

Studying with impairments in Germany

A 2011 survey of the situation for students
with a disability or chronic illness

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Authors

Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS)
(Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna)
Martin Unger
Petra Wejwar
Sarah Zaussinger
Andrea Laimer

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Introductory Remarks

According to the 18th Social Survey published by the Deutsches Studentenwerk¹, eight percent of students have a disability/chronic illness (Isserstedt et al. 2007). The results of the special survey now make additional, detailed data on the current situation for students with a disability/chronic illness available for the first time.

For this purpose, almost 16,000 students with health-related impairments which make participation in higher education difficult, provided detailed information via an online questionnaire in the 2011 summer semester on the issues they faced as a result of their impairment(s) with regard to their choice of degree, participation in their chosen course and the financing of their studies. The participants in the survey are students at some 160 of the currently 266 state and state-recognised universities and other higher education institutions, which are members of the German Rectors' Conference (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, HRK*) and had confirmed their willingness to actively support the survey by sending out the questionnaire via their internal campus management systems.

The particular challenge in this survey lay in the fact that it sought to reach a target group which is not included as such in any database and thus cannot be contacted in a targeted manner. As a result, almost one in three students in Germany received details of the survey via e-mail, although only students with health-related impairments which make participation in higher education difficult were actually invited to complete the questionnaire.

Students with mobility and sensory impairments long recognised in society as disabilities were to be included in the survey to an equal extent as students with chronic somatic illnesses, psychological impairments and specific learning disorders (e.g. dyslexia). Since many of them do not see themselves as members of the "students with disabilities" subgroup, the term "disability" was not used in the survey. Nonetheless, the definition of disability used in the Ninth Book § 2 (1) of the Social Law Code (*Sozialgesetzbuch IX*), remains the authoritative definition for all students with health-related impairments which make participation in higher education difficult:

*"Persons are disabled if their physical functions, mental capacities or psychological health deviate with high probability for more than six months from the condition which is typical for their respective age and whose participation in the life of society is thus impaired."*²

The results of the survey are representative of the group of students with a disability/chronic illness, and all analyses presented are significant ($p \leq 0.05$) – unless otherwise expressly indicated. For methodological reasons, comparisons of sociodemographic data with the results of other studies with regard to the student population as a whole are however only possible to a limited extent. The Deutsches Studentenwerk's 20th Social Survey will provide additional data in 2013 which could potentially reveal existing differences.

¹ (the German National Association for Student Affairs)

² „Menschen sind behindert, wenn ihre körperliche Funktion, geistige Fähigkeit oder seelische Gesundheit mit hoher Wahrscheinlichkeit länger als sechs Monate von dem für das Lebensalter typischen Zustand abweichen und daher ihre Teilhabe in der Gesellschaft beeinträchtigt ist.“ Translated by the authors

Summary of Main Findings

Students With Impairments Which Make Higher Education More Difficult

1. Which impairments make higher education more difficult?

The survey shows the extent to which health-related impairments interplay with barriers to make higher education and studying more difficult. 45% of the students who participated in the survey feel that physical impairments have the greatest impact on their studies, 20% assign the largest impact to chronic somatic illnesses (e.g. allergies, rheumatism, tumours), 6% to specific learning disorders (e.g. dyslexia), 5% to visual impairments, 4% to mobility impairments and 3% to hearing/speech impairments. 13% of the students surveyed accord equal levels of impact to multiple impairments, while 5% gave no response. Impairment-related obstacles to higher education arise more frequently for women in conjunction with psychological impairments and/or chronic somatic illnesses, and for men in conjunction with specific learning disorders. One quarter of the students surveyed did not develop their impairment until after they had actually started higher education.

2. How strong an impact do health-related impairments have on participation in higher education?

The information provided shows that impairment-related obstacles have a strong or very strong impact on participation in higher education for approx. 60% of the students who took part in the study, a moderate impact for approx. 30% and a mild impact for approx. 10%. Students on Bachelor degree courses are hampered by health-related impairments to roughly the same extent as students on *Staatsexamen* courses (the degree awarded in Germany for state supervised professions such as law, medicine, teaching or pharmacy), but more than students on Master degree programmes. 8% of students carry an ID (*Schwerbehindertenausweis*³) indicating that they are registered as severely disabled. However, this ID offers only a limited indication of the actual extent of the impact on participation in higher education.

3. Who is recognisable to others as having a health-related impairment?

Of the students surveyed, only 6% have a health-related impairment which is immediately recognisable to others. In almost two thirds of cases, the impairment is not apparent to others even after an extended period of time. Impairments have a permanent effect on their studies for around half the students surveyed and a periodic effect for the other half.

4. Do the students surveyed differ from other students?

There are virtually no differences between the students surveyed and the average student with regard to family educational background and higher education entrance qualifications. The students who participated in the survey typically progress through their courses at a slightly slower rate than the German student average: they start university on average three months younger than the average German student, but are already about nine months older than the German student average at the time of the survey.

³ Severely disabled person's pass (issued across Germany on request to people with a severe disability).

The present study cannot deliver any further comparisons with the German student population as a whole. However, the Deutsches Studentenwerk's 20th Social Survey in 2013 will provide relevant supplementary data.

Barrier-Free Higher Education Institutions and Student Service Organisations

5. Barrier-free accessibility and usability of higher education institutions and student service organisations: What are the requirements and are they being met?

13% of the students who participated in the survey have specific needs with regard to the barrier-free accessibility, design and usability of higher education institutions and student service organisations (*Studentenwerke*). These include the availability of parking spaces for people with disabilities and links to barrier-free public transport. To be able to participate in higher education, 6% of the students surveyed rely on adherence to a "minimum" standard for barrier-free construction, i.e. they require step-free access to facilities, elevators, accessible toilets, etc. These requirements are met sufficiently in 28% of cases, partially in 46% of cases, and not sufficiently in 26% of cases. Particular deficits are mentioned with regard to the usability of classrooms/lecture rooms and the rooms in individual university departments.

38% of the students surveyed have special needs with regard to acoustics, lighting or ventilation, as well as the availability of rest and retreat areas as a result of their impairments. 10% of these students have impairment-related visual needs, which are met sufficiently in 14%, partially in 65% and not sufficiently in 21% of cases. 7% of the survey participants have impairment-related hearing needs, which are met sufficiently in 7%, partly in 56% and not sufficiently in 38% of cases. Independent of their impairment, one quarter of the students who participated in the study expressed a demand for special rest and retreat areas in higher education institutions. However, in three out of four cases this demand is not even partially satisfied.

When barrier-free construction requirements are met, students with special needs have significantly fewer problems studying for their degrees.

6. Barrier-free design of general and supplementary services in higher education: What are the requirements and are they being met?

Almost half the students surveyed expressed a need for general and/or specific supplementary services to compensate for everyday impairment-related disadvantages in higher education. Independent of their impairment, students need, for example, access to documents in barrier-free format via the internet, special borrowing terms in libraries, texts in spoken form, as well as study assistance (e.g. people to read out texts) or communication assistance (e.g. sign language interpreters). There is a particularly strong demand for supplementary services in psychological counselling centres and for campus catering that accommodates the needs of chronically ill students. Responsibility for providing and financing such services is distributed across different agencies. These individual demands are not met sufficiently in around 40% to 65% of cases and only met sufficiently in between 5% to 16% of cases.

Information and Counselling

7. To what extent do students make use of relevant counselling services?

45% of the students surveyed are familiar with the specific information and counselling services provided by the university's counsellors and authorised representatives for the interests of students with disabilities and chronic illnesses. 40% of them are familiar with the counselling centres run by the student service organisations. 34% are familiar with the services provided by student councils (e.g. the General Student Committee (*AStA*) disability units). Some two thirds of the students are familiar with the services on offer at the psychological counselling centres run by the student service organisations and the higher education institutions.

Although almost 60% of the students surveyed indicate that they face strong or very strong impairment-related obstacles to their studies, only 24% have made use of at least one of these specific advisory services. Students with mobility and sensory impairments make well above average use of all specific counselling services for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Students with psychological impairments make well above average, almost exclusive, use of the services provided by psychological counselling centres. Students with chronic somatic illnesses and, in particular, students with specific learning disorders are less familiar with and make below average use of all available advisory services. 44% of students do without necessary specific counselling because they do not want to reveal their impairment; 36% do so because they do not feel the advisory services address their specific needs.

Counselling is primarily sought for the following topics: dealing with an impairment, organising a degree, defining and enforcing academic adjustments.

8. How useful are the available counselling services?

Half the students surveyed who have used the information and advisory services for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses assess them as useful or largely useful. The services provided by the authorised university representatives are assessed positively in as many as two thirds of cases. Students with sensory and/or mobility impairments and students facing strong obstacles to their studies express above average levels of satisfaction with the information and personal counsel provided. However, between one fifth and one third of students who make use of the respective counselling services are not satisfied with the results. They criticise in particular the lack of information relating to their own impairments on the internet and the fact that the counsellors pay too little attention to the individual student's particular situation.

Access to Higher Education and Feasibility of Courses

9. What impact do health-related impairments have on course choice?

Almost half of those students surveyed whose impairments had existed prior to their starting higher education indicate that these impairments had played a significant role in their choice of course. While only one third of students indicate that their impairments played no role in their course choice, one quarter assign these impairments a very strong role.

60% of students whose impairments had already existed when they applied for a course are studying their preferred subject; 9% are not studying their preferred subject for impairment-related reasons. For the latter, the alleged limited feasibility of studying their preferred subject and alleged poor employment prospects for graduates with an impairment played an overriding role in the decision. 14% of the students who are not studying their preferred subject for impairment-related reasons criticise the lack of consideration of impairment-related issues in the admissions process.

While almost one in three of those students whose impairments had had a very strong impact on their choice of course relied on the advice of parents, relatives and close friends in this choice; only one in ten based their decision on the advice of external counsellors.

10. What obstacles are posed by time-related or formal provisions in course and examination guidelines, examination and teaching styles or routines?

70% of the students who participated in the survey face difficulties in their studies with time-related provisions in course and examination guidelines, 61% with organisational course provisions, 63% with teaching and examination styles or routines and 17% with the completion of work placements and excursions.

An above average number of students with physical impairments have difficulties with time-related provisions, e.g. with the prescribed workload per semester or high concentration of exams. A comparatively high number of students with chronic illnesses have problems with formal provisions, e.g. compulsory attendance. A particularly high number of students with hearing/speech impairments have difficulties with teaching styles or routines. An above average number of students with specific learning disorders, psychological impairments and multiple impairments find it difficult to meet time-related or formal examination provisions and achieve course credits. Work placements prove a particularly frequent source of difficulties for students with mobility impairments and multiple impairments.

Academic Adjustments

11. How effective is academic adjustment in securing access to university and in the university entrance process?

6% of the students who participated in the study had submitted a hardship case claim (*Härtefallantrag*⁴), while 1% had submitted a request to have their average grade or waiting period “improved” (*Antrag auf Verbesserung der Durchschnittsnote bzw. Wartezeit*⁵) in conjunction with their application for their current course. Students who are registered as severely disabled make well above average (40%) use of special claims options.

Half of those students who are not studying their preferred subject as a result of the lack of consideration of impairment-related issues in the admissions process maintain that they

⁴ In Germany, prospective students with exceptional circumstances can submit a so-called hardship case claim to request that they be accepted on a course without consideration of the entrance criteria.

⁵ In Germany, a prospective student can apply to have his/her average grade in the higher education entrance qualification (*Hochschulzugangsberechtigung*) changed as a selection criterion in the acceptance process. To do so, he/she must be able to enforce a claim that circumstances had prevented him/her from achieving a higher average grade. Similarly, places in higher education are not allocated only on grades, but also on the length of time a prospective student has been waiting for a place. A request to have this waiting period improved can result in an impairment-related academic adjustment.

were not acknowledged as particular hardship cases. More than one third of these students were unable to gain consideration for impairment-related disadvantages encountered at school.

12. How effective is academic adjustment in enabling students to participate in their courses, take examinations and attend classes?

Only 27% of the students surveyed have actually submitted at least one request for academic adjustment for impairment-related difficulties encountered in participating in their courses, taking exams and/or attending classes – despite the fact that almost 60% of them indicate that they face strong or very strong impairment-related obstacles in their studies. Among the students facing such obstacles, the highest number of requests for academic adjustment are submitted for exam-related disadvantages (e.g. deferral/repetition of exams, alternative exam accommodations) or preferential participation in specific courses. The claimant rate is below average when it comes to agreements on measures to compensate for impairment-related difficulties with the prescribed workload per semester (e.g. through individual study plans) – an area in which a particularly high number of students indicated difficulties.

54% of claimants had all their requests for academic adjustment accepted, while 23% had some of their requests accepted. 36% of accepted requests were compensated in full, while 56% were compensated in part.

Almost 40% of students who had submitted at least one unsuccessful request indicate that their requests were not accepted for the following reasons: lecturers are not prepared to adapt their teaching routines, academic adjustment is not considered reconcilable with course guidelines, and the impairment is not accepted as justification of reason for academic adjustment.

13. How do individual impairment groups differ when it comes to obtaining academic adjustment in higher education?

Students who are officially registered as severely disabled can enforce their requests particularly effectively in the admissions process by submitting a hardship case claim. For all others, impairment-related requests can only be enforced in the admissions process in exceptional cases.

An above average number of students with hearing/speech impairments and specific learning disorders have difficulties in obtaining academic adjustment for examination and teaching styles or routines.

Academic adjustments are particularly effective for students with mobility and visual impairments. In contrast, students with specific learning disorders and those with psychological impairments in combination with chronic somatic illnesses assess academic adjustment to be totally ineffective with particular frequency.

14. How can students facilitate the enforcement of academic adjustment?

Students who sought specific advice on academic adjustment were particularly successful in enforcing their claims with examination boards/lecturers/administrative authorities. This also

applies for students who could provide significant evidence of the impairment-related obstacles faced.

15. What prevents students from submitting a request for academic adjustment?

More than half of the students who had not submitted a request for academic adjustment – despite facing impairment-related obstacles in their studies – were not actually aware of this option. 43% of students who had foregone the opportunity to request adjustment did so because they did not believe that their claims were justified. 44% did not want “special treatment”, 33% did not want their impairment to become known, and around 35% of the students surveyed had inhibitions about approaching the examination board or lecturers with a request for academic adjustment.

Financing Higher Education

16. Who incurs impairment-related additional costs?

71% of the students surveyed incur additional costs as a result of their impairments. In a particularly high number of cases, these additional costs are not specifically related to their studies: 47% incur additional costs for medical consultations, 27% for psychotherapy, 41% for special living requirements (e.g. medicines not covered by statutory health insurance, sanitary articles, adapted clothing or impairment-related aids), and 2% for adapted accommodation (e.g. 24-hour assistance).

Additional costs to cover study-related special requirements (e.g. study or communication assistance, mobility or technical aids) are incurred by a comparatively small group of students (9%), but by a well above average number of students with mobility (31%), hearing/speech (23%), visual (20%) and multiple (17%) impairments.

17. Where and to what extent do students have difficulties in financing their studies?

15% of the students surveyed indicate that they either cannot cover their living costs (incl. any impairment-related special needs not specifically related to their studies) or can only do so very inadequately. The main reasons given for this are that their main sources of income (usually support from their families and government assistance through the Federal Training Assistance Act (*Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz – BAföG*⁶) funding) do not cover their costs, that they are unable to carry out paid work as a result of their impairments, and that statutory health insurance only insufficiently covers the medical costs incurred in conjunction with their impairments. One in four students with additional special study needs as a result of their impairments either cannot cover the associated costs or can only do so very inadequately.

18. Which financial sources do students with impairments make use of?

Students with impairments which make studying more difficult essentially make use of the same financial sources as all other students to cover their living expenses, i.e. they depend primarily on support from their families or BAföG funding, and more rarely on scholarships and loans. However, impairment-related special needs cannot be claimed in connection with

⁶ Students who have no other means of income or financing their studies can receive financial assistance under the terms of the Federal Training Assistance Act.

BAföG or scholarship funding. Although 71% of the students surveyed incur additional costs as a result of their impairments, only 2.4% receive social security benefits to compensate for impairment-related disadvantages or cover extraordinary hardships. In the 2011 summer semester, 0.6% of the students surveyed received integration support for people with disabilities to cover impairment-related additional study needs.

19. From a higher education perspective, what are the reciprocal effects of unsecured student financing and strong impairment-related obstacles to participation in higher education?

The group of students who indicate that their impairments have a very strong impact on their studies also have the greatest problems in financing their living and study costs (including any impairment-related additional special requirements).