UK university teachers on inclusive education: Conceptualisations, practices, opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

Despite growing attention being paid to inclusive higher education in the UK and beyond, research with university teachers remains scarce. To address this gap, we interviewed 34 UK university teachers about their conceptualisations, practices, and experiences of the opportunities and challenges of inclusive education. In line with the consensus view amongst leading international organisations, interviewees conceptualised inclusive education in broad terms. They also reported having adopted many recognised good practices in inclusive education. In contrast to existing research which often problematizes student diversity, respondents perceived it as an opportunity for developing inclusive teaching and assessment practices. However, they identified four key challenges to the provision of inclusive education which can inform institutional policies in the UK and beyond. The institution's endorsement of a narrow view of inclusivity focused on disability was a paramount challenge. This suggests that institutions should promote a broader understanding of inclusivity. Workload was highlighted as another significant challenge, suggesting the need to explicitly recognise university teachers' efforts to develop inclusive practices in workload allocations. The rigidity of approvals processes made the introduction of innovative assessment types slow and difficult. This highlights a need for greater flexibility in institutional approval processes. Finally, interviewees highlighted two issues related to inclusivity training - its relevance and the varying levels of participation among colleagues. These challenges could be addressed by making inclusive teaching part of professional development review processes as well as by offering discipline-specific sharing practice events.

Keywords
inclusive education, interviews, universities, student diversity

Introduction

Higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly committed to the principles of equality/equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) (e.g., Gertz et al, 2018; Jia et al, 2024). The provision of inclusive education is seen as essential for addressing the growing diversity of students and particularly, the increasing numbers of international students on home campuses (e.g., Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Inclusion has become embedded in higher education policy in many countries around the world following the publication of the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Salamanca Statement. The Salamanca Statement established the fundamental principle of inclusion, initially confined to addressing the needs of learners defined as having special educational needs (UNESDOC, 1994). Over time, the concept of inclusion has broadened, emphasizing the need to reach all learners regardless of their background (e.g., UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

However, several recent large-scale, systematic reviews of published studies on inclusive pedagogies (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021) and inclusivity more broadly (Altes et al, 2024; Shaw, 2024) within higher education have concluded that inclusivity continues to be mostly associated with disability and special needs education. It is also notable that the overwhelming focus in existing published research has been on the experiences of university students with disabilities and special educational needs (Altes et al, 2024; Shaw, 2024; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Other student groups, for example, ethnic minorities, women, international students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are only beginning to receive research attention (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). University teachers' conceptualisations, practices, and experiences of the challenges and opportunities in delivering inclusive education have also been found to be under-studied (Altes et al, 2024). This gap in research with university teachers stands in contrast to their undoubtedly key role in devising and implementing inclusive education.

To answer calls for an improved understanding of university teachers' experiences of inclusivity (Altes et al, 2024), we interviewed 34 university teachers based across the different departments within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at a university in Northwest England. The university has a high number of international students and the faculty to which the interviewees belong recruits significant numbers of international students - particularly at postgraduate level. We address the following research questions (RQs): (1) How do university teachers conceptualise inclusivity? (2) What inclusive practices have they adopted in response to student diversity? (3) What are the opportunities they experience when teaching students from diverse groups? (4) What are the challenges they experience when teaching students from diverse groups? Drawing on our findings, we propose what institutional support is needed to better enable university teachers to deliver high quality university education to an increasingly diverse student population. Our recommendations can inform institutional policy on inclusivity in higher education in the UK and beyond.

The following section first discusses the concept of inclusive education. Next, we summarize the large body of research on schoolteachers' experiences of inclusive education and the comparatively much smaller body of research with university teachers. This is followed by a description of the methods of data collection and analysis - semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, respectively. We then present and discuss our findings. We conclude with reflections on the study's implications, limitations and directions for future research.

Literature review

Inclusive education

Inclusive education has been defined in various ways. While earlier, narrower definitions had focused on integrating students with disabilities in education, more recent broader definitions refer to the inclusion of a variety of students (Altes et al, 2024; Haug, 2017). There is consensus between different international and many national organisations that inclusive education should be understood holistically (Haug, 2017) - as encompassing '*all* children with many different attributes such as ethnicity, language, gender and socio-economic status' (Schuelka, 2018: 2). According to UNICEF (2024), for example, inclusive education 'allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side'. Advance HE (formerly the UK Higher Education Academy), a charity and professional membership scheme promoting

excellence in higher education, similarly proposes a broad definition of inclusive education. According to Advance HE, inclusive education is education that is relevant and accessible to all students regardless of their 'cultural heritage [...] language; values; cultural capital; religion and belief; country of origin/residence; ethnicity/race; social background' (Thomas & May, 2010: 4-5).

The broadening of the remit of inclusive education 'away from the field of disability into the realm of diversity' (Haug, 2017: 209) has, however, attracted criticism from some inclusive education theorists. The broader definition of inclusive education has been described as a 'masterpiece of rhetoric, easy to accept and difficult to be against or even criticize' (Haug, 2017: 207). One of the concerns raised by critics is which groups of students should be the focus, as diversity 'incorporates a more extensive spectrum of concerns and discourses' than disability and special educational needs (Thomas, 2013: 474). Another concern has been that a more 'inclusive' approach to inclusivity (e.g., based on gender, socioeconomic background, nationality and ethnicity) may inadvertently lead to the interests of students with disabilities and special educational needs being overlooked (Norwich, 2014).

Schoolteachers' experiences of inclusive education

We start by reviewing the comparatively larger body of research looking into schoolteachers' understandings of and attitudes to inclusive teaching (e.g. Jia et al, 2024). This body of research is relevant to our study because of the similarities in school and university contexts and because student populations at all levels of education are increasingly diverse. The existing research on schoolteachers' understandings of and attitudes to inclusive teaching points to a disconnect between schoolteachers' understanding of inclusive education and the consensus view at international organisation level. Despite agreement amongst international organisations that inclusive education pertains to all learners (see e.g., UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024), schoolteachers tend to conceptualise it more narrowly - as the inclusion of students with disabilities or special educational needs (Jia et al, 2024).

Amongst studies with schoolteachers, those evaluating their attitudes to inclusive education have been among the earliest and most numerous, as indicated by large-scale, systematic reviews of the published literature (see Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al, 2011). Considering that the successful implementation of inclusive policies is largely dependent on educators' positive attitudes, the popularity of such studies is unsurprising. But while an earlier literature review by Avramidis & Norwich (2002) showed evidence of prevailing positive attitudes, a more recent one by de Boer and colleagues (2011) which summarised subsequent research found predominant neutral and negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities or special educational needs in mainstream schools.

Research on schoolteachers' beliefs about their preparedness to deliver inclusive education has helpfully identified key factors impacting beliefs. These include knowledge of policy and legislation, teaching experience, context, and age (for a systematic literature review see Wray et al, 2022). In terms of support needed for implementing inclusive education, common challenges have included the availability and appropriateness of training and the availability of time to implement inclusive practices (for a scoping review see Chow et al, 2024).

University teachers' experiences of inclusive education

Compared to research with schoolteachers, research with university teachers regarding inclusive education is scarce (Altes et al, 2024) and has 'arrived with a significant delay' (González-Castellano et al, 2021: e06852). It has also been dominated by studies which explore university teachers' attitudes towards inclusion through surveys with much fewer examples of in-depth research (e.g., interview studies) with university teachers about their experiences of inclusive education (Altes et al, 2024). Existing studies have mainly sought to establish whether university teachers hold overall positive, neutral or negative attitudes towards accepting and accommodating students with disabilities and special educational needs in higher education (Altes et al, 2024).

Within the small body of research where university teachers have been interviewed about their experiences of inclusive education, inclusivity has been approached in the narrow terms of teaching students with a form of disability. This mimics the above-described focus on disability and special educational needs in survey research with university teachers. Where interviews have been used, these included relatively small numbers of participants. For example, Lintangsari & Emaliana (2020) interviewed and observed the teaching of one Indonesian university teacher in a classroom where a student was blind. Svendby (2020) interviewed five Norwegian university teachers about their experiences teaching students with dyslexia and/or mental health challenges. Martins and colleagues (2017) interviewed six Portuguese university teachers with experience of teaching students with any form of disability. Smith and Myers (2024) interviewed 12 US university teachers about their experiences teaching students with developmental disabilities.

A theme shared across all the above-mentioned studies (Lintangsari & Emaliana, 2020; Martins et al, 2017; Smith & Myers, 2024; Svendby, 2020) was a sense of insufficient training and limited institutional support in terms of recognising and alleviating workload constraints. In Svendby's (2020) study, an additional theme emerged about university teachers' lack of awareness of student diversity. University teachers interviewed in that study reported often being unaware of students' disabilities due to the invisibility of some forms of disability. Another theme which emerged from Smith & Myers' (2024) research was that university teachers identifying as disabled demonstrated greater skill in providing modifications for students.

These studies are valuable for helping understand university teachers' experiences of inclusive education but are limited by narrowly focusing on experiences of teaching students with disabilities and drawing on small sample sizes. Given university teachers' central role in developing and implementing inclusive education and the growing worldwide attention to inclusive higher education, studies with university teachers are too few. We seek to address this gap and extend existing published research by interviewing a large(r) sample of university teachers and not limiting ourselves to a narrow definition of inclusive education. As there are various ways of defining inclusivity, we sought to understand how university teachers conceptualise inclusive education (RQ1), what inclusive practices they have adopted (RQ2), what opportunities (RQ3) and challenges (RQ4) they experience when teaching diverse student groups.

Data and method

We conducted 34 interviews with university teachers based across the different departments within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of a university in Northwest England. We aimed for about equal numerical representation from each department. Participation was voluntary

and interviewees were recruited through a mix of prior contact with the authors and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams with its in-built recording and transcription facility. In addition to questions about inclusivity and student diversity, we asked questions about decolonisation. In this paper, we focus on the findings that emerged from the questions relating to diversity and inclusivity. We report our findings on decolonisation elsewhere. We anonymised interviewees' details by replacing real names with pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were chosen by us, the researchers. We selected pseudonyms with the aim to convey the diversity of our interviewees (e.g., in terms of nationality and ethnicity, sex). When seeking consent, we explained that the university will not be named in publications but that its identity could potentially be inferred by some readers and that we could not guarantee full anonymity. Interviews were conducted between July 2023 and December 2023 with the majority taking place in July and August when university teachers have comparatively fewer teaching commitments. Interviews lasted 58 minutes on average (the shortest was 45 minutes, the longest 86 minutes). Ethics approval was granted by our university's research ethics committee.

Interviews were analysed by the two authors using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022). Each author independently read and coded three interviews noting down initial points of interest guided by our research questions. We then compared our initial codes and coding and analysed three more interviews each, after which we compared codes and coding again. We repeated these steps until we had analysed 10 interviews each and were satisfied that our codes are exhaustive of the themes relevant to our research questions. At this stage, we entered the transcripts in NVivo 15 Windows and completed the coding of the full set of interviews, each of us coding about equal number of interviews, comparing our coding periodically, and analysing a mix of interviews conducted by each author.

Findings and discussion

Below we describe and discuss our findings in the same order as our research questions. We start with interviewees' conceptualisations of inclusivity which they consistently discussed in relation to student diversity (RQ1). Next, we turn to the inclusive practices they had adopted (RQ2). This is followed by a summary of the key opportunities that our interviewees identified when teaching students from diverse groups (RQ3). Finally, we present the key challenges when teaching students from diverse groups (RQ4).

Conceptualisations of inclusivity

Our interviewees' conceptualisations of inclusivity were consistently grounded in reflections on student diversity. It can thus be argued that interviewees were concerned with what inclusivity is as much as with who it is for. As student diversity was a persistent theme in the interviews and a 'building block' for reflections on inclusivity, we start with interviewees' reflections on student diversity.

Interviewees shared a broad understanding of 'diversity' which aligns with the consensus view amongst international organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF. For example, Matthew explained:

> Diverse could mean anything in terms of where people come from, religious
> diversity, spiritual diversity, sexual diversity. Both in terms of sexuality and gender

identity. You know, ability in terms of disability as well as, well, both in terms of, you know, people with physical disabilities, people with mental health illnesses. So, I would understand it very holistically. So, not just about kind of nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, but also sexuality, gender identity, disability. Neuro atypical, neurotypical. You know, everything, basically. Oh sorry, I forgot to mention class as well.

Unlike the participants in Svendby's (2020) study who reported being sometimes unaware of the diversity of their students, there was widespread agreement amongst our interviewees that 'any classroom could be considered diverse' (Gavin) and that 'we are all teaching diverse groups and if we think we're not, we should be asking ourselves are we just not noticing' (Sylvia). However, some interviewees qualified that their most immediate associations with 'diversity' were with nationality, race and ethnicity. These associations were felt to be influenced by the university context. As mentioned earlier, international students are a core group of the student population in the faculty where our interviewees are based. Lakshmi explained that this form of diversity related to students' nationalities is 'most actively promoted by the university. People go out to recruit students from other countries because they pay phenomenal fees'.

Several interviewees commented on the (in)visibility of diversity. As Emily said, 'there's different ways of being diverse, but they might not necessarily be visible'. This view was shared by Hugo who described his typical classroom as diverse in terms of class, which to many may not seem diverse, as it 'isn't necessarily as visible as it might be in other contexts where you have people from different parts of the world together where there is a visual sense of diversity'.

Most interviewees discussed the meaning of 'inclusivity' at length making it difficult to reproduce in full the definitions they offered. Some provided more concise explanations. Ellen, for example, described inclusivity as 'adopting a pedagogical approach which enables everybody who's involved in the interactions and the teaching and learning to engage'. Sylvia gave the most concise definition: to her inclusivity was about 'enabling all students to flourish on their own terms'. Regardless of length, in all definitions inclusivity in higher education was understood as addressing the needs of all students, not limited to a particular form of diversity. As Adam put it:

it's learning and teaching, that is considered from the perspective of lots of different groups of people or, or individuals and these are students who may have learning difficulties, have psychological, mental issues. They might have physical disabilities. That there might be, yeah, differences in all sorts of backgrounds, whether that's class, or ethnicity, or what have you.

Inclusive practices

The university teachers we interviewed reported having changed various aspects of their practice as a key strategy of providing inclusive education. Diversifying reading lists emerged as one approach. Ravindra explained that she tries 'to incorporate scholars from diverse backgrounds as much as possible, to make it as inclusive as possible'. For Angela, diversifying reading lists was particularly important because universities 'make great efforts to recruit students from around the world and then we don't represent them in the readings that we

use, that's a cause for, for concern'. Jessica knew from her end-of-module feedback that students were 'quite excited, you know, so proud to see reading materials from their own countries'. Overall, our interviewees' approach to diversifying reading lists can be said to align with goals to decolonise the curriculum, as interviewees often explicitly talked about extending resources beyond the West (Winter et al, 2024):

> I try to have readings and a curriculum that are designed for diversity. So, you know, it's a very simple thing, so, you don't have ten weeks of, you know, like white men, you know, and I've tried to include voices that are usually not included, I try to move away from the Anglophone theory (Matthew).

Considering that historically assessment has struggled to meet the needs of student diversity in higher education (McArthur, 2016; Nieminen, 2023, 2024), it is encouraging that our interviewees talked about their experiences of adapting assessment to improve inclusivity. Interviewees recognised that different students do better in different types of assignments; and that having a variety of assessment types increases all students' opportunities to do well. Closely reflecting the definition of inclusive assessment in the existing literature as 'the provision of assessments that allow all students to do well without receiving alternative or adapted assessments' (see e.g., Bain, 2023:1), Gavin explained that 'certain students, you know, have strengths in certain areas. So, we'd not always rely on the formal essay, so that we have diversity'. Interviewees revealed they had mainly relied on mixing 'standard assessment means' (James) - a recognised form of good practice in inclusive assessment (Chandra et al, 2024; Tai et al, 2021). James explained that he uses 'a mix now of, sort of, open book, timed online exams, essays, group presentations' but that he has not introduced 'innovative assessment types' like 'peer assessment' or 'assessment co-design' which have, in fact, been identified as particularly promising ways of promoting inclusivity (see e.g., Nieminen, 2023, 2024).

Other ways in which our interviewees reported having tried to cater for student diversity include offering learning and teaching materials 'in different modes' (Patricia) using 'a wide range of different media' (Matthew) and having a range of seminar activities fitting everyone's preferences as much as possible. Stefanie explained that she adds 'a video, say of the same scholar giving a talk or an interview or a podcast so that it's not only written materials that students encounter'. Regarding seminar activities Ellen said:

> I might have some time where we're all talking as a group and sometime where people are talking in small groups and then time where people do things on their own and so people who feel comfortable in different contexts can have some of that context.

Another key strategy of responding to student diversity and providing inclusive education concerned language use – in terms of both how our interviewees adapt their language and how they assess students' language use. Lakshmi, for example, said she goes into every class trying to remember 'how do you communicate in a clear, slow way that is not detrimental and you're not using jargon or you're able to explain it'. Valerie explained how over time, through her interactions with students, she has realised that 'complex language is often easier to understand, idioms are not'. Adam said he 'tries using language that would make sense to anyone when writing feedback'. When assessing students' work, interviewees agreed that 'as

long as the language is clear enough that I can read it, I will never, ever mark that down' (Meera). Interviewees often commented on the issue by explicitly presenting themselves as speakers of several languages and having at some stage themselves been international students. Jessica said, 'I never comment on students' English language skills as myself, I speak three languages and I'm not a perfect speaker'. Interviewees often felt that they are 'far more flexible than many colleagues' (Agnes) referring to their British colleagues in particular. Jessica, for example, recounted reading assignment feedback where her British colleagues had 'criticised like seriously' students' English-language use.

Yet another core strategy of providing inclusive education reported by our interviewees was to create opportunities for all students to learn from diversity by proactively mixing students with diverse backgrounds in teamwork tasks. Mia talked about 'consciously and deliberately kind of moving people around'. Interviewees were aware of the benefits of mixed-culture teamwork as a key means of integrating international and home students to encourage learning from this form of diversity (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). Gavin explained that 'you've got to find a mechanism to put home and international students together' because 'the groups will often sit together and work together in their separate, you know, the Chinese here and the British there and won't learn from each other'. Some interviewees, like Adrian, shared elaborate strategies to mix students in teamwork tasks:

> You can get, um, homogeneous groups of students forming and that could act against their learning. So, I have methods at play in my teaching that I'd use to disrupt that tendency at the level of group formation. [...] Say I want a group size of six. So, I might ask them to form teams of three. The students can feel safe that they're in their group of three, but I can move those groups of three around. So, if I see that there's too much, um, a group, maybe all female, all from China, or all something else, and there is too much uniformity in how they are exploring an idea which can benefit from a different perspective, I might disrupt that, and pair that three with a different three.

Opportunities

Interviewees were unanimous that student diversity presents, in the words of Adam, 'wonderful opportunities to learn just how people do things differently'. They commented positively on the educational opportunities from 'any form of diversity' (Julian). Interviewees recurrently used the words '(really) rich', 'enriching' and '(really/more/very) interesting' to describe in-class discussions involving students with diverse backgrounds. They also repetitively referred to an opportunity to gain 'a (potentially) different perspective' thanks to student diversity - a common theme in the existing literature on inclusive education (e.g., Jin & Schneider, 2019). For others, diversity afforded 'a much more fleshed out perspective' (Meera) making abstract discussions of how something can be different more concrete. As Calvin said, 'instead just to talk about it in the abstract that, oh, you could do things differently, someone is saying but this is how I see the world, this was my experience'. These views indicate that educators are keen to explore the opportunities that student diversity presents. The implication here is that they are likely to be willing to invest time and effort into adjusting their teaching so that it benefits from the diverse resources and experiences students bring. We believe this is important because, as Morina (2016) has highlighted, educators' positive views of student diversity (as an asset and opportunity for delivering

quality education rather than a problem or deficit) are essential for developing an inclusive higher education sector.

In line with previous research on inclusive education (e.g., Jin & Schneider, 2019), there was a widespread perception that everyone benefits from a diversity of voices in education. According to Adam, 'it makes things more interesting not only for students, but for staff'. Peter noted that 'the more different people are able to contribute in different ways, the more we all learn'. Valerie said that 'it improves us as teachers and, and I know our students learn so much'. Echoing findings from other published research (e.g., Haan et al, 2017; Mantzourani et al, 2015), some interviewees highlighted how including a diversity of views in teaching and learning can be especially beneficial for home students because 'British students don't learn foreign languages and don't travel' (Valerie). So, like Hugo explained, these 'encounters' with international students are especially educationally important because:

> Students who come from different backgrounds and different countries, they're able to provide views that our students just wouldn't have thought about, and that, that provides almost like an extra analytical lens that they can use.

Challenges

Interviewees' experiences of challenges can be grouped into four key areas - all relating to the wider university context and policies affecting them as faculty members. These included (1) the institution's endorsement of what was seen as a narrow view of inclusivity, (2) workload, (3) the rigidity and time-consuming nature of approval processes when attempting to introduce inclusive assessment forms and (4) the relevance of existing training and its limited uptake by (some) staff members. The order in which we present these challenges follows the frequency with which they were discussed by interviewees. Two of these challenges – workload and the relevance of existing training – have also emerged from research with schoolteachers (Chow et al, 2024) suggesting that these issues might require most urgent attention in education policy.

A foremost challenge reported by our interviewees was that the university privileges what our respondents considered to be a limited view of inclusivity centred on addressing disability, while neglecting other forms of diversity. Interviewees appeared to be especially concerned about the needs of international students having been left out from institutional discussions and policies on inclusive education. They were aware of recent literature on inclusive education which highlights how international students have typically not been acknowledged as an equity and equality deserving group (Gupta & Gomez, 2024; Tavares, 2024). Astrid evaluated the institution as 'good' at signalling that 'inclusive teaching and learning is important to the university when we talk about disability' but felt 'there are areas where you don't get this message, and teaching international students is one of them'.

Commenting on the institution's focus in relation to inclusivity, Calvin said that 'accessibility is the first step, but just being, just getting into the building isn't inclusion'. He also felt that while the inclusion of students with a disability is an important objective, inclusion should address 'all students' and yet, 'the discussion about inclusive teaching is always about, well, is it accessible'. Peter speculated that the focus on disability and accessibility might have a legal explanation:

> In terms of disability, I think, the university have been probably quite good, partly because of legal requirement, the fact that there are fundamental formal rules around accessibility […] But in terms of thinking about inclusive teaching, the fact that we're a hugely international university, I hear nothing from the university about international students.

A second key concern for our participants, as highlighted in previous research (Chow et al, 2024; Lintangsari & Emaliana, 2020; Martins et al, 2017; Smith & Myers, 2024; Svendby, 2020), was workload. Emily, for example, wondered, 'you know, where are colleagues expected to find the time to do this?' considering they already 'have got increased workloads'. Hugo like others acknowledged that 'it's our responsibility [to offer inclusive education] but we do need the university to provide us with support in terms of giving us the space and the time'.

The rigidity and time-consuming nature of the institution's internal quality assurance processes when attempting to introduce innovative forms of inclusive assessment was also a concern. For changes of a more fundamental nature, university teachers must undertake an internal approval process. For James, an impediment to introducing innovative assessment types such as peer assessment and assessment co-design in his modules was the 'challenging' approval process, which he described as 'bureaucratized and, uh, counterproductive'. Such experiences are worrying, considering that assessments of the type referenced by James have been highlighted as particularly promising for promoting the inclusion of all students, as they encourage social relationships and interdependence (Nieminen et al, 2024).

Our respondents also raised issues concerning the relevance of existing training which was considered too general to be relevant and useful to their disciplinary contexts. Thomas commented on the mandatory tutorial on inclusive teaching offered by the university as follows: 'Yeah, I mean, those things were basically quite commonsense stuff where you think, hey, what kind of person wouldn't do it that way'. Given this context, it was up to lecturers' own initiative to learn about good practice in specific disciplinary contexts by proactively reading on the topic out of personal interest. Interviewees also spoke about differences in their colleagues' interest and willingness to participate in inclusivity-related discussions and training. The challenges that this presents are especially well captured in Adam's words:

> We certainly have professors in our department who haven't done the training and never will. Because why would they? They are professors and they would never engage in issues of inclusive learning and those of us who were involved, if we were to pass on information about things then it would fall on deaf ears.

Adam's view here points to a lack of institutional expectation that all teaching staff should consider inclusivity and learn about inclusive teaching. Missing for example is, as Henry explains, a formal acknowledgement of inclusive teaching being considered part of academics' professional development and duties, something that could be addressed by including discussions of inclusive teaching in the regular development reviews that academics undergo.

Conclusions

Our study, which involved 34 university teachers from different disciplines, was inspired by the growing attention paid to inclusivity in many universities in the UK and globally. It responds to calls for more research that examines the views and experiences of university teachers (Altes et al, 2024). Our findings, specifically what we have learned about respondents' practices of inclusive education, their belief in student diversity being a resource and their dedication to creating inclusive teaching methods, are a cause for optimism. But interviewees also shared key challenges when aiming to deliver inclusive education – notably all relating to the institutional context. While these are a cause for concern, they allow us to identify proposals for action suggesting directions for institutional policy initiatives to support inclusivity in higher education, in the UK and beyond.

Echoing current views of inclusivity (e.g., UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024), the university teachers we interviewed conceptualised inclusivity in the broadest sense, not only relating to students with disabilities or special educational needs. They explained that university teachers should think of any classroom as diverse, as diversity can manifest in different ways (e.g., gender, nationality, ethnicity, class) and some forms of diversity are less immediately visible than others. Interviewees reported having adopted various inclusivity practices such as diversifying reading lists and assessment types, the modes in which materials are made available, and the types of seminar activities offered to students. Interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about the educational opportunities from any form of diversity for the benefit of all students and themselves. Amongst the opportunities that interviewees identified was the potential to gain different perspectives. Others explained that with a diverse student group it is easier to make abstract discussions of how things can be done differently more concrete by having specific examples from the students' varied contexts.

Our participants were also keenly aware of various challenges. Foremost among these was the institution's endorsement of a narrow view of inclusivity centred on disability, despite its professed wider policies. This, we propose, highlights the need for university policies to move beyond a focus on disability and to clearly signal their commitment to inclusivity in a holistic sense. This could be achieved, for example, by ensuring that workload allocations explicitly recognise time needed to develop and implement inclusive teaching and assessment strategies. The rigidity and time-consuming nature of approval processes when attempting to introduce inclusive assessment forms was another challenge, which may again signal an underlying reluctance by the university to consider inclusivity across all its processes and practices. Institutional approval processes need to be flexible and incentivise innovation, especially in relation to assessment. Given the central role of assessment in relation to student attainment (and success), educators, researchers, and university leaders should focus on ensuring that assessment is inclusive and attentive to student diversity (McArthur, 2016; Nieminen, 2023, 2024).

A final challenge discussed by interviewees was training which was considered too general to be relevant for different disciplinary contexts. To address this, interviewees suggested that events where colleagues share their practices would be particularly beneficial in providing opportunities to exchange ideas and find out what works in specific disciplines and teaching contexts. Such events would allow colleagues to reflect on their current ideas and practices. Several of our interviewees commented on the research conversation with us having afforded them a valuable opportunity for such reflection and wishing to continue this together with other colleagues. Our respondents also expressed a wider concern with training: not all teaching staff appear to be equally committed to inclusivity, or they may not feel the need to take part in training. Interviewees suggested that institutional measures were

needed, including clearer workload recognition for this kind of work as well as making inclusive education an explicit element in performance reviews and promotions criteria.

Our study is not without limitations. It should be noted that most university teachers who volunteered to participate in our study have worked and/or studied and/or speak several languages and this is likely to partly explain their interest in this study and their views and experiences. Indeed, some interviewees invoked their personal background as motivation to participate in our study. Our findings are thus partial in terms of capturing the views and work of colleagues dedicated to inclusivity and we are likely to miss the ideas of colleagues less aware of or interested in inclusivity strategies. Another limitation of our study and a direction for future research, is to include colleagues working in science and management disciplines.

Regardless of these limitations, our study makes an important contribution to our understanding of current views and strategies to support inclusive education practiced by a diverse group of university teachers from a range of disciplines. Compared to previous research, ours captures a much wider set of ideas, practices and experiences. While some of these may be unique, many are likely to match what teachers in other universities and countries experience too. Understanding university teachers' views and strategies is essential to universities ability to fulfil commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion and to remain attractive to students from a range of backgrounds. University teachers' experiences should be seen as resources, providing valuable insights into what institutions can do to improve inclusivity.

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