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OBTAINING INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTRUMENTALLY: SWEDISH UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE.

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OBTAINING INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTRUMENTALLY:

SWEDISH UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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Abstract.

Signing the Bologna Accord in 1999 (Sweden was among the first signatories), ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 and incorporating the concept of inclusion in HE in cooperation with the Nordic countries, Sweden adopted a law to reform HE in February 2006. Scholars remark that in many ways, the implementation of the Bologna objectives in Sweden is similar to the experiences of other signatories: convergence at the macro level and diversity at the micro level, presenting "a highly complex cultural and social transformation".

The analysis of Bologna documents shows that expansion of inclusive processes in European HE represents a 'social dimension in education' and is essential to the implementation of the Bologna Declaration. Swedish history of Inclusion of students with SEN HE Institutions is closely connected to the Nordic democratic educational traditions as well and counts its own experience of inclusion in HE, approximately 5 decades period, referring to the 1960–70s. At that time the diversification of Swedish HE, caused the growth of a significant number of universities across the country. A systematic special education support service for students with SEN in Sweden has developed during the last two decades. Today educational support for students' service at the Swedish Universities is an integral part of the well-functioning network among several Swedish national actors: special education services of HEIs, UHR, SPSM and Stockholm University.

The *aim* of this paper is to give a short theoretical presentation of the Bologna-based platform for inclusive HE for students with SEN and to introduce the Swedish approach for supporting students with SEN in HE, as well as the newly built National administration and information system for coordinators, which supports students' education in HEIs (NAIS). The *methodology* is based on studying European/Bologna/Nordic and national documents, formulating fundamental values and meanings of HE towards social inclusion and its operational functioning for students with SEN in Swedish HE institutions (HEIs).

This study collected data from the Administration of Special Education Schools (SPSM); statistics and reports from Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) and the NAIS program involving students with SEN at the University of Gävle (HiG). The theoretical platform of inclusive HE for students with SEN was introduced as a result of the content analysis of relevant scientific articles (collected from peer-reviewed journals), where special attention was paid to the experience of HE by students with SEN themselves. Semi-structured

interviews with the coordinators of the Supporting Students Education Program at the University of Gävle (HiG) were conducted and analysed (content analysis) to monitor the implementation of the inclusive HE and NAIS program at the university.

Examining the theoretical foundation engendered conceptual approaches to understanding inclusion in HEIs from both individual and institutional perspectives. Responding to the expansion and belief in the fundamental value of inclusion for European HE, the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) initiated the development of a new program for standardizing different aspects of the inclusion of students with SEN in HEIs, creating NAIS and started its cross-country university functional network implementation in 2017, linking it with 32 HEIs all over Sweden. Introduction to this study data, collected by the NAIS program, is of great interest for the further development of university and societal knowledge about the inclusion of young people with special educational needs in HEIs. The issues suggested for the discussion are based on some results of the implementation of NAIS program at the University of Gävle.

Inclusion in HE is of a holistic nature within individual and societal expectations, where HEIs play a central role. A theoretical platform is based on these expectations and visions, constituting a major vision of university institutional, organizational and international changes. This paper does not aim to present a complete guide to the theoretical foundations of inclusive HE, but will clarify some of the key theoretical aspects, illuminating its development for students with SEN.

Theories of lifelong learning formed a theoretical platform for inclusion. Referring to Orr and Hovdhaugen, lifelong learning is an “endogenous issue” for the foundation of inclusive HE. This issue is illustrated by the writings of Derrida, Michel Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, which focus on understanding the experience of disabled students and “making sense of the disabled student journey …, demystifying” this journey. The studies by researchers with disabilities of their own “experiences” of HE, show that a set of theories related to lifelong learning supports “non-linearity” of life, in a common (with other students) and specific way, when “long standing presence at university” is a challenge to everyday life. These studies emphasize that the assumption of “non-linearity” of disabled students’ university journey restricts barriers existing in a disablist society and supports the development of their autonomy, self-determination and freedom from the need to obtain social acceptance. The other influence in the formation of a theoretical platform for inclusive higher education is framed by theories, conceptualizing organizational university issues, both substantively and in numbers, focusing also on university curricula. This set of theories clarifies alternative/supportive opportunities for students with SEN to follow the university study program in accordance with the chosen curriculum.

The formation of NAIS belongs to the UHR, aiming at systematising and standardizing the work of specialists across the country working with students with SEN in Swedish higher education institutions. Stockholm University developed this program and the work of NAIS continued throughout 2013–2014, having been introduced to the Swedish HE community in 2015. On January 2016, NAIS was put into the national HE operational system. Since autumn 2017, 32 higher education institutions joined this program, the University of Gävle being among them. The Swedish Council for HE (*Universitets- och högskolerådet*, UHR) was responsible for national

management and the software of this program. Stockholm University, having joined the program collects the NAIS data from all the universities. With respect to NAIS, each student with SEN has the right to receive individual learning support with the university being mandated to create appropriate conditions to achieve this goal. Structurally, the work of NAIS is implemented through the regular management groups (Stockholm University and UHR), reference groups (coordinators from some universities on a national level) and specialists representing special education support resources (coordinator on the local HEI level). Local coordinators, providing the conditions for inclusion, work not only with students, but also arrange regular educational meetings and consultations with other university staff.

The University of Gävle (HiG), akin to any other university in Sweden, networks systematically with the national actors, using the NAIS program for developing unified structures of work with students in need of special education support. The educational support process starts when a student applies for such support, formally presenting his/her document identifying the disability. Then, the students contact the pedagogical support coordinator, who indicates how the student's educational needs will be described, understood/measured and discussed for further procedural solutions and recommendations.

Implementation of NAIS on the national level creates a knowledge platform based on including students with SEN in HE. Some students with SEN do not apply for study support and cannot be identified statistically or are otherwise not visible among this number of registered students. This can be explained in many ways. NAIS, as mentioned above, is a new program. One reason may be that some students would like to avoid the stigma of being recognized as 'disabled' when they enter HEIs. Responding to this possible problem, NAIS secured its registration system, enhancing its confidentiality and anonymity. Still, understanding NAIS' inputs in the quality of educational support of students with SEN requires more systematic monitoring and research, involving students with SEN in this process.

Identification of students with SEN by the NAIS program on local HEI level clarifies their preferences in professional areas they chose to study. At the University of Gävle students with SEN prefer social disciplines (pedagogy and social care), as well as economics and communicative technologies. This study focuses on understanding the Nordic, Bologna-based platform for inclusive higher education of students with SEN and the implementation of this platform according to the Swedish program of NAIS on national and local (University of Gävle) operational levels. The analysis of Bologna documents shows that expansion of inclusive processes in European HE represents a 'social dimension in education' and is essential to the implementation of the Bologna Declaration. Examining the theoretical foundation engendered conceptual approaches to understanding inclusion in HEIs from both individual and institutional perspectives. Responding to the expansion and belief in the fundamental value of inclusion for European HE, the Swedish Council for HE (UHR) initiated the development of a new program for standardizing different aspects of the inclusion of students with SEN in HEIs, creating NAIS and started its cross-country university functional network implementation in 2017, linking it with 32 HEIs all over Sweden.

Introduction to this study data, collected by the NAIS program, is of great interest for the further development of university and societal knowledge about the inclusion of young people with special educational needs in HEIs. The questions discussed and formulated in this paper reveal that understanding inclusion in HE requires further investigation.