

# Universal Design in Higher Education: Ideology or Research Based teaching?

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**Abstract.** In the Norwegian Action Plan (2009-2013) *Norway Universally Designed by 2025*, one measure is to implement Universal Design (UD) in the academic sector. In order to promote this, the government has established a National Driving-force provided by a small amount of funding to promote the sectors implementing of universal design. This far, the National Driving-force unit has been operative for 5 years and has been supporting projects in universities and university colleges.

Although building upon earlier measures of barrier-free and user-centered design, UD is a new strategy, emerging over the latest decades. The trajectory from a political and strategic concept towards a topic in higher education may have just started. There is an emerging recognition that to work with universal design and implement the strategy is a question of knowledge, skills and competence. In line with this, *The UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) focuses in article 4 on the need for education and research on universal design. The CRPD highlights knowledge on what it implies that persons with disabilities have equal rights and should be able to participate in society as equal citizens.

From analyzing two projects that have received financial support from the Norwegian Action Plan, this paper will discuss UD as an interdisciplinary area of academic teaching. What characterizes the teaching and research, and how can students learn through interdisciplinary work? Are the structural conditions sufficiently? Can research-based teaching avoid that academics and students perceive UD in higher education as a top-down ideology enforced upon them?

**Keywords.** Universal Design, Higher Education, CRPD, Area of Academic knowledge, Inter-disciplinary teaching

## Design Case

Universal Design (UD) has been integrated both in *The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) and in the Discrimination and Accessibility Act (DAA). However, the strategy has this far not been successfully integrated in the educational institutions in general, and more specifically in higher education. In the Norwegian Action Plan (2009-2013), *Norway Universally Designed by 2025* one measure is to implement Universal Design (UD) in the academic sector. In order to promote this, the government has established a National driving force provided by a small amount of funding to promote the sectors implementing of universal design. Responsible ministry is the Ministry of Education and Research, in line with the sectors' responsibility. This far, the national driving force unit has been working to

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promote UD in higher education for 5 years and has been supporting projects in universities and university colleges.

Although building upon earlier measures of barrier-free and user-centered design, UD is also a new strategy, emerging over the latest decades (Bednar, 1977; Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012; Lid, 2013). National funding has in Norway supported the trajectory from a political and strategic concept towards a topic in higher education. One early outcome was the international anthology *Universal Design: 17 ways of thinking and teaching*, edited by Jon Christophersen, at the Norwegian Building Research Institute, and financed by the Norwegian State Housing Bank (Christophersen, 2002). The latest anthology financed by national government is *Trends in Universal Design: An anthology with global perspectives, theoretical aspects and real world examples* (Delta Centre, 2013). There is thus an emerging recognition that to work with universal design and implement the strategy is a question of knowledge, skills and competence. In addition, also the CRPD focuses in article 4 on the need for education and research on universal design. The CRPD highlights knowledge on what it means, in various sectors and for various professionals, that persons with disabilities have equal rights and should be able to participate in society as equal citizens.

UD has developed from an understanding of individuals as equal, together with acknowledging that people with disabilities encounter barriers that hinder their participation on various arenas. The aim is to create environments that facilitate for participation. The design should meet different individual's needs for accessibility. I will argue that UD is best interpreted as a *relational* concept and builds on knowledge on human condition as experienced by a rich diversity of individuals together with knowledge on environmental factors and the *interaction* between these. Thus, UD involves an interdisciplinary field of knowledge together with disciplinary knowledge. When UD is adopted in curriculum, it is relevant for different disciplines as occupational therapy, physical therapy, rehabilitation, engineering, spatial planning, architecture and pedagogy, just to mention a few disciplines. When working with UD in higher education it is of importance both to be able to work within a disciplinary framework and interdisciplinary. In addition to this UD also calls for knowledge from non-academics, i.e. stakeholders and disability advocates is to be involved in the knowledge production (Lid, 2013; Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012).

It is necessary to gain knowledge on why UD is of importance as a topic in higher education, however, this awareness rising is not enough. What does it mean to incorporate UD in higher education? Incorporating UD means that also UD must be subject to the careful examination and critique that characterizes academic work (Imrie, 2012). This may be in conflict with a plan to promote a strategy. Two values may be in conflict: The value of academic freedom freely to choose a topic, and the value to try to realize a non-discriminatory society. Should the academic sector have the liberty not to choose to incorporate UD in the various disciplines curricula? On the other hand, is UD the best instrument to achieve a society with equal opportunities for all and therefore too important to be subject to academic freedom?

Because dismantling barriers that hinder participation is dependent upon relevant knowledge on human diversity, barriers and the human-environment interaction, an inclusive non-discriminatory society is also a question of good knowledge. However, few academic studies have evaluated UD; there is therefore little scientific and scholarly knowledge on exactly how valuable this strategy is as a means to achieve non-discrimination. One critical position would be to argue that UD is ideology-based and needs to be criticized as a political top-down strategy.

From analyzing projects that have received financial support from the Norwegian Action Plan, this paper will discuss UD as an area of academic knowledge. What characterizes the teaching and research, and how can students learn through disciplinary, interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary work? Are there any structural conditions that may hamper an implementation of UD in higher education? Can research-based teaching avoid that academics and students perceive UD in higher education as a top-down ideology enforced upon them?

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