



## Article

# Inclusive Teaching in Higher Education: Challenges of Diversity in Learning Situations from the Lecturer Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper contributes to the dialogue around how to increase inclusion in higher education, taking the lecturer perspective as the point of departure. Theoretically, disability is understood as an interaction, which means that lecturers partake in the constitution of dis/ability in learning situations. Two qualitative interviews were conducted with an interdisciplinary lecturer employed in an institution of higher education in Norway. These data are used for this single case study to illustrate and reflect on the challenges of diversity in learning situations. Findings suggest that the lecturer struggles to encounter an increasingly diverse student population inclusively. Overall, her experiences unpack the outcome of a structural lack of prioritization to ensure accessibility for disabled students at an institutional level at the university where she is employed. This article emphasizes that the responsibility to ensure an inclusive teaching practice in higher education must be recognized and treated as an institutional obligation. To signal its priority, all institutions of higher education should make inclusive training obligatory for lecturers, as well as assigning hours to work on enhancing the development of inclusive skills in this group.

**Keywords:** higher education; disabilities; inclusive practice; inclusive education; lecturer perspective; disclosure; student diversity



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## 1. Introduction

While research on disabled students' access to higher education has increased over the years, still relatively few studies have been conducted on this matter from the perspective of the lecturer. In the existing literature, lecturer experiences, practices, and attitudes are typically represented by several voices (i.e., [Cameron and Nunkoosing 2012](#); [Kendall 2018](#); [Moriña and Orozco 2020, 2022](#); [Orozco and Moriña 2023](#); [Svendby 2020](#)). In turn, this research gives a general insight into, for example, why and how lecturers may hinder or facilitate accessibility for all their students in learning situations. While acknowledging the importance of this knowledge, a holistic approach, providing context to the lecturer experience, may add value to the research dialogue. It is likely to increase our understanding of the general picture presented in the literature as well as enable transferability regarding similar situations ([Befring 2020](#), p. 50). Aiming at such an outcome, this paper contributes to the research dialogue with a description of the experience of one lecturer, using a single case study approach, hereby offering an in-depth presentation to supplement the literature.

The questions explored in this article are as follows: How is encountering increasing student diversity experienced by a lecturer with inclusive ambitions? What structures, or lack thereof, related to opportunities to teach inclusively are implicitly unpacked in her stories? A brief summary of the status of the field of inclusion and accessibility to higher education is presented below, followed by an outline of the theoretical and methodological aspects of the study this paper relies on.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Status

According to disability scholars, there is still much progress to be made before disabled students encounter the same educational opportunities as other students (Dolmage 2017; Eunyong and Aquino 2017; Goodall et al. 2022; Goodley 2014; Kerschbaum et al. 2017; Titchkosky 2011). Unfortunately, disabled students have faced and continue to face inaccessibility in higher education on a number of levels. For example, they encounter physical barriers as well as historically ableist assumptions that result in the stigmatization of particular groups of students and thus their exclusion from campus (Titchkosky 2011; Dolmage 2017). Currently, institutions of higher education around the world are moving towards the practice of inclusive education. However, in comparison with other levels of education, this is a slow process (Pérez-Esteban et al. 2023). One central problem in this regard is that the learning environment is often inaccessible due to a general lack of inclusive practices among lecturers internationally (Colón et al. 2018). In turn, disabled students continue to encounter inaccessibility at the university level (Sandoval et al. 2021; Vergunst and Swartz 2020).

### 2.2. Disability as an Interaction

Theoretically, this paper situates inclusion within an understanding of disability as an interaction. Following Shakespeare (2014), this entails a holistic view, focusing on disability not as a deficit, a structural disadvantage, or as a product of cultural discourse, but, instead, “the experience of a disabled person results from the relationship between factors intrinsic to the individual, and extrinsic factors arising from the wider context in which she finds herself” (Shakespeare 2014, pp. 74–75). These intrinsic factors include the nature of the impairment, individuals’ attitudes to it, and their personality, qualifications, and abilities. The extrinsic factors include attitudes and reactions from others, the extent to which the environment is enabling or disabling, and the wider cultural, social, and economic issues concerning disability in society at the time (Shakespeare 2014, p. 75). According to this perspective, people are disabled both by society and their bodies (Shakespeare 2014, p. 75). In the context of this paper, inclusion is understood as a learning environment which is welcoming to all students regardless of their functional variations.

## 3. Methods

The backdrop for this paper is a qualitative, explorative study about lecturers’ experiences of teaching disabled students in Norwegian institutions of higher education (Svendby 2020, 2021). Five lecturers with teaching experience in the Norwegian university and university college sector were interviewed in this regard. Additionally, two persons employed at a disability office at one university and three people working at a national, state-financed, interest organization for young disabled people were interviewed. The aim was to produce knowledge to inform practice and increase disabled students’ opportunities to participate in learning situations. After publishing articles where (some of) the experiences of lecturers participating in the study were presented and analyzed, unpublished data from the interviews of one participant (here named Emma for anonymity) were used for a single case study. This method is often used with an idiographic aim, which means a search for knowledge about particular traits or phenomena, which is in turn presented in a holistic format (Befring 2020, pp. 49–50). The reason for singling out the story of Emma from the larger study was that it captured an essence of insecurity and frustration regarding teaching in the current climate of increased demands with respect to managing an inclusive practice in higher education. An underlying notion of insecurity and frustration had been present in all interviews, as well as being recognizable from the research literature. In the story of Emma, it stood out as a key element; thus, the single case study design was chosen because it provided a unique opportunity to explore this aspect of the lecturer perspective on inclusive practice by zooming in on Emma’s reality.

The study used a phenomenological approach, where subjective understandings and experiences are of the essence (Justesen and Mik-Meyer 2012). This is significant in situations experienced by Emma, where disability was encountered when no disclosure had occurred. Establishing whether a student is disabled or not, defines themselves as such, or has any diagnosis is not relevant for this study. Here, the underlying premise is accepting that Emma understands and experiences the situations under scrutiny as encountering disabled students.

Emma was interviewed for about one hour, twice, and the interviews were semi-structural. The first interview took place in her office. The second occurred a few days later, and on the telephone for practical reasons. The interviews were written down on a computer by the researcher during the conversations. Prioritizing meaning (and not verbatim statements), the interviews were sent to Emma in written form after each one was conducted and she was encouraged to process the text further if she wished in order to promote her ownership of the data (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). She made some changes to the material from both interviews, for example, by supplementing the text with added information and altering her wording. Later, the empirical data material was translated from Norwegian to English by an authorized translator.

Analytically, the study drew on a 'reflexive thematic analysis', inspired by the process initially outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), who later refined and nuanced this technique (i.e., Braun and Clarke 2019; Braun et al. 2022). The process of analysis was inductive and entailed reading and becoming familiarized with the data. Then, the data were manually coded. The coding process was creative, reflexive, and subjective, which means that another researcher is likely to have viewed the data through a different lens and to have developed other codes than I did (Braun and Clarke 2019). The same is true of the production of the empirical material (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). In the interviews, I was, for instance, searching for examples of challenging situations and best practice in the stories of the interviewee due to the overall aim of the study. This influenced the direction of the conversations and thus the production of the data. Among the initial codes, which were all words occurring in the empirical material, were 'challenge', 'problem(s)', 'difficult', 'don't know', 'aggressive' and 'solve'. After coding the dataset, I re-read the full text as well as cross-reading and comparing the coded sections. In the following process of actively generating themes, I relied on the idea that they are "stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset" (Braun and Clarke 2019, p. 592). I have used three themes as subtitles in this article because they illuminate meaningful patterns of Emma's experience of encountering diversity as a lecturer in higher education.

Below, the Norwegian context is briefly unpacked. Then, Emma's experiences as a lecturer are used to illuminate the ways in which she seeks to build an inclusive learning environment and the barriers she encounters in this regard.

#### 4. Context

In Norway, where this study is situated, the government has the ambition of offering higher education to the whole population. Therefore, institutions of higher education in the public sector charge only a symbolic tuition fee. Regarding functional variation, legislation and policies establish that higher education is to be accessible to all students 'within reason' (NOU 2020; St.meld. nr. 40 2002–2003; Universitets-og Høgskoleloven 2005). To help with this process, a department has been established by the Norwegian government under the Ministry of Education and Research, working nationally to secure the accessibility of higher education, called the Department for Universal Design and Learning Environment in the Division for Higher Education and Research in HK-dir (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills). While the institutions of higher education in Norway are required by law to provide an inclusive learning environment, there is currently no formalized training in inclusive practices for academic staff, i.e., the group executing the actual teaching. Consequently, whether disabled students receive relevant information, accommodations, and encounter an inclusive learning environment in Norwegian institutions of higher education

is random and dependent on the competences of each individual lecturer (Svendby 2020). Locally, all institutions of higher education are obliged to have a disability services office that works to promote accessibility by, for instance, offering information to the public and guidance to disabled students. To obtain accommodations, students must document their disabilities and send in an application. The disability offices may provide help in the application process. Often, available accommodations are listed on the institution's website. Examples of typical accommodations include extended time during exams, technological aids, sign interpreters, and access to a place to rest.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. *Introducing the Lecturer*

Emma is an experienced interdisciplinary lecturer as well as an established researcher. She has taught students in higher education for approximately two decades. Her academic background includes areas of both humanities and social sciences. She has worked abroad for several years of her career, teaching in institutions of higher education in Norway, the UK, and the US. Her experience includes tutoring individual students and having academic responsibility for both small and large student groups of up to approximately 150 individuals. While she has experimented with a variety of methods in seminar groups to create a fruitful learning environment for students, she has extensive experience within the traditional lecturer role as well. When the interviews were conducted, Emma was employed at a Norwegian university where she had worked as a lecturer for several years. Emma emphasizes that she has a clear ambition of being an inclusive lecturer but also that she finds this goal increasingly difficult to fulfil.

### 5.2. *Encountering Student Disclosure Creates Unpredictable Situations*

Despite her comprehensive and international experience with teaching in higher education, Emma explains that she has become increasingly worried about issues related to inclusion in the context of teaching. For example, Emma finds that students today are very open about their internal struggles compared to a few years ago. This openness influences her work in unexpected ways. It creates unpredictable situations that she has to manage there and then. On one occasion, for instance, a student stated out loud in class that she struggled with ADHD. Moreover, the student explained in plenum that it might become a problem because she could get over-excited and not be able to calm herself. In this instance, the student's openness had constructive effects. Since the student had been open in plenum, Emma was comfortable guiding her openly too. It was both necessary and it worked well. She explains:

I had to interrupt her and set boundaries during the lesson so that it didn't spin out of control. She found it difficult to take a hint and understand her classmates' signals; she had problems understanding that enough is enough. She would not give up, and she disregarded others. But things went well because I could interrupt her during class and talk with her on the breaks. I could ask her, 'How are you doing? Do you think I was too harsh when I interrupted you just now?'. Then we could have a meta-discussion since she had told us in advance about her problem and that I could speak with her about it and interrupt her. This made it much easier for me. I didn't have to leave the classroom with a bad conscious because I had spoken harshly to her. (Emma)

To Emma, the student's disclosure created room for an open meta-discussion to take place in which she could address the ways that she interacted with the student in class. Here, disclosure gave Emma the opportunity to adjust her strategies in accordance with the student's experiences, for instance, of Emma's interruptions and level of 'harshness'. Hence, Emma could take steps to take part in the production of an enabling learning environment for both the individual student and the group through her responses.

### 5.3. Balancing between Teaching and Healthcare

While Emma found that she succeeded in supporting the student due to the disclosure of ADHD in the example above, she is ambivalent about student openness in plenum. Emma finds that trying to balance her role as a lecturer within the terrain of disability disclosure is demanding. She elaborates:

There must be a greater acceptance of these challenges [disabilities], but it's important to strike a balance as well. A class lesson should not become a therapy group either. Students must be allowed to remain anonymous and not be compelled to always talk about their problems. I also think that adequately supporting students who struggle with such difficulties can be quite demanding. (...) I don't think that we can fix every problem. We work with people in a field that is both educational, you look after students—but at the same time you are not a healthcare worker. You are not a therapist. Where do you draw the line? (Emma)

Emma raises various issues of importance to lecturers. Where do you draw the line between looking after the students as a lecturer and this turning into the role of a healthcare worker? How do you strike a balance between a safe and open environment where students feel free to disclose their challenges without turning class into a therapy group? How do you acknowledge personal challenges—a natural part of living—without pathologizing them? While there are no set answers to these questions, Emma is in a situation where she is more or less left to figure out how to answer them by herself.

To Emma, securing the right to privacy for the students is a part of this complex issue as well. Here, Emma is on board with the concerns raised from the student perspective on this matter. In *Negotiating Disability: Disclosure and Higher Education* (Kerschbaum et al. 2017), the authors highlight that disclosure may be experienced as a heavy burden on the person in question. They describe disclosure as 'coming out'. This is a continuous process which may be enriching, but also risky, demanding, and tiresome. The lecturer may experience the receiving end of disclosure as a one-time incident. From the discloser's side, however, it is often part of a continuous negotiation, sometimes throughout their lives. Choosing whether to disclose or not is a complicated and personal issue (Knight 2017). Furthermore, it involves, according to Pryal (2017), an invasion of privacy due to the requirements of 'mountains' of documentation, sometimes repeatedly, to obtain even the minimum amount of support. What follows, moreover, is the risk of facing ableist language, stigmatizing attitudes, and being met with the suspicion of fraud by academic staff (Pryal 2017). Pryal argues that the fear of stigmatization is especially precarious to people with mental health issues due to latent ableist attitudes in academic culture. This applies particularly to issues affecting the brain, which are deeply valued in academia. Overall, regarding non-/disclosure, she states that "[i]n the context of higher education, giving up our privacy just might not be worth it" (Pryal 2017, p. 55). Like Pryal, many disabled people choose non-disclosure. To Emma, this reality actualizes the question of how to encounter every student group inclusively when they are all unique in their compositions and needs. Because, Emma declares, ultimately, she knows very little about her students most of the time: "I have no idea what kind of diagnoses or challenges the students in the group have". She emphasizes:

There is so much we don't know about people—and maybe we should not know it either. Nor should we pathologize everything. (Emma)

### 5.4. Encountering "Something" in Students Is a Challenge

One challenge of not knowing is that it makes it harder to give support when one detects what Emma calls "something". Emma explains that in encounters with student groups she uses her "intuition". Often, she "senses" her "way forward". Still, there are times when she does not know what to do or how to help, or even what is her responsibility when she suspects that there is "something" about a student. Moreover, Emma has felt insecure about how to manage the lecturer role in encounters with some of her students.

She explains that, in her experience, some students with cognitive disabilities express themselves aggressively when they are challenged in learning situations. She is facing a challenge in one student group that she suspects might be connected to such issues. She describes the situation as follows:

It's a small seminar group with just a few students. I don't know what this one student's problem is. There are some dyslexia, but... also something else. I have no idea how to explain to her that she becomes aggressive and obstinate during discussions. The other students feel that she attacks them and their projects in a non-constructive manner. Last week I thought to myself that this isn't going to work. So I said, 'Next time we won't assemble as a group. You will meet individually with me instead.' I will talk with each student, one on one, and they can talk to me about their projects. Students react differently to what happens during the seminars, and it's important to me to speak with them now to ensure that they don't lose confidence in their projects after such aggressive criticism. By setting up individual meetings, I also get to speak with her [the student] a bit more; perhaps I can find a better way to communicate with her. When I do it like that; setting up individual discussions with everyone, it won't be so strange, like it might be if I spoke *only* with her or removed her from the group to talk with her. But in order to do this, the seminar group must not be too large. If there had been a lot of students, I could not have solved it like this. (Emma)

Emma has reflected on how certain behavior—such as expressions of aggression and anger in teaching situations—may be a result of something other than the person being 'difficult' and associates such behaviors with certain disabilities. To understand and find a helpful approach to interpret such expressions herself, Emma has concluded that it might be uncertainty that causes some disabled people to react this way. To her, however, these reactions create what she calls "a special situation" in seminar groups such as the one illustrated in the example above. Encountering "something" this way is challenging for her personally. In addition, she is concerned with how it impacts the other students and the group dynamics. She explains:

Then there are the other students, who may not grasp the situation of others. They may not take a hint or realize that the student they think is 'uncool' actually has a personal challenge. It's more difficult for us as teachers to deal with the fact that the students don't see the whole picture, and the other students do not necessarily have the same information as I do. They don't know there is a problem, and I can't say anything when I know there is one. (Emma)

##### 5.5. Challenges of Student Diversity in Learning Situations

In this paper, inclusion in learning situations is explored through the experience of the lecturer Emma, who has a clear ambition of working with the increasingly diverse student body inclusively yet struggles to fulfil this goal in her daily practice. Her stories unpack a structural lack of prioritization to ensure accessibility for disabled students at an institutional level. Regarding learning situations, this lack is evident for her as well as for lecturers generally, considering the long-going absence of necessary resources assigned to academic staff to equip them with what they need to teach inclusively. Significantly, research from different countries has established that while lecturers often show positive attitudes towards inclusive teaching, many lack the consciousness, training, time, or other resources to ensure that they provide an inclusive learning environment (Cameron and Nunkoosing 2012; Fuller et al. 2004; Holloway 2001; Hong and Himmel 2009; Kendall 2018; Langørgen and Magnus 2018; Matthews 2009; Moriña and Orozco 2020; Redpath et al. 2013). Consequently, many struggle to manage their role and feel unable to offer good educational responses to all students (Collins et al. 2019; Colón et al. 2018; Moriña et al. 2020; Sandoval et al. 2021). This experience comes to the fore in Emma's story, too.

Emma unpacks how student diversity has led to a more unpredictable work situation for her, especially in terms of complex interactions in the classroom. On the one hand,

students might disclose diagnoses in plenum. In turn, it then becomes her responsibility in the role of the lecturer to manage the impact of such a situation adequately on the spot. She is insecure about how to handle this. In addition, she struggles with the issue of how to handle reactions from other students when one student appears to be 'difficult' due to reasons that Emma is aware of but is hindered from revealing to the group due to confidentiality. Finding a balance between being accepting of disabilities while not making personal challenges central in seminars and avoiding turning, from the position of a lecturer, into a healthcare worker is a re-occurring issue which has become increasingly pressing as the diversity of the student body has continued to grow. While student openness may create unpredictable situations that are demanding to handle, Emma finds that, on the other hand, (presumed) non-disclosure is difficult to tackle as well. These situations may also lead to demanding encounters where Emma is faced with finding solutions to dilemmas using her own experience and creativity.

Considering disability as an interaction (Shakespeare 2014), Emma's reactions, attitudes, and behaviors as a lecturer directly influence whether the learning situation may be characterized as enabling or disabling. Thus, these frustrations and insecurities, as unpacked by Emma, are concerning. They highlight the importance of equipping academic staff with adequate resources to handle complex interactions in order to create an inclusive environment through enabling extrinsic factors. However, her stories also cast light on the complexity of disability and highlight how the lecturer is only one part of the puzzle of creating an inclusive environment. The interaction is dependent on the lecturer and her responses, yes, but also on the reactions, attitudes, and behaviors of individual students, the group as a whole, and their (institutional) surroundings. From an interactive perspective, the inclusive learning environment is created by cooperation and the engagement of all parts are necessary to ensure its existence. It is necessary, therefore, to emphasize that while Emma seems to feel solely responsible for sustaining an inclusive learning environment, she neither is, should, or could be. Significantly, the responsibility of ensuring that academic staff are equipped to encounter diversity rests on their institutions.

While all have a role to play in the production of inclusion in learning situations, providing lecturers with relevant knowledge on inclusion is a necessity (Grimes et al. 2021; Sandoval et al. 2021; Vergunst and Swartz 2020). Indeed, disability scholars have offered lists and practical advice on how to proceed to increase inclusive skills in teaching (Castrodale 2017; Dolmage 2017; Svendby 2023). However, it is not sufficient or fair to rely on lecturers' personal motivations to explore such questions in their own time. It is paramount to recognize that the responsibility of ensuring an inclusive learning environment rests not on the individual lecturer; rather, institutions of higher education have the obligation of accessibility, including equipping academic staff with the necessary knowledge. Concretely, all basic training in teaching skills should involve inclusive strategies. For example, early in their teaching career, all lecturers should at least be instructed on how to hold inclusive introductions in their classes and how to promote an inclusive atmosphere through a conscious use of language (Svendby 2023). Furthermore, the time it takes to ensure competence enhancement in inclusion should not come on top of other tasks or be voluntary; rather, institutions of higher education should signalize their priority by making such training obligatory as well as assigning hours especially to both the formal (bound) and informal (self-regulated) development of inclusive skills for individual lecturers. Engaging in a reflexive process to take responsibility for one's own situatedness within teaching and the effect it may have on the people in the setting is an example of the latter. Relevant training ought to be on-going, useful, and contextualized (Orozco and Morña 2023). Moreover, lecturers should be given clear and informative guidelines from their institutions, including information on where and who to contact should they need advice concerning issues related to inclusion. In addition, all institutions should consider establishing places for academic staff to discuss dilemmas, solutions, share inclusive strategies, and so on (Svendby 2020). Until institutions of higher education around the world consider accessibility with the seriousness it deserves and counter a lack of inclusive practice among their staff with

concrete measures, disabled students will unfortunately continue to face a situation where they are robbed of their right to access higher education.

### 5.6. Limitations

This paper uses interviews with only one study participant as the point of departure for discussion. On the one hand, focusing on the experience of one person constitutes a limitation which must be taken into consideration in any reading and interpretation of this paper and its arguments. On the other hand, the arguments outlined here draw on a larger study as their backdrop and rely on the research literature in the field. Considering this, the experience of the lecturer Emma may be seen as illustrative of some of the general challenges lecturers currently encounter regarding issues of inclusion in higher education. One example is the changing characteristics of the student body in terms of increased diversity, which have greatly impacted Emma's teaching experience.

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