



GÖTEBORGS  
UNIVERSITET

# About discrimination at the University

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES


GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

# Sweden's Discrimination Act has two main parts:

1.  
Prohibitions on  
discrimination

2.  
Active measures

Focus of this  
presentation



# Contents

- About discrimination
- Grounds of discrimination (protected characteristics)
- Forms of discrimination
- Prohibition of reprisals
- Consequences at individual and community level
- Adaptation strategies
- Everyone can do something

# Prohibition of discrimination

- Discrimination is when someone feels that they have been treated less favourably than others.
- Discrimination is prohibited under the Discrimination Act.
- The protection against discrimination applies to students who participate in or apply to an educational activity (education provider).

# Different interpretations of discrimination

- The word discrimination is often used as a word to mean **workplace bullying, unfair treatment** or **exclusion**.
- But what is experienced as workplace bullying, unfair treatment or exclusion is not always the same as discrimination.
- What is considered discrimination depends on the individual case and/or the course of events.

# To qualify as discrimination, the following applies:

Disadvantaged or aggrieved

- A person must have experienced that they have been disadvantaged or aggrieved.

Grounds of discrimination (protected characteristics)

- There must be a link with a protected characteristic (for sexual harassment, this does not apply).

Form of discrimination

- It must concern one of the six forms of discrimination described in the Act.

Areas of society

- It must have occurred in one of the areas of society where the Act applies (for example, education).

# Grounds of discrimination (protected characteristics)

To qualify as discrimination, the experience must be linked to one of the seven protected characteristics:

1. sex
2. transgender identity or expression
3. ethnicity
4. religion or other belief
5. disability
6. sexual orientation
7. age

# Six forms of discrimination

The Act prohibits six forms of discrimination:

1. direct discrimination
2. indirect discrimination
3. Inadequate accessibility
4. harassment
5. sexual harassment
6. instructions to discriminate

# 1. Direct discrimination

- A student/applicant is treated less favourably than someone else in a comparable situation.
- For this to be considered discrimination, the way in which the person is treated must be linked to one or more of the seven protected characteristics.

# Examples of **direct discrimination**

- A student receives a lower grade and this is linked to the student's ethnicity.
- A student is not allowed to continue their studies after approved leave from studies and this is linked to the fact that the student is pregnant.

## 2. Indirect discrimination

- A student/applicant is treated less favourably than someone else would be treated in a comparable situation because a certain rule or procedure is applied.
- The rule or procedure *appears* fair on paper but becomes unfair to some people when it is applied.

# Examples of indirect discrimination

- Course syllabuses and other rules for assessment risk compromising opportunities for a particular group of students.
- Instruction is organised in a way that makes it difficult for students to combine studies with parenthood.

### 3. Inadequate accessibility

- Obstacles in the activity make it difficult or impossible for a student with a disability to benefit from the course or study programme.
- Accessibility is deemed to be inadequate if the University does not do *enough* to enable the student to come into a situation comparable with that of other students without a disability.

# Examples of **inadequate accessibility**

- A student with hearing loss cannot take in lectures because there is no microphone or induction loop system.
- A student with dyslexia is given less favourable opportunities for participating in a course because new course material is often handed out to read during teaching sessions.

## 4. Harassment

- Harassment is conduct that violates a person's dignity.
- In order to be considered harassment, a link with one or more of the protected characteristics is required.
- According to the Act, the perpetrator must understand that the conduct is experienced as offensive in order for it to count as harassment.

# Examples of harassment

- Some fellow students joke in a derogatory way about a student because the student has a limited knowledge of Swedish. In group work, a student is frozen out.
- A supervisor questions a student's competence and treats the student less favourably because she wears a headscarf.

## 5. Sexual harassment

- Sexual harassment is conduct of a sexual nature that violates someone's dignity.
- According to the Act, the perpetrator must understand that the conduct is experienced as offensive in order for it to count as sexual harassment.
- It is therefore important that the victim makes clear to the harassing person that the behaviour is not welcome.

# Examples of **sexual harassment**

- Unwanted looks, wolf-whistles or sexual comments.
- Spreading rumours about a person's body or sex life.
- A sexual touch that is not welcome.
- Sexual jargon, using derogatory language.
- Unwanted text messages, pictures, or videos.
- Unwanted sexual propositions.

## 6. Instructions to discriminate

Instructions to discriminate means that someone with power gives an order or instructs someone who is in a subordinate or dependent position, such as an employee, to discriminate against someone else.

# Examples of instructions to discriminate

A person in a managerial position gives instructions to teachers that students with a certain ethnicity, sexual orientation or sex for example should not be allowed to participate in a particular type of activity that is part of the course to which they have been admitted.

# Prohibition of reprisals

- Anyone who wants to report or call attention to discrimination should be able to do so without having to worry about reprisals.
- The Discrimination Act contains a 'prohibition of reprisals', which protects anyone who has called attention to discrimination from being punished.

# Discriminatory processes

- It is common for discrimination to be experienced as occurring in **processes** rather than as individual incidents.
- Past experience combined with an individual incident can contribute to the experience of being discriminated against.

# Example of experiencing a discriminatory process

A student experiences that they are negatively stereotyped because of their gender expression.

At the same time, the student experiences that there is a sexist and transphobic jargon used in the study environment.

**Individual incident:** A lecturer refuses to use the pronoun that the student wants to be addressed by.

Based on past experience, the individual incident is perceived as part of a discriminatory pattern.

# Impacts of discrimination on individuals

## Psychological reactions

- Concern, anxiety, fear, depression, self-criticism, feelings of inadequacy, isolation, reduced engagement with studies

## Physical reactions

- Disrupted sleep, stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, dizziness

# Social impacts

- Increased risk of non-completion
- Costs in the form of sick leave and rehabilitation
- Poorer health for some groups
- Poorer economy for victim groups
- Reduced trust in other people and institutions
- Increased gaps between different groups

# Adaptation strategies

Those who have experienced being treated less favourably often develop various kinds of adaptation strategies to:

- deal with the experience of discrimination
- avoid the discrimination happening again.

# Combating discrimination – everyone can do something

- The education provider has the ultimate responsibility for combating discrimination.
- However, to really combat discrimination, all those working in universities need to shoulder their share of this responsibility.
- Everyone can do something to promote the equal rights and opportunities of students and applicants.

# Examples of what students can do

## **Become aware of your own prejudices**

- We all have prejudices about other people.
- Becoming aware of your prejudices is a step towards making the University more inclusive.

## **Become aware of your advantages**

- Depending on the context, different people have more power and influence than others.
- By becoming aware of when you have power, you can promote or make room for others with less power.

# Examples of what teaching staff can do

## Approach

- Think about whether you have ideas about how students should be and behave that influence how you approach them.
- Reflect on the examples you use in your teaching. Are they examples of the same type? Whose reality is depicted? Review these. Can you see a pattern?
- Avoid pointing out individual students as examples of content that is discussed in your teaching, such as: “You over there, you wear a veil...”

# Examples of what teaching staff can do, continued

## Course planning

- Follow the recommendations of the special educational support coordinators or the individual student's recommendations for special educational support.
- Review the types of teaching materials used (books, PowerPoint presentations, compendiums, digital learning materials, videos, audio files). Are the formats you are using accessible?

# Examples of what administrative staff can do

## Admission

- Map sex distribution at different education cycle levels.
- If applicable, investigate the reasons why:
  - a study programme only attracts a certain group of students
  - students don't complete their studies
- Use alternative selection and assessment of prior learning.

# Examples of what management can do

- Make sure everyone in the activity knows what harassment, sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination are.
- Actively highlight equal treatment issues within the organisation.
- Provide guidelines for how work is to be managed, organised and implemented at different levels, and set goals.
- Estimate the time and resources for this work.
- Request results.

# More information

For more information about discrimination and suggestions on how to promote students' rights and opportunities, see the Equality Ombudsman's online course:

[Studenters rätt i högskolan \(Students' rights in higher education institutions\)](#)



GÖTEBORGS  
UNIVERSITET

This presentation was developed as part of the **Sustainable and accessible learning environments** project at the Faculty of Social Sciences.