

**PROFESSIONAL REPORT ON PARTICIPATION AT THE 17TH NNDR
CONFERENCE HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, HELSINKI,
FINLAND
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The 17th Nordic Network on Disability Research (NNDR) Conference was held on 7th – 9th May, 2025 at University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland. The theme of the conference: disability in the local and global contexts invited scholars, activists, decision makers, NGOs, and private sector actors, among others, to encounter each other and deepen understanding of disability both locally and globally.

Our experiences with disability are embodied, thus often individualised and normalised. As such, scholars mostly conceptualise disability as a social phenomenon that is locally embedded. There is evidence that global factors increasingly influence issues around disability and people with disabilities. For example, global issues including, climate change, pandemic, digitalisation, war, and migration are intertwined to our social fabric, hence complicate the phenomenon of disability in a local context. The global challenges therefore raise important questions concerning the binary between the local and global contexts based on state or continental borderlines. Moreover, the global challenges call for international collaborations. It is against these changes and challenges that the conference invited us to debate certain critical questions, including, how should disability studies approach the changing relations between the local and global phenomena? If we consider disability as a contextualised phenomenon, how do the global changes impact our understanding or approach to disability? What kind of new research questions are unfolding from these changes? What does contextual sensitivity and its rigorousness mean and require from disability scholars? Drawing on these critical questions, the 17th NNDR conference explored a wide range of issues around disability and disability research, including, disability and the labour market, service quality for people with intellectual disabilities, youth and transitions, independent living, disability and the digital society, neurodiversity, global disability studies, disability and ageing, disabilities in modern societies, history, and education.

The conference's thematic stream of the disability and the labour market, explored the barriers and opportunities for people with disabilities to equality in the labour market, employment and work life. The conference observed that current changes in the world of work, such as digitalization, flexibilization and individualization, are not only opportunities for better inclusion and overcoming of barriers for employment of people with disabilities, but also yield

the risk of creating new barriers and new cleavages of exclusion. The sub-theme of service quality for people with intellectual disabilities explored the factors that contribute to, or hinder the quality of support and services for people with intellectual disabilities, including, challenges related to the severity of disability, staff competence, evidence informed working methods, the organisational factors needed to embed good practice and legal regulations. The discussions delved on the strengths and weaknesses of different methods for measuring the quality of support and services as well as specific aspects of service quality for people with intellectual disabilities. It was noted that de-institutionalized services and support based on individual preferences have significantly improved the opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, as small community-based and more individualized services continue to replace institutions with an aim to promote self-determination, participation, and a sense of meaning and purpose. However, cases of abuse and violence towards people with intellectual disabilities are still being reported in the same settings. It was further observed that a good practice is fragile, and outcomes of similar services are variable. Therefore, continued discussions about quality and safeguarding are necessary.

The forum on youth and transitions invited the participants to explore the inequalities and diversities that shape the transitions of disabled young people as they move from childhood into adulthood. Thus, the discussions moved beyond individual and uncritical understandings of the values of independence, choice, and responsibility to engage with the broader constraints that shape transition experiences. This was a wider approach to transitions, thus enhance our understanding of how the experiences of disabled young people have been changed by social, political and economic shifts in areas employment, education, social care, technology, and wider welfare systems, as well as the impact on family and other significant relationships. The discussions on independent living tapped on the intersection between activism, research, and policy engagement. The participants debated on how to maximise on the space where activism meets scholarly engagement and policy innovation. Thus, presenting independent living as a field of enquiry capable of driving forward disability research.

The section on disability and the digital society, attracted discussions on disability and digitalization. The key achievement of disability studies would be to understand the relationships between bodies, abilities, and technologies primarily as social matters. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this stream deepened the understanding of society's digitalization in relation to the disability field. Accordingly, the stream provided not only the perspective of how digital technology can be understood from a disability perspective but also how the considerations about digital technology in social sciences, science and technology studies, and

humanities might change the current disability theories. The discussions focussed on accessibility to digital technology and how global inequalities are intertwined with digitalization. The debate on neurodiversity research explored the lived experiences of neurodivergent people by considering the barriers to achieving equity. Both medical and social models approach to disability were explored.

The forum on global disability studies observed that the mainstream disability studies has been dominated by the northern lens, with the experiences and voices of disabled people from the global south largely missing, even though the majority of disabled people reside in global south countries. The participants engaged in discussions around de-centring of disability theorizing by engaging in a transnational and comparative understanding of disability rights and justice across cultures and contexts, with a particular focus on the broadly defined Global South contexts. Disability and aging also came into a sharp focus. Demographic changes in countries around the world are giving rise to new concerns, not only for the general public, but also for people with disabilities. The conference analysed the links between ageing and disability from the angles of growing old as a disabled person; the evolution of epistemological currents, concepts, and methodologies used in the study of disability through the prism of ageing; and disability and ageing in the light of intersectionality.

The stream of disability in modern societies analysed disability from the context of significant shifts in social structures and institutions. The discussions delved into the living conditions and opportunities shaped by the dialectic relation between individuals and evolving institutional structures, along with political and scientific discourses. The conference employed interdisciplinary approaches that aim to re-examine our vocabulary of social pathologies, ableism and disability in a contemporary and innovative way by pointing towards new approaches to sustainable inclusion and diversity. The discussions on historical approach to disability emphasised on inter and multidisciplinary approaches to disability throughout history. We shared our experiences through case studies and methods between different fields. It is our believe that such interactions can lead to co-operations and collaborations that could extend beyond the confines of NNDR.

The forum on disability and education focused on education of learners with disabilities from early education to higher education. We explored ableist barriers to full participation of disabled people in education. Using reflections from my personal experiences as a teacher and a person with a disability, I presented the Kenyan perspective of inclusive education, with a focus on instructional inclusion, which seems to be inadequate in our schools. Instructional inclusion focuses on engagement of learners in a program of instruction that is meaningful and

challenging. I took a perspective that appropriate classroom instruction is more important than inclusion in the sense of students being merely physically present in general education classrooms.

Further, the conference gave me an opportunity to meet Professors, students, and other highly respected disability researchers across the globe. I had opportunities to interact with my colleagues whose research spheres intersect with mine, with whom we shared ideas on our doctoral research topics and current scientific challenges, and possible ways to successfully navigate the challenges. I intend to share my experiences from the conferences with my classmates and lecturers, and where possible make a presentation of the same to a larger audience.

Finally, I sincerely thank the Talent Support Council of Eötvös Loránd University for the financial support that enabled me to attend this conference.