
Students with disabilities and their experiences of higher education- a comparative institutional analysis of equal opportunities in Sweden, The Czech Republic and the United States

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Abstract

For persons with disabilities a university degree may be one of few options to gain access to the labour market (Riddell et al., 2005). Yet, in most countries persons with disabilities face hardships in accessing and taking part in university studies (Vidali 2007, Fuller et al. 2009). The aim of this study is to investigate how the institutional context shapes students' experiences of equal opportunities in higher education. Students (n=45) from five different universities in Sweden, the Czech Republic, and the USA were interviewed.

An institutional analysis following Scotts (2013) theoretical framework emphasizes how the regulative-, the normative-, and the cognitive elements of the university as an institution shape student's experiences. The laws that support equal opportunities in higher education are important regulative conditions. The process of providing students with support in their studies form the normative element and student's experiences of interaction with academic staff express the cognitive elements.

Overall, the study has shown that students' possibilities for equal participation are shaped by the institutional context that is based on medical diagnosis and compensation for an inaccessible education. Regulative elements are moving in the same direction. All three countries have political intentions to increase participation in higher education for disabled persons.

Also, the cognitive elements; students' experiences and strategies are alike since all students' experience that the relationship with the teacher is decisive for their chances of succeeding in their studies.

The normative elements, however, influence the actual possibility of equal participation. Students experience that the procedure to apply for support is based on a medical model demanding students to present a medical diagnoses in order to be eligible for support. We conclude that universities need to change their practice to apply equal opportunities for all students.

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Keywords: disability, student experience, accommodation, institutional and neo, institutional theories, social sciences, higher education