

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Lecturers' Teaching Experiences with Invisibly Disabled Students in Higher Education: Connecting and Aiming at Inclusion

Rannveig Svendby

Oslo Metropolitan University, NO  
rannveig@fastmail.fm

This qualitative study is positioned in critical disability studies and explores lecturers' teaching experiences with invisibly disabled students. Five lecturers in the Norwegian higher education sector were interviewed. The study uses a transactional perspective and a relational approach to disabilities. The participants experienced a lack of institutional guidelines, formal training in inclusive practice, and access to pedagogical resources. Their diversity awareness increased over time through connections and interactions. In turn, new insights led them to transformative change by creatively exploring approaches and teaching methods which, in their perception, had an inclusive effect. The study recommends that all institutions of higher education embrace their formal responsibility of accessibility by providing academic staff with clear guidelines and obligatory training in inclusive practice to ensure a fair and coherent educational program. They are also encouraged to establish an online platform dedicated to inclusive practice that will serve as a pedagogical resource bank.

**Keywords:** higher education; inclusion; disability; lecturer perspective; transactions

## Introduction

According to recent Norwegian legislation and educational policies, higher education should be accessible to all students regardless of their individual needs and disabilities (NOU 2020: 3; St.meld. nr. 40 2002–2003; Universitets- og høyskoleloven 2005). As a result, student diversity at Norwegian educational institutions has expanded in recent decades. Meanwhile, the adaptations disabled students require have become more complex. For example, students increasingly request adaptation for invisible disabilities such as ADHD, dyslexia and mental health challenges (Rognaldsen 2012). The inclusion of invisibly disabled students in teaching situations requires awareness of student diversity and expertise in inclusive practice. This paper investigates lecturers' capacities in this respect. Inclusive practice being an enabling teaching practice that seeks to embrace the participation of all students and treat each as a valuable member of the learning collective. 'It is an educational philosophy and practice that aims to improve the learning and active participation of all the students in a common educational context' (Moriña 2017: 3). In this philosophy, diversity is regarded as beneficial and is broadly defined as differences in capabilities, gender, social background, and cultural background, etc. (Ibid.). In this paper, the term diversity is used to refer to disabilities in particular.

The study is positioned in the field of critical disability studies, which places the problem of disability in society (Goodley 2011) and values difference without the goal of normalization (Castrodale 2017). The study aims to elucidate lecturers' experiences of teaching invisibly disabled students and to inform reflections and pedagogical strategies to increase this student groups' access to higher education. The study asks: What steps do lecturers in the Norwegian higher education sector take to include invisibly disabled students in their teaching? What do lecturers see as the challenges related to inclusion of this group of students in educational situations and how do they perceive their own capacities to teach inclusively? Currently, there are no qualitative studies that offer lecturers' perspectives of teaching invisibly disabled students in the context of Norwegian institutions of higher education. This study seeks to help fill the gap by contributing insight into lecturers' experiences and inclusive practice from an interactional perspective. For contextualization, an overview of previous research on disability in higher education follows below.

## Previous Research

### *Disability in higher education*

Disability scholars have investigated the role of disability in higher education from different angles and established that there is still a long way to go until disabled students have the same educational opportunities as others (Dolmage 2017; Eunyoung & Aquino 2017; Kerschbaum, Eisenman & Jones 2017; Titchkosky 2011). For example, Tanya Titchkosky (2011) reveals that disabled people experience exclusion on campus, e.g., physical barriers and excluding discourses. Jay Dolmage (2017) points to the historical devaluation of disabled people in higher education and ableist assumptions that continue to rank and exclude some students' form of participation. Mad studies, which has evolved as a radical critique of cultural violence, stigma, and stereotyping attached to mental health issues (Beresford & Russo 2016), problematizes the alienation of mad subjects in higher education (Castrodale 2015). Pedagogical decisions 'may dis/able particular ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world among others' (Castrodale 2017: 53). In the academic dialogue of critical pedagogy, however, there is an absence and thus a need to embrace disabled and mad subjects (Castrodale 2015; Goodley 2007). Responding to the absence of disabled subjects in the discussion, Mark Castrodale offers a list of enabling pedagogies. For example, he encourages the representation of traditionally silenced voices and nuancing dominant narratives on disability and mental health in teaching (Castrodale 2017: 61). In a similar practical approach, Jay Dolmage (2017) offered lecturers a list of ways to improve inclusive practice on his publisher's website, focusing on universal learning design. Such practical advice directed at academic staff on how to create an inclusive learning environment is much needed, as this paper will elucidate.

Internationally, a small but expanding body of literature has explored academic staffs' teaching experiences with, attitudes towards, and perceptions of disability (Cameron & Nankoosing 2012; Kendall 2018; Matthews 2009; Moriña & Orozco 2020) as well as the significance of the teacher role in relation to accessibility of higher education (Langørgen & Magnus 2018; Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela 2004; Stein 2014). The picture that emerges is complex. But, research has established that availability, understanding, and caring staff positively impact disabled students' academic achievement (Langørgen & Magnus 2018; Rao 2004; Stein 2014). Also, academic staff often show willingness to make accommodations for these students, at least in theory (Hong & Himmel 2009; Kendall 2018; Mutanga & Walker 2017). However, there is still great uncertainty, prejudice, and relatively little knowledge about disabilities and appropriate adaptations among lecturers in higher education (Baker, Brown & Fazey 2006; Cameron & Nankoosing 2012; Kendall 2018; Mutanga & Walker 2017).

To illustrate the picture, some examples are presented here: A recent study from Spain highlights faculty members' negative attitudes, lack of awareness, and lack of training regarding disability as obstacles to inclusion (Moriña & Orozco 2020). In South Africa, a study of lecturer perspectives at two universities found that barriers to inclusion arose from lecturers' lack of knowledge, responsibility, and skills related to addressing the needs of disabled students and making appropriate adaptations for them (Mutanga & Walker 2017). In the UK, a study found that personal experience with dyslexia stimulated lecturers' recognition and provision of support for dyslexic students, while a lack of personal experience decreased the lecturers' ability to acknowledge the students' need for support (Cameron & Nankoosing 2012). Another study from the UK identified a juxtaposition in which all the participants were committed to implementing inclusive practices. However, they found this difficult to deliver in practice due to feelings of being overwhelmed, under pressure, and uncertainty about how to balance maintaining academic standards and accommodating disabled students (Kendall 2018). This finding resonates with other studies (Mutanga & Walker 2017; Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson 2005). Overall, the studies suggest that sensitizing, informing and training faculty members to recognize disabilities, respond appropriately, and use universal design for learning and assistive technologies might enable participation for a larger student population. This recommendation resonates with studies from the perspective of disabled students which reveal that this student group often receives poor follow-up and adaptation in higher education and ends up with individual responsibility for their own inclusion (e.g. Brandt 2011; Fuller et al. 2004; Holloway 2001; Langørgen & Magnus 2018; Magnus 2009; Redpath et al. 2013; Rognaldsen, 2012).

### *Disability disclosure*

Disability disclosure is often a prerequisite for access to accommodations in higher education, and its positive and negative implications are an ongoing debate in research literature (e.g. Castrodale 2015; Eunyoung & Aquino 2017; Grimes et al. 2019; Kerschbaum, Eisenman & Jones 2017; Matthews 2009). While academic staff might prefer students to disclose in order to make it easier to offer appropriate support (Cunnah 2015; Knott & Taylor 2014), it is not necessarily easy or right for students to do so. Manuel Madriaga (2007) points to 'the uneasy position' of having to disclose and convince others of their disability. Also, it is a question of how one identifies (Cunnah 2015; Kerschbaum, Eisenman & Jones 2017; Langørgen & Magnus 2018). Many invisibly disabled students choose to conceal their health challenges even though they are entitled to and need adaptations (Grimes et al. 2019; Martin 2010; Matthews 2009). Reasons for choosing non-disclosure are complex and include the ambition to complete their studies in the same way as others, bad experiences with disclosure, the burden of bureaucratic paperwork, fear of encountering negative reactions, a lack of understanding from those around them, fear that sensitive information may be spread or that disclosure will affect their future opportunities in education or working life (Collins & Mowbray 2005; Dolmage 2017; Fuller et al. 2004; Grimes et al. 2019; Magnus 2009; Martin 2010; Matthews 2009). This especially applies to students with mental health

challenges. This group is particularly exposed to cultural stigma (Cunnah 2015) and may wait years before they finally decide to confide in academic staff they have come to trust (Grimes et al. 2019; Martin 2010; Olney & Brockelman 2003). Instead of full disclosure, some choose other strategies, such as seeking the support of close friends (Castrodale & Zinargo 2015), avoiding institutional formal channels in favor of accessing accommodations through negotiation in particular situations, and alternating between choosing to pass as non-disabled or disclosing their identity as disabled according to the circumstances (Castrodale 2015).

### **Theory**

In this study, the understanding of disability both rejects and draws on aspects of the medical model and the social model. The medical model is based on a conception of disability as a pathology in individual bodies that preferably ought to be 'cured, treated, trained and changed' (Barnes 2003: 9–10). In contrast, the social model views disability as socially created; the gap between society's facilitation and the functioning of individuals creates disability, which may be treated by universal design and social justice (Oliver 2013). This study distances itself from an understanding in which disability is confined to the individual and ought to be 'fixed,' as in the medical model, and from an understanding in which impairment and materiality are largely ignored, as in the social model. Instead, the study draws on a relational understanding (Shakespeare 2014) that simultaneously acknowledges impairments as a biological phenomenon (as in the medical model) and disability as a restriction of activities that impaired individuals experience due to social oppression and inequality (as in the social model).

To explore and understand the participants' experience of the teacher role and its change over time in relation to diversity awareness and inclusion practices, a transactional perspective is used. This entails an analytical gaze that links the participants' experiences and responses in the context of teaching with human connections and interactions (Wright-St Clair & Smythe 2013). Every person enters a situation with embodied habits that are under continuous revision as a response to the evolving situation (Dewey 1998) and 'as the transactional relationship of disability and situation proceeds, understandings of disability and its presence or absence may change' (Stone 2013: 98). In the context of teaching, '[h]abits, imagination and creativity guide the teacher to structure activities, engage with the students in particular ways, and adapt (or not adapt) to the responses of the students within the situation' (Coppola 2013: 203). The study looks at how the participants react and change in response to connections and interactions and how this relates to the overall question of increased access for invisibly disabled students in higher education.

### **Methods**

#### ***Approval and recruitment***

Ethics approval to conduct this study was given by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Information about the study was published on social media and email lists of academic staff in higher education. At the recruitment stage, the focus was on finding academic staff with experience teaching disabled students. In line with the explorative approach and to welcome variation, disability was not strictly defined, but described to include 'physical, mental and/or cognitive challenges.' Subsequently, potential participants contacted the researcher on their own initiative via email. To ensure that consent to participate was voluntary and informed (NESH 2016), all the participants received an information letter and a consent form approved by NSD, which was signed prior to the first interview.

#### ***The study participants***

Five subjects were interviewed – two men and three women with teaching experience in the Norwegian university and university college sectors. Their backgrounds cover the disciplines of social sciences, humanities, and technology. Overall, these subjects have taught at a minimum of three different higher education institutions in Norway, teaching both small student groups (approximately 2–30 people) and large student groups (approximately 70–450 people) at the bachelor's and/or master's degree level. Each had at least eight years of teaching experience at the time of the interview with the exception of one person.

The author carried out conversations with five key informants in addition to the study participants. Two of these work on adaptation in higher education and three work in a user organization for disabled people. One of these was invisibly disabled and had experienced being a drop-out student in higher education and could therefore provide a user perspective. The author herself contacted the institutions where the key informants worked and arranged meetings with employees who wished to provide input. Data from these conversations provided background information for the study.

#### ***The interviews and the subjects' understandings of disabilities***

The study uses an approach centering on the participants' subjective understandings and experiences. Accordingly, the interviews—each lasting between 55 minutes and 2.5 hours—were organized as semi-structured conversations, enabling the participants to discuss the topics and experiences that interested them (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002). The researcher wrote down what was said in the interviews on a computer as they went along. Later, these texts were sent to the participants. In line with the understanding that data is produced in a social process that both the researcher and the participants partake in (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002), and an approach where the meaning of statements is

prioritized over verbatim statements, the participants were encouraged to contribute in further processing of the text. Four chose to participate in such a textual collaboration.

When the subjects talked about encounters involving invisible disabilities, they referred to ADHD, Asperger syndrome, dyslexia, unspecified pain and fatigue disorders, and mental challenges in the form of depression and anxiety. While acknowledging impairments as (also) a biological situation, the theoretical approach in this study is not concerned with medical conditions or diagnosis per se. Rather, the situational and relational constitution of disabilities is the focus of analysis. Nevertheless, I include the specification above in order for the reader to gain insight into the participants' understandings of invisible disabilities. Some participants relied on a taken-for-granted biomedical understanding of disabilities and expected students to document their needs and diagnosis. Others did not rely expressly on such categorizations. Rather, they made sense of invisible disabilities as an experienced 'difference' or unusualness in encounters with some students. Sometimes participants referred to terminology the students had used to describe themselves.

### **Anonymity**

Since their experiences are related to third parties, the participants were requested to protect the identity of the students by omitting biographical information in the descriptions. Moreover, for reasons of confidentiality, participants in the study and the institutions where they worked were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms and general descriptions (Fangen 2010). The code—i.e. contact information of the study participants—was kept separate from the empirical material, which was anonymized after the interviews.

### **Analysis**

Analysis is here understood as a process that includes writing, reflection, discussions with peers, and work on interpretation during the project period (Braun & Clarke 2006). Focus was placed both on close reading of parts of the empirical material and on reading of the data as a whole in order to identify the perceptions of the subjects and patterns throughout the material. While the overall study is about teaching experiences and disabilities in general, only data concerning invisible disabilities were analyzed for this article. The data were coded manually using empirically close words and phrases, and then categorized. This phase was inspired by thematic analysis and four categories were developed: 1) Lecturers' un/awareness of the student diversity, 2) Inclusion strategies as a response to diversity awareness, 3) The use of life experiences to create an inclusive learning environment, 4) Confusion, uncertainty, and lack of resources. While these patterns emerged, it should be emphasized that differences between the subjects were always present and the degree to which each category applies to the individuals varies. The discussion seeks to be transparent about the differences as well as the similarities and sets the findings in dialogue with existing research and theory.

### **Findings and Discussion**

A common feature of the participants' narratives was that, over time, they had acquired greater awareness of differences in the student groups, and had found ways to teach in what they perceived to be a more inclusive manner. Simultaneously, the participants experienced confusion and uncertainty at times in relation to dealing with situations that involved disabilities. In the following section, these aspects of the participants' experiences are presented and discussed with special attention paid to the role of interactions in relation to disability.

#### ***Lecturers' un/awareness of the student diversity***

When the participant Kai was asked whether he had considered that there might be disabled students in the classroom when he started his teaching career, he shook his head. 'I hadn't thought about it whatsoever,' he answered. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that previous studies have established that lecturers' unawareness of student diversity is not uncommon (e.g. Madriaga et al. 2010; Matthews 2009). Moreover, like all the participants in this study, Kai had received no information about disabilities or tailored support from the Norwegian institution at which he taught. Kai said he wished that he had, because disability was not something he had been consciously aware of. Furthermore, while personal experience with diversity seems to increase lecturers' abilities to recognize and respond to disabled students' need for support (Cameroon & Nunkoosing 2012), Kai had had little experience of this kind. He explained that as a result, he had engaged in teaching without taking strategies of inclusion into consideration at all.

Kai's 'unthinkingness' about disability may be seen as habitual and thus 'by its very nature, taken-for-granted' (Wright-St Clair & Smythe 2013: 26). Kai had taken for granted that the audience was non-disabled until this 'knowing' was confronted. He explained that he had gained insight into the lived experiences of disabled people through interactions with disabled students and colleagues and thus 'discovered' disability. This was the case for several of the participants.

While the level of un/awareness regarding student diversity had differed among the study participants, processes of increased awareness over time emerged in all interviews. To Evy, for instance, diversity was something she attempted to be aware of when teaching: 'I try to be aware that I'm dealing with a complex group of people who come with different kinds of baggage. You can't just start teaching. I try to remind myself of that.' In addition, to Evy, inclusion was not straightforward or all about being informed: 'It's also experiential. You *learn* and *feel* as you go along what you should do.'



The common thread in Kai and Evy's experiences is that they center around the significance of human connections in relation to inclusion and disability. Disability–accessibility and inaccessibility–is constituted in the social relational space (Titchkosky 2011), and humans learn through experience and connections with others (Coppola 2013; Wright-St Clair & Smythe 2013). Kai experienced through interactions with others that his 'unthinkingness' of disability and inclusion practices had surfaced. He had become self-reflexive in the aftermath. For Evy, connections were involved in a process of learning and feeling over time what you should do to teach inclusively.

### ***Inclusion strategies as a response to diversity awareness***

Awareness of diversity in their student groups had led the participants to develop inclusion strategies. For example, at the time of the interview, all the study participants routinely opened their courses by informing the students that they could reach out to the lecturer if they needed alternative solutions to giving class presentations or speaking in plenary sessions. Siri and Joakim described their habit of doing so in these words:

I usually say at the start of the course that we have a few rules. I begin by saying they can just come and speak to me. On occasion, people say to me that they don't like to speak in a plenary session. Then we try to find a solution. Like saying 'pass' when there's a round of the group at meetings [i.e. when students are expected to give a response in a group, one after the other]. But I also make it clear that practice leads to mastery. I tell them that I have never liked speaking in plenary sessions. But that I do it anyway. You need to push yourself a bit, not just get out of something because it's uncomfortable. And when I say that, I find that people push themselves a bit. I make it clear that I have some expectations and you must come and talk to me if you're having difficulties. (Siri)

I make it clear at the very start of the course. I don't mention people with mental health challenges, but I say that if people have difficulty working in groups and so on, they must come and speak to me. I take this up straightaway, try to create a relationship of trust with regard to that part. And this means that students come early on and let me know. This usually happens during the first or second week of the course. (Joakim)

The habit of reaching out to the students as outlined above is an example of how the participants' initiated inclusion by seeking to connect with the students. Opening their courses this way may be seen as a way to signal both an awareness of diversity and positive attitudes to making accommodations for invisibly disabled students and thus a safe space to disclose difference. Also, Siri and Joakim showed sensitivity by not alienating the students when giving information about adaptation options. Siri had an empathetic approach whereby she humanized personal challenges by using herself as an example. Joakim linked potential challenges to actions and situations rather than to individual characteristics. Thus, instead of disabled students being constituted as radically different, they are met by this approach: 'first and foremost, as persons with valuable experiences, as well as persons with the need of some extra support, downplaying the "othering" because of disability' (Langørgen & Magnus 2018: 613). Overall, the study participants expressed confidence in this incentive to be inclusive. Joakim, for example, explained that in his view, he had succeeded in establishing trusting relationships with the students. He continued:

They come to my office. Some say they have Asperger syndrome, some ADHD, still others say they have other mental health challenges. I ask them to send me any documentation they have. I also say this during the first lectures, that they must have documentation of their condition. If they have something from a doctor, it will make it easier to prepare a plan that suits them. And we have fairly good experience with this—that they come along and inform us. ... Typically they have documentation showing that they find it difficult to function in large groups. Then we try to place the person in question in a *smaller* group when we do group work. And I think that works well; we manage to make it work quite well. (Joakim)

In the experience of Joakim, tailored support does not necessarily have to be difficult to implement in order to have a positive outcome for the student. He was confident that for some invisibly disabled students, entering a learning environment where it is safe to disclose their challenges and where they are given the opportunity to make connections with others in a small group instead of a larger one may be sufficient to facilitate participation. The next section will unpack ways in which the participants interacted with their previous experiences to create connections in the present.

### ***The use of life experiences to create an inclusive learning environment***

In order to deal with challenges in teaching situations, the participants typically made connections with previous life experiences. For example, as Joakim had been a trainer for a sports club, he explained that he used mindsets and strategies he had learned from his time there when preparing his teaching. Group dynamics, rather than the individual, was the central focus. Accordingly, Joakim was preoccupied by talking about the 'group's problem' rather than focusing on 'the individual as a problem' in the encounter with disabilities. Similarly, solutions were oriented towards the group as a whole. In order to create a good space for teaching a diverse student group, Joakim employed a structure in which a group leader was appointed for each group, in line with what he had experienced in the physical training arena. The

group leaders received instruction in inclusive practices and were monitored via meetings. If there were problems in the group, these concerns were raised at the meetings and followed up. For example, in one case a student had problems speaking in the group when surrounded by too many people. Joakim explained how this problem with the group dynamics was solved:

I talked to the group leader and got the leader to involve everyone in the group. The leader structured the group so that it wasn't just the person who spoke first that got to talk, the one who typically always takes the floor and speaks. Instead the leader reviewed the questions systematically and gave everyone the floor in turn, so that they all were enabled to say something about the topic under discussion, what their opinion was, etc. We made it work... . In particular, getting groups to make sure that everyone can give their opinion on the topic under discussion makes it easier for those who have problems such as Asperger syndrome and ADHD and a number of other mental problems. I tend to give the group leader responsibility—to ensure that the person who chairs the meeting is responsible for ensuring that everyone gets a chance to speak. This has a lot of advantages. It leads to better group dynamics while also teaching the students how to chair academic meetings. So it has a positive effect on both the individual with mental challenges and all the others in the group. (Joakim)

Seen from a transactional perspective, Joakim developed strategies aimed at creating connections by merging time. His memories of the past and his imagining of how to act to create a positive outcome for the student group in the future were brought together in the present. Joakim was sensitive to the environment, adapted to the responses of the students in the situations they were in together, and used his creativity (Coppola 2013). The aim was to find solutions that would ensure that the group would reach its full potential. Focusing on connections among those who were brought together, he aimed at creating a learning environment in which the students as a whole could thrive and grow.

Like Joakim, Evy used her previous experiences as a basis for developing inclusion strategies. She drew on her personal experience as a former student in higher education in combination with earlier work experience during which she had received training in diversity awareness. She used two methods strategically to create an inclusive learning environment: copious PowerPoint presentations and reflection notes. She explained:

I make a lot of PowerPoint presentations so that those who have challenges can use these as aids. Those who haven't attended the teaching session or have different kinds of challenges can leaf through these and use them as a support tool... . A lot of people think there are too many PowerPoint slides, but I just say then you don't need to look at them; they're for people who need more structure or who want to work more on things... and I've also used reflection notes. That reduces the pressure because for some people, presentations are too challenging. It's better when they can remain in their seats. They write reflection notes for every session... I liked doing that myself when I was a student and think I learned a lot from it and that it made it easier to say something. In a reflection note, you write a bit about a topic or about one of the texts you've read or about the topic to be discussed today. These are handed in beforehand, a few hours before the teaching session. Then I have time to scan them, and during the session I may say: 'I see you write about such and such, that was very interesting. Can you say something about that?' Then they are put on the spot, but they have something to fall back on. (Evy)

The underlying motivation for Evy's use of copious PowerPoint presentations was to provide support tools to students who would benefit from the extra structure or who needed to compensate for their physical absence during lectures. The method of using reflection notes was a tool to reduce pressure and make talking in front of others easier for those who found this challenging. By implementing these habits on her own initiative, she sought to ensure that (some) invisibly disabled students were freed from the burden of standing out as different, disclosing their health condition and having to ask for individual accommodations.

The collective-focused approaches of Joakim and Evy are in line with a recent shift away from the traditional focus of individually tailored support towards an inclusive learning environment for all in higher education (Collins, Azmat & Rentschler 2019; Fuller et al. 2004; Madriaga 2010). When safeguarding *the diversity*, the need for individual accommodations often becomes redundant as the teaching environment in itself increases accessibility by enabling more students to participate.

### ***Confusion, uncertainty, and lack of resources***

While the participants had individually developed inclusion strategies that worked well in their view, the lack of pedagogical resources was a recurring topic of frustration in the interviews. For instance, Mia sighed during the interview and blurted out: 'I wish I had a wider range of pedagogical tools.' She said this in relation to a transaction she had had with a student. The student had told Mia of a decision to drop out of her course because the teaching plan and the format of the teaching were incompatible with the student's health situation. Mia explained that she was taken aback and did not know how to respond appropriately in this situation. Unfortunately, the student dropped out. However, the transaction had led Mia to reflect on the teaching situation in which disability had been constituted. It gave her the following insights:

You need to be creative and adopt a radical approach to the teaching format. And that doesn't just apply to these kinds of students, it applies to many others... I believe in thinking innovatively in terms of pedagogy and how you structure your teaching. Norm-critical pedagogy, reflection on power relations in the classroom—who is present, who is not, and how can you change this? I don't have a set answer... but I still think it's necessary to do something radical... I don't think that the current teaching situation appears very welcoming to people who don't fit into the system and are in an inferior power position. (Mia)

Here, a transaction with a student had led Mia to reflect on how teaching is thought of and done, and how this in effect excludes some students from participation. Her habitual ways of thinking evolved and matured in response to the interaction with another human being (Wright-St Clair & Smythe 2013).

The other participants also found themselves often or occasionally in situations that led to confusion or uncertainty. For instance, they expressed confusion as to whom they might contact when they had questions about tailored support, and uncertainty about what was expected of them when they suspected that a student might need accommodations. An excerpt from the interview with Evy illustrates such a situation:

I've been in the game for a few years. I'm not educated in healthcare, but I notice things when I read assignments and see how students work on tasks... Then I notice those who have problems with attention and concentration; I notice that it's more than the student just not doing the work, it's based on something more serious, something that can't be drilled as might be the case with other students. It might be students who are supposed to submit a short draft but hand in a stack of 70 pages. And I say: 'I can't read 70 pages, it's too much. It was only supposed to be a draft.' I understand that there's an underlying problem, but how to bring it up? I'm not a regular GP. I've experienced that kind of thing many times. I haven't known how to talk to the student about it. They're not here to receive therapy. Meanwhile, I feel the need to give some warning about this or let someone know. I suspect that there's something wrong here, who is supposed to help in this situation? I sometimes see this kind of thing when I'm an external examiner as well, that there *is* something, and then I just think to myself that I hope someone notices. But what is our responsibility? It's really a difficult ethical challenge. (Evy)

Evy experienced uncertainty regarding her responsibility as a teacher when she noticed in students 'something that can't be drilled as might be the case with other students.' She found that there was a lack of clarity about where responsibility lay, who should provide help and what could be done. Evy's confusion and uncertainty in this situation can be interpreted as the result of structural prioritization at Norwegian higher education institutions. In situations like the one described by Evy, it is likely that nothing will actually be done to support the students involved due to a lack of clarity and directions at the institutional level.

### Concluding Remarks

Tanya Titchkosky (2011) points to how, in theory, the concept of inclusion is widely circulated in higher education institutions while, in practice, disabled people remain excluded from significant participation. She coins it as a paradox that bureaucratic changes regarding disability policy and access 'can actually be a time of no change within some structures' (Titchkosky 2011: 92). In Norway, higher education institutions are obliged to provide an inclusive learning environment according to law and policies; to achieve it the institutions depend on academic staff to commit to inclusive practice. Nevertheless, the institutional follow-up in terms of clear guidelines, formal training, and pedagogical resources seems conspicuous by its absence.

The main findings of this study suggest that the participants had not necessarily been aware of student diversity and their responsibility to teach inclusively when they started their teaching practice. Over time, their diversity awareness increased through experiences and interactions that gave them new insights. In response, they took individual initiatives to include invisible disabled students in learning situations. For instance, they informed students of adaptation opportunities and experimented with enabling pedagogical strategies. The participants expressed confidence in that the approaches and methods they had developed had inclusive effects. In addition, they revealed insecurities regarding lack of pedagogical resources and confusion regarding their responsibility to offer support.

Currently, academic staff in Norwegian institutions of higher education are required to complete a course in basic pedagogical skills (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). However, there are no formal requirements that this course should include knowledge of diversity, inclusion, or adaptation. Thus, whether these topics are to be regarded as part of academic staffs' basic skills is up to each institution to decide. To follow Tanya Titchkosky (2011), the absence of disability and inclusive practice among the learning outcomes in the course—as well as the option to ignore these topics completely—may in itself be understood as parts of a process of exclusion. Considering that public educational institutions in Norway target a broad student population and are required to provide equal training and opportunities for students regardless of any disabilities (Universitets- og høyskoleloven (2005), this study recommends that these topics be incorporated as an obligatory and obvious part of the course at all higher education institutions. Leaving it to each individual lecturer to figure it out on their own has significance for the type of adaptation measures higher education institutions offer invisibly disabled students. Research on disabled students' experiences of adaptation in higher education show the consequences of this situation in practice. The students' experiences differ vastly, and the

provisions offered are often random and dependent on the individual the student encounters (Brandt 2011; Fuller et al. 2004; Holloway 2001; Langorgen & Magnus 2018; Magnus 2009; Redpath et al. 2013; Rognaldsen, 2012). This reveals that there is a clear, demonstrated need for higher education institutions to make changes that would benefit invisibly disabled students. Senior administrators at these institutions should initiate a dialogue about disability. Clear guidelines must be drawn and made public so that academic staff can be familiarized with their responsibilities vis-à-vis invisibly disabled students in their role as lecturers. The responsibility of academic staff to adopt an inclusive approach in their teaching must be clarified: How should they respond when students disclose challenges, when difficult situations arise in teaching, and when they become aware that a student may be entitled to support? Clarity is essential in ensuring that the students get—and the lecturers provide—a fair and coherent program of education at Norwegian educational institutions.

Findings in this study suggest that, by connecting with others, the participants were enabled to critically reflect about their teaching practice and to mature as lecturers. Connections with disabled students, colleagues, and past experiences prompted new insights, enabled the participants to imagine new realities, and to creatively develop strategies of inclusion in response. In light of such transformative potential of interaction, institutions of higher education should be encouraged to introduce an online platform and/or a physical discussion forum on inclusive practice. Platforms of interaction will give people the opportunity to connect with each other; to discuss and document their inclusive learning strategies, methods and experiences, both good and bad. Countering the legitimized, naturalized absence of disability in higher education (Titchkosky 2011), the presence of disabled and mad subjects' voices, knowledges, and experiences are especially welcome. Human connections of this kind have the transformative potential of making a difference in practice. Imagine how, over time, this platform would become a resource bank filled with pedagogical methods and creative suggestions that lecturers in general may use for inspiration when they design their courses and teach. Also, it may be used as a practical tool in courses designed to instruct lecturers about diversity. In addition, through such a platform, the teaching body will have the opportunity to make use of the valuable knowledge and experience that individual lecturers have developed and refined over the decades and which otherwise would be lost when the individual lecturer retires.

### **Moderations**

It varies individually how institutions of higher education in Norway manage their responsibility of universal accessibility. Therefore, institutional variation must be taken into account when reading the study's findings and discussion points. For instance, NTNU has implemented an inclusive learning environment as one of the learning outcomes in their course on basic pedagogical skills.

### **Acknowledgements**

Sincere thanks to the study participants and key informants for their contribution. Thanks to Universell for financial support in the study's planning phase. Thanks to Sophies Minde Foundation (grant number 1213) for funding the study. Thanks to the research group (Re)habilitering–individ, tjenester og samfunn at Oslo Met for valuable comments.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Svendby, Rannveig. (2020). Lecturers' Teaching Experiences with Invisibly Disabled Students in Higher Education: Connecting and Aiming at Inclusion. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 22(1), pp. 275–284. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.712>

**Submitted:** 13 February 2020    **Accepted:** 04 September 2020    **Published:** 23 September 2020

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*Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.

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