

## 'I am a college student' postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities

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### ABSTRACT

Postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities is almost unheard of in the Nordic countries, but several colleges in America, Australia and Europe offer such programmes. These colleges seldom offer inclusive education services; since 2007, however, the University of Iceland has offered a Vocational Diploma in inclusive settings for students with intellectual disabilities. In this article we report on qualitative research carried out in 2009–2013 among 39 graduated students with intellectual disabilities from the University of Iceland and 14 lecturers who have taught inclusive college courses. The findings suggest that, despite some reservations, there seems to be a common agreement that this initiative is an important part of improving the access of disabled people both to education and society. The courses are inclusive, that is, offered to disabled and non-disabled students at the School of Education studying at the undergraduate level. The graduated students described increased social participation, knowledge and self-esteem. The lecturers described the inclusive courses as positive both for non-disabled and disabled students. The employment outcomes for graduated students have in general been positive.

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### The Icelandic setting

Historically, disabled people have lacked access to mainstream education at all levels, especially students with intellectual disabilities. Postsecondary education (PSE) for people with intellectual disabilities is a new idea in the Nordic countries and the college experience is traditionally and globally reserved for the elite or 'best' students. However, in autumn 2007 22 students with intellectual disabilities were admitted to the Iceland University of Education; for many this was their first time participating in inclusive educational settings. In this article we will describe the Vocational Diploma Program for People with Intellectual Disabilities offered by the University of Iceland, School of Education<sup>1</sup> as well as reporting on graduated students' and lecturers' views of the programme.

Education for students with intellectual disabilities in Iceland has developed parallel to what we have witnessed in other Western societies with a growing emphasis on their rights to education in inclusive settings (UNESCO 1994). Iceland is considered to have a highly inclusive education system (Eurydice 2003; Gunnþórsdóttir 2011; Bjarnason and Marinósson 2015). Inclusive education is the guiding policy for the national education system, at all levels, in Iceland (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Ólafsdóttir et al. 2014). It is possible to trace the development of the policy back to the 1970s when compulsory students who had been labelled as having 'special education needs' were allowed extra support and accommodation (Ministry of Education 1974, 1977; Bjarnason and Marinósson 2015). Originally, debates on inclusion were focused on

compulsory education and some resistance to its implementation has been documented at local level in Iceland as in other neighbouring countries (Gunnþórsdóttir 2011). More recently, attention has turned to the accessibility of all students to upper secondary education, which is not compulsory in Iceland. Upper secondary students are usually between 16 and 20 years of age. 'General academic education is primarily organized as a four-year course leading to a matriculation examination. The length of courses in vocational education varies, lasting from one semester to ten, but most prevalent are four-year courses' (Ministry of Education Science and Culture n.d.).

Since 1996, students with intellectual disabilities have had access to special study programmes (self-contained special education classes) at the upper secondary school level, but their right was not formally secured with legislation until 2008 (Ministry of Education Science and Culture 2008c). These students rarely have the opportunity to participate in inclusive classrooms and previous research has concluded that upper secondary school teachers who take on inclusive classes outside the special study programmes do not receive the support and training they need for including students with intellectual disabilities (Björnsdóttir 2002).

Early debate in Iceland on upper secondary school education for students with intellectual disabilities was centred on the idea that upper secondary education was not compulsory and should not be accessible to everyone; educators and policy-makers seemed worried that better access (e.g. students with special education needs) to upper secondary schools meant 'dumbing down of education' (Björnsdóttir 2002; Ragnarsdóttir 2005). Also, research suggests that educators, including trained and experienced special education teachers, have reservations regarding inclusive settings at the upper secondary school level which to some extent explains the complications of implementing inclusive upper secondary education (Björnsdóttir 2002; Marinósson 2007). After graduation from upper secondary school there are limited educational opportunities in Iceland for people with intellectual disabilities, apart from segregated adult education classes (Björnsdóttir and Traustadóttir 2010) and the diploma programme at the University of Iceland.

## The international context

Although PSE for people with intellectual disabilities is a novelty to most there are such programmes for example in the USA, Canada, Australia and Ireland (Hart et al. 2006; Uditsky and Hughson 2012). So-called 'dual-enrolment' has been practiced in colleges in the USA for over 30 years. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act students should receive federally mandated special education services until they are 22 years old. 'Dual-enrolment' students are technically still enrolled in the K-12 education system but receive services on a college campus. Grigal, Hart, and Weir (2012) have described three main PSE models: 'substantially separate programs', where students participate in self-contained special education classrooms, 'mixed programs', where students with intellectual disabilities participate in a mixture of segregated and inclusive academic and social activities and 'inclusive individualized services'. There are approximately 250 such programmes across the USA where the inclusive individualized services are relatively rare and the mixed programmes most common (Hart et al. 2004). Some colleges only enrol one to three students with intellectual disabilities every year with entrance requirements such as students falling within specific intelligence quotient (IQ) range and being able to demonstrate a certain level of written, communication, self-care and social skills. It has been reported that those students who have been in segregated high-school programmes typically move into segregated adult programmes and miss out on the important interaction with other college students (Walker 2014).

The same year, 2007, as the diploma programme started, Iceland became a signatory party to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and thereby acknowledging full human rights including the right to education where an inclusive education system at all levels should be ensured (United Nations 2007). Gabel (2005) has argued that there is ableism within education systems, which are designed for non-disabled students who have been defined as 'normal'; it is therefore always better to be non-disabled than disabled, better to walk than using a wheelchair and

reading text rather than braille (Gabel 2005; Hehir 2007). Furthermore, Gunnþórsdóttir (2011) argues that such dualism is commonly promoted towards students in education systems where the 'majority who are healthy/whole and those who are not, who are imperfect' (29). Education for non-disabled students becomes 'normal' education and the education of disabled students is, therefore, something else that needs to be dealt with. Such ableist beliefs and differentiating practices based on the binary notion of normal/disabled are barriers to successful education for all students. Thus it is of high importance to emphasize inclusive education which accommodates all students instead of attempting to integrate and adjust the disabled student to the educational settings (Gunnþórsdóttir 2011).

It has been widely reported that disabled PSE students are faced with numerous barriers in their education, including access to buildings and participation in social activities (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2012). There is some contention as to whether higher education can ever be inclusive and arguments have been made that a wider student body contributes to the 'dumbing down' of education (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). The University of Iceland was established in 1911 and to begin with the large majority of students were men (Jónsson 1961). Traditionally, higher education has been reserved for men rather than women and non-disabled people rather than disabled people. This tradition is reflected in PSE policy and while modern education institutions are legally bound to accommodate disabled students disability policy often describes accommodation as a burden or obligation and the bio-medical model is used to define who are eligible for services (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2012). Barnes and Mercer (2003) argue that the medical approach to disability, that is, the preoccupation with impairments, diagnosis and limitations, has not furthered the inclusion of disabled people into mainstream society; on the contrary, this has added to the oppression and exclusion of disabled people. The University of Iceland does rely on such bio-medical definitions which are also stipulated in Icelandic disability legislation. However, the university has appointed a Council for Disability Rights in the effort to ensure that the policies and practices of the university coincide with equality legislation and disabled student's rights for support (University of Iceland n.d.-a).

People with intellectual disabilities are underrepresented in colleges and universities compared to students with other impairments (Yamamoto, Stodden, and Folk 2014). Also, disability policy and accommodation mainly focus on issues such as assistive technology and access to buildings rather than different barriers (e.g. belittling attitudes and access to information) faced by students with intellectual disabilities. Kleinert et al. (2012) have argued that among the greatest barriers to creating inclusive PSE institutions are belittling attitudes and low expectations that students with intellectual disabilities can contribute to the collegiate environment.

The diploma programme at the University of Iceland has been based on an inclusive individualized model from the start, where students receive individualized support in order to access college courses (Stefánsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir 2011). In Iceland like many of its neighbouring countries there has been debate over inclusive education that has focused on the practicality of the concept and its meaning (Jónasson 2008). There is much confusion about what inclusive education is, which makes it a difficult debate (Runswick-Cole 2011). The diploma programme is based on the understanding that inclusive education should be available to all students at all education levels and students should be granted the support they need to be included in the academic and social life of the university (Stefánsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir 2011). Inclusion is, therefore, a process and the aim is to move towards equity while recognizing and supporting students' needs (Runswick-Cole 2011).

Research has demonstrated that students with intellectual disabilities who participated in inclusive PSE programmes experience increased satisfaction in domains such as self-esteem, self-respect, interpersonal relationships, self-determination and social inclusion (Hughson, Moodie, and Uditsky 2006; Kleinert et al. 2012; Uditsky and Hughson 2012). Also, students with intellectual disabilities who have graduated from PSE are reported to have improved their employment opportunities (Hughson, Moodie, and Uditsky 2006; Kleinert et al. 2012; Yamamoto, Stodden, and Folk 2014). It has been reported in Iceland, Europe and America that people with intellectual disabilities are underrepresented in the labour market and on average earn lower wages than the general population

(Social Science Research Institute 2013; Walker 2014; Moore and Schelling 2015). Also, Walker (2014) claims that by the year 2018 two-thirds of jobs in the USA will require PSE and similar numbers can be expected in Europe. It is, therefore, of high importance to make efforts towards a more inclusive society, with better employment outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities, which include improving their job training skills through PSE.

Most of the PSE literature has focused on programmes in America and there has been a call for more international coverage (Moore and Schelling 2015) which will contribute to the global development of PSE for people with intellectual disabilities.

## Methods

The diploma programme was defined as an experimental or development programme from 2007 to 2013 and was during that time evaluated by means of research. The main aim of the research was to gather information about the programme, how it could be improved and how students were supported academically and socially. Employment outcomes of graduated students were explored in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational aspect of the programme.

In this paper we present three sets of data, qualitative interviews, focus groups and statistical information on employment outcomes. Qualitative approaches are concerned with producing descriptive data and focus on the meaning of lives, and how people think and experience the world around them (Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Creswell 2007). Qualitative approaches are commonly used in research with people with intellectual disabilities and have created space for their voices and perspectives to be heard (Atkinson 2004). Qualitative data this article reports on was collected through open-ended interviews and focus groups over a period of five years (2009–2013) and statistical information was gathered in May 2015.

The purpose of the unstructured open-ended interviews was to encourage the research participants to describe in their own words their perspectives, values and life experiences (Kvale 1996). All the students, a total of 39, who had graduated before 2011, were interviewed for this research. The group comprised 15 men and 24 women, aged 23–42. The focus of the interviews was on their participation in the diploma programme, their perspective on academics, and on-campus social life. Each student was interviewed twice, at the beginning of his/her study and after graduation. Each interview lasted from 20 to 40 minutes, was recorded and transcribed word by word. Since the students belong to a diverse group of people in relation to communication ability the questions were adapted to each participant and they had opportunities to bring up issues they found important to share for the purpose of the research.

Six focus groups were conducted for the purpose of gathering information about the students' views and experiences of the diploma programme and employment outcomes. Focus groups have the advantage of enabling the researcher to gather much information in short period of time. They also allow for different and often contrasting views and opinions to be heard, but at the same time the focus groups are not as in-depth and personal as individual interviews (Neuman 2011). Twenty-two graduated students participated in the focus groups. Each group interview lasted 60–80 minutes, was recorded and transcribed.

Fourteen lecturers, eight men and six women, were interviewed, the focus of the unstructured interviews being on their experience of teaching inclusive college courses and on their views of the diploma programme, its impact on their teaching strategies and on the school environment. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was recorded and transcribed word by word. All interviews were carried out by research assistants at the School of Education. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse qualitative data. We identified patterns or themes within the data on the basis of which it was organized into codes or categories. Axial coding was used for the purpose of portraying interrelationships between coding categories and in order to make the analysis more systematic (Creswell 2007). The interviews and focus groups were conducted in Icelandic and all direct quotes were translated by the authors of this article.

A total of 56 students have graduated from the programme which include the 39 research participants who graduated in 2011 or earlier and 17 students who graduated in 2013. Statistical information about the employment outcomes of all graduated students was gathered and presented in the form of descriptive statistics. Even though the population,  $N = 56$ , includes the total number of graduated students it is small and caution should be exercised when presenting and interpreting data in percentages. Also, there was no comparison group and the findings were therefore confined to descriptive statistics and limited generalization.

For checking on and enhancing validity and reliability we triangulated among different data sources (participants), methods (interviews and focus groups) and multiple researchers (authors and research assistants). The diploma students were interviewed more than once, at the beginning and at the end of their studies, and we also used member checking; that is, asked participants in the study to determine whether our findings were accurate (Creswell 2007).

### **Ethical issues**

Conducting qualitative research in Iceland raises ethical issues due to the small size of the country with a population of 329,000 and lack of anonymity. This is particularly relevant in relation to the diploma programme, since this is the only PSE programme in Iceland and the number of students is small. Ethical procedures in this research complied with the Icelandic Act on the Protection and Processing of Personal Data (No. 77/2000) and Regulation on Scientific Research in the Health Sector (No. 286/2008). The research proposal was sent to the Data Protection Authority in Iceland and received a formal receipt of notification. The research was also approved and funded by the University of Iceland. Precautions have been taken to remove all identifiable characteristics. All participants gave their informed consent and understood that they could terminate their participation at any time.

Both authors are members of the School of Education faculty and have been actively involved in the development of the diploma programme but are not concerned with the daily operations. Our hands on knowledge of the programme might have provided us with better understanding of the programme but could also cause discomfort for participants who also are faculty members or former students. It is therefore important to acknowledge the possible risk of conflict of interests regarding these different roles as researchers on the one hand on faculty members on the other hand. The role of the researchers and the purpose of the research were clearly defined from the beginning. To provide some distance and create a more trustworthy research process all interviews were carried out by research assistants who had experience working with people with intellectual disabilities.

### **Findings**

Below is a presentation of our findings. First, we describe the diploma programme at the University of Iceland; second, we present students' views and experiences of the programme; third, the views and experiences of the lecturers and fourth, we provide information about the employment outcomes of graduated students. The article concludes with a summary and suggestions for further research.

### **Vocational diploma programme**

The University of Iceland is located in Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland. The university offers study and research in almost 400 programmes in social sciences, health sciences, humanities, education, natural sciences and engineering. The main campus is in the city centre and also has branches in two other areas where the School of Education is operated, a few kilometres – or a short bus ride – off the main campus. Student housing does not include conventional dormitories and relatively few students live in on-campus housing. Diploma students are as eligible as others for student housing. The university's

student count is about 14,000; thereof 2000 students at the School of Education. Students are admitted to the diploma programme every other year. Call for application is advertised on the university's web-page and in local newspapers as are other university programmes. All applicants are interviewed and about 15 offered place in the programme based on their interest in the field of education. Since 2007 about 60% of applications have been rejected based on limited space available. There has been a decrease in interested in the field of education in recent years which has led to fewer students at the School of Education and fewer courses offered which affects the diploma programme and the number of places for diploma students.

The diploma programme is a 60 ECTS<sup>2</sup> part time two-year programme. The aim of the programme is, on the one hand, to prepare students for specific jobs within the field of education, in pre-primary schools (nurseries), after school clubs, libraries and within the field of disability and self-advocacy, which are the jobs School of Education provides training for on the other hand, the aim is to give them an opportunity for PSE. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on providing students with practical knowledge and skills in inclusive education settings in order to promote their participation in society. Although the diploma programme is only for students with intellectual disabilities, the courses offered are available as mandatory or free electives to other undergraduate students at the School of Education.

Students with intellectual disabilities receive support to access college courses. Students also receive on-site job training at local pre-primary schools, after school clubs, libraries or within the field of disability and self-advocacy. One full-time staff member coordinates the programme and ensures that students receive the support and accommodation they need. The students also receive support from mentors who are undergraduate students at the School of Education. Mentors assist students, individually or in small groups, with individual and group assignment participation (in cooperation with other undergraduate students) and accessing reading material and lectures. The staff member and mentors also support and assist the lecturers with, for example, planning and evaluation. The mentors were interviewed for the purpose of this research and data based on their experiences will be presented in further publications.

Students must complete 60 ECTS for a vocational diploma. Forty ECTS are mandatory courses and include 10 fieldwork credits. Twenty ECTS are free electives and Table 1 gives an overview of the courses offered in the diploma programme. The elective courses are usually small with 20–30 students while the largest mandatory courses include over 100 students.

The diploma programme is based on a social understanding of disability which draws attention to the environment and the need for social change. There is no universal social model of disability, but several approaches to understanding disability in social context (Shakespeare 2006; Traustadóttir 2006). This research takes place in a Nordic context where disability is viewed in relational terms and understood as the result of the discrepancy between the disabled person's abilities and the functional demands made by society which does not assume the full range of human diversity. A person is therefore defined as disabled if s/he confronts barriers in everyday life due to limited ability, diseases

**Table 1.** Programme composition.

First term	ECTS	Second term	ECTS
Disability studies (m)	10	Sociology and equality (m)	10
Career guidance I (m)	5	Practicum I (m)	5
Third term	ECTS	Fourth term	ECTS
Career guidance II (m)	5	Practicum II (m)	5
Ethics and professionalism (e)	10	Leisure and children (e)	10
Children's creativity (e)	10	Events and project management (e)	10
Gender, disability and sexuality (e)	5	Introduction to social education (e)	10
Adapted physical education (e)	5	Social issues, life skills and organizations (e)	10
Effective communication (e)	5	Play and technology (e)	10
		Movement and dramatic expression, inside and outside (e)	10

Notes: M, mandatory; E, free elective.

or impairment (Tøssebro 2002). It is therefore not the individual's impairment in itself that causes difficulties or problems in his/hers life, but rather a combination of physical and cultural barriers in the environment. The diploma programme is organized and shaped in ways that students with intellectual disabilities have access to the School of Education's learning opportunities including specialized job training. The social understanding of disability has been constructed in opposition to the medicalization of disability and is rooted in the disabled people's movement and the field of disability studies (Traustadóttir 2006). Despite increased emphasis on disability rights and social inclusion the individualistic medical approach, with preoccupation on diagnosis, rehabilitation and limitations, still dominates disabled people's lives and the public discussion on the topic of disability. In many cases medical professionals are 'granted the primary power to decide on various aspects of the lives of people with intellectual disabilities', even aspects related to, for example, education, which are not among the qualifications of physicians or health professionals (Vehmas 1999, 49). Special needs students, at all education levels, in Iceland are reliant on a medical diagnosis to access services and support. The diploma programme does not require any such definitions or diagnosis and each student receives reasonable accommodations and individualized support based on his/hers needs and wishes.

### *Students' views and experiences of the vocational diploma programme*

The students were in general positive regarding the diploma programme and described how participating in the programme had boosted their self-esteem, encouraged social participation and had a positive impact on their employment outcome. Many of the students had not experienced an inclusive classroom before entering the diploma programme and for most it was at the top of their list for positive experiences. One student said:

The biggest change for me is being in college and not labelled and segregated from others. We participate in courses with other students, it does not matter who you are or what you look like, and this way we meet a lot of people. Just like in real life and work, you have to interact with and work with all sorts of people and not only disabled people. I think that was the biggest lesson for me.

Another student said: 'I think I learned most from spending time with other students and not being socially excluded somewhere in the corner.' The students also claimed that they had improved their social and communication skills and were more able to recognize others' points of view. Most of them had also received positive feedback from staff in their on-site practicum who had commented on their improvements.

One of the mandatory courses, Disability Studies, addressed disability rights and the self-advocacy movement. This was one of the courses and issues that the students found to be practical, providing them with a new set of tools to negotiate disability personally and socially. One student explained:

I learned a lot. Disabled people came to class and talked about living in institutions and being parents. Many guest lecturers came to tell us about their lives, how their rights had been violated and how they had fought for equality. I found it very interesting. I had also experienced things like that.

Some students were enrolled at the age of 20, straight from upper secondary school, while a few were older (30–40 years) and benefited from more life experiences. Some of the younger students admitted that they had not realized how disabled people had been treated in the 'olden days' but were nevertheless able to relate to the injustice of segregation which many people with intellectual disabilities of all ages have experienced. People with intellectual disabilities are often viewed as eternal children who should be protected from sensitive or hurtful information (Stefánsdóttir 2008). Protecting and pitying people with intellectual disabilities in this manner can be interpreted as ableism and is based on prejudice. The students, however, wanted to learn more and demonstrated that they were capable of dealing with sensitive information and painful historical facts and did not want these aspects to be kept from them as secrets. They claimed that learning the

history of self-advocacy in Iceland had a positive impact on their self-esteem, made them more aware of their rights and encouraged their hope for a better future. One student said:

I think it is time that we are allowed more opportunities both for employment and for education. I want the diploma program to be longer than it is now and I have learned to fight for what you want. I thought I could only be in special classes for disabled people, but now I know what I can do and I do not always have to be segregated or special, special, special. I am working at a library, just a regular job, before I would not have believed I could do that.

As previously stated, a third of the diploma consists of free electives and students choose from different courses within the field they are being trained to work in. Most of the students agreed they were, after the completion of these courses, able to demonstrate increased knowledge and skills and that the free electives were useful and practical. One student said:

My job training was at an after school club and I used what I learned in the Leisure and children course in my training. I had for example learnt about outdoors games in that course and I made a outdoors games program for the kids in the club. After I graduated I got a job there.

These positive stories from the diploma students harmonize with the reports from Trinity College in Ireland of their mixed model PSE programme. Students with intellectual disabilities participate in a mixture of segregated and inclusive courses and students claim that going to college felt like growing up, and for many it was the first time they felt they were grown-ups (O'Brien et al. 2009).

Although the diploma students' experiences were mostly positive they also criticized the programme for being limited; that is, only within the field of education and spoke of how disappointing it was to get only two years of study with no opportunities to further their studies within the university. Some felt the courses that the programme offers were not practical enough and would have wanted to have more free electives to choose from, particularly in relation to their practicum. One student said: 'I would like to see more variety of courses available to us at the university. I am also hoping they will offer another, continuing, program for graduated students.' Also, some criticized the lack of support available to them at the university, for example with assignments, accessibility and finding their way on campus and with activities of daily lives such as hygiene.

Most of the students experienced positive attitudes and perspectives from other students and lecturers. However, during the first years of the programme there were more reports of negative attitudes and one young man said:

At first, when we were supposed to be working on group assignments with other [non-disabled] students it felt as if nobody wanted to work with us. They just sat down in front of the computers and we waited for them. But then when we got to know each other, work together and hang out together on campus it changed. I think they might have been scared of us in the beginning and maybe we were a little bit scared too. We just needed to get to know each other and then everything changed. Everybody together and we became good friends and we still are.

There was some scepticism about allowing students with intellectual disabilities access to the university at the beginning of the diploma programme and the 'dumbing down' argument was voiced both by undergraduate students and lecturers but these perceptions gradually changed when all involved became more secure with their roles as fellow students, friends, mentors, supporters or lecturers. Previous research demonstrates that PSE programs based on the inclusive individualized services model lead to more social acceptance of disabled students by college students in general (Griffin et al. 2012). As time has passed the diploma programme has gained more public attention and most people in Iceland seem to know about it which has also contributed to the general acceptance of the programme within the university among students and staff.

The students mostly experienced positive attitudes from the lecturers but one graduated student said: 'some of the lecturers talked to us as if we were little kids and some even spoke in a childish high pitched voice'. It seems like these lecturers were influenced by the stereotypical idea that people with intellectual disabilities are childish and eternal children. But nothing suggests that the lecturers or

other students intentionally treated or spoke to the students with intellectual disabilities differently or with disrespect.

### *Lecturers' views and experiences of the diploma programme*

An inclusive PSE programme is to some extent a challenging idea and students without intellectual disabilities need to have successfully completed their matriculation examination to be admitted to the university. The lecturers who participated in this research had all taught in the inclusive college courses offered by the university and claimed they had not themselves had many reservations but knew that some of their colleagues were sceptical. One lecturer said:

I heard faculty members arguing that this program was just fake and it was dumbing down higher education and now they were making primary school education into college education. Most of my colleagues were positive towards the program but were sceptical in the beginning about how it should be executed. They worried about how these students should be taught in the same classrooms as other university students.

It seems as if some lecturers at the School of Education feared that inclusive courses as one lecturer put it, 'reduce the respect for higher education'. These kinds of reservations are similar to what was documented during the implementation of upper secondary school education for students with intellectual disabilities 20 years ago (Björnsdóttir 2002; Ragnarsdóttir 2005). Nevertheless, the lecturers seemed to be proud of the programme. One lecturer said:

I sensed that some of my colleagues were sceptical in the beginning but today these lecturers are proud of the program. People find this a remarkable initiative and are pretty amazed that it was possible to persuade the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to keep supporting it. It is a success and everybody knows that.

The lecturers had varied previous experience of teaching disabled students in an inclusive classroom. Interestingly, some of the more experienced lecturers who had taught in inclusive classrooms at lower education levels had more reservations than those who had little or no experience. They feared the extra work and challenges involved in adapting courses, reading materials and assignments. Also, some did not believe that people with intellectual disabilities could successfully participate in college courses. One lecturer who had been involved with the diploma programme from the beginning said:

I had so many reservations in the beginning, but both of the diploma students who participated in my course did very well and made the course more enjoyable. Sometimes they offered different solutions to problems that the other students had not even considered, nor had the lecturers. I think their participation made the course better for all the students.

The lecturers were faced with many challenges regarding teaching methods in the inclusive courses. Many mentioned how much more work preparation was needed when different groups of students are involved. Even though lecturers were not paid for their extra work, most of them did not make that an issue. However, two of the lecturers who participated in this research felt that the extra work involved in these inclusive courses was too much and that excessive time was spent adapting assignments and course evaluations; those lecturers relied on the programme's project manager or student mentors to do this work. These findings agree with previous findings of inclusive education at the lower education levels where lack of support is often described as a barrier to inclusion (Gunnþórsdóttir 2011). Also, the level of adaption and accommodation necessary varied and practical courses were commonly more accessible than theoretical courses. A lecturer who taught a practical course said:

I did not make any adaptations or anything different, apart from interacting with the student mentors regarding assignments. It was not necessary. They [diploma students] did exactly the same work as other students. I did not make any adaptations. I did not need to.

Many of the lecturers made an individualized education plan for the diploma students, most often in collaboration with the student mentors and the diploma students themselves and most assignments

were adapted. Many of the lecturers compiled special study outcomes for the diploma students, based on the course's general study outcomes.

Most of the lecturers found evaluation a challenging task and wondered how it was possible to make it fair. In some courses the diploma students took the same exams as the undergraduate students, but were allowed additional time to finish and received support from their student mentors. Other lecturers used different and adapted evaluations. Since the diploma students have not completed the matriculation examinations they are not eligible for undergraduate study at postsecondary level. There has been some discussion as to whether the diploma students should receive higher postsecondary school credits for their participation in the diploma programme. A few of the lecturers who participated in this research said they thought the diploma students had earned their PSE credits even though their evaluation was adapted. Others felt it was not reasonable to expect the diploma programme to be based on PSE credits. Therefore, student evaluation was the factor most often mentioned as the most challenging aspect of the inclusive courses. This is something that needs more examination and discussion within the college community.

Two of the lecturers who participated in the research said they needed more information about the students and wanted some kind of information about their impairments or IQs. The students were not required to provide any such information when entering the programme and consequently this was not available to the lecturers. As previously mentioned, the ideology of the programme is based on a social understanding of disability which criticizes how special education services have been linked to and based on medical diagnosis and labelling (Lindsay 2003). However, the project manager, in cooperation with the diploma students, provided information about reading and communication skills and, when relevant, information about interests, strengths and weaknesses.

The lecturers who participated in this research repeatedly talked about how much positive influence the diploma students had on the student group. One argued that the diploma students contributed to the multicultural atmosphere of the School of Education and explained:

The diploma students bring a certain atmosphere and of course not all have a visible disability; many are open and warm and show interest in other people. They are visible in the hallways, in the library, in the food court and this influences the environment and makes it different and more diverse. The main point is that they change our beliefs with their presence and we see them for what they are but not what we think they are. I find this wonderful. I have re-evaluated my perspectives regarding people with intellectual disabilities and I am positive that many others have done so too, just by getting to know them.

All involved in the research were aware of the reservations towards this programme, but the lecturers argued that the programme was in accordance with the development of disability rights and education services for students with special education needs. A few of them mentioned the CRPD and assumed that it would secure the rights to PSE of people with intellectual disabilities. Others mentioned the inclusive education policy and said the programme could have an impact on the policy in general. One lecturer said:

The inclusive education policy has been contested. About half of compulsory school teachers do not agree with it. To experience themselves in college courses where students with intellectual disabilities actively participate must have some impact on the perspectives of students who will in the near future become compulsory school teachers or social educators. That's how I think the diploma students can change attitudes regarding inclusive education. If inclusive education is possible at PSE level, it should also be possible at lower levels.

The diploma programme for people with intellectual disabilities is the first PSE programme in Iceland for this student group. The programme was, within the university, defined as an experimental project until 2013 and is currently a 'special project' and not a formal programme within the university. The lecturers who participated in this research argued for the importance of implementing the project as a formal academic programme in order to secure its existence within the university.

## Employment outcomes

The hope for improved employment outcomes for graduated students is one of the stronger arguments or justifications for the programme. In 2015, 71% of the diploma students who had graduated from the programme at the time of the study were employed on the open labour market. Thereof, 50% had jobs within the scope of the diploma programme; that is, pre-preschools, after school clubs, libraries or as assistants within the field of disability services. Twenty per cent were employed at sheltered workshops, 7% were unemployed and 2% in continuing education. Information was gathered about the employment status of the students before they entered the programme. Their experience varied; 36% came straight from upper secondary school, 14% had only worked at sheltered workshops, 39% had worked on the open labour market and 9% were unemployed. Twenty one per cent of those who had worked on the open labour market had jobs within the scope of the programme. Table 2 provides an overview of employment status before entering and after graduating from the diploma programme. About half of the students who had been working in sheltered workshop before entering the programme were still employed in such settings in 2015.

As demonstrated in Table 2, participation in the diploma programme had an impact on students' employment outcomes. It is encouraging that the proportion of individuals working within the scope of the programme (field of education) increased from 21% to 50% after graduation. Although the number of individuals working in sheltered workshops also increased from 14% to 20% after graduation, this is to be expected since 36% of the students came to the programme straight from upper secondary school and thus had no job experience.

Career guidance and practicum makes up about a third of the programme and most of the diploma students agreed that this was one of its most important aspects. Their job experiences before entering university varied and those who came straight from upper secondary school had never been in paid jobs. The students who were employed in pre-primary schools, libraries and after school clubs at the point of entrance felt they had gained more knowledge and empowerment in their jobs. Many of those who had been employed in different fields of work had been able to get new and more challenging jobs after graduating from the programme based on new sets of skills acquired. On entering the programme, most of the students who had no or little job experience had few ideas about what they wanted to do in the future but discovered their field of interest during career guidance and practicum and a number of them found jobs after graduation at their practicum sites.

**Table 2.** Overview of employment status.

Employment status	Before entering the programme		After graduation	
	Number	Ratio %	Number	Ratio %
<i>Jobs within the scope of the programme</i>	12	21	28	50
After school programmes	2	4	8	14
Pre-primary schools	5	9	6	11
Compulsory schools	0	0	2	4
Libraries	4	7	6	11
Disability	1	2	6	11
<i>Other jobs in the open labour market</i>	10	18	12	21
Factory	1	2	1	2
Cafeteria	2	4	2	4
Shops	6	11	8	14
Gym	1	2	1	2
<i>Other</i>	34	61	16	29
Sheltered workshops	8	14	11	20
Unemployed	5	9	4	7
Continuing/postsecondary education	1	2	1	2
In upper secondary school	20	36	N/A	N/A
<i>Total</i>	56	100	56	100

Most experienced their practicum as positive, believing they had successfully met various challenges, and felt their self-esteem improving which was beneficial when they got jobs on the open labour market after graduation. A few changed sites during their practicum, either because they did not enjoy their original practicum placements or their on-site supervisors believed they could not rise up to the challenges and tasks of the site. Some were disappointed because they felt the practicum tasks were not challenging enough and sensed that their supervisors did not believe in them. This is in accordance with previous research where people with intellectual disabilities are not trusted to take on any responsibilities in relation to employment (Smith et al. 2004).

Disappointments in relation to their practicums were more of an exception than a common experience. One young woman commented on her on-site experience: 'I learned to work with children, learned how to play with them and assist them in their daily lives and this helped me a lot when I got a job at a nursery after graduation.' The employment outcomes are positive and if sheltered workshops are included, 93% of students were employed or in school after graduation. The employment outcomes are also acceptable in consideration of the economic environment in Iceland, which experienced nationwide crises in 2008 following the collapse of the Icelandic banking system. Unemployment is, however, relatively low, 5% in 2014, compared to 10% in Europe. However, it has been reported that unemployment among disabled people is closer to 50% (Social Science Research Institute 2013).

## Conclusion

Much has been accomplished since the diploma programme was established in 2007. The programme has attracted public attention and the presence of students with intellectual disabilities on campus and in courses has become a mundane part of campus life. The University of Iceland is 'committed to promoting equality and diversity in all fields and strives to be at the forefront in all areas of equality' (University of Iceland n.d.-b). Therefore, we argue that it is part of the university's obligations to contribute to the fight against ableism and the discriminative beliefs that people with intellectual disabilities cannot and should not have access to PSE. An important part of the quest for equality would also be providing these students with the tools of knowledge about their rights, thus helping them to fight for their place in society.

In general, graduated students regard the programme to be a positive experience and many of its aspects practical in relation to their current employment. The employment outcomes are better than we had expected especially in relation to the difficult economic environment in Iceland and high unemployment rates among disabled people. Also, most of the graduated students valued the opportunity to interact with non-disabled people of a similar age and with the same interests, and they reported increased social participation on and off campus. Our findings coincide with previous research where graduated students report higher self-esteem and self-worth at the point of graduation (Hart et al. 2006; Uditsky and Hughson 2012). Despite some reservations in the beginning, all of the lecturers described the inclusive courses as positive, both for non-disabled students and the diploma students.

However, even though the diploma students' views and experiences were in general positive they also criticized the scope of the programme for being limited since it is only two years of study with no opportunities for further education within the university. The findings also suggest that some of the diploma students need increased support and accommodation especially during their practicum. Also, although the students can choose from a variety of courses the selection needs to be greater in order to fit better individual needs and the employment aspect of the programme. Furthermore, eight of the participants are currently employed at sheltered workshops which are segregated from the shared social experience but the aim of the diploma programme is to promote full participation in society, including participation in the job market. It is important strengthen the collaboration between the University of Iceland and the job services that are responsible for providing disabled

people support in the labour market in order to improve the employment outcomes of graduated students.

One important issue has been left out of this discussion and that is the role and experiences of the student mentors; they have been interviewed and this will be included in future publications. The lecturers who participated in this research claimed that the experience also had a positive impact on their own perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities and their abilities to contribute to society. Future teachers, at all education levels, receive their education and training at the School of Education where they are being trained to become teachers in inclusive classrooms or settings. Providing this kind of education services, inclusive PSE, is therefore an important practical and ideological contribution to the development of inclusive education policy in Iceland.

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## Notes

1. The former Iceland University of Education, which has merged with the University of Iceland, forms the core of the new School of Education.
2. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a credit system designed to make it easier for students to move between different European countries and central in the Bologna Process. Sixty ECTS are the equivalent of a full year of study or work (European Union 2015).

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