from her teachers, classmates, and family; consequently, her school did not acknowledge these difficulties. Although her grades initially prevented Lara from studying psychology in Germany, she wanted to study and live independently. She tried to take the entry exam for psychology at a university in Austria, but her fear of learning made it very difficult. She failed the entry exam and enrolled in sociology instead. After two semesters, however, she was able to psychology to her study programme. Lara managed to get in, but life at university remains difficult. Despite a few contacts with fellow students during lectures, she distanced herself from others. This is because social interactions put much strain on her, although she did not understand why it was so challenging. Later, in her interview, she reflected on the effects of her learning anxiety by describing a particular exchange with fellow students:

Due to my restrictions, I was slower at studying, which people see from the outside.

They ask: 'Will you stay within the standard study period?' Moreover, I say: 'No'.

Initially, I said 'yes' because I thought I could do it. And then I say 'no'. Then you get

a certain reaction ... I somehow realised: 'Okay, that does not feel good,' and then the fear kept building up. (Interview L. Selb)

During the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lara largely withdrew from university settings. She worked at home on the final theses for both psychology and sociology and experienced a mental crisis, from which she recovers in inpatient psychological treatment afterward. Supported by therapy, she took on the challenge of oral exams. This experience was crucial to recognising her limits and potential and naming the barriers to her studies:

I came here and wanted to write my first exam after just two weeks. Of course, I did not just want to write one exam; I still needed to write two before I graduated. I registered for both straight away. I did not just try the whole thing in October and again in January because I had to get out of the exams. I had a panic attack on all four attempts and could not cope at all. (Interview L. Selb).

Once her struggles become evident to her exam supervisor, who recognised her from a repeat exam, she received help. The Austrian university, with inclusion policies, is open to students still in the process of getting learning difficulties diagnosed, and it provides support by documenting the aborted examination attempts. She could thus apply for accommodations without medical evidence. This enabled her to continue her studies. Recognising her situation as a limitation, which arose from learning, school, and study conditions on the one hand and family expectations on the other, allowed Lara to come to respect herself.

Traumatic Struggles: Anna's Loss and Compassion for Her Studies

Since the sudden death of her father, 28-year-old Anna Haupt has been characterised as a pupil incapable of succeeding at the Abitur. Her schoolteachers told her that she is not expected to study due to her psychosocial issues. Nevertheless, she was admitted to a secondary school after passing an external mathematics exam. Afterward, she became a graphic designer. When she does not find a job, she decides to go on and enrol in history and ethnology at an Austrian university with no inclusive policies. The student describes the initial university experience as positive and the phase of entering university as an opportunity to self-recognise her abilities.

The first two semesters went incredibly well ... I was over-motivated and sometimes had fourteen lectures in a week. So ... I finished both subjects two semesters early, and I have not been able to start my bachelor's thesis yet ... Yes, it was great – and about a year ago, I slipped back into depression, actually relatively extreme.

(Interview A. Haupt)

This quotation shows the direct influence of Anna's emotional conditions on her ability to study. In addition, a structural aspect of studying becomes apparent. The way her courses are structured prevents Anna from choosing the pace of her program. This is a substantial barrier in both directions when extending the study time and when working faster. Slipping into depression cannot be read as solely causal to this situation. However, as Anna narrates the two connecting events in her life, she named the barriers to modular study programmes. Disabilities are variable over time and can lead to abrupt changes: Anna addressed this experience while writing her thesis. Her supervising professor had asked her why he had not heard from her for several months. After opening the topic of mental

health, she was referred to the psychological student counselling service. However, she emphasised that this help did not work for her because she could not work with the counsellor.

And then there was a point where my professor approached me 'What is going on? I have not heard from you in three months; what about work?' ... I explained the situation to him ... that I was not feeling well at the moment, yes, and then he recommended psychological student counselling. Yes, I went there twice for sessions, but I did not get along with the therapist at all. (Interview A. Haupt)

She then privately found a form of art therapy, which helped her complete the two bachelor theses within two months. By covering her needs, she also turned the challenges of her studies into success. Therapy and costly private support helped her deal with the university's expectations. Anna searched for her own space, a safe environment. Despite her experiences at secondary school, Anna has learned about her academic compassion. With therapeutic support, she could adapt to the pace of her studies, learning to follow the strict study programmes. While struggling with barriers at university, she did not reach for accommodations Anna searched for her academic (s)pace and a safe environment. She plans to pursue a PhD in the future.

Making Disability Visible against Ableist Expectations

The scope for action and the biographical (im-)possibilities that students with disabilities face in the educational life course vary in the cases discussed. All students completed high school education but positioned themselves outside the mainstream school career path. When the students entered the university system, they had to assert

themselves as “able” to study, and fight for their right to be there, whereas the institutions and their staff mainly did not. Entering a university alters the social expectations for people with disabilities, whether these expectations are self-imposed or institutionally assigned by the school or university. This influences the students’ experiences and whether they can interpret this change in a positive or negative light. Disabled students must actively negotiate this individual (new) subject position at university. Negotiating a new identity at the university includes a disclosure to reach out for support.

Findings from the Life Stories

The case analysis of Lisa Ries and Robert Bacher highlights transitions and school changes that shape the students’ experiences in undergraduate programmes. Lisa changed from a mainstream school to a special school because no secondary school in the neighbourhood supported her care needs. Robert transitioned from a special elementary school to a mainstream high school because he had learned spoken German as a deaf person, and the special school did not provide sufficient educational support to achieve the Abitur (high school certificate). In both cases, the school changes are connected with the students becoming aware of their academic needs and expectations. Lisa and Robert received family support to claim their learning opportunities. They started to self-identify as disabled in school and reflect on the barriers that restricted their participation in higher education. Overall, their educational success fostered self-esteem, which they needed to complete their bachelor’s degrees. When Lisa wanted to transfer to another university out of interest in a particular study programme, which does not have extensive support services for students with disabilities, she realised that the barriers were

too high and left the second university without a master's degree. Robert also comes up against the limits of inclusion, which can be described as rejection and audism. To participate in the entrance test, he required legal advice and assert himself for his study programme. He encountered more barriers but learned to study among people who can hear. He fell back on family support and is withdrawn from campus life, studying alone at home. Eventually, he discovered technical aids to attend class because his university does not support his educational needs in a structured and deliberate manner.

The analysis has shown that the hierarchical and segregated school system shapes students' expectations before they enter university, which coins the transition to university. In the discussed cases, the students shared that they graduated at the mandatory school level (at a specialised or regular school or changed schools). Transitions from regular schools to special schools or vice versa occur if the students do not receive the support they need in order to gain a high school certificate. At all school levels, learning is oriented to homogenous performances, following the idea of a "normal" student. When, for various reasons, students reach their limits within the system and cannot meet expectations, they may utilise accommodations based on a diagnosis or strengthen their efforts to adapt to the educational system. Depending on the diagnosed educational needs, students may stay in regular schooling with some support or may attend a specialized school for students with disabilities. School decisions and experiences involve a personal effort to obtain Abitur, the only qualification to access university in adolescence.

The case analysis of Lara Selb and Anna Haupt highlights the role of school institutions and family socialisation in the transition to university. Lara and Anna were regarded as lousy students but passed their Abiturs, even though their disabilities were not apparent to others in the first place. Frequent illnesses and poor grades hindered their educational ambitions. Both achieved access to university on their own without extra family or school support. They wanted to study to avoid precarious employment and regard academic training as a means of escaping socioeconomic depression and fostering individual development. Lara Selb carried a stigma during her studies due to covering up her learning difficulties from her school days. She believed that she must solve her academic challenges on her own rather than obtaining support. Later, following a diagnosis given to her in the context of private therapy, Lara elected to obtain accommodations. Lara also came to realize that her challenges difficulties were not her fault, but rather a result of her disability. Anna Haupt experienced the time regimes in her studies as a barrier as she begins to study and quickly overfulfils the study plan. When she must wait to register for her final exams, she enters a depressive phase that prevented her from studying. She distanced herself from campus and seeks help outside. She continues to study to ensure her own progress but is forced to adjust her study schedule.

Inclusion-sensitive programmes and measures reduce barriers and strengthen diversity awareness in higher education. Since the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, educational sciences should work with an understanding of disability as a social phenomenon that interacts with environmental factors and is related to the bio-psycho-social well-being of individuals. Universities' inclusion policies do not reflect this

understanding when they insist on medical diagnosis and individual disclosure. The students eventually have to develop their sense of belonging and self-identify as experiencing barriers. Accordingly, social factors come to the fore when removing barriers to academic training. Fundamental and human rights issues arise where achievement and participation are prevented by discrimination or a lack of reasonable accommodation.

Conclusion: Universities as a Working Space for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities claim—if they do so at all—for disability accommodations at different points in their study process. They tend to avoid or delay this claim by organising private support rather than disclosing their discrimination to the university. Studying for a long time on their own, students with disabilities lack a connection to their peers. Often, students do not want to address themselves as disabled. They insist on their right to complete their studies to be accepted. Following a normalisation strategy, they nevertheless question what negatively affects them. Other students find peers at university. They exchange their experiences and develop a self-relationship that allows them to create a disability identity. These results address challenges that international research has highlighted. Students with disabilities support each other despite the risk of discrimination (Price et al., 2017).

To draw conclusions about the structures offered by universities and to identify the central social factors of subject formation of students with disabilities, the life course is understood as a part of the socio-structural and institutional contexts where individuals are socialised. Social structures predetermine options for action and decision-making and determine which (social) attributions a person experiences in their life course (Stauber et

al., 2022). They are closely related to stigmatising educational social classifications (Powell & Pfahl, 2019). Social categories support the institutional order and guarantee accessibility (inclusion) or deny it (exclusion). Identifying the quality of the life course transitions and institutional categorial attributions that students are exposed to makes it possible to undertake a socio-structural localisation of the students' case.

Biographical case analysis draws particular attention to the contexts of how life stories develop: the social reality of students with disabilities. This interpretive perspective enables a systematic investigation of the conditions under which individuals succeed in accessing and studying at university, as well as the structures of interpretation and meaning that enable successful participation in studies. In addition, it can indirectly provide information on the extent to which measures for students with disabilities are effective and offer to support their individual needs.

The case studies show that students adapt and withdraw due to a lack of structurally inclusive measures from the university. They point to the students' agency as problem-solvers and academic newcomers. To make university life accessible, students must adjust to barriers and must engage with the administration, faculty members, and peers sooner or later. They develop strategies in accordance with the university's meritocratic and ableist principles and constantly negotiate their experiences, private resources, and support. When they manage to see their agency and find peers and friends, university life can feel temporarily like a home—the place to be who you are.

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