Dear student,

Empowerment, enablement and participation are key concepts in actual social care and education. Due to a paradigm shift, the social worker is struggling with his identity. The expert model, where the professional knows it all and knows it better, has changed towards a partnership model where clients have to take responsability for their own quality of life. Making choices, taking or being in control of their support system, taking their life or future in their own hands … these are the new objectives of social care and clients need our ongoing support on this. The social workers professionalism and the clients expertise are equally valued. The focus is on full participation in society and therefore barriers constructed by social structures become more visible and critisized. Supporting their clients in the process of empowerment, social workers have to inform them about their rights, to make them conscious about oppressive forces and discriminating barriers in society, , ... so they can enhance their self-determination and stand up for their rights and life quality.
Trough this process they have to cut themselves loose of their 'learned dependency' … and in fact from the social professional or service that they are depending on. What are the chances …? People who are depending on our social care systems, experience that these systems and professionals are still patronizing and impede their emancipation.
Education and social care systems are constructed, and therefore pretending, to fight or correct inequality but at the same time they create inequality.
Constructed by the mainstream, education and social work are reflecting the values and standards of this majority. Both social structures are so powerful that they don't tolerate oppositon not from professionals acting within this systems, nor from the clients, client systems or parents.
Will this ever change? How do we prepare - through education - future social workers and teachers? Are these students and future professionals by themselves empowered? Does higher education create empowerment of students or does it create uncritical professionals that have learned to conform to the system? Empowerment in (higher) education undergoes the same paradox as in social work. While studying to become a teacher or a social worker, while being taught about the importance of empowerment, students show little of being empowered themselves.
In this context participating into higher education is participating into a system that maintains inequality in society. Firstly, higher education is dominated by economic strategies and labour market principles which enlarges the gap between the haves and the have nots. Secondly, it's not accessible for everybody and thirdly you are being dominated and suppressed by this educational structure. Do you even care that everything is prepared for you? That you consume education as a product and you undergo the reality in stead of shaping it? You think that you're education is making you free but in fact you're afraid to criticize it and show your self. Instead you know that adjusting or conforming yourself to the system, increases your chances of success in higher education.
So what are the chances that you as a future professional will make a difference for your client? Empowerment of future clients, will not succeed when you don't go through the proces of empowerment yourself. But that's not going to happen, is it? Because you're afraid to stand up for who you are and maybe against the school system you're depending on. Empowerment will only be tolerated when it's fitting social structures … but isn't that a contradiction in terms?