

Peer-Mentoring for Students with Disabilities – A Preliminary Study in Norwegian Higher Education

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Abstract. The number of students with disabilities in higher education is increasing. Despite governmental and institutional support, students with disabilities often have poorer progression and are at a higher risk of dropping out than their non-disabled peers. Peer mentoring has been practiced in higher educational institutions to help students with disabilities in successful transition to higher education, participating social activities, enhancing retention, and achieving academic success. However, there is a lack of research concerning different stakeholders involved in peer-mentoring process and their experiences and challenges, particularly in different social contexts. In this study we have carried out interviews with support service personnel, mentors and mentees in the Norwegian context. The results show positive outcomes from the mentoring process as well as challenges that need to be addressed, particularly in the organization of the mentor program and the responsibilities of the different stakeholders. Further research should focus on a wider spectrum of social contexts in which the mentoring programs are organized.

Keywords: Peer-mentoring, Students with disabilities, higher education.

1. Introduction

At a global level, inclusion in higher education is considered in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) in Article 24 Education, points 1 and 5 [1]. Inclusive education is also the objective in Goal 4 on Education in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and inclusive tertiary education particularly addressed in Target 4.3 [2]. In the European Union (EU), targeting inclusive higher education as a social right that needs to be worked towards is stated in Principle 1 of the 2021 European Pillar of Social Rights [3]. Building on this principle, inclusive education and training at European universities is also addressed in the EU 2022 strategy for European universities, particularly in section 4.2 Foster diversity, inclusiveness and gender equality [4].

At the same time, the number of students with disabilities in higher education is increasing. For example, in Europe about 15% of students in higher education reported that they are limited in their studies due to a health impairment [5]. In the US it is estimated that about 19% of undergraduate students and 12% of graduate students have disabilities [6]. Most higher education institutions have a support center that provides

accommodation to students with disabilities such as sign language interpreting, allowing extra time for completing exams, and providing materials in alternative formats.

However, according to the EUROSTUDENT survey, 36% of students with impairments in higher education rate the public and institutional support they receive as not (at all) sufficient [5]. Students with disabilities often have poorer progression and are at a higher risk of dropping out than their non-disabled peers [7] [8].

Literature has shown that although university services provide support for student with disabilities, peer support, such as buddy-systems and peer mentoring, can help students in participating social activities and achieving academic success [9]. Some studies have demonstrated positive effects of peer support on both students with disabilities [10] [11] and on mentors [12]. Although existing studies have investigated peer-mentoring for students with disabilities in higher education, most of them focused on the experiences and challenges of mentors and mentees. In order to gain a more complete picture of the peer-mentoring, it is important to investigate different stakeholders who are involved in the peer-mentoring process, including disability support services personnel, staff who design and organize the programs, as well as mentors and mentees. Their experiences will be able to provide us with a richer context and a deeper understanding of the peer-mentoring programs.

The goal of this study is to address this gap by carrying out interviews with support service personnel, mentors and student mentees in the Norwegian context. This study is a part of a larger international collaboration project “Peer Learning and Social Support for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education (PLE3SD)” funded by Firah with partners from France, Ireland, Greece, Norway, and UK.

1.1 The Norwegian Context

The right to accommodation for students in higher education in Norway are covered in the Norwegian Act relating to universities and university colleges, Section 4-3c Individual accommodation related to reduced functional ability and special needs¹, and in the Norwegian Act relating to equality and a prohibition against discrimination, Section 21 Right to individual accommodation of pupils and students². The 2021 action plan Sustainability and equal opportunities – a universally designed Norway 2021-2025³, has a section on Education covering all levels of education and presents some action points for ensuring inclusive education.

¹ Lov om universiteter og høyskoler (Act relating to universities and university colleges), §4-3c Individuell tilrettelegging ved funksjonsnedsettelse og særskilte behov, <https://lovdata.no/lov/2005-04-01-15/§4-3c>

² Act relating to equality and a prohibition against discrimination (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act) Section 21 Right to individual accommodation of pupils and students: <https://lovdata.no/NLE/lov/2017-06-16-51/§21>

³ Norwegian Ministries: Bærekraft og like muligheter – et universelt utformet Norge 2021-2025, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/51369fe60a0240e4bbd554c54310048d/no/pdfs/handlingsplan-for-universell-utforming.pdf>

Most universities in Norway do not have a mentor program targeted at students with disabilities, as was the case at the university in this study. Many do, however, have university financed student mentor, or buddy, programs for all first-year students, and some also have a buddy-program for international students. In Norway, only students that are enrolled in a work capability assessment program from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) are eligible to have a mentor to support them during their studies. Unless the student's institution takes on the responsibility for the mentor initiative, i.e., handles all practical arrangements such as the hiring of a mentor, etc., NAV does not fund the mentor. A contract is made between the student (mentee), the mentor, the university, and NAV. The contract is usually a three-month contract and allows for a certain number of hours mentor-support per week, depending on the student's (mentee's) situation and the decision made by NAV. The mentors are paid by NAV, not the university. The role of the university in this is mainly to help students eligible for mentor support apply (to NAV) for this support and to facilitate hiring an appropriate mentor in cooperation with the student. The mentor is typically a peer student in the same study program, typically a year ahead in their studies than the student receiving support (mentee). After the mentor and mentee have met and the contract signed, they are free to organize their work together themselves. The university support office is available to be contacted in case the mentor and/or mentee have questions or need support during the time of the mentoring.

2. Related research

Peer-mentoring has been practiced in many contexts such as workplaces and education. According to literature, peer mentoring programs in higher education were found to contribute to increasing levels of wellbeing, integration, and retention for students who received mentoring [13] [14] [15].

Regarding peer-mentoring for students with disabilities in higher education, research has also shown positive effects. A recent literature review [16] on evidence-based mentoring programs for students with disabilities shows many benefits for mentees, including facilitating transition and adjusting to universities, providing social and emotional support [17], and better opportunities to participating in social activities that further contribute to enhanced communication skills, self-esteem, and self-efficacy [9]. The improvements on social activities by peer mentoring are more evidenced for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities [18] [19]. The literature review by Cardinot and Flynn [16] has also identified benefits for mentors such as enhancing social and communication skills, building relationships with peers, and becoming more committed to their universities [12] [20] [17]. Some mentors also consider the experience as a way to increase their potential in the labor market [12].

In addition to the benefits for both mentors and mentees, studies have also found challenges in peer-mentoring for students with disabilities in higher education. For example, mentors reported that developing mentor-mentee relationship [17] and setting up boundaries are challenging, and they feel inadequate in their role as a mentor [12].

Some studies have identified challenges in designing a suitable evaluation plan and measuring the effectiveness of the mentoring program [12] [21] [20] [22].

3. Method

In this study we have adopted a qualitative method for collecting data concerning experiences in relation to peer-mentoring for students with disabilities in higher education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups of participants representing support services, mentors and mentees. The participants were recruited with help from staff at the university support service, forwarding a request for participation to students that were either employed as mentors or receiving support as mentees at the time. The interviews took place in September 2021. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and each interview lasted 20-25 min. The interview data was transcribed and analyzed using the conventional content analysis approach [22]. The participants in this study include

- two female employees (one works in the university support office and the other works in the faculty administration as contact point for students with disabilities in the faculty),
- two mentors (one female and one male) who were both students at Master level in health and social sciences disciplines,
- one disabled student who received support from a mentor (female) who was a student at Master level in health sciences.

When interviewing the support service personnel, the questions focused on the support services provided, responsibilities, the process when disabled students seek mentors, and peer-mentoring practices. For mentors, the questions concerned how the contact between mentors and mentees were established, if and what types of training they received, the types of support provided to mentees, the motivation for being a mentor, the benefits for mentors, and general experiences and challenges. For the mentee, we asked about the initial contact, the types of support received, comparing experiences and outcome with and without support from the mentor, and general experiences and challenges.

The procedure for recruitment of participants, data collection, and secure data storage was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research – SIKT⁴ in August 2021, ensuring secure handling of personal data. The transcribed interviews were fully anonymized.

⁴ Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research – SIKT, <https://sikt.no/en/home>

4. Results

The interviewed mentors and mentee all have an educational background within health or social science and were at master level (one had already completed their master's degree). All had been working for some years before going back to university for further study. Both mentors also had much previous work experience within health and caring professions. However, only one of them said they had known people with disabilities in their personal life. Thus, both mentors had much professional experience with people with disabilities or other health-related challenges, which they said they found to be very useful in their role as peer mentors. One of the mentors had been a mentor for three students, while the other was mentor for the first time. The mentee had only experience with one mentor.

One of the mentors had previously (before becoming a mentor) experienced fellow students that struggled or that had disabilities and often had helped these students as their peer student without it being formally a mentor role. When the mentors were asked about why they chose to become a mentor, one explained that they felt they mastered the academic subjects well and had more to offer, and that being a mentor was something that could make their studies more meaningful, while the other mentor said that it was the mentee's need for support that they found compelling, and that they just wanted to contribute in some way if they could. The more experienced mentor commented that they found their first period as a mentor so rewarding that they immediately accepted when another opportunity to be a mentor came along.

4.1 Recruitment

The presented results are primarily based on the interviews with the two university-staff members, supplemented with information from the interviewed mentee and mentors.

The university in this study does not have a formal mentor program for students with disabilities, thus the only option available is to get funding for a mentor via NAV, as explained in the Norwegian context. Since the support service at the university in this study is relatively small, they are dependent on involving administrative staff at the faculty where the mentee is enrolled. Mentors are usually recruited the same way as student assistants, by advertising vacant positions for the students at the university. Sometimes, students that have been mentors or that are otherwise qualified, are contacted directly by the university support office.

When a decision has been made regarding who to hire as a mentor, a meeting is arranged between the faculty administration, the university support office, and the mentor and mentee for signing the contract. At this meeting, they go through the specifics of the arrangement, such as the number of weekly hours, and some practical information such as where to find relevant information and who to contact if they need help from the faculty administration or the university support office.

Recruitment criteria. The criteria for becoming a mentor are academic accomplishments (grades) and they must have good social competence. It is also preferred that the

peer mentor is enrolled in the same study program as the mentee, although that is not always possible. The university support office arranges interviews with qualified applicants. The student seeking a mentor takes part in the interviews, as the selection of the mentor is very much up to the student and how they feel they connect with the applicant.

Follow-up. After this first meeting, the university support office or faculty administration mainly follow up through monitoring the academic achievements (exam results) by the student that receives support (the mentee), and help the student apply for further funding, and similar, but they do not have the capacity to follow up the mentor and mentee relationship any further. The support office also investigates cases where either the mentor or mentee no longer wants to continue the arrangement to try to disclose what lies behind this decision.

Training. There is no formal training for mentors for students with disabilities at the university in this study, due to the lack of capacity at the university support office. There is however some general mentor training available from people at the university library for student mentors for first year students. The two mentors we interviewed had not been offered any training in conjunction with their positions as mentors for students with disabilities. One of them said that they just did what they thought were expected based on what they discussed at the first meeting where representatives from the support office and faculty administration also were present.

4.2 The interaction between mentor and mentee

The mentor and mentee are free to organize their work together themselves, i.e., what kind of support is needed and when and where they meet, as long as they stay within the fixed number of hours per week in accordance with their contract. One mentor explained that they usually scheduled their meetings week by week, sometimes a couple of weeks ahead in time, and opted for flexibility so that a meeting quickly could be arranged if the mentee asked for this. However, the mentor emphasized that they took care to stay within the fixed number of hours per week. The mentee shared that the fixed hours of mentor support each week also covered time that the mentor needed to prepare for meetings, read through any written work sent by the mentee, and answer emails and questions, in addition to the time spent in the meetings. They also mentioned that some periods were more demanding than others and therefore more support was needed at those times, e.g., when an exam or an assignment deadline was coming up.

Communication channels. Due to the COVID pandemic, most of the meetings between mentors and mentees had been online using Teams or Zoom, but all three students stated that if the situation had been different, they most likely would have had physical meetings, and one of the mentors said they now only had physical meetings with their mentee. The mentee shared that s/he initially had felt uncomfortable with online meetings and wanted to avoid it, but eventually got so accustomed to using it that s/he felt quite comfortable with it. They also mentioned communicating via phone calls and messages, e.g., using Messenger, mainly for scheduling meetings.

Type of support. The type of support mentors give varies with the individual mentee's needs. Commonly, they need help with structuring their work as a student, getting started with tasks, reading, attend lectures, keep deadlines and appointments, plan their work with an assignment, required coursework, etc. Some may need academic support related to specific subjects, e.g., mathematics, or in conjunction with required practical training. While others may need a kind of study partner or someone to discuss academic subjects with or that can confirm that what they are doing is going in the right direction, e.g., related to coursework or preparing for an exam, as shared by one of the mentors. One mentor supporting a student during the required practical training said the support given concerned both the subject itself and the mentee as a professional in the field, and that s/he also had tried to provide some stability and strengthen the mentee's motivation in a situation where there had been much uncertainty concerning the required practical training.

The mentee shared that it was very helpful to discuss course-related topics with the mentor and that the mentor, when given a concrete issue, sometimes shared their own previous work on a similar issue as an example to read and discuss together in a meeting. The mentor also helped the mentee understand difficult topics from the required reading in a course and provided help to find Norwegian terms for some of the English terms in the course curriculum, because much of the required literature on higher levels of education in Norway are only available in English.

The value of the mentor support given. One of the staff members interviewed said that many students have had good results from having a mentor, and that sometimes the arrangement works very well, but it is difficult to identify what works well and not. Both mentors evaluated the support they provided as very important to the mentee, one also emphasized the importance of "having someone believe in you" and to communicate this to the mentee. One mentor shared that "one of them [mentee] said very, very clearly that it would not have been possible if there had not been such a mentor arrangement".

Experience with the mentor-mentee relationship. The interviewed students said they experienced the interaction with their mentor/mentee(s) as mainly positive, with good rapport and without any major conflicts or misunderstandings. The mentee revealed that getting to know the mentor and discovering that s/he was "not an A-student ... [but] a bit like me" was a particularly positive experience. The mentee also appreciated that they in their meetings could share their experiences with the same courses, or even chat about what kind of jobs they wanted to apply for after their studies or what the topic of their master's theses was.

To ensure good communication and quality of support, one mentor explained that s/he actively tried to ask the mentee about their preferences when it came to how they communicated and how the mentee wanted to do things. The mentor emphasized that it is important to pause for a bit and check out if all is good, even ask "does this work well?" and to talk about these things, and if necessary, make some adjustments. The mentor that communicated with the mentee via a sign interpreter explained that s/he

tried to adjust their way of communication to this new unfamiliar situation, through for example consciously using more body language and looking at the mentee when s/he talked via the interpreter.

Challenges in the mentor-mentee interaction. One of the staff interviewed explained that they typically only get feedback when the mentor-mentee interaction does not work out well. For example, some mentors experience that mentees are very inconsistent and do not do what they agreed on or just disappear, or similar, and sometimes mentees do not really want a mentor because they feel it is too demanding, too many requirements. One mentor shared that s/he was feeling uncertain of what the mentee “really wants” and that s/he has offered support, but the mentee seemed reluctant to accept the support. This mentor also sometimes experienced the mentee a bit evasive, keeping things to herself/himself and suddenly cancelling meetings without giving a reason, etc. The mentor however emphasized that the contact and communication was good between them.

Another challenge experienced by one of the mentors was that the mentee and mentor needed a sign interpreter to communicate during meetings, which was unfamiliar to the mentor and took some time to get used to. One issue mentioned by the mentee is that the exam periods for the mentors and mentees usually coincided, and it would take a bit longer before the mentor responded in these periods, which was not optimal since s/he experienced exam periods as being particularly stressful.

The interviews also revealed that a mentor can feel insecure about how to deal with or who to contact in cases where a mentee might need more support or different support than the peer mentor can give. And that in such cases, being aware of one’s limits and being clear on what is within the mentor’s role and what is not, can become important for the mentor. Examples presented in the interviews were amongst other situations where the mentee needed more hours of support than the mentor contract allowed, a case where the mentor felt s/he had to explain clearly to the mentee that s/he was not their therapist, and what to do if the mentor fears the mentee’s challenges are too great to complete the study or course. “Who to contact about all these issues, I am not quite sure about that,” one of the mentors said.

4.3 Potential improvements

Based on the interviews, we have found several areas with potential for improvement.

Good mentors can be difficult to find, and sufficient training is essential. The university in this study at times had struggled to find suited mentors and did not currently offer training to mentors. One interviewee said that ideally, there should be a pool of mentors that could be contacted, and mentors should get the appropriate training, but it seemed clear that due to limited resources this was currently difficult to achieve at the university in this study. It was also clear from the interviews that some students may be better suited for a mentor role than others, which is something that could be related to age and life experience as well as to relevant educational background or previous

professional experience. “I don’t think just any student can be a mentor, I don’t think so!”, one interviewee said.

Ensuring continuity in the mentor-mentee relationship and support. Partly because peer-mentors complete their studies and leave university and start working, but also because of a mismatch between the NAV contract and the university semester. The current length of the NAV contract (number of months) is much shorter than the length of the contract given to student assistants and the length of the university semester.

Systematic recruitment, training, follow-up, and evaluation. Although some feedback reaches the university support office, particularly when things do not work out well between the mentor and mentee, there is no systematic evaluation of all mentor-mentee co-operation at the university in this study. Evaluation only takes place in cases where the mentor and mentee continue their cooperation for more than one semester. It was expressed through the interviews that gathering information for evaluation should be done regularly. The importance of methodical and planned recruitment, training, follow-up, and evaluation was emphasized by the interviewees, as one interviewee said, “It is important to emphasize the significance of working with this in a systematic way.”

Need for a supporting group for mentors and mentees. The interviews revealed that there can be many large and small challenges in the interaction between the mentor and mentee, and that the mentor (and perhaps also the mentee) sometimes can feel insecure about how to handle some situations. And in some cases, being aware of one’s role and limits as a mentor may be important. Having a support group that gives the opportunity to share experiences and good advice with other peer mentors and students receiving support might be valuable for both mentors and mentees during their work together.

Information to eligible students regarding the possibility for a peer mentor. It also became clear through the interviews that students did not know that this kind of (mentor) support existed until they were in contact with the university support office either as an applicant for a mentor position or seeking support in their studies. Ensuring that information about this option is available might be good to ensure students that are eligible for this kind of support know about it.

5. Discussion

This preliminary study has confirmed many findings from previous studies, such as the benefits for mentees and challenges faced by mentors. This study has also contributed to new understanding of the roles and challenges of different stakeholders in mentoring process.

The support office and the mentor program staff play an important role in ensuring the success of peer-mentoring. They manage and oversee the whole process from program design, recruitment (strategy, criteria and screening), and training to soliciting feedback from both mentors and mentees and providing support and guidance for

mentors [12] [17]. The university in this study does not have a formal mentor program for students with disabilities. The limited resources do not allow support service staff to carry out many of the important management, monitoring and supporting tasks. This challenge was addressed in Hillier et al. [12] where a graduate student was recruited to manage the day-to-day logistics of the program. In addition, mentor programs often involve different faculties working together with the support office, such as the Faculty of Education and Department of Psychology in Roberts & Birmingham [17]. Such partnership is valuable for the quality of the program, in the meantime, could also help to address the resource challenge in the support services.

In our study, mentees were found to often play a leading role in mentor-mentee interaction. First, a mentee participates in the interviews with potential mentors identified by the support service and decides which of them is most suitable. During the mentoring process, it is the mentee's needs that decide the types of help a mentor provides, whether it is about course work, motivation, or time management. In other words, the mentors adapt their activities according to the mentee's needs. The support services also try their best to accommodate the needs of the students with disabilities who seek mentors. This could be considered as a mentee-centered approach [17]. Such an approach requires that mentees are able communicate their needs and wishes to their mentors and support service staff, which in itself is a skill that mentees may develop through interacting with mentors.

In Norway, different from many other countries, understanding the different responsibilities between the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and support services in higher education institutions is important for students with disabilities who need mentors. This difference is not always clear for students, particularly first-year students. In our study, we have also found the duration for funding (3 months) provided by NAV does not match the semester length, which caused confusion and challenges for students with disabilities who expect to have a mentor throughout the whole semester. According to [24], mentor programs with significant outcomes were often longer in duration (over 6 months).

One of the limitations of this preliminary study is the small number of participants who are all from the same higher education institution in south of Norway. This limitation has a negative effect on the generability of the results. Nevertheless, the data we have collected provided us with a good understanding of the mentoring process and challenges in the Norwegian context. After we completed the interviews, the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HKDir) published a more comprehensive study aiming at understanding the benefits and the organization of the mentor program in NAV for students with disabilities in higher education. The study has confirmed many of our findings concerning organizational and practical challenges [25].

6. Conclusion and Future Work

In this preliminary study we have conducted interviews with different stakeholders including two disability support staff, two mentors and one mentee. We have identified positive outcomes from the mentoring process as well as challenges that need to be

addressed. Several of the challenges could be attributed to the lack of a formal peer-mentoring program in the university. A carefully designed program with suitable structure, recruitment strategies, matching mechanism, and appropriate training for mentors as well as good supporting groups that can facilitate the mentoring process and providing timely supports for both mentors and mentees, will be able to address many of identified challenges and contribute to the success of the program [16].

As this preliminary study and the study by HKDir [25] have shown, the social context and the organization of mentoring programs play an important role for the success of programs. It involves not only support service, mentors and students with disabilities in higher education, but also national policies, agencies and other organizations such as NGOs. Therefore, future studies should investigate a wider spectrum of social contexts in which the mentoring programs are organized.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the funding agency Firah and all partners in the PLE3SD project. Thanks also to all participants of the study for their valuable input.

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